Multiple Hamitic Theories and Black Egyptians: Negotiating Tensions between Standards of Scholarship and Political Imperatives in UNESCO's General History of Africa (1964–1998)

Schulte Nordholt, L.R.C.

Multiple Hamitic Theories and Black Egyptians: Negotiating Tensions between Standards of Scholarship and Political Imperatives in UNESCO's General History of Africa (1964–1998)

Larissa Schulte Nordholt, *Leiden University, Netherlands*

ABSTRACT

UNESCO's eight-volume General History of Africa (GHA) was a politically engaged but scholarly endeavor that aimed to Africanize the writing of African history. It did so partly through an expulsion of historical explanations that hinged on the idea that greatness had been transported into Africa from the outside. This article shows how the GHA developed scholarly standards while at the same time grappling with the political tension inherent in a move away from European colonialist historiography. It was specifically during the editing of the chapter written by Cheikh Anta Diop on the origins of the ancient Egyptians that political imperatives seemed to clash with standards of academic rigor and scholarly methods. This article offers an analysis of reports produced by the GHA during the editing of the series to show how the GHA navigated these tensions and why they chose to include the Diop chapter even if not all historians working on the GHA agreed with it. The article thereby shows how a decolonization of history took place in historiographical practice.

The UNESCO-funded eight-volume General History of Africa (1964–98), or GHA, was a political and academic project that aimed to contribute to the Africanization of African history as part of the project of nation-building in a decolonizing Africa. The GHA was a multiauthored, pan-Africanist, and Afrocentric

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synthesis of the history of the African continent, including North Africa.[1] This article offers a case study of how the GHA tried to decolonize African history while developing Africa-centered scholarly standards. It thereby contributes to the aim of "decentralizing the history of the humanities," which has so far somewhat overlooked Africa.[2] The article shows that there was a tension between the development of such standards and the GHA's political emancipatory purposes. The GHA tried to avoid historical explanations that put the primacy of African history outside the continent, such as Eurocentric interpretations that explained development in African history by reference to a European presence or European events. A related but different historical explanation was the "Hamitic hypothesis," which, in various and often racialized interpretations, supposed that progress or development in Africa was the result of invasions by peoples from North Africa. This was a racist explanation in African history because it suggested that black Africans could not have developed themselves, but it was also factually incorrect. For GHA historians the term *Eurocentrism* usually referred to historical explanations that incorrectly assumed a European influence on African history or that placed European concerns at the center of historical explanations, but it could also refer to the use of theories developed by European historians that placed the impetus of development outside of Africa.

The most important discussion within the GHA, one that became emblematic of the tensions between political and academic imperatives, surrounded Cheikh Anta Diop's chapter on the origin of the ancient Egyptians. Diop argued that the ancient Egyptians had been black Africans by, among other things, making use of *racialist* ideas on the origins and identities of peoples.[3] He argued that if civilization had spread from Egypt to the

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1. *Afrocentrism* refers both to the idea that everything can be explained as stemming from Africa, as an inverse Eurocentrism, and to a way of explaining the world as seen from an African rather than a European viewpoint. The term *Afrocentrism* has been most associated with African American conceptions of history and is especially connected with Temple University, which sought to locate the birth of civilization in Africa, specifically Egypt; see Moses, *Afrotopia*. In French, there are two different words sometimes used to describe these different meanings: *afrocentrisme*, for the former meaning, and *afrocentricité*, for the latter; see Coquery-Vidrovitch, "African Historiography," 118. In this article I use the term "African-centered" or "Afrocentric" to mean that the GHA aimed to take Africa as a geographical starting point from which to create a historical narrative and a new historiographical logic. I use "Afrocentric" also because this is the term that historians within the GHA used themselves. See also Keto, *Africa Centered Perspective of History and Social Sciences*, 1.

2. The society for the History of the Humanities is, laudably, aware of this issue and as a result organized their 2019 conference in South Africa in an effort to draw African historians into their sphere, resulting in several interesting conference papers on the humanities in South Africa and encounters between scholars of European, American, and African intellectual history.

3. *Racialism* is the idea that humanity could be classified into different and distinct "races" with heritable characteristics that are shared and that have a biological essence.

rest of the continent as is suggested by "Hamitic hypotheses," it would have been black African civilization rather than white. Diop's most important point, however, was pan-African; he simply wished to assert that the ancient Egyptian civilization had been African and was therefore part of African history and culture, which he perceived of as consisting of a single entity.[4] The salience of the debate on ancient Egypt, therefore, hinged on political questions of identity and belonging. Who could create knowledge about Africa and to whose advantage? Diop's chapter was finally published with a note warning the reader that not all of the GHA editorial board agreed with Diop's view. I argue that Diop's piece was published because, although it did not fit with the scholarly aim of the GHA, it did align with its political aims.

The GHA took as its starting point the notion that Africa had a history that should be written "from within," as Bethwell Ogot (b. 1929), the project's president at the time, framed it.[5] The eight volumes were published between 1981 and 1998, having been drafted largely in the 1970s and 1980s—although the project work had started as early as 1964.[6] The GHA was part of a process of professionalization of African history in the twentieth century and aimed to change the way the historical discipline regarded Africa.[7] History was deemed to be of paramount importance to shape new nation-states, and that meant ridding the mythologies of those nation-states of the idea that greatness had come from outside via "Hamites" or others. The GHA was led, from 1971 onward, by an International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, consisting of thirty-nine members, the majority of whom were African or of African descent.[8] However, the editorial board also included Europeans, Americans, and historians from Eastern Europe. The GHA adhered to an ideal of cultural and intellectual diversity and was therefore invested in the importance of attracting authors from many different countries, including from outside Africa, which is unsurprising given that the project was funded by UNESCO.

