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Newspapers as Sources for African History

Emma Hunter

Summary

Newspapers have become increasingly important as a source for African history, and the range of historical questions which newspapers have been employed to address has expanded dramatically. Newspapers are not only sources for political history, they also have much to teach us about the social, cultural and intellectual history of Africa. They were spaces of literary and textual experimentation. They also played an important role in the creation of new identities. It is however essential that we approach newspapers as sources critically and think carefully about their limitations, as well as the opportunities they present to the historian.

Keywords

Newspapers, Print Culture, Archives, Digitization, Identities, Publics, Nationalism

Essay

Once relatively neglected, newspapers have become increasingly important as sources for African history, and the range of historical questions which newspapers have been employed to address has expanded dramatically.

Newspapers in Africa and Africa in Newspapers

Newspapers have been published in Africa since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The history of newspaper publishing on the continent would have been even longer, had not the first printing press brought to the continent in 1792 with the aim of establishing a newspaper

been destroyed shortly after its arrival.¹ When considering newspapers as sources for the writing of African history, we may also wish to cast our net beyond those newspapers published in Africa. Newspapers such as *Le Cri des Nègres* or, later, *Jeune Afrique* were published in Paris but intended for an African audience. Some were aimed at a wider international diasporic audience. Marcus Garvey's *Negro World* circulated widely in Africa, despite the best efforts of colonial administrations to restrict its circulation.² In writing political or diplomatic histories of Africa, historians may also find themselves turning to newspapers published elsewhere which discussed in passing African affairs, or the policies of other countries in relation to African affairs. However, in this entry I shall primarily focus on newspapers published in African countries.

Before we can begin to consider newspapers as sources, we must consider what a newspaper is, and how it differs from other kinds of printed material. One set of criteria for a newspaper includes the following characteristics. First, publicity: that 'its contents are reasonably accessible to the public'. Second, periodicity: the characteristic of being 'published at regular intervals'. Third, 'currency': the sense that the information it carries is current affairs. Finally, the 'universality' or 'range of topics' covered in the newspaper.³

¹ Frank Barton, *The Press of Africa: Persecution and Perseverance*, London: Macmillan, 1979, p. 5.

² On the circulation and impact of *Negro World* in Africa, see for example Robert Trent Vinson, 'Sea Kaffirs: American Negroes and the Gospel of Garveyism in Early Twentieth-Century Cape Town', *The Journal of African History*, 47, 2 (2006), 281-303; Michael O. West, 'The Seeds are Sown: The Impact of Garveyism in Zimbabwe in the Interwar Years', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 35, 2/3 (2002), 335-362, p. 342; Robert A. Hill, *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers: Africa for the Africans, 1923-1945*, vol. 10, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. This volume includes both letters to *Negro World* showing its circulation in Africa, and evidence from colonial archives of the concern which it sparked in colonial administrators. For examples of the former, see pp. 506 and 549 and for an example of the latter, p. 400.

³ Abiodun Salawu, 'Not *Iwe Irohin* but *Umshumayeli*: A revisit of the historiography of the early African language press', *African Identities*, (2015), 1-14, p. 166.

This definition of a newspaper allows us to include under the heading of ‘newspapers’ a very wide range of publications. Many newspapers were published at intervals which were far less frequent than daily, often weekly or even monthly, but that were still fairly regular. The length of time that newspapers took to travel to their readers meant that a great deal of time might elapse between a newspaper being printed and reaching its intended audience, yet the content was written in such a way as to claim currency. At the same time, newspapers often contained a great deal of material which was not straightforwardly ‘news’. This might be political commentary or literary production. In missionary newspapers it might be theological discussion or religious education. Yet what all newspapers had in common was ‘publicity’. Unlike other ways of transmitting information, both ‘news’ and other sorts of information, newspapers were, in principal, public. They were open to all, regardless of status. Like rumour, newspapers could travel far beyond their intended audiences, but unlike rumour, the message stayed constant.

Who produced newspapers and why?

Writing about newspapers often adopts a normative understanding of the newspaper as a crucial part of a democratic society, an independent force, separate from government, whose purpose is to speak truth to power or to engage in rational debate. While this conception of a newspaper has, understandably, a powerful hold over our imaginations, the social and cultural history of newspapers points to the important role which governments and other agencies have always played in producing newspapers, as part of a wider struggle to control information and interpretation. At the same time, newspapers were part of society, not separate from it, and a sharp line between oral ‘rumour’ and written ‘truth’ often becomes hard to discern in practice.

In his 1979 history of the press in Africa, the journalist Frank Barton wrote that the ‘Adam and Eve of Africa’s newspapers were the government gazettes.’⁴ It was, he wrote, ‘no accident that the Swahili word for newspapers is *gazeti*. They were produced by authority to tell the people what the rulers wanted them to know.’⁵ Establishing a newspaper was also a declaration of intent, a sign that a government was committed to building up an institutional apparatus of government.⁶ We can see both of these forces at work in the establishment of the first newspaper published in West Africa, *The Sierra Leone Gazette*, established by the colonial government in 1801.⁷ While the early gazettes were very limited in purpose and scope, as the ambition of colonial governments increased over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so too did their use of newspapers as didactic tools. Newspapers were used to communicate new technologies and practices. They also played a major role in projects to standardize African languages.⁸

Yet at the same time, Frank Barton’s use of a religious metaphor to describe the historical roots of newspapers in Africa reminds us that the history of newspaper publishing in Africa is intertwined with the history of Christian mission. In South Africa, the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society began publishing the Xhosa periodical *Umshumayeli Wendaba* (Publisher of the News) in 1837.⁹ In Nigeria, the first newspaper was *Iwe Irohin* which first appeared in 1859.¹⁰ *Iwe Irohin*’s first editor was the Church Missionary Society missionary Henry

⁴ Barton, *The Press of Africa*, p. 5

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5

⁶ This was in turn adopted by those who opposed colonial governments. For nationalists in mid-twentieth-century Tanganyika, it was axiomatic that any nationalist movement which aspired to be recognized as such should have its own newspaper.

⁷ Barton, *The Press of Africa*, p. 5; Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, London: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 89.

⁸ Derek R. Peterson and Emma Hunter, ‘Print Culture in Colonial Africa’, in Derek R. Peterson, Emma Hunter and Stephanie Newell, eds., *African Print Cultures: Newspapers and their Publics in the Twentieth Century*, Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2016, pp. 1-45, p. 14.

⁹ Les Switzer, ‘Preface’ in Peter Limb, ed., *The People’s Paper: A Centenary History and Anthology of Abantu-Batho*, Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012, pp. x-xiii, p. xiii fn.

¹⁰ Oluwatoyin Oduntan, ‘Iwe Irohin and the representation of the universal in nineteenth-century Egba land’, *History in Africa*, 32 (2005), 295-306.

Townsend, who seems to have seen the newspaper as much more than a channel for the communication of news about the Church. Topics ranged widely from history and geography to current affairs, with foreign news too, and reports of the changing conditions of trade.¹¹ For the historian Toyin Oduntan, ‘the news and articles’ published in *Iwe Irohin* ‘focused on bringing Britain closer to its would-be subjects’, but at the same time the newspaper became ‘a source of learning and information both for the missionaries and the increasing number of mission school graduates in Lagos and Abeokuta.’¹²

If many of the first newspapers were produced on government or missionary presses, these newspapers quickly inspired the production of independent newspapers. In 1855, an independent newspaper called *New Era*, published by William Drape, began publication in Sierra Leone. Its slogan, ‘To consult the welfare of the people is the first great law’, signaled its intention to speak critically to a government which offered few opportunities for the voice of the people to be heard.¹³ Shortly afterwards, another newspaper appeared in Sierra Leone, *The African and Sierra Leone Weekly Advertiser*. The latter provides an example of the role played by missionaries in training and supporting a new generation of African printers and publishers. It was the work of Moses Henry Davies, who had been sent to London by the Church Missionary Society to train as a printer. As the historian Christopher Fyfe writes, ‘Not specifically religious, the *African* aimed to raise the moral tone’.¹⁴ Yet for all that one of these newspapers was created within a missionary sphere and the other not, their content was very similar, with a balance of local and foreign news, publication of government announcements and advertisements.

