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

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CHAPTER FIVE

Everyday Realities in the Creation of the *General History of Africa*

Introduction

In 1975, in the midst of one of the busier years in the drafting of the *General History of Africa*, Jacob Ade Ajayi wrote a somewhat annoyed letter to the UNESCO secretariat, of which Maurice Glélé was in charge. 'I can complain about the way the last meeting of the Bureau at Fez was handled.' Ajayi wrote:

Fez is a delightful place, but not easy to get to. You fixed a meeting of the Bureau there during term time without prior consultation. I agreed to visit. Then I had a crisis in my University and I offered a full Professor to go at my University's expense as an observer to answer questions when my volume is discussed as he collaborates with me on the work. You refused his coming and insisted I should come even if for only two days. To get to Fez, I had to travel by car across the Nigerian/Dahomey border to Cotonou, to catch a plane at 6 a.m. Go via Abidjan to Paris, change Airports by taxi in Paris and arrive Rabat at 9 p.m. In spite of my messages, no

arrangement was made for me to get to Fez. I was to sleep at Rabat, and go on to Fez to arrive around noon on the last day of the meeting. I chose instead to try to get to Fez that night, by train at very great inconvenience to myself. I lost my luggage in the train and had to start going round the train before I located it fourth coach to where I left it. I had to stand all the way in the train. I arrived at Fez at 2 a.m.¹

Suffice it to say, it took some commitment to the project from Ajayi to finally reach the meeting. Uncomfortable, long and arduous travel to reach meetings was not the exception within *The General History of Africa*. The project had always tried to hold meetings in various African countries, alternating between Western, Eastern, Southern, Northern and Central Africa.² Although the aim of this was to spread knowledge equally and help enthuse local academics and the public, it also caused practical difficulties for ISC members. Other problems that frustrated the work included slow responses from authors, postal strikes in various countries and political obstacles that made it impossible for some ISC members to travel.³ The international character of the GHA made the work exceptional, but it also caused trouble.

The early years of the GHA had coincided with a period of tremendous optimism in the African academy, the so-called 'Golden Era'.⁴ It had been a time when full Africanisation of universities and African control of knowledge produced about Africa had seemed possible and

1 This was at a time that Ajayi was the Vice-Chancellor of the university of Lagos. UAP, CC CSP 31, J.F. Ade Ajayi to Maurice Glélé, 10-04-1975.

2 UAP, UNESCO, Committee of experts on the General History of Africa, Abidjan, 31 August – 5 September 1966, Introductory Document, 5 and UAP, SHC.73/CONF.602/4, International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, 2nd Plenary Session, Lusaka, Zambia, 21-26 May, 1973, 18. (Hereafter: UAP, 2nd Plenary Session, Lusaka 1973)

3 UAP, SHC.75/CONF.601/3, Meeting of the Bureau of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, 5th meeting, Fez, Morocco, 5-11 February 1975, 2 and UAP, CC-78/CONF.607/3, Final Report of the Eight meeting of the Bureau and Fourth Plenary Session of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, 30 March-8 April 1978, 36.

4 Esperanza Brizuela-García, "African Historiography and the Crisis of Institutions" in *The Study of Africa. Volume I. Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Encounters*, ed. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2006), 135-67, 142.

the project of nation-building was still in full swing.⁵ For a brief moment during the 1960s African universities could function as epicentres of global intellectual life. Problems that have since arisen in the academy for African academics were not always as considerable as they have become in the 21st century, in terms of visa requirements and funding. From the 1970s onwards funding for universities in Africa dwindled as a result of worldwide financial and African political crises and disillusionment.⁶ David Scott has argued that from the 1970s onwards, new problems arose as neoliberalist policies emerged and the liberationist ideals of the post-war world began to wane. Correspondingly, postcolonial questions concerning the discourse rather than the political materiality of colonialism emerged as it had become clear that national independence alone was not enough to achieve liberation from Europe.⁷ The decline of funding for African studies, moreover, went hand-in-hand with its orientation shifting from the African to the American continent.⁸ The interdependent way the GHA functioned made it difficult to adapt to these changing circumstances. The emphasis on pan-African collectivity as a guiding ideal was deemed so important and so crucial for an Africa-centred writing of African history, that the goal to complete the work in time was sacrificed for it.⁹ Therefore, and because the project was largely funded from outside the continent, by UNESCO, the GHA struggled to grow used to the changing demands of the time.

The chapter is concerned with the materiality of the GHA, meaning it asks how the work operated in practice and how this changed

5 Jan Vansina, "Foreword" in *Higher Education in Postcolonial Africa. Paradigms of Development Decline and Dilemmas*, ed. Michael O. Afoláyan (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2007), xi–xiii, xii.

6 Michael O. Afoláyan, "Introduction" in *Higher Education in Postcolonial Africa. Paradigms of Development Decline and Dilemmas*, ed. Michael O. Afoláyan (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 1–16, 5 and Mahmood Mamdani, "Introduction: The Quest for Academic Freedom" in *Academic Freedom in Africa*, eds. Mamadou Diouf and Mahmood Mamdani (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997), 1–16, 3.

7 David Scott, *Refashioning Futures. Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 12.

8 Brizuela-Garcia, "African Historiography and the Crisis of Institutions", 152

9 It had originally been envisioned that the work on the GHA would be finished within the ten year period between 1965–1975, but the last volume was not published in both languages until 1998, UAP, UNESCO/CLT/HIGENAF/ABIDJAN/3, Committee of Experts on the General History of Africa, Paris 23 August 1966, original French. Introductory Document, 1.

over the years. It therefore details how ideals of collective pan-African knowledge production and the wish to contribute to political emancipation were brought to fruition. The chapter secondly explains that, whilst at first, the GHA was relatively successful at implementing these ideals, this became more difficult as time wore on as a result of financial and political changes on the African continent. The last part of the chapter investigates the everyday hassle and the day-to-day work that was necessary to complete the eight-volume GHA, such as the sending and receiving of an endless stream of letters in order to organise meetings and conferences across three continents. It also asks what high-minded ideals of emancipation looked like in terms of organisation and operationalisation. As such, it focuses on the *Alltagsgeschichte* of the GHA and the question of how ideals of knowledge production that transcended the purely epistemic, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, worked in practice, as is evident from the everyday, sometimes mundane, activities of those working on the GHA.¹⁰

Balancing the numbers amongst changing circumstances

The economy of knowledge production in the *General History of Africa* was aimed towards emancipation and further decolonisation of the continent. These aims were framed with the ideal of collectivity in mind. Collectivity was both an ideal as well as a necessity for other ideals connected to it: plurality and diversity, as discussed in Chapter 2. By economy of knowledge production, here, I mean the economic choices, where to spend money, on whom and to what end, that were made as a result of what was deemed ‘good’ or desirable within the social microcosm of the GHA. For instance, the GHA insisted on organising most of its committee and bureau meetings on the continent itself in order to (financially) stimulate the African historical academy. As mentioned above, meetings of the Bureau and Committee took place either somewhere on the continent or, if necessity required it, in Paris. Whereas the first official plenary meeting of the committee

¹⁰ Inspired by studies like: Steven Shapin, *Never Pure. Historical Studies of Science as if It Was Produced by People with Bodies, Situated in Time, Space, Culture, and Society, and Struggling for Credibility and Authority* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010), 8 and Jo Tollebeek, *Fredericq & Zonen. Een antropologie van de moderne geschiedwetenschap* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 2008), 22–27

in 1971 took place in Paris, the second meeting was in Lusaka. The third took place in Cotonou, the fourth in Nairobi, the fifth in Ibadan, the sixth meeting in Brazzaville and only the seventh meeting in 1985 brought the ISC back to the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. The ISC intended for the meetings to have an emancipatory effect and explicitly held them in what they perceived as globally underrepresented regions. It also provided young African researchers with extra funding to attend.¹¹ Meetings were frequented not only by the 39-member committee and the UNESCO secretariat of around five people, but also, as guests, by representatives from various historical associations from around the continent, liberation movements, such as ZANU PF and (African) publishing houses.¹²

A committee meeting for the GHA was an exciting event for the many relatively new history faculties and institutes around the continent. One historian working in Ibadan, Simon Ademola Ajayi (not related to the editor of volume VI) remembered the time the committee came to the university of Ibadan in Nigeria in 1981. 'That was the first time that I was privileged to meet many of the big names of African history.'¹³ An emeritus professor of history at Ibadan, Obaro Ikime, similarly remembers the meeting, and the project itself, as an important watershed in African historiography.¹⁴ The fact that so many giants of African history had travelled to Ibadan was meaningful to Ikime.

