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Literacy and writing practices have been both a subject of research and a starting point for analyses of societies and their history. The state of research and reflection in this field is rich and diverse, especially for historiography in the West. But what about studies of the practices and uses of writing on the African continent during ancient and modern times, apart from the colonial period? Since new studies in historiography can now be used to reconsider the tools and topics of history, how do classical methods from medieval history and its so-called “auxiliary sciences”, as well as methods from anthropology, sociology or linguistics, change (if they do so) our way of looking at how writing has been used in Africa?

The study of written documents in Africa prior to the colonial period, is undergoing two major epistemological shifts. First of all, it is moving beyond the scholarly tradition of translating and editing works in classical Arabic, Hebrew or Ge'ez. From the Orientalist approach, studying written texts, deemed valuable in and of itself, did not (at least not initially) entail analyzing them in relation to the problematics of history. We had to await the discovery during the 19th and 20th centuries of documents that had to be understood, contextualized and made available so that, once they were numerous enough, they could be analyzed using historiographical methods. Secondly, our knowledge in this field is expanding, as new corpora of documents have been found. We need but mention the enthusiasm in recent decades for the “manuscripts of Timbuktu”. Progress has been made in understanding the material aspects, such as the book trade, of writing and written texts. Moreover, our typology of documents has been reworked thanks, for instance, to Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias’ (2003) long-term project on West African chronicles and epigraphs, or Manfred Kropp’s (2011) patient work on Ethiopian sources, which has shown that what used to be considered a "constitution" was in fact a vademecum for officials at the royal court. The unremitting labor of scholars trying to understand complicated collections (such as the documents in the genizah in Cairo) has...
also contributed to this expansion. Lastly, the study of written documents has been renewed owing to the increasing number and accessibility of digitized manuscripts.

Without claiming to cover the full range of precolonial manuscripts in Africa, this issue of Afriques presents articles on what we have called “pragmatic writings”. In these five articles, historians examine various documentary sources and pragmatic writings, which they have often edited and translated. The author of each article has described his/her analytical framework and findings, and laid a solid foundation for further research.

These articles are organized in two major subsections. The first assembles writings that, made to be circulated, were a means for building or consolidating networks of power, controlling territory and vouching for the legitimacy of the officials or persons who had them made. In contrast, the second focuses on documents that were collected by an institution that produced, recorded and/or kept written texts: records from rabbinic tribunals and family documents on land rights in Darfur are documents that accumulated because they were kept, their legitimacy stemming, in part, from their storage in archives.

Some of these documents might have been widely circulated, thus leaving imprints in distant places (sometimes as additions between the lines of manuscripts). On the contrary, others might have been kept in a single “record office”, a layer in a collection of documents. But all of them were likely to have been copied and conveyed physically, hierarchically or symbolically.

“Pragmatic writings”, a working definition

Let us return to the phrase “pragmatic writings”, whereby historians refer to documents written during the exercise of administrative or legal duties. Other terms — pragmatic literacy, legal documents, records — exist for referring to various sets of documents that do not fully overlap. Beyond these variations in terminology, the common objective is to draw attention to a set of writings that scholars took a long time to see as a category worthy of interest as such, because their attention had been focused on written texts they immediately identified as religious or literary. Pragmatic writings were mainly seen as a means for conveying information and placed in narrow functional subcategories: “chancery” documents, “notary” records, etc. The category’s malleability might have kept it from becoming an operational concept and thus have hampered the work of identifying and locating documents of this sort. Those presented herein illustrate this malleability, since some of them fall under a range of headings: poetry and praise, prophecies or even hagiography. In a field less sown with documentary sources and, too, less tilled than the study of the European Middle Ages, it does not come as a surprise to discover that the category “pragmatic writings” has not been systematically submitted to textual criticism in African Studies, as has happened in other disciplines.

In contemporary settings, specialists from other disciplines, such as anthropology and sociology, have proposed stretching the concept of “pragmatic writings” beyond the institutional framework in which such texts are made so as to cover the ordinary or everyday uses of writing in contexts characterized by the lack of specialization of the writers, rising literacy and the diffusion of writing practices. Phrases such as “ordinary uses of writing” or “everyday literacy” have been adopted by historians working on the colonial and postcolonial periods in Africa or on Europe after the end of the Middle Ages.
Their application is hardly relevant to these articles about societies where a minority of the population knew how to write. There is nothing “ordinary” about the control that, through writing, can be exercised economically, politically, socially, legally or commemoratively, as the reader will see in these pages.