¹¹ Oduntan, ‘Iwe Irohin and the representation of the university’, p. 299.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 299.

¹³ Fyfe, *History of Sierra Leone*, p. 280.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

New Era was a trail blazer, but others soon followed and by the late nineteenth century, West and South Africa were home to a lively African press. In East Africa, the first newspapers appeared later in the nineteenth century, and again the first newspapers were produced by missionaries, beginning with *Msimulizi*, published by the Universities' Mission to Central Africa at Kiungani College in Zanzibar from 1889. As in West Africa, colonial governments saw newspapers as a means of informing and educating their subjects, as well as an index of progress. In German East Africa, the colonial government subsidized the Swahili-language newspaper *Kiongozi*, published by the Government School in Tanga.¹⁵ The British Protectorate government in Zanzibar established a weekly newspaper in 1915.¹⁶ An independent press also developed. The establishment of the short-lived *East African and Uganda Mail* in 1899 was swiftly followed by A.M. Jevanjee's launch in 1902 of *The Standard*, later sold on and renamed the *East African Standard*. The 1920s saw the development of an African-owned and edited press in Kenya, Uganda and, to a lesser extent, Tanganyika.¹⁷ Between 1945 and 1952 there were forty new African newspapers in Kenya, countered by the colonial government which began producing twenty-one district newspapers in the same post-war period.¹⁸

When describing privately-owned newspapers as independent, we should of course be careful not to overstate their distance from government. Newspapers have always been published in a regulatory context defined by the government of the day. Independent African newspapers depended on government permission to publish, but also often depended on subsidies or

¹⁵ Hilda Lemke, 'Die Suaheli-Zeitungen und Zeitschriften in Deutsch-Ostafrika', unpublished PhD Dissertation, Leipzig University, 1929, p. 20

¹⁶ Philip C. Sadgrove, "The Press, Engine of a Mini-renaissance in Zanzibar (1860-1920)," in *History of Printing and Publishing in the Languages and Countries of the Middle East*, ed. Philip Sadgrove (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 155.

¹⁷ James F. Scotton, 'The first African press in East Africa: Protest and Nationalism in Uganda in the 1920s', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 6 (1973), 211-228.

¹⁸ Fay Gadsden, 'The African Press in Kenya, 1945-1952', *Journal of African History*, 21, 1980, 515-535, p. 515.

advertising revenue from governments. A good example is that of the newspaper *New Era* in nineteenth-century Sierra Leone. When *New Era* was established, the governor agreed that the newspaper would publish government notices in return for a payment of £30 per year. When a new Governor arrived in Sierra Leone, his outrage at the tone of *New Era*'s editorials led him to cancel this agreement, putting the financial security of the newspaper in jeopardy.¹⁹ While the Governor's tactic was in the end unsuccessful, it serves as a reminder that independent newspapers often depended on financial support from governments.²⁰

At the same time, the term 'independent' also covers a multitude of financial arrangements. Until the mid-twentieth century, many newspapers in Africa were produced on a shoestring budget, the work of an individual editor who worked morning until night to perform all the tasks that were required to bring the newspaper to publication. The sacrifices which this entailed are captured by the Ugandan editor, Eridadi Mulira, who began publishing his newspaper *Uganda Empya* (New Uganda) in 1953. Mulira explained in his autobiography that he worked twenty hours a day 'as editor, manager, circulation manager and parcels boy, reporter, subeditor, proof reader and cash collector'.²¹

But if some newspapers were produced on a shoestring budget, others were part of large publishing empires, produced on a large scale and for profit, and increasingly so over the course of the twentieth century. In his autobiography, Nnamdi Azikiwe's title for his chapter on the 'Founding of the Zik Group of Newspapers' includes the revealing subtitle: 'The story

¹⁹ Barton, *Press of Africa*, p. 17.

²⁰ In Mozambique, João dos Santos Albasini persuaded the Portuguese colonial government that providing a subsidy to his newspaper would be an effective means of promoting the Portuguese language. Penvenne, 'João dos Santos Albasini', p. 440.

²¹ Derek R. Peterson and Emma Hunter, 'Print Culture in Colonial Africa', in Derek R. Peterson, Emma Hunter and Stephanie Newell, eds., *African Print Cultures: Newspapers and their Publics in the Twentieth Century*, Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2016, pp. 1-45, p. 2.

of my efforts to be economically secure and free from want'.²² For Azikiwe, newspaper publishing was a business, and his innovations lay as much in the mode of organisation, production and distribution as in his newspapers' content.

The second half of the twentieth century saw large-scale publishing enterprises move in to the African market. In the late 1940s, for example, the British Government encouraged Cecil King's Mirror Group of newspapers to publish in Nigeria. On 2 October 1950, the Group launched the *Daily Graphic* in the Gold Coast, where it made good use of its material and technological advantages to quickly establish itself. In 1958, it was able to claim circulation figures of 22,800,000 copies.²³

The history of newspaper publishing and editing in Africa is at one level a pantheon of famous names. Some of these are names which are still well-known to us, such as Nnamdi Azikiwe whose newspaper the *West African Pilot*, launched in 1937, revolutionized newspaper publishing in West Africa or the South Africans John Dube, Tengo Jabavu and Sol Plaatje.²⁴ Yet while these individuals stand out, they must be situated within a much broader tapestry of smaller-scale editors, many of whose newspapers were short-lived and quickly forgotten. Others were famous in their day, but are not now remembered. In some cases, this is because they were working within rather than against colonial structures. They were often less radical than those who came after them, and the post-colonial nationalists who wrote their nations' histories struggled to place them in the nationalist story. The Mozambican journalist and editor João dos Santos Albasini is an example of this group of

²² Azikiwe, *My Odyssey*, p. 286.

²³ Nate Plageman, "'Accra is Changing, Isn't It?': Urban Infrastructure, Independence, and Nation in the Gold Coast's 'Daily Graphic,' 1954-57", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 43, 1 (2010), 137-159, p. 142.

