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

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Ideals and Anti-ideals in Reaction to eurocentrism

### Introduction

The starting point of this first chapter on ideals is the problem that African historical studies were faced with in the immediate post-war era. A historian of Africa had to be persistent and willing to defy a host of racist ideas concerning the perceived lack of historicity of the continent, by which I mean the idea that the African past was part of a myth rather than history. They had to explain what merited historical interest in Africa proper, rather than interest in the history of Europeans in Africa. Chapter 1, therefore, describes and analyses the historiographical ideals that were formulated in opposition to the eurocentrism that had been present in modern European academic writing about the African past and to which historians of Africa felt they needed to respond.

As a result of this modern eurocentrism, these ideals were often conceptualised as anti-ideals: mistakes and undesirable convictions or attitudes to avoid — scholarly vices in other words. The chapter, therefore, draws on the study of scholarly personae to show how the GHA drew on ideas of scholars as critical producers of knowledge, whilst simultaneously constructing eurocentrism as the result of

shoddy scholarship connected to bias nestled in individuals.<sup>1</sup> The GHA did not totally reject historical scholarship as it had been developed in Europe, but wished to amend it and add new repertoires of scholarship, so as to expunge the existing eurocentric model when it came to the writing of African history. The subject matter to be engaged played an important role therein. In order to get away from eurocentric prejudice, the precolonial became an ideological recourse to place opposite the ideological space of colonialist history. This was the case even though ‘precolonial’ emphasised the change brought about by the colonisers. The chapter, therefore, shows that one of the three guiding ideals, next to pan-African collectivity and emancipation, of the *General History of Africa*, was that the work had to be in opposition to eurocentrism and eurocentric interpretations of history in order to create new standards of African history. This was an ideal that was mostly academic in nature, meant to establish African history as a reputable scholarly activity.

To analyse these anti-ideals, I will primarily make use of the GHA’s positioning policy documents and some of the published pieces written for the project by its key figures. The documents, written during the GHA’s early drafting phase, may help construct how the GHA historians positioned themselves opposite the figure of Europe and its historiography. It is during the drafting of goals and guidelines that the historians working on the GHA started to envision their ideal of African history. I will therefore look at documents and texts that show how the GHA envisioned that African history should be written on a daily basis; the rules and guidelines the GHA created for contributors and editors alike as well as the eventual publication, specifically the preface and the General Introduction to the GHA. These last two

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<sup>1</sup> I draw mostly on what Herman Paul has described as the meso level of research into scholarly persona. At that level scholarly personae are seen as regulative ideals or models of scholarly selfhood that specify abilities, attitudes and dispositions that are regarded as crucial for a specific mode of study, including habits, skills or competencies required for being a good scholar or, in this case, vices, habits and attitudes that signify bad – eurocentric – scholars. I have adopted such an approach because the GHA historians put their idea of a scholarly persona to work not by rejecting the European historical academy altogether, but by positioning themselves as a better, but not radically different, alternative of what it meant to study African history as opposed to that of the eurocentric historian. See: Herman Paul, “Introduction: Scholarly personae: what they are and why they matter” in *How to be a Historian. Scholarly Personae in Historical Studies, 1800–2000*, ed. Herman Paul (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 1–15, 3–6.

published sources are interesting because they more or less reiterated what had already been said in the positioning documents at much greater length — a testimony to the importance of and attachment to the historiographical ideals posited earlier. Consequently, what do these overarching goals and ideals of the *General History of Africa* as formulated in the projects' early positioning documents tell us about the agitation against Euro-American academia?

## **How not to be a historian of Africa. Inverse ideals of scholarly behaviour**

The decision to draft a *General History of Africa* was made by UNESCO in 1964 at its thirteenth general conference.<sup>2</sup> However, the idea that the African continent needed an encyclopaedic historical account of its past to counter Euro-American visions of that past was older. 'The scholarly significance of the project has been emphasised in several meetings, including the 1st international congress of Africanists, organised in Accra, in December 1962, under UNESCO auspices', stated the introductory document of the 'committee of experts' meeting for the *General History of Africa* in 1966, which took place in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>3</sup> It was in Abidjan in 1966 that a precursor to the later International Scientific Committee was established, the so-called committee of experts. Both the 1962 congress of Africanists and the 1966 meeting of experts were presided over by the pioneering Nigerian 'father of history', Kenneth Onwuka Dike.<sup>4</sup> In 1962, moreover, the Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah had brought African historians from around the continent together and encouraged the creation of the GHA. Before that, Nkrumah had already invested in

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2 UNESCO, *Records of the General Conference. Thirteenth Sessions Paris, 1964. Resolutions*. (Paris: UNESCO, 1965), 66–7.

3 According to Jan Vansina the Organisation of African Unity had asked UNESCO to create a General History of Africa at its founding meeting 1963. Jan Vansina, "Unesco and African Historiography" *History in Africa* 20 (1993): 337–52, 337 and UAP, UNESCO/CLT/HIGENAF/ABIDJAN/3, Committee of Experts on the General History of Africa, Abidjan 31 August – 5 September, 1966, Introductory Document, 23 August 1966, 1 (hereafter: UAP, Committee of Experts 1966, Introductory document)

4 UAP, Committee of Experts 1966, Introductory Document, 3.

an Encyclopaedia Africana.<sup>5</sup> The editor of this project was the African-American sociologist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois.<sup>6</sup> He had started it as early as 1909 and meant it to be an emulation of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. In fact, the 1962 Accra meeting had been a significant moment in the history of knowledge production about Africa. Here in independent Ghana concerns regarding the racial politics of that knowledge production were discussed and it was decided that knowledge production about Africa should be in African hands. Both the Encyclopaedia and the GHA were discussed in 1962 in Accra, yet seemingly without any interconnections between the two projects, except for Nkrumah's role in spurring the scholars on and perhaps some funding from UNESCO.<sup>7</sup> Both projects wanted to match and possibly even outdo European scholarship in brilliance and breadth.<sup>8</sup> The *General History of Africa*, then, aimed to provide the world with an alternative for European scholarship on Africa.

The Abidjan meeting was followed by another meeting of experts in 1969 in Paris, during which the 'content and spirit' of the GHA started to take shape. It was decided there that the GHA had to take a chronological approach and the history of Africa should be divided into five time periods. The five time periods had been established by a committee consisting of Gamal Mokhtar, Jacob Ade Ajayi, Joseph

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5 In his autobiography Nkrumah professed himself a supporter of the American anthropologist Herskovits, who theorised that African-Americans and Africans were still culturally connected. Kwame Nkrumah, *Ghana. An Autobiography* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1957), 44. Ironically, it was also Herskovits who blocked the Nkrumah-backed Du Bois encyclopaedia from being finished in the USA. Jean M. Allman, "Herskovits Must Fall? A Meditation on Whiteness, African Studies, and the Unfinished Business of 1968" *African Studies Review* 62:3 (2019): 6–39, 14.

6 One of the chapters of the GHA mentions Du Bois' interest in African history, but the author, Philip Curtin, does not mention the Encyclopedia Africana's inception in 1909. He rather notes that Du Bois seems not to have had the opportunity to engage with his interest in African history until he finally settled in Ghana in 1961. Curtin seems to have been unaware of Du Bois' earlier work on African history. P.D. Curtin, "Recent trends in African historiography and their contribution to history in general", In *General History of Africa I: Methodology and African Prehistory*, ed. J. Ki-Zerbo (Paris: UNESCO, 1981), 54–71, 66.

7 Jean Allman, "Kwame Nkrumah, African Studies, and the Politics of Knowledge Production in the Black Star of Africa" *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 46:2 (2013): 181–203, 198–9.

8 Henry Louis Gates Jr, "W.E.B Du Bois and the Encyclopedia Africana, 1909–1963" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568:1 (2000): 203–219.

