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

Schulte Nordholt, L.R.C.

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CHAPTER SIX

Positionality and the Global Politics of Knowledge Production within the *General History of Africa*

Introduction

What was the role of Euro-American historians within the GHA? This chapter continues the exploration of African collectivity as a reality and concentrates on one specific matter of tension within the GHA; the paradoxical presence of white European and white American historians of Africa. It shows how these Euro-American historians — largely men rather than women, who were not very present in the GHA — became increasingly important throughout the lifespan of the project as a result of growing inequalities in the global production of knowledge about Africa, as already commented upon in the last chapter. This chapter, however, focuses not so much on the African side of this equation, but contrasts the global south and north. As such, the chapter analyses why ideals of pan-African collectivity were difficult to translate into practice given the increasing predominance of some Euro-American authors as time wore on and connects this predominance to the geo-politics surrounding African studies. The chapter therefore explores how positionality within the global system

of knowledge production influenced the production of African historiography within the GHA.

The presence of Euro-American historians of Africa has remained problematic ever since the inception of the sub-discipline of African history, in specific, and within African studies, in general. The continuing imbalance regarding the study of Africa as situated within North America and Europe rather than on the continent itself has been the norm rather than the exception, over the past century, as commented upon by scholars such as Paul Tiyambe Zeleza.¹ As such, the *General History of Africa* with its relatively successful focus on African history as written by Africans has been somewhat of an outlier within African historiography. It nevertheless stumbled upon problems of Euro-American epistemic dominance. Although the presence of Euro-American experts had been foreseen from the very start and, to an extent, welcomed, it did sometimes interfere with the main goal of the GHA. Indeed, some complaints about the predominance of non-Africans within the project were voiced throughout the years. Moreover, despite the clear and constant stipulation that the GHA had to be written primarily by Africans, Europeans, such as Jan Vansina, played pivotal and cherished roles within the GHA and exerted their influence on the project. They were active and valued members of the GHA community. Their curious position within a project of African anti-colonial liberation and their presence within the GHA and the field of African history deserves scrutiny.

The chapter begins by discussing the position of Europeans within the project and the instances in which the European presence caused internal disruptions and debates for the GHA. In what way, if at all, did the presence of Euro-American scholars adversely affect the ideal of pan-African collectivity? This first section discusses how the global politics of knowledge production influenced the GHA as a result of the Cold War, specifically in regards to the development of African studies in the United States. The chapter, secondly, explains why Euro-American historians were able to take on such important roles within the GHA, arguing that it was the result of disparaging material circumstances.

Thirdly, the chapter elaborates on the public self-fashioning of both African and Euro-American historians within the GHA, as a result

1 Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997), 61.

of the dynamic described in previous sections. Within the GHA, Ali Mazrui formulated what could be seen as a response to the reality of a European presence in African knowledge production at the time. He explained how he thought African historians should fashion their scholarly selves given the challenges of their situation. Mazrui argued for an insider–outsider perspective as a virtue to strive towards. This virtue lay at the core of what African history writing was all about. It is of illustrative importance to contrast Mazrui’s insider–outsider perspective with how Euro-Americans presented themselves and how they asserted their authority as academics and professionals. The difference illuminates how global power structures and the resulting disparaging material realities translated in the practice of public self-presentation. This part of the chapter, therefore, concerns the scholarly self at the micro level, through individual conceptions of what it meant to be a historian of Africa and how to convey this to the outside world.²

The power of the European voice and the politics of global knowledge production

The prevailing concern within the GHA concerning Euro-American historians of Africa was that the presence of too many could endanger the projects’ original goals and ideals. As Jean Devisse remarked in a reading report for volume IV:

Trop de chapitres sont attribués à des non-Africains et, aussi, à des francophones. Il faut absolument que nous respectons les règles que nous sommes fixées à nous-mêmes. [Too many chapters have been given to non-Africans, and Francophones, as well. It is imperative that we should respect the rules we have set for ourselves.]³

One of the GHA’s positioning ideals of African collectivity and thereby the ideal to write African history from ‘within’ was in danger of

2 Herman Paul, “Introduction. Scholarly Personae: what they are and why they matter.” In *How to be a Historian. Scholarly Personae in Historical Studies, 1800–2000*, ed. Herman Paul (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 1–14, 3.

3 UAP, CC CSP 39, Observations Jean Devisse, date unclear.

being subverted and Devisse therefore reiterated the GHA's assertion that there needed to be an even spread of authors from different countries and between Francophone, Anglophone and Lusophone areas. By 'non-African' Devisse in all probability was referring to what I have dubbed 'Euro-American' authors. The term non-African here, and elsewhere in the primary source material I have quoted, served almost as a euphemism to refer to white scholars from North America or Europe since there were very few Asian or other scholars involved in the project. At the same time, it may also have served as a way to centre the narrative on Africa, rather than Europe. However, in practice non-Africans within the GHA were almost always Euro-American scholars. Volume IV ended up with an equal amount of African and non-African authors.

Centring the narrative on Africa instead of Europe remained an issue throughout the lifespan of the GHA. A letter from ISC member since 1975 Phares M. Mutibwa, a Ugandan professor of history at Makerere University and a specialist on Madagascar, written on 16 March 1979 to Amadou Mahtar M'Bow illustrates this point. It shows what its author thought the consequences of such a Euro-American preponderance could be, especially regarding the GHA volumes that dealt with the history of colonialism. It also makes clear in what way the Cold War influenced the global politics of knowledge production. Mutibwa worried that European points of view and European political and epistemic concerns would come to dominate the History in favour of the African centred perspective the ISC had set out to embody. As Mutibwa wrote:

The African voice should really be heard more effectively. [...] This point became more apparent to me at the last meeting of the Committee held in March–April 1978 in Nairobi when, largely because of the absence of several key scholars, the majority of the participants tended to be non-African. Partly therefore as a result of the somewhat predominant presence of non-African members, the Committee has tended to be involved in matters which, while they may be crucial to non-Africans, are not all that important for our own side of our history. Perhaps an example is called for in connection to this. At our last meeting in Nairobi there was some heated discussion of whether the Ethio-

pian war of liberation during World War II was against fascist Italy or against Mussolini's Italy. Apparently there were some non-African members who objected to the use of the term 'fascist' to describe Italy. In other instances, there are quite often squabbles of ideological terms as well as terms affecting Colonialism in Africa in general. This is because we have on the Committee members from both capitalist and socialist camps who tend to see issues along ideological lines. I do not wish to suggest, Your Excellency, that ideologies are not important; but my point is that there is no reason why, in writing our own history, Africans should be involved in discussions that are raised by some members who just happen to come from different ideological camps. In this connection, one could perhaps cite Professor Philip D. Curtin's letter of 30 January 1979 to Dr. Maurice Glélé, in which, while commenting on Professor Mazrui's revision of volume 8, he referred 'a potential ideological split' if the organizational problems of chapter 26 overtly remained an ideological rather than a geographical division. Indeed, for us Africans the issues of chapter 26 may not be geographical but ideological ones. This is not to criticize Professor Curtin but merely to underline the sort of problems which we are involved in, which may reduce the effectiveness of our work. In other words [sic], the presence on the Committee of so many scholars from 'ideological areas' undermines Africans' efforts to reconstruct their — or, in this case our — history as we see it rather than as others see it.⁴