²⁴ Nnamdi Azikiwe, *My Odyssey: An Autobiography*, London: C. Hurst and Company, 1970; D.D.T. Jabavu, *The life of John Tengo Jabavu, editor of Imvo Zabantsundu, 1884-1921*, Lovedale Institution Press, 1922.

colonial-era newspaper editors. He edited the newspaper *O Africano*, launched in 1908 and its successor, *O Brado Africano* which lasted from 1918 to 1974. While he worked within the colonial system, in his editorials he engaged critically with the colonial government and called on his readers to do the same. As the first editorial of *O Brado Africano* forcefully reminded readers, ‘Anyone who does not struggle for his Rights condemns himself voluntarily to be someone else’s doormat. To stop is to die.’²⁵ In a similar vein, in West Africa *La Voix du Dahomey* made clear in its inaugural issue that its aim was not to challenge Dahomey’s colonial status, but rather to speak for the people of Dahomey, bringing grievances to the government’s attention and offering wise counsel.²⁶

If African newspapers were produced by a diverse group of people, from governments and missionary societies to companies and individuals, and for a wide variety of purposes, the audiences for which they were intended were equally diverse. Some newspapers were produced by and aimed at white communities, such as the first South African newspaper, the *Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser*, *The Standard* in Kenya or *Paris-Dakar* in Senegal.²⁷ Others were aimed at Asian or Lebanese communities, such as *The Colonial Times* in Kenya.²⁸ Some were defined in terms of political allegiance. This was the case with *The Cape Guardian*, later *The Guardian*, established in late 1930s South Africa as a counterweight to a right-wing dominated media landscape.²⁹ *The Guardian* went on to play a

²⁵ Jeanne Marie Penvenne, ‘João dos Santos Albasini (1876-1922): the contradictions of politics and identity in colonial Mozambique’, *Journal of African History*, 37 (1996), 419-464, p. 426.

²⁶ Bellarmin Coffi, ‘La Presse dahomeenne face aux aspirations des ‘evolues’’. ‘La Voix du Dahomey’ (1927-1957). PhD Thesis: Université de Paris VII, 1978, p. 97.

²⁷ Switzer, ‘Preface’, p. xiii; Bodil Folke Frederiksen, ‘Print, Newspapers and Audiences in Colonial Kenya: African and Indian Improvement, Protest and Connections’, *Africa*, 81, 1 (2011), 155-172, p. 156; Gilles Kraemer, *Trois siècles de presse francophone dans le monde: hors de France, Belgique, de Suisse et du Québec*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 1995, p. 119.

²⁸ Bodil Folke Frederiksen, ‘Print, Newspapers and Audiences in Colonial Kenya: African and Indian Improvement, Protest and Connections’, *Africa*, 81, 1 (2011), 155-172, p. 156.

²⁹ James Zug, *The Guardian: The History of South Africa’s Extraordinary Anti-Apartheid Newspaper*, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007, p. 10.

key role in the struggle against apartheid until it was finally closed down by the Government in 1963. The Sudanese newspapers *al-Saraha* ‘Frankness’ and *al-Shaab* ‘the People’, both on the left of the political spectrum and close to the labour movement, spoke to particular political and socio-economic constituencies.³⁰ Some newspapers, such as *Uwongozi*, colonial Kenya’s first Islamic newspaper, or the long-running Tanzanian Catholic newspaper *Kiongozi*, spoke to audiences defined in religious terms.³¹ Others, such as Henry Muoria’s Gikuyu-language newspaper *Mumenyeri*, ‘The Guardian’, which played a crucial role in the anti-colonial struggle in Kenya until it was banned in 1952, addressed a defined ethnic group.³² Yet given the nature of print, newspapers inevitably travelled and had an impact beyond their intended audiences.

The diversity of audiences which newspapers sought to address helps explain the diversity of languages in which they were published. While there is a strong tradition of newspaper publishing in European languages, particularly in English, French and Portuguese, in Sudan Arabic-language newspapers played an important role and East Africa in particular was home to a lively vernacular-language press. In some cases, newspapers reached out to wider audiences or to multiple audiences at the same time by publishing in two or more languages. In South Africa, the name of the newspaper *Abantu-Batho* or ‘The People’, created by combining the Nguni word ‘ntu’ with the Sesotho-Setswana word ‘Batho’, was testament to its multilingual nature.³³ In French Cameroun, the newspaper *L’Eveil des Camerouniens* established in 1934, edited by a European settler, Eugene Schneider, and intended for an

³⁰ Elena Vezzadini, ‘An Uphill Job Demanding Limitless Patience’. The Establishment of Trade Unions and the Conflicts of Development in Sudan, 1946-1952’, *International Development Policy*, 8 (2017), 81-108.

³¹ Kai Kresse, *Guidance (Uwongozi) by Sheikh Al-Amin Mazrui: Selections from the First Swahili Islamic Newspaper*, Leiden: Brill, 2016.

³² Wangari Muoria-Sal et.al., *Writing for Kenya: the life and works of Henry Muoria*, Leiden: Brill, 2009.

³³ Peter Limb, ‘A Centenary History of *Abantu-Batho*, the People’s Paper’ in Peter Limb, ed., *The People’s Paper: A Centenary History and Anthology of Abantu-Batho*, Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012, pp. 2-48, p. 4.

African audience, attempted to shore up its financial base and reach new subscribers by publishing in multiple languages simultaneously, including French, though this was not enough to stave off collapse in 1935.³⁴

How were newspapers created?

Early newspapers were produced on a small scale, making use of the technologies available. Charles Bannerman, who established the *Accra Herald* in 1858, initially wrote out copies by hand because the printing press he had been promised failed to arrive from Liverpool.³⁵ The typical model in nineteenth-century Africa, and indeed in the first half of the twentieth century, was small-scale, artisanal production.³⁶ By the mid-twentieth century, however, new technology and injections of capital saw some newspapers appear in mass-produced form.³⁷ By the end of the twentieth century, many newspapers were producing online editions, which opened up new potential to address distant audiences more quickly.

The content of newspapers was shaped by copyright regimes and by the wider political context and material conditions in which editors operated. Editors in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Africa made use of what Antoinette Burton and Isabel Hofmeyr have recently termed the ‘imperial commons’, whereby material published in newspapers in America or Britain was reproduced in the pages of a West African newspaper.³⁸ The periodical exchange system played a key role here. As Burton and Hofmeyr write, ‘[i]nitially a pre-telegraph

³⁴ Emma Hunter, ‘“Our common humanity”: print, power, and the colonial press in interwar Tanganyika and French Cameroun’, *Journal of Global History*, 7, 2 (2012), 279-301, p. 284.

³⁵ Barton, *Press of Africa*, p. 17.

³⁶ Antoinette Burton and Isabel Hofmeyr, ‘Introduction: The Spine of Empire? Books and the Making of an Imperial Commons’, in Antoinette Burton and Isabel Hofmeyr, eds., *Ten Books that Shaped the British Empire: Creating an Imperial Commons*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2014, pp. 1-28, p. 15.

³⁷ Nnamdi Azikiwe, *My Odyssey: An Autobiography*, London: C. Hurst and Company, 1970, pp. 309-313; John Chick, ‘Cecil King, the Press, and Politics in West Africa’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 34, 3 (1996), 375-393.

³⁸ Burton and Hofmeyr, ‘Introduction’, p. 4.

phenomenon, the system persisted among those who could not afford the steep wire service fees and/or objected to their imperial bias.’³⁹

As new research by Stephanie Newell, Leslie James and others has begun to show, the practice of reprinting material was not simply forced upon editors by the need for cheap copy. It could also provide an opportunity for editors to make arguments which they could not make in their own voices. Capturing this powerful potential, the *Gold Coast Leader* noted in 1902 alongside an article which it had reprinted from a London newspaper ‘what a hubbub there would have been, if *we* had ventured in any shape or form to have said anything like this’.⁴⁰

Thinking about reprinting as part of a distinctive genre of newspaper publishing opens up new possibilities for using newspapers as sources to explore the development of new kinds of collective imagining. For example, Leslie James draws out the implications of the Ghanaian newspaper *The Ashanti Pioneer* choosing to print a cutting from *Hansard*, the British record of parliamentary proceedings, in which the Undersecretary of State for the Colonies, David Rees Williams, claimed that British colonialism was restoring ‘color’ to colonized peoples alongside a reprinting of Hubert H. Harrison’s 1920 radical poem ‘The Black Man’s Burden’.⁴¹ No additional commentary was needed, James argues, for the poem ‘provided the

³⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

⁴⁰ Stephanie Newell, ‘Articulating Empire: Newspaper Readerships in Colonial West Africa’, *New Formations*, 73 (2011), 26-42, p. 34. Though as David Pratten reminds us, we should not straightforwardly assume that a culled clipping represents the ‘real’ views of an editor – some editors, like J.V. Clinton who edited the *Nigerian Eastern Mail* from 1935-1951, were decidedly ambivalent about some of the radical positions which he reprinted without comment. David Pratten, ‘Creole Pioneers in the Nigerian Provincial Press’, in Derek Peterson, Emma Hunter and Stephanie Newell, eds., *African Print Cultures: newspapers and their publics in the twentieth century*, Ann Arbor MI: Michigan University Press, 2016, pp. 75-101, p. 89.

