



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

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

Schulte Nordholt, L.R.C.

### **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

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3244250>

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

# CHAPTER THREE

## Ideals of Political Emancipation

### Introduction

The preceding chapters mainly analyse how ideals of anti-eurocentrism and pan-African diversity influenced the creation of knowledge within the *General History of Africa*, whereas this chapter focuses on the ideal of the GHA to contribute to political emancipation. Practical concerns occupied the editors and authors of the GHA alongside high-minded questions concerning the place of Europe within the history of Africa. The GHA wished to contribute to nation-building on the continent and, subsequently, to a widespread dissemination of knowledge about African history on the continent and across the globe in order to contribute to a greater understanding of Africa. The chapter shows that African history required an investment not just in the academic emancipation of Africa, but also in the political emancipation of the continent. Ideals concerning the reputability of the new field of history related to ideals of uplifting the people and creating educational emancipation, as well.

This chapter, the last of three on ideals, therefore, looks into the way the GHA envisioned African history should contribute to the political emancipation of Africans, rather than looking at the reali-

ty of whether it actually did contribute to political emancipation on the continent. It asks the question of why and how did the *General History of Africa* envision the volumes should and would contribute to political emancipation on the continent? The chapter shows in how far the GHA was a political project that aimed to contribute to anti-colonial nationalism and which saw political emancipation as a duty which was almost indistinguishable from the creation of African history as a scholarly endeavour of reputability.

The chapter first discusses the way in which oral historiography specifically came to function as a tool for building nation states through education and heritage conservation. Secondly, it analyses how the nationalist emancipatory and anti-colonial role the GHA set out to fulfil, expressed itself in the wish to spread knowledge widely. The creation of nationalist history would only have an emancipatory effect if there was also an effort to spread information and knowledge to as many Africans as possible. The GHA was set up to encompass the whole of Africa not only in terms of topics, but also in its reach. Lastly, the chapter details the way in which the GHA cared about its societal relevance as it played a role within the history of African studies. For instance, regarding critique levelled against nationalist history writing by Marxist-oriented historians in the 1970s.

## **Nation-state building through oral historiography**

As already noted in Chapter 1, oral historiography came to be seen as a typically African and therefore possibly unique way to decolonise history. Historians working on Africa's past had increasingly come to challenge the idea that only written source material could be used to unlock the past. The treatment of oral traditions as legitimate source materials marked a pivotal change in the way history was done. Yet, within the GHA the archetype of oral historiography as specifically and truly African became susceptible to a myriad of myths and essentialisations. Oral source materials were envisioned to be able to reach a pre-colonial past which could then subsequently contribute to the political imagination by conjuring images of political independence and even greatness.

Oral history became such an important envisioned decolonising tool because it could contribute to emancipation. The collection and use of oral traditions for the writing of African history symbolised that all peoples had a right to historical memory because the use of

oral sources appeared to create an opening into hitherto unknown parts of the African past. This created the possibility of listening to voices that had previously been ignored, often from the pre-colonial period.<sup>1</sup> Pre-colonial Africa became synonymous with ‘unspoiled’ Africa. The ‘true’ African past was that which had not yet been ‘distorted’ by colonialism. One could escape to pre-colonial African history to catch a glimpse of African greatness and imagine what the future of Africa, under African rule, could look like. Pre-colonial Africa therefore offered repertoires for the political imagination of the post-independence period, for instance in the history of various empires, such as the Songhay, Mali and Ghana empires. Pre-colonial history became synonymous with a nationalist focus on the African factor as pre-colonial Africa was uniquely equipped to show that Africans could rule themselves and were capable of making their own history. As such, it functioned not only as an epistemological antidote to eurocentrism, as is explored in Chapter 1, but also as a nationalist and anti-colonial escape towards Nkrumah’s much-yearned for political kingdom.

The *General History of Africa* therefore embraced the new methodology of oral history. The manifesto stated that it would introduce the values of oral tradition, presumably to the historical discipline. Oral history changed the way that African history was studied and vastly broadened the subject material available. As a result, oral tradition came to be seen as such an important carrier of African values that the language to promote this idea within the GHA was highly normative regarding the results that oral history was supposed to yield in terms of its capacity to decolonise history. Remember Joseph Ki-Zerbo’s assertions, discussed in Chapter 1, that oral traditions were the most authentic African sources. For this chapter, it is particularly noteworthy that oral history came to function specifically as a tool of imagined political emancipation, whereas in Chapter 1, the point is epistemic, to assert that oral historiography was used to prove the existence of African historicity. In almost all of the positioning documents, UNESCO’s efforts in collecting oral traditions from across Africa are highlighted, praised and stimulated — referencing, for instance, the project in the Niger Valley which took place in 1967–1968 or the need

---

<sup>1</sup> Toyin Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001), 231, 233.

to collect oral material in Southern Africa and Ethiopia.<sup>2</sup> Oral tradition, it was imagined would give greater access to the African past, in more diverse ways. Of course, the local knowledge carried by these traditions is actually highly valuable in what they may tell us about the societies in which they function and functioned.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the way in which this almost instinctive idea was articulated within the *General History of Africa* sometimes hinged on the wishful.

It was through teaching oral traditions as history specifically that it was imagined new national citizens could be created. The creation of viable systems of education that could uplift that nation had been a central tenet of the independence period throughout the former colonies in Africa, Jacob Ade Ajayi wrote in 1982. Education was one of the pillars of the successful nation state.<sup>4</sup> The *General History of Africa* therefore felt a need to reflect on the educational development that had taken place after the attainment of independence and convened a symposium to discuss the theme of *Educational Progress and Historiography in Africa*.<sup>5</sup> During the symposium, which took place in 1982 in Dakar, Senegal, experts reflected on the educational inheritance from pre-colonial times, as well as the colonial legacy and the content of African history that had been taught.<sup>6</sup> Ade Ajayi reflected on the legacy and impact of 'western' style education on Africa, a theme he had already researched extensively in a Nigerian context for his book on Christian

---

2 G.S.M., "The General History of Africa: A UNESCO Project" *Cahiers D'Histoire Mondiale* 13:4 (1970): 527-538, 529-31 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)

3 Wyatt MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture. The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 2-7.

