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The Netherlands

## **Africanising African history: decolonisation of knowledge in UNESCO's general history of Africa (1964-1998)**

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### **Citation**

Schulte Nordholt, L. R. C. (2021, December 1). *Africanising African history: decolonisation of knowledge in UNESCO's general history of Africa (1964-1998)*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3244250>

Version: Publisher's Version

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Dramatis Personae

## Jacob Festus Ade Ajayi (1929–2014)

Jacob Festus Ade Ajayi was the Nigerian editor of volume VI, which dealt with Africa during the 19th century, before the direct colonial occupation of the continent by Europeans. Ajayi was a very active member of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa (ISC) and was one of the committee members who attended most of the meetings. He was also a part of the well-known Ibadan school of history in Nigeria and was an advocate for history in the style of the Annales school, opting to focus on historical continuity rather than events. In 1969, he wrote the seminal and influential essay *Colonialism: an episode in African history*, in which he argued for a focus on continuity in African history, stating that it should be understood on its own terms and not as an appendage of European history. His work focused on the writing of Yoruba history and the history of Christian missions in Nigeria. His academic career was spent mostly at Ibadan university, although he also became vice chancellor of the University of Lagos between 1972 and 1978, on top of several sojourns abroad. He and Adu Boahen were great friends. Ajayi was known by some of his students as ‘the one who lies down to fight’.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This anecdote was told to me during a meeting with Niyi Ade Ajayi, Ade Ajayi's son.

## **Cheikh Anta Diop (1923–1986)**

Cheikh Anta Diop is perhaps the most well-known, out of all the GHA contributors. He was a historian, anthropologist and also a physicist who studied the origins of the ancient Egyptians. In his first seminal publication, *Nations nègres et culture* (1954), he came up with the controversial thesis that the ancient Egyptians had been black Africans. He also advocated for the cultural unity of the African continent in his 1959 monograph *L'unité culturelle de l'Afrique noire: domaines du patriarcat et du matriarcat dans l'antiquité classique*. His work was immensely influential across disciplines and Diop became an important intellectual in Black American circles advocating an Afrocentric view of history. Afrocentric here meaning the exact reverse of eurocentrism (without capitalisation), the idea that civilisation had originated with the ancient Egyptians. In the *General History of Africa* Diop was no less controversial than outside; he reiterated his Egyptian thesis in volume II of the GHA and during a symposium in Cairo in 1974. Extensive debate on his work ensued.

## **Adu Boahen (1932–2006)**

Adu Boahen fulfilled the role of president to the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a *General History of Africa* from 1983 until the completion of the work. Boahen was the Ghanaian editor of volume VII, which concentrated on Africa during the colonial period and in which the editor focused on resistance to colonial occupation. Boahen became the first Ghanaian to receive a PhD in history from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London in 1959 and went on to work as a lecturer and later professor in history at the University of Ghana. He was an engaged scholar who even ran for president for the New Patriotic Party against flight lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings in 1992. This was partly a result of his public lectures on the history of Ghana between 1972 and 1987, later published as *The Ghanaian Sphinx: The Contemporary History of Ghana 1972–1987*. Boahen also wrote books on the history of West Africa, most notably his 1966 *Topics in West-African History*. He was a critic of Marxist historiography outside and inside of the *General History of Africa*.

## Jean Devisse (1923–1996)

Jean Devisse was a French historian who, like Vansina, was at first specialised in Medieval history. From 1958 onwards he started focusing on Africa after a posting at the university of Dakar. He functioned as the *rapporteur*, or secretary, for the duration of the *General History of Africa* project. In that capacity he provided feedback on both content as well as organisational matters.

## Ivan Hrbek (1923–1993)

Ivan Hrbek was the Czech assistant editor of the third volume of the *General History of Africa*, focusing on Africa from the 7th to the 11th century, alongside Mohammed El Fasi. In reality, however, Hrbek conducted most of the editorial work on the volume. Hrbek was also in charge of the reading committee for volume IV, dealing with Africa from the 12th to the 16th century. Both volumes dealt extensively with migrations and population movements, causing Hrbek and Djibril Tamsir Niane, the editor of volume IV, to have to deal with the so-called ‘Hamitic Hypothesis’. Hrbek was a member and later the head of the African and Arabic Department and Oriental Institute at Charles University in Prague between 1953 and 1992. He had converted to Islam as a young man and translated the Koran into Czech.<sup>2</sup>