⁴¹ Leslie James, ‘Transatlantic Passages: Black Identity Construction in West African and West Indian Newspapers, 1935-1950’ in Derek Peterson, Emma Hunter and Stephanie Newell, eds., *African Print Cultures: newspapers and their publics in the twentieth century*, Ann Arbor MI: Michigan University Press, 2016, pp. 49-74.

commentary'.⁴² In this way, the juxtaposition of these two reprintings played a role in helping to constitute a 'black international'.

How were newspapers preserved?

Early newspapers were often intended to be kept by their readers for future reference. Each issue of the monthly paper *Mokaeri oa Becuana, le Muleri oa mahuku* or 'The Instructor of the Becuana, and the Announcer of News', published by William Ashton at Kuruman in South Africa from 1857 to 1859, was four pages long, but the issues were conserved in a bound volume, labelled *Kico ki nonoco* or 'Knowledge is Power'.⁴³ In the same spirit, readers of the Kilimanjaro Native Co-operative Union's periodical, *Uremi*, published in the early 1930s in Tanganyika, were advised to conserve their copies, on the grounds that they would be a valuable resource in the future.⁴⁴

It is in this bound form that newspapers are often conserved in libraries around the world – sometimes close to the place of origin, sometimes far away, in libraries in Europe, America and beyond. Yet paper copies of newspapers are conserved in other places too. Many government archives in Africa include both newspaper clippings and whole newspapers, testimony to the important role which newspapers played in local and national politics and in the educational projects of the colonial and post-colonial state. In some cases, these archives are now the only place in which these newspapers can be found. Mission and church archives similarly often conserve the newspapers which they published.

⁴² James, 'Transatlantic Passages', p. 64.

⁴³ F. R Bradlow, *Printing for Africa: The Story of Robert Moffat and the Kuruman Press*, Kuruman Mission Trust: Kuruman, 1987, pp. 32-33.

⁴⁴ 'Tangazo la Bwana Shauri', *Uremi*, 30 April 1935, p. 3, TNA 20984, f. 54.

In some cases, extracts from newspapers have found their way to the national archives of the colonising power, where they sometimes form the subject of agonized discussion between civil servants over the significance and meaning of the words printed on their pages. Many government archives include files concerned with the ‘vernacular press’. Officials would first have the content translated before considering its implications. The result might be a set of pages of typed text, in which the words of a speech or editorial are excised from the context in which they first appeared and can appear very different as a result. At the same time, choices made in the process of translation could have major implications for the way the content of a newspaper was eventually read.

More recently, newspapers have begun to change form for different reasons. A growing understanding of the importance of newspapers as sources for our understanding of the past has led to a series of conservation projects, first using microfilm and more recently using digital technology.⁴⁵ Both technologies change the way that the reader engages with the newspaper. In both cases, the reader is unable to experience the material form of the newspaper. In the case of digitization, the reader can begin research by using search tools to jump from one word to another, and only after key articles have been identified move to download full issues.

This opens up a range of new research possibilities. It makes it possible to use newspapers as sources without travelling to the repository in which the newspaper is held. It can be less time-consuming. Working through a complete run of a particular newspaper, particularly one published every day, requires a major time commitment and this can shape the kind of

⁴⁵ John Edward Philips, ‘The early issues of the first newspaper in Hausa *Gaskiya ta fi Kwabo*’, *History in Africa*, 41 (2014), 425-431.

historical research carried out, for example leading a historian to focus on only one newspaper rather than reading different newspapers side by side which could mean missing the dialogue between newspapers which often takes place. Yet if digital technologies open up new possibilities, they can limit others.⁴⁶ If text-searching software is used, our eyes are directed towards some parts of the newspaper and not others. Inevitably, too, choices are made in terms of what is digitized, and digitization projects often privilege English or French-language newspapers over newspapers in African vernaculars.

At the same time, while there is a vast repository of extant newspapers from 1800, many newspapers have *not* survived. Newspapers were often very short lived and this can mean that no trace remains. Accidents of survival can offer a misleading picture. The issue of a newspaper which was deemed sufficiently dangerous to public order to find its way to a colonial official's desk may, as a result, be the only issue of that newspaper which survives, yet its contents may well be far from representative of the typical content of that newspaper. Were its contents typical, one suspects that other issues would have found their way to that same official's desk or that the newspaper would have been closed down sooner. More prosaically, some issues were simply lost and did not make it into bound volumes or into archival files. In other cases, parts of a newspaper's pages may be preserved but nevertheless have become unreadable through such everyday accidents of archival preservation, from insect damage to water damage.

In what historical context were newspapers produced?

⁴⁶ Lara Putnam, 'The transnational and the text-searchable: digitized sources and the shadows they cast', *American Historical Review*, 121, 2 (2016), 377-402.

The history of newspaper publication in Africa began around 1800, and the form taken by newspapers has been shaped by the changing historical context in which they have been published. Changing legal regimes shaped what it was possible to publish and how. In Tanganyika in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, the British sought to prevent the emergence of an independent press by demanding a hefty bond from any publisher who sought to publish on a fortnightly basis. The editor of *Kwetu*, Erica Fiah managed to avoid this restriction by publishing his newspaper every 18 days.⁴⁷ In the early post-colonial period, new nationalist governments often sought to control newspapers by bringing them under government control. In contrast, other periods saw a rich flourishing of an independent press, notably in the 1940s and 1950s and then again in the period of Africa's 'second liberation' in the late 1980s and 1990s. Wider geopolitical events could have an impact too – as was the case during the Second World War when a shortage of paper had serious consequences for newspaper production across the continent.

What sort of historical information do newspapers provide and how can we test and validate it?

Newspapers provide historical information about a huge variety of topics ranging from politics and law to economics and social change. This means that there is a wide range of historical research which can be done using newspapers as sources, as we shall see when we turn to review the literature.

But like all types of source material used by historians, newspapers pose challenges for the historian and must be approached critically. The claims made by newspapers to objectivity

⁴⁷ N.J. Westcott, 'An East African radical: the life of Erica Fiah', *Journal of African History*, 22 (1981), 85-101, p. 92.

and truth can lead to historians taking their content at face value. There are also more specific challenges. The most basic questions, such as who published the newspaper and who was the editor, can be extremely hard to answer. So too, very often, are questions about readership. What were the circulation figures? Who read (or listened to) the newspaper? How did newspaper readers read? How did the oral and the written interact?

