

# Death on the River: Solving the Mystery Through Analysis of Primary Sources

by  
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Two groups meet and clash. There is smoke, the report of a gun, and people die. One side cries “Murderer” while the other claims self-defense. Each day in courts of America witnesses take the stand and juries attempt to sift through claims and counter claims to arrive at some understanding of the truth. The historian is like a detective. There are many mysteries and incidents in history to unravel and the historian becomes both detective and jury in constructing and then detailing a “truthful” view of events.

Historians rely on primary sources to conduct their investigations of events of the past. The scientist examines the physical/biological world and uses physically observable phenomena (even if microscopic) to make hypotheses about the world. The social scientist must examine the mind of humans and human phenomena to try to investigate history and hypothesize as to whom and why as well as when and where. It is through the examination of primary sources that the historian often constructs meaning of the past. One might look at the difference between the detective and forensic scientist in a murder mystery. The forensic expert looks for physical clues: fingerprints, blood analysis, bones, dirt composition, to construct an understanding of the case. A detective must use questioning and documents as well as relevant physical information to make a case and to get into the mind of the suspect.

Primary Sources include written documents, images, and artifacts from the period being studied. A primary source is a piece of living history. It may be defined as any artifact that provides first hand or direct information about the past. Primary sources may include first person accounts such as oral histories, diaries, memoirs, correspondence, documents (correspondence, treaties, laws, and speeches), and images (e.g. maps, photographs, drawings, and paintings). In this article we will focus on written sources.

Historians analyze historical sources in different ways. First, historians think about where, when, and why

a document was created. They consider whether a source was created close in location and time to an actual historical event. Historians also think about the purpose of a source. Was it a personal diary intended to be kept private? Was the document prepared for the public? Some primary sources may be judged more reliable than others may, but every source has its own point of view or frame of reference. As a result, good historians read sources skeptically and critically. They also cross-check sources against other evidence and sources for corroboration.

We will examine the question of how historians carefully read and analyze primary sources in order to arrive at some semblance of the truth. How do we ensure that historical (or student) hypotheses about history based on documents are credible? What are the means by which historians analyze primary source documents and make judgements? How can we have students carefully consider a document if there is not an exact counter point document or evidence?

## ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

Historians have a set of techniques to analyze documents. Two of the rules are the (1) Time and Place Rule and (2) the Bias rule. Historians look at when and where the primary source was written relative to the event. Secondly, historians are concerned about possible bias.

### Time and Place Rule

This rule indicates that proximity to the event ensures some credibility. This may be balanced by a possible bias or myopia by the person writing the document. This bias may not be conscious, but still may be bias. Certainly a soldier in World War II writing home about the Japanese might not only have a limited view, but one biased by fear and propaganda intended to motivate him to fight. This happens even at the high school sports level where the opponent is demeaned and demonized in some cases to inspire performance in a game. The time and place rule assumes that those closest to the event have the best view. It assumes a second tier of people

who interview those that were there or who use evidence from the time will also use this information to form credible hypotheses.

### **The Bias Rule**

The time and place rule is balanced to some degree by the bias rule. The bias rule assumes every source is biased in some manner. Thus every piece of evidence must be viewed with skepticism. It also assumes one must dig deep into the context and purpose of the author of the document.

The historian has to balance the above two rules. The soldier who sees the battle can comment on the nature of the battle itself, but a historian must be careful of any judgements about the general course of the war by that soldier. One must also carefully consider a diary of a public official who realizes that diary may be public someday as opposed to the diary of an individual who has no idea that the diary may ever be published. The first may involve a conscious bias in presenting an event. The second may simply present the biased worldview of a lone individual.

American Memory Collection recommends a worksheet for students to utilize as they examine documents. The worksheet asks the following questions:

#### **Questions for Analyzing Primary Sources**

1. Who created the source and why? Was it created through a spur-of-the-moment act, a routine transaction, or a thoughtful, deliberate process?
2. Did the recorder have firsthand knowledge of the event? Or, did the recorder report what others saw and heard?
3. Was the recorder a neutral party, or did the creator have opinions or interests that might have influenced what was recorded?
4. Did the recorder produce the source for personal use, for one or more individuals, or for a large audience? Was the source meant to be public or private?
5. Did the recorder wish to inform or persuade others? (Check the words in the source. The words may tell you whether the recorder was trying to be objective or persuasive.) Did the recorder have reasons to be honest or dishonest?
6. Was the information recorded during the event, immediately after the event, or after some lapse of time? How long a lapse of time?