Perhaps as a result of this institutional context, the GHA has so far been studied primarily from the perspective of international cooperation and as a part of UN history, for instance, by Chloé Maurel.[9] It also received some attention for its role in developing an Afrocentric perspective on history and is usually mentioned in overviews on African

4. Diouf and Mbodj, "Shadow of Cheikh Anta Diop," 120.

5. Ogot, "Description of the Project," xxiii–xxv.

6. UNESCO, *Records of the General Conference*, 66.

7. Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, 237–38.

8. First plenary meeting of the International Scientific Committee for the drafting of a General History of Africa, March 30–April 8, 1971, Rules of Procedure, art. 1, rev. April 5, 1971, SHC/CONF.70/8, 1, UNESCO archives, Paris (hereafter UAP).

9. Maurel, "L'histoire générale de l'Afrique," 715–37; Andersen, "UNESCO's General History of Africa"

historiography as part of a nationalist school of African history.[10] As such, it is mostly understood as an African attempt to apply historical methodology developed in Europe to African pasts.[11] I argue that, although this is true, the GHA should also be understood as part of a history of intellectual decolonization and as part of the history of scholarship more broadly. As Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Siphamandla Zondi have argued, decolonizing projects of the post-independence period, such as the GHA, essentially focused on a deracialization of history and never really moved beyond colonialist conceptualizations.[12] That, however, did not mean that the GHA historians were not concerned with the pervasive influence of colonial historiography and racism on the study of African history, even if they framed this in terms of scholarly accuracy rather than making a moral claim or aiming at profound epistemic change. Nor was a deracialization of history easy to accomplish, as racist ideas had permeated knowledge production on Africa from the fifteenth century onward—what Valentin Mudimbe has called the "colonial library."[13] The importance of a deracialization of historiography, moreover, was connected to scholarly respectability, and this was one reason that Diop's contribution became a main point of contention within the GHA. Although the GHA historians did not necessarily frame their opposition to Eurocentric and colonialist historiography in terms that we have come to identify as postcolonial, they did conceive of their own project as part of a decolonization, or Africanization, of history.

To analyze and describe how the GHA came to conceptualize what it meant to decolonize African history, I will make use of archival source material to illuminate the minutiae of the discussions, debates, and eventual decisions that were made behind the scenes. The article focuses on the GHA's system of internal review to analyze how different strategies of moving away from what was perceived of as colonialist and Eurocentric historiography were debated within the GHA. Unfortunately, not all reading reports for all volumes are still traceable in the various archives I visited. The UNESCO archives in Paris contains reading reports relating to volumes 1, 2, 4, and 5 (out of a total of eight volumes). Moreover, the Jadeas Trust Library—the private archive of J. F. Ade Ajayi in Ibadan, Nigeria—contains additional material pertaining to volumes 1 and 2, as well as volumes 6 and 7. The article also looks into the report of the 1974 Cairo meeting during which Diop's contribution was debated. By looking at the reading reports primarily, I analyze how disagreements on such fundamental issues as perceived Eurocentrism were

10. Santana Barbosa, "A construção da perspective Africana," 211–30.

11. Falola, "Nationalism and African Historiography," 224; Iggers and Wang, *Global History of Modern Historiography*, 298; and Woolf, *Global History of History*, 443–46.

12. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Zondi, "Introduction: The Coloniality of Knowledge," 13.

13. Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*

dealt with internally and how an attempted decolonization of history took place in scholarly practice. This study therefore concerns itself with scholarly practices—reviewing, editing, convening, and corresponding.[14] The narrative is partly shaped by the archive itself, which through correspondence only sporadically narrates both the conviviality and the antimony of editing a work of historical scholarship over a span of nearly thirty-five years. The documents nevertheless illustrate the complexities of writing an eight-volume work of history. We may catch a glimpse of friendship or, conversely, animosity, but the relationships built during the lifespan of the GHA were perhaps more meaningful than an institutional archive can reveal. The point of this article, however, is not to focus on the individual but rather to illustrate the collective labor involved in drafting the GHA.

I start by exploring how the GHA dealt with the multiple explanations that hinged on external influences, including the Hamitic hypothesis and Eurocentrism. The second part of the article traces Cheikh Anta Diop's specific way of dealing with the implications of nineteenth-century racialism for the history of ancient Egypt as well as the reactions to his explanations from others involved in the project.

COMBATTING EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

When GHA authors received praise within the GHA's system of peer review, it was usually because they had avoided explanations that depended on external influences on African history. They would subsequently be congratulated on being objective or impartial, capable of producing a well-rounded view of African history.[15] If an author had succeeded in avoiding such external explanations, they had succeeded in following the GHA's primary and most important rule—to write African history from the inside. Conversely, when chapters were criticized, the criticism often started with the assertion that the chapter had an "external orientation."[16] Use of or reference to "Hamites" quickly became associated with such an "external orientation" and was therefore antithetical to writing African history from the inside. In the introduction for volume 4, therefore, the editor of the volume, the Guinean Djibril Tamsir Niane (1932–2021), had written that the word was banned. The word "was used to describe certain white pastoral peoples, so-called 'bearers of civilization.' These presumed pastoralists, whose reality or historical existence has never been

14. Following work by scholars such as Tollebeek, *Fredericq & Zonen*, 22–23, and "L'historien quotidien," 153; and Friedrich et al., "Practices of Historical Research," 3–13.

15. Bethwell A. Ogot, comments on "Introduction and African Prehistory," vol. 1 of GHA, July 10, 1975, p. 3, Ade Ajayi papers, box 75, Jadeas Trust Library, Ibadan (hereafter JTL).

