



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

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

Schulte Nordholt, L.R.C.

### **Citation**

Schulte Nordholt, L. R. C. (2021, December 1). *Africanising African history: decolonisation of knowledge in UNESCO's general history of Africa (1964-1998)*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3244250>

Version: Publisher's Version

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

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

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

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Defining the Political and the Place of 'Europe' within the *General History of Africa*

### Introduction

How did the *General History of Africa* deal with the influence of Europeans on the history of Africa? How, in other words, was the GHA to account for the history of colonisation and decolonisation? This was a specifically pertinent question in terms of its political assignment of emancipation from Europe. Chapter 6 deals with the positioning of Euro-Americans within the GHA, whereas this chapter delves into the historiographical presence of Europe within the GHA.<sup>1</sup> Volumes VII and VIII, respectively, discuss the history of colonialism and subsequent decolonisation on the continent, whilst the GHA had no choice but to write about European influences on African history. Moreover, because the history of colonialism and its formal end was very contemporary and contentious, the boundaries between scholarship and politics, sometimes, became blurred. This chapter, therefore, researches how the ideals discussed in Chapter 3 about how the GHA

---

<sup>1</sup> Historiographical here refers to the way the history of European presence in African has been dealt with in various historical accounts of the past.

should strive to contribute to political emancipation, operated in historiographical reality and explains the resulting tensions regarding the boundary between scholarship and politics.

Writing the history of colonisation and decolonisation meant writing a history of political emancipation. As a result, political and scholarly ideals and realities were hard to separate when it came to the history of (de)colonisation. Since the question of Europe within the history of Africa existed on the apex of emancipation, it was here that tension between scholarship and politics came once more to the fore.<sup>2</sup> How were perceptions of political partisanship or, conversely, impartiality, aligned with the pursuit of intellectual goals closely connected to nationalism and the emancipation of Africans? Who could decide what ‘good’ academic African history was and what the role of politics was therein — or what even counted as overtly political?

In a way, the GHA owed its existence to the colonial subjugation of Africans by Europeans and the subsequent reaction to that subjugation: the achievement of independence in the form of national states. European colonisation of Africa had been justified and made possible by a denial of African history and agency, and now it was up to the GHA to justify the creation of national African states through a reappraisal of African historicity. This assignment was nowhere more pronounced than in the writing of the history of (de)colonisation. If we want to know how the GHA Africanised African history, we must ask how it did so in the two volumes that had to deal explicitly with Europe. In these volumes the GHA could no longer keep Europe out of sight, as it had done in previous volumes and that meant that the political assignment the GHA had given itself became more prominent in these volumes.

This chapter, therefore, contextualises ‘impartiality’ within the GHA as a political-epistemic virtue or vice. Impartiality as opposed to political partisanship is a well-known historical virtue to aim towards, researched by, amongst others, Lorraine Daston, Herman Paul,

---

2 The controversy surrounding Diop, of course, also hinged on the clash between political emancipatory imperatives and scholarly standards, but, in that case, Diop was outlier who was eventually included in the GHA, partly for political reasons, whereas, in the case of the history of Europe in Africa there emerged a clash within the GHA that was more profound.

Kathryn Murphy and Anita Traninger.<sup>3</sup> All have richly contextualised this virtue in the context of European historical scholarship in the 18th, 19th and 20th century, and often contrasted it with the more modern ideal of ‘objectivity’. They have shown that who was seen as impartial was dependent on moral as well as political considerations and contexts, whether one had been trained in the method of source criticism or was able to consider different (political) points of view.<sup>4</sup>

The chapter first discusses volume VII, entitled *Africa under Colonial Domination 1880–1935* and edited by Adu Boahen, to research how he and the GHA dealt with the history of colonisation. Next, the chapter examines volume VIII, entitled *Africa since 1935*, edited by Ali A. Mazrui. The ISC spent years discussing the title and table of contents for the last volume, a testament to the difficulty of writing the history of decolonisation whilst it was still underway, specifically in Southern Africa. The third part of the chapter, consequently, draws the conclusion that scholarly and political activism within the GHA was closely entwined with mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within scholarship and the question of who could write the history of Africa and from what African perspective. The chapter, therefore, uses the last two volumes as a case study to investigate the relationship between politics and academic history writing in the GHA.

