Words of Paper. Materiality of Writing and its Discourses in African Contexts

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Written supports have become a fully-fledged research subject. In themselves, as well as through their articulation with the sign or signs inscribed therein, they reveal complex discourses, practices and social interactions with vast temporal and geographical ramifications. The interest in written supports is part of the explosion of modes of materiality, in particular, the widespread use of devices for digitizing handwritten and printed textual resources on a global scale and the democratization of its consultation. Initiated some twenty years ago, this movement has now reached a maturity that allows us to reflect not only on the materiality of scriptural documents, but also on the sensory relationship we have with these documents. Indeed, scriptural materiality is not only accessible through a codicological approach to physical media and its ownership. It must also be considered in terms of the sensitive and felt effects of the uses of a support. If, on one hand, the dematerialization resulting from the digitization of documents has revived questions about the physical processes of writing production, on the other, digital vectors and their on-screen display can also be considered as additional layers in the sensitive relationship between the reader and a text. Thus, digital forms of communication reorganize information, while adding new ones through the association and/or dissociation of forms and materials (Bonaccorsi 2013: 127). Therefore, it seemed appropriate to engage in a historical and anthropological reflection that does not start from the narrative content of the texts, but from their supports, in order to understand the societies that produce and receive these texts, but also our own relationship, as researchers, to the written object.

This reflection is the starting point of this special issue devoted to the materiality of writing in African contexts. It is part of the renewal of historical and anthropological studies on writing in Europe and, over the past twenty years, in Africa. In the aftermath of the archival shift from archive-source to archive-subject (Stoler 2018: 78, see also...
Jungen & Raymond (2012), the written object was no longer confined to its source status, but became a subject. The “material turn” was decisive for questioning the paper supports of writing as objects (Roche 1997; Hall 2000; Stolow 2010; Van Damme 2015), which had “largely remained for researchers of little interest” (Hebrard 1999: 10, cited in Mboj-Pouye 2009: 857). In the footsteps of Guglielmo Cavallo and Armando Petrucci, Roger Chartier and Christian Jacob played a seminal role in the study of writing and reading in Europe, and many researchers in African studies were directly inspired by his work, from anthropologists (Cohen 2017; Mboj-Pouye 2013) to historians (Peterson 2004). In parallel, the relationship between meaning, sensuality and written objects such as letters has been the subject of particular attention in recent years, particularly in the field of global history and micro-history (Raabke 2017; Freist forthcoming: 75). The reflections of this relatively new field are also emerging in African Studies, as shown by several contributions to this issue.

Like Europe (Anheim & Chastang 2009), the study of the culture of writing in Africa is based on an older scholarly tradition, in which palaeography has played an important role (Ficquet & Mboj-Pouye 2009: 753; Wion et al. 2016). However, since the pioneering work of Rex Sean O’Fahey and John Hunwick on Arab literature in Africa (O’Fahey & Abu Salim 1983; Hunwick 2005), an important branch of study has developed on African manuscript cultures (Krätli & Lydon 2011; Delmas & Penn 2012; Bausi et al. 2015; Brigaglia & Nobili 2017). Thanks to the collection and enhancement of a rich endogenous manuscript literature, several projects have developed an analytical perspective attentive to the interactions between writing, visuality and orality, and to the diffusion across different manuscript cultures (notably Christian and Islamic), as well as to collection and archiving practices.

Moreover, book historians have rarely considered the African continent. Most have highlighted the role of missionaries, colonial administrators (Davis, Dick & Le Roux 2018: 377) and European or Arab traders in the dissemination of books and literacy in sub-Saharan Africa (Krätli & Lydon 2011). Recently, the history of books, literature and the press in sub-Saharan Africa has attracted the attention of researchers who have become interested in the first endogenous writings in Africa (Ricard 1995; Van Dalen 2016; Delmas 2017; Dewière 2017), contemporary processes of training a reading audience, the social impact of a literary culture, and the production and circulation of books in transnational circuits (Mirza 2017), particularly in Egypt and South Africa (Yusuf 2016; Davis, Dick & Le Roux 2018). The history of print culture in Africa has raised gender and class issues, namely in Egypt, where women entered the male space of the press at the end of the 19th century, gaining new social visibility and as writers and readers of newspapers, poems and autobiographies (Booth 2001; Yusuf 2016).