### **Red Alert language**

The questions above are helpful, but analysis of language within a document may also send warning to the reader to be careful in accepting the information. In particular, number 5 above says “Check the words in the source. The words may tell you whether the recorder was trying to be objective or persuasive.” But a key point of

this article is - how does one check the words? What does one particularly look for? Some types of examples are:

### **Universal Quantifiers**

One should be very careful when reading a source that uses word like “all” or “every”. When dealing with humans, it is difficult to find a situation where “all” or “every” person/s act in a certain way. One newspaper in describing protests against the 2003 Iraq war said “all” protesters were boisterous. That should be a warning sign that the writer may be overexaggerating. How often have you seen a crowd where “all” had one attitude or acted the same way? Or it may be “Someone always does X.” Always? Often there is a consistent pattern, but one must ask themselves “Always?” and investigate before you accept the evidence. Like the detective ñ be suspicious!

### **Excessive Adjectives/Loaded Phrases**

Though this seems obvious, we should recognize as propaganda words loaded with negative or positive images or connotations meant to sway us. If the leader of another country is called “bloodthirsty”, we should pause and be careful about the intent of the speaker. Actually “bloodthirsty”? Or, “accused of killing thousands of innocent people in his country who resisted his regime?” It may include “loaded” words such as “murder” or “slaughter” rather than “killing.” It is very different to say, “The calvary was slaughtered by the Sioux” versus “The entire calvary regiment was killed in the engagement.” Slaughter “certainly evokes a different emotional response than “killed” and it may certainly be the intent of the author to elicit that emotion.

### **Corroboration of Evidence**

Good historians also try to discover multiple sources about an event. They attempt to answer the questions above, but the existence of two sources allows for some “triangulation of truth” or “corroboration” if the two sources are written from disparate points of view. The two sources below are about the same event in time, written by two participants in the event. Have two separate groups of students read one source each, then have them answer the questions.

In the ensuing discussion have students determine which statements in the two accounts agree. Historians look for items of agreement between two accounts that have different perceptions (or biases) about an event. Since both parties were involved in the action, the “time and place” rule seems irrelevant. Look also for loaded phrases and words on either side, or both.

### **King Mojimba Describes Stanley’s Visit (2)**

When we heard that the man with the white flesh was journeying down the Lualaba (Lualaba-Congo) we

were open-mouthed with astonishment. We stood still. All night long the drums announced the strange news - a man with white flesh! That man, we said to ourselves, has a white skin. He must have got that from the river-kingdom. He will be one of our brothers who were drowned in the river. All life comes from the water, and in the water he has found life. Now he is coming back to us, he is coming home.

We will prepare a feast, I ordered, we will go to meet our brother and escort him into the village with rejoicing! We donned our ceremonial garb. We assembled the great canoes. We listened for the gong which would announce our brother's presence on the Lualaba. Presently, the cry was heard: He is approaching the Lohali! Now he enters the river! Halloh! We swept forward, my canoe leading, the others following, with songs of joy and with dancing, to meet the first white man our eyes had beheld, and to do him honor.

But as we drew near his canoes there were loud reports, bang! bang! and fire-staves spat bits of iron at us. We were paralyzed with fright: our mouths hung wide open and we could not shut them. Things such as we had never seen, never heard of, never dreamed of ñ they were the work of evil spirits! Several of my men plunged into the water. What for? Did they fly to safety? No - for others fell down also, in the canoes. Some screamed dreadfully, others were silent ñ they were dead, and blood flowed from little holes in their bodies. "War! that is war!" I yelled. "Go back!" The canoes sped back to our village with all the strength our spirits could impart to our arms.

That was no brother! That was the worst enemy our country had ever seen.

And still those bangs went on: the long staves spat fire, flying places of iron whistled around us, fell into the water with a hissing sound, and our brothers continued to fall. We fled into our village - they came after us. We fled into the forest and flung ourselves on the ground. When we returned that evening our eyes beheld fearful things; our brothers, dead, bleeding, our village plundered and burned, and the water full of dead bodies.

The robbers and murderers had disappeared.

### **Henry Stanley Visits an African Village (3)**

At 2 P.M. we emerged out of the shelter of the deeply wooded banks and came into a vast stream, nearly 2,000 yards across at the mouth. As soon as we entered its waters, we saw a great fleet of canoes hovering about in the middle of the stream. The canoe men, standing up, gave a loud shout when they saw us and blew their horns louder than ever. We pulled briskly on to gain the right

bank when, looking upstream, we saw a sight that sent the blood tingling through every nerve and fiber of our bodies: a flotilla of gigantic canoes heading down upon us, which both in size and numbers greatly exceeded anything we had seen hitherto!

Instead of aiming for the right bank, we formed a line and kept straight downriver, the boat taking position behind. Yet after a moment's reflection, as I noted the numbers of the savages, the daring manner of the pursuit, and the apparent desire of our canoes to abandon the steady compact line, I gave the order to drop anchor. Four of our canoes made believe not to listen, until I chased them to return to the line, which was formed of eleven double canoes, anchored ten yards apart. The boat moved up to the front and took position 50 yards above them. The shields were next lifted by the noncombatants, men, women and children in the bows, and along the outer lines, as well as astern, and from behind these the muskets and rifles were aimed.