16. M. Malowist, "The Main Characteristics," vol. 5, chap. 1, CLT/CID/89, UAP; GHA, vol. 5, first readers report, rapporteur J. Vansina, CLT/CID/89, UAP; and vol. 7, chap. 2, p. 1, box 67, Ade Ajayi papers, JTL.

demonstrated, are supposed to have wandered hither and thither through the continent, bringing culture and civilization to black agriculturalists."[17]

The reason for this ban was that the Hamitic hypothesis in its various incarnations could be seen as among the most fundamental assertions of European disdain for Africa within historiography. The term "Hamitic hypothesis" refers to a cluster of interpretations that have appeared in various areas of African history, linguistics, and physical anthropology over the years. In its historiographic incarnation, introduced into the collective consciousness of Africanists by C. G. Seligman in 1930, it usually supposed that a people designated by later scholars as "Hamites" had invaded from the Middle East, via northern and northeastern Africa, into central, eastern, and western Africa. One iteration of the hypothesis suggested that these people had supposedly spread the practice of rearing cattle as well as ideas and institutions of monarchy into Africa, specifically through a process of diffusion from the ancient civilization of Egypt, thereby placing Egypt at the center of African historical development.[18] These various forms of Hamitic myths were, and sometimes still are, tenacious explanatory narratives that have come to impress upon African histories and societies a logic from outside.[19] This was often the result of, as Edith Sanders demonstrated in 1969, colonial and imperial efforts to transform African history in such a way that would render it intelligible to European outsiders.[20] In the Rwandan context, the physical, economic, and social differences that European missionaries and scholars perceived between the Tutsi royal court and the Hutu peasantry became essentialized into these categories, with devastating consequences.[21] In the words of J. J. Carney, "the Hamitic thesis combined the biblical narrative of the 'curse of Ham' . . . with the scientific racialism of the late 19th century."[22] In that way, the Hamitic hypothesis served as a layered ethnographic narrative meant to explain African differences to European invaders, often resulting in the enhancement or creation of systems of hierarchies between groups of people.[23] The idea that through understanding the world Europeans could own and control it, as has been discussed by, among others, Edward Said and Valentin Mudimbe, may be most overtly demonstrated

17. Niane, "Introduction," 13; I have used UNESCO's translation from the French.

18. McCaskie and Fage, "Western Africa"

19. The hypotheses have taken on various forms over the years and find part of their origins in nineteenth-century linguistics. As a result of fieldwork in the Nile region after the Napoleontic claim on Egyptian antiquities, Hamitic languages were conceptualized as a language family that could connect Egyptian, Coptic, and Ethiopian with Berber and even Khoisan languages; see Solleveld, "Lepsius as a Linguist."

20. Sanders, "Hamitic Hypothesis," 528.

21. Carney, *Rwanda before the Genocide*, 10–15.

22. Ibid., 11.

23. Chrétien, "Mythes et strategies," 281–320.

through the way this cluster of interpretations here denoted as the Hamitic hypothesis manifested itself in African historiography.[24]

In the reading report for volume 4, Niane therefore expressed an aversion to what he saw as the use of plural Hamitic *hypotheses* when he wrote, cementing the GHA view, that "It is necessary to combat the multiple theories, including that of Seligman about the Hamites, that anti-scientific theory claims that white pastoralists (the Hamites) have spread civilization among black populations from the Nile Valley to the African lakes."[25] Niane's referral here to "multiple" Hamitic theories reflects the fact that the idea of "Hamites" had come to refer to an array of different explanations in African history. The hypothesis also appeared in different forms in the GHA. This caused Ivan Hrbek, the Czech coeditor of volume 4, to exclaim in exasperation while editing a chapter: "When will there be an end with all these strange hybrid and mixed peoples coming from Arabia, Egypt and other parts of the world and crossing the Sahara to and back founding states and dynasties and then changing their colour, names, customs, religions, languages so that nothing is left? . . . Why the Africans could not have African origins, why always look somewhere else for their coming and progress? Let us finish once forever with all this even if some traditional accounts tend to support it."[26] As these two quotes show, within the GHA, referring to explanatory narratives that placed the origin of African civilizations somewhere in the Middle East became suspect, as it placed emphasis on outside influences on Africa's history, whereas the GHA was bent on avoiding that particular pitfall. Niane repeatedly warned against the attribution of external influences and theories developed elsewhere as explanations of historical facts in Africa: "there is often a tendency among some to attribute too much influence to external influences and research from non-African historical schools."[27]

In these reading reports, both Niane and Hrbek were reviewing volume 4, on Africa from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, which seemed to attract the use of various Hamitic hypotheses due to its focus on migration and the spread of civilizations across the continent. For them, tracing these migrations and the origins of African civilizations to Arab or other origins became synonymous with bad historical scholarship. Crucially,

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24. Said, *Orientalism*; and Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*.

25. "Il est nécessare de combattre les nombreuses théories dont celle de Seligman sur les Chamites, cette théorie anti-scientifique prétend que des pasteurs blancs (les chamites) ont répandu la civilisation chez les populations noires depuis la vallée du Nil jusqu'aux Lacs africains" (Lettre sur l'*Histoire générale de l'Afrique*, Volume IV, Directeur de Publication: D. T. Niane, p. 19, CC/CSP/38, UAP).