Ki-Zerbo, Jean Devisse, Cheikh Anta Diop, Bethwell Ogot and Raymond Mauny.<sup>9</sup> Except for Mauny all would play an important role in the drafting of the GHA. It was also decided that the GHA should be directed by an International Scientific Committee that would carry the intellectual and scientific responsibility of the project, whilst the task organisation and administrative support was to be given to UNESCO.<sup>10</sup> The decision to again divide the five time periods into eight volumes was finally made at the Addis Ababa meeting of June 1970.<sup>11</sup> The 1969 meeting also asserted that ‘the History will have to avoid placing undue emphasis on *events* [my emphasis] and thus running the risk of giving too much importance to outside influences and factors’ — thereby signifying the influence of the Annales school, to which we shall return in due course.<sup>12</sup> Combatting ignorance regarding African history was one of the primary goals of the *General History of Africa*, or as the Abidjan document stated: ‘the development of knowledge on the generally little known history of Africa’ would do away with ‘prejudices and false or incomplete notions.’<sup>13</sup> What these ‘positioning’ documents show is that the GHA positioned itself in opposition to the existing historical academy, but, crucially, also as a part of it.

It was during the first few meetings of the GHA, in 1966 (Abidjan), 1969 (Paris), 1970 (Addis Ababa), 1971 (Paris again) and possibly the 1962 dinner at Flagstaff house in Accra as well, that these overarching ideals and goals of the GHA were determined and written down.<sup>14</sup> The same four main points were repeated in 1970 and again in 1971, based on ideas developed largely in Paris in 1969:

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9 UAP, SHC/CONF.27/1, Meeting of Experts on the Measures to be taken for Drafting and Publishing a General History of Africa, Unesco, Paris – 23–27 June 1969. Final Report, 6 August 1969. Translated from the French, 6–7. (hereafter: UAP, Meeting of Experts 1969 Final Report)

10 UAP, SHC/CONF.27/1, Meeting of Experts on the Measures to be taken for Drafting and Publishing a General History of Africa, Unesco, Paris – 23–27 June 1969. Introductory Document. 25 April 1969. Translated from the French, 8. (hereafter: UAP, Meeting of Experts 1969 Introductory Document)

11 UAP, SHC/MD/10, Meeting of Experts for the Drafting and Publication of A General History of Africa, Addis Ababa, 22 to 26 June 1970, Paris, 15 September 1970, 5–11.

12 UAP, Meeting of Experts 1969 Final Report, 5.

13 UAP, Committee of Experts 1966 Introductory Document, 1.

14 The dinner at Flagstaff house was perhaps more important as an image in Ogot’s memory than in actuality.

(a) Although aiming at a synthesis at the highest possible scientific level, the History will not seek to be exhaustive and will avoid dogmatism. In many respects, it will be a statement of problems showing the present state of knowledge and the main trends in research and it will not hesitate to show divergencies of doctrine and opinion. In this way, it will prepare the ground for future work.

(b) Africa will be considered as a totality. The aim will be to show the historical relationships between the various parts of the continent too frequently subdivided in works published to date.

(c) The General History of Africa will be, in particular, a history of ideas and civilisations, societies and institutions. It will introduce the values of oral tradition as well as the multiple forms of African art.

(d) The History will be viewed essentially from the inside. Although a scholarly work, it will also be, in large measure, evidence of consideration by African authors of their own civilisation. While prepared in an international framework and drawing to the full on the present stock of scientific knowledge, it will also be a vitally important element in the recognition of the African cultural heritage and will bring out factors making for unity. This effort to view things from within could be the novel feature of the project and could in addition to its scientific quality, give it great topical significance. By showing the true face of Africa, the work could, in an era absorbed in economic and technical struggles, offer a particular conception of human values.<sup>15</sup>

The group of historians who were present (African and otherwise; the most important of whom were Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Jacob Ade Ajayi and Jean Devisse) and who wrote these four points essentially created a 'manifesto' for their envisioned *General History of Africa*. The 'manifesto' offers a tentative understanding of how the historian working on the GHA, and on Africa by extent, was to approach their work. The

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<sup>15</sup> UAP, SHC/WS/198, Guide for the Preparation of the General History of Africa. Paris 18 November 1971, translated from the French, 1-2.

‘manifesto’ after all, suggests a collective way of thinking, judging and working for a group of scholars, which Lorraine Daston and Otto Sibum suggest might signify the formation of a scholarly persona.<sup>16</sup> It was subsequently added to the ‘Description of the project’, which was published in every volume of the General and named Bethwell Ogot as its author. In reality, however, it was a collaborative effort. Chapter two will discuss the points in the manifesto that make it clear that the GHA was a collaborative pan-African project, such as a focus on the continent as a whole. Concurrently, this chapter targets those parts that show an opposition to historical standards perceived as eurocentric or at least as detrimental to a historical study of the African past.

Interestingly, the document started with an admonishment rooted in opposition to eurocentrism. The history was to avoid dogmatism and ‘it will not hesitate to show divergencies of doctrine and opinion.’ This was reiteration of a similar kind of comment made in the ‘introductory’ document for the 1969 meeting, in which it was suggested that ‘the non-dogmatic expression of all points of view [...] can facilitate the constant revision of current opinion about research in African history.’<sup>17</sup> The warning surfaces again in a document entitled *Recommandations aux auteurs*, authored by the editor of volume IV, Djibril Tamsir Niane. Niane made clear that due to the controversial nature of some of the questions posed in his volume it was pertinent to avoid all forms of dogmatism.<sup>18</sup> Niane’s volume deals with a time period that invited use of a cluster of interpretations surrounding the so-called ‘Hamitic hypothesis’, which Niane considered a dogmatic and colonialist interpretation of African history that viewed change and civilisation in African history as coming from outside the continent. I delve into this in more depth in Chapter 4, but it is important to note here the construction of dogmatism as connected to a history written from a perspective that constructs African history as being dominated by outside factors.

The desire or aim to avoid dogmatism could be seen as an aim to avoid a classic epistemological vice. In the Preface to the GHA, which was written by the Director General of UNESCO Amadou-Mahtar

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<sup>16</sup> Lorraine Daston and H. Otto Sibum, “Introduction: Scientific Personae and Their Histories” *Science in Context* 16:1-2 (2003): 1-8, 3-5.

<sup>17</sup> UAP, Meeting of Experts 1969 Introductory Document, 7.

<sup>18</sup> UAP, Cultural Studies and Circulation Division (hereafter CC CSP) 38, CS/5404, *Recommandations aux auteurs*.



M'Bow and also eventually printed in each of the eight volumes, the word surfaced again:

We are indebted to the International Scientific Committee in charge of this *General History of Africa* [...] for having shed a new light on the African past in its authentic and all-encompassing form and for having avoided any dogmatism in the study of essential issues.<sup>19</sup>

Note again the pairing of multiple points of view, 'all-encompassing', with the avoidance of dogmatism. The word also surfaced in the introduction to the first volume, written by Joseph Ki-Zerbo, who noted that use of Marxist methodologies was permissible as long as it was not dogmatic.<sup>20</sup> It is not immediately clear what was meant with dogmatism in both these instances. It is possible that Ki-Zerbo wished to avoid being labelled as a Soviet ally, whilst aiming to reach across the iron curtain, as the GHA followed a non-alignment policy. The word dogmatism, moreover, has itself a deep history within the history of scholarship. The charge of dogmatism was an effective way to criticise opposing scientists and scholars as far back as the early European 17th century. It was an aspersion poured on rivals in order to accuse them of unexamined, impatient and most importantly here, prejudiced or presumptuous research.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, in 19th century orientalist circles, it was a vice associated with biased scholarship.<sup>22</sup> The GHA's wish to 'avoid dogmatism' and leave room for a plurality of different, but scholarly sound, opinions, points towards a grounding in the existing — European — academy. Moreover, the word carries

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19 Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, "Preface" In *The General History of Africa I: Methodology and African Prehistory*, ed. J. Ki-Zerbo (Paris: UNESCO, 1981), xvii-xxi, xix.