Mutibwa clearly did not want the GHA to be bogged down by discussions that seemed essentially centred around Euro-American sensibilities, such as Cold War ideologies or questions of terminology that pertained to European history and that were thus external to the concerns of the GHA. Mutibwa saw the concerns of 'non-Africans' as clearly deviating from the Afrocentric ideal the GHA had originally espoused. What the letter makes clear moreover is that pertaining to the history of more recent pasts, it was perhaps easier to confound po-

⁴ UAP, CC CSP 33, Phares M. Mutibwa to Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, 16th March 1979, 3-4.

litical and epistemic concerns seeing as the distance between the past and the present was less profound. African and non-African concerns may consequently have diverged somewhat more clearly regarding contemporary history. Resultant political and ideological differences in worldview were especially irksome when ‘non-Africans’ assumed that their position was the universal one and which thereby tended to overwhelm African perspectives. The fact that he specifically named Philip Curtin, an American, is telling. The ‘ideological areas’ Mutibwa refers to pertain to the bipolar world order that had emerged as a result of the Cold War.

The Cold War extensively influenced African politics and how one related to it politically certainly mattered within the politics of the GHA. Worldmaking for African nations had on several occasions been swayed by Cold War politics and related interventions by international powers, the most chilling example of which is the Congo Crisis.⁵ In his autobiography Bethwell Ogot also commented on the presence of the Cold War within the GHA as something which tended to confuse priorities of perspectives between African, Soviet and Euro-American historians working on the project. He unsurprisingly ascertained that authors from either of the two superpowers or their allies could be overly concerned or cautious with matters that did not seem as pertinent to them or to other African ISC members.⁶ The Cold War interfered in African’s ability to centre knowledge production on Africa because it tended to force African academics to take a side in the global conflict. This was perhaps also the reason that GHA tried to avoid an undue emphasis on Marxist historiography. According to Frank Gerits and Mateo Grilli, moreover, it has recently started to become clear that perhaps it was the Cold War that limited the ability of new nationalist African leaders to build strong states in the 1960s and 1970s, rather than the legacy of colonial exploitation, as postcolonial studies scholars have argued.⁷ The Mutibwa letter makes clear that this Cold War dynamic also played its part in sometimes derailing conversations

5 See: Alanna O'Malley, *The Diplomacy of Decolonisation: America, Britain and the United Nations During the Congo Crisis 1960-1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018)

6 Bethwell A. Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of time* (Kisumu: Ayange Press Limited, 2003), 390.

7 Matteo Grilli and Frank Gerits, “Introduction” in *Visions of African Unity. New Perspectives on the History of Pan-Africanism and African Unification Projects*, ed. Matteo Grilli and Frank Gerits (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 1-20, 12.

within the GHA. It was, as it turned out, difficult to create an African centred history of Africa so long as one was part of the bipolar world order. Moreover, as long as authors from either block, broadly understood, were part of the GHA or even the ISC in particular, it was hard to rid the GHA of discussions and differences of opinion that were not strictly epistemic or related to African (political) realities, but instead linked to the Cold War. This was the case specifically because the GHA was a part of UNESCO and therefore had to position itself within the global political climate of the United Nations.

The Cold War, moreover, extensively influenced funding of African studies in the United States of America. American institutions of higher learning poured money into African studies programmes as part of their Cold War policies. The United States thereby aimed to shift the power balance within the global politics of knowledge production about Africa to make it fit with US political requirements. This inpour of American dollars created a decidedly unequal Africanist scene. As William Martin has shown in his analysis of the history of African studies in the United States, during the 20th century, the academic historical study of Africa slowly became to be centred on white institutions in North America, after having briefly resided in Africa in the 1960s and before that, for a much longer time, in north-western Europe.⁸ White British scholars especially had been part and parcel of the period in which academic African history was on the rise in the 1960s. As Anthony Kirk-Greene writes, the British Africanist of the 1960s were almost all involved in the creation of departments of history at African institutions.⁹ They often spent several years teaching in soon to become or recently independent African countries, before returning to Britain to build centres of Africanist study there.¹⁰

In the United States the African Studies Association was founded in 1957. It marked the beginning of Africanist scholarship there, although not the beginning of academic research into the African past. For a long time, this went largely unacknowledged by the ASA itself. In 1958 Melville Herskovits had stated that American Africanists

8 William G. Martin, "The Rise of African Studies (USA) and the Transnational Study of Africa," *African Studies Review* 54:1 (2011): 59–83, 60, 75.

9 Anthony Kirk-Greene, "The Emergence of an Africanist Community in the UK" in *The British Intellectual Engagement with Africa in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Douglas Rimmer and Anthony Kirk-Greene (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000), 11–40, 11–2.

10 John McCracken, "African History in British Universities: Past, Present and Future", *African Affairs* 92:367 (1993): 239–53, 241.

could benefit from a 'heightened degree of objectivity' because the United States had no obvious political connection to the continent, thereby conveniently forgetting America's history of slavery.¹¹ Curtin had moreover claimed, in 1971 and again in a diluted manner in 1995, that the United States had had no real or 'serious' academic study of Africa before the Second World War.¹² Yet, before the white American discovery of Africa, a pan-African inspired academic study of the continent had already taken place at historically black institutions, such as Howard, since at least the late 19th century.¹³ In the 1960s the programmes of African studies that had existed at these historically black universities, slowly lost funding, only to see it refocused on traditionally white northern schools.¹⁴ This 'vindicationist' and 'transcontinental' tradition, led by the likes of W.E.B. Dubois and William Leo Hansberry, that had come into being since the late 19th century was closely related to the same brand of African history that was part and parcel of the GHA. As also discussed in Chapter 2, vindicationist history aimed to ascertain the authenticity of the African past to prove that white supremacist ideas on the absence of Afro-history were wrong. It sought a pan-African connection across the globe between different African peoples.¹⁵ After World War II, however, predominantly white institutions became interested in Africa as well. These new Africanists sought a separation between the study of continental Africa and the (African-American) diaspora and related issues of race and identity — a separation which the GHA did not necessarily seek, even if it was also focused on the continent. In 1968 the systematic denial of African American interest in the African past within the American academy led to an altercation and eventual breach within the ASA as

11 Jean M. Allman, "#HerskovitsMustFall? A Meditation on Whiteness, African Studies, and the Unfinished Business of 1968", *African Studies Review* 62:3 (2019): 6–39, 6.