4 J.F. Ade Ajayi and B.A. Ogot, "Introduction", in *The General History of Africa. Studies and Documents 9, Educational Processes in Africa and Historiography. Final Report and papers of the symposium organized by Unesco in Dakar (Senegal) from 25 to 29 January 1982* (Paris: UNESCO, 1985), 9-10, 9-10.

5 N.N., "Final Report of the symposium" in *The General History of Africa. Studies and Documents 9, Educational Processes in Africa and Historiography. Final Report and papers of the symposium organized by Unesco in Dakar (Senegal) from 25 to 29 January 1982* (Paris: UNESCO, 1985), 129-44, 129.

6 N.N., "Contents" in *The General History of Africa. Studies and Documents 9, Educational Processes in Africa and Historiography. Final Report and papers of the symposium organized by Unesco in Dakar (Senegal) from 25 to 29 January 1982* (Paris: UNESCO, 1985)

missions in that country in the 19th century.<sup>7</sup> In the piece Ajayi argued that although ‘western’ education had successfully created a new elite, it had not totally eradicated the indigenous systems of education.<sup>8</sup> It was through indigenous education that a sense of continuity, tradition, and therefore a sense of history, could be safeguarded, he argued. Oral traditions had therein played their role in creating consensus, emphasising periods of political stability and peace and fostering the idea that periods of conflict and gaps in good leadership were less important. Through oral tradition a sense of community was favoured over a sense of individualism. According to Ajayi the latter was the exact opposite of what ‘western’ education had come to stimulate in the new African elite.<sup>9</sup> In another paper for the same symposium, Ali Mazrui and Teshome Wagaw, from Ethiopia, also emphasised the importance of oral tradition in the indigenous education system in East Africa.<sup>10</sup> Mazrui, Wagaw and Ajayi called upon the restoration of indigenous systems of community, through the promotion of oral tradition. The colonial, traditional and also Islamic influences, would together provide for the replacement of colonial and pre-colonial logic with something new that would ultimately reflect the conflicting memories of the postcolonial moment.<sup>11</sup> In the postcolonial state, then, education would have to become a fusion of several practices, allowing for what Valentin Mudimbe has dubbed ‘the promise of modern Africa.’<sup>12</sup>

In the final report of the symposium the theme of oral historiography resurfaced as a way to ensure a restoration of communality, and

---

7 See: J.F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891. The Making of a New Élite* (London: Longmans Green and Co, 1965)

8 J.F. Ade Ajayi, “The educational process and historiography in contemporary Africa: background paper” in *The General History of Africa. Studies and Documents 9, Educational Processes in Africa and Historiography. Final Report and papers of the symposium organized by Unesco in Dakar (Senegal) from 25 to 29 January 1982* (Paris: UNESCO, 1985), 11-21, 15-16.

9 Ade Ajayi, “The educational process”, 17.

10 A. A. Mazrui and T. Wagaw, “Towards decolonizing modernity: education and cultural conflict in Eastern Africa” in *The General History of Africa. Studies and Documents 9, Educational Processes in Africa and Historiography. Final Report and papers of the symposium organized by Unesco in Dakar (Senegal) from 25 to 29 January 1982* (Paris: UNESCO, 1985), 35-62, 40.

11 Ade Ajayi, “The educational process”, 12-13 and Mazrui and Wagaw, “Toward decolonizing modernity”, 60-61.

12 Valentin Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 144.

therefore tradition, in the educational system. Oral historiography had the potential to bring several strands of African relations with the past together. In African societies there was far less of a separation between history, memory and education as had come into being in the West, the meeting concluded. Therefore, there was no point in simply mimicking the ‘western’ way of doing history, Jean Devisse noted.<sup>13</sup> The symposium seemed to have framed the oral almost as carrying an African essence, which was imagined to hold the key to decolonising African education and history. What this symposium shows then, is how, at the time, Ajayi, Mazrui and others idealised oral traditions.<sup>14</sup>

Oral historiography within the GHA was mythologised and connected to an ideal of shared knowledge and shared community. It therefore needed to be safeguarded for future generations, as well as spread through history writing and education. Or rather, the indigenous values installed in oral traditions would be best disseminated through education. Moreover, the suggestion was made that oral sources were actually better than written sources because they were perceived to ‘live’ closer to the actual past, hence the use of the phrase ‘living tradition’ in Amadou Hampaté Ba’s chapter title of volume I. This was partly a reflection on the malleability of oral sources and the ability of people to speak back to the historian collecting sources, whereas dead written documents obviously could not.<sup>15</sup> In Franco-phone West Africa, Hampaté Bâ became the most well-known figure amongst a group of collectors of oral traditions, such as Djibril Tamsir Niane and Camara Laye.<sup>16</sup> It was in an effort to keep knowledge

---

13 N.N., “Final Report of the symposium”, 136–7.

14 It should be noted here that Ajayi did emphasise the need to critically assess oral traditions before using them as pedagogical material, Hakeem Ibikunle Tijani, “Ade Ajayi and the Pedagogy of Teaching and Learning about African History” in *J.F. Ade Ajayi. His Life and Career*, eds. Michael Omolewa and Akinjide Osuntokun (Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2014), 358–72, 360.

