

## **Words of paper: discourses and materiality in African contexts**

**WORKSHOP, IMAf (Paris) in collaboration with SMI (Bergen University), March  
15<sup>th</sup> 2017**

**Deadline for the call for abstracts: June 30<sup>th</sup> 2016  
Deadline for full selected papers: January 15<sup>th</sup> 2016**

Until recently, the search for new texts and narratives has been at the core of scholarly interests in order to write a history of African societies in the *longue durée*. The metaphor of the miner looking for the gold nugget lost in a rubble heap of worthless (Riello, 2007) illustrates the condition of the historian ignoring what is brought in its content: its material support, specially thought, organised and conceived for the future reader. Indeed, before entering into the contents of a letter, of a legal or religious document, an epigraphic inscription or a newspaper, the historian faces an object that is a communication tool integrated in a concrete interaction between the sender(s) and the intended recipient(s) (Stollberg-Rilinger, 2008).

The study of the document, as producer of a discourse, involves many research fields, including religious, social and political history, with always three key questions: What is the message expressed by the creator of the object? What were the tangible and intangible tools used to communicate this message? How the object bearing the message affect the sensory of the recipient, whether as historical agent or historian, and how the object is preparing to read the text? To these questions, a further one is added: that of the itinerary and of the recycling of the supports in the long term.

By focusing on African societies that developed a long tradition of writing, as Islamic Africa, Christian Nubia and Ethiopia, this workshop aims to analyse the messages expressed through the carriers of these texts and their interaction with the textual content by decrypting layout, images and writing styles chosen by their authors and copyists. Compared with the textual study of documents, these elements can highlight conflicting messages, sub-texts and stories that would otherwise remain silent. This shows how “reading” a text at several levels can offer us a more complex story.

This workshop is part of the collaboration between Bergen University and IMAf, and aims at preparing a collaborative publication through discussions that will articulate around the participants’ papers. Each of them will be circulated among all contributors prior to their gathering at the workshop. For each essay, the debate will be animated by two discussants selected among the contributors. All participants are encouraged to submit their original works along one of the following three research topics:

### **Emotions, sensoriality and materiality of the historical document**

The bodies of the reader and of the recipients of a given document are placed at the centre of this analytical perspective. The first research focus is on emotion and affects in

historical process (see Rosenwein, 2010), and in particular on emotions that are expressed and transmitted by the documents. We might ask what was the power of our set of textual sources to affect and to move in the direction of an action, and how the document involves the interlocutor's body (Boquet and Piroška, 2011). The support, just as texts do, expresses, transmits, and transforms emotions. How can historians analyse these concepts and practices of the emotional register? By adding flesh to sources, texts, and their media once again, we also find a way of addressing the sensual message that emerges from the documents, and historians can then reconsider the meaning, the visibility, the senses, the texture, and the tone that emerge and are recalled in the document.

**- In search of authenticity: support, certification and forgery.** Diplomatic is one of the first scientific disciplines that focused on document's paratextuality. It developed in early modern Europe as a tool for jurists for studying and determining whether documents were authentic or forgeries (Guyotjeannin et al., 2006). However, the certification of documents was an issue in every literate society. The support of written documents is the receptacle of rules and norms that allows the document's authentication or that mislead its recipient. This research topic proposes to analyse how scribes or writing specialists developed figurative and technical norms in order to express the power and legitimacy of their religious, political or economic authorities. Contributions that will focus on fake or fictive dimensions, as well as on the making process of forged documents or their uses by both historical actors and historians, are also welcome.

**- Circulations, recycling and recovery of the support.**

In many cultural contexts, the text travels on its carrier. Letters cross seas and deserts, steles are detached and displaced, surfaces are used to write once again. If to follow the trails of the carriers of writing contributes to a better understanding of the material and immaterial circulation in Africa and beyond, its recycling brings a new life to the object. The issue of the recycling of the writing support and of its recovery for political, religious or aesthetic purposes has so far been only briefly discussed by historians and archaeologists (Thyrza Sparks, 2013). Besides, the itinerary of the document and the recycling process does not stop when the object becomes a work item for the historian. We could also consider the transformative process that occurs with its use and handling as historical document, during the process of editing and archiving.

## **Calendar**

We invite interested contributors to send article proposals before the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2016 with: a title, an abstract of 500 words including a description of the documents used and the methodology chosen, and an academic CV of two pages maximum.

The article of 9,000 words maximum, in English or French, must be submitted by the **15 January 2017** at the latest, to allow other members to read the papers before the workshop that will take place on **15 March 2017**. We plan to submit a manuscript to a publisher before the month of **July 2017**.

All proposals will be evaluated by the members of the Franco-Norwegian Aurora project, which will announce the papers selected for the workshop in early September 2016.

The proposals should be sent to the following email addresses: remi.dewiere@orange.fr; silviabruzzi@yahoo.it.

### **References**

BOQUET, Damien et PIROSKA, Nagy. « Une histoire des émotions incarnées », *Médiévales, Langues, Textes, Histoire*, 61, 2011, p. 5-24.

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ROSENWEIN, Barbara H., « Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions », *Passions in Context*, 1 (1), 2010, p. 1-32.

STOLLBERG-RILINGER, Barbare, LAROCHE, François (trad.), « La communication symbolique à l'époque pré-moderne. Concepts, thèses, perspectives de recherche », *Trivium* [en ligne], 2, 2008, <http://trivium.revues.org/1152>.

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