In France, historical and anthropological research in Africa has taken up the question of writing, from its uses to its production, including its archiving, paving the way for the study of the written object, as well as the way in which it has been manufactured and the tools used, in order to obtain information on the past and the present of African societies. The Annales special issue, coordinated by Aïssatou Mboj-Pouye and Eloi Ficquet (2009), devoted to written cultures in Africa, was an important step in research on African societies. By focusing mainly on the written production resulting from the colonial encounter and the colonial and post-colonial periods, the dossier laid the foundations for research that influenced specialists from all geographical areas and all historical periods in its questioning.
In 2016, the special issue coordinated by Aïssatou Mboj-Pouye, Anaïs Wion and Sébastien Barret (Wion, Barret & Mboj-Pouye 2016) added an additional element to the debate by focusing on a type of document not usually considered by writing specialists in Africa: what these authors call “pragmatic writings.” The attention paid to non-literary documents, namely “a writing register linked to the exercise of administrative and legal functions,” highlighted the close relationship between power and writing, as well as the challenges surrounding the conservation and archiving of texts of power (Street 1993; Goody 2007; Mboj-Pouye & Fraenkel 2010).

This special issue is a continuation of this work. The originality of the contributions lies in their focus, since they do not start from the narrative content of the written documents, but from all the elements that surround the scriptural artifact as an object: not only the support, but also the glosses, the graphic aspect or the relationship between the text and its environment through the senses. By discovering a manuscript, epigraphic inscription, legal act or photograph, the researcher is confronted with an object that has been specially designed, organized and produced to be part of a concrete interaction between originals and recipients (Stollberg-Rilinger 2008). Their analysis reveals the social facts that can be analyzed in the material features of written documents and which would have remained silent if only the discursive features had been considered. Focusing on the materiality of written documents opens up new avenues for research. For example, it makes it possible to analyze the messages expressed through the media and their interactions with their textual content by decoding the layout, images and writing styles chosen by their authors and copyists. When combined with textual study of the documents, articulations between shapes and materials can highlight complementary messages and untold subtexts and stories, reproducing a more complex history of African societies, present or past.

The question of the interaction between materiality and discourse also poses a methodological challenge. With the help of reflections already carried out by archaeologists, anthropologists or in other geographical areas (Chartier 1991, Fabre 1993, Goody 2007; Denis & Pontille 2012; Mboj-Pouye 2013; Thyrza Sparks 2013), we wish to interrogate the relationship historians and anthropologists of Africa develop with their sources, through a new methodological reflection. This questioning may be conducted through a pragmatic approach, linked to the fragmented nature of written documentation, or multi-level analysis (from social, political and economic history to the history of techniques, daily practices or bureaucratic uses). Thus, research on the materiality of writing makes it possible to fill in the gaps in our sources, and to highlight shadow actors, such as scribes, printers or simple readers. Finally, the consideration of materiality in the historical analysis builds a strong link between the historian and the people who created and/or manipulated the document under study. From the hands of the craftsman to those of the researcher, the letter, stèle or photograph convey as many emotions as they meet intermediaries responsible for their memory and experience.

**Paper and Writing, in the most Concrete Sense**

The materials and formats of writing are numerous, from rock to sand (Lefebvre 2009), from skin (Vaughan 2007) to fabrics (Parkin 2005), from film to screens. However, one medium attracted the attention of all contributors: paper.
While other media have always coexisted, from papyrus to walls, including plant leaves, paper and its economic and logistical constraints are an essential factor to be taken into account in the history of economic, religious, legal and political institutions in Africa (Lydon 2009: 648-649), and through to the present day. By focusing on paper, or for the oldest periods, on its cohabitation with papyrus and parchment, we decided to narrow the field of analysis to explore the plurality of approaches and issues around one of the most widespread and shared written media in time and space in Africa.