15 In an edited volume on fieldwork in Africa, Vansina noted that because oral traditions come from living people, they incorporate a larger number of viewpoints and subjectivities. In addition, in their reception they are sometimes subject to control from those living people as opposed to the study of ‘dead’ documents that never speak back. Jan Vansina, “Epilogue: Fieldwork in History,” in *In Pursuit of History. Fieldwork in Africa*, eds. Carolyn Keyes Adenaike and Jan Vansina (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996), 138.

16 Niane, who was also the editor of volume IV of the GHA, wrote down the epic of Soundjata. D. T. Niane, *Soundjata ou L’Épopée Mandingue* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1960)

about the African past from disappearing that UNESCO and the experts working on the drafting of a General History became engaged in the collection of oral data, already mentioned above. Hampâté Bâ's famous adage was often invoked to describe the perceived situation: 'En Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle.' [Every time an old man dies in Afrique, it is as if a library burns down.] The idea being that some depositories of knowledge were about to disappear as elders passed away, whilst younger men became absorbed by an increasingly modernised, or some would say westernised, way of living. Of course, it should be emphasised here that oral traditions and oral knowledge was not just possessed by any old man, but, by specialised experts trained in the orature, often called 'griots' in a West African context. Griots traditionally performed a wide variety of roles, but also functioned as historians and storytellers across West Africa.<sup>17</sup> UNESCO feared the disappearance of local knowledge carried by these griots if it were not recorded or collected in some way. The 1966 Abidjan meeting of experts on the *General History of Africa* therefore ended with a statement on 'historical research work in Africa.'<sup>18</sup> UNESCO had by that time already implemented several archival studies throughout Africa in an effort to make knowledge about the continent's past more accessible. The experts recommended that a meeting of specialists on African oral traditions should be convened, in order to establish regional centres in West Africa for the collection and analysis of data, as well as the training of research staff. Two meetings were eventually organised, in 1967 in Niamey, as mentioned above and in 1968 in Ouagadougou.<sup>19</sup> The idea here was that through access to traditional and local knowledge, African cultural heritage, would not be lost for it allowed researchers to connect to layers of society that would otherwise elude them. In that way oral traditions were connected to an ideal of shared and communal knowledge of the African past. Perhaps it is not unsurprising that the GHA chose to emphasise the importance of oral history as an ideal given the importance of oral story telling specifically in West Africa and the pre-eminence of West Africans amongst the GHA's editors.

This necessity to salvage oral traditions, however, contains a par-

---

<sup>17</sup> Patrick Corcoran, *Griot*, in *The New Oxford Companion to Literature in French*, ed. Peter France (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995 [2005])

<sup>18</sup> UAP, Committee of Experts 1966, Introductory document, 5.

<sup>19</sup> G.S.M, "The General History of Africa", 527-538.



adox. The aim betrays a certain bias towards the written word, even whilst arguing for the validity and importance of oral material. This is also noticeable in Hampâté Bâ's famous dictum on burning libraries, the idea being that knowledge disappears if it is not written down. As Moradewun Adejunmobi explains: 'orality is obviously important [for Hampâté Bâ], but orality does not survive on its own in a world that has experienced colonialism.'<sup>20</sup> In this postcolonial world literacy has become the mode of understanding and preserving knowledge. In the historical context in which Hampâté Bâ operated writing had slowly started to supersede orality in the colonies and later post-colonies in which he did his research. He therefore uniquely emphasised the process of writing down spoken text.<sup>21</sup> In his chapter for volume I of the GHA, Jan Vansina moreover noted that the increasing availability of written history books and the increasing literacy of the population would make it harder for the historian to find uncontaminated oral accounts. Vansina argued that the times offered a unique and compelling chance to write down the orature of Africa and decolonise the writing of history about Africa.<sup>22</sup> Paradoxically it was this very imposition of colonial modes of knowledge production that would, eventually, make it possible for oral traditions to disappear. Heritage conservation in this instance, therefore, seemed to be conceptualised from a Euro-American perspective. Perhaps because this was the only perspective available that was also congruent with the narrative of internationalism as championed by UNESCO. Phrasing the necessity to safeguard oral traditions in a way that could be understood in terms of the internationalist rationale of the time was perhaps partly strategic rhetoric aimed to include African countries in the post-colonial world order.<sup>23</sup>

The idea, therefore, espoused within the GHA specifically, that oral traditions were a somehow pure historical source that could more or less transport the researcher to an African past and which held information about society on many different levels, was at least partly a utopia connected to the ideal of using a past of great value for the pur-

---

20 Moradewun Adejunmobi, "Disruptions of Orality in the Writings of Hampâté Bâ," *Research in African Literatures* 31:3 (2000): 28–36, 31.

21 Adejunmobi, "Disruptions of Orality", 31.

22 J. Vansina, "Oral tradition and its methodology" in *General History of Africa I. Methodology and African Prehistory*, ed. J. Ki-Zerbo (Paris: UNESCO, 1981), 142–66, 162.

23 See: Marie Huber, *Developing Heritage – Developing Countries. Ethiopian Nation-Building and the Origins of UNESCO World Heritage, 1960–1980* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 144–49, 168–74.

pose of political anti-colonial emancipation and partly a rhetorical device in order to frame Africa as part of the international world order. The oral therefore functioned on multiple layers; as part of indigenous education that had to be salvaged in postcolonial times and which could shape the nation, as a way to connect to the pre-colonial African past, as a carrier of cultural knowledge that needed to be conserved for posterity and as a political tool on the global political stage. It was seen as a way to marshal materials from the past to legitimate new nations in the present and connect the, sometimes arbitrary, boundaries of these new nations with a (great) history. Oral historiography therefore functioned not only as a methodology or genre of source material that could be deployed in the argument against eurocentrism, but also, through education and conservation, as a carrier of the political ideology of the independence period. It was through its connection to the non-European pre-colonial especially that oral historiography became a carrier of the ideal of political emancipation.