## Joseph Ki-Zerbo (1922–2006)

Joseph Ki-Zerbo was the Burkinabé editor of the first volume of the *General History of Africa*, which dealt with the methodology of African history as well as its prehistory. As such, he wrote the introduction to the whole series in which he argued that African history had been distorted by a colonialist view. He was one of the very first African historians to produce a synthesis on the history of Africa in 1963: *Le monde africain noir: histoire et civilisation*. Ki-Zerbo was also an anti-colonial intellectual who was active in African student circles in Paris in the 1940s, where he became friends with Cheikh Anta Diop and who participated in the political decolonisation of French West Africa, creating a political party in 1957, *Mouvement de Libération Nationale* to advocate for a ‘no’ vote in the referendum created by Charles de Gaulle to

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<sup>2</sup> Maurel, “L’histoire Générale de l’Afrique de l’Unesco”, 726.

create a Franco-African community. He remained active in the politics, but was also professor of history at the University of Ouagadougou from 1968 until 1973.

### **Ali Mazrui (1933–2004)**

Ali Mazrui was the Kenyan director of volume VIII, which dealt with African history from 1935 until 1975. Decolonisation therefore played an important role in his volume. He was a political scientist rather than a historian in the strict sense of the word and according to Vansina was chosen because no suitable historian could be found, despite the fact that the GHA already had a Kenyan director. Mazrui was a postcolonial intellectual who often commented on international political affairs, developing a critical attitude towards American imperialism. His most important work is perhaps the triple Africa thesis; the idea that Africa has had three major influences: indigenous, Christian capitalist colonialism and Islamic. But Mazrui contributed to a myriad of different intellectual debates surrounding African identity, history and politics. He was perhaps the most prolific of the GHA scholars.

### **Bethwell Ogot (b. 1929)**

Bethwell Ogot fulfilled the role of president to the *General History of Africa* from 1978 until 1983. As such the ‘description of the project’ which was adjoined to every volume was published under his name. He was also the volume director of volume V which dealt with Africa from the 16th until the 18th century, focusing on the continuing evolution of African states and cultures, including the increase of external trade and the consequences of the slave trade. Ogot is a Kenyan historian specialised in the study of oral traditions in non-centralised societies, who has written extensively on the history of the Luo, as well as African historiography. He spent most of his academic life at Makerere University in Uganda and as the chairman of the History Department at the University of Nairobi, although he also served in non-academic positions within the East African Community as well as UNESCO itself. Within the GHA he became increasingly important after taking on the role of president and was often critical of his colleagues’ tendency to focus on centralised states.

## **Djibril Tamsir Niane (1932–2021)**

Already mentioned above, Niane was the Guinean editor of the fourth volume of the *General History of Africa*. Like Hrbek, Niane was involved in trying to rid volume IV of the *General History of Africa* from references to various interpretations of the ‘Hamitic hypothesis’. A cluster of interpretations surrounding the external origins of some African peoples which he vehemently opposed. He notably engaged in the collection of oral traditions by writing down the tale of Sundiata; founder of the Mali empire and became a political refugee as a result of the regime of Ahmed Sékou Touré.

## **Jan Vansina (1929–2017)**

Jan Vansina was a Belgian pioneer in the study of oral traditions and perhaps the most important European participating in the drafting of the *General History of Africa*, which he professed deeply changed his views on African history. He wrote several chapters for the GHA but perhaps more importantly, acted as one of the most loyal committee members of the ISC, tirelessly working to complete the project from 1971, when he joined the committee, until 1998, when the last volume was officially published in French. Vansina spent most of his academic career at the University of Wisconsin. He had been recruited to come set up a graduate programme in African history there in 1960 by Philip Curtin, who would remain a lifelong friend as well as rival. Vansina also spent several years in the 1950s and 1960s conducting fieldwork in the Belgian Congo, later the Democratic Republic of the Congo, specifically spending time amongst the Kuba. During that period, he also taught the University of Louvanium in what was then Léopoldville. He returned to teach at the same university, renamed the national University of Zaire and later the University of Kinshasa, between 1972 and 1974. His most important work is undoubtedly his work on oral tradition, culminating in his 1990 *Paths in the Rainforest*. Other acclaimed books include *Kingdoms of the Savanna* (1966) and *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880–1960*. His work on oral tradition as historical source material revolutionised the historical discipline.