Paper is more than just a medium for the written word. It accompanies written texts through the “two ages” of the document’s life: that of its conception and production and that of his journey (Morelle 2009: 117). From paper manufacturing in Mediterranean and Northern European factories to the design of the written document in Africa, there is a history of long-distance circulations and economic exchanges. To the best of our knowledge, there was no local production of paper until the end of the 19th century and it is imported from the northern Sahara until the end of the 19th century, making it a rare and expensive product (Bloom 2008: 45). However, paper is rapidly penetrating sub-Saharan Africa. Invented in China, paper was introduced into the Mediterranean through the Abbasid Caliphate in the 8th century (Bloom 2008: 9). As early as the 10th century, it was used in the context of trans-Saharan trade: the Arab geographer Ibn Hawkal mentioned a debt instrument, identified as a cheque (ṣakk), of 42,000 dinars in Awdaghost in the 10th century, signed by witnesses (Bloom 2008: 138; Lydon in this issue).

As Ghislaine Lydon notes in her article, this document was probably written on paper, but it is not impossible that papyrus or parchment was used. At that time, paper production competed with papyrus and parchment in the Mediterranean and south of the Sahara. This transition period is also described by Alexandros Tsakos, who shows in his article that their coexistence implies different uses and sensitivities: leather was mainly used for legal documents, parchment for literary and liturgical texts and paper for correspondence (Ochala 2014: 14). However, this coexistence quickly ceases and the use of paper is becoming widespread, although it is subject to some resistance, as in the medieval Maghreb for the writing of religious texts (Deroche 2005: 35), in colonial institutions in Togo (Glasman 2012) or in monetary exchanges in the Nuer (Hutchinson 1996). From Antiquity to the 14th century, “paper instruments”, as Ghislaine Lydon defines them in her article, were produced in North Africa and supplied Sahelian, Nubian and Ethiopian markets. The end of the Middle Ages saw a major shift in paper production towards the Christian world. Spanish, then French and especially Italian papers invaded the Mediterranean with the tre lune, a paper whose watermark was specially created for the Islamic market (Humbert 2001: 211). North African paper production collapsed, and Italian factories became the main source of paper in the Sahel until the early 20th century (Walz 1985; Bloom 2008): many of the diplomatic letters studied by Rémi Dewière were written on such paper, even during the British occupation. The range of diffusion of the tre lune was wide, since several documents show that it was used as far as Northern Ghana, alongside oriental paper (Levtzion 1965: 118).

Until the 19th century, references to the paper trade were rare, although many testimonies, as well as the presence of endogenous literature in the Horn of Africa or the Sahel, attest to a regular use (Bloom 2008 : 53). In the 19th century, the first European testimonies from the interior of West Africa made it possible to make
estimates on the quantity of paper, on its economy, but also on the circulation of European (Walz 1985; Last 2008; Nobili 2011) and non-European (Regourd 2018) paper. Three observations nuance the scarcity and high cost of paper: paper was present on large parts of the continent, even though in low quantity; it was certainly an expensive good, but not exorbitant and, finally, prices varied greatly depending on where it was bought. Thus, in 1767, Tripoli exported two thousand reams of paper to the south, which was equivalent to four million folios (Last 2008: 152). If paper is a common commodity in major cities, such as Timbuktu, Harrar, Kano or Kukawa, some leaves could be found on the shelves of the most remote markets in the countryside. However, it was often a struggle for supplies to meet demand, and scholars living on the margins of large Sahelian cities’ catchment areas endeavoured to find alternative supply routes (Levtzion 1965: 119), or other supports. This difficulty in finding quality or cheap paper, depending on needs, persisted in some places until the second half of the 20th century (Brigaglia & Mutai 2017).