### **The political ideal of ‘reaching the widest possible audience’**

For African cultural heritage, including oral traditions, to be recognised, it was necessary to assure the *General History of Africa* would reach a wide audience. The intellectual battle for nationalism could partly be fought through the writing of history if both audiences in Africa as well as elsewhere would read and come to believe the story of a past of great value.<sup>24</sup> During most of the period of nationalist historiography in the 1960s, when the goals and aims of the GHA were written down, historians sought to reveal the previously unknown African past to a general public in order to promote a global understanding of that African past and combat the colonial idea of Africa as a savage and war-torn place before the imposition of colonial ‘order’ and ‘progress’. Nationalism therefore provoked a demand for history books.<sup>25</sup> As a result, funding was readily available for universities and

---

<sup>24</sup> As such the GHA stood in a global but European-inspired tradition of history writing for nationalism, which is part of a larger nationalisation of the past, see: Stefan Berger ed., *Writing the nation: a global perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and Ilaria Porciani and Jo Tollebeek eds., *Setting the Standards: Institutions, Networks, and Communities of National Historiography* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

<sup>25</sup> Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, 181.

historians in the early years of the post-independence period when new nation states were flourishing, years which, consequently, overlapped with the most productive years of the new discipline.<sup>26</sup> Funding was readily available in part because education could be used to shape national citizens. Most of the African GHA historians, if not all, had been at least partly educated at Euro-American institutions and they wished to create new and sustain existing institutions of higher learning in their own countries to contribute to national independence. I will here focus on higher education and specifically the study of history as well as a widespread dissemination of the work to a general audience.

In the introductory document for the 1966 meeting of experts in Abidjan, it was first stated that the 'results of research should be used for teaching purposes; cooperation should be organised to that end between specialists in history and specialists in education, mainly in Africa.'<sup>27</sup> This idea was further expanded upon in the meetings that took place, 1970 in Addis Ababa and 1971 in Paris. The 1970 meeting, after presenting what would be general directives guiding the work, what I have dubbed 'the manifesto', set forth how the synthesis dictated by that manifesto was to be presented:

The style of presentation [...], whilst making no concessions whatsoever, with regard to the level of scholarship, endeavours at the same time to reach the general cultivated public, retain the interest of the lay reader and stimulate a new interest in the history of Africa, both within and outside the continent. Low-priced paperback editions, special school version and translations in the major African languages should help the work to reach the widest possible audience and especially the students of African universities.<sup>28</sup>

Besides paperback editions, the document also introduced the plan to create abridged editions, that 'could constitute a cheap popular edition

---

26 Saheed Aderinto and Toyin Falola, *Nigeria, Nationalism, and Writing History* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013) 24-6

27 UAP, Committee of Experts 1966, Introductory document, 2.

28 UAP, UNESCO/SHC/MD/10, 1970 meeting of Experts for the Drafting and Publication of A General History of Africa, Addis Ababa, 1970, 2. (hereafter: UAP, meeting of Experts 1970)

liable to very wide diffusion.’<sup>29</sup> The 1971 *rules of procedure*, which had been commissioned by the Bureau during an earlier meeting that year in Cairo, repeated these programs. The manifesto, then, was supplemented by the wish to actively contribute to the creation of a widespread awareness of African history, specifically throughout the continent in its secondary schools and universities, but also throughout the rest of the world. Certainly, the GHA was to become more than just an academic work of history. Ideally, it would come to occupy a position as a standard work of African history throughout the postcolonial world, or as the GHA put it: ‘it would result in the publication of works that would be of immediate interest to the public not only in Africa but also elsewhere.’<sup>30</sup>

By endeavouring to become a standard reference work, the GHA was aiming to fill a void. As Toyin Falola states in his *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, the extensive production of historiography during the 1950s and 60s, the period immediately prior to that of the GHA, can be partly explained by the lack of textbooks on African history available to the many new students entering university at that time. The intellectual labour conducted during this period was enormous, because the need for nationalist history at newly established universities was enormous. The only works of African history that were available suffered from the prejudices that the new generations longed to get rid of. In the Nigerian university town of Ibadan, the history department, led by its pioneering and first African head, Kenneth Dike, produced a series of textbooks, the Ibadan History series, meant to dispute the Colonial Library. Dike and his peers and students were determined to recover pasts that had been obscured by colonial historiography about Africa.<sup>31</sup> The books that they produced were widely used by history departments throughout Africa.<sup>32</sup> Ibadan itself had become an independent institution in 1962. This was an important milestone because it meant a change in degree requirements. Before 1962 honours students were only required to take one course in African history, whereas they had to take several courses on British history.<sup>33</sup> The change in

---

29 UAP, meeting of Experts 1970, 3.

30 G.S.M, “The General History of Africa”, 529.

31 Toyin Falola, “Nationalism and African Historiography” in *Turning Points in Historiography: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, eds. Q. Edward Wang and Georg G. Iggers (Rochester: The University of Rochester Press, 2002) 209–236, 222.

32 Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, 237–238.

33 Falola, “Nationalism and African Historiography”, 221–222.

degree structure and the production of more material on African history from the nationalist or African perspective mutually reinforced one another. Both developments took place against the background of the Africanisation of staff. African universities at the time, especially in former British territories, were transitioning from entirely European institutions — complete with Oxbridge inspired high tables and Latin graces — to African interpretations of what higher education would come to mean in the new national contexts.<sup>34</sup> The Africanisation of universities took place against the background of the developing post-independence states, who were engaged in Africanising their civil service, for which they needed university trained personnel.<sup>35</sup> As Ndlovu-Gatsheni has noted however, these universities were African in their location, yet remained essentially westernised, or Euro-American, in their conceptions of both knowledge production as well as in education.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile the demand for a survey like the *General History of Africa* grew. At Ibadan, too, the history department was invested in the production of secondary school books and the creation of syllabi.<sup>37</sup> The need for a textbook that would provide an overview of African history and which could be widely used by students across the continent was substantial. School histories, moreover, were important because they offered such a large potential audience, as well as the opportunity that some students and pupils would take up further study of African history, thereby supplementing staff at the universities themselves.<sup>38</sup> The International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General

---

34 R. Cranford Pratt, "African Universities and Western Tradition – Some East Africa Reflections" *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 3:3 (1965): 421–8, 421 and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Empire Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity* (Oxford: Berghahn books, 2013), 191–4.