20 The introduction was originally written in French. I have chosen to quote the English translation made by UNESCO here. J. Ki-Zerbo, "General Introduction" in *General History of Africa I Methodology and African Prehistory*, ed. J. Ki-Zerbo (Paris: UNESCO, 1981), 1-24, 15.

21 Sorana Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind. Boyle, Locke, and the Early modern Cultura Animi Tradition* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 93-4, 98-9.

22 Christiaan Egberts and Herman Paul, "Scholarly Vices: Boundary Work in Nineteenth-Century Orientalism" in *Epistemic Virtues in the Sciences and the Humanities*, eds. Jeroen van Dongen and Herman Paul (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 79-90, 84.

an overt religious connotation, suggesting the ‘manifesto’ functioned almost as a creed. Most importantly perhaps, by placing the avoidance of dogmatism next to the assertion that African history needed to be viewed from the inside, it constructs eurocentrism itself as dogmatic and places the GHA opposite that vice. This is especially evident in Niane’s comment on the avoidance of dogmatism. Simultaneously however, it is important to note that, whilst the GHA probably viewed all instances of eurocentrism as evidence of dogmatism, it did not equally view all instances of dogmatism as eurocentric. M’Bow was said to have repeatedly pressed this point of avoiding dogmatism during the seventh meeting of the Bureau in Paris in 1977, stating that the GHA had to be careful not to try to hide insufficiencies in research on African history.<sup>23</sup> He thereby suggested that the GHA should avoid dogmatism, even if it was not eurocentric but borne out of incomplete research. Dogmatism here then, it can tentatively be said was constructed as pertaining to a failure to admit insufficiencies in research, connected to bias and prejudice. Mostly this pertained to eurocentric or racist bias, eurocentrism had, after all, resulted in inaccurate, false, accounts of the Africans pasts with as its ultimate result, the idea that Africa had no history.

## Historian non grata

The manifesto focused on the idea that ‘a view from within’ would show ‘the true face of Africa.’ The GHA clearly contested outside or eurocentric views of African history. Often, a eurocentric view meant a history of Europeans in Africa or of European influences on Africa as exclusively worthwhile of academic historical study. It constructed Europe not only as the centre of the world, but also perpetuated the idea that history could only emanate from that centre. Africa then, had no history because it did not conform to European ideas of what history was. As Chinua Achebe put it, Africa occupied ‘in the European psychological disposition the farthest point of otherness.’<sup>24</sup> As a negative idea, the eurocentric vision of African history has a history of its

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23 UAP, CC/77/CONF.602/2, Septième Réunion du Bureau du Comité Scientifique International pour la Redaction d’une Histoire Générale de L’Afrique, Paris, 18-29 Juillet, 1977, 34.

24 Chinua Achebe, *Africa’s Tarnished Name* (London: Penguin Random House United Kingdom, 2018), 17.

own, which is often seen as having started with Hume's so-called racist footnote.<sup>25</sup> However, it had been etched into the collective consciousness of early Africanists by a rather infamous comment made by the Regius professor of history in Oxford, Hugh Trevor-Roper:<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject for history. Please do not misunderstand me. I do not deny that men existed even in dark countries and dark centuries, nor that they had political life and culture, interesting to sociologists and anthropologists; but history, I believe, is essentially a form of movement, and purposive movement, too.<sup>27</sup>

Countless references were made throughout the years to this comment made in a lecture series in 1963, later published as part of a book on Christianity in Europe, *The rise of Christian Europe*. It also appeared in the GHA. As Caroline Neale remarks offhandedly in her book *Writing 'Independent' African history*, every Africanist of the time seems to have quoted this particular passage by Trevor-Roper.<sup>28</sup> Jan Vansina also mentioned the passage as a rallying cry for historians of Africa. In a way, it was a signifier that the battle had already been won, that recognition for African history had already arrived.<sup>29</sup> Although written in the midst of decolonisation, Trevor-Roper's unfortunate diatribe partly functioned as a rhetorical echo of the past. Notwithstanding the

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25 For a short article on the racist footnote: John Immerwahr, "Hume's Revised Racism", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53:3 (1992): 481-6. For the construction of a denial of African historicity as having started with Hume, see: Toyin Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001), 225.

26 Elsewhere Chinua Achebe also mentions Trevor-Roper's egregious comment: Chinua Achebe, *An Image of Africa* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 2.

27 Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The rise of Christian Europe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 9-11.

28 Caroline Neale, *Writing "Independent" African history* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), 8. For an example of this practice see: S.A.I. Tirmizi, *Indian Sources for African History* (Delhi: International Writers Emporium and UNESCO, 1988), VII.

29 Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (The University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1994), 123.

general consensus, within Africanist circles at least, that Trevor-Roper was wrong, the condescending statement caused for his name to become synonymous with eurocentrism and racist historiography within African history.

UNESCO's general conference made the decision in 1964 to draft a *General History of Africa*, the infamous remark that had equated Africa with darkness, was a fresh wound. Akin to what Valentin Mudimbe would argue later, African historians in the early 1960s had identified a long tradition of historical marginalisation of the African continent which they had to work against, dubbed the 'colonial library' by Mudimbe. As a result, they engaged in revisionist history and tried to shift the meaning of 'Africa' in the Euro-American academy to such an extent that 'Africa', as well as 'Africans' would come to signify not 'difference', but normality. African history was to become inherently integrated into the global communal past and its academic study.<sup>30</sup> As Mudimbe's work suggests, however, the problem of othering lingered. For years African historians, such as Adu Boahen, editor of volume VII, would place the Trevor-Roper remark within a long and insidious tradition of 'western' denial of African historicity.<sup>31</sup>

Trevor-Roper, following a Hegelian logic, envisioned a sort of progress in history that saw European societies as a teleological end point. He could not see African history because he was looking at it only through a eurocentric lens, using eurocentric ideas of what constituted, for example, history, states, politics and finally progress. For that reason, too, he saw the African past as only offering information for those studying present societies.<sup>32</sup> Historians linked the offensive Trevor-Roper comment to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy of history, or rather what he had said about Africa in his lectures on the philosophy of history.<sup>33</sup> The Hegel lectures, delivered at the

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30 Valentin Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), 21–2.

31 A. Adu Boahen, *Clio and Nation-Building in Africa. An Inaugural Lecture delivered at the University of Ghana Legon, on Thursday, 28th November, 1975* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1975), 17.

32 Enocent Msindo, "Writing history beyond Trevor-Roper: The Experience of African History, with special reference to Zimbabwe", Keynote Address, the Zimbabwe Historical Association, 17–19 July, 2019.

33 See: Adu Boahen, "The Historiography of Anglophone West Africa in the 1980s", in *Africa in the Twentieth Century. The Adu Boahen Reader*, ed. Toyin Falola (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004), 625–636, 625.

university of Berlin between 1822–1823 and 1830–1831, were published posthumously. It should therefore be noted that these publications are only a reflection of what Hegel concretely delivered to his audience in so far as that the publications were redacted lecture notes and transcriptions made by Eduard Gans and his son Karl in 1837 and 1840.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, within post-independence Africanist circles Hegel became infamous for having stated, amongst other things, that ‘in Africa proper, man has not progressed beyond a merely sensuous existence, and has found it absolutely impossible to develop any further.’<sup>35</sup> I quote this particular sentence because it was taken by some of the poets of the Negritude movement, such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, as a badge of honour, a way to extol the qualities of the black man to connect to nature and emotions.<sup>36</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre would later call this attitude an ‘anti-racist racism.’<sup>37</sup> Of course, Hegel also spoke more directly about the African continent as being devoid of history, and here we stumble upon another infamous and often quoted passage within Africanist circles:

At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it — that is in its northern part — belong to the Asiatic or European World. Carthage displayed there an important transitional phase of civilisation; but, as a Phoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and

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34 Hegel was apt to change details and inflection in his oral presentations. Tom McCaskie, “Exiled from History: Africa in Hegel’s Academic Practice”, *History in Africa* 46 (2019): 165–194, 169. McCaskie also points out that Hegel based his assertions on dubious source-material.