The colonial expansion in Africa was accompanied by two technologies that revolutionized the use of writing: the continuous paper machine and printing. Invented in 1799, the continuous paper machine was massively industrialized in the first half of the 19th century. Roll paper rapidly replaced Italian hand-made paper and British, French and Dutch papers flooded the African market from the coast (Lamberg et al. 2012: 11). Paper became one of the main power tools of colonial administrators. In East Africa, British paper was exported by Indian merchants, which underlines the extraordinary complexity of the paper circuits (Regourd 2018). If paper was then closely linked to colonial power, it was also recycled and reclaimed by the colonized, as shown by the recycling of the colonial notebooks studied by Anne Bang and Didier Nativel. Even today, paper is not widely produced in Africa, and Indian paper supplies many markets, such as Nigeria (Mutai & Brigaglia 2017). Paper remains an expensive commodity, particularly in the publishing industry, which chooses its paper according to the price and tax exemptions granted by the public authorities, as in Morocco (Cohen 2016: 266). Printing works spread in Africa from the 18th century onwards and revolutionized many fields of intellectual and religious life in Africa (Chih, Seesemann & Mayeur-Jaouen 2015). In 1767, a press was set up in Mauritius; in 1784, another was put into operation in Johannesburg (Toussaint 1948: 3). Printing works were also taken over by African authorities, as in Madagascar in 1883, where the Royal Government published its own official newspaper (Didier Nativel’s contribution). The history of printing then foreshadows that of the colonial and post-colonial press (Loimeier 2009; Brennan 2013; Peterson, Hunter & Newell 2016), but also of the administration, bureaucratization and documents produced by the latter, such as identity documents or visas (Awenengo Dalberto & Banégas 2018).

“Papers, please!” The Document and its Uses

The link between paper and administration raises the question of the uses of the written object and the contexts in which it circulates. While all the contributions deal with objects made of paper, their nature differs greatly, revealing the variety of situations in which written objects are used, by both literate, semi-literate and illiterate populations. Thus, Anouk Cohen and Alexandros Tsakos work respectively on the Muslim (Moroccan Korans) and Christian (Nubian) liturgical texts; Anne Bang and
Didier Nativel describe the uses and role of notebooks and intimate manuscripts, religious or not, which can circulate in intimate circles, religious brotherhoods or be recycled. Letters, passes and identity documents also represent a domain of writing techniques, granting the object and its owners power and protection in their travels and movements (Didier Nativel & Rémi Dewière). Trust in the validation marks of the written artifact, as well as debates about their legality, are central to long-distance trade relations, as in the case of the **sufaja** discussed by Ghislaine Lydon.

The articulation between religion, economics, power and textuality is a recurring theme in the contributions of this dossier. It is part of an extremely dynamic research trend in recent years (Lydon 2009; Wion & Bertrand 2011; Fitzgerald 2015; Kaiser & Petitjean 2016; Potin 2016; Warscheid 2017). In particular, the relationship between writing and power is at the heart of the “worlds of paper” (Mbodj-Pouye 2013: 31; Rule & Trotter 2014). In line with research on ordinary (Bertrand 2015), pragmatic (Wion, Barret & Mbodj-Pouye 2016) or bureaucratic (Awenengo & Banégas 2018) writings, several articles study the technical processes and gestures related to the identification, authenticity and authority of written documents. In particular, Rémi Dewière’s article shows that the variations in the epistolary writing norms of the Borno authorities (northern Nigeria) in the 19th century make it possible to understand the way in which a precolonial Sahelian administration worked, but also to identify its actors and associate them with a family of administrators close to the authorities since at least the early modern period.

Power is not only read in official texts or its most accomplished achievements. Ann Laura Stoler’s work (2019: 73-74) on colonial archives has shown that margins and footnotes reveal the power relations, emotional economies or local knowledge that irrigate colonial and non-colonial administrations. In early modern Ethiopia, land charters are inscribed on the margins of liturgical texts (Bertrand & Wion 2011): here, the **marginalia** was the refuge in official texts of political power. The acts are then fully integrated into the daily life of the societies that produced them, thereby preventing changes and guaranteeing their access to the members of the institution (Wion 2017). These “parasitic transformations” (Bertrand 2015: 80) concern both documents of power, but also personal texts or texts for educational and religious purposes: the works of Tal Tamari and Dimitry Bondarev show that the body of the text is not necessarily the most important element of the Sahelian manuscripts, but rather their margins, for which the copyist deliberately left large empty spaces for comments in Arabic and Ajami, African languages in Arabic characters (Bondarev 2017; Tamari 2017). Sometimes, another copy of the same text was made to add new marginal notes, before the manuscript was given to a neighbor or a family member, thus creating real networks of copies of Arabic and Ajami texts (Raia 2014, 2018).