26. Report of the Reading Committee 1977, p. 23, CC/CSP/38, UAP.

27. "La tendance est souvent manifeste chez les uns et les autres d'attribuer une influence par trop grande aux influences extérieures et aux recherches des écoles historiques extra-africaines" (Lettre circulaire Niane à Messieurs les Membres du Comité de lecture du Volume IV de l'*Histoire générale de l'Afrique*, July 7, 1977, CC/CSP/38, UAP).

however, they did not deny that there had been outside influences on African civilizations during this period, but they wanted to emphasize that this did not mean that Africans had passively absorbed these influences or that they had only developed as a result of these influences. They wanted to make sure that such assertions were based on sound historical research rather than racist misinformation developed as a result of the European colonialist expansion. As Niane also wrote in his introduction, "Indeed it was a very special period, in which Africa developed its original culture and assimilated outside influences while retaining its own individuality."[28]

Specifically, questions of origin that attributed too great an influence to the outside, then, did not always seem pertinent or scholarly to historians working on the GHA. Hrbek, explaining Vinigi Grottannelli's view on the origins of Swahili cultures, wrote that Grottannelli "considers the question . . . whether the Swahili civilization was African or brought by strangers from outside as a false one."[29] Grottanelli argued that Swahili culture was evidently a mixed culture influenced by a multitude of different peoples. Establishing its origins was somewhat beside the point. Crucially, researching "origins" may have seemed eerily similar to researching race, something that the GHA wished to move away from entirely. Nonetheless, Hrbek added the following note to these comments: "in view of the well known [*sic*] fact that for long time European historians and other scholars considered the East African civilization as Arabic and as work of non-Africans it is necessary to fight against the non-scientific theories and proclaim once for ever the African origin of this civilization!"[30] More so than Grottanelli, it seems, Hrbek believed that historians of Africa needed to be extra wary of the multiple "Hamitic hypotheses" floating around. More interesting even is Hrbek's seeming skepticism toward the idea that Swahili culture could also have been Arabic if Arabs were considered "non-African." Given the fact that East Africa was an integrated part of the wider Indian Ocean world of trade and commerce, and also Niane's comments in the introduction to the volume, this is somewhat curious.[31] Moreover, it is a testament to Hrbek's aversion to what he perceived as erroneously attributed outside influences on African history—all the more interesting given Hrbek's conversion to Islam as a young man.[32]

Due to the focus on the Middle East and its possible connection to Hamitic interpretations perhaps, a focus on the influences of Arabic traders or Islamic culture beyond Hamitic interpretations was sometimes also seen as "external," and thereby suspect. In his

28. Niane, "Introduction," 1.

29. Grottanelli on Volume IV, pp. 6–7, CC CSP 38, UAP.

30. First Supplement to the Report of the Reading Committee, Rapporteur: Ivan Hrbek, Prague, July 7, 1977, p. 8, CC/CSP/38, UAP.

31. See Beaujard, *Worlds of the Indian Ocean*; and Nurse and Spear, *The Swahili*.

32. Maurel, "L'histoire générale de l'Afrique," 726.

review of volume 6, chapter 20, dealing with Africa in the nineteenth century, Henry Slater, a historian who was located at the Dar es Salaam university in Tanzania and who had a materialist approach toward history,[33] wrote:

> the writer approaches his analysis from an Islamic standpoint. . . . This has led to the development of a view of the African past which locates the dynamic of its historical development in an external force—the universalist religion of Islam. There was apparently only "ignorance" in west Africa until the arrival of Islam. . . . One wonders whether this is the kind of progressive "Africanist" viewpoint the editors had in mind when they embarked upon the UNESCO project. Is it not dangerously close to becoming a variant of the kind of colonialist view of Africa's history which the editors, and I'm sure the author, are trying to bury once and for all?[34]

Although this time pertaining to West Africa, too much influence ascribed to Islam was received with skepticism by Slater. In the same vein, Ogot argued that too much influence had been attributed to Islam in the history of Madagascar in chapter 24 of volume 4. In the editing of volume 5, on Africa from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, Ogot, who was the editor, had also been skeptical toward what he perceived was an excessive focus on Islam in the history of the Sudan.[35] As a Luo historian working to include the narrative of noncentralized histories of Nilotic peoples in East Africa, Ogot was hyperaware of such dynamics.[36] Jan Vansina (1929–2017), the pioneering Belgian specialist in oral traditions and one of the most active historians working on the GHA throughout its lifespan, suggested that the chapter's focus was too narrow owing to a "total lack of critical approach."[37] Here too the suggestion was that a so-called extra-African focus was the result of uncritical biased scholarship, even if what constituted "extra-African" was defined in different ways.

Further to these discussions on the influence of Islam, Eurocentrism also remained a problem, as it too hinged on external explanations in African history. This was the case specifically regarding volume 7, which dealt with Africa under colonial domination. The head of its reading committee, Jacob Ade Ajayi (1929–2014), in his review of the first

33. Maddox, "The Dar es Salaam School"

34. I. N. Kimambo to Maurice Glélé, comments chapter 20, p. 2, reader Dr. Henry Slater, Ade Ajayi papers, box 67, JTL.

35. Yusuf Hasan to Bethwell Ogot, August 12, 1986, CLT CID 92, UAP; Bethwell Ogot to Yusuf Hasan, April 15, 1981, CLT CID 92, UAP; Bethwell Ogot to Maurice Glélé, September 24, 1982, CLT CID 92, UAP.