35 Mahmood Mamdani, "Introduction: The Quest for Academic Freedom" in *Academic Freedom in Africa*, ed. Mamadou Diouf and Mahmood Mamdani (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997), 1–16, 1–2.

36 Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "The Imperative of Decolonizing the Modern Westernized University" in *Decolonizing the University, Knowledge Systems and Disciplines in Africa*, ed. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Siphamandla Zondi (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2016), 27–45, 28 and Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (Milton: Routledge, 2018), 161–3, 170–2.

37 Falola, "Nationalism and African Historiography", 224.

38 Caroline Neale, *Writing "Independent" History. African Historiography 1960–1980* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), 26.

History of Africa (ISC) also made sure to emphasise that the GHA had to contribute to the academic study of African history at the highest level, calling for UNSECO to produce an ‘exhaustive bibliography, in the form of a scientifically produced card index’ alongside the volumes themselves. It would be ‘an indispensable reference for research workers all over the world.’<sup>39</sup> Generally speaking, the decade after independence was marked by a need to incorporate African subjects into African universities so that new citizens of African countries could be adequately trained.<sup>40</sup> The GHA wanted to simultaneously be a work of rigorous academic scholarship on Africa as well as available and intelligible to a wide audience, including students. These were two somewhat conflicting goals, at once appealing to epistemological as well as political needs regarding the writing of African history.

It is not all that surprising, moreover, that the creation of historiography aimed at supplying these universities with a history curriculum was written under the auspices of UNESCO. As already remarked upon, internationalism as well as the geopolitics of the Cold War played a significant role in allowing African nation states to flourish in the decade of independence by opening up a so-called third pathway for new states to follow. The supranational organisation offered a way to engage in geopolitics and transcend new national boundaries, whilst establishing these new nations as legitimate. It cherished pan-African and international idealism. UNESCO, moreover, especially in the francophone countries, was invested not just in the GHA, but also in the expansion of higher education across the continent.<sup>41</sup>

As the positioning documents make clear, moreover, the *General History of Africa* strove to be accessible, in some form or other, to a much broader audience than university students as well. Africanisation was meant to stretch beyond institutions of higher learning to a general public. To this end, the 1970 meeting suggested that abridged versions of the volumes had to be created. The abridged versions would subsequently be translated into African languages, ‘at the requests of governments’ to ensure a ‘very wide diffusion’ of the

---

39 UAP, meeting of Experts 1970, 3.

40 J.F. Ade Ajayi, Lameck K.H. Goma and G. Ampah Johnson, *The African Experience with Higher Education* (Accra: The Association of African Universities, 1996) 75.

41 Damiano Matasci, “«Un rendez-vous africain.» L’Unesco, la fin des empires coloniaux et le plan d’Addis-Abeba (1945-1961)” *Histoire@Politique* 41 (2010): <http://www.histoire-politique.fr/index.php?numero=41&rub=dossier&item=383>

work.<sup>42</sup> Eventually the abridged volumes were translated into some of the most widely used African languages, Swahili, Hausa and Fula. These abridged versions can still be consulted online for free.<sup>43</sup> The unabridged editions were also translated into several non-African languages, including Chinese. Undoubtedly translation into a language such as Chinese was also made possible, as well as stimulated, by the fact that the project was created under UNESCO auspices. UNESCO had access to a large body of language specialists and strove to spread knowledge, through books and education, across the globe in an effort to promote international understanding.<sup>44</sup> During the 1981 meeting in Ibadan however, the ISC made it clear that its main priority would be to have the volumes translated in ‘as many African languages as possible.’ They expressed the need to invigorate languages that they thought were in danger of dying out, seeing the promotion of language use as a way to ‘transform’ the continent. Moreover, providing translation of the GHA could serve ‘as a springboard in education’.<sup>45</sup> Meaning that translations of the volumes into local languages could serve as catalysts for more widespread use of those languages in schools and elsewhere. According to the official regulations, however, initiative for translation still needed to be taken by African governments themselves. Other criteria for translation that were considered, were the size of that language, its place in traditional education as well as the availability of qualified translators and publishers to support the effort.

Another idea that surfaced throughout the years in an effort to ensure a widespread dissemination of the works was the creation of series of comic books based on the GHA. A comic book, it was ar-

---

42 UAP, meeting of Experts 1970, 3.

43 The abridged versions are also available in English, French and Korean. Some of the complete volumes have also been translated in Chinese, Arabic, Italian, Portuguese, Japanese, Spanish and Fulfulde. “Language version”, UNESCO, accessed 9 February 2019, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/general-history-of-africa/language-versions/>

44 Céline Giton, “Weapons of Mass Distribution: UNESCO and the Impact of Books” in *A History of UNESCO. Global Actions and Impacts*, ed. Poul Duehahl (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 49-72 and Thomas Nygren, “UNESCO Teaches History: Implementing International Understanding in Sweden” in *A History of UNESCO. Global Actions and Impacts*, ed. Poul Duehahl (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 201-230.