## **Volume VII: Where does history end and politics begin?**

Volume VII dealt with the violent encounter between European imperialism and African peoples. Contrary to most of the material treated in the previous six volumes, this meant volume VII explicitly dealt with history that had also been interpreted and written by European colonial historians who, according to the Boahen, had completely ignored the actions of Africans.<sup>5</sup> The point of volume VII was to pro-

---

3 Lorraine Daston, “Objectivity and Impartiality. Epistemic Virtues in the Humanities” in *The Making of the Humanities III: The Modern Humanities*, eds. Rens Bod, Jaap Maat and Thijs Weststeijn, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 27–42 and Kathryn Murphy and Anita Traninger, *The Emergence of Impartiality* (Leiden: Brill, 2014)

4 Herman Paul, “Distance and Self-Distanciation: Intellectual Virtue and Historical Method Around 1900” *History and Theory* 50:4 (2011): 104–16.

5 Adu Boahen, “Africa and the Colonial Challenge” in *General History of Africa VII Africa under Colonial Domination 1880–1935*, ed. A. Adu Boahen (Paris: UNESCO, 1985), 1–19, 9.

vide a counter-narrative, not to prove that there was a narrative to tell in the first place. As will become clear on the following pages not everyone agreed with the instrumentality of history that was attached to this mission. How did various contributors to the volume respond to Boahen's interpretation of what it meant to create useful history? The following pages will first explain exactly how and with what goal in mind Boahen edited and directed his volume, before detailing one particular moment of tension that hinged on different interpretations on the use of history.

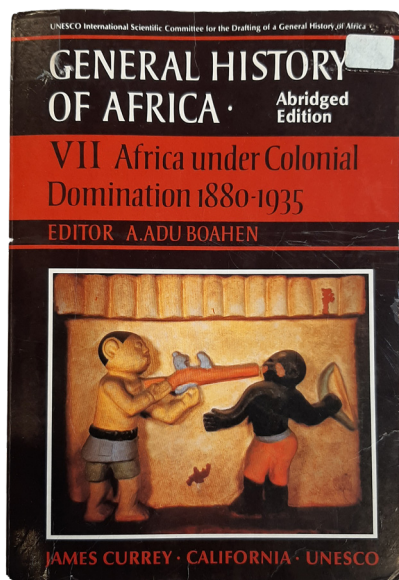


Fig.3 Dust jacket of Volume VII, English abridged edition.

The image portrayed on the dust jacket of volume VII is illuminating. (See Figure 3.) It depicts a relief of an African and a European, taken from one of the palace walls of Dahomey in Abomey. The European threatens the African with a gun, whilst the African holds only a bow, thereby emphasising the unequal relationship between the two. The cover portrayed an obvious political message. One that seemed to signify that Europeans had come to Africa to wage unfair and bloody war against Africans during the 20th century.<sup>6</sup> In the first chapter of

<sup>6</sup> For a similar discussion on this jacket-cover, see: Casper Andersen, "UNESCO's General History of Africa, memory and the quest for relevance" in *Essays in Memory of Jan-Georg Deutsch*, eds. Cassandra Mark-Thiesen, Moritz Mihatsch and Michelle Sikes (Melton: James Curry, forthcoming 2022)

the volume, however, the editor of the volume explains that the dust jacket also conveyed a positive message. With it, he aimed to portray that Africans, against great odds, managed to survive and even thrive during the colonial period, and meant to signify that the volume dealt with African initiative and resistance in the face of terrible colonial conquest. Boahen wanted to show that Africans had bravely resisted the imposition of colonial rule. Boahen's point was that it was not due to any inherent weakness of African societies that Europeans had managed to conquer nearly the entire continent in the late 19th and early 20th century, but, that it was simply due to technological advancements in Europe.<sup>7</sup>