36. Ogot, "Some approaches," 7.

37. A General History of Africa Volume IV, Report of the Reading Committee – Ivan Hrbek, May 10, 1977, p. 36, CC/CSP/38, UAP.

chapter of the volume, noted that the "orientation remains curiously external to African history." Ajayi therefore framed Eurocentrism as part of the various external orientations that the GHA loathed. He did not think that a historiographical overview of imperialism was a pertinent way to study the African dimensions of the European scramble: "It is curious that in a work on African history, European history is regarded as a wider context." Ajayi wanted the chapter to focus on the "African geopolitical situation at the time of the scramble," rather than European political concerns, as "this might provide a more satisfactory answer to the question of . . . relative ease of the European conquest."[38] Even though the historiographical overview of imperialism was not removed from the chapter, Ajayi accepted it at a later stage mainly because its title had been changed from "The Partition, Conquest and Occupation of Africa 1880–1914" to "The European Conquest of Africa: An Overview."[39] The title had come to better reflect the chapter, and even though it remained Eurocentric, in Ajayi's estimation this at least made sure readers would be made aware. In 1969, Ajayi had written a seminal piece on the question of colonialism in African history titled "Colonialism: An Episode in African History." In it he had pressed a *longue durée* vision on African history in which continuities needed to be stressed over singular events.[40] The chapter that he criticized in his volume, then, received critique as a result of an undue emphasis on the importance of colonialism for African history.

The problem of undue emphasis on outside factors resurfaced throughout the reading reports, and it was often identified as bad scholarship. Readers either thought questions regarding influence were beside the point, like Grottanelli, or they were simply fed up with the explanation and thought it had lost its power, like Hrbek or Ajayi. Perceived Eurocentrism, however, did not automatically lead to an agreement among readers considering the quality of a chapter. In the reading report for volume 5, the Ghanaian editor of volume 7, Adu Boahen (1932–2006), rejected a chapter wholly due to its Eurocentrism and emphasis on external factors. Or, as he put it, "spirit and Eurocentric stress run counter to the spirit of this history. . . . External factors are too strongly causes of decline or stagnation in Africa."[41] Slater, the chapter's author, had a completely different view of the chapter, stating that "Africa's place in the world is masterful."[42] This difference in judgment can

38. In the same report regarding another chapter, Ajayi also wondered whether the whole volume should be centered on African responses to colonialism; see Comments on Volume VII, Chapter 2, pp. 1–3, 6, box 77, Ade Ajayi papers, JTL.

39. Third Report of the Reading Committee on Volume VII by J. F. Ade Ajayi, July 20, 1981, p. 5, box 77, Ade Ajayi papers, JTL.

40. Ajayi, "Colonialism," 497–510.

41. General History of Africa – Volume V. Fifth Reader's Report: June 24, 1984. Rapporteur: J. Vansina, p. 2, CLT/CID/89, UAP.

42. Ibid.

be explained by referring to the vastly different historiographical and political outlooks of the two commenters. While Boahen was firmly grounded in a nationalist Africanist focus on Africa-centered history, which emphasized the African factor in history, Slater adhered to a more materialist view in which more emphasis was placed on the influence of colonialism and European economic interventions in Africa.[43] The chapter was broad in its scope, dealing with African socioeconomic and political structures from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, and therefore its author chose to compare and link structures in Africa to those in Europe. In a reading report that followed, however, the rest of the committee seemed to share Boahen's view that the chapter was problematic due to its Eurocentrism.[44] A tension existed between Africa's global contexts, both in the Indian Ocean world and with reference to European expansion and the need to treat the history of Africa with reference to the unicity of the historical processes that took place on the continent itself.[45]

The charge of an external explanation, based on ideas that could be connected to Eurocentrism, Islamcentrism, or colonialist historiography, usually meant that a given scholarly work was incompatible with the goals of the GHA.[46] The following section details an extensive compromise that shows that racialist or Hamitic-adjacent, and therefore external, explanations were not always avoided within the GHA when it brought into conflict the GHA's goal of political emancipation and the creating of scholarly standards within African history.

RECLAIMING EGYPT

Another way to address the question of "external orientation" in African history was by reclaiming ancient Egypt for Africa, which was the path taken by Cheikh Anta Diop, as well as Théophile Obenga. Their interpretation of ancient Egypt, namely, that it had been a black, but more importantly, African civilization, dealt with questions of identity head on, by arguing that one of the most important ancient civilizations, at least according to European standards, had in fact been African. They based their arguments largely on elements of physical anthropology and race science that had become outdated and that were rejected as racist by some.[47] It was not, however, Cheikh Anta Diop who first set out to proof the racial origin of the ancient Egyptians, but nineteenth-century European scholars who were invested in the idea that ancient Egypt was the origin of Western

43. I. N. Kimambo to Dr. Maurice Glele, March 26, 1981, p. 1, CLT/CID/89, UAP.

44. Revised Reading Rapport after Brazzaville, date unclear, p. 36, CLT/CID/89, UAP.

45. Miller, "Wisconsin School of African History."

46. Bethwell Ogot to Maurice Glélé, March 26, 1981, p. 2, box 67, Ade Ajayi papers, JTL.

47. For a good discussion on the historical context of Diop's work, see Derricourt, *Inventing Africa*, 110–15.

civilization. For them, the Egyptians, for political and ideological reasons, could not be "negroid" but had to be white.[48] Racialism itself was therefore an external intrusion of African history, as it was a European invention. Heated debates concerning the origins of ancient Egyptian civilizations, therefore, and the question of who could lay claim to its history lay at the core the of the debate on the chapter Diop wrote for the GHA. They prompted equally heated debates concerning the origin of Western civilization—centered on the well-known Black Athena controversy. To discuss this particular multifaceted academic debate is beyond the scope of this article. But the Black Athena controversy, like the work of Cheikh Anta Diop within the GHA, essentially revolved around culturally and politically significant debates concerning citizenship and identity.[49]