45 UAP, CC CSP 42, J.F. Ade Ajayi, 27.04.1987, Guidelines for the translation of the UNESCO General History of Africa into various African languages.

gued, could reach an illiterate public and could be an innovative way to spread knowledge about the history of Africa throughout the continent. Although the idea did not make it into any of the early reports, what I have dubbed the positioning documents, it was mentioned in the report for the Ibadan meeting which took place in 1981. During this meeting, which was the fifth plenary session of the ISC, the various language editions as well as plans for the abridged versions were discussed, and so were comic books. The report even suggests that, by then, various steps had already been taken to bring the plan to create comics based on the volumes to fruition, or as was reported: 'Contacts have been made with various specialists with a view to preparing a strip-cartoon version of the History on the basis of the abridged versions.' The comics were 'aimed at children or adults or, as seems likely, at both (where adults are concerned, thought should be given to barely literate adults.)' The comics were, moreover, meant for a worldwide public, although, as was the case for the volumes themselves, they were 'intended to appeal first and foremost, to African readers.'<sup>46</sup> The comic books based on the abridged versions were never actually published, most likely due to lack of funding, although the idea was mentioned again in 1994 during a presentation of the project at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris.<sup>47</sup> Ali Mazrui, moreover, suggested creating a series of photobooks to be published alongside volume VIII, which dealt with 20th century Africa. That idea was rebuffed by the ISC who did not want to treat volume VIII differently from the other volumes. The idea of creating a history of Africa in pictures, however, was not entirely abandoned and Mazrui rewrote his proposal to include all of African history. During the Brazzaville meeting, which took place in 1983, the plan was discussed again and it was even suggested a televi-

---

<sup>46</sup> UAP, CC CSP 331, UNESCO, fifth plenary session of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, Ibadan, Nigeria, 20-31 July, 1981.

<sup>47</sup> UAP, Division of International Cultural Cooperation, Preservation and Enrichment of Cultural Identities (hereafter CLT CID) 50, *Présentation de l'Histoire Générale de L'Afrique. Quelques suggestions à l'attention du Ministre de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique en vue de la relance de la recherche historique en Guinée*, 1994. In 2019 UNESCO created an interactive webpage on 'Women in African History', including several comic strips, in both French and English, aimed at a general audience. "Women in Africa", UNESCO, accessed 18 May 2021, <https://en.unesco.org/womeninafrica/>



sion series could be created based on such a picture history.<sup>48</sup> Although the *General History of Africa* under UNESCO auspices never brought this plan into actualisation, Mazrui himself did create a television series about the history of Africa. 'The Africans' became a widely watched BBC series in the 1980s.<sup>49</sup> Even though the GHA never realised most of the above ambitions pertaining to public outreach, it is unmistakable that the idea was a part of their strategy for the GHA. It was to be a work of history meant for both the general public as well as academics. Why that was and the context in which that ambition came to be is the topic of the next section.

## **History for whom?**

### **The contested relevance of nationalist history writing**

What use historical knowledge of Africa might be and for whom was a topic of debate throughout the 20th century. The Ibadan school, of which the GHA is often considered a part, was criticised for being too far removed from the everyday concerns of Africans. In the 1970s especially the liberal Ibadan school was increasingly criticised by the nationalist turned Marxist-oriented Dar es Salaam school. Although this critique is itself not a part of the creation of ideals within the GHA and although I do not wish to entirely identify the GHA with the Ibadan school, it does provide context for the creation of ideals within the GHA. It is therefore important to spend some time detailing what it was about, in part because it retrospectively began to lead a life of its own in publications such as *Historians and Africanist History: A Critique: Post-Colonial Historiography Examined* by Arnold Temu and Bonaventure Swai (1981). The ideal of emancipation, I argue, was an essential part of the GHA, despite what later commentary and later historiographical developments might suggest.

---

48 UAP, CC CSP 36, ANNEX II 14th meeting bureau and 6th meeting ISC Congo Brazzaville: Proposed photo-volume for the project. Revised proposal from Editor of Volume VIII. Brazzaville, 20 July 1983.

49 Mazrui also created a companion book: Ali A. Mazrui, *The Africans: a triple heritage* (London: BBC Publications, 1986). The series was criticised for being 'anti-western', a testament to the political climate in the United States under Reagan and the controversy Ali Mazrui carried in his wake, rather than the series itself. John Corry, "TV VIEW: The Africans: An Attack On Western Values", *New York Times*, October 26, 1986.

The ISC, as well as some of the other contributors to the *General History of Africa*, were attuned to the value of their academic work outside of the academy and seemed to have felt it was a duty to contribute to the spread of knowledge about African history. In that light, the spread of knowledge itself was seen as emancipatory.<sup>50</sup> The historians working on the GHA were often public intellectuals, and sometimes political figures, in their respective countries. They took part in discussions regarding their country's social and political issues and felt a responsibility to contribute to postcolonial nation-building. One ideal of scholarship that emerges from the various efforts to create a free flow of information regarding African history is that of the public academic who is firmly grounded in the society he (rarely a she) served. The ideal GHA historian seems to have valued both emancipation of African history within the academy and the emancipation of the people through the creation and spread of knowledge. Both were essential tasks of African historical scholarship. Of course, it was most certainly not the case that all of the ISC members would have valued these goods in equal measures. Nor is it useful to pretend that all members of the ISC agreed upon the positioning documents in equal measures. It was indubitably a compromise of some sort, as is detailed in Chapters 4 to 7.<sup>51</sup> Yet, it is clear that questions of dissemination of the work and who it was written for played an important role in the creation of the GHA. The editors and authors of the GHA were concerned with creating volumes that were more than academic monographs, but that could be extended to reach, educate and inform a much broader part of the population. As becomes clear from this, there was a certain tension between the various proposed audiences for the GHA that aligns with the tension between its goals; both to be accepted within the Euro-American academy and to contribute to the political emancipation of new nations on the continent.

Yet, despite these ideals, nationalist history was long critiqued for being too elitist. This had more to do with the content than the intent of its historiography. Frantz Fanon had criticised the post-independence generation of historians for creating a false bourgeois national

---

<sup>50</sup> Within UNESCO books themselves were seen as emancipatory, both in a cultural and economic sense, Giton, "Weapons of Mass Distribution", 50, 52.