12 Philip D. Curtin, "African Studies: A Personal Assessment." *African Studies Review* 14:3 (1971): 357–68, 358 and Philip D. Curtin, "Ghettoizing African History" *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (1995). Recently, however, Jean Allman declared that #Herskovitsmustfall in the 2018 ASA presidential lecture, thereby criticizing the narrative that African studies in the USA was started by Melville Herskovits rather than W.E.B. Du Bois and 'meditating' on the whiteness of African studies in the US. See: Allman, "#HerskovitsMustFall?", 7.

13 Martin, "The Rise of African Studies (USA)", 70.

14 Ibid, 76–7.

15 Michael O. West and William G. Martin, "Introduction" in *Out of One, Many Africas. Reconstructing the Study and Meaning of Africa*, eds. William G. Martin and Michael O. West (University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 1999), 1–38, 19.

black scholars pushed for recognition. Yet, within the GHA African American scholars never claimed their place and it was Curtin who served as one of its most important American ISC members. As noted above, the post-1945 American interest in Africa was spurred on by the USA's Cold War motivated need for expertise on the continent, as funding was made available to allow for Americans to come to a better understanding of the so-called third world in order to claim it over the USSR. This somewhat embroiled African studies in the United States with the country's foreign expansion across the globe as well as with anti-communist tendencies. Moreover, even though these policies were created in the 1950s and 1960s and American African studies programmes suffered from budget cuts in the 1970 and 1980s like others across the globe, the result was that the study of Africa in North America became centred on historically white institutions — as Jean Allman eloquently articulated in a self-implicated indictment of the ASA during her presidential lecture in 2018.¹⁶

It is obvious that predominantly white American research universities benefitted from increased funding after World War 2.¹⁷ African studies, as a result, became a more mainstream academic endeavour, pushing out the historically black colleges and universities. Pearl T. Robinson argues that this cannot be seen as existing separately from the State Departments Cold War fuelled concerns concerning the loyalties African Americans given the way they were treated in the United States and simultaneous fears over the domestic impact of Soviet anti-imperialist rhetoric.¹⁸ As such, the intellectual pursuit of the African past was not left untouched by the country's history of racism and segregation. A continuing racial divide plagued the study of Africa in the United States especially, creating a gap between Euro-American, Afro-American and African inquiry into the continent in North America.¹⁹ Once the global study of Africa became more consolidated around historically white North American centres, it moved away from some of its more radical pan-African roots. African history prac-

¹⁶ Allman, “#HerskovitsMustFall?”, 9–10.

¹⁷ Pearl T. Robinson, “Area Studies in Search of Africa” in *The Politics of Knowledge. Area Studies and the Disciplines*, ed. David Szanton (Berkeley: University of California, 2004), 119–183, 119–20.

¹⁸ Robinson, “Area Studies in Search of Africa”, 143.

¹⁹ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “The Perpetual Solitudes and Crises of African Studies in the United States” *Africa Today* 44:2 (1997): 193–210, 193.

ticed as an area study in the United States, moreover, became divorced from African American studies in the mid-20th century. This may also be why African American scholars did not play key roles within the GHA. It, moreover, as Zeleza has argued, created a situation wherein knowledge about Africa was largely produced by white males in American institutions and centred around mostly English language journals. African produced knowledge on Africa eventually became the periphery.²⁰

Given this context and the role the Cold War played in establishing it, it is unsurprising that it was relative to the Cold War that differences in perspective surfaced within the GHA, specifically because Mutibwa's complaint pertained to Curtin. That Curtin seemed to have thought that Chapter twenty-six, on 'Africa and the Capitalist countries', of volume VIII should be depoliticised was a testimony to his removal from what African historians' thought should be the key concern of African historiography. Chapter twenty-seven would concurrently deal with 'Africa and the Socialist Countries.' According to Ogot, the point of these chapters was to position Africa as neutral within the Cold War.²¹ As a result of Africa's geopolitical position in-between two superpowers and as inhabitants of mostly newly independent nations, it may have been that African historians of Africa were more attuned to the ideological nature of the bipolar world system as opposed to Euro-Americans who were generally part of one of two poles — and this was the case specifically for Americans. Curtin seemed to have failed, at least in the eyes of Mutibwa, to reflect sufficiently on his own geopolitical position as American vis-à-vis his African colleagues. According to Mazrui, African historians of Africa, as insider-outsiders, may have been more likely to be aware of the fact that they were speaking from a point of view that was not inherently universal as a result of their historical position as outsiders. Mazrui berated European scholars who were unable to transcend their own

²⁰ This has been disputed by, for instance, the authors of *Africa and the Disciplines*, cited elsewhere in this work. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Introduction. The Internationalisation of African Knowledges" in *The Study of Africa. Volume 2 Global and Transnational Engagements*, ed. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2007), 1-26, 2.

²¹ Ogot, *My Footprints*, 390.

cultural context.²² I will return to Mazrui's ruminations at the end of this chapter.

To provide one further illustration of this position of Africans within the global system of knowledge production and diverging Euro-American and African ideas on what African history should be I want to turn to Ogot's autobiography again. Ogot remarked upon the positions of white scholars in Kenyan universities. For the purpose of Africanising the universities in his country these white scholars had to eventually leave. Unsurprisingly not all of them went willingly, but, Ogot noted, oftentimes, expatriate staff also made reaching the goal of Africanisation harder because they had different ideas on what a good university should be, how the Kenyans were to get there and were often removed from the concerns of the society they were to serve.²³ They had substantially different ideas on what good African scholarship meant and what the role of politics, specifically nation-building therein, should be.²⁴

Disparate material circumstances

The GHA, then, had to deal with the problem of Euro-American perspectives and concerns presented as universal, often as part of the Cold War, and moreover, as threatening to push aside African perspectives, even if this happened without intent. Negating this had, in a way, been the very reason the GHA had come into being in 1964. Why then did so many European voices still interject as Devisse and Mutibwa had complained? A return to Mutibwa's letters provides one explanation why the GHA had to deal with squabbles over terminology and political sensitivities that were in some way external to African concerns:

Perhaps to emphasise the predominance of non-African historians on many of the Committee's work (which is a result

²² Mazrui himself explicitly stated that he reviewed books with 'an African bias' in a letter. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan (hereafter BHL UM), Ali A. Mazrui papers (hereafter AMP), box 8, Lectures, seminars and talks, Ali Mazrui to Dennis G. Duerden, 17-01-1963.

²³ Ogot, *Footprints on the Sands of time*, 118-123.