We had sufficient time to take a view of the mighty force bearing down on us and to count the number of the war vessels. There were 54 of them! A monster canoe led the way, with two rows of upstanding paddles, 40 men on a side, their bodies bending and swaying in unison as with a swelling barbarous chorus they drove her down toward us.

In the bow, standing on what appeared to be a platform, were ten prime young warriors, their heads gay with red feathers; at the stern, eight men with long paddles, whose tops were decorated with ivory balls, guided the monster vessel; and dancing up and down from stem to stern were ten men, who appeared to be chiefs.

The crashing sound of large drums, a hundred blasts from ivory horns, and a thrilling chant from 2,000 human throats did not tend to soothe our nerves or to increase our confidence. However, it was "neck or nothing." We had no time to pray or to take sentimental looks at the savage world, or even to breath a sad farewell to it. So many other things had to be done speedily and well.

As the foremost canoe came rushing down, its consorts on either side beating the water into foam and raising their jets of water with their sharp prows, I turned to take a last look at our people and said to them:

"Boys, be firm as iron; wait until you see the first spear, and then take good aim. Don't fire all at once. Keep aiming until you are sure of your man. Don't think of running away, for only your guns can save you."

The monster canoe aimed straight for my boat, as though it would run us down; but when within 50 yards off, it swerved aside and, when nearly opposite, the warriors above the manned prow let fly their spears and on either side there was a noise of rushing bodies. But every sound was soon lost in the ripping, crackling musketry. For five minutes we were so absorbed in firing that we took no note of anything else; but at the end of that time we were made aware that the enemy was reforming about 200 yards above us.

Our blood was up now. It was a murderous world, and we felt for the first time that we hated the filthy, vulturous ghouls who inhabited it. We therefore lifted our anchors and pursued them upstream along the right bank until rounding a point - we saw their villages. We made straight for the banks and continued the fight in the village streets with those who had landed, hunting them out into the woods, and there only sounded the retreat, having returned the daring cannibals the compliment of a visit.

### **Time and Place Rule Applied to the Accounts**

The time and place rule assumes that those closest to the event have the best view. Assuming King Mojimba and Stanley were there is this rule met?

### **The Bias Rule**

The bias rule assumes every source is biased in some manner. Thus every piece of evidence must be viewed with skepticism. It also assumes one must dig deep into the context and purpose of the author of the document.

1. How might the accounts of both Stanley and Mojimba be biased, even though they had met the “time and place” rule?
2. As each person wrote his account, what purpose might have biased his or her writing?
3. What would we want to find out about each author to help us?

To help us balance the bias in each account, we look at areas where both very different accounts say the same things.

### **Areas of Agreement**

Have students select three important facts the two sources agree to. For example, both agree that the canoes met on the river and there was firing. What are three other actions they agree upon? What are three items mentioned in each account that seem of importance that are not mentioned in the other account? What hypothesis can you make about these differences?

### **Loaded Words or Images**

Ask students the following questions:

What words used in each account might appeal to your emotions, such as “foul murderer”? List for each account.

Does either account utilize more loaded images? Does one seem more evenhanded? Students will probably see that both use loaded words such as (from Mojimba) “The robbers and murderers had disappeared.” But from Stanley we see: “Our blood was up now. It was a murderous world, and we felt for the first time that we hated the filthy, vulturous ghouls who inhabited it.” Students will see that loaded language may sway them, but if they ignore adjectives and compare the areas of agreement between wholly different accounts, they may at least be able to write a fairly objective account. Asking them to write a 30-second “byte” for CNN might lead to the following:

“Today on a river in Africa, the forces of Stanley Livingston and King Mojimba engaged. We know that both forces discharged weapons while in the middle of a river riding canoes. Many Africans were killed though we do not have a report of Stanley’s losses. As we receive more facts, we will provide updates.” And then consider the following statement. “Father Frassle added that this kind of ceremonial meeting of a person, such as Stanley, had experienced, was still in common use in his time and that he had often been honored in this way.” (Comments by Heinrich Schiffers.) So – murder, self-defense – or misunderstanding? Ask students to decide.

Of course, most media feel a responsibility to interpret the news and the nature of a report coming from an American and an African reporter would be quite different. But understanding that sources written by people close to the event can be so diametrically opposed is a major increase in understanding about how to evaluate primary sources by students. In an era of information glut and unfiltered information readily available on the Internet, the skills learned in such an exercise as above will help our young citizens to more carefully judge both past history and present actions of governments, leaders, and people.

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