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Deconstructing the “Primary Source”:

Reflecting on the course “Queen Mothers, Unruly Women” and my reflection paper for the course, “Illustrations in ‘The Translation of the Life-Struggles of Walatta Petros.’”

As part of my Global Perspectives coursework, I took the course “Queen Mothers, Unruly Women” in Fall 2022. “Queen Mothers” was a survey course of African women’s history across a variety of time periods and regions, with a focus on power and influence.

The definition of a “primary source” was a core question. In some of the time periods we studied, many of the nations we discussed documented history through oral traditions rather than writing. However, in Western academia, the written word is prized as a more “reliable” form. As a result, much of the historical documentation of these times comes from Western academics that draw on the writings of European colonizers rather than the perspectives of African women. This course prompted me to take extra care in considering the positions, perspectives, and agendas of any sources I consume. After all, why would European colonizers portray African women in a way that emphasizes their humanity and power rather than furthering the exoticization and minimization necessary to justify the colonial project? Especially when taking into account this agenda to misrepresent African women’s history, but also across any discipline, what qualifies a written source as so much more “reliable” than an oral tradition or any other representation of history?

During the course, we explored alternatives to colonial methods of documenting history. We discussed how oral traditions have been preserved, and read written sources coming from

African perspectives rather than European perspectives. We also had the opportunity to meet Dir. Oumou Sidibe, Prof. Madina Thiam (NYU), and Prof. Devon Golaszewski (Colgate) and learn about their project, [Projet Archives des Femmes du Mali](#), which seeks to create an authentic archive of African women's history. As described on its website, the project "preserves thousands of endangered papers and photographs belonging to a generation of Malian women who undertook anti-colonial activism in the 1950s and feminist social reform projects in the following decades." This material has been found in "private homes, storage rooms, and granaries," and is being collected, archived, and digitized by the project. Conducted with care, this project is part of a push to construct archives of histories that the dominant narrative seeks to erase, surveying women within the community rather than referring to Western academia or documents produced by European colonizers.

We also read "The Life-Struggles of Walatta Petros," the hagiography of an Ethiopian saint, Walatta Petros, written by a monk named Gälawdewos in 1672, thirty years after her death. The writing itself is based on oral histories from those in her community, and contains a number of images of illustrated plates. (For the class, I wrote a reflection on interpreting this source, which is attached.) While interpreting the source, we discussed differences in how we might interpret images as twenty-first century students in a U.S. university and their significance in seventeenth century Ethiopia. For example, the sizes of the illustrated people represented not their actual size or age, but their power. These changes in size communicated meaning beyond what I would be able to take from my starting perspective exclusively, which prompted me to realize that "translation" does not solely apply to written language, but also to illustrations. While a Western perspective that seeks to minimize validity of African sources could misconstrue the variations in size as a lack of consistency or artistic skill on the part of the

illustrator, a viewer must take on an understanding of the value and significance of the original artistic tradition. Through this reflection, I gained one of my most valuable takeaways from the class: understanding the historical and cultural context of a visual source is an essential piece of the learning process, especially when studying time periods and/or regions beyond one's own.