The GHA, moreover, used the meetings to keep track of its aim to include 'the largest possible number' of young African researchers. During the meetings the selection of authors was discussed extensively. This was one of the reasons various associations of African history were invited to committee meetings. The committee hoped

¹¹ UAP, SH-71/CONF.38/2, Meeting of the Bureau of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, Cairo, 23-27 November 1971, 3-4.

¹² See for instance: UAP, CC CSP 33, R.C. Hove Deputy Sec. for External Affairs ZANU. Zimbabwe African National Union to Maurice Glélé, Division of Cultural Studies UNESCO, 14-06-1979

¹³ Interview by the author conducted on 30-7-2018 at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, with Simon Ademola Ajayi.

¹⁴ Interview by the author conducted on 15-08-2018 at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, with Obaro Ikime. Ikime is best known for producing: Obaro Ikime, ed., *Groundwork of Nigerian History* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980)

that they would be able to supply the GHA with possible names.¹⁵ Like with the choice of location for the meetings, regional representation was taken into account when it came to authors too and this demand was taken beyond just Africa.¹⁶ Ogot, for instance, supposedly selected the Polish historian Marian Malowist over Philip Curtin to write the first chapter of his volume V on trade for reasons of geography and diversity— even though the criterion of including as many Africans as possible was not at play here.¹⁷ The reason for this may have been a letter by the Soviet historian A. Letnev. Letnev complained that Ogot's volume did not include enough authors from socialist countries and suggested Malowist.¹⁸ Since the GHA aimed to include authors from both sides of the Cold War divide it is likely that this was part of the reason Malowist was eventually selected over Curtin. Maurice Glélé, moreover, produced a plethora of lists for the ISC in which he kept track of the geographical regions from which the authors of various volumes stemmed. In one document of an unknown date, he concluded that 2/3s of the authors were African and 1/3 from outside, in another he checked the geographic spread for volume IV.¹⁹ Keeping track of numbers, counting the presence of Africans as well as researchers from other parts of the world, became a key practice within the GHA. And, as the example with Malowist shows, diversity was about more than just African diversity. As Chloé Maurel has noted, however, few researchers from the Eastern bloc were eventually included in the GHA, even if Hrbek played an important role.²⁰ The GHA attempt to

15 The members of the committee were all asked to send in “the greatest possible number of curricula vitae of prospective authors”, after which the committee and bureau would select two possible authors for each chapter. Decisions were then made based on written correspondence with the volume editor. UAP, 2nd Plenary Session, Lusaka 1973, 8.

16 UAP, Meeting of the Bureau of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, Rwanda 17–23 July 1972, 12–13 (Hereafter: UAP, Meeting of the Bureau Rwanda 1972) and UAP, CLT CID 103, Geographical spread.

17 UAP, CLT CID B7S2.23, Volume V author choice report and UAP, CLT CID B7S2.23, B.A. Ogot to Dr. Augustin Gatera, Division of Cultural Studies and Circulation, UNESCO, 10–01-1977.

18 UAP, CLT BS7S2.23 104, A. Letnev to Monsieur le Président du Comité Scientifique International pour la rédaction d'une Histoire générale de l'Afrique, 20–02-1973.

19 UAP, CLT CID 103, Répartition Géographique pour la rédaction d'une Histoire Générale de L'Afrique ; UAP, CC CSP 45, Maurice Glélé à M. E. Pouchpa Dass, directeur CC/CS, 30–04-1980, handwritten scribbles on last page detail the geographic spread of a specialist colloquium for the GHA.

20 Maurel, “l'histoire Générale de l'Afrique de l'Unesco”, 726–7.

bridge the divide between East and West was therefore not entirely successful. This might have had something to do with the relative insularity of Soviet African studies.²¹

	Afrique	Europe	Etats Unis
Niane (Guinée)	-		
Saidi (Tunisie)	-		
Tallier (Tunisie)	-		
Johris (France)		-	
Jenhami (Tunisie)	-		
Niane (Guinée)	-		
Ly (Mali)	-		
Sissoko (Sénégal)	-		
Ki-Zerbo (Haut Volta)	-		
Lange (Allemagne)			-
Solidon (Niger)			

Fig 1. Geographic spread, handwritten note by Glélé, date unclear. Apparently, there were so many authors from the United States, that this warranted its own category.²²

It may also have been the case that the GHA historians wanted to avoid being labelled as Marxists and, as a result, seen as having taken a stance within global Cold War politics. As also noted in Chapter 2, Marxist historical analysis, although not completely absent, did remain somewhat on the periphery of the GHA. This may also explain why South African historians in exile never became an important part of the project, for historical materialism became an increasingly important part of South African scholarship from the late 1960s onwards.²³ Ki-Zerbo, as noted in Chapter 1, added a sort of disclaimer

21 Irina Filatova, “Anti-Colonialism in Soviet African Studies (1920s-1960)” in *The Study of Africa. Volume 2: Global and Transnational Engagements*, ed. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2007), 203-34, 203.

22 UAP, CC CSP 38, handwritten note Répartition Géographique Volume IV.

23 Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius, “Radical History and South African Society” in *History from South Africa. Alternative Visions and Practices*, ed. Joshua Brown, Patrick Manning, Karin Shapiro, Jon Wiener, Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 3-25.

about potential dogmatism in relation to Marxist scholarship in his introduction to the GHA. Ogot, too, was critical about the ability of Marxist analysis to fundamentally transcend European frameworks, as discussed in Chapter 3. Fundamentally, the GHA, although anti-colonial in nature, was a project that eschewed overt radicalism. This was, in part, thanks to those scholars who engaged in it the most, namely Ajayi, Ogot, Ki-Zerbo, Vansina, Devisse, Diop and Boahen.

Nevertheless, the GHA did organise a meeting on the decolonisation of southern Africa in 1978 and published the results as part of its *Studies and Documents* series in 1981. The meeting took place in Poland and it is therefore unsurprising that a good number of its participants were interested in Marxist analysis. Marxist historical analysis was discussed amongst them: 'For some experts, the method of Marxist analysis was most appropriate [...] For others, more aware of the balance of power, Marxist analysis was of political importance and fostered political commitments but did not bring out the sequence of events as obviously and necessarily as for the first group.' The volume editor, in this case Ali Mazrui, who was also known to be somewhat sceptical towards Marxism during this period suggested 'that modern imperialism was perhaps a child of the modern nation-state system rather than a child of capitalism as such.'²⁴ Except for this comment the report does not note who said what. It is not hard to guess however. Only a few ISC members were present, Ajayi most notably, as well as Devisse. It is likely that especially Ajayi did not think Marxism was the best way to analyse African history. The GHA, moreover, did invite African liberation movements to attend its meetings and it did also include scholars such as Walter Rodney and Shula Marks. The report on the discussion on Southern Africa also notes that the participants praised the USSR for its anticolonial support. More tellingly, the report ends by stating that due to the presence of scholars 'who are also militants [...] the discussion took on an ideological and political turn, rather than remaining purely historical.'²⁵ This is a remarkable description given also the GHA's anticolonial and thereby political roots. It is clear that the GHA aimed to steer away somewhat from

24 N.N., "General Discussion" in *The General History of Africa. Studies and documents 5. The decolonization of Africa: southern Africa and the Horn of Africa*. (Paris: UNESCO, 1981), 143-6, 143-4.

25 N.N., "Southern Africa" in *The General History of Africa. Studies and documents 5. The decolonization of Africa: southern Africa and the Horn of Africa*. (Paris: UNESCO, 1981), 147-51, 149-50.

certain types of political engagement, whilst remaining committed to others, such as nation-building. It is entirely possible, therefore, that some more radical scholars were themselves reluctant to fully engage in the GHA. Perhaps it was not the GHA who sometimes eschewed Marxists or radicals, but rather the other way around. Or, at the very least, the feeling was mutual.

