

Photo source: Works for the Sennar Dam, University of Birmingham, Cadbury Research Library, in Frank Morton Chinn collection, MS 296, reprinted from The Engineer, 28.08.1925.

CROSSING METHODOLOGIES IN AFRICAN LABOUR HISTORY

For the program and the connection link see here

28 May 2026

9:00 – 17:15

LOCATION

Room: 3.122

Bâtiment de recherche Sud, Campus Condorcet, Aubervilliers

(Metro : Front Populaire, line 12)

Workshop organized as part of the project WOMEN AT WORK.
For a Comparative History of Women's Professions in Africa

WOMEN AT WORK

Funded by the European Union

European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

cnrs

IMAF
Institut des mondes africains
UMR 8171 (CNRS) - UMR 243 (IRD)

Crossing methodologies in African labour history: The Macro and the Micro

28.05.2026

Room Miriam Makeba, 3.122,
Bâtiment des recherches Sud, Campus Condorcet

Link for online participants:
https://rendez-vous.renater.fr/93pwa-829j6-2gw2m

Program

Morning session: discussant Florence Brisset-Foucault, IMAF (Florence.Brisset-Foucault@univ-paris1.fr)

9h-9h15: Welcome and introduction

9h15-10h15: Bridget KENNY, University of the Witwatersand (Bridget.Kenny@wits.ac.za)
A fragmentary labour history of lift (elevator) workers in Johannesburg, South Africa

10h15-11h15: Violaine TISSEAU, IMAF (violaine.tisseau@cnrs.fr)
Writing the history of domestic workers in Madagascar (19th–20th Centuries): Sources, silences, and a methodological paradox

11h15-11h30: Coffee break

11h30-12h30: Annick LACROIX, IDHES (alacroix@parisnanterre.fr)
Crossing sources and methods to write a history of work in colonised Algeria (1900s-1950s)

12h30-13h30: Lunch break

Afternoon session: discussant Florence Wenzeck, IMAF (florence.wenzek@univ-paris1.fr)

13h30-14h30:
Malak LABIB, Centre Marc Bloch (malak.labib@cmb.hu-berlin.de)
From State Expertise to Factory Struggles : Rethinking the History of Industrial Labor in Postcolonial Egypt

14h30-15h30: Karin PALLAVER, University of Bologna (karin.pallaver@unibo.it)
Shifts and continuities in female labour relations in British East Africa (1800-1950)

15h30-15h45 Coffee break

15h45-16h45:
Jutta BOLT, University of Groningen (j.bolt@rug.nl)
Africa @ Work: Transformation of employment 1920–2020

16h45-17h15: Concluding remarks: the Macro and the Micro

Abstracts
(in alphabetical order)

Jutta BOLT, University of Groningen (j.bolt@rug.nl)
Africa @ Work: Transformation of employment 1920–2020
The lack of productive and decent jobs remains one of the most pressing challenges in Sub-SaharanAfrica (SSA). An estimated 82% of workers are engaged in informal occupations—primarily self-employed or in family work—leaving millions of workers vulnerable to poverty, economic shocks, and insecurity due to unstable jobs, low pay, and limited social protection. This scarcity of jobs fuels political and social unrest, including anti-government protests and coups, and drives migration to Europe. SSA's young and rapidly growing workforce, projected to nearly double by 2050, underscores the urgent need to expand decent employment opportunities to alleviate poverty, enhance foodsecurity, and sustain economic growth.
In this ERC project, I offer the first comprehensive, long-term analysis of employment patterns in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), reconstructing occupational trends by region and gender across 33 countries from 1920 to 2020. I examine how work evolved during key periods of transformation, including colonial agricultural expansion, post-independence state-led development, the Structural Adjustment Programs of the 1980s, and economic growth from 1995 to 2015. Key questions include: Why are agricultural jobs increasing in SSA while declining in other world regions? Why is the SSA informal sector disproportionately large, especially for women, who are 14 percentage points more likely than men to hold informal jobs? And to what extent can jobs in the expanding service sector provide a pathway out of poverty?
By linking colonial and post-independence employment patterns, this project will uncover how economic transformations shaped informality, gender inequality, and stratification in the labour market. It also explores changes in work quality and social mobility, aiming to identify barriers and opportunities for structural transformation. The findings will inform policies to promote productive and inclusive employment and sustainable economic development in SSA.