Boahen espoused an idea of African society as united through a common resistance to colonialism and simultaneously emphasised that the colonial period was only a short interlude between two periods of state-formation. However, 'Africa did face a very serious challenge', Boahen wrote, 'the challenge of colonialism.'<sup>8</sup> What mattered, and what the volume would be about, was how Africans responded to that challenge. Or, as Boahen put it: 'What was the attitude of the Africans themselves to the establishment of colonialism, involving as it did such a fundamental change in the nature of the relationships that had existed between them and the European over the preceding three hundred years?'<sup>9</sup> Boahen underlined the importance of bringing to light African responses and resistance to colonialism by quoting Prempeh I of Asante, Wobogo, King of the Mossi as well as Menelik of Ethiopia in their refusal to relinquish lands or control to European colonialists, be they British, French or Italian. Volume VII of the GHA had as its task, he continued, to bring to light these African resisters because their actions had been 'grossly misrepresented or entirely ignored' by colonial historians. The editor did not miss the opportunity to name and shame the historians he had in mind, such as Lewis Henry Gann, Peter Duignan and Margery Perham, quoting the latter at length. He balked at her use of the term 'pacification', calling it, 'Eurocentric.' In the early 1970s, Gann and Duignan had published a five-volume series

---

<sup>7</sup> Boahen, "Africa and the Colonial Challenge", 10 and Andersen, "UNESCO's General History of Africa"

<sup>8</sup> Boahen, "Africa and the Colonial Challenge", 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

*A History of Colonialism in Africa, 1870–1960*.<sup>10</sup> Gann specifically had previously been sympathetic to colonialism and it is therefore not surprising that Boahen aimed his dissatisfaction at him, amongst others. ‘It is to correct this wrong interpretation of the colonial school and to redress the balance and highlight the African perspective that we have devoted as many as seven chapters [out of thirty] to this theme of African initiatives and reactions.’<sup>11</sup>

‘Pacification’ was not the only word that Boahen perceived as eurocentric and colonial. He was careful not to condemn Africans who worked with Europeans in order to safeguard their independence, grasp economic opportunity or simply the safety of their people. He therefore banned use of the word ‘collaboration’, stating that African rulers who were painted as collaborators had been ‘grossly misunderstood.’ ‘We are opposed to the use of this term collaboration not only because it is inaccurate but also because it is derogatory and Eurocentric. [...] only those historians who are really ignorant of or hold very simplistic views about the political and ethno-cultural situation in Africa on the eve of the European partition and conquest would use that term.’<sup>12</sup>

As a result of his focus on African initiatives and perspectives, Boahen could be seen as a near-perfect representative of the nationalist school of African historiography, which had an important influence on the *General History of Africa* as a whole, even though it should not be identified entirely with just this group of African historians.<sup>13</sup> Although the nationalist historians had a preference for pre-colonial

---

10 Lewis H. Gann and Peter Duignan, *Colonialism in Africa, 1870–1960 Vol. 1–5* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969–1975)

11 Boahen, ‘Africa and the Colonial Challenge’, 9.

12 Ibid, 11–12.

13 Toyin Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001), 228, 231, 239. The most famous examples of the nationalist school are the Ibadan history series, edited by Kenneth Dike as well as his 1950 PhD on *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885*. The symbolic significance of this book was considerable and Dike has since often been called the father of African historiography because he analysed Africans and Europeans on equal ground, as different actors within the same historical context. When I spend some time in 2018 interviewing historians who had been part of the Ibadan school, many of them named Dike’s book as a turning point in their own career because it proved academic African history could be written and produced by Africans taking Africans as rational actors within the narrative. It was published in 1956. K. Onwuka Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830–1885. An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956)

subjects, Toyin Falola describes how this first generation of African historians expanded their scope beyond the pre-colonial to write the history of European imperialism in as far as it concerned Africa to include 'the African response to European penetration' as well as 'the brilliance of Africans in adapting to changes.'<sup>14</sup> This was exactly what Boahen did in volume VII.