35 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. Hugh Barr Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 172.

36 Babacar Camara, “The Falsity of Hegel’s Theses on Africa” *Journal of Black Studies* 36:1 (2005): 82–96, 86.

37 Jean-Paul Sartre, “Orphée Noir” *Présence Africaine* 6 (1949): 9–14, 11

which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History.<sup>38</sup>

I quote here the English translation, for that is the text that was quoted and critiqued by African historians and Euro-American historians of Africa. The point here being not to delve into Hegel's actual academic work, but to qualify how it was received by historians of Africa at the time. It is not about Hegel so much as it is about Hegel as a pervasive symbol for the historical discipline.<sup>39</sup> This text therefore is not interested in Hegel-as-Hegel, but rather in Hegel as he was perceived by the African historians and other historians of Africa who worked on the GHA.<sup>40</sup> Hegel, in that sense, was seen as having made a mistake vis-à-vis Africa and therefore became symbolic for the historical discipline's mistakes vis-à-vis Africa. Thus, Hegel as such was not rejected, but only as pertained to his comments on Africans and Africa.

The most well-known and relevant reaction to Hegel's assertion of the absence of African historicity for the GHA, however, was made by the Senegalese Cheikh Anta Diop.<sup>41</sup> Diop, partly in response to Hegel and working across disciplines, attempted to construct a universal history that would place Africa rather than Europe at the centre of historical conception. He argued for the existence of a black and decidedly African Egyptian antiquity, on which Greek antiquity and therefore European modernity, was based. It was an attempted reversal of Hegelian logic — the outcome of which was still a modern European state. Yet, for Diop, the focus on Egypt would eventually

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38 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), 99.

39 In her book on Hegel and the Haitian revolution, Susan Buck-Morss too makes the point that the perceived burden of Hegelian historiography lies on us to contextualise and not enlarge eurocentric visions. His unfortunate Berlin comments may point to faults on his part, rather than towards a complete denial of African historicity in the European academy. Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 73, 118.

40 For a good article on the Hegel's academic practice vis-à-vis Africa, see: McCaskie, "Exiled from History", 169.

41 As a result of his ubiquitous presence, moreover, many Africans have written back to Hegel, such as the above named *Négritude* movement, but also Frantz Fanon in his creation of an independent racial other and Mudimbe who turned against what he called 'Alterity politics', see: Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952) and V.Y. Mudimbe, *On African fault lines : Meditations on alterity politics*. (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013)

unearth a federal African state that had, as it were, been waiting in the wings since Pharaonic Egypt had disappeared.<sup>42</sup> Given Hegel's assertion that Egypt was in fact not African, it became crucial for Diop to reclaim it for Africa. Cheikh Anta Diop contributed to volume II of the *General History of Africa*, which dealt with African antiquity. Chapter 4 elaborates further on his work for the GHA, for his view was far from unilaterally shared amongst the GHA historians — who often seemed to have preferred an Africa-centred history that placed Africa at the centre of the history of the continent itself, rather than at the centre of world history.

In the first volume of the *General History of Africa*, which appeared in 1981, both Trevor-Roper and Hegel made an appearance. The honour of naming them ironically befell two European historians who wrote overview chapters on African historiography for the first volume. John Fage, one of the earliest exponents of African historical studies in Britain, wrote the first chapter after the General Introduction on the development of African historiography. The chapter mostly concerned European historiography because it served as an explanation of eurocentric historiography about Africa. European historical writing concerning 'tropical' Africa, Fage noted, appeared at roughly the same time as the European penetration of the continent. Near the end of the 18th century, writing about Africa increased as growing controversy regarding the slave trade led some European historians to compile histories of African kingdoms and states, such as the British colonial official Archibald Dalziel's *History of Dahomey* (1793).<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, such interest and, by extent, acknowledgement of Africa's historicity, was quelled by an increasing emphasis on European history and European superiority. Interestingly, Hegel himself seems to have based his comments on Africa partly on the work of Dalziel, who was an anti-abolitionist and therefore had political stakes in portraying 'Africa' as a savage land.<sup>44</sup> Fage went on: 'European intellectuals

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42 Mamadou Diouf and Mohamad Mbodj, "The Shadow of Cheikh Anta Diop", in *The Surreptitious Speech. Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987*, ed. V.Y. Mudimbe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 118-35, 125. See also: Robbin Derricourt, *Inventing Africa: History, Archaeology and Ideas* (New York: Pluto Press, 2011), 110-114.

43 John Fage, "The development of African historiography" in *General History of Africa I Methodology and African Prehistory*, ed. J. Ki-Zerbo (Paris: UNESCO, 1981), 25-42, 30.

44 McCaskie, "Exiled from History", 176

persuaded themselves that the purpose, knowledge, power and wealth of their society were so strong that it must prevail over all others; [...] history was the key to understanding.<sup>45</sup> And it is here that Fage locates Hegel's role, even though he does not neglect to mention that Hegel did not have that big an influence on the actual writing of African History. Nevertheless, his articulation of European superiority in his philosophy of history came to 'represent part of the historical orthodoxy of the 19th century', which, in Fage's present day, had accumulated with Trevor-Roper.<sup>46</sup> Fage did not deem Trevor-Roper worthy of being named, referring to him instead as 'a recent Regius professor of Modern History at Oxford University'.<sup>47</sup> He did quote the egregious comment and this was apparently enough to conclude his argument regarding the European 19th and 20th century denial of African historicity. During the 19th century, the purpose of history had been to come to an understanding of European greatness, Fage argued. It was Trevor-Roper after all who stated that only European history had any kind of significance as it had been European ideas, values, civilisations, techniques, in short European history, that had come to dominate world history for the past 500 years. Fage argued that eurocentrism had become the *raison d'être* of the modern historical discipline.<sup>48</sup> The impossibility of studying African societies, moreover, had been further entrenched in the 19th century by the emergence of *Quellenkritik*, which made it impossible for oral societies to be inserted into the discipline.<sup>49</sup> Fage moreover added several more names to the list of those who had not done African history justice. A. P. Newton, for instance, had repeated the idea that there could be no African history because there was no writing in Africa.<sup>50</sup> Newton's name also appeared, here and there, next to Trevor-Roper's and Hegel's in African historical scholarship as 'historian non grata'.<sup>51</sup> Fage also mentioned C.G. Seligman, who although not a historian but an anthropologist, had also been guilty of 'bluntly' generalising scholarship regarding

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45 Fage, "The development of African historiography", 30.