²⁴ Carol Sicherman, "Building an African Department of History at Makerere, 1950-1972" *History in Africa* (2003): 253-282, 255.

of non-attendance of African scholars) I should mention the fact that the ISC's report which was adopted in Nairobi on Saturday afternoon, 8 April 1978, was attended only by 16 members of whom only 6 were Africans. I do appreciate the tremendous contribution which non-Africans have made to the research and writing up of African History and only a few people would begrudge non-African of this great achievement. I am also mindful of the fact that up to now the non-African scholars are more equipped than Africans themselves to contribute to the writing of African History. But while all this remains true, we cannot escape from the fact that we, Africans, are writing our own history. [...] In short, while we should have as contributors non-African historians, who moreover have greater resources than we ourselves have in carrying out research and even writing, the new General History of Africa should principally be written by Africans regardless of the paucity of their experiences and resources.²⁵

The growing preponderance of Euro-Americans within the GHA was at least partly the result of the absence of African committee members, which in itself was a result of the issues within the African academy discussed in the last chapter. Gradually, therefore, Euro-Americans, such as Vansina, Curtin, Hrbek and Devisse, moved into positions of greater importance as a result of the institutional and material privilege they had and which African committee members seemed to lack, a consequence of global funding inequalities.

African ISC members cancelled their attendance at meetings more often than Euro-American ISC members, judging by the letters found in UNESCO's archive. They did so for various reasons. Cheikh Anta Diop, for instance, skipped a meeting in October 1979 because he was being detained by the Senegalese government and had to await a trial date preventing him from travel.²⁶ In 1983 Boahen too struggled with the political situation in his country and asked UNESCO to present him with an official invitation to the next ISC meeting because he

25 UAP, CC CSP 33, Professor Phares M. Mutibwa to His Excellency Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, 16th March 1979, 4–5.

26 UAP, CC CSP 15, Cheikh Anta Diop to Maurice Gléél, 10–10–1979.

would not otherwise be allowed to travel and obtain a new passport, which had been impounded. ‘We are living in very difficult times indeed. But we shall overcome.’²⁷ Mazrui, moreover, cancelled meetings on multiple occasions citing, for instance, teaching commitments or guest lectureships as the reason.²⁸ Ki-Zerbo also cancelled a meeting citing previous commitments that clashed with the GHA.²⁹ As Claude Ake has noted, and as Mutibwa suggested also in his letter, African academics had to contend with greater demands on their time as a result of a heavier teaching load and more administrative duties as well as a lack of facilities, such as poorly stacked libraries and a general lack of equipment.³⁰ Moreover, as becomes clear from the letters discussed above, some academics had to deal with travel restrictions for political reasons. Mobility has played an important role from the 19th century onwards in the epistemological shaping of the African continent. Who could travel and bring knowledge to and from Europe and Africa determined how the continent was regarded.³¹ Increasingly throughout the 20th century and especially in the 21st travel has become a privilege that is awarded more easily and frequently to researchers situated in North American and European institutions.

Ogot, moreover, took on a myriad of different tasks and duties after finishing his PhD. The decolonisation of British Kenya directly impacted the educational institutions that he studied and worked at and he identified with the struggle and successes of those institutions as well as that of the nation as a whole. As a result, national victories often felt like personal victories, and vice versa. He fulfilled an almost endless number of public duties for both the nation, as well as the continent. From 1965 onwards, Ogot became a university administrator

27 UAP, CC CSP 36, Adu Boahen to Maurice Glélé, 18-01-1983.

28 UAP, CC CSP 32, Ali Mazrui to Maurice Glélé, 14-03-1977.

29 UAP, CC CSP 33, Telegram Ki-Zerbo to Maurice Glélé.

30 Claude Ake, “Academic Freedom and Material Base” in *Academic Freedom in Africa*, eds. Mamadou Diouf and Mahmood Mamdani (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1994), 17–25, 21.

31 Haytem Guesmi argues that this, combined with the amount of funding available for Americans vis-à-vis other scholars within African studies, has led to a gentrification of African studies. Haytem Guesmi, “The Gentrification of African Studies,” *Africa is a Country*, last modified December 12, 2018, <https://africasacountry.com/2018/12/the-gentrification-of-african-studies>. Emily Callaci has made a similar argument, relying on Guesmi to state that privilege and mobility are inherently intertwined within African studies and academia in general. Emily Callaci, “On Acknowledgements” *The American Historical Review* 125:1 (2020): 126–131, 128.

and joined the University of East Africa council as well as the University Development Committee and the Working Party on Higher Education in East Africa. He was part of a group of academics and civil servants that set up the university of Nairobi and worked to achieve Africanisation in universities throughout East Africa.³²

Overcommitment combined with deteriorating material and political circumstances then, made it difficult for African ISC members to focus on the GHA work — although this is not to say they did not do their utmost best to finish the volumes. The decrease of funding for African universities in the 1970s coincided with the increase of funding for African studies in the United States, thereby undermining efforts to Africanise (or even decolonise) African history. The GHA simply could not escape the wider context in which African universities experienced severe cuts in funding, whereas the funding of African studies in the United States increased as a result of Cold War geopolitics.³³ Of course not all Euro-Americans were situated at American institutions and not all Africans were located on the continent. In fact, African academics increasingly moved towards North America, which I have also commented on in the last chapter. Yet, generally speaking, it was because of the privileged positions most Euro-Americans enjoyed that they were able to stick with the project up until the end. Euro-Americans played crucial roles, despite the fact that this predominance was not in accordance with the epistemic and political goals of Africanisation within the GHA.

A set of letters between Ali Mazrui and Omari Kokole in 1987 allows for some further insight into the difference between institutional life in the global south and north.³⁴ In the letters, Mazrui and Kokole discussed whether Mazrui had been more productive whilst working for the University of Michigan, an American institution, or when at Makerere, in Uganda. Kokole was of the opinion that the environment in which Mazrui conducted his work mattered, juxtaposing a 'northern infrastructure' with a 'lack of facilities in African schools.'³⁵ Mazrui argued against the suggestion that he had been less productive

32 Ogot, *My Footprints*, 193–380.

33 Allman, “#HerskovitsMustFall?”, 10.

34 Omari Kokole later edited a volume on Mazrui: Omari Kokole ed., *The Global African. A portrait of Ali. A. Mazrui* (Trenton: Africa world press, 1996)

35 BHL UM, AMP, Box 7, folder Mazrui Biographical Materials, letter, Omari Kokole to Ali Mazrui 13-04-1987

at Makerere than in Ann Arbor, disputing whether it was even possible to measure productivity. Both agreed, however, that if Mazrui had been less productive it was because ‘the USA is technologically ahead of Uganda.’³⁶ Mazrui, however, thought that a ‘more interesting point’ would be made if Kokole could point out that ‘in spite of the poor technological facilities of Uganda and my much heavier administrative burden there, I was as prolific during my Uganda years as I have been during my American.’³⁷ The letters show that Mazrui and Kokole were both aware of the institutional privileges one gained when moving to the United States and of the factors inhibiting research by academics employed at African universities. It is indeed true that many of the first-generation African historians did not produce new fundamental research after their PhD theses, instead focusing on the production of textbooks and works of overview — like the GHA itself.³⁸

