



### *Call for Papers*

#### *Oral histories of economic life in Africa during the neoliberal-capitalist era*

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Oral histories (OHs) of contemporary economic life and change in Africa – including OHs of work or earning a living – have, it seems, fallen out of fashion. The work of an earlier generation of Africanist historians - much of it forged initially at the University of Dar es Salam during the heady, African nationalist years of the 1960s, and later cemented theoretically through the work of Jan Vansina, David Henige, Joseph Miller and others in the early 1980s - long ago established the methodological and conceptual basis for doing OH as a way of accessing multiple, contingent and emergent African pasts. Past that were contemporaneous and entangled with, rather than separated and distanced from, so-called ‘world’ or rather European history. These important foundational movements effectively led historians out of the archives and into the field, raising new questions not only about the past but also about how it is constituted in the first place. In the wake of this trail blazing, and increasingly self-conscious of their own discipline’s complicities in colonial projects everywhere, anthropologists became both more diachronically aware and much more historiographically anxious. This would later lead anthropologists to develop new kinds of ethnography in and of colonial archives, reading with and against the grain of partial fragments of written pasts, alongside or rather in critical engagement with, life histories and oral testimonies.

As both history and anthropology grappled with their own crises of representation, and concerns about voice, biography and self-making became increasingly urgent, new ethnographic and oral methodologies for collecting, reconstituting, and interpreting multiple, contingent and open-ended pasts, and particularly life histories, came to the fore. As a result, African Studies has built up a rich body of OHs and biographies of the colonial and early postcolonial periods across the continent (see for example, Charles van Onselen, *The seed is mine: The life of Kas Maine, a South African sharecropper, 1894-1985*). Albeit that these often placed disproportionate focus on single key individuals (who remain, too often, male politicians of an earlier generation), sometimes such critical perspectives merged effectively with Marxist analyses emergent from parallel analytical traditions, to produce new histories of labour and economic life in the colonial and early postcolonial period, particularly, for example, in the work of scholars influenced by Max Gluckman, the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute and later the Manchester school. A few other works have made use of OHs to reconstruct the economic experiences of women during the colonial period. Of these Belinda Bozzoli with Mmantho Nkotsoe’s, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983* and Teresa Barnes’, *We Women Worked So Hard: Gender, Urbanization and Social Reproduction in Colonial Harare, Zimbabwe, 1930-1956* are worth mentioning, amongst others.

But what has happened since? Even if life histories, ethnographic and oral methodologies have become standard tools in the research repertoires of scholars ranging from political scientists to cultural studies specialists (and everything in between) there are precious few significant OHs of the contemporary period, including of neoliberalism (reforms, transformations, operation of institutionalized neoliberalism, crises, etc.) on the African continent. In anthropology an increasing weariness, if not exhaustion, with the postmodern angst of the 1980s and 1990s fueled a new critical rethinking about the relationships that are understood to pertain between people, technologies, animals and things, which however fascinating and important these are, have sometimes had the effect of drawing attention away from life histories, biographies and personal narratives. At the same time, discourses of ‘development’ and ‘globalisation’, and the varied critiques that have emerged of them, often seem to have replaced critical materialist analysis of neoliberalism and the complexities, dynamics, transformations, precarities and brutalities of late capitalism, with - at times analytically bland - concerns about livelihoods, governance, and accountability; or with - celebrations of informality and entrepreneurship, which are at times thoroughly un-self-critical and hide deepening dynamics of privilege and precarity experienced (often generationally) across the continent. Some scholars, of course, do use life histories of various economic actors to run their analysis, and there are, separately, moves towards new kinds of analysis of, for example, money and debt; and of global articulations of inequality and precarity; as well as a new historiographical interest in biography as a form of doing history.

However, as far as we are aware, there is no larger body of work existent at the moment that tries to offer a collection of OH data and analysis concerning economic life during the neoliberal-capitalist era, aka from the 1990s onwards. Moreover, no body of work seems to exist that somewhat resembles - in terms of focus, scope, depth, volume, format - the seminal work of Studs Terkel (*Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do; American Dreams: Lost and Found; Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression; Race: What Blacks and Whites Think and Feel About the American Obsession*). Terkel published a relatively large number of accounts per book (*Working*, for example, has more than 120 entries with an average entry length of about three to six pages). We have not seen anything like this for the contemporary period for the African continent, on any of the pertinent economic and social issues, and yet Terkel’s format could be highly useful for the African context too. This lacuna is a scholarly problem not only for the simple reason of record and analysis - the last few decades have seen unprecedented changes in the everyday lives of people and generations across the continent, and especially their working lives - but also because the questions of voice, self-making, representation, and of course inclusion, humanism, and equality that animated Africanist scholarship a generation ago, seem to have been to a significant extent jettisoned or excluded today.

Our purpose in this Call for Papers, therefore, is to seek contributions to a special issue of ROAPE or another journal of similar standing and emphasis, focusing on oral testimonies and life histories of work and economic lives during the neoliberal-capitalist era from across the continent. In a first instance we have in mind two things: (1) A *Special Issue on OHs of work/jobs/earning a living in neoliberal Africa*. This will be an open call to see what is ‘out there’. We are aware of colleagues who should/do have material on contemporary life histories, and it is this pool of available data we target with this call. We envision scholars who have data/analysis to offer to apply with their papers. Once we have collected enough interest, we will formulate a Special Issue proposal, with the aim of getting papers submitted for review by autumn, or thereabout, for publication in mid to late 2020. (2) A *website space* to publish OHs of economic life in contemporary Africa, in blog format, on a rolling basis, on a suitable, journal-linked or other academic website. We regard the above two interventions as a start of reviving critical OH studies. An edited book, or another Special Issue might follow down the line.

**Please submit your abstracts by 20.03.2019 to:** [j.wiegratz@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:j.wiegratz@leeds.ac.uk), [jfontein@uj.ac.za](mailto:jfontein@uj.ac.za), [josephmujere@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:josephmujere@yahoo.co.uk)