46 Ibid.

47 He did name him in a footnote, however. Ibid, 31.

48 Ibid, 30-31.

49 Ibid, 32.

50 Ibid, 33.

51 See: Boahen, "The Historiography of Anglophone West Africa", 625.



Africa in his work on the so-called 'Hamitic influence'.<sup>52</sup> However, despite the presence of African intellectuals throughout European history and especially during this time of disciplinary codification, Africans, such as James Africanus Horton, had been securely kept out of the discipline.<sup>53</sup>

The next chapter that mentioned Hegel (chapter eleven), was written by Dmitri Olderogge. Olderogge was a Soviet-based anthropologist of Africa, named the founding father of African anthropology and also African studies in the USSR and a testament to the GHA and UNESCO's commitment to bridging Cold War animosities.<sup>54</sup> He, too, placed the origin of the denial of African history by the Euro-American academy on 19th century German shoulders. In a chapter on migrations, he asserted that it was in Germany specifically that the African past had been relegated to the realm of ethnography. The first European inquiries into African languages took place in Germany and it was in Germany that ethnographic research into Africa ensued, with the establishment of a Colonial Institute in Hamburg.<sup>55</sup> Olderogge did not explain why this interest in Africa manifested itself in Germany and why an institute and academic research to go along with it, was established. The development is perhaps best understood in light of late 19th century German desires to conquer colonial territories of its own, alongside the simultaneous development of a new model of universities that we have now come to call 'modern' that could create knowledge on non-European worlds in order to substantiate claims of power.<sup>56</sup> The Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 in this light serves as the political counterpart for the philosophical role played by Hegel in the *General History of Africa*. Olderogge argued that it was due to Hegel's earlier philosophical assertions regarding the nature of historical progress or evolution that research on Africa done in Germany steered

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52 We shall come to speak of the 'Hamitic influences' in more detail in chapter four. Fage, "The development of African historiography", 5.

53 Ibid, 33.

54 Dmitri M. Bondarenko, "Dmitri Olderogge and his place in the history of Russian African anthropology", *Social Anthropology* 13:2 (2005–6): 215–20, 215.

55 D. Olderogge, "Migrations and ethnic and linguistic differentiations" in *General History of Africa I Methodology and African Prehistory*, ed. J. Ki-Zerbo (Paris: UNESCO, 1981), 270–86, 270.

56 Sebastian Conrad, *German Colonialism. A Short History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 127–33.

towards the circular thought that Africa had no history to speak of because it was not a historical part of the world.<sup>57</sup>

'Africa has a history' is therefore tellingly the very first sentence of the whole GHA. The General Introduction, which was written by Ki-Zerbo, started with this observation, followed by the declaration that the history of Africa needed to be rewritten.<sup>58</sup> This assertion was made in defiance of and in reaction to the infamous quotes mentioned above: 'The history of Africa needs rewriting, for up till now it has often been masked, faked, distorted, mutilated by 'force of circumstance'. [...] Crushed by centuries of oppression, Africa has seen generations of travellers, slave traders, explorers, missionaries, governors, and scholars of all kinds give out its image as one of nothing but poverty, barbarism, irresponsibility and chaos.'<sup>59</sup> The creation of such distortions were the results of myths surrounding the racial inferiority of Africans, resulting in 'historical passivity' and 'congenital tribalism.'<sup>60</sup> The GHA therefore rejected 'racially prejudiced physical anthropology' and all other forms of racialism or racialised thinking.<sup>61</sup> UNESCO was one of the first organisations to deny the biological basis for racism when it created a committee to research the theoretical basis of human rights, which included the cultural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.<sup>62</sup>

In the General Introduction Ki-Zerbo never mentioned Hegel nor Trevor-Roper likely because he also pressed that it was not in interest of the GHA to engage in a 'mere settling of scores, with colonialist history backfiring on its authors.'<sup>63</sup> He was invested in the idea that African history could only be redeemed if it were scholarly sound: 'We must turn once more to science in order to create genuine cultural

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57 Olderogge, "Migrations", 271-2.

58 J. Ki Zerbo, "General Introduction" in *General History of Africa I Methodology and African Prehistory* (Paris: UNESCO, 1981), 1-2.

59 Ki-Zerbo, "General Introduction", 2.

60 Ibid, 5.

61 Ibid, 21 and J. Ki-Zerbo, "Editorial note: theories on the 'races' and history of Africa" in *General History of Africa I Methodology and African Prehistory*, ed. J. Ki-Zerbo (Paris: UNESCO, 1981), 261-70.

62 "Unesco and the declaration", UNESCO, accessed 18 June 2018, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/human-rights-based-approach/60th-anniversary-of-udhr/unesco-and-the-declaration/>

63 Ki-Zerbo, "General Introduction", 2.

awareness.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, he wanted to redeem Africa and Africans as beyond a dichotomy between civilised and barbarous, the same and other. Like also Niane, Ki-Zerbo was invested in the idea of African history as part of the history of the world next to Europe and not in opposition to Europe. In other words; Ki-Zerbo seemed to have preferred an Africa centred history that placed Africa at centre within the history of the continent itself, rather than placing it at the centre of world history as an inverse eurocentrism.<sup>65</sup>

In M'Bow's Preface the same essential assertions regarding African history were made. African history had long been obscured: 'the continent of Africa was hardly ever looked upon as a historical entity.' Furthermore, source material had been pulled from outside the continent, so that the history of Africa had been judged by alien standards — by, for instance, comparing it with the European Middle Ages, suggesting Africa was literally backwards. As a result, 'African societies were looked upon as societies that could have no history [...] a great many non-African experts could not rid themselves of certain preconceptions and argued that the lack of written sources and documents made it impossible to engage in any scientific study of such societies.'<sup>66</sup> Like Ki-Zerbo, M'Bow referred implicitly to those historians who had denied Africa a history as a result of their prejudice. M'Bow, moreover, also referred to the emergence of racial thought as a key factor in the distortion of African history.<sup>67</sup> The denial of African historicity was the result of racism nestled in European society and expressed through its historians. European scholarship when it came to Africa, was to be viewed with scepticism and the GHA took it upon itself to amend that scholarship. Prejudice and preconceptions, for instance regarding the necessity of written source material, had to be avoided. Above all the GHA set out to deracialise African history.

The point of these opening overtures was to impress upon the reader that colonial historiography had been ideologically motivated.<sup>68</sup>

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64 Ki-Zerbo, "General Introduction", 2.

65 V.Y. Mudimbe et al., "Analysts" in *The Surreptitious Speech. Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987*, ed. V.Y. Mudimbe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 382-403, 383.

66 Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, "Preface" in *General History of Africa I Methodology and African Prehistory*, ed. J. Ki-Zerbo (Paris: Heineman and UNESCO, 1981), XIX.

67 M'Bow, "Preface", XX.

68 A. Temu and B. Swai, *Historians and Africanist History: A Critique* (London: Zed Press, 1981), 20.

Essentially, the GHA made the point that errors had been made regarding Africa in historical scholarship and it wanted to correct those faults. Fage and Olderogge both linked the Hegelian grasp of African history to the emergence of the 20th century (historical) academy. Consequently, an attempt to write African history became part of a rebellion against that academy — or at least it was shaped that way by the reiteration that European history was the Hegel inspired history of Trevor-Roper and the likes. These names arguably functioned as signifiers within a specific context of what Steven Shapin has dubbed ‘proverbial economies’: ‘a network of speech, judgement and action in which proverbial utterances are considered legitimate.’<sup>69</sup> Proverbs, moreover, have a unique and well-known history within African oral tradition as well. Take for instance the proverb ‘until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter’ — often attributed to Chinua Achebe. Toyin Falola reminds us that proverbs like these serve a function to criticise and admonish.<sup>70</sup> If we take the use of ‘Hegel’ and ‘Trevor-Roper’ and, crucially, the quotes, almost invariably used alongside the names as stereotypical language use, it may be possible to argue that it was through this usage that the knowledge produced by African history became legitimate as a form of proverbial criticism. Put differently, by constantly reiterating the same words African historians and historians of Africa tried to establish legitimacy. Hegel came to function as a symbol of the modern Euro-American academy’s denial of African historicity.

Good historical scholarship, then, avoided racial prejudice and uncritical eurocentrism which equated history with a European presence or reference to European pasts, or which only made use of European source material. It, in other words, avoided the vices of 19th century European scholarship pertaining to Africa. The vices were classified as such because they were framed as political, subjective, prejudice, that needed to be avoided by historians of Africa who wished to produce sound historical scholarship on the continent. Ideals of African history were, inevitably, contrasted against and around the academic discipline of historical scholarship as it had been conceived by histori-

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69 Steven Shapin, “Proverbial Economies: How an Understanding of Some Linguistic and Social Features of Common Sense Can Throw Light on More Prestigious Bodies of Knowledge, Science For Example.” *Social Studies of Science* 31:5 (2001): 731–69, 735.

