



Colonial knowledge pathways back to the European capitals and how to use them to recover the history of African knowledge in the early 20th century

[Pistes de recherche dans les capitales coloniales européennes pour dévoiler l'histoire des connaissances africaines dans la première moitié du 20ème siècle]

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ABSTRACT :

From the decline of the Library of Alexandria to the pan-African intellectual awakening associated with modern independence movements and mass communications the commonwealth of knowledge was eclipsed in Africa. Muslim North Africa and Spain had high civilizations and great learning but were essentially the first and most successful colonial regimes to rule in Africa, with their centres of civilization outside the continent. The subsequent European scramble for African colonies fissured the African intellectual landscape into different language camps and exported African knowledge to the colonial capitals rather than keeping it and sharing it in Africa. Some resources for reconstructing an African commonwealth of knowledge for the colonial era are explored.

La communauté des connaissances en Afrique a connu une traverse du désert dès la chute de la bibliothèque d'Alexandrie jusqu'à la renaissance intellectuelle panafricaine liée aux mouvements indépendantistes modernes et aux médias de communication de masse. L'Afrique du Nord et l'Espagne musulmans possédaient des hautes civilisations et des grands savants mais furent essentiellement les premiers et les plus réussis des régimes colonialistes à gouverner l'Afrique, car le centre de leur civilisation fut hors Afrique. La ruée européenne des siècles 17^{ème} au 20^{ème} pour contrôler et coloniser les territoires africains a fissuré le terrain intellectuel africain par langues et a exporté les connaissances africaines aux capitales colonialistes au lieu de les retenir en Afrique et de les partager à travers le continent. On mettra en vedette certaines ressources pour la reconstitution historique d'une communauté africaine de connaissances pour l'ère coloniale.

Between the fall of the Library of Alexandria in the 7th century of our era and the development of modern means of mass communication and diffusion of knowledge in the 21st-century Africa stretches fourteen centuries of terra incognita.

Africa had high civilizations in the Muslim middle ages. Great institutions of learning like Al-Akbar University in Cairo were founded. Ancient Greek and African learning was transmitted by the North African dynasties to al-Andalus, helping produce the cultural efflorescence that made Muslim Spain the intellectual centre of Europe in the tenth to thirteenth centuries. The Muslim scholar Averroes (Ibn Rushd), through whom Thomas Aquinas knew Aristotle, was at home in both Africa and Spain. The African Muslim traveler Ibn Batuta continued the work of Strabo and penetrated the heart of the continent; the philosopher Ibn Khaldun carried forward the tide of historical learning that had first crested in Alexander's metropolis. But the intellectual map of medieval Muslim Africa is little known because it is hidden in Arabic, Africa's first colonial language, in records written in a non-Western script, and is viewed by scholars from the perspective of Baghdad rather than of Timbuktu.

From the sixteenth century on, the absentee Ottoman Turkish rule in North Africa made of it an intellectual backwater. The era of the spice trade, of the slave trade, of voyages around the Cape of Good Hope to Zanzibar and India, gradually opened up sub-Saharan Africa to European exploitation and colonization, and the nineteenth-century scramble for Africa divided the continent up into Western European colonial empires. The history of African knowledge from the seventeenth to the twentieth century was recorded, not in African libraries or institutions of learning, nor in African languages, but in the company and governmental archives of the European colonial powers, in European languages. Knowledge of Africa flourished, but not in African countries; it was disseminated vertically, up the colonial hierarchy to the European capitals, rather than horizontally, across African colonial boundaries. In consequence deep fissures of language and dislocation still mar the map of African knowledge in the imperial age, like rift valleys in the intellectual landscape of early 20th century Africa.

How do we follow the colonial knowledge pathways back to the European capitals, and how can we learn to use European colonial archives and study centres, on or off the Internet, to recover the history of African knowledge in the early 20th century? That is the subject of this brief presentation.

From the outset I want to acknowledge the invaluable help of my IFLA Reference and Information Services colleague Petra Van den Born of the UNESCO library in Paris in researching information resources on colonial Africa. She looked for references on the subject of African colonial history and knowledge resources in the capitals of the major European powers that carved up Africa : England, France, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Germany, and The Netherlands. Not surprisingly, she found that most often searches on subjects of

African colonial knowledge such as “colonial history” led to the respective national libraries and archives of the colonial powers.

In particular, the historical files of reports from Africa to the British Colonial Office and to corresponding governmental agencies for the colonies in each of the other major European colonial powers of the 19th and 20th centuries contain vast and rich resources for the recovery of African knowledge from the imperial era. The civil servants of empire were well educated and eager to prove their usefulness to their masters back home by reporting thoroughly on a myriad of subjects. But the mining of these documents is tedious: they are ill indexed if at all by subject matter, they are often buried under obscure titles, and their accidental gold is often discovered only by serendipity, through careful reading of unrelated matter.

The subject range of colonial history, administration and information as recorded in European national libraries and archives is immense, and the resources are often organized across the colonial empire on many continents, rather than by geographical region, making the retrieval from such institutions of resources for the history of African knowledge difficult. One has to search their catalogues and archival indexes by a whole series of geographical keywords and colonial administrative subdivisions, selected from atlases or compendia of colonial history, and seek to isolate reports, studies or books that present particular features of the local African knowledge landscape. And scholarly articles published in specialized journals of colonial history from the different former colonial powers likewise seem to run the gamut of establishments across the world.