Newspapers as sources of ‘fact’

In 1970, James Finucane, a political scientist conducting research in north-western Tanzania, was surprised to read a newspaper report describing what happened when the Uhuru Torch, a concrete symbol of nation-building in post-colonial Tanzania, reached the town of Mwanza in the course of its annual nationwide tour. The newspaper, *The Nationalist*, described a momentous event in the town’s calendar. ‘Almost the entire population of Mwanza town yesterday lined up the streets to give a colourful reception to Uhuru Torch... Revolution songs... greeted the Uhuru Torch as it was being raced through the streets of the town.’⁴⁸

This account was distinctly at odds with Finucane’s recollection, which was that: ‘Its passing was observed by a small detachment of the police field force unit and National Servicemen who were accompanying it, by five members of the TANU Youth League who walked quickly with it through the streets, and by school children who had been lined up by their teachers.’⁴⁹

Newspapers can be seen by historians as a source of facts, a place to go to find out what happened. Thus a historian seeking to establish the timeline which led to a major event might turn to the relevant issues of the country’s main daily newspaper. This approach depends on a

⁴⁸ James Finucane, *Rural Development and Bureaucracy in Tanzania*, (Uppsala, 1974), p. 65fn.

⁴⁹ Finucane, *Rural Development*, p. 65fn.

view of the newspaper as an objective source of information, but as Stephen Ellis reminds us, writing specifically about the newspapers of post-colonial Africa, newspapers ‘must be regarded as highly partial sources’.⁵⁰ In this case, to understand the perspective taken by *The Nationalist*, it is helpful to know that it was one of two newspapers published by the ruling party, TANU, and the only one published in English.⁵¹ As such, it was intended both for a relatively elite local audience in Tanzania, but also for a wider international audience.

This does not mean that *The Nationalist* is of no use to us as a source, but it does change the questions we can ask of it. The newspaper is unlikely to provide reliable evidence of what happened on the ground on important days in the nationalist calendar. However, it tells us a great deal about how the nationalist party TANU sought to project an image of successful nation-building efforts, both to the Tanzanian population and to the world.

Newspapers, this example reminds us, cannot be used uncritically as repositories of facts.⁵² They are a genre, with their own conventions. They are also part of a wider cultural landscape. As cultural historian Robert Darnton writes, the graffiti in a Manhattan police station stating that “All the news that fits we print” has a deeper truth lying behind the obvious point that articles will only make it into the newspaper if there is sufficient space. ‘[N]ewspaper stories’, Darnton writes, ‘must fit cultural preconceptions of news.’⁵³

The idea that newspapers print only verifiable truth comes from a normative idea of what a newspaper is, which itself has a long history. In colonial Africa, readers and editors

⁵⁰ Stephen Ellis, ‘Writing histories of contemporary Africa’, *Journal of African History*, 43 (2002), 1-26, p. 16.

⁵¹ The other, *Uhuru*, was published in Swahili. For more details, see Martin Sturmer, *The media history of Tanzania* (Ndanda: Ndanda Mission Press, 1998).

⁵² Ellis, ‘Writing histories of contemporary Africa’.

⁵³ Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette*, New York: Norton, 1990, p. 90.

disciplined each other, reminding fellow readers and writers that when they prepared text for the newspaper they should only submit items which were ‘true’. And yet despite these high-minded admonitions, gossip and rumour have always found their way into newspapers, and by appearing in printed form, acquired added currency.⁵⁴ This was as true of colonial era newspapers as newspapers published in the post-colonial state.

This points to a further challenge which confronts the historian who wishes to use newspapers as sources, the interplay of the world on the page and the world off the page, or the written and the oral. We can use newspapers to understand social and cultural history, but we also need to understand the social and cultural history of the place we are studying to understand the place of newspapers in that society.

In the first place, we need to know who read which newspapers; yet we often do not have the sorts of hard evidence about readership that historians of other parts of the world take for granted.⁵⁵ To return to our example from Mwanza, a month before the Uhuru Torch came to Mwanza, Finucane conducted a survey and found that the District of Geita, also in Mwanza Region, was receiving only 3 copies of *The Nationalist*, alongside 25 copies of the other party newspaper *Uhuru*, and 35 copies of *The Standard*. These numbers were far outstripped by the Catholic fortnightly *Kiongozi*, 70 copies of which were sold, and the Nairobi-published Swahili weekly *Baraza*, which sold 170 copies.⁵⁶ It is interesting to note that the newspaper with the largest circulation in Geita was not a Tanzanian newspaper but *Baraza*, a newspaper

⁵⁴ Ellis, ‘Writing histories of contemporary Africa’, p. 20; Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: rumor and history in colonial Africa*, Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000, p. 259.

⁵⁵ James R. Brennan, ‘Communications and Media History’, in John Parker and Richard Reid, eds., *The Oxford handbook of modern African History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, DOI 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199572472.013.0026.

⁵⁶ Finucane, *Rural Development and Bureaucracy*, p. 46

published in Kenya. The assumption that the citizens of a nation-state read first and foremost the newspapers published in that nation-state is not, in this case, correct.

These low circulation figures might lead us to conclude that newspapers were of peripheral importance in Geita. Yet it is likely that more than one person read each copy of a newspaper. For colonial Africa, it is often said that each copy sold reached around ten people, but such figures can only ever be very rough approximations.⁵⁷ Nor can we make assumptions based on literacy rates. In her study of newspaper reading in 1950s Uganda, Luise White describes the ways in which newspapers were read aloud, translated into vernaculars and their content debated in public settings. As White writes, ‘The crowds in Katwe and Wandegeya might not be newspaper readers, but they knew what newspapers said.’⁵⁸

If it is difficult to know how many people read newspapers, it is hard too to uncover *how* these people read them. As colonial states sought to use mass media to create loyal imperial subjects, they worried that their African subjects were not reading the papers as they were supposed to. During wartime, many colonial states turned to newspapers to squash rumours and to ensure that their account of wartime events reached their subjects. Yet in Southern Rhodesia, attempts by the Chief Native Commissioner to publish news bulletins with news of the war translated into African languages drew opposition from some officials and settlers. In Southern Rhodesia, E.A. Cordell, Location Welfare Officer in the town of Salisbury, wrote that in his view the ‘semi-educated native misses the import of a printed statement like: “A German communique states...” and accepts the following statement as being accurate

⁵⁷ Mhoze Chikowero, ‘Is Propaganda Modernity? Press and Radio Broadcasting to Africans in Colonial Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi, 1939-1950s,’ in Stephan Miescher, Peter Bloom and Takywa Manuh (eds.), *Modernization as Spectacle in Africa*, Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2014, pp. 112-135, p. 116.

⁵⁸ White, *Speaking with Vampires*, p. 252.

news'.⁵⁹ The result of such criticism was that the news bulletins were stopped and the government returned to methods such as public meetings to make their case. Colonial concerns about African newspaper reading habits did not cease after the Second World War. Mass education projects after 1945 included lessons on 'how to read a newspaper'.⁶⁰

African editors too worried about the reading habits of their readers, though from a different perspective. In 1950s Uganda, the editor Eridadi Mulira complained that readers preferred to believe rumours rather than the truth contained in the newspaper. Rumours were, Mulira wrote, 'a habit... lazy thinking. You hear a rumor, you believe in it, and then it has become a habit for people, they cannot distinguish between rumour and truth'.⁶¹

This means not only that we need to pose the same rigorous questions of newspapers as we would of any source, but that we need to think what questions we *can* ask of these sources. What historical questions do African newspapers enable us to answer? What kinds of theoretical models might we profitably use to engage with newspapers? What are the benefits of engaging with other disciplines? Some of the most productive recent work has come at the intersection of disciplines and through engagement with new theoretical frameworks. It is to this growing body of scholarship that I now turn.