Anne Bang’s article ask a very similar question: how are manuscripts used in private circles? Her historical research on manuscripts resonates strongly with the work of anthropologist Anouk Cohen, whose article deals with the Korans published according to the rules of Moroccan power. She shows how the editorial choices that accompany this text with its fixed content, familiar with Moroccan culture, aims to create an intimate relationship between the holy book and its owner. The Koran is used by private individuals both as a medium for writing, but also as a decorative object or, on the other hand, as an intimate and identity-bearing object. These literary para-literary and non-literary uses of the written object call into question the separation between
literary societies and non-literary societies. In the wake of the work dealing with the uses of writing by societies “on the fringes of the alphabet” (Tóth 2001; Mboj-Pouye 2013; Ware 2014) or by out-of-school literate populations (Yousef 2016), we wanted to understand how written media circulate in largely “oral” societies, and describe the uses of writing by non-literate or semi-literate populations.

Whether during the pre-colonial, colonial or post-colonial period, diglossia situations are frequent on the African continent (Mboj-Pouye 2013: 31; Cohen 2016: 30-31). In these contexts, literacy is associated with power, as in the Ethiopian case (Crummey; 2006), and power writing is a “foreign language”—in the sense that it is not decipherable and the languages used are foreign, such as Arabic, French or Greek. In these contexts, the material support gains more importance than the text itself. Indeed, written artifacts are used daily by people who can neither read nor write. This is the case for ordinary writings, such as legal documents or land registers, but also for diplomatic letters or identity documents, whose validation marks are used to circulate or confer authority on an oral claim (article by Didier Nativel, also Crummey 2006: 13) whether before, during or after colonization. The place of the written object in African societies also reveals networks, materialized by the mobility of courts and archives, commercial and diplomatic alliances or, finally, the “graphic communities” (Bertrand 2015: 364). Rémi Dewière’s article questions the diplomatic networks and conventions standardized within the administrations of Sahelian Islamic States, as well as the shared norms during letter exchanges. Ghislaine Lydon speaks about the texts that circulate within the trading communities in order to facilitate commercial transactions. On a completely different scale, Anne Bang questions the “networks of practices” that are built around a particular text, within religious communities or friends.

**Writing between Sensoriality, Aesthetic and Authenticity**

Placing the written object back in the center therefore makes it possible to overcome the dichotomy between written and oral. While Crummey’s study (2006) on Ethiopian land acts showed that the written word is only the visible part of a set of oral practices, the written artifact is the residue of practices that combine words, gestures, material elements and bodies, but also norms, prohibitions and transgressions. Thus, in the case of Swahili poetry in Ajami, writing is intertwined with poetic language, and vice versa (Vierke 2014): studying one helps to better understand the other, even if the poetic tradition has disappeared. The parallel with archaeology takes on its full meaning: just like archaeological data, the written objects available to us today are the visible result, passed through many filters, of a set of literary and writing practices, of tangible and intangible elements (Bocquentin et al. 2010: 160). Thus, the fragility of the writing supports leaves precious traces and clues that allow us to explore the social and sensory universe in which the written object is inserted. However, historical processes, but also different reproduction and preservation techniques (from the work of the copyist to the digitization of archives) are all factors that erase extremely volatile material traces and take objects out of their context. The written word is then reconditioned, rewritten in a new format and context, thus releasing new perceptions and stimulating new meanings. These processes value, select and preserve scriptural
and visual elements, at the expense of other physical traces that disappear or become transparent.

21 The fragility and volatility of these traces lead Didier Nativel to take up Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1946) phenomenology of perception to define sensoriality as betwixt and between perception and materiality. A perspective favoring the sensoriality of the written medium aims to give “flesh” to the documents, in order to be able to reconstruct the sensoriality and perceptual universe in which these texts are incorporated. It is about seeing how the written object affects subjects in their relationship to their environment. Didier Nativel conceives the notion of “documentary reversibilities,” to highlight how the power of colonial-era identification papers (from the South African pass, to the Mozambican cadernetas indígena or the kipande in Kenya) affect the sensory field of the urban atmosphere of colonial cities. The identification paper and the laissez-passer are instruments of body control, invested with an administrative and bureaucratic power capable of affecting the social status and the intimate and daily life of the subjects.

