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

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Conclusions to Part One

IDEALS

The GHA had three foundational ideals that were conducive to the creation of African history as a scholarly reputable activity as well as the political emancipation of Africa through the writing of history:

1. The ideal of anti-eurocentrism
2. The ideal of pan-African collectivity
3. The ideal of emancipation

The GHA aimed to write an Afrocentric history in opposition to previous eurocentric accounts of the continent because it would prove that the African past was a subject worthy of academic historical interest, rather than ethnographic or anthropological interest. This first ideal was political as well as epistemic simply because advocating for African history to be taken seriously was a political act — and possibly still is. All history is in some ways political. The GHA, secondly, aimed to write that history from a continental perspective and collaboratively by as many different African historians as possibly for both epistemic as well as political reasons. The epistemic rationale pertained to the idea that different African perspectives would allow for a more complete and therefore objective image of the African past. The political reasons were connected to the idea that through the inclusion of many different African voices the GHA could contribute to the political emancipation of those historians and their countries. The GHA

wanted to create space for African historians to write African history. Moreover, the inclusion of a pan-African amalgamation of African voices and histories in the GHA would itself be a political act. The last ideal of political emancipation was obviously political in nature and almost entirely congruent with the GHA's wish to contribute to emancipation of Africans worldwide. Yet, this ideal also could be seen as epistemic as well in that the advocacy inherent in African history was only seen as such because it was African. The idea that historical scholarship should in some way contribute to nation building and emancipation was not so foreign to the 19th century European academy either. Moreover, through a widespread dissemination of the volumes the GHA aimed to widen the academic historical horizon as well. The wish to decolonise African history education, moreover, could not be seen as separate from dreams of epistemological decolonisation of method and theory.

These three ideals, therefore, are entangled and intertwined and mutually influence one another. All three ideals were congruent to both political and academic goals in some way. Politics and academia can, of course, not be neatly separated. In a way, the GHA was activist to its very core, and in a way all scholarship is, in how it always aims to change the world through observation. By changing the order of knowledge about Africa, the GHA aimed to change the way the continent was regarded.