Although the diversity of the documents and situations presented herein jeopardizes the attempt to infer from these cases a unified definition of “pragmatic writings”, this category is, in our opinion, operational for two reasons. For one thing, it lets us analyze together a wide spectrum of documents in situations where the writs used for administrative, managerial or political interventions could be materially, discursively and symbolically linked to religious or literary writings. We can thus avoid using anachronic or unadapted categories to study our documents and the writing situations where they were produced. For another, using the category of pragmatic writings places African studies in a comparative perspective, thus allowing, if need be, for borrowings from the theoretical and methodological accomplishments of several decades of research on Europe, in particular. Helen Lacey (2012, p. 44) has pointed out that the word “pragmatics” has been used “to define a methodology, a way of thinking about all kinds of texts, rather than to define a particular genre”. This approach to studying written documents adapts this word for an inquiry into the “specific relation that each piece of writing has with action in the world”.

The authority and power of written texts

A theme running through these articles is the linkage between power and writing, a classical question that has bounced back and forth between disciplines, in particular history and anthropology. This theme lies at the center of Jack Goody’s work, a reference shared by so many studies on literacy. This British anthropologist started fieldwork during the 1950s in northern Ghana; but his later work on social and cognitive issues in the development of writing relies on historical and archeological sources. Michael Clanchy, a medievalist, has implanted Goody’s ideas in the scientific consciousness of historians working on the European Middle Ages, whom he has goaded to dwell on the role of the written word in shaping medieval societies.

The articles in this issue of *Afriques* take but an indirect part in the lively debate that has marked Goody’s posterity. G. Ruffini’s reflections on power rely on Goody (1986) whereas other articles refer to studies that have made a critique of Goody’s work, such as J. EWALD (1988) in G. La Rue’s article or G. LYDON (2009) in M. Nobili’s. However, given their focus on specific situations of the use of writing, these five articles fit better into a perspective that insists on the need to contextualize the eventual effects of writing and refuses a functionalistic approach. If there is a need in the discipline of history to reinterpret Goody’s ideas in the light of contextualized studies of precise situations (what anthropologists have long been doing), this issue provides ample documents for satisfying it.

Regardless of their theoretical orientations, we notice that these articles never relate the question of the power of writing to a fascination for the written word (or the act of writing) by a not very literate population. Instead, this question hinges on an articulation between writing and power with three dimensions: the places, close to political or religious powers, where institutional documents are made and put into circulation; the
material and textual infrastructure that constitutes the space of reference and eventually of circulation of these documents; and the socially identified groups of scribes or scholars as well as the local context where their requisite skills are acquired and transmitted.  

Each article describes a different configuration of these three dimensions. 

Written documents might serve to legitimate an institutional, religious or political power, as shown in the articles by Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne and Mauro Nobili. However what establishes authority is different in each case. In the Hamdallahi Caliphate described by M. Nobili, authority is established in two phases: linking written documents to a historical genealogy via a prophecy (from orality to literacy); and circulating them over the networks of a government that, as the author has shown, relied heavily on the written word. In the Ethiopian monasteries of Goğğām described by Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne, the narrative and symbolic resources drawn from hagiography were used to construct a fictive, historical precedent, which gave rise to a dispute that would be settled by imperial letters. 

Giovanni Ruffini’s analysis focuses on how written documents were used in medieval Nubia to generate, limit and diffuse power, and create it at various levels. He shows the implications of questions related to the land in terms of power and prestige; and describes the lists of witnesses and ceremonies, evidence that the written act was a social event. Even bookkeeping could serve as an emblem of the power surrounding it. 

Georges La Rue’s article on Darfur in the 18th and 19th centuries shows the complexity of the power relations based on the land by describing the change in land statutes and drawing attention to documents for conveying property. These changes of property came out of matrimonial strategies. The documents themselves do not explicitly mention these strategies, but oral traditions have stored them in memory. 

Power is also the focus of Judith Schlanger’s article on how Jewish communities saved records of their legal acts. As she has shown, rabbinic tribunals in urban areas, as early as the Fatimid period, gradually took control over drawing up legal acts, a monopoly depriving individuals of the right to make private deeds or enter into oral agreements. We clearly observe the relation between an institutional structure and the authority of the written word. In the rabbinic tribunals in Cairo, this entailed paying careful attention to recording and then archiving acts. These tribunals were, was, in fact, a centralizing institution since some records stored there came from Syria and Jerusalem. 