The issue of productivity was commented upon by Boahen in a lecture for the Canadian African Studies association as well. He argued that the lack of new monographs and research done by his generation was not to be blamed on their lack of commitment or the paucity of their work, but was rather the result both the need to produce previously non-existent textbooks on African history as well as increasingly heavy workloads. Moreover, he noted that perhaps the expectations put upon Ogot, Ajayi and, indeed, himself, were too high:

It is absolutely true that the Dikes, the Biobakus, The Ajayis, the first academic historians, did not live up to expectations. [...] because right from the beginning, they were all saddled with such heavy administrative responsibilities that made it impossible for them to embark on any new original piece of research. As is well-known, soon on their return home, Dike became the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan

³⁶ BHL UM, AMP, Box 7, folder Mazrui Biographical Materials, letter, Ali Mazrui to Omari Kokole, 15-04-1987

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Jacob Ade Ajayi is a good example of this. Although he produced, by all accounts, an excellent PhD-thesis and was very productive in terms of administration, teaching and authoring and editing textbooks and works of overview, such as J.F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder, *History of West Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), he never published another single-authored volume based on original research.

[...] while Ajayi, became first, Head of the Department of History at the University of Ibadan, and then Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lagos. The present writer who is himself a contemporary of the Dikes and Ajayis himself became head of the History Department of the University of Ghana four years after his appointment as lecturer.³⁹

Boahen argued that many of the first-generation historians of Africa were swept in up their own success. There was an absence of a sustainable pace of growth for the academic discipline of African history in African countries.

Vansina too experienced these disparities between working in the United States and on the African continent. In 1971 Vansina, then 41 years of age, left Wisconsin for Louvanium in the Congo. By his own admission because he held hopes to 'decolonise both African history and Louvanium'.⁴⁰ He felt his talents were best used there, rather than in Wisconsin.⁴¹ He also expressed an identification with the cause of African liberation during the early- and mid-20th century and wished to support it and provide service to the African academy. The disparities between Louvanium and Wisconsin, however, became apparent when the situation in Louvanium started to deteriorate for Vansina. In letters to Morton Rothstein, who was the chairman of the department of history at Wisconsin at the time, Vansina described the deteriorating situation at Louvanium in terms of political instability and uncertainty and a resulting lack of basic goods.⁴² He therefore asked to return to Wisconsin.⁴³ It is very telling that Rothstein's response emphasises that he will 'do everything possible to ensure that you do

39 Adu Boahen, "The Historiography of Anglophone West Africa in the 1980s" in *Africa in the Twentieth Century. The Adu Boahen Reader*, ed. Toyin Falola (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004), 625-36, 631-2.

40 Vansina, *Living with Africa*, 161.

41 Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies (hereafter: HLAS), Jan Vansina papers (hereafter: JVP), PERSONAL, PERSONELL FILE: 4 FILES, 1969-1974, Box 134, folder 6, Irvin G. Wyllie to Robert Clodius, 01-02-1965.

42 HLAS, JVP, PERSONAL, PERSONELL FILE: 4 FILES, 1969-1974, Box 134, folder 7, Jan Vansina to Morton Rothstein 12-06-1971 and, *ibid*, Jan Vansina to Morton Rothstein, 21-09-1971

43 HLAS, JVP, PERSONAL, PERSONELL FILE: 4 FILES, 1969-1974, Box 134, Jan Vansina to Morton Rothstein, 21-09-1971.

not suffer financially.⁴⁴ Even if Vansina wanted to use his position and talents in a way subservient to the larger ideal of decolonisation, he was overtaken by the material and political realities surrounding him and the access to academic and professional mobility he possessed — although he can hardly be blamed for it.

To return to Mutibwa's letter: It exemplified a change within the GHA and was written during a time in which Europeans and North Americans began to take more important positions within the GHA. Although Vansina wrote in his autobiography that African scholars continued to dominate the GHA meetings at least up until 1983, it becomes apparent from the mass of letters, the attendance of meetings and the reading committee memberships that Vansina's own role grew considerably in the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁴⁵ Other European scholars, such as Ivan Hrbek, also became more prominent as time wore on. From that time onwards, moreover, the reading committees, were increasingly staffed by Europeans, despite the GHA's intention to balance a lack of African authors in some of the early volumes with more Africans in the reading committees. Following Mutibwa's reasoning this change was a problem in and of itself. Yet, the Euro-Americans, such as Vansina, who joined the reading committees may have done so out of sense of duty and a wish to be subservient to the project. They, after all, had the ability to stick to project and carried out tasks such as reading committee membership despite getting relatively little in return in terms of recognition and money.

Vansina, moreover, reflected on the racial prejudice towards African history and the African academy and what that meant for the position of African scholars therein in a journal article detailing his time as a ISC member. He identified scepticism towards the project at its beginning which he thought was partly based on scepticism pertaining to whether the project was feasible. UNESCO had never before attempted to head a publishing project with more than a few authors that was not connected to a prestigious European or American university. According to Vansina many officials doubted whether the GHA could be pulled off partly because it had to be pulled off in newly in-

44 HLAS, JVP, PERSONAL, PERSONELL FILE: 4 FILES, 1969-1974, Box 134, Morton Rothstein to Jan Vansina, 01-10-1971.

45 Vansina, *Living with Africa*, 201.

dependent countries in Africa.⁴⁶ Crucially, moreover, Vansina attested to the perseverance of especially Africans in bringing the project to fruition: 'the project was saved by the determination of the African member countries at every UNESCO general conference, the stubbornness of M. Glele and the disbelief within UNESCO waned and finally turned to enthusiasm.'⁴⁷ Vansina seemed to have been keenly aware of the differences in privilege that resulted from the different positions inhabited by Africans and Europeans. In *Living with Africa*, Vansina noted that African historians of Africa did not possess the same freedom to express their 'intellectual disagreements' with the 'western' world of scholarship. During a conference on African history in 1957 at the School for African and Oriental Studies in London, Vansina remembered the attitude of European academics. They were 'happily surprised that Africans could be rigorous academic historians, but still unaware of the constraints of a colonial situation.'⁴⁸ Vansina thereby unearthed some of the racism of early years of professional African history and identified that African historians of Africa and European historians of Africa were not always on equal grounds — a lingering problem. Material differences in circumstances translated into a greater influence for Euro-American scholars, which in itself perhaps created a hierarchy of perceived importance regarding the contributions of Africans vis-à-vis Euro-Americans. The racial politics inherent therein, recognised by Vansina and others, however, were the result of a system of colonial racism rather than a problem nestled in individuals. Euro-Americans such as Devisse could involve themselves in safeguarding the principle of African collectivity, whilst being chided for adopting a patronising tone towards African colleagues — as happened in a 1981 letter to Glélé sent by a Nigerian historian.⁴⁹ The point here, then, is not to say that Euro-Americans were necessarily individually set against the GHA ideals, but that they were part of a racialised system within academia that privileged Euro-Americans over Africans, even as many recognised this and resisted it. In practice this meant that the historians working on the GHA, African and

46 Jan Vansina, "UNESCO and African Historiography" *History in Africa* 20 (1993): 337–352, 341.

47 Vansina, "UNESCO and African Historiography", 342.

48 Vansina, *Living With Africa*, 52.

49 UAP, CC CSP 45, G.O. Olusanyo to Maurice Glélé, 30-12-1980.

Euro-American, had to navigate a habitat of racial and postcolonial politics with considerable diplomatic skill.