Mazrui, moreover, was concerned with involving more women with the GHA and provided the committee with a list of names for his volume, including Jacqueline Ki-Zerbo, who was married to Joseph Ki-Zerbo.²⁶ None of these women made it into the final volume, however. Nor was the question of gender discussed in any detail within GHA circles. Apparently, some forms of diversity were less important than others. In fact, Mazrui was the only GHA scholar who even tried to put this issue on the agenda. The reason for this may have been that gender issues were not a priority within African nationalism.²⁷ Given the emphasis on the GHA placed on the inclusion of 'as many different African perspectives and its engagement in the question of 'who gets to write history?', this is remarkable.

Nevertheless, the result of the GHA's absorption with this question has been that the majority of authors contributing to the GHA were in fact Africans from all corners of the continent and beyond — although a considerable number of Europeans and Americans also contributed to the volumes.²⁸ The GHA also included Afro-descendants from the diaspora into their definition of 'African'. As illustrated in Figure 2, volumes I through III had more non-African than African authors. Most of the non-African authors, moreover, were Europeans and although volume II included fourteen African authors, six of them were Egyptian, hinting towards that volume's somewhat Egyptocentric approach. The volumes dealing with more recent history, however, included more Africans and Afro-descendants — although the vast majority were continental Africans. It seems as if it was harder to contract African historians for the volumes dealing with more distant pasts. Even in the case of the earlier volumes, however, the GHA was doing much better in terms of representation of Africans than many other academic projects. Vansina, moreover, described how difficult it

26 UAP, CLT CID 137, Concerning Authors for Volume VIII of the UNESCO General History of Africa, Received by the Secretariat on 16 July 1979.

27 Bozzoli and Delius, "Radical History", 23.

28 In the end, 57% of authors were Africans or of African descent. See Figure 2.

had been to find African historians throughout the project because the pool of candidates to choose from was so small given that the GHA wanted candidates who were academically trained.²⁹ To redress the imbalance the ISC employed the reading committees as became clear during the Bureau meeting in Rwanda in 1972: 'reading committees would make it possible to restore the balance at the African regional, international or interdisciplinary level in case where it had been unsatisfactory at the time when the authors were designated.'³⁰ This also serves to underscore the GHA's epistemic commitment to the African voice as reading committee lists were not published. Attracting African academics then, was about more than just (re)presentation.

Balancing the numbers was one of the reasons the GHA was so adamant about organising meetings on the continent itself. And by providing a platform for historical scholarship on the continent UNESCO's GHA seemed to genuinely be satisfying individual governments' wishes as well. Both the Republic of Zaire and Côte D'Ivoire contributed to the committee meetings by providing extra funding.³¹ Often, a committee meeting would be opened with a speech from the minister of education of the host country, signalling the appreciation for the project and often including some sort of promise that the ministry would make use of the volumes once they had been published. A myriad of countries also provided practical assistance in hosting the ISC or Bureau meetings. The government of Libya especially contributed a large sum of 1.2 million dollars towards the completion of the work in 1977, when the original 10-year period budgeted by UNESCO during which the project should have been completed had passed.³² Its then president, Moamar Gaddafi aimed to promote the inclusion of Libyan national history into the GHA, but also subscribed

29 Jan Vansina, "Unesco and African historiography", *History in Africa* 20 (1993): 337-52, 337-8.

30 UAP, Meeting of the Bureau Rwanda 1972, 12-13.

31 UAP, CC CSP 36, Makaminan Makagiansar á Monsieur Ministre de la Cooopération République du Congo, October 3rd 1983, UAP, CLT CID 159, Monsieur le Directeur Générale de l'UNESCO á Monsieur le Professeur Pierre Kipre, Ministre de l'Education nationale Côte d'Ivoire, 15 March 1996 and UAP, CC CSP 36, Théophile Obenga to Maurice Glélé, 03-06-1983.

32 UAP, CLT CID 159, contract between the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organisation, 8-11-1977.

to the kind of pan-African unity that would include North Africa.³³ It is not surprising that the ISC's Libyan member, Idris El-Hareir, subsequently demanded more inclusion of Libyan history in the GHA. This was only reluctantly granted by the rest of the ISC.³⁴ The GHA, after all, wished not to be influenced by governments, although repelling such outside influence must have become harder as funding became more precarious. Nevertheless, regional cooperation and greater inter-African unity as a means of stimulating socioeconomic progress on the continent have been on the minds of African scholars and policy makers continually ever since independence. This was the case even if agreement on how to achieve such cooperation has sometimes been lacking.³⁵ The pan-African-oriented GHA likewise involved governments and people across the continent.

	AFRICANS	NON-AFRICANS (European or American, unless otherwise mentioned)
V1	10	20
V2	14	15
V3	14	19 (1 Iraqi and 1 Singaporean)
V4	13	13
V5	21	10 (1 Israeli)
V6	23 (1 Jamaican)	11 (1 Singaporean)
V7	24 (1 Guyanan, 1 Brazilian)	12
V8	31 (1 Jamaican)	11

Fig. 2 Numbers of African and non-African authors within all eight GHA volumes.

33 As a result of the contribution a special seminar on the history of Libya was organised by the GHA. UAP, CLT CID 159, Agreement between the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organisation and The Socialist Peoples Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, 7 November 1977 and N.N., *The general history of Africa. Studies and documents 11. Libya Antiqua. Report and papers of the symposium organized by Unesco in Paris, 16 to 18 January 1984.* (Paris: Unesco, 1986)

34 UAP, CC CSP 43, Makaminan Makagiansar to Directeur Général, 6-05-1983.

35 Guy Martin, *Africa in World Politics. A Pan-African Perspective* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2002), 123-4.

However, as Gaddafi's contribution of funds to the GHA shows, financial difficulties increasingly began to surface from the late 1970s onwards. Whereas the early years had been characterised by a relatively easy flow of funds towards the project, the latter years were defined by a lack of funding.³⁶ This was largely due to the fact that the project was taking much longer than the ten years that had been anticipated in 1964, when UNESCO had agreed to the undertaking. UNESCO had originally budgeted \$100,000 per biennium, but by 1970 it was already clear that not all eight volumes would be published by 1975 and the timeline was therefore deferred until 1978, including the biannual funding.³⁷ The extra funding that kept the project afloat after that came from so-called extra-budgetary funds, including those provided by the Libyan government. Other governments also contributed. In order to have volume VIII translated into French, UNESCO sent out several letters to African governments, commercial companies (including one Champagne producer) as well as all the committee members in an effort to raise funds to finish the French version.³⁸ In the end the governments of France and Cote D'Ivoire contributed for such a translation, as well as the empress of Iran and the Vatican.³⁹

Financial difficulties for UNESCO increased further when the United States withdrew their membership in 1984. The withdrawal was partly due to what they perceived as financial mismanagement at the hands of UNESCO director general Amadou Mahtar M'Bow. Partly it was also because the US government under President Reagan did not like the ideological direction the agency had taken under M'Bow's guidance. UNESCO's pro-Palestine stance was one of the

36 UAP, Meeting of the Bureau Rwanda 1972, 14 and UAP, CLT CID 140, Christophe Wondji á Madame Coffi-Studer, 19-01-1995.

37 UAP, 85 EX/10 Rev. Executive Board. Eighty-fifth Session. Paris 6 October 1970, 5.

38 UAP, CLT CID CW/95.01, Christophe Wondji á Monsieur le Secrétaire général de la Commission française, 3-10-1996 and UAP, CLT CID 141, Edem Kodjo, Premier Ministre de la République Togolaise á Christophe Wondji, 12-07-1994.