This special issue of *Afriques* on pragmatic literacy raises, too, questions related to memory and the political effects of setting decisions down in writing. How legitimate is an authority for storing the memory of the present for the future? Written texts can be passed down to the future so as to bear witness, recollect and bring proof. In contrast, prophecies reverse the relation between past, present and future, since the intent is to root the quest for legitimacy in a reconstructed past: writings are what spans the gap between now and then. Written documents thus have a twofold authority: at the time of their making, an authority is the grounds for the document; and then, at the time of their use, the document is what serves as the grounds for authority.  

The situations described in these articles are all of limited literacy in a context of diglossia, the language of writing (classical Arabic, Ge’ez, Hebrew, ancient Nubian) seldom being a vernacular spoken by the population in whose midst these documents were written and circulated. These situations are, however, varied, far from being of a single sort, where written texts are used in restricted forms — “restricted literacy” in Goody’s
words (1968). Although it is hard to gauge the role of medieval Nubian in the society that used it, other cases let us glimpse tensions between languages: cases of borrowing (a transfer of goods and cultural exchanges) and of regionalization (an appropriation of writing tools by the people concerned). We can but call for further historical, sociolinguistic studies on these different contexts.

The social topography of written documents

Writing is a form and means of communication. As such, it does not just inform us of the contents it conveys. It also suggests a geographical and social topography with networks and organizations, both social and physical. What could be more anchored in its geographical and social context of production and use than pragmatic writings?

The most obvious example of this can be found in G. La Rue's article, which seeks to follow the shifting bounds of landed properties. His documents on land rights are indeed topographical, based on testimonies and the location of bounds — from one tree to another, from a copse to a stream, etc. This sociogeographical topography even came with special words for referring to neighbors with land bordering on the lot to be demarcated. Disputes and their settlement involved lineages, generations, social circles that expanded as litigation rose from the local level up to the sultan’s court. As the author has clearly shown, the setting of words into writing implied recourse to networks that were larger than what we might imagine by reading the documents alone. We come to understand this on condition that we take into account the context. In this case, oral traditions passed down for over a century provide information about this context.

By describing how ancient Nubia’s periphery was controlled by the center through royal decrees, G. Ruffini’s article designs the “networks of communication and power” formed through the letters of royal officers. These letters put the various nodes of this power network in relation, and reinforced every step in the process. The apparent similarity of the contexts and documents available allows for a probably fertile comparison with Martin Gravel’s book on how Merovingian kings communicated and managed distance so as to control their realm politically and economically. In a similar vein, G. Lydon’s work on Sahelian trade networks has inquired into the means of communication for forming multifunctional networks.

The social context of the making and use of written documents is the focus of J. Schlanger’s study on the transcription of transactions in the records of rabbinic tribunals (which are now, at least what is left of them, stored in the genizah in Cairo). Her article brings to light the markers of an identity and the porosity between Jewish and Muslim administrative practices, which evolved together in a context of growing urbanization.

The falsification of documents, as reported by Habtamu Mengiste Tegegne and M. Nobili, also has a topographical dimension. When a controversy broke out about the order of precedence between two neighboring monasteries, Dimā and Martula Māryām, the contending parties undertook a quest for the origins of the narratives supporting their claims by turning toward an ancient church in the north, in Tigray, the cradle of Christianity in Ethiopia. The texts thus assembled were then validated in Shawā, the seat of imperial power. The imperial letters signifying the settlement of the controversy returned to the province of Goğgām, where the two monasteries were located. This
geographical and institutional triangulation made the documents performative. The Risāla studied by M. Nobili was a circular, a letter in two versions intended for distribution over a wide area. This circular — a forged prophecy inserted in the much longer text of the Tārīkh al-Fattāsh, — was intended to establish the legitimacy of Ahmad Lobo’s claim to a territory. It was, therefore, diffused through administrative circuits; and local authorities received instructions to make copies of it.

23 As these articles show, writings can serve to form a geographical or social network over a territory, to occupy, represent or commemorate it. A written document not only follows but might also encapsulate a topography. In this case, the sociogeographical topography is highly symbolic. However the purpose of setting words down in writing might be as concrete as the setting of bounds on a plot of land, as in G. La Rue’s article. Although the immediate purpose of writing differs in each of these two cases, the act of writing has symbolic effects. After the surveys and intervention of “borderers”, what was set down in writing was not only the physical topography but also, very probably along with it, the social stratification. The range of effects described by G. Ruffini is evidence of the circles, often interconnected, of the use of writing by a central authority. Paul Bertrand has recently proposed, for a quite different context, that the idea of a chain of writings be supplemented with a “network of writing” or a “documentary network”.22 This proposal seems sound for the cases treated in this issue.