70 Toyin Falola, *Decolonizing African Studies: Epistemologies, Methodologies and Agencies* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, forthcoming), 17.

ans of Europe in the perception of the GHA. As part of a new field of history, the GHA needed scholars to define what it meant to 'do' African history and what it meant to be an African historian in opposition to what it had meant in the preceding historical context.<sup>71</sup>

## The ideal of pre-colonial African history

The ailing historical discipline had been diagnosed with eurocentrism. The cure was a history written for Africa that would look at the African past from the African present — instead of the European present.<sup>72</sup> The medicine Ki-Zerbo presented was largely a focus on pre-colonial history as the chosen way to write a history of Africa from an Africa-centred perspective. The uses of the pre-colonial transcended the time period itself. By unearthing pre-colonial historical facts, more insight could be gained in the whole of African history. Research into the pre-colonial past came to denote a specific way of looking at African history by means of African actors and structures that had originated in the pre-colonial era, crucially, because this period had been without significant influence from Europeans. For instance, through a historical understanding of developments within certain regions and by explaining the past by referencing inter-regional political and social developments, new historical explanations for later time periods could also surface. Another internal approach explained African history by focusing on intra-African diffusionism, by looking at the diffusion of African cultural influences or political concepts. Thirdly, the pre-colonial could also be implemented in the history of colonial Africa by focusing on African resistance, resistance which had, the argument went, stemmed from pre-colonial socio-economic and political structures.<sup>73</sup> Pre-colonial history of African could lead to a deeper understanding of post-colonial history of Africa.

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71 21st century historians of Africa still quote Trevor-Roper, as well as Hegel, thereby carrying on the tradition of naming them 'historians-non-grata'. See: Ihedijiwa Nkemjika Chimee, "African Historiography and the Challenges of European Periodization: A Historical Comments", *TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research* (blog), 31 July 2019, <https://trado.hypotheses.org/11518>, and Jacob U. Gordon, "Toward an African Historiography", in *African Studies and Knowledge Production*, ed. Stephen Owoahene-Acheampong (Accra: Sub-saharan Publishers, 2013), 17–29, 26.

72 Ki-Zerbo, "General Introduction", 3.

73 Muryatan Santana Barbosa, "The African Perspective in the General History of Africa (Unesco)" *Tempo Niterói* 24.3 (2018): 1–14, 7.

In order to do this, African historians had to find a way around the historical disciplines' 19th century focus on written source material. It is no surprise, therefore, that the introduction makes explicit the importance of researching oral traditions in order to be able to analyse and document the pre-colonial African past.<sup>74</sup> As becomes clear from the manifesto as well, oral history had become the preferred new method with which to uncover the African pre-colonial past. To fill in the blanks of pre-colonial African history the tools offered by other disciplines, such as archaeology and linguistics, were invaluable.<sup>75</sup> The historicity of pre-colonial Africa, moreover, showed the inadequacies of only looking at the past through (archival) written documents. Interpreting oral traditions became the preferred way to research the lives and experiences of the colonised, rather than the colonisers. It seemed like a way to correct the arrogance of Euro-American historiography and colonial record-keeping in the post-colonial period.<sup>76</sup> Ki-Zerbo described these oral traditions as 'the most intimate of historical sources, the most rich [sic], the one which is fullest of the sap of authenticity.'<sup>77</sup> He thereby betrayed an essentialist view of both African history and the use of oral historiography. As Ki-Zerbo described it in the introduction, and as becomes evident from the manifesto and Preface as well, oral history was almost mythologised as method to decolonise history and to unearth the true African past. Like the pre-colonial itself, the possibilities of oral traditions as gateways to the African past were enlarged to such mythical proportions

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74 In this thesis I will make use of the term 'oral history' when referring to the historical methodology dependent on the use of oral traditions as source materials. Oral traditions are unwritten narratives, often myths or chronicles, preserved in the collective memory of a society and transferred from generation to generation by word of mouth. Oral history as activity and oral tradition as a genre of source together I shall call 'oral historiography', following David Henige. Therefore, in the context of this thesis, oral history does not refer to the study of the recent past through the practice of interviewing subjects to gain a greater insight in historical events they have personally lived through. David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London: Longman, 1982), 2 and Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition. A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), 1.

75 Ki-Zerbo, "General Introduction", 16–7.

76 Luise White, "Hodgepodge Historiography: Documents, Itineraries, and the Absence of Archives" *History in Africa* 42 (2015): 309–318, 315–316.

77 Ki-Zerbo, "General Introduction", 7.

that it was almost impossible to live up to these from the outset.<sup>78</sup> As M'Bow put it in the Preface, oral history could be used to 'understand the African vision of the world from the inside.'<sup>79</sup> Of course, Ki-Zerbo did not neglect to list some of the problems with the use of oral traditions as historical source material — the weakness of its chronology, its tendency to mythologise, the necessity of context, the problem of various versions existing synchronously.<sup>80</sup> The point here is therefore not to unmask Ki-Zerbo as an ideologue, but to show in how far he and the GHA and Africanist historiography of the time generally, idealised oral historiography and the possibilities it carried.<sup>81</sup> It is of course also true that African historiography did contribute a hitherto unexplored methodology to the historical discipline as a whole in the form of oral history.<sup>82</sup>

It is important, however, to reflect for a moment on the use of oral history as historical methodology as well in order to scrutinise how essentialised ideals of oral historiography interacted, inside the GHA and also more generally outside of it as well, with the development of oral history as a methodological tool. Historians who practiced the methodology of oral history and who, moreover, developed it, were mindful of the demands levelled at source material from a Euro-American academic point of view. In order to conduct research into the pre-colonial past that would be academically sound, therefore, the ideal of oral history was also framed as a rigorous method of looking into the past. Within that development Jan Vansina was arguably the most famous as well as one of the earliest proponents of using oral traditions for the writing of history. His doctoral dissertation *De La Tradition Orale — Essai de Methode Historique* appeared in 1961. It was translated to English in 1965.<sup>83</sup> Vansina is often identified as the per-

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78 Ralph A. Austen, "Africanist historiography and its critics: can there be an autonomous African History" in *African Historiography. Essays in honour of Jacob Ade Ajayi*, ed. Toyin Falola (Harlow: Longman, 1993), 203-17, 205.

79 M'Bow, "Preface", XXI.

80 Ki-Zerbo, "General Introduction", 7-11.

81 Austen, "Africanist historiography and its critics", 205.

82 In his *Paths in the Rainforest*, Jan Vansina empathically makes the point that it is possible to write a history based on oral traditions. Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest. Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990)

83 Jan Vansina, *De La Tradition Orale. Essai de Methode Historique* (Tervuren: Annalen Koninklijk museum voor Midden-Afrika, 1961)

son who changed the historical discipline in the 1960s and more or less forced it to accept oral testimony as a source, albeit within a quite conventional framework of source-based analysis as it had been known in the historical discipline since the late-19th century.<sup>84</sup> Mudimbe describes his influence as a culmination of the acceptance of concepts such as subjectivity, the relativity of values and the questioning of the universality of the 'western' experience.<sup>85</sup> Vansina, in his autobiography, also identified the redemption of subjectivity as an academic tool in the second half of the 20th century which allowed for African history to be taken seriously by the Euro-American academy.<sup>86</sup> We see here an appreciation of subjectivity as a necessary part in admitting African history to the discipline of history generally. 'The concept of history metamorphosed itself, making it possible to restore the past of non-Occidental cultures', writes Mudimbe when referring to Vansina's influence.<sup>87</sup> In other words, the discovery of oral history as a valid methodology with which to uncover the past developed alongside and thanks to an increased sensitivity to the worth of cultures other than the west. It is no coincidence that these developments took place in the post-Second World War world, when Europe was in ruins. The fact that it was a European historian who opened up the historical discipline to the study of oral narratives is not all that surprising in that context either as it would have been easier to accept the intervention from a European scholar rather than an African, I suspect.