Bridget KENNY, University of the Witwatersand (Bridget.Kenny@wits.ac.za)
A fragmentary labour history of lift (elevator) workers in Johannesburg, South Africa
South Africa offers a deep and rich tradition of labour history (Freund 1984; Freund 2013). In particular, there has been extensive work done on its mining economy and the migrant labour system which explained both the formation of South Africa's racist coercive labour regime and its particular development of capitalism. Secondly, much research has been dedicated to histories of trade union organising: craft unions organising white immigrants, industrial unions

organising both black and white workers through the 1940s, and, independent black trade unions organising black workers from the 1970s. These traditions used well-documented trade union archives, state archives, oral histories and the engaged histories of the labour activist-scholars themselves, who were often involved within the trade union movements. This paper discusses my current project about lifts (elevators) as affective urban infrastructure in Johannesburg. I consider the sources I have used to document various forms of lift labour that ensured that the technology was installed, maintained, repaired and driven. Unlike much previous labour history, this work does not have a single trade union archive or even state location from which to source information. I have had to glean what I can about the nature of the work from fragments from multiple archives and interviews. This presentation thinks about the strengths and weaknesses of a fragmentary labour history focusing on categories of workers not often examined.

Malak LABIB, Centre Marc Bloch (malak.labib@cmb.hu-berlin.de)

From State Expertise to Factory Struggles : Rethinking the History of Industrial Labor in Postcolonial Egypt

In this presentation, I will discuss several methodological observations on writing the history of industrial labor in postcolonial Egypt, drawing on my current research project. The project examines the history of industrial labor in postcolonial Egypt (1940s-1980s) and takes this history as a vantage point from which to analyze the dynamics and tensions that shaped the rise of the developmental-welfare state.

The project combines two sites of observation. On the one hand, it examines the forms of expert knowledge on labor produced by state planning agencies and research institutions; on the other, it explores the social relations and struggles surrounding work through a case study of the Egyptian Iron and Steel Company, a major industrial project established in 1954.

The presentation will reflect on the methodological choices, implications, and challenges involved in connecting the history of public policy on labor and development with the social history of work at the micro level.

Annick LACROIX, IDHES (alacroix@parisnanterre.fr)

Crossing sources and methods to write a history of work in colonised Algeria (1900s-1950s)

In this presentation, I revisit the sources and methods that I have used in my research to contribute to thewriting of a history of labor in colonial Algeria (1900s-1960s). How can we write a history of subaltern and colonised Algerian workers on the basis of asymmetrical colonial sources? Through regular fieldwork in Algeria, I was able to collect local archives that remained there after independence and to mobilise the tools of social history in order to grasp the complexity of labour relations in 20th-century Algeria.

The personnel files collected in Algeria, analysed through quantitative methods, first enabled me to reconstruct the sociology and career trajectories of low-ranking civil servants. I then analysed the reports and statistics produced by labour administration officials (mining engineers, labor inspectors, agricultural inspectors) in order to capture everyday working conditions. By critically interrogating the figures, surveys and categories they employed, it also became

possible to identify the sectors and workers that representatives of the colonial state failed, or chose not, to address. More recently, my new project on public scribes explores the blurred boundaries of a profession situated at the margins of the wage-earning economy, one that involves 'making do with everything available'.

Karin PALLAVER, University of Bologna (karin.pallaver@unibo.it)

Shifts and continuities in female labour relations in British East Africa (1800-1950)

This paper combines quantitative and qualitative evidence to provide a long-term analysis of major shifts and continuities in female labor relations in Tanzania and Kenya from the late precolonial period to the post-independence era. The first part of the paper focuses on the nature and quality of the available sources on demography and the history of female labour in the two countries. It discusses the limitations of these sources as well as the methodological challenges connected to their use. The second part analyses the shifts and continuities in female labor in relation to broader historical processes, including the development of long-distance caravan trade, the establishment of colonial economies, and postcolonial transformations. The main aim of the presentation is to investigate how female labor relations changed over time while also identifying the historically distinctive features of the work performed by women in different social and economic contexts in Tanzania and Kenya.

Violaine TISSEAU, IMAF (violaine.tisseau@cnrs.fr)

Writing the history of domestic workers in Madagascar (19th–20th Centuries): Sources, silences, and a methodological paradox

This paper draws on a personal experience: the daily presence of domestic workers—cooks, housekeepers, gardeners, or laundry workers for example—in the domestic sphere during my fieldwork in Madagascar, as well as two observations: the very limited presence of these workers in the literature on labor in Africa, and the resurgence in media and academic discourse of issues surrounding domestic work, often linked to questions of gender and international migration. I propose to explore potential sources for writing the history of these domestic workers in Madagascar during the colonial period. In particular, these workers constituted a heterogeneous group in terms of status (descendants of former slaves or not, for example) and working situations and conditions (for Malagasy nationals or for foreigners, for example). Domestic service is further characterized by the fact that the private sphere is the setting for the employment, that it denotes at once a relationship of employment, dependence, subordination, and a quasi-familial bond (or one expressed as such) : domestic workers thus constitute a group distinct from other categories of workers. The historian is consequently faced with a tension: while this work is rarely recognized as such, the sources related to labor regulations are the easiest to access—sources that must be crossed and completed with those from the private sphere.