39 UAP, CLT CID 159, Directeur général to Monsieur le Professeur Pierre Kipre, Ministre de l'Education nationale Côte d'Ivoire, 15-03-1998; UAP CLT 159, Directeur général á Christophe Wondji and Ali Mazrui ed. and Christophe Wondji, ass. ed., *Histoire Générale de L'Afrique VIII. L'Afrique depuis 1935* (Paris: UNESCO, 1998), cover page.

biggest disputes.⁴⁰ During the latter years of the project, therefore, the UNESCO secretariat as well as the committee became increasingly involved in fundraising in order to finish the project and with success, given the financial aid the GHA received from various governments. Nevertheless, committee members responded to fundraising queries by pointing towards the overall financial difficulties on the African continent. Adu Boahen expressed his inability in helping the GHA in writing, 'I have not reacted to it till now because I did not know what to say. You must be very much aware of the economic plight of virtually every African country.'⁴¹ Boahen's response speaks volumes in regards to the way the financial climate for projects such as the GHA had changed in the twenty years after independence.⁴² Although the GHA had been conceived of in the 1960s, in the wake of political independence and widespread optimism over the future of Africa, the project was brought to fruition in the 1970s and 1980s, during a period when optimism seemed to dissolve into pessimism.

The financial climate for African history had worsened throughout the lifespan of the GHA. Already in the 1970s African universities, and especially humanities faculties, had started to contend with funding problems and increasing mismanagement as the economies of some countries started to nosedive, whilst politicisation elsewhere led to increasing restrictions on research. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for instance, 'Zairianisation' or nationalisation of universities caused the universities to become subordinated to political ideology and biased management, resulting in a complete detachment from societal needs or academic ideals, be they colonial or Congolese.⁴³ Even if 'Zairianisation' suggested the opposite and seemingly aligned with the interests of African historians in its goals to revalue indigenous

40 N.N., "Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow", Your Dictionary, accessed 08-12-2020, <https://biography.yourdictionary.com/amadou-mahtar-m-bow>. See also: Roger A. Coate, *Unilateralism, ideology and US foreign policy: the United States in and out of UNESCO* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1989) and Mark F. Imber, *The USA, ILO, UNESCO and IAEA: politicization and withdrawal in the specialized agencies* (London: Macmillan, 1990)

41 UAP, CLT CID 141, Adu Boahen to Doudou Diene, 12-10-1994.

42 Boahen's Ghana became the first country to undergo Structural Adjustment Programmes, Justin Williams, "The Rawlings Revolution' and Rediscovery of the African Diaspora in Ghana (1983-2015)" *African Studies* 74:3 (2015): 366-87, 368.

43 René Devisch, "The University of Kinshasa: From Lovanium to Unikin" in *Higher Education in Postcolonial Africa. Paradigms of Development, Decline and Dilemmas*, ed. Michael O. Afoláyan (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2007), 17-38, 19-26.

culture over colonial influences in a politics of authenticity invented by Mobutu, its practical effects were such that academic research suffered because academic freedom suffered at the hands of an autocratic government.⁴⁴ Across the continent, moreover, the humanities were generally considered of much less importance for economic development than technical and financial degrees, resulting in the overall depreciation of many universities, causing history as a discipline, and by extent the GHA, to suffer.⁴⁵ This happened also at the University of Kinshasha, or UNIKIN, which had once been a part of the University of Leuven as Louvanium, and where Jan Vansina had once taught classes on the Kuba in the 1950s to groups of hostile students who did not wish to hear about African history from a white Belgian teacher.⁴⁶

Budgetary crises across Africa as a whole, moreover, constrained government ability to spend on higher education, forcing governments to turn to foreign investment and aid, of which structural adjustment and shock therapy were a part. As Mahmood Mamdani has put it, the World Bank came into many African countries with both a ‘carrot and a stick’, they injected financial aid but not without demanding academic ‘relevance.’⁴⁷ Increasingly seen as elitist, African history as a scholarly endeavour did not seem to be able to deliver on the promises of independence and thereby lost societal relevance.⁴⁸ Governments, furthermore, in line with these IMF imposed Structural Adjustment Programmes, generally also tended to cut public funding of higher

44 This paradox has been explored in great detail by Mudimbe: V. Y. Mudimbe, *Autour de “la nation”: leçons de civisme: introduction* (Kinshasa: Editions du Mont Noir, 1972), see also: Pierre-Philippe Fraiture, V. Y. Mudimbe, *Undisciplined Africanism* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 52–9. See also: Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatseni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (Milton: Routledge, 2018), 176.

45 See various chapters in: Michael O. Afoláyan, ed., *Higher Education in Postcolonial Africa. Paradigms of Development, Decline and Dilemmas* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2007) and J.F. Ade Ajayi, Lameck K.H. Goma & G. Ampah Johnson, *The African Experience with Higher Education* (Accra: The Association of African Universities, 1996), 144–66.

46 Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 72–73.

47 Mamdani, “Introduction: The Quest for Academic Freedom”, 3.

48 Brizuela-García, “African Historiography and the Crisis of Institutions”, 150.

education in order to focus on other forms of education.⁴⁹ As Thandika Mkandawire and Adebayo Olukoshi have noted, this tended to work in favour of authoritarian regimes who benefitted from a clipped academic class.⁵⁰

Since the 1980s African universities have also had to contend with a brain drain as a result of the developments described above — which included some of the ISC members, such as Mazrui who exchanged Makerere university in Uganda for the university of Michigan in the United States as a result of Idi Amin's regime.⁵¹ One example of decline, and resulting brain drain, is the fate of history as a discipline in Nigeria. In an article for *History in Africa*, published in 2006, Olutayo Adesina placed the *General History of Africa* itself in a larger narrative of decolonisation, the emergences of new elites and the eventual fading to the background of history as an academic discipline in the Nigerian academy. Adesina placed the blame of this decline with the instability created by a succession of military regimes and the Structural Adjustment Plan adopted in 1986. The latter especially introduced what Adesina called a 'widespread cynicism about the utilitarian value of history.' Students, who had become infected with the same logic of utilitarianism, increasingly opted for diplomas that seemed more practical and lucrative, such as management, accountancy, business and Law. The early dreams of Africanists of mental liberation

49 Lynn Hewlett et al., "Key Features of Student Protest Across Historical Periods in Sub-Saharan Africa" in *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*, ed. Susan Booysen (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2016), 330–334, 332.

50 Thandika Mkandawire and Adebayo Olukoshi, "Issues and Perspectives in the Politics of Structural Adjustment in Africa" in *Between Liberation and Oppression. The Politics of Structural Adjustment in Africa*, eds. Thandika Mkandawire and Adebayo Olukoshi (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1995), 1–20, 4.

51 Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, 214 and Claude Ake, "Academic Freedom and Material Base" in *Academic Freedom in Africa*, eds. Mamadou Diouf and Mahmood Mamdani (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997), 17–25, 18–20. Jan Vansina also commented on the increasing difficulty of conducting long-term fieldwork in Africa as a result of changing political conditions, Jan Vansina, *Living With Africa*, 203.

and emancipation, Adesina concluded, only seemed viable in times of economic optimism.⁵²

As a result of these crises, moreover, ideals of widespread dissemination and the wish to facilitate the spread of knowledge, highlighted in Chapter 3, turned out to be difficult to realise.⁵³ Prices set for volumes I and II by non-African publishers, such as Heinemann or UNESCO itself, proved unfeasible on the continent.⁵⁴ As Ogot noted in a report of the Ibadan meeting in 1981 written for M'Bow, the prices, such as at 22 naira per volume in Nigeria, were too high, especially for students. 'It was clearly paradoxical and outrageous that the work should sometimes cost twice as much in Africa as in Europe or the United States, when its primary function had been intended to be to help Africans to recover their past.' Ogot also noted, however, that this was not solely to be blamed on publishers, given the economic crises in several African countries. The committee, he reported, hoped that UNESCO could come up with a comprehensive pricing policy, partly in the form of allowing free circulation of the work.⁵⁵ No one was going to even consider buying the volumes, however, if they did not

52 Olutayo C. Adesina, "Teaching History in Twentieth Century Nigeria: The Challenges of Change" *History in Africa* 33 (2006): 17-37, 23, 27-33. Regarding student protests in Nigeria as a result of SAP as well as autocratic university administrators, see: Isaac O. Albert, "University Students in the Politics of Structural Adjustment in Nigeria" in *Between Liberation and Oppression. The Politics of Structural Adjustment in Africa*, eds. Thandika Mkandawire and Adebayo Olukoshi (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1995), 374-393.