Dutch colonial history, for example, covers many places and periods on virtually every continent, from the perspective of a single commercial empire. In this case there is a useful website, <http://www.atlasofmutualheritage.nl/main.aspx?lang=en>, that can be searched to find out categories and keywords to retrieve resources for African knowledge garnered from particular Dutch enterprises and colonies in Africa, like the posts of the Dutch East India Company. But for some other countries no such general Internet resource for tracking down the components of colonial knowledge and heritage from Africa seems to exist.

Centres of African Studies in Europe have created their own retrieval tools for finding out the history of African colonies and colonial knowledge, though again the geographical and subject headings are uneven. The tools can be consulted onsite, or in some cases online, and include subject thesauri, bibliographic databases, and guides to Internet resources. A valuable overview is posted in English on the website of the African Studies Centre of the University of Leiden at <http://www.ascleiden.nl/Library/AfricanStudiesLinks/Libraries.aspx>.

The World of Learning gives particulars for contacting or visiting the main institutes, which are listed on the Leiden website with their library or institutional Internet links as follows:

[Afrika-Studiecentrum, Leiden](http://www.ascleiden.nl/Library/), The Netherlands (<http://www.ascleiden.nl/Library/>)

[Center for Afrikastudier, Copenhagen](http://www.teol.ku.dk/cas/), Denmark (<http://www.teol.ku.dk/cas/>)

[Centre d'Études d'Afrique Noire, Bordeaux](http://www.cean.sciencespobordeaux.fr/documentation.htm), France
(<http://www.cean.sciencespobordeaux.fr/documentation.htm>)

[Institut für Afrika-Kunde, Hamburg](http://www.giga-hamburg.de/index.php?file=iz.html&folder=bibliothek#region), Germany (entries under the heading Afrika at <http://www.giga-hamburg.de/index.php?file=iz.html&folder=bibliothek#region>)

[Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala](http://www.nai.uu.se/library/), Sweden (<http://www.nai.uu.se/library/>)

[School of Oriental and African Studies, Centre of African Studies, London](http://www.soas.ac.uk/library/), England
(<http://www.soas.ac.uk/library/>)

[Zentrum für Afrikastudien, Basel](http://www.unibas-zasb.ch/english/research/sources.php), Switzerland
(<http://www.unibas-zasb.ch/english/research/sources.php>)

Interestingly, there are important institutes of African studies in countries like Sweden, Denmark or Switzerland which had no African colonies, but major institutes seem to be lacking in the Mediterranean colonial powers of Europe, geographically the closest to Africa.

Mention should also be made of African scholars' efforts to recover European colonial knowledge exported from Africa, as noted in the bibliographies of African centres of African studies. The most notable of these is the [Africa Institute of South Africa](http://www.ai.org.za/) in Pretoria (<http://www.ai.org.za/>), which as background to its focus on contemporary Africa also notes colonial studies by African authors in its monthly AISA Web bibliographies, available by e-mail subscription from library@ai.org.za.

General databases of history and the other social sciences, such as INTUTE on the Internet at <http://www.intute.ac.uk/socialsciences/search.html>, will sometimes support useful specific subject heading searches for African knowledge from the colonial period. For example, the subject heading '*colonial history*' in INTUTE retrieves 66 hits scattered around the world, some of them providing links to organizations or digital libraries which have a focus on African colonial knowledge. Hits found by this particular search include links to [Aluka : a digital library of scholarly resources on and about Africa](http://www.aluka.org/) (<http://www.aluka.org/>), to the [French Colonial History Society](http://www.frenchcolonial.org/) (<http://www.frenchcolonial.org/>), to the French National Library's digitised Gallica collection which includes a virtual African knowledge library at <http://gallica.bnf.fr/html/dossiers/VoyagesEnAfrique/>, and to various bibliographic databases of African and Commonwealth history.

UNESCO-related resources for African knowledge studies of the colonial period can be found in the World Digital Library at <http://www.wdl.org/en/>. Searching with the keyword 'colonies' does give you a world-wide result set of 150 images, but these are quite random and not focused on colonial Africa. Unfortunately <http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php->

[URL ID=1501&URL DO=DO TOPIC&URL SECTION=201.html](#), the UNESCO [Archives and Libraries portals](#), are not searchable on subjects like this.

This brief overview of resources and tools for accessing the African knowledge stored up in the former colonial capitals, and of the problems of their use, only scratches the surface of a broad topic. My aim here was not to be exhaustive but to indicate that there is a rich African knowledge continuum from the Arab era through the colonial period to the present, waiting to be exploited by scholars. Unfortunately most of the African knowledge from the colonial era is held captive in strange lands, where like the artefacts of Egypt it was collected and stored up as evidence of their superiority by the lords of human kind.¹

¹ The reference is to the classic title by British Marxist cultural historian V. G. Kiernan, **The Lords of Human Kind: European Attitudes towards the Outside World in the Imperial Age**. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1972 (ISBN: 0140215131)