Diop's chapter for the GHA, in which he made the argument for a black Egyptian civilization, was published in the GHA's second volume. The volume, dealt with the ancient civilizations of Africa up to about the seventh century BC. The volume was edited by Gamal Mokhtar (1918–98) and primarily covered ancient Egypt, Nubia, and the kingdom of Kush. Diop's chapter was effectively a reiteration of his earlier work and specifically a tome he had published in 1954, *Nations, nègres et culture: De l'Antiquité nègre égyptienne aux problems culturels de l'Afrique noire d'aujourd'hui*.[50] The GHA chapter was a technical account, concerned with anthropological, biological, linguistic, and archaeological evidence. As he stated in the chapter itself as well as the introduction to his 1967 follow-up to the 1954 tome, *Antériorité des civilisations nègres*, it was of the utmost importance to stay on strictly scientific grounds and use "objective language" so that it would not be possible for others to reproach the work and denounce it as ideological.[51] Diop nevertheless also used classical sources, referring to Herodotus, Aristotle, and the Bible, among others, to make his case.[52] Moreover, he appealed to ideals of cultural unity among people of African origin as well—a pan-African sentiment that was shared by the GHA as a whole.[53]

Diop showed he was aware of the standards and values upheld and appreciated in the existing Euro-American academy. He knew that his work would be taken seriously only if articulated in a language that could be understood by those who guarded the gate to epistemic trustworthiness. He, moreover, was himself invested in the idea of African

48. Eltringham, "'Invaders Who Have Stolen the Country,'" 425–27; and Sanders, "Hamitic Hypothesis," 524–26.

49. Bernal, *Black Athena*; and Lefkowitz, *Black Athena Revisited*

50. Diop, *Nations, nègres et culture*, *Antériorité des civilisations nègres*, and *African Origin of Civilization*.

51. Diop, *Antériorité des civilisations nègres*, 10, and "Origins of the Ancient Egyptians," 49.

52. Diop, "Origins of the Ancient Egyptians," 36–43.

53. Diop, *Unité culturelle de l'Afrique noire*

civilization as inherently rational. Diop, who was trained as a chemist and physicist, worked within a tradition of positivist historical scholarship most associated with nineteenth-century European thinkers—in the words of Jean Devisse. As a testimony to his multifaceted interest in the production of knowledge, moreover, he set up the radiocarbon laboratory of the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire in Dakar in 1966 and functioned as its director until his death. His confidence in positivist rationality was partly informed by his interdisciplinary outlook on academia.[54]

Within the ranks of the GHA, however, his work was not appreciated by all. The chapter included an editorial note: "The arguments put forward in this chapter have not been accepted by all the experts interested in the problem."[55] The report of the symposium, titled "The Peopling of Ancient Egypt and the Deciphering of Meroitic Script," was annexed to the chapter so that readers would be able to follow the discussion preceding the publication of Diop's chapter.[56] This annex is by itself noteworthy. It provides the reader of the work with background discussions to the chapters and therefore serves to underline the GHA's focus on intellectual diversity.

The symposium itself took place in Cairo from January 28 to February 3, 1974. Only some of its participants were active members of the GHA community, such as Devisse, Grotanelli, Obenga (b. 1936), Diop, Mokhtar, and Maurice Glélé (b. 1934), who was the official UNESCO liaison to the project. Whether the ancient Egyptians could be counted as a "white" or "black" civilization became a point of contention during the symposium. Diop and Obenga both presented papers in which they argued for the black origins of Egyptian civilization. The other contributors mostly disagreed with their points of view on the basis of methodology, disputing, for instance, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources on which Diop had based some of his findings and, moreover, arguing that a purely black African Egyptian population could not be reconciled with Egyptian iconography.[57] Opponents of his work argued that the Egyptians were inherently a culture of multiple mixed elements. They did come to a general consensus that the Egyptians could not have been "white" in the same way that Europeans were. None of these statements amounted to the denial of the inherently African nature of Egyptian civilization. But, to most symposium attendees, skin color alone was not a good measurement for being African.[58] Moreover, some participants advocated for an outright "outlawing" of the terms *Negro*, *black*, and so on, on the grounds that there should be no place in modern scholarly discourse

54. The French academic establishment reluctantly rewarded him with a doctorate only in 1960, even though he had finished his doctoral work in 1954; Devisse, "DIOP Cheikh Anta (1923–1986)."

55. Diop, "Origins of the Ancient Egyptians," 36–43.

56. Ibid., 4.

57. UNESCO, *Peopling of Ancient Egypt*, 86.

58. Ibid., 74, 96, 99.

for the concept of race. Discussions on race made some of the participants uncomfortable. In volume 1, Burkinabe historian and editor Joseph Ki-Zerbo (1922–2006) had already stated that there was no place for explicit racialism in the GHA.[59] Glélé reassured the experts present at the symposium that UNESCO was, as always, "committed to the cause of promoting international understanding."[60] UNESCO explicitly adhered to an antiracist and antiracialist point of view and had scientifically dismissed the concept of race.[61] Diop's work, however, was based on explicit racialism.

The group did not reach a consensus because the methodological disagreements were the result of fundamental differences of opinion regarding research standards, specifically regarding the idea of race. The symposium simply did not adhere to the very premise from which it had begun, namely, that the skin color of the ancient Egyptians was something that mattered. The report of the symposium, moreover, stated that UNESCO would rather focus on studies of racial discrimination in an effort to combat its effects than on questions of racial classification. Although the report also stated that it thought the GHA needed to use those words that "readers were already accustomed" to (i.e., *negroid*), it nevertheless showed that most participants did not think it was good scholarship to fixate on race.[62] The difference of opinion, then, was based on a different outlook on how to best create Afrocentric history and contest racism within scholarship.