53 In 2021, it seems the English version of the volumes is much better represented across libraries worldwide, at least according to Worldcat. For instance, the English edition of the first volume can be found in 119 libraries, whereas the French version is only available in 39. Patrick Manning found a much wider discrepancy even, with 915 libraries having the English edition of volume I and only 57 French editions. I suspect this may partly be a result of Worldcat's methods and bias towards the English language. The discrepancy between my finds and Mannings' might be a result of the different years in which the searches were conducted. Chloé Maurel, "L'histoire Générale de l'Afrique de l'Unesco. Un projet de coopération intellectuelle transnationale d'esprit afro-centré (1964-1999)" *Cahiers d'études africaines* 215 (2014): 715-737, 733.

54 UNESCO itself was not always as inclusive of African contexts as would have been ideal for the project. For example, the paper size specified in the *Guide for the Preparation of the General History of Africa* was 'unobtainable in Ibadan', as one clerk informed UNESCO in 1974, UAP, CC CSP 40, A.F.C Ryder to Acting Director Department of Studies, Development & Dissemination of Cultures, UNESCO, 22-03-1974.

55 This eventually did happen in the form of online publications via UNESDOC, UAP, CC CSP 33, Bethwell A. Ogot to Mr. M'Bow, 30-08-1981, 4.

hit the shelves of bookstores. The 1981 Ibadan meeting established that volumes I and II were almost impossible to find in Liberia, Zambia or Zaire, for example.⁵⁶ Moreover, during the 1983 ISC meeting in Brazzaville ‘the committee members present in Brazzaville found ample evidence that the work was not on sale in the city and that very little was known about it there.’⁵⁷ The committee again hoped that UNESCO would remedy the problem. This time they advised establishing contacts with international, national, regional and private agencies in order to ‘provide maximum publicity at the time of publication of the volumes.’⁵⁸ In a testimony to the pressing nature of the problem, earlier recommendations had been made towards this goal in 1975, 1981 and 1982.⁵⁹ In 1984 UNESCO did indeed promise to launch a campaign to promote volume I and II, although it is unclear what came of this.⁶⁰

The GHA relied on UNESCO to keep the project running financially, administratively and through its policies. The organisation was for a long time capable of keeping up this work. It flew contributors and committee members across the continent and the world and facilitated meetings. It was a testimony to the organisation’s commitment — specifically, certain individuals within it, such as M’Bow — to African epistemological growth, Africanisation and independence.⁶¹ UNESCO, however, was not hampered in the same way by the economic and political predicaments of many humanities departments on the continent, at least not until 1984.⁶² Promoting broad education on the continent,

⁵⁶ UAP, CC CSP 33, Bethwell A. Ogot to Mr. M’Bow, 30-08-1981, 4.

⁵⁷ UAP, CLT/83/508/3, Sixth plenary session of the international scientific committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, Brazzaville, 1-3 August 1983, 4. (Hereafter: UAP, Sixth Plenary Session)

⁵⁸ UAP, Sixth plenary session, 4

⁵⁹ Ibid and UAP, SHC/75/CONF.613/3, International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, 3rd plenary session, Cotonou, Benin (Dahomey), 8-13 September 1975, 18-9.

⁶⁰ UAP, CC CSP 37, CLT/84/503/2, Seizième reunion du Bureau du Comité scientifique international pour la redaction d’une Histoire Générale de l’Afrique. Paris, 9-18 juillet 1984, Information Note, 4.

⁶¹ Casper Andersen, ““Scientific independence”, capacity building, and the development of UNESCO’s science and technology agenda for Africa.” *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines* 50:3 (2017): 379-394, 383-5

⁶² For an insightful overview of contemporary funding challenges in African higher education see: Dantew Teferra, “Funding Higher Education in Africa: State, Trends and Perspectives” *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* 11:1 (2013): 19-51.

both lower and higher, moreover, had always been a primary concern of UNESCO.⁶³ UNESCO allowed for continued agency for global south actors, even amidst neoliberal policies, and whilst SAP's changed the intellectual landscape in Africa. This is not to say that the individual committee members were not suffering from the relative lack of funding within the African academy, or that flying to different meetings and seminars did not take its toll upon their personal and academic lives.

In fact, as is evident already from the first page of this chapter, committee members often complained. 'Your staff in Cotonou in charge of travel arrangements were charming and well-meaning, but I regret they were not always thorough. I wish someone had told me that there was a Pan-American flight from Lagos to New York on Sunday, 14 September.' Wrote Mazrui to Glélé on 24 September 1975.⁶⁴ Aklilu Habte, who attended the same meeting complained about the delay with which his ticket had been delivered, causing him to have to pay for the airfare himself.⁶⁵ Moreover, Ajayi and Mazrui both wrote numerous letters asking for the dates of meetings to be changed because they could not be made to fit their individual schedules — in which Ajayi also joked about not wanting to stay in Paris during winter.⁶⁶ Mazrui especially mentioned that the dates for meetings changed too often for his taste, making it impossible for him to arrange his schedule around the GHA meetings.⁶⁷ Frequent travel by ISC members for various academic jobs also caused letters, and sometimes people, to cross and thereby miss each other. This happened for instance when Ajayi tried to reach Emmanuel Pouchpa Das, director of Culture and Communication at UNESCO, from London rather than Lagos in preparation for the Ibadan meeting.⁶⁸

Simultaneously and alongside these complaints, however, ISC members also used UNESCO to get around. Mazrui, for instance, on occasions used meetings in Paris as a stopover between Detroit and Mombasa and had UNESCO pay for the airfare.⁶⁹ In a letter he wrote 'I have

63 Damiano Matasci, "Assessing Needs, Fostering Development. UNESCO, Illiteracy and the Global Politics of Education (1945–1960)" *Comparative Education* 53:1 (2017): 35–53.

64 UAP, CC CSP 31, Ali Mazrui to Maurice Glélé, 24-09-1975.

65 UAP, CC CSP 31, Aklilu Habte to Maurice Glélé, 21-10-1975.

66 UAP, CC CSP 32, Jacob Ade Ajayi to Gerard Bolla, 28-04-1976

67 UAP, CC CSP 32, Ali Mazrui to M. Bammate, 20-10-1976.

68 UAP, CC CSP 33, Ade Ajayi to Pouchpa Das, 05-02-1981.

69 Ibid.

discovered that I have not charged you for my airfare for 1982!! No wonder I am always broke!’⁷⁰ Fernando Augusto Albuquerque Mouraõ, member of the ISC from Brazil, similarly used the opportunity provided by ISC meetings to extend his visit to Europe and fly to Rome and Lisbon on UNESCO’s dime.⁷¹ On another occasion Boahen wrote he was ‘a little disappointed by [the] postponement of the April meeting. I need so many things such as tooth paste, toilet roll, soap which I had hoped to purchase, not to mention some tyre and spare parts for my Car (Peugeot 505). I will try and survive till July.’⁷² At the time, Ghana suffered from a drought as well as a migration crisis, as Nigeria had sent home some 1.5 million migrants. A simultaneous disastrous economic programme was introduced by the military government led by Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings, causing Boahen to suffer from a lack of amenities.