In 1961 Vansina stressed the rigorous source critique that oral traditions demanded and this was emphasised by the GHA as well. The GHA had organised a meeting in Niamey in Niger, from 18–25 September 1967, to discuss the importance of collecting oral traditions.<sup>88</sup> During the meeting, Vansina was quoted to have said that both written and oral source material demand the same kind of 'critical historical rules.' The overall report stated that 'the committee of historians which met at Abidjan stressed the point that the use of oral traditions as a historical source required, more than any other type of evidence,

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84 David Newbury, "Contradictions at the Heart of the Canon: Jan Vansina and the Debate over Oral Historiography in Africa, 1960–1985" *History in Africa* 34 (2007): 213–254, 213–4.

85 Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, 21–22.

86 Vansina, *Living With Africa*, 99.

87 Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, 21–22.

88 UAP, SHC/CS/121/1 Meeting of Specialists on African Oral Traditions, Niamey, 18–25 September 1967. Working Paper, 16 August 1967, 1. (hereafter: UAP, Meeting of Specialists 1967 Working Paper)



a very strict method of evaluation.<sup>89</sup> The meeting emphasised that researchers needed to have been trained in the critical historical method so that they could apply the same rigour to spoken texts as was the practice when encountering written texts.<sup>90</sup> It is not surprising therefore that epistemic virtues linked to oral source work are somewhat reminiscent of epistemic virtues linked to archival source work: perseverance, sacrifice, hard work and methodological rigour.<sup>91</sup> Vansina's methodological book on oral history is absolutely meticulous in its instruction towards readers.<sup>92</sup> Vansina insisted on taking the historical method of source-based criticism seriously and applying it to oral traditions as if they were written texts. By doing so he made it possible for conventional (European) historians to understand what he was trying to do, but he also applied a sort of straightjacket to the African orature he had encountered. As Vansina described in his autobiography, his conviction that oral tradition was history was based on the idea that the 'Bushong poems were just like medieval dirges'.<sup>93</sup> David Newbury explains that Vansina, 'sought to broaden the field of history by claiming that historical techniques of the day could be applied fruitfully to other classes, races, cultures and sources. But in so doing he had to accept the conventional techniques of historical analysis and associate himself with those very conventions.'<sup>94</sup> Harry Garuba describes this conundrum as follows: 'The ultimate postcolonial paradox in knowledge production: that the new producers coming on the stage sought the prestige of disciplinary validation and authority while the nature of their research and writing was undermining this authority and destabilising its foundations.'<sup>95</sup> As Newbury also identified, Vansina had a tactical reason to present oral historiography in the way that he did. In order for it to be accepted by the existing historical discipline,

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89 UAP, Meeting of Specialists 1967 Working Paper, 5.

90 UAP, SHC/CS/121/1 Réunion de Spécialistes en Traditions Orales Africaines, Niamey, 18 – 25 septembre 1967, Rapport Final, Paris, le 21 juillet 1968, 9.

91 Herman Paul, "Performing History: How Historical Scholarship is Shaped by Epistemic Virtues" *History and Theory* 50 (2011): 1-19.

92 Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 187-204. Unlike the French version, the appendix of the English translation contained a section with practical advice for the researcher.

93 Vansina, *Living with Africa*, 17.

94 Newbury, "Contradictions at the Heart of the Canon", 215-216.

95 Harry Garuba, "African Studies, Area Studies, and the Logic of the Disciplines", in *African Studies in the Post-colonial University*, eds. Thandabantu Nhlapo and Harry Garuba (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2012), 39-54, 47.

he had to speak the language of that discipline and moreover, make use of the epistemologies available to him. In his later works, such as *Paths in the Rainforest*, Vansina developed a more complex understanding of the methodology of oral history, incorporating the influence of social determinants and cultural factors.<sup>96</sup> He slowly moved away from the ‘documentary analogy’ and became more openly sensitive to the context in which his source material was produced.<sup>97</sup> What this shows is a negotiation and eventual compromise within changing standards of historical scholarship. Vansina was a ‘bricoleur’ when he engaged in the theorisation of the methodology of oral history. He was more concerned with making sure oral traditions would be accepted as sources, than with the theoretical purity of what he was doing. This way of doing things, creating a bricolage of different methods and cultural influences, can be found at the heart of the *General History of Africa* as well. The project was operating between the conceptual space of ‘Africa’ and ‘Europe’ in an effort to create something new that would incorporate both. Likewise, it hoped to incorporate rigorous academic work with an investment in political realities and goals — such as the idea that reference to the pre-colonial by way of oral historiography could aid in the creation of nation states.

Of course, Vansina was hardly the only scholar engaged with oral methodologies and neither was he the only one interested in their historical value. At roughly the same time Vansina wrote and published his ground-breaking methodological innovations, Amadou Hampate Ba and Bethwell Ogot, to name two historians who were also active within the GHA, had been doing similar work — sometimes based off of what Vansina had written about oral methodologies.<sup>98</sup> Ogot became a key figure in expanding the methodological tools of the oral to in-

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<sup>96</sup> Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest*.

<sup>97</sup> Henri Moniot, “Profile of A Historiography. Oral Tradition and Historical Research in Africa.” in *African Historiographies. What History for Which Africa?* eds. David Newbury and Bogumil Jewsiewicki (London: Sage, 1986), 50–58, 52 and David Newbury, “Contradictions at the Heart of the Canon”, 236–44.

<sup>98</sup> Another East-African who was a part of the GHA and who pressed the importance of collecting oral traditions was Isaria Kimambo, Isaria N. Kimambo, “Historical Research in Mainland Tanzania” in *Expanding Horizons in African Studies*, eds. Gwendolen M. Carter and Ann Paden (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 75–90, 75–78.

clude non-centralised societies in East Africa.<sup>99</sup> The use of oral tradition to write history then, has been identified and idealised numerous times as a way to study the marginalised and oppressed.

Oral history, moreover, had the advantage of not having had a rich history of othering, unlike ethnography. Ki-Zerbo denounced ethnography as 'a discourse with explicitly discriminatory practices.' Unlike linguistics and archaeology, it was not to be used for the GHA. 'Its main presupposition was often linear evolution, with Europe, pioneer of civilisation, in the van of human advance, and at the rear the primitive 'tribes' of Oceania, Amazonia and Africa.' Ethnology had taken a perceived inherent and inherited difference between distinct peoples or even races as a starting point. Ki-Zerbo went on to argue that important anthropologists, like Bronislaw Malinowski, had done a disservice to African history by denying African societies 'a historical dimension.'<sup>100</sup> Ki-Zerbo's critique was in line with the arguments later made by Mudimbe as well as Sally Falk Moore regarding ethnographic or anthropological narratives concerning Africa: the othering of the African.<sup>101</sup>

The need to avoid that which was seen as out of the ordinary and the subsequent focus on the ordinary was part of the GHA manifesto as well in that it wanted to be a history of ideas and civilisations. The GHA, moreover, wanted to show how African cultures had mutually influenced one another as well as the rest of the world.<sup>102</sup> The use of these words is of course not coincidental. Ideas and civilisations were perceived of as historical, rather than ethnographic. The manifesto, moreover, added to these that the GHA would be a history of

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99 Bethwell A Ogot, "Some approaches to African History" in *Hadith I, Proceedings of the annual conference of the Historical Association of Kenya 1967*, ed. Bethwell A. Ogot (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968) 1-10, 7, The Ibadan historian Adiele Afigbo followed in his footsteps in the 1980s. He reiterated that if Oral History was only used to study traditional centralised societies, through kingship lists for instance, historians were still denying some societies entry into 'the kingdom of Clio', A.E. Afigbo, "Oral Tradition and the History of Segmentary Societies" *History in Africa* 12 (1985): 1-10, 2-4.