<sup>51</sup> This is especially noticeable regarding the dispute that emerged between Cheikh Anta Diop and the other members of the ISC regarding the origins of the ancient Egyptians, which is detailed in chapter four.

consciousness, deeming the process Africanisation simply a replacement of one elite by another.<sup>52</sup> The more Marxist-oriented historians of the so-called Dar es Salaam school equally came to critique the idea of writing history for building nation states, if such a nation state was only to serve the new national, so-called western-educated elites. Tanzania's turn towards African socialism after the Arusha Declaration of 1967 had become the basis for such critique on 'bourgeois historiography designed to meet the needs of an embryonic national bourgeoisie.'<sup>53</sup> The University of Dar es Salaam, which was officially founded in 1970 after having functioned as constituent college of the University of London from 1960 to 1963 and the University of East Africa from 1963 to 1970, became a centre for dependency and materialist historiography. Nationalist historiography as it had been produced at Ibadan, Ghana Legon, and Dar es Salaam itself, in the early 1960s, was criticised for its theoretical and methodological poverty, but, more strikingly, it was argued that the style of historiography marshalled by Dike and others was too focused on kingdoms and great states and underplayed the wounding influence of colonialism. Dar es Salaam became the home of a collection of revolutionary thinkers who were invested in African and black resistance, such as Walter Rodney and its first professor of history, Terence Ranger, under whose leadership the school was able to flourish.<sup>54</sup> Within the GHA, Bethwell Ogot had voiced similar criticism. His commentary stemmed from his own experience with researching decentralised societies in East Africa. Ogot noticed that the focus of nationalist historiography was towards centralised states — pasts that could be made to function as inspiration for nationalist movements. Nationalist historiography it was argued, moreover, did not succeed in providing a thorough critique of colonialism because it failed to analyse its structures and impact in favour

---

52 Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Maspero : paris, 1961), 144–91. See also: Achille Mbembe, "Decolonizing the university: New directions." *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 15:1 (2016): 29–45, 33–4.

53 I.N. Kimambo, *Three Decades of Production of Historical Knowledge at Dar Es Salaam* (Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press, 1993), 8–9 and Henry Slater, "Dar Es Salaam and the Postnationalist Historiography of Africa", in *African Historiographies. What History for Which Africa?* eds. Bogumil Jewsiewicki and David Newbury (London: Sage Publications, 1986), 249–60.

54 Gregory H. Maddox, "The Dar es Salaam school of African History" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African historiography: Methods and Sources*, ed. Thomas Spear (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.314>

of studying local initiatives and resistance. It was accused of simply mirroring the imperialist historiography it tried to fight by using concepts and languages that had been developed in Europe.<sup>55</sup> As Paul Tiyambe Zeleza put it, the nationalists had failed to provide their own 'problematic' by simply reacting to the issues posed by the imperialist historians who came before.<sup>56</sup> Ibadan school style historiography may have been useful for the promotion of nationalism, but it was thought it fell short when it came to offering solutions or explanations for the problems of neo-colonialism. This problem of (economic) dependency on the west increasingly reared its head in the 1970s. The publication of Walter Rodney's seminal *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* in 1972 only served to emphasise the shortcomings of work done in the years previously. In other words, nationalist historiography did not provide for ordinary Africans due to its obsessions with statehood and political superstructures rather than looking for economic historical explanations of Africa's plight. 'The people', or lower classes, had not been studied adequately according to the new wave of Marxist historiography and in that way the nationalists had fallen into the same trap as the colonialists before them.<sup>57</sup> It could be argued that both groups were caught in the conflicting colonial memories that produced a system of binaries, modern-traditional, African-European, nationalist-Marxist, which did not find its reflection in the postcolonial reality. Neither the nationalists nor the Marxists extensively questioned the system of knowledge production upon which they based their epistemological claims.

As Ogot had mentioned in another paper for the symposium on education, moreover, the socialist method of historical scholarship in Tanzania, followed patterns of historical production as they had taken place in other continents. Presumably he meant Europe. African history, Ogot went on, had not yet succeeded in evolving an autonomous body of theoretical thinking that went beyond 'Western' theoretical interventions. As already mentioned above, the usable past practiced

---

<sup>55</sup> Arnold Temu and Bonaventure Swai, *Historians and Africanist History: A Critique: Post-Colonial Historiography Examined* (London: Zed Books, 1981), 41, 49, 52 and Terence Ranger, "Mirror Images – Modes of Thought, Essays on Thinking in Western and non-Western Societies. Edited by Robin Horton and Ruth Finnegan. Faber and Faber, 1973. Pp. 379", *The Journal of African History* 15:1 (1974): 147-149

<sup>56</sup> Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *Manufacturing African Studies and Crisis* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997) 91.

<sup>57</sup> Temu and Swai, *Historians and Africanist History*, 5-11

in Dar es Salaam was not so different from the Marxist history as it was written in Europe. 'We have struggled hard to reject a conceptual framework which is Western both in its origins as well as in its orientations.'<sup>58</sup> The idea that African historians needed a new way to analyse the lasting impact of European epistemology also appeared in *Présence Africaine*: Joseph Ki-Zerbo argued that the 'nature' of expression used by African historians needed to change. He wanted to create a kind of history that would analyse why Europeans had come to look at Africa and Africans the way they did. It was the only way to be able to move forward and write 'our own history.'<sup>59</sup> Both these GHA authors, in other words, formulated the need for mental or historiographical decolonisation alongside a political decolonisation of the content of history. The realisation that the very epistemological basis of history was European, however, was hard to bring into historical practice because it was political in and of itself.