What these examples show is both the value that UNESCO had in ISC members individual lives as well as the economic difficulties that various members had to content with throughout the project. It, moreover, shows how multifaceted and international the life of a professor of African history was, in the late 20th century. In February 1982, for instance, Mazrui send a circular letter to his colleagues, including Glélé, informing them of his calendar for the academic year. The letter emphasised that he had lectures ‘on five continents’ and would have two academic postings that year, in Jos, Nigeria and at the University of Michigan, in the United States.⁷³ Ogot, Vansina as well as Philip Curtin and John Fage equally emphasised the international character of their work in their autobiographies.⁷⁴

The practices that became a part of life as an ISC member, the continual, sometimes uncomfortable, travel and the need to visit several academic centres for one’s research and career, were not only a necessity of academic life, but also a part of the optimism of the

70 UAP, CC CSP 36, Ali Mazrui to Maurice Glélé, 01-06-1983.

71 UAP, CC CSP 33, Gustave López, Représentant de l’Unesco au Brésil à Maurice Glélé, 18-12-1980.

72 UAP, CC CSP 36, A.A. Boahen to Maurice Glélé, 21-03-1981.

73 UAP, CC CSP 35, circular letter Ali A. Mazrui, February 1982.

74 See: Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), Philip D. Curtin, *On the Fringe of History. A memoir* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), Bethwell A. Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time* (Kisumu: Ayange Press Limited, 2003) and John Fage, *To Africa and Back: memoirs* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham. Centre of West African Studies, 2002)

post-independence period. Travelling across the world was a part of accepting the legacy of that post-independence period. It was a way of claiming Africa's rightful place in the postcolonial academic, as well as political, order. Throughout the lifespan of the GHA, however, this optimism had begun to wane. In the 1970s and the 1980s it became apparent that political representation was not enough to wrest free from economic and mental control by 'the west'. Intellectual attitudes towards nation-building and the related production of historical memory changed drastically, as Joseph Ki-Zerbo explained in a paper from 2003, reprinted in 2005.⁷⁵ The goals of emancipation had changed. As a result of this development postcolonial criticism began to flourish — the first text that drove this point home was Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, as David Scott observes.⁷⁶

Scott's analysis of the moving goalposts of the post-independence period can be applied to the GHA and, in part, explain why the project increasingly started to struggle from the 1970s onwards and simultaneously, somewhat paradoxically, played the role of lifebuoy for some ISC members and contributors.⁷⁷ UNESCO had functioned as a facilitator from the start of the project, but the responsibilities conferred upon the agency increased throughout the 1970s and 80s.⁷⁸ Synchronously, the working conditions of the historians working on the project deteriorated whilst they also became busier. The academic and institutional momentum of the 1960s gradually disappeared during the decades the GHA was written. Nevertheless, the GHA persisted to adhere to a collectivist pan-African nationalist vision of history. And it was partly due to these ideals that some of the financial difficulties became really pressing. The ISC and the secretariat would rather spend time writing fundraising letters to champagne farmers, than try to cut some of the expenditure. For instance, by dividing the work over a

75 Joseph Ki-Zerbo, "African intellectuals, nationalism and pan-Africanism: a testimony" in *African Intellectuals. Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*, ed. Thandika Mkandawire (New York: Zed Books, 2005), 78–93, 80–8.

76 Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 10–15.

77 Vansina, *Living with Africa*, 201.

78 In her study on UNESCO's world heritage programme in Ethiopia, Marie Huber concludes that it was also during these decades that UNESCO expanded its operational capacity and evolved from a more intellectual into a more operational organisation. Marie Huber, *Developing Heritage – Developing Countries. Ethiopian Nation-Building and the Origins of UNESCO World Heritage, 1960–1980* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 168.

smaller number of academics. The next section will detail how important the ideal of collectivity and including as many academics as possible actually was. Although, as time and money became more pressing, more and more meetings were indeed organised in Paris, which would have cut some costs. It may have been that rising political tensions on the continent made it harder to travel between African countries. As a result, some ideals, such as collectivity, became more expedient than others, such as meeting on the continent itself.

Why, moreover, did the GHA cling to such ideals rather than change its way of working? It had partly been the result of UNESCO's universalist and cosmopolitan outlook. The idea that peace, in a post-World War II world could be best secured through not only political international cooperation, but also through intellectual and moral solidarity became part and parcel of UNESCO's *raison d'être*.⁷⁹ It had therefore become possible for a network of intellectuals connected to the GHA to establish itself and leave traces of African historiography as well as UNESCO's presence not just in the official UNESCO archives but also elsewhere. In Ibadan, for instance, there is a small three room private-archive the owner of which is Christie Ade Ajayi, the late Jacob Ade Ajayi's wife.⁸⁰ This archive still contains numerous documents pertaining to UNESCO and the GHA. It is likely that there are a multitude of such private archives containing UNESCO materials around the continent, a testimony to the amount of travelling GHA historians did.

UNESCO held on to dreams of one-worldism and universality when they had slowly began to lose appeal elsewhere in the academy and despite ardent critique.⁸¹ It was this commitment that contributed to the eventual bringing to fruition of the GHA and, later on, other General History projects.⁸² In his 1994 autobiography Vansina made a similar point regarding the value of UNESCO and the GHA:

79 Fernando Valderrama, *A History of UNESCO* (Paris: UNESCO, 1995), 308, 317, 328, 348, 374 and Glenda Sluga, "UNESCO and the (one) world of Julian Huxley," *Journal of World History* 21:3 (2010): 393-418, 393-4.

80 Larissa Schulte Nordholt, "From Metropole to Margin in UNESCO's *General History of Africa* – Documents of Historiographical Decolonization in Paris and Ibadan" *History in Africa* 46 (2019): 403-412.

81 Lynn Meskell, *A Future in Ruins UNESCO, World Heritage and the Dream of Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 223.

82 As well as its world heritage list for which it is so well-known today.

The situation [regarding the decline of African studies on the continent] would have been worse were it not for UNESCO and especially the *General History of Africa* project. Not only were African scholars such as Jacob Ajayi, Adu Boahen, Bethwell A. Ogot, and Joseph Ki-Zerbo leading figures in the activities, and not only did meetings of the committee or its bureau provide regular occasions for such leaders to meet and confer, but the project spawned the realisation of smaller projects. [...] The UNESCO project has therefore been a major catalyst in the historiography of the field.⁸³

The GHA was perhaps most important not for its actual output, but for the connections and activities it engendered that allowed for African history to be led by African historians.⁸⁴ Measured by the yardstick of its own success, the GHA did perhaps not always do well. However, when moving away from the actor's perspective, the GHA may very well have contributed substantially to the development of African history as a scholarly endeavour, both inside and outside the continent.

'Slow progress', 'recalcitrant authors' and 'continual delays'

Despite the eventual completion of the GHA, the project dealt with a lack of engagement and an excruciating slow pace of work throughout most of its existence. By looking at the mechanics of these issues as well as the response from some of the projects' pioneers and their attempts at solving the problem, this section offers a description of the daily regime of the GHA when it comes to work ethic and explains how the ideal of collectivity was made so important that practical needs were sometimes sacrificed for it.

One very basic, albeit often difficult, requirement was that authors would make their deadlines. Another was the expectation that ISC and Bureau members would show up to their respective meetings and, crucially, engage in the work that had to be done both during as well as in-between sessions. Scholars were required to provide the editors

⁸³ Vansina, *Living with Africa*, 201-2.

⁸⁴ A prime example of this is the 1974 Cairo meeting during which Diop's work was discussed. The meeting seems to have worked as a catalyst for new discussions within African history and Egyptology.

of the volumes with names of possible authors and to respond with critique to written chapters. This important, but cumbersome, collaborative work ethic, however, caused delay after delay. After all, if the whole committee of 39 members spread across four continents was supposed to respond to every communication, it was bound to take a while before decisions could be made. Delays therefore became the main annoyance of the GHA. The problem of the slow pace of work was inherently linked to a lack of engagement from some key contributors, which in turn was often connected to their extremely and, after 1970, increasingly busy schedules as part of the small new intelligentsia of the post-colonial nations of Africa. Whilst some ISC members, such as Ajayi, literally went the extra mile to make the project into a success, others were swept away by other responsibilities.