Discussion of the Literature

What kinds of historical questions do African newspapers allow us to answer? For some historians, newspapers are important primarily as a source of information, as a way of

⁵⁹ Chikowero, 'Is Propaganda Modernity?', p. 117.

⁶⁰ White, *Speaking with Vampires*, p. 255.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

reconstructing chronologies and finding out what happened and when. They are used in conjunction with other types of sources to reconstruct the past. For others, newspapers are a key part of Africa's rich textual cultures, part of a textual landscape which was once relatively neglected yet the importance of which is now being rediscovered by historians. Seeing newspapers in this way opens up the type of historical questions which newspapers can be called upon to answer.⁶²

In cases where archival or printed records are thin, newspapers can offer a valuable source for such information. Early historians of nationalism drew on newspapers to trace the development and growth of nationalist parties in Africa. For historians of post-colonial Africa, for whom the traditional sources for political history, such as state and party archives, are often simply not available, newspapers offer significant potential as a source of evidence.⁶³ For Miles Larmer, writing about opposition politics and protests in 1980s Zambia, newspapers, 'despite being themselves state-controlled, provide a glimpse of the extent of popular unrest.'⁶⁴

For some places and times, newspapers are a key source for the writing of political history because newspapers were the primary space in which political activity was taking place. Writers in colonial West Africa's press explicitly linked the importance of the press to the absence of other forms of political engagement. In 1905, the editor of the *Gold Coast Leader* reminded readers that, in a context where they were denied the vote, the press was 'our fourth

⁶² Karin Barber's edited collection, *Africa's Hidden Histories: everyday literacy and the making of the self*, Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2006, played an important role in demonstrating the importance of texts as a source for African history.

⁶³ Ellis, 'Writing Contemporary African history'.

⁶⁴ Miles Larmer, *Rethinking African politics: a history of opposition in Zambia*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, p. 248.

and only estate'.⁶⁵ In a similar vein, in 1903 a Lagos newspaper described the press as 'the only medium for the people to express their grievances'.⁶⁶ In this context, newspapers themselves become the object of study for those writing the history of political battles.

For historians of political thought, African newspapers do more than merely enable us to identify key political actors and key events: they allow us to answer questions about how political ideas changed over time. Newspapers provide a crucial body of evidence of changing ideas and their circulation. Many important figures in the intellectual history of nineteenth and twentieth-century Africa were journalists or edited their own newspapers, and newspapers are thus a crucial source for their ideas.

For the first generation of historians writing the history of nationalism and pan-Africanism, the English-language West African press was a crucial source through which to examine the emergence and spread of nationalist ideas. An outstanding example of this tradition is Robert W. July's 1968 book, *The Origins of Modern African Thought: its development in West Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*.⁶⁷ More recently, historians have expanded their gaze beyond the intellectual history of nationalism towards a wider intellectual history of Africa. For example, Philip Zachernuk's study of a 'colonial intelligentsia' in Nigeria is in part a story of newspapers, in which he traces those Nigerians who 'actively contributed, in public meetings or through the newspaper press and other publications, to discussions of Nigeria's past, present, and future problems.'⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Cited in Stephanie Newell, 'Paradoxes of Press Freedom', *Media History*, 22 (2016), 101-122, p. 105.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁶⁷ Robert W. July, *The origins of modern African thought: its development in West Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, London: Faber, 1968.

⁶⁸ Philip Zachernuk, *Colonial Subjects: An African Intelligentsia and Atlantic Ideas*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000, p. 12.

Yet newspapers are not only a source through which to explore the thinking of prominent individuals. Although profoundly restricted, they were nevertheless spaces of debate, in which those who could read and write reflected on and debated the political possibilities open to them.⁶⁹ Some of this discussion was in an anti-colonial or nationalist idiom, but much more was not.⁷⁰ Newspapers, then, are sources not only for what happened, but also for how people thought about what was happening around them. For John Lonsdale, for example, the Gikuyu-language newspaper *Muigwithania*, edited by Jomo Kenyatta, is a key source through which to explore Kikuyu thinking about wealth, poverty and civic virtue in the 1920s.⁷¹ Other communities were engaged in similar debates. As Brett Shadle has shown, white settlers used the pages of the *East African Standard* to warn against the risk to white prestige posed by the presence in the colony of ‘poor whites’.⁷² Yet set against these elite voices were those of the poor and their defenders who criticized employers for failing to pay adequate wages.⁷³

A close reading of newspapers allows us to explore the ways in which ideas changed over time and in relation to changing economic or political contexts. While this allows us to explore changing political thinking, it also allows us to explore the ways in which discourses around race, gender or nationhood changed in Africa over time. This approach has, for example, radically altered our understanding of the history of racial thought in Africa.

⁶⁹ Emma Hunter, ‘“Our common humanity”’; Harri Englund, ‘Anti anti-colonialism: vernacular press and emergent possibilities in colonial Zambia’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 57, 1 (2015), 221-247; Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, *La Conquête de l’Espace Public Colonial*, Frankfurt am Main: IKO Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 2003.

⁷⁰ See for example, Peter Limb, ‘The Empire Writes Back: African Challenges to the British (South African) Empire in the early Twentieth Century’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 41, 3 (2015), 599-616; Nate Plageman, ‘“Accra is Changing, Isn’t it?”: Urban Infrastructure, Independence, and Nation in the Gold Coast’s “Daily Graphic,” 1954-57’, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 43, 1 (2010), 137-159;

⁷¹ John Lonsdale, ‘Wealth, poverty and civic virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought’ in Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, eds., *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa, Volume 2*, Oxford: James Currey, 1992, pp. 315-504.

⁷² Brett Shadle, *The Souls of White Folk: White Settlers in Kenya, 1900s-1920s*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015, p. 63.

⁷³ Shadle, *The Souls of White Folk*, p. 66.

Historians seeking to explain the hardening of racial categories in colonial Africa and the racial violence which came after independence in places such as Zanzibar once turned to the social categories and concepts introduced by colonial rulers and the ways in which they were instrumentally employed by African intermediaries to mobilise constituencies of support. In contrast, Jonathan Glassman has argued that it is to Africa's 'own intellectual histories' that we must turn to find 'the sources of racial thought', and '[t]o the extent that imported concepts were significant, Africans' encounter with them took the form not of an embrace but of an entanglement, in which locally generated ideas were inextricably entwined'.⁷⁴

Newspapers played a crucial role in this history. In Zanzibar, the case study he explores, a key space for 'cross-fertilizing intellectual circuits' were Zanzibar's newspapers, and thus any study of the intellectual history of racial thought in Zanzibar must take newspapers seriously as a source.⁷⁵

Glassman's emphasis on the entangled history of ideas and the difficulty of separating out 'colonial' and 'African' discourses is important in relation to methodologies for the use of newspapers as sources. Historians once privileged independent, African-owned newspapers in writing the intellectual history of colonial Africa. But more recently historians have also begun to take newspapers and periodicals owned, financed and sometimes edited by missionaries and colonial governments, seriously as sources for the intellectual history of colonial Africa.⁷⁶ In his study of a newspaper published by the colonial state in Zambia, the

⁷⁴ Jonathon Glassman, *War of words, war of stones: racial thought and violence in colonial Zanzibar*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011, p. x.

⁷⁵ Glassman, *War of words, war of stones*, p. 150. A similar role was played by newspapers in mainland Tanzania, on which see James R. Brennan, *Taifa: making nation and race in urban Tanzania*, Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2012.