24 Social topography and geographical space penetrate each other through (and even within) written documents. As a vector conveying words, a writ is performative of an action in a given territory: not only does it diffuse information about the action there, but it is also used to legitimate authority and muster support. The aforementioned Risāla, more or less like other documents presented in these articles, was apparently a way of creating, or trying to do so, “textual communities” by federating, at least ideally, human groups around specific texts that were intended to orient the understanding of history, society and identities.23 These aspects should not be seen as excluding the primary, concrete goals of the act of writing or as an alternative to them. Instead, they overlay them like an additional layer of social phenomena and of interpretation. Ultimately, certain strategies for using writing remain the same, beyond differences in type, geography and time. Given the development of studies on literacy and writing in Africa since conquest and colonization,24 the contribution made by the articles published in this issue of Afriques to the study of earlier periods25 will hopefully help us grasp the points of continuity and rupture in these strata of African written cultures.26

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NOTES

1. This introduction has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France)

2. For an example, see the impressive intellectual and historiographical overview in P. CHASTANG (2008).

3. On the need to investigate the methods used for editing and translating, see D.S. COLLINS’ (2008) theoretical and ideological warning about biases in the translation of the Arabic texts assembled by J.F.P. HOPKINS and N. LEVTZION (1981). The classical tradition in Orientalism, given its tendency to make literal translations intended for scholars familiar with the sources, has encountered a deep misunderstanding with American postmodernism and the uncompromising requirement for a “linguistic turn”.

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4. See J.L. TRIAUD (2012) for a critique of this wave of enthusiasm for “manuscripts of the desert”, which, sweeping over academia and through the media, has inevitably made ripples and attracted funding.
5. For example, G. KRÄTLI and G. LYDON (2011).
6. Literacy and derived terms have no strict equivalence from one language to another.
7. Several corpora from the Near East and Asia have been identified, edited and analyzed. See: C. MÜLLER (2013) on documents in Arabic; and B.S. KUPPUSAMY and G. VIJAYAVENUGOPAL (2006-2010) on dynastic inscriptions in Tamil Nadu.
11. Comparative studies are now being made with Asia (R.H. BRITNELL, 1997) as well as the Middle East (A.M. EDDÉ and B.M. TOCK 2009).
12. É. ANHEIM and P. CHASTANG (2009), p. 3.
16. On the power of writing, see J. MORSEL (2000). Owing to its limits, he would replace a utilitarian conception of writing by taking into account the “specific use of writing in the relations of domination which are configured in relation to it, in relation to the structure of the symbolic domination that it is likely to install” (p. 21).
17. The debate between scholars who, like Goody, advance a general theory of the effects of literacy and their critics who emphasize the social and historical contexts now seems outdated owing to a return to comparative studies with a focus on specific aspects of literacy. For a recent review in anthropology, see W. KEANE (2013).
19. In line with D. BONDAREV (2010), for example.
23. B. STOCK (1983, 1996) has described “textual communities” (social groups formed around a corpus that relates a given text to its interpretation) as a factor, during the Middle Ages in Europe, in socially differentiating Cathars from Catholics or creating a sense of identity for religious groups.
25. Donald Crummey edited in 2005 the proceedings of a conference (dating back to 1993) on the effects of written texts, or their absence, on strategies for nation-building in Africa before the colonial period.
26. For the colonial and postcolonial periods, the comparative approach has increasingly drawn attention to the circulation of written texts and writing techniques and to the use of printing. The findings from studies on Europe could be extended elsewhere (R. CHARTIER, 1987), like studies on the Indian Ocean (I. HOFMEYR, P. KAARSHOLM, F.B. FREDERIKSEN, 2011).
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AUTHORS

ANAÏS WION
Chargée de recherches CNRS, Institut des mondes africains (IMAF)

SÉBASTIEN BARRET
Chargé de recherches CNRS, Institut de recherche et d’histoire des textes (IRHT)

AÏSSATOU MBODJ-POUYE
Chargée de recherches CNRS, Institut des mondes africains (IMAF)