Within the GHA then, differences between African and Euro-American researchers manifested themselves in the material circumstances in which both groups could, generally speaking, conduct their research. In his letter Mutibwa added a sentence in which he emphasised that he did not want to be racist, but that positions simply differed. Equally, the reason why Devisse thought it absolutely necessary to stick to the rules the committee had fixed for itself was because a preponderance of Euro-American scholars endangered the epistemic and thereby also political goals of the GHA.

The insider–outsider view

Given the realities of the material differences between the global north and south, it is worthwhile to explore how these differences manifested themselves in the public self-fashioning of GHA historians. How were African historians of African history supposed to position themselves vis-à-vis these realities? And how did Euro-American historians of Africa position themselves? The difference was at least partly a result of the fact that Africans entered the academic discipline in the 1950s and 1960s coming from a continent whose history had been neglected and denied until well into the 20th century. African historians of Africa were forced to come to terms with their position within the discipline in a very different way from Euro-American historians of Africa. This position emerged from the racial politics Mazrui and countless other African and black intellectuals have described as existing between worlds, as discussed in Chapter 2. African scholars, at least within the GHA, had to position themselves opposite the system of eurocentrism they were trying to undo as becomes clear from Mutibwa's letter. The GHA was part of African research as existing 'betwixt and between the tensions and possibilities of interconnecting global and local hierarchies', to quote Francis Nyamjoh.⁵⁰ As a result, Euro-Americans could overwhelm African voices even if they were not the majority. It was precisely this hierarchy within the politics of knowledge production that Mutibwa had complained about.

⁵⁰ Francis Nyamjoh, *Drinking from the cosmic gourd: how Amos Tutuola can change our minds* (Mankon: Langaa Research & Publishing CIG, 2017), 1.

Out of the necessity then of navigating the reality of African historical studies in the 20th century there arose an insider–outsider ideal constructed by Mazrui. Mazrui was himself somewhat awkwardly positioned within the GHA, as he was never included in the ISC, yet did edit the last volume of the series. His ideal was therefore never adopted by other ISC members. It is important to include it here because it shows a particular understanding of the positionality of African historians during the period in which the GHA came into traction that aligns with African and black intellectual traditions. This section will discuss Mazrui’s ideal and how it supposed the GHA could combine an ideal of Africanisation, or pan-African diversity, with the need to become incorporated into the Euro-American academy. It also discusses how Vansina and Curtin publicly understood and conveyed their roles as historians of Africa and what this tells us about positioning and scholarly self-fashioning of Euro-American historians. To do so I use the autobiographies of the two men. Memoirs are powerful tools to present oneself towards others scholars as well as the outside world. They therefore inform us how individuals displayed their public self and may be used to investigate what constituted scholarly personae for those individuals.⁵¹

Mazrui became the editor for volume VIII and he was chosen because no historian could be found, but also because volume VIII dealt with recent events — as Ajayi explained in a GHA-commissioned paper on contemporary history, calling Mazrui an outsider to the GHA.⁵² In 1979 the committee organised a special meeting in Ouagadougou for Mazrui’s sake to discuss contemporary African historiography and methodology. During this meeting the persona of the historian was discussed alongside other methodological issues. Mazrui presented a paper in which he ruminated on the position of African historians vis-à-vis the Euro-American academy.

He started his paper by slaying the usual eurocentric dragons. He argued that Trevor-Roper was subjective in his denial of the existence

51 Julia Dahlberg, “Gifts of Nature? Inborn Personal Qualities and Their Relation to Personae?” in *Gender, Embodiment, and the History of the Scholarly Persona. Incarnations and Contestations*, ed. Kirsti Niskanen and Michael J. Barany (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 181–214, 184, 192–3.

52 J.F. Ade Ajayi, “Problems of writing contemporary African history” in *The General History of Africa. Studies and Documents 9. The methodology of contemporary African history. Report and papers of the meeting of experts organized by Unesco at Ouagadougou, Upper Volta, from 17 to 22 May 1979* (Paris: UNESCO, 1984), 47–58, 47

of African history and that this was ‘evidence of cultural arrogance.’⁵³ Mazrui used the figure of Trevor-Roper to illustrate his point: Trevor-Roper’s fault lay in his inability to transcend his own cultural context. This epistemic virtue, or competence, that allowed a historian, or rather an academic or scholar, to overcome his or her own culture, Mazrui argued, was of especial relevance for a historian. It was precisely because of this that it was of pertinent importance to include more Africans than Europeans in the GHA because these men and women had already learned to transcend their own culture by virtue of being enmeshed in a Euro-American system of academia. Mazrui linked debates concerning this ‘outsider view’ to social anthropology. Anthropologists thought, Mazrui explained, that it was dangerous to describe a society from within. It was a danger that could lead to oversights and ‘excessive ethnocentrism.’ An outsiders’ view would allow for the uncovering of certain mores and institutions that would otherwise be taken for granted. However, Mazrui argued that these maxims weren’t applicable to historians in the same way as they were applicable to anthropologists and that for African historians both historical and anthropological virtues were of importance. African historians, and Mazrui took the example of an Igbo historian, possessed both the insider as well as the outsider view. And this insider–outsider view, which is my designation, lent them an advantage when it came to scientific assessment of the historical societies they studied. The Igbo historian studying the Igbo past would have already undergone the culture shock that is necessitated by anthropologists for good cultural research. ‘The very initiation into Western academic culture, and the power of comparative observation linked to this familiarity with both the West and his own society, provide the requisite exposure to discover salience and appreciate significance in Ibo society’ — as Mazrui put it.⁵⁴ Any African historian would possess both the view from within, as they were part of an African society, and the view from without, by virtue of being part of a ‘western’ system of academia, making him or

53 Mazrui also mentioned Hegel. He argued that Kwame Nkrumah had perhaps been the first to withstand Hegel’s arguments. Ali A. Mazrui, “Dilemmas of African historiography and the philosophy of the Unesco *General History of Africa*” in *The General History of Africa. Studies and Documents 9. The methodology of contemporary African history. Report and papers of the meeting of experts organized by Unesco at Ouagadougou, Upper Volta, from 17 to 22 May 1979* (Paris: UNESCO, 1984) 15–26, 17

54 Mazrui, “Dilemmas of African historiography”, 20.

her perfectly situated to explore the African past. Now that Africa had produced ‘modern historians’, the time had come for African historiography, ‘embodied in the perception and techniques of African historians.’⁵⁵ It only made sense that African history, situated between the African past and the ‘western’ — what I have dubbed Euro-American — academy, would be written by historians who were equally situated between the two.