⁷⁶ James R. Brennan, 'Racial nationalism in Tanzania, 1920-1950', *Social Identities*, 12, 4 (2006), 405-423; Hunter, "'Our common humanity'"; Maria Suriano, 'Letters to the Editor and Poems: Mambo Leo and Readers' Debates on Dansi, Ustaaarabu, Respectability, and Modernity in Tanganyika, 1940s-1950s', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 57, 3 (2011), 39-55.

anthropologist Harri Englund shows that while the newspaper might have been intended by the colonial state simply as a means of informing its African subjects, it was used by these subjects to make claims on the state, sometimes in unexpected ways.⁷⁷ The same was true of the periodical *Mambo Leo* in colonial Tanganyika. Intended by the colonial state as a space in which to teach colonial subjects about their duties as colonial subjects, it was also used by its readers to express grievances. By the 1930s, officials in the education department had come to recognize its importance as one of a small number of ways they had of directly accessing African thought.⁷⁸

We can trace debates and discussions in the pages of newspapers, not only about political questions but more generally about social and cultural issues. In her recent study of gender, sexuality and marriage in the Gold Coast, Carina Ray reads African-owned Gold Coast newspapers alongside archival sources to explore changing attitudes towards interracial relationships.⁷⁹ For a later period, advice columns like the long-running ‘Dear Dolly’ advice column in *Drum* magazine provide valuable sources for the history of sexuality and youth in 1960s and 1970s Africa.⁸⁰ For historians working on this recent past, it is possible to combine newspaper research with interviews to learn more about how the column was read. In her study of ‘Dear Dolly’, Kenda Mutongi found that while young men read the column aloud, in public, using it as the basis for a wider discussion about sex and sexuality, young women tended to read it in secret, and to take from it new vocabularies and languages which they

⁷⁷ Englund, ‘Anti anti-colonialism’.

⁷⁸ Hunter, “‘Our common humanity’”, p. 296.

⁷⁹ Carina E. Ray, *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Sex, and the Contested Politics of Colonialism in Ghana*, Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2015, p. 22.

⁸⁰ Kenda Mutongi, “‘Dear Dolly’s’ Advice: Representations of Youth, Courtship, and Sexualities in Africa, 1960-1980’, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 33, 1 (2000), 1-23.

then employed in letters to their boyfriends.⁸¹ Others have used newspapers to explore changing conceptions of womanhood or childhood in colonial and post-colonial Africa.⁸²

Newspapers have long been a source for cultural and social histories of Africa. Terence Ranger's study of the Beni *ngoma* or dance societies in eastern Africa used evidence from *The Mombasa Times* to show the role which Beni societies played in major civic events.⁸³ For historians of sport, newspapers provide vivid insights into the role which sports like football and boxing played in society.⁸⁴

More recently, historians interested in the history of consumer cultures in twentieth-century Africa have found the advertisements which appeared in newspapers to provide a valuable body of source material. This literature is closely tied to a growing body of work exploring the history of the emergence of new kinds of middle class or elite identities in colonial Africa.⁸⁵ For the historian Timothy Burke, 'press advertisements' serve as 'the best witness to historical shifts in the practices and discourses of marketing in colonial Zimbabwe.'⁸⁶ Yet care must also be taken in using advertisements as sources. In his study of beer and gin advertising in decolonization-era Nigeria, Dmitri van den Bersselaar, shows that while in the case of beer, emphasizing the ways in which beer drinking was part of a 'modern' lifestyle

⁸¹ Mutongo, "Dear Dolly's Advice", p. 20.

⁸² Saheed Aderinto, 'Researching colonial childhoods: images and representations in Nigerian newspaper Press, 1925-1950', *History in Africa*, 39 (2012), 241-266; Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué, "When women wear slacks": Fashion, Beauty, and Gendered Nation-Building in West Cameroon, 1961-1982', Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Purdue University, 2013.

⁸³ T.O. Ranger, *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa 1890-1970: the Beni Ngoma*, London: Heinemann, 1975, p. 34.

⁸⁴ Peter C. Alegi, 'Playing to the Gallery? Sport, Cultural Performance, and Social Identity in South Africa, 1920s-1945', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 35, 1 (2002), 17-38.

⁸⁵ Daniel Toedt, 'Les Noirs Perfectionnés': Cultural Embourgeoisement in Belgian Congo during the 1940s and 1950s', in *Working Papers des Sonderforschungsbereiches* 640 4/2012. Earlier studies of middle class culture, particularly in South Africa, also used newspapers as sources.

⁸⁶ Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy men, lux women: commodification, consumption, and cleanliness in modern Zimbabwe*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1996, p. 140.

worked well, for gin this strategy failed to match consumers' understanding of that product. Advertisers eventually switched strategy and moved to linking gin with 'tradition'. 'When using advertisements as historical sources', van den Bersselaar concludes, 'we thus need to understand advertising as a negotiated process and consider how advertising for any particular product evolved over time.'⁸⁷

Newspapers as spaces of literary and textual experimentation

Historians have recently begun to understand the newspaper as a lens through which to explore African reading and literary cultures. Much of this new work has come at the interface of disciplines, with important contributions from literary scholars and anthropologists.

Across the continent, newspapers were important sites of literary production. In colonial Francophone Africa, for example, very few books were published by African authors. Yet by turning to the press, we find an extensive corpus of fiction, poetry, ethnographies and other literary forms.⁸⁸ For some writers, publishing in newspapers was a precursor to publishing their own volumes. Louis-Marie Pouka M'Bague, for example, published 'ethnographic descriptions, folk materials and commentaries on proverbs' in *La Gazette du Cameroun* before going on to become 'the first Cameroonian to publish a poetry volume'.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Dmitri van den Bersselaar, 'Who belongs to the 'Star People'?: Negotiating beer and gin advertisements in West Africa, 1949-75', *Journal of African History*, 52 (2011), 385-408, p. 408.

⁸⁸ Lüsebrink, *La Conquête de l'Espace Public Colonial*, p. 12.

⁸⁹ Richard Bjornson, *The African Quest for Freedom and Identity: Cameroonian writing and the national experience*, Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 23. John L. Dube's newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal*, launched in 1903, is another example of newspapers providing a space in which to publish new poetry. Heather Hughes, *First President: A Life of John L. Dube, founding president of the ANC*, Auckland Park, SA: Jacana Media, 2011, p. 103.

The first novels often appeared in newspapers, published in serialised form. This was the case of *Marita: or the Folly of Love*, which has some claim to be West Africa's first English-language novel written by an African writer, published as a serial over two years between January 1886 and January 1888, and of Thomas Mofolo's *Traveller to the East*, published in the Sesotho-language newspaper *Leselinyana* or 'The Little Light' from 1907.⁹⁰ And it is also true of the story published in the Yoruba newspaper *Akede Eko* between July 1929 and March 1930, purporting to be a true account of the life of a Lagosian prostitute called Segilola but in fact a morality tale constructed by the newspaper's editor I.B. Thomas and which is now recognised as the first Yoruba novel.⁹¹ More recently, since the liberalization of the press in Tanzania in the 1990s, newspaper serials published in the tabloid press have become the most widely read form of fiction, entertaining readers with gripping stories of the seamier sides of modern life.⁹²

The serialised novel was a new genre in Africa, but the styles in which novels were written drew on older literary forms. And alongside these new genres, newspapers allowed writers to re-interpret older genres in new ways in print. In East Africa, Swahili poetry, once produced in oral form or in Arabic-script Swahili, took on new life in Roman-script Swahili in government, mission and later independent newspapers.⁹³ In the bilingual Yoruba and

⁹⁰ Stephanie Newell, *Marita: Or the Folly of Love. A Novel by A. Native*, Leiden: Brill, 2002, p. 1; Thomas Mofolo, *Traveller to the East*, London: Penguin, 2007.