In the reading report for volume 2, unsurprisingly, similar issues surfaced. Diop had written his chapter for volume 2 after the Cairo symposium, but without changing his views substantially. The *rapporteur*, or head of the reading committee, for volume 2 was Jan Vansina; other reading report members included Diop himself, Hrbek, and Alexis Kagame (1912–81). As with the report for the symposium, readers were divided over the use of the word *race*. Hrbek and Vansina thought that the conception of race in the Diop chapter was "outdated." Vansina stated that "it was a long while since the colour of the skin, the form of the hair, the nasal index and measurements of the length and width of the cranium had been considered as the main indices, or even as the best indices among so many others' for the classification on human types."[63] It seemed, therefore, that Vansina, like the symposium participants, did not want to focus on racial categorization in a way that was reminiscent of and similar to nineteenth-century European racialism.[64]

The last reading committee member, the Rwandan Alexis Kagame, conversely, thought the chapter was "remarkable and a very convincing exposition." He was the only reader

59. Ki-Zerbo, "Editorial Note," 266–69.
60. UNESCO, *Peopling of Ancient Egypt*, 94.
61. Montagu, *Statement on Race*; and Brattain, "Race, Racism, and Antiracism," 1386–413.
62. UNESCO, *Peopling of Ancient Egypt*, 95.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., 4.

who approved of the chapter wholeheartedly. Kagame's deviation from the other reading committee members can be explained by providing some context as to who he was; it is important to do as such here so that it becomes clear that support of Diop's point of view was itself rooted in an adherence to interpretations of African history that favored a focus on racial classification and also some version of a Hamitic hypothesis. Kagame was a priest as well as a historian, writing mostly "official" Rwandan court histories.[65] He became very influential during Rwanda's formative postcolonial years and managed to almost equate the history of Rwanda with the history of its royal courts.[66] As a result of this view, Kagame was focused on projecting the image of a unified Rwanda back in time.[67] Kagame adhered to the idea that pastoralist "Hamites" had invaded the country sometime in the precolonial period and had left cultural and genetic traces and intermingled with the existing population.[68] The presence of Hamites in ancient Rwandan history connected them to European classical antiquity.[69] To him, therefore, the idea of a peoples invading from the north and influencing what had come to be known as Rwanda was an important part of his national history—Diop's work on the ancient Egyptians only served to cement these views. It was unsurprising that he supported Diop's chapter within the GHA. In his autobiography, Ogot, editor of volume 5 and president of the GHA at the time, described a scene in which Kagame proclaimed himself to be a Hamite when the GHA had decided to rid the GHA of the "Hamitic myth." Ogot's response was telling: "As President [of the GHA] and a specialist on the history of the Great Lakes region, I did not mince my words: I dismissed his claim with the contempt it deserved."[70] It seems clear that Kagame was somewhat of an outlier regarding Hamitic historiographical explanations. The reading report for volume 4, written by Hrbek, serves to further cement the difference of opinion between Kagame, Ogot, and others. Kagame heavily critiqued Ogot's chapter on East Africa from 1200 to 1500 for its failure to include references to Hamitic influences. He accused both Ogot and Vansina—on whose work Ogot had based part of the chapter—of having written a political pamphlet. Hrbek however, ended the discussion. He agreed with Ogot and moreover referred the debate to the committee that was in charge of the GHA as a whole.[71]

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65. Vidal, "Alexis Kagame," 497.

66. Newbury and Newbury, "Bringing the Peasants Back In," 854.

67. Mathys, "Bringing History Back In," 472.

68. He also tended to identify Rwandan precolonial history with the "feudal stage" of European history; see Vidal, "Alexis Kagame," 498.

69. Kagame, *Un abrégé de l'ethno-histoire du Rwanda*, 30–31.

70. Ogot, *My Footprints*, 389.

71. First Supplement to the Report of the Reading Committee, Rapporteur: Ivan Hrbek, Prague, July 7, 1977, p. 13, CC/CSP/38, UAP.

Besides the official reading committee, other GHA historians also commented on volume 2. Ajayi suggested more proof was needed to solidify Diop's arguments.[72] Boahen was more definite in his dismissal of Diop's thesis: "This is the usual Diop hobby-horse."[73] The solution to the Diop problem was finally given by Philip Curtin, a historian from North-America. He argued that since Diop's views did not reflect the view of the majority of scholars dealing with Africa—as he put it—it might be a good idea to offer several points of view to the readers. From this he constructed a general rule regarding such instances: "it seems to me that, if these volumes are to stand up with the respect of the scholarly world in Africa and outside it, that alternate readings should be presented on points of conflict like this one where neither side has yet succeeded in mustering a consensus from the scholarly community."[74] Curtin's solution was deemed satisfactory and implemented as the symposium proceedings were finally added to the chapter.[75] Simultaneously it had become clear that most readers were not comfortable with the focus on race that was necessitated by Diop's methods.

Diop's work, then, existed on the intersection of academic research and political power. In a reflection on Diop's work in the newspaper *Le monde diplomatique* in 1998, in which several Senegalese historians were interviewed, including Mamadou Diouf and Ibrahime Thioub, the UNESCO GHA symposium in Cairo in 1974 was mentioned as a turning point in the dissemination of Diop's ideas. Even if most attendants did not wholly agree with his ideas, they did agree on one fact, namely, that ancient Egypt had been African. Diop had thereby unmistakably changed the way that the Egyptological establishment thought about the historicity of African civilization, but not by proving that the Egyptians were black. Rather, he had made the point that they were African. Diop's work, the article stated, had often been ignored because of its focus on race, its Egyptocentrism, and its political nature: "in short, his work would remain too imbued with Ideology."[76] However, Diop had simply used the same weapons as his adversaries. If he was racist, it was because he was responding to racists. Yet, despite this, the importance of his work for Egyptology and the restoration of African dignity, was unmistakeable. It, moreover, could not be said that his racism had had the same devastating effect as the racism he

72. Comments by J. F. Ade Ajayi on UNESCO General History of Africa: Volume II: Ancient Civilizations of Africa, n.d., p. 1, box 75, Ade Ajayi papers, JTL.