This idea of ‘being between two worlds’ has been theorised by many black and African scholars, such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Albert Memmi, as well as more contemporary thinkers such as Achille Mbembe, Kwame Anthony Appiah, but also black feminist thinkers.⁵⁶ Although these thinkers and theorists do not necessarily frame the ability to refer to multiple epistemic frameworks as a virtue, it could be seen as such. Mazrui argued that the insider–outsider position allowed for clarity as researcher. ‘Having a double-consciousness’, the famous term that was coined by Du Bois in 1905, was framed as an indictment towards the dominant culture, something that black folk in the United States or a colonial subject anywhere had to have in order to survive everyday life.⁵⁷ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, in reference to Du Bois, equally describes the phenomenon of double consciousness as a form of mental colonisation and alienation.⁵⁸ Chakrabarty’s discontent with the expectation that historians of non-European pasts are supposed to self-evidently acquaint themselves with European history, whereas the reverse expectation is almost never levelled, stems from the same idea of having to navigate two epistemic environments at once as an injustice — although not necessarily a disadvantage. Chakrabarty called this ‘asymmetric arrogance.’⁵⁹ Yet, in Mazrui’s paper for the *General History of Africa*, double consciousness by use of the academic context of the insider–outsider ideal had become an embodied epistemic virtue

55 Mazrui, “Dilemmas of African historiography”, 23.

56 See: Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) 85 and Kimberlé Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality* (New York: The New Press, 2017)

57 W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Co., 1903), 2.

58 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, 34.

59 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 28.

or even advantage.⁶⁰ It, moreover, was part of the self. Mazrui argued that it could be an epistemic virtue to be able to look at the African past from multiple angles, by referring to epistemic virtues identified by anthropologists for doing their work. Mazrui therefore linked African history to anthropology, acknowledging how the former was rooted in the latter — and unintentionally acknowledging the GHA's rootedness in UNESCO as well.

Mazrui wrote the article in 1979 for a meeting which was specifically organised to reflect on the philosophy of the *General History of Africa* and as such, it could be seen as Mazrui's reconsideration or reflection on the positioning documents — as he had not been involved in drafting them. His insider–outsider ideal could be seen as a tentative answer to the realities of African historians navigating the unequal territory of the Euro-American academy. The duality inherent in navigating between African and European positionalities on history in the 1960s and 1970s was aptly captured by Mazrui in this paper on the virtuous position of Africans for the creation of knowledge within historical scholarship dealing with Africa. Throughout his career Mazrui was engaged in the construction of African identities. His own complex identity led him to investigate the importance of subjectivity. One of the results of these inquiries was his famous triple heritage thesis, which was itself inspired by others such as Nkrumah and Blyden. The point had been to highlight the many-sided nature of African identities as a result of many historical trajectories, including Islam, indigenous African religions and Christianity. Mazrui's triple heritage thesis and his insider–outsider ideal were closely related, both weaving together European and African traditions.⁶¹ His ideas on the multifocal African condition therefore aligned with that of the GHA. Nevertheless, his emphasis on the importance of these multiple strands of identity for historical research seem not to have travelled much farther than the 1979 Ouagadougou symposium and were not adopted by the rest of the ISC as angle from which to approach the position of African historians within the GHA.

60 Appiah too has called Africa's intellectuals, who navigate Africa's cultural presence in the rest of the world in European languages, 'Europhone'. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House. Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 4.

61 Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialisation and Decolonization* (Milton: Routledge, 2018), 116–25.

In their autobiographies, Curtin and Vansina convey their scholarly identities very differently. Curtin's memoir is a self-portrayal focused on masculinity, as Jan-Bart Gewald has put: 'unashamedly a book for a man's kind of man.'⁶² Adventure was therefore a key ingredient. In 1959 Curtin took a yearlong trip through Africa, starting in Morocco and driving all the way to Kenya.⁶³ His portrayal of this trip is not devoid of stereotypical descriptions also to be found in travel reports from the 18th century onwards. Here, the 'seeing-man' — a white European male — often plays the role of passive and neutral observer. Landscapes and the natural environment, including 'natives', play a big role in the travel accounts this 'seeing-man' produces.⁶⁴ Curtin described friendly villagers (who appear 'out of nowhere'), perilous river crossings, and of course the 'physical beauty' of places visited.⁶⁵ The line between travel writing and academic memoir is often blurred. Curtin alternates between comments on the waning colonial regimes and observations about what may attract (white American) tourists to a place. This perhaps illustrates the lingering imperial ideology connecting academic research into colonial and post-colonial territories with the exoticism of travel writing about Asia and Africa.⁶⁶ Curtin was aware of the dual roles he and his wife played as travellers through Africa. They functioned as both researchers as well as tourists and seemed to have had no problem switching between these roles. How Curtin described his journeys was specific for a white outsider and seems aimed at a white American audience. When explaining what drew him to the study of African history, Curtin mentions the adventure that came along with travelling to Africa and 'the fact that Africa was the least explored historically of the world's major culture areas', a statement that betrays a degree of eurocentrism because it takes into account only Euro-American historiography and only Euro-American

62 Jan-Bart Gewald, "On the Fringes of History: A Memoir," by Philip D. Curtin, *Africa Today* 53:2 (2006): 115–117, 117.

63 Philip D. Curtin, *On the fringes of History: A Memoir* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 102–26.

64 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 9

65 Curtin, *On the Fringes*, 113, 117, 121.

66 Not uncommon in American memoirs written by academics studying cultures other than their own, see: Cynthia G. Franklin, *Academic lives memoir, cultural theory, and the university today* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 88.

ideas of what history is.⁶⁷ In fact, the use of the word 'explored' is itself telling, as the exploration of non-European 'culture areas' was part of the rationale behind the colonialist expansion of the European continent. Curtin, knowingly or not, emulated some earlier ideas of (white) colonial exploration and knowledge creation. He alternatively drew on the persona of an explorer, tourist or researcher.