100 Ki-Zerbo, "General Introduction", 13-14.

101 See: Sally Falk Moore, "Changing Perspectives on a Changing Africa: The Work of Anthropology" in *Africa and the disciplines: the contributions of research in Africa to the social sciences and humanities* eds. Robert H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe and Jean O'Barr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3-57, 3 and V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988)

102 UAP, Meeting of Experts 1969 Introductory Document, 2.

institutions and societies and linked this to oral traditions and art — forms of source material that would be more suitable for such a history. Ki-Zerbo ended his introduction by stating that the GHA would not be a '*histoire événementielle*, for otherwise it [the GHA] would be in danger of according too much importance to external factors and influences.'<sup>103</sup> The *General History of Africa* generally and Ki-Zerbo specifically were influenced by the Annales school of history developed in France under the auspices of Lucien Febvre and March Bloch, and later much influenced by Fernand Braudel.<sup>104</sup> Due to the fact that the Annales school criticised the 19th century historiography that was based on events and written history and aimed to expand the horizon of the historian to include social and economic history, it was a welcome tool for historians of Africa — even if it was European.<sup>105</sup> For the same reasons, some African historians were attracted to Marxism, for Marxism also carried within it the dual possibility of levelling a critique against Europe as well as expanding the kingdom of Clio beyond political history, based solely on written sources. The GHA then was not set against all ideas emanating from Europe, but simply those they perceived as unhelpful or detrimental to uncovering an African past. Moreover, a history focused on events would be likely to focus on those things that were out of the ordinary, such as the coming of Europeans, rather than detailing, for instance, the structure of a given society, its trade networks, political organisation, culture, philosophy and religion. The GHA had to become a problem driven history rather than an event driven history. Like many other points made in the General Introduction, Ki-Zerbo's admonishment regarding a *histoire événementielle* follows the line set out by the positioning documents.

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**103** In the English version '*histoire événementielle*' had been translated to 'a history that is too narrative', which, I believe, confounds the point made that a history based on chronicling events that are out of the ordinary (IE: the arrival of Europeans) would allow for a greater focus on disturbances from the outside and, more problematic even, may obscure the intellectual influence of the Annales school. Ki-Zerbo, "General Introduction", 22.

**104** Fernand Braudel had written the preface to Ki-Zerbo's 1972 history of Africa, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, *Histoire de l'Afrique Noire* (Paris: Hatier, 1972), see also: Adame Ba Konaré, "L'histoire africaine aujourd'hui", *Présence Africaine* 173 (2006): 27-36, 30.

**105** See: André Burguière, *The Annales School. An Intellectual History*, trans. Timothy Tackett (New York: Cornell University Press, 2009), Giuliana Gemelli, *Fernand Braudel*, trans. Brigitte Pasquet and Béatrice Propetto Marzi (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1995) and Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-2014* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015)

In 1969 the committee of experts had already argued that the GHA had to be a history of ‘civilisations and ideas rather than a chronicle of events.’ Or, somewhat more poetically: ‘not so much a history of princes and battles as a history of societies and peoples, not just spectacular summits or peaks which awed the beholder, but the whole mountain range.’<sup>106</sup>

As a result of the focus on an African *longue durée*, therefore, pre-colonial history became preferred over history of the colonial period. The colonial era, it was argued, had only been an interlude during which Europeans had temporarily been in power. It was by looking at the continuity evident between pre- and post-colonial history that the ‘true’ history of Africa would really become visible — and could be made glorious as part of new national identities.<sup>107</sup> This specific argument was made most famously by Jacob Ade Ajayi, the editor of volume VI, who argued that colonialism had only been an ‘episode’ in African history, a mere interlude.<sup>108</sup> The main point of speaking of the African factor in history had become to emphasise how the African initiative was not just a reaction to Europeans and was not dependent on the presence of Europeans, but was in fact rooted in a *longue durée*.<sup>109</sup> The precolonial was, as a result, favoured by many of the early Africanists, a great number of whom also became a part of the GHA. The focus on pre-colonial history as meaning Africa from within was therefore, in large part, an effort to expel a eurocentric focus that had existed in history written about Africa by use of European source materials and largely through European eyes.

## Conclusions

The *General History of Africa* had two clear goals: to establish African history as a scholarly sound and reputable activity and to contribute to the political emancipation of the continent. This chapter has focused on the first goal and analysed the ideals that were congruent to it.

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<sup>106</sup> UNESCO, SHC/CONF.27/1, Meeting of Experts on the Measures to be taken for Drafting and Publishing a General History of Africa, Unesco, Paris – 23–27 June 1969, Final Report, 6 August 1969. Translated from the French, 2, 5.

<sup>107</sup> Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, 272.

<sup>108</sup> J.F. Ade Ajayi, “Colonialism: an episode in African history”, in *Colonialism in Africa 1870–1960 Volume 1*, eds. L.H. Gann and Peter Duignan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 497–510.

<sup>109</sup> Temu and Swai, *Historians and Africanist History*, 18–9, 22–3.

As a result of the overall European denial of historicity, the *General History of Africa* was mostly engaged in positioning itself opposite and against that denial, in an effort not only to be accepted by the Euro-American Academy, but also to improve it. The GHA, therefore, developed anti-ideals in reference to the creation of an Africa-centred history of Africa; historians had to avoid eurocentrism, which surfaced in the form of dogmatism, or an unmerited focus on the colonial over the precolonial past. In order to cement Africa as a suitable topic for historical scholarship, moreover, the GHA made it clear that it was not the historical discipline as a whole that they wished to retract from, but simply those parts and persons specifically that had denied Africa a history. Within Africanist circles specifically Trevor-Roper and Hegel became 'historians non grata', whose pronouncements on Africa were to be regarded as unscholarly because they had been prejudiced and had taken European superiority as a given. It was therefore the vices of the historical discipline that had to be shed and amended with new ideas, rather than its whole methodology, for the vices were the result of subjective and politically motivated ideological scholarship. The GHA then set out to decolonise African history through a deracialisation of African history; meaning it wanted to adopt existing historiographic rationality but without its racial prejudices by subverting and challenging methodologies.<sup>110</sup>

Ideally, historians of Africa would engage in a study of Africa in such a way that Europe would no longer be the focal point. They could do so by engaging primarily in the pre-colonial past through the use of oral traditions and other source materials that were not primarily written archival documents. As many historians have since noted, however, this mostly remained an ideal for the Africanist historians who were a part of the GHA as they ended up mostly writing history books that did engage in the colonial through the use of written archival material.<sup>111</sup> The point of this chapter therefore has been to emphasise that these ideals may not necessarily tell us something about the product that became the GHA, but, nevertheless show us how the historians working on the GHA envisioned a decolonised African histor-

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<sup>110</sup> Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Siphamandla Zondi, "Introduction: The Coloniality of Knowledge: Between Troubles Histories and Uncertain Futures" in *Decolonizing the University, Knowledge Systems and Disciplines in Africa*, eds. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Siphamandla Zondi (Durham: North Carolina Press, 2016), 3–24, 13.

<sup>111</sup> Austen, "Africanist historiography and its critics", 205.

ical practice. They did so partly in opposition to what they perceived as existing eurocentric ideals. Most likely because doing as such was necessary in order to rhetorically position oneself as scholarly sound and reputable — a better and more academic alternative to existing historical writing about Africa.