How to solve the problem was a matter of discussion. In a letter sent to Glélé on 3 February 1983, Vansina complained about the slow pace with which the work was progressing, sparking a small debate amongst ISC members:

I am very concerned by the delay which, once again, had built up over the past two months. [...] The delays are becoming intolerable and I feel it is time new measures were proposed, in addition to those adopted some years ago, to speed up the whole process. What I propose is that any new chapter, or major revision concerning Volume III, IV and V be henceforth entrusted to a member of the Committee [...], and preferably to the Volume Director. [...] I know this proposal has its drawbacks. But these are less serious than the continual delays which are having a very harmful effect on our project. My proposal would at least eliminate the problem of contributions that are long overdue — authors seem to be almost incapable of keeping their word [...] I would be grateful if you could put this proposal to all the members of the Bureau and see what their reactions is [sic]. [...] I am convinced that we shall be forced to adopt measures of this kind after the month of August if we do not do so earlier. If we wait until then members will first of all go on vacation, after which they will settle in to work until October and then — thanks to the academic year — go into hibernation once more. But the time has come to take these problems serious-

ly. We only have to look at the small amount of new work which has actually been done since the meeting at the end of July 1982 to realise this. At this rate it will be two or three years before we have finished, and by that time we shall have to write the work all over again if it is not to be outdated before it is published. [...] The proposal that our own group should do as much of the work as possible would enable me and my colleagues to draw up a realistic timetable and to know when a special effort will have to be made. If we are criticised because too many chapters have been drafted by the Volume Directors and the members of the Committee, our reply will be that if we had depended on recalcitrant authors we should still be waiting for the work to be finished.⁸⁵

Vansina's main concern was with 'recalcitrant authors' who did not deliver their chapters on time. But, overall, he was exasperated with the way the work had progressed, or rather, lacked progress and he identified the collaborative nature and the insistence that as many academics as possible be involved as the reasons for it. Given the fact that he had been involved with the GHA since 1970, thirteen years, during which only two of the eight proposed volumes had been published, this is not all that surprising. At the second plenary session of the ISC, in Lusaka, in 1973, a timetable was adopted in which volumes I and II would be ready for publication in November 1974.⁸⁶ However, both volumes were only published in 1981. The final volume was not published in both English and French until 1998.⁸⁷

In the meanwhile, the project had suffered from a lack of engagement from the majority of the ISC members. As a result of the slow progress of the work, moreover, meetings sometimes had to be cancelled.⁸⁸ Although the committee consisted of 39 members, the project was *de facto* brought to fruition by only a handful of them. Maurice Glélé kept track of the activity of committee members and how often

85 UAP, CC CSP 36, Jan Vansina to Maurice Glélé, 03-02-1983.

86 UAP, 2nd Plenary Session, Lusaka 1973, 4

87 Chloé Maurel notes that translations of the volumes between French and English often slowed the work down considerably. Maurel, "L'histoire Générale de l'Afrique de l'Unesco", 730.

88 UAP, CC CSP 46, Bethwell A. Ogot to Emmanuel Pouchpa Dass 06-07-1978.

they replied to letters.⁸⁹ A 'state of consultations for the preparation of volumes I to VIII' was attached as annex to the report of the 7th meeting of the Bureau, which took place from 18–29 July 1977 in Paris. During that meeting problems with the functioning of the committee and bureau were discussed. 'Despite the reminders issued at Lusaka and Cotonou, there has been no improvement in the participation of its members in the activities of the Committee. [...] The work is still being carried out by a few people. [...] The situation is becoming disturbing.' The meeting emphasised, once again, that the Committee carried a joint responsibility.⁹⁰ Generally speaking, less than half of the committee members replied to circular letters asking for consultations on tables of content and suggested authors and often it was less than a third. Glélé had also tracked who had never once replied. Amadou Hampaté Ba was on the list, as were Musa Galaal, Joseph Ki-Zerbo and Cheikh Anta-Diop. However, the latter did attend almost all meetings and fulfilled an important job as reading committee member for volume II. Diop was therefore on the list of three members who had 'regularly attended all the meetings', alongside Jean Devisse and Jacob Ade Ajayi.⁹¹ The key members that did the brunt of the work, not just in the writing of chapters, but by providing the daily academic and practical input necessary for the work to be completed, were Jan Vansina, Jacob Ade Ajayi, Jean Devisse, Adu Boahen and Ivan Hrbek, and, despite his failure to respond to circular letters, Joseph Ki-Zerbo. Bethwell Ogot, moreover, was also of great importance, although he only became seriously involved after about 1975 and even more so after 1978, when he became president of the committee.⁹²

⁸⁹ Ali Mazrui is not included in this tally because he was not officially a member of the ISC. This did not keep others, such as Adu Boahen, from complaining about his absence from certain meetings. UAP, CC CSP 42, Adu Boahen to Maurice Glele, 23-01-1987.

⁹⁰ JTLI, JAAP, Box 73, Seventh Meeting of the Bureau of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, Paris 18–29 July 1977, 6–7.

⁹¹ JTLI, JAAP, Box 73, Seventh Meeting of the Bureau of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, Paris 18–29 July 1977, Annex A, State of Consultations for the Preparation of Volumes I to VIII and UAP, Meeting of the Bureau Rwanda 1972, 19.

⁹² During two meetings it was explicitly stated that the committee 'regretted the absence of Professor Ogot'. Gradually however, Ogot came to engage with the project more and more. UAP, Meeting of the Bureau, Cairo, 1971, Annex I, 18 and UAP, CLT CID 140, Christophe Wondji á Madame Coffi-Studer, 19-01-1995.

Most likely the lack of engagement from some members of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa (ISC) was brought on by the fact that the *General History of Africa* was a project taken on by Committee members on top of their already taxing full-time engagements as professors, teachers, administrators and sometimes politicians — a problem which was perhaps even more dire for those situated at African rather than Euro-American institutions. Given the fact that the GHA had aimed to attract eminent personalities to their ISC, it is not all that surprising that some turned out to be too busy to actually engage in the work. For some, it seems, the GHA may have been a prestige project. In 1977, Percy Stulz, who was the head of the cultural heritage division at UNESCO, made the same observation, and added sickness and old age to the list of reasons why the ISC was not functioning as well as it should.⁹³ He also suggested unresponsive members of the ISC needed to be replaced.⁹⁴ This did happen on occasion, but generally speaking only on a voluntary basis.

Vansina's solution to the slow-paced problem, moreover, demanded more, rather than less engagement from the ISC and Bureau members who already had a considerable workload. Maurice Glélé responded quickly and in agreement. 'The authors have been known to take six months to a year to reply, if indeed they reply at all.'⁹⁵ Ki-Zerbo, Kimambo, El Fasi and Grottanelli also agreed with Vansina's plan.⁹⁶ Ajayi was less enthusiastic. He was concerned that Vansina's plan to have the committee take up more of the work was only going to exacerbate the problem, as most of the active committee members were

93 And he was not wrong, Mekki Shibeika, for instance, cancelled several meetings as a result of a heart-condition and a heart-attack in 1979. A year on, he had died. UAP, CC CSP 33, Mekki Shibeika to Amadou Mahtar M'Bow, 14-08-1979.

94 UAP, CLT CID 103, Percy Stulz to Maurice Glélé, 23-03-1977.

95 UAP, CC CSP 36, Maurice Glélé to Jan Vansina, undated.

96 Somewhat ironically, however, Ki-Zerbo took three and a half months to reply. UAP, CC CSP 36, Joseph Ki-Zerbo to Maurice Glélé, 26-05-1983; UAP, CC CSP 36, I.N. Kimambo to Maurice Glélé, 24-03-1983; UAP, CC CSP 36, Mohammed El Fasi to Maurice Glele, 14-03-1983 and UAP, CC CSP 36, Vinigi Grottanelli to Maurice Glélé, 21-03-1983.

already overworked.⁹⁷ The editors worked as hard as they could, Ajayi pressed. He was not amused at the suggestion that they, or he, did not.⁹⁸ During the meeting that followed Vansina's complaint measures were discussed to speed up the process. Although Vansina's ideas were not taken up, it was decided, as Ajayi had suggested, that volume editors would spend some time at UNESCO in Paris to complete their volumes. It was also decided that the rapporteurs of the reading committees would be asked to take part in the meetings of the Bureau in order to further smoothen the process of editing the chapters.⁹⁹ At the 19th Bureau meeting in Paris in 1987, finally, the group decided that chapters needed to be approved of during the meeting itself if the volume under discussion of that time, volume VIII, was to be finished.¹⁰⁰ The necessity of solidarity amongst those working on the GHA was underlined at several meetings and, on occasion the reports even stated that there was a 'moral compact [sic]' between UNESCO and the committee members or spoke of 'moral obligations' on the part of authors.¹⁰¹ Evidently, this moral contract was not enough to overcome certain practical difficulties.