Vansina too emphasised adventure when seeking to explain on a personal level why he was attracted to African history as a vocation. He started his autobiography by referring to 'the flesh and blood of that adventure that African history was and is [...]'.⁶⁸ He later identified his need for 'high adventure' as a reason why a research position as an anthropologist in 'Belgian Africa' seemed attractive at the start of his career.⁶⁹ Unlike Curtin, however, Vansina spent a considerable amount of time living and working in various African countries and regions, from Kuba country in the present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo, to Rwanda and Kinshasa. This was a lived experience which he valued so much as a researcher, he made it into a required part of the curriculum for graduate students in African history at Madison. Vansina adopted some of the methodologies and *métier* of the anthropologist and applied it to African history. For Vansina one could only become a historian of Africa through extensive and intensive contact with the people one wanted to write history about. This need to experience the country one wrote about through field work was an epistemic virtue partly borrowed from anthropology and it is also reflected in Mazrui's ruminations. Through a focus on and celebration of fieldwork, Vansina consciously agitated against the image of the historian as a stuffy drawing-room intellectual.

The focus on fieldwork, moreover, was a way to try to negate justifiable critique levelled against Euro-Americans studying a continent they only knew as outsiders. In a reflective chapter, entitled *Fieldwork in History*, which was published after his memoir, Vansina explains that fieldwork is a 'sine qua non' for every aspiring historian of Africa and almost mythologises its function: 'Is it not an esoteric training procedure, similar to an initiation, which endows fledgling historians

⁶⁷ Curtin, *On the Fringes*, 70.

⁶⁸ Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), IX.

⁶⁹ Vansina, *Living with Africa*, 7–8.

with the unchallenged authority of personal experience?’⁷⁰ Throughout the piece, Vansina emphasised that one of the crucial aspects of fieldwork is the experience one gains whilst conducting it. Fieldwork ‘usually encompass [sic] about five years of the life of every non-African scholar’ and, moreover fieldwork enables the researcher to learn more about the language, landscape, historical imagination and habits of the people he or she studies.⁷¹ Therefore, Vansina continued, ‘Foreign-born historians of Africa especially need to learn such fundamentals and acquire them best through fieldwork.’⁷² Fieldwork was, it seems, most beneficial to Euro-American scholars of Africa, who needed to be trained in subjectivity to reflect on their own positionality — be made to realise what position they inhabited. It, Vansina wrote, had something essential to offer the historian especially due to the necessary subjective nature of interpretation that is a vital part of the discipline of history.⁷³ The ‘experience’ gained through fieldwork was vital because it could allow researchers to ‘translate’ between the Euro-American context of the academy and the different contexts of their chosen culture of study.⁷⁴ Vansina used fieldwork, at least rhetorically, to argue why and how he would do the work necessary in order to subvert the difference between himself and African researchers. Although he attempted to demonstrate that fieldwork was not just the foray of Euro-American scholars, but that it was also conducted by Africans, taking Kenneth Dike as an example, he nonetheless creates the impression that the very notion of fieldwork implied an outsider looking in. The racial politics presents in the field, moreover, are seemingly glossed over by Vansina. Carol Sicherman has noted that for East African students from Makerere in Uganda, for instance, it was not always as easy to collect oral traditions as it was for white scholars as they tended to be subjected to the cultural traditions and rules that Euro-Americans could supersede. African graduate students could be accused of impertinence in their attempts to collect narratives from

70 Jan Vansina, “Epilogue: Fieldwork in History” in *In Pursuit of History. Fieldwork in Africa*, eds. Carolyn Keyes Adenaike and Jan Vansina. (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996), 127–41, 127.

71 Vansina, “Fieldwork in History”, 134.

72 Ibid, 136.

73 Ibid, 137

74 Ibid.

specialised elders, whereas white scholars or dignitaries were not, in that specific context.⁷⁵

Where Curtin wrote about travelling to the continent looking for archival collections and holiday fun, Vansina fit himself more into the persona of an ethnographer. Lyn Schumaker has noted that such self-fashioning was not uncommon for the first few generations of anthropologists in southern Africa either, legitimising their status as experts through demonstrations of intimate knowledge with ‘the field.’⁷⁶ Vansina, nevertheless, seems to have been aware of the different positionality Euro-American researchers brought to the study of Africa as opposed to African researchers of Africa.⁷⁷ In their reflections on an inside or outside position and the importance of subjectivity, moreover, Mazrui’s and Vansina’s ideas seem to overlap, both in their reference to anthropological repertoires of scholarly selfhood as well as in their recognition of a distance between the Euro-American academy and African realities. They thereby negotiated the material, historic and geopolitical differences that manifested themselves in the practice of African history; in Vansina’s case by emphasising the importance of learned subjectivity and in Mazrui’s case through the persona of the Insider-outsider. Both ideas could have existed as mechanisms to deal with the changing circumstances and resulting inequalities within the GHA.

Conclusions

The problems with the presence of European voices that arose for the *General History of Africa* as described in section one of this chapter were the result of geopolitical power structures, most notably the Cold War, and how these influenced funding worldwide. As a result of inequalities in global funding structures Euro-American historians of African gained the upper hand within the global economy of knowledge production about Africa. Such changing epistemic and

75 Sicherman, “Building an African Department of History”, 265.

76 Lyn Schumaker, *Africanizing Anthropology. Fieldwork, networks, and the making of cultural knowledge in Central Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 44.

77 In chapter seven for volume I of the GHA, Vansina also wrote briefly about the experience of field work and here emphasised that even the historian who studies his own society must “rediscover his own culture”, Jan 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.

material positions taken up by Euro-American historians vis-à-vis African historians affected who was able to exert influence on the project. A difference in material privilege developed along a geographical north-south divide, making it easier for some to contribute rather than others. This difference partly played out along racial lines and could result in boosting Euro-American voices over African ones. As a result, Euro-American historians of Africa could and would play crucial roles within the GHA despite the ideal of African collectivity and sometimes against their better judgment. This did not go unnoticed within the GHA itself as ISC members sometimes complained about the preponderance of European voices.

Because Euro-American and African historians of Africa came to inhabit such different positionalities and flowing from the realisation that European points of view were (and are) not universal, reflection on one's own position became imperative, moreover. This was a realisation that came as a given for African historians of Africa. As the last section of this chapter argues, however, the public scholarly self-fashioning of Euro-American historians and African historians within the GHA could differ markedly. Nevertheless, both Mazrui and Vansina made use of scholarly repertoires taken from the discipline of anthropology to shape how they understood the role of either African historians of Africa, or, as Vansina put it, 'foreign born' historians of Africa.

Within the *General History of Africa*, consequently, most scholars worked towards the same goal: the Africanisation of history. What this meant and how this should be accomplished differed greatly between scholars. One's position and identity impacted what various scholars thought a new history of Africa was to look like. The tensions that emerged as a result of a shifting power balance between Euro-American and African points of view since the project had started in 1964, becomes more apparent when looking at historiographical discussions on colonialism and subsequent decolonisation internal to the *General History of Africa*. This is discussed in the next chapter, which shows some of the differences of scholarly opinion that resulted from differences in background.