It becomes clear therefore that the rationale and theory behind Africanist historiography was a topic of discussion throughout the entire period of drafting the GHA, despite what later critique may suggest. Perhaps as part of this, the GHA also aimed to incorporate new brands of African historiography as they entered the 1970s. The ISC successfully invited Rodney to contribute, as well as Isaria Kimambo, a Dar es Salaam-based historian of Tanzania. The GHA, then, was concerned with critique levelled against the Ibadan school and other early producers of African historiography. And so were Ibadan historians and other nationalist historians themselves, both by amending their focus and by arguing that the post-independence moment had demanded a certain close-mindedness in terms of topic.<sup>60</sup> Nationalist historiography, after all, had been concerned primarily with simply justifying historical research of Africa and Africans, as Ade Ajayi himself explained in a letter defending 'his' school. In the letter he complained that the belligerent, Peter Ekeh in this case, had forgot-

---

58 B. Ogot, "Three decades of historical studies in East Africa: 1949-77" in *The General History of Africa. Studies and Documents 9, Educational Processes in Africa and Historiography. Final Report and papers of the symposium organized by Unesco in Dakar (Senegal) from 25 to 29 January 1982* (Paris: UNESCO, 1985), 63-79, 76.

59 Joseph Ki Zerbo, "Histoire et conscience nègre", *Présence Africaine* 16 (1957): 53-69.

60 Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni has also made the argument that nationalism as reaction to colonialism, among others, informed later counter-discourse on Eurocentrism. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Empire, Global Coloniality*, 187-8.

ten that in order to study the impact of colonialism, one must also know and understand what came before. Ajayi moreover noted that too much focus on the colonial impact failed to acknowledge the agency of Africans themselves and was therefore even somewhat eurocentric.<sup>61</sup> Paul Lovejoy as well as Adiele Afigbo, an Ibadan scholar himself, argued, moreover, that the Ibadan school had in fact studied ‘the people’ and had paid attention to class struggle, although not in the Marxist terminology of dependency that was favoured by the Dar es Salaam school.<sup>62</sup>

The GHA then was deeply concerned with its impact on Africans — even if this impact was envisioned to be nationalist. Congruent with the optimism of the historical moment in which the GHA came into being, they envisioned nation-building to be relevant for a broad swathe of the population. One of its guiding ideals was that the GHA should contribute to the political emancipation of the continent in its totality, as well as African peoples worldwide. The idea was that this could be done partly by reaching a large audience and by making sure knowledge of the African past was widely available, as also becomes evident through the GHA’s efforts to collect oral materials. This was supplemented to the idea that the history needed to focus on those parts of the African past that would encourage the recognition of African greatness and which would contribute to nation-building. The history of colonialism and its impact was therefore made less important, but not necessarily out of a bourgeois disregard for ‘the people’. Rather, the GHA believed in uplifting African populations through education.

## Conclusions

What this chapter makes clear is the GHA’s awareness of the civic potential of history. The GHA did not believe in historical scholarship which was far removed from the everyday lives of what they imagined were the citizens of the postcolonial nation states for whom they were

---

61 Jadeas Trust Library Ibadan (hereafter JTL), J.F. Ade Ajayi papers (hereafter JAAP), Box 77, J.F. Ade Ajayi to Peter Ekeh, 02-02-1981.

62 Paul Lovejoy, “The Ibadan school of historiography and its critics” in *African Historiography Essays in honour of Jacob Ade Ajayi*, ed. Toyin Falola (Harlow: Longman, 1993) and Adiele Afigbo, “The Ibadan School of History: A comment” in *Myth, History & Society, The Collected Works of Adiele Afigbo*, ed. Toyin Falola, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2006), 495-504.

writing history. This was one reason why the idea of making the GHA available to as many people as possible, students first amongst them, and the need to reflect on educational practices both played a significant role in the positioning documents as well as the studies produced later on. These documents, after all, were meant to stipulate a programme for the GHA to follow. The historians working on the GHA were acutely aware of the importance and need of their work and the necessity to find new ways of communicating the history of Africa to both European and African audiences. It was essential for African historians to be aware of the responsibility they carried when they were writing African history. Lofty ideals of historiographical emancipation were therefore accompanied by a focus on education and an engagement in the wider societal value of the volumes. The task of the historian incorporated these dual goals.

The GHA was somewhat caught in the conflicting legacy of colonialism, however. Meaning that it was still in the process of translating Euro-American historical practices to suit the continent, and had yet to successfully incorporate the different legacies impressed upon the postcolonial moment. Ideals of community, which were connected with the ideal of oral historiography, were discussed alongside the need for a widespread dissemination of the volumes in written form. Questions of audience (for who was the GHA written?) were entangled with questions of its educational value (how could the GHA contribute to history education on the continent) and societal relevance (how could the GHA contribute to African nations?). Questions of audience were directly related to questions of theory: how to discover a way of 'doing' and writing African history that would work synchronously with the lived reality of its people? How to incorporate the political need for nation-building with the academic need for epistemologically sound work on the African past? Could both goals be achieved simultaneously? The GHA was, if anything, a deeply plural project in its epistemic outlook. It incorporated so many different historians, from an equal number of different cultural and post-colonial contexts, reducing its practices to one identifiable goal somewhat confuses its history. Still, the GHA set out to be a political project from its very start. At the same time, it also highly valued academic standards. Yet, in order for an academic narrative about Africa to come into existence, political advocacy was necessary. The GHA used politics as a means of resistance because it seemed the most effective tool in the toolbox with which to neutralise epistemic colonisation. This could

not be separated from emancipation more broadly, however. The *General History of Africa* therefore came to believe that the work they were doing should contribute in some way to the political emancipation of the continent. What that meant exactly, differed between individuals and was susceptible to change over time as well as practical complications. Chapters 5 and 7 look at this, in far greater detail.