22 The written object is also taken into account in its performative horizon. Analysis of the ceremonies around the texts reveals noises, gestures and smells that accompany their circulation or archiving (Wion 2017). Thus, sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch evoke emotions that have been voluntarily or involuntarily produced by the creators or sponsors of the object. The physical dimension is reflected in the contribution of Alexandros Tsakos, who questions how the senses are mobilized by the written object. Based on cognitive sciences, it proposes a social history of the senses in medieval Christian Nubia, based on religious literature, anthropology and archaeology. Similarly, Anouk Cohen shows that the publishing criteria of the “Moroccan Korans” seek to favour a strictly “Moroccan” Koranic reading and intonation.

23 The sensory dimension of the book makes it possible to touch upon the question of representations and the symbolic role of the object-book, based on its artificial reproductions. The pretend book, or false book, simulates the book without being it. It can fulfil aesthetic, recreational, secular, sacred or even scientific functions. Made of various materials, such as wood or ceramics, it can be found in all literate societies and at all times, from early modern Europe (Bernasconi 2017: 164) to contemporary Moroccan salons (Cohen 2016: 96). While we confined ourselves to the study of paper, the questions raised by these examples nourished our thought: the aesthetics and the way in which the written object produces a sense of authenticity is central to this special issue. The quality, shape and size, as well as the validation marks, calligraphy, seal or space between the lines, make it possible to identify a document, but also contributes to provoke reactions to its readers through a visuality closely associated with power (article by Rémi Dewière). These identification markers are recycled, copied, falsified or reclaimed in other contexts and contributed, in many African societies, to the creation of a particular aesthetic. More than a history of the written object, it is a history of these aesthetics and graphic communities that we wish to carry through this dossier.

24 Specialists from various areas and periods, the authors of this special issue work on the societies of the African continent, from North Africa to Madagascar and the Sahelian strip. By questioning the materiality of textual sources, we are considering going beyond chronological boundaries, since the articles deal with medieval, early modern and modern periods. This desire to overcome temporal, geographical and disciplinary
barriers is also reflected in the choice of reviews of this dossier: from contemporary Pakistan to medieval France, from Yemen to the Sahel, the works listed touch, directly or indirectly, on the themes that were dear to us in this project: if all the contributions concern Africa, they answer broader questions about the materiality of writing and its messages.

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NOTES

1. The dossier “Words of Paper. Materiality and Discourses in African Context” is the result of a scientific collaboration between the Institut des Mondes Africains in Paris and the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Bergen. Launched in 2014, as part of the Franco-Norwegian Projet Hubert Curien (PHC) Aurora, the collaboration brought together researchers from different specialities and disciplines to discuss the materiality of texts in African history, from the Middle Ages to the present day, and the uses, production and circulation of written documents, regardless of their medium. The highlight of this dossier was an international round table organised on 15 March 2017 at the IMAf (Paris), in collaboration with the SMI of the University of Bergen (Norway). We would like to thank Anne Bang, Anouk Cohen, Ghislaine Lydon, Didier Nativel and Alexandros Tsakos, as well as the anonymous reviewers, for their comments.

2. The Gallica website was created in 1997; followed by the websites produced by the Endangered Archives Programme (2004), Google Books (2004) or Archive.org (1996 for web pages; 2005 for printed books), to name a few private and public initiatives.


4. We would like to stress the importance of codicology and palaeography of texts in Coptic and Arabic, for which there is a vast literature focusing on North Africa and the Middle East (Deroche 2000).

5. A particularly important field concerns medieval epigraphy (de Moraes Farias 2004; Fauvelle, Hirsch & Cherroun 2017; Derat 2018).

6. In Dutch Indonesia, Ann Laura Stoler notes the ironic quote of a Métis journalist critical of colonial power: “mountains of paperwork were simply being filled to the benefit of the Dutch paper mills” (Stoler 2018: 224).

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