73. Comments by A. A. Boahen on Volume II, n.d., p. 1, CC/CSP/67, UAP.

74. Philip Curtin to Maurice Glélé, December 6, 1977, CC/CSP/67, UAP.

75. This solution was suggested once more by Curtin regarding the controversy over the numbers in the trans-Atlantic slave trade—a controversy in which he had skin in the game himself; see Philip Curtin to Maurice Glele, May 22, 1985, box 77, Ade Ajayi papers, JTL.

76. "Bref, son oeuvre resterait trop empreinte d'Idéologie" (Wané, "Cheikh Anta Diop," 24).

responded to in terms of the structures of power it conceived, Diouf stated.[77] In another piece that Diouf wrote with Mohamad Mbodj in a volume edited by Valentin Mudimbe, he had already developed that thought, stating that Diop never meant to reverse the polarity of racism and that he had simply meant to formulate a speculative pan-African philosophy of history that ran parallel to Hegel's conception of modern European statehood.[78] Diouf added, however, that it had long been nearly impossible to conduct critical academic discussions on Diop's work because it was so closely connected to questions of African emancipation as well as race. Diop himself knew this too, and he knew that he could not "yield an inch" or else he would lose the political effect he aimed to create. To engage with Diop meant engaging with race, but disavowing his ideas entirely meant taking a stance that was unpatriotic from a pan-African point of view.[79] Essentially, the debate remained unresolved as a result of the tension between the development of reputable research standards in African history and the political causes to which African historians and Africanists also subscribed.

In another, more recent reflection on Diop's work, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch more or less draws the same conclusion. Without condoning Diop's methods, we should place them in a context of racialist science and the Afrocentric reaction to that science. The fact that almost no one has produced a neutral reflection of his work is telling according to Coquery-Vidrovitch, and she identifies a color bar in these responses.[80] The emancipatory worth of Diop's work then was unmistakable for the African historians who were engaged with the GHA, and it is precisely in his function as an intellectual who upset the status quo of African history that they appreciated him. After Diop passed in 1980, Boahen remembered and honored Diop as someone who had fought for the "authenticity of African history" in an internal letter to Glélé.[81] It was his contribution to the acceptance of African history as a valuable epistemic undertaking that Boahen praised. As the Senegalese historians had observed in *Le monde diplomatique*, the very point that ancient Africa had been recognized and was now seen as essentially African instead of European—a move away from an external point of view—was the contribution that Diop had made that was of lasting worth for Boahen and others. Coquery-Vidrovitch concluded that his message had been militant but necessary.[82]

77. Wané, "Cheikh Anta Diop," 24.
78. Diouf and Mbodj, "Shadow of Cheikh Anta Diop," 130–31.
79. Ibid., 118, 129.
80. Coquery-Vidrovitch, "Cheikh Anta Diop," 181.
81. Prof. A. Adu Boahen to M. Glélé, March 5, 1986, CLT CID 137, UAP.
82. Coquery-Vidrovitch, "Cheikh Anta Diop," 190.

CONCLUSION

The debate surrounding Diop's contribution to the GHA shows perhaps most clearly the existing tensions between political, emancipatory, and scholarly aims espoused by the GHA. His message that Egyptian civilization should essentially be seen as African was so important that his seemingly defunct methods based on European race science were, at least partly, tolerated. While the GHA was engaged in the creation of new research standards for the writing of African history, it was also deeply concerned with the political emancipation of Africans as well as with establishing African history as a reputable scholarly activity. It was not the case that the GHA necessarily always denounced arguments that they perceived as unsound scholarly work, but rather that within the GHA their scholarly standards had developed in such a way that explanations that referenced external factors—such as Eurocentric or colonialist ideas or theories—were seen as bad historical work. It was therefore of immense importance to the GHA historians to rid the work of any semblance of such an "external orientation," including Eurocentrism. That meant avoiding explanations that placed the primacy of African history outside the continent based on outdated and disproved theories while at the same time being mindful of outside influences that could withstand the test of sound historical source work. It also meant avoiding explanations that hinged on race as an explanatory factor. The various incarnations that were identified as "Hamitic" did both and were therefore banned from the work, at least in rhetoric. Yet Diop's contribution withstood the test of peer review, even if many GHA historians did not agree with the substance of Diop's argument, precisely because it dealt with questions of meaning within African history that could not be avoided: in arguing for the African origins of Egyptian civilization, Diop made the very basic recognition that African history was African. The solution for this problem was twofold. First, the GHA compromised and included the work so as not to seem one-sided. Second, and more important, the argument that ancient Egypt had been an African civilization fit with the overall emphasis on writing African history from within, even if the method deployed to prove as such was not considered entirely permissible by most of the other GHA historians.

In the end, the GHA did not entirely succeed in creating an Afrocentric history in the way that they imagined, that is, without references to external explanations. The GHA did assert that a decolonization of history should take as a point of departure the authenticity and autonomy of people to define for themselves what it meant to write African history and what scholarly standards were a part of that. This article has shown that the scholars who compiled UNESCO's General History of Africa engaged in debates over the standards of African history in an age of decolonization, thereby establishing that historiographical and emancipatory demands were sometimes, but not always, incongruent. It has offered a unique archival case study regarding the historiographical practice of

decolonization that shows that it was sometimes difficult to decolonize the writing of African history. It was not always clear how a politically engaged pan-African vision of history could be combined with detached scholarship. The GHA, moreover, was a project made up of many different historians, both African and other, who did not always agree with one another on what sound historical work was.

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