⁹¹ Karin Barber, *Print Culture and the first Yoruba Novel: I.B. Thomas's 'Life story of me, Segilola' and other texts*, Leiden: Brill, 2012, p. 3.

⁹² Uta Reuster-Jahn, 'Newspaper serials in Tanzania: The Case of Eric James Shigongo (with an interview)', *Swahili Forum*, 15, 2008, 25-50, p. 25.

⁹³ Kelly Askew, 'Everyday Poetry from Tanzania: Microcosm of the Newspaper Genre', in Derek R. Peterson, Emma Hunter and Stephanie Newell, eds., *African Print Cultures: newspapers and their publics in the twentieth century*, Ann Arbor MI: Michigan University Press, 2016, pp. 179-223.

English newspapers of 1920s Lagos, writers drew on oral forms to convey messages to fellow Yoruba speakers which could not be adequately rendered into English.⁹⁴

But textual experimentation went beyond the realm of fictional prose and poetry. In her recent book, *The Power to Name: A History of Anonymity in Colonial West Africa*, the literary scholar Stephanie Newell brings the dynamism of the African-owned press to life, as a zone of ‘literary creativity and textual experimentation.’⁹⁵ Her focus is on the use of pseudonymity and anonymity in the press, and the ways in which writers often ‘carefully concealed their identities behind the “screen” of print.’⁹⁶ Newell’s purpose is not to uncover the ‘real’ identities behind the pseudonyms, but rather to explore the ways in which anonymity and pseudonymity ‘allowed writers to experiment with voices, genders, genres, and opinions; to vocalize across identities; and to play *against* biographical methods and desires.’⁹⁷ I.B. Thomas’s ‘Life Story of me, Segilola’, is another example of such pseudonymous writing.⁹⁸

Asking questions about who newspapers addressed, how they addressed those readers, and how newspapers brought new communities into being allows us to use newspapers as source for another set of questions around the construction of new types of identities in colonial and post-colonial Africa.

Newspapers, identities and publics

⁹⁴ Karin Barber, ‘Translation, Publics and the Vernacular Press in 1920s Lagos’ in Toyin Falola, ed., *Christianity and Social Change in Africa: Essays in Honor of J.D.Y. Peel*, Durham NC: Carolina University Press, 2005, pp. 187-208, pp. 205-6.

⁹⁵ Stephanie Newell, *The Power to Name: A History of Anonymity in Colonial West Africa*, Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2013, p. 2.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹⁸ Barber, *Print Culture and the first Yoruba Novel*, Leiden: Brill, 2012.

For Benedict Anderson, the history of nationalism is intimately tied to the history of print media. Of central importance is the concept, borrowed from Walter Benjamin, of ‘homogenous, empty time’, in which readers of newspapers are brought together as a community through the shared ritual of reading a daily newspaper.⁹⁹ This simultaneity ‘allows one to imagine a limited sovereign community beyond face-to-face relations as well as to envision other limited sovereignties besides one’s own as equivalent.’¹⁰⁰ Newspapers, then, provide a way of thinking about how nations were imaginatively constructed, both before and after independence.

Historians interested in the ways in which post-colonial nations were normalized have also been drawn to newspapers and the role they played in creating and reinforcing a national imaginary. The social scientist Michael Billig has used the term ‘banal nationalism’ to describe the ‘ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced’. For Billig, newspapers are one of a myriad of ways in which the ‘nation is indicated, or ‘flagged’, in the lives of its citizenry.’¹⁰¹ As historians increasingly ask how national identities developed in post-colonial Africa, newspapers are likely to form an important means of answering this question.¹⁰²

Newspapers were not only agents in the making of national identities. As Karin Barber writes, “[t]he role of print (and subsequently the electronic media) in the constitution of a *national* imagined community was only one strand in a history that included the simultaneous

⁹⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 24; Benedict Anderson, *Spectre of Comparison: Nationalism, South East Asia and the World* (London: Verso, 1998), 29-45.

¹⁰⁰ Pheng Cheah, “Grounds of Comparison,” in *Grounds of Comparison: Around the Work of Benedict Anderson*, ed. Jonathan Culler and Pheng Cheah, London: Routledge, 2003, 6-7.

¹⁰¹ Michael Billig, *Banal nationalism*, London: Sage, 1995, p. 6.

¹⁰² See for example a special issue of the journal *Nations and Nationalism*, published in 2013, eg. Carola Lentz, ‘The 2010 independence jubilees: the politics and aesthetics of national commemoration in Africa’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 19, 2 (2013), 217-237.

consolidation of local ethnic and other identities and the imagining of supra-national communities”.¹⁰³

The role which African newspapers played in creating new kinds of communities was not self-evident. Convening a new kind of public required work on behalf of editors, and active engagement from readers. An exciting emerging body of work explores the modes of editorial addressivity which brought these new textual communities into being, and the ways in which, as discussed above, the world on the page and the world off the page intertwined.¹⁰⁴

While national or ethnic identities were once seen as usurping previous identities, a close reading of colonial and post-colonial newspapers can offer insights into the ways in which different textual communities interacted and the ways in which communities created through print waxed and waned.

Newspapers as sources

As we have seen, the growing use of newspapers as sources is due not only to a greater awareness of their importance in African history and their increasing accessibility, thanks in part to digitization projects, but also to a dramatic expansion in the range of historical questions which newspapers are employed to answer. There remains a great deal of untapped potential for these sources to yield up the secrets of Africa’s past. Yet they must also, like all sources, be approached with care.

Primary source section

There are a number of digital collections through which African newspapers can be accessed.

¹⁰³ Karin Barber, *The anthropology of texts, persons and publics: oral and written culture in Africa and beyond*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 145.

¹⁰⁴ See for example Peterson, Hunter and Newell, eds., *African Print Cultures*, Part 3.

World Newspaper Archive – contains African newspapers 1800-1922. Includes newspapers published in a number of European languages, including English, French and Portuguese, African languages, including Afrikaans, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Xhosa and Zulu, and Indian Ocean languages, including Gujarati, Hindi, Malagasy and Tamil. Phase two is now under way and many more newspapers will soon be available.

<https://www.crl.edu/collaborations/global-resources-partnerships/news/world-newspaper-archive>

Cooperative Africana Materials Project: collection of more than 1400 African newspapers on microfilm with some also available in digitized form. Includes newspapers from across the continent and from 1800 to the present day: <https://www.crl.edu/area-studies/camp/membership-information/project-history>

Gallica: This database includes a growing number of historical Francophone African newspapers. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/accueil/>

Many more are available on microfilm or as print copies in the Bibliotheque Nationale Française.

The British Library's Endangered Archives Project has played a role in digitizing rare newspapers, for example the Hausa-language newspaper *Gaskiya ta fi kwabo*, published in colonial Nigeria: <http://eap.bl.uk>

Some publishers are also making newspapers available digitally. For example, Brill's *Missionary Archives from Lesotho, 1832-2006* which includes a complete run of the Sesotho-language newspaper *Leselinyana*, published from 1863-2006.

As discussed in the entry above, libraries and archives in Africa and around the world have extensive holdings of African newspapers on microfilm and in print copies.

Further Reading

Karin Barber, *Print Culture and the first Yoruba Novel: I.B. Thomas's 'Life story of me, Segilola' and other texts*, Leiden: Brill, 2012

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Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: rumor and history in colonial Africa*, Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000