The collaborative aspect of the GHA was both an asset to the *History* as well as a liability. Whilst solidarity and an open attitude geared towards the sharing of knowledge were ideals of importance within the GHA, these ideals simultaneously seemed to cause 'intolerable' delays. The historiographical wish to emphasise (African) diversity was

97 In 1985, when the situation had not changed significantly, Adu Boahen made another list of suggestions in which the various editors of the work had to take action. In a reply to this specific letter, Vansina noted that the delays were indeed 'endangering the whole enterprise' UAP, CC CSP 37, Adu Boahen to Maurice Glélé, 20-03-1985 and UAP, CC CSP 37, Jan Vansina to Adu Boahen, 05-04-1985. Boahen himself, however, at times also seemed to be guilty of a lack of engagement as the committee complained that Boahen had been absent during two meetings in 1979. UAP, CC CSP 33, Emmanuel Pouchpa Dass to Mr. B. Atepor Deputy Permanent Delegate of Ghana to UNESCO, 24-07-1979.

98 UAP, CC CSP 36, Jacob Ade Ajayi to Maurice Glélé, 29-03-1983.

99 UAP, UNESCO Sixth Plenary Session of the International Committee, Brazzaville 1-3 August, 2-3.

100 UAP, CLT CID 154, 19th Bureau meeting, Paris, 21-25 September 1987, 5.

101 Most likely, 'compact' here is supposed to read 'contract'. UAP, CC-79/CONF.609/1, Report of the Extraordinary Plenary Session of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, Paris, 30-31 July 1979, 5 and UAP, SHC.75/CONF.601/3, Meeting of the Bureau of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, 5th meeting, Fez, Morocco, 5-11 February 1975, 11.

translated into a practice of circular letters and endless consultations. Every committee member had to have an opinion on whatever author was proposed or however the table of contents for a volume was supposed to look like. As a result, an almost endless stream of documents, reports, annexes and letters was produced and mailed across the world. This also caused an increasingly heavy workload to land on the shoulders of UNESCO's employees, such as Glélé, as noted in 1979.¹⁰² The GHA would come to rely on UNESCO for supporting work in growing amounts throughout its lifespan.

Regardless of all the problems, Vansina's proposed solution for the sluggish pace at which the GHA progressed was not taken on board. His solutions, to centre the work on a smaller number of individuals, did not suit the principles of the GHA. The project, after all, wanted to be collaborative. The collective responsibility of everyone involved was constantly emphasised, for instance in the reading committee system.¹⁰³ At the 9th bureau meeting in 1979 the decision was made to add a note to the beginning of each volume, underlining once more the collective responsibility of the committee.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, several chapters across volumes were attributed to up to five authors, sometimes adding the phrase 'in collaboration with.'¹⁰⁵ Disagreements were settled through debate, followed by diplomacy and, failing that, the adding of statements of disagreements at the ends of chapters — as was done with Cheikh Anta Diop's chapter in volume II. Being disagreeable, it seems, was a vice that was tolerated, whereas deviating from the ideal of collectivity was not.

This need to exude the kind of scholarship that valued the collaborative effort, moreover, stressed the importance of a scholarly perso-

102 UAP, CC CSP 33, Memorandum submitted by the Bureau of the International Scientific Committee to the Director-General of Unesco, July 1979.

103 See for instance: UAP, 2nd Plenary Session, Lusaka 1973, 21-26 May, 14 and UAP, SHC/75/CONF.613/3, International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, 3rd plenary session, Cotonou, Benin (Dahomey), 8-13 September 1975, 9.

104 JTLI, JAAP, Box 73, Ninth meeting of the Bureau of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, Paris, Unesco, 11-24 July 1979, 38.

105 See: Majhemout Diop in collaboration with David Birmingham, Ivan Hrbek, Alfredo Margarido and Djibril Tamsir Niane, "Tropical and equatorial Africa under French, Portuguese and Spanish domination, 1935-45" in *General History of Africa VIII. Africa since 1935*, ed. Ali A. Mazrui, ass. ed. C. Wondji (London: Heinemann Educational, 1993), 58-75.

na actively engaged in the idea of knowledge production as a shared endeavour. This idea is somewhat different from the Romantic figure of the individual author as a genius, which has been rather influential throughout the history of Euro-American scholarship.¹⁰⁶ A difference that is only in degree rather than essence, since the GHA still identified individual scholars as authors.¹⁰⁷ Individual scholarship, then, was still praised and made meaningful within a constellation of other scholars in which solidarity was a key epistemic and moral virtue to adhere to. Given the anti-colonial and political nature of the work undertaken, the centralisation of solidarity as a moral value is hardly surprising. Within the history of emancipatory movements, inside and outside of intellectual debate, solidarity has always been emphasised as key in order to achieve victory and this was most definitely the case for anti-colonial movements, at least rhetorically.¹⁰⁸ For, by the 1970s many anti-colonial nationalist movements in the West and East African countries that had come to dominate the GHA were no longer as revolutionary as they had been previously. Many West and East African countries had become one party states.

The emphasis on collaboration, moreover, did not mean there was no unequal distribution of work, as Glélé's tally from 1977 makes abundantly clear. Rather, it is a testimony to the commitment made to the project and its ideal of collaboration by those who did the brunt of the work. As such, it is a testimony not to the absence of inequality, but, rather, to the attempt of ridding the work of such inequality.

Conclusions

When it came to practical difficulties, the *General History of Africa* was troubled by both external factors as well as its own refusal to let go

¹⁰⁶ Christine Haynes, "Reassessing "Genius" in Studies of Authorship. The State of the Discipline" *Book History* 18 (2015): 287–320, 287–291.

¹⁰⁷ See for instance Travis E. Ross' work on *The Works of Hubert H. Bancroft*, another large-scale 20th century work of history, in which individual authorial identities were erased in an effort to strengthen the brand. Ross argues that the reason behind this was the single author as a recognizable and therefore sellable entity for a larger public. Travis E. Ross, "Fixing genius: the Romantic man of letters in the university era" in *How to be a Historian. Scholarly Personae in Historical Studies, 1800–2000*, ed. Herman Paul (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2019), 53–71.

¹⁰⁸ Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire. Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London: Verso, 2019), 23, 333, 342–3.

of some of the early ideals of the project. The early years of the project, moreover, were marked by an abundance of opportunity: in the 1960s and 1970s, African historians had opportunities that have since disappeared and that were novel at the time as well. In fact, there were so many opportunities that many historians embarked on perhaps too many projects at once — there were perhaps too many possibilities resulting in a lack of sustainable growth for African studies on the African continent. Later on, the project increasingly had to look for outside funding as the original UNESCO funding ran out, whilst contending with shifting political climates, the results of which impacted the historians working for the GHA. Contributing to emancipation through a widespread dissemination of the GHA became more difficult as political interest, and therefore also funding, dwindled. Yet, despite all this, the GHA was finished in part because UNESCO offered a political as well as financial safe haven. The GHA increasingly came to fulfil a function not just as a project of historiographical change, but as a network of intellectuals. At the same time, the ISC's insistence on widespread dissemination and other grand plans shows at least some sort of financial illiteracy or unwillingness to contend with changing realities. Following Scott's analysis on the moving goalposts of emancipation, moreover, it is safe to say that UNESCO existed somewhere between the post-independence ideal of political emancipation and nation-building and post-colonial critique geared towards mental liberation. The following chapters will delve deeper into this conundrum in an analysis of the role of Euro-Americans within the project as well as the dynamic of political activism that becomes apparent in historiographical debates concerning the role of colonialism in African history.

The economy of knowledge production within the project, moreover, was geared towards the inclusion of as many African historians as possible, as stressed in part one of this chapter. During meetings solidarity and the sharing of academic responsibility was emphasised, whilst detachment and the centralisation of decision-making were discouraged. The rules had made this clear in the positioning documents. What this chapter has shown, is that the emphasis on collaboration was important enough to allow the work to take much longer than was originally intended. Despite considerable delays, the GHA mostly stuck to its original ideals of a collaborative work ethic and diversity of authors. The solution to the problem was sought in bringing the work to meetings rather than leaving it with individual committee

members, and by pressing the importance of solidarity, rather than making a substantial change in the process of creating the work itself. In this way an academic atmosphere of mutuality and debate was created. This was in line with the activist and pan-African ideals of shared knowledge production with which the GHA had started out. Yet, this ideal jeopardised the ideal of political emancipation during the period of nation-building. By the time the GHA volumes started appearing, political concerns had shifted considerably.