The African national perspective guided Boahen throughout his editorship of volume VII. Boahen was born in 1932 in Oseim, in Ghana's eastern region.<sup>15</sup> He first took a degree in history at Ghana Legon before obtaining a PhD at SOAS in 1959. He then returned to Legon in Accra and had, by then, come to believe that African history needed to be Africanised and decolonised. He pursued this through the GHA and in his role as lecturer and educator at Legon, writing several textbooks on the history of West Africa. Boahen's analysis of colonial Africa had a clear political purpose, because for Boahen there was no obvious contradiction between being a historian and a political activist.<sup>16</sup> To ignore that history was political, was to be disingenuous. For history had an important role in post-colonial nation-building. Volume VII, with its focus on African resistance and initiative was therefore wholly Boahen's project in that he drew lines between resistance to colonial rule and the rise of nationalism throughout the volume.

African resistance to European conquest and colonisation had, by the 1970s, when the volume was written, become an important and contested issue in African historiography, with books on the Maji Maji and on Samori Ture, amongst others, as result.<sup>17</sup> Frederick Cooper has written that Boahen's concept of resistance to colonialism reflected the first generation of post-independence Africanist scholarship that was mostly concerned with nationalism and sovereignty of the state. This period was then followed by a focus on differentiation within Af-

---

<sup>14</sup> Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, 227.

<sup>15</sup> Kwabena O. Akurang-Parry, "A. Adu Boahen", in *The Dark Webs. Perspectives on Colonialism in Africa*, ed. Toyin Falola (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), 379-99, 387.

<sup>16</sup> Toyin Falola, "Adu Boahen: An Introduction" in *Ghana in Africa and the World. Essays in Honor of Adu Boahen*, ed. Toyin Falola (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), 3-18, 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo, "From African Historiographies to an African Philosophy of History" in *Africanizing Knowledge. African Studies Across the Disciplines*, ed. Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 13-64, 17.

rican society and underdevelopment, brought over from Latin America and associated with Walter Rodney, amongst others. Dependency theory resulted from a disillusionment with independence in the 1970s.<sup>18</sup> Even though the GHA also dealt with the crisis of the 70s, the African perspective remained the most important historiographical orientation.

The seven chapters Boahen mentioned all more or less delivered what the introduction had promised in their description of the African initiative. Each chapter covered a different geographical area and meticulously detailed different forms of resistance to colonial conquest and rule. Chapter four, for instance, told of the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, but from the perspective of resistance leaders, such as Colonel Ahmad Urabi (1839–1911), a famous anti-colonialist. It also described the Mahdist revolution and risings in the Sudan and covered the Azande leader Yambio's attempts to play off two colonial powers against one another.<sup>19</sup> Chapter five, on North Africa and the Sahara, follows Boahen's lead as well, this time in denouncing colonial historians who 'knowingly distort the facts.'<sup>20</sup> Chapter six emphasises that resistance to European impositions had started long before 1900, as had been estimated in previous accounts.<sup>21</sup> All the chapters mentions anti-colonial nationalist resistance as leading forces against colonialism.

The chapters mentioned above follow the introduction so closely because Boahen took his role as editor seriously and reviewed chapters extensively. In cooperation with Jacob Ade Ajayi, who was the reading committee rapporteur for the volume, he made the chapters align with his idea on how colonialism should be interpreted and often made

---

18 For an overview of African historiography on resistance see: Frederick Cooper, "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History" *The American Historical Review* 99:5 (1994): 1516–1545.

19 H. A. Ibrahim, based on a contribution by the late Abbas I. Ali, "4. African initiatives and resistance in North-East Africa" in *General History of Africa VII. Africa under Colonial Domination 1880–1935*, ed. A. Adu Boahen (Paris: UNESCO, 1985), 63–86, 65, 73–80, 81.

20 A. Laroui, "5. African initiatives and resistance in North Africa and the Sahara" in *General History of Africa VII. Africa under Colonial Domination 1880–1935*, ed. A. Adu Boahen (Paris: UNESCO, 1985), 87–114, 89, 105.

21 M'Baye Gueye and A. Adu Boahen, "6. African initiatives and resistance in West Africa, 1880–1914" in *General History of Africa VII. Africa under Colonial Domination 1880–1935*, ed. A. Adu Boahen (Paris: UNESCO, 1985), 114–148, 129.

authors change their terminology.<sup>22</sup> One of the reading reports for volume VII bears testimony to this. Concerning Chapter four, it states that the chapter ‘was heavily criticised for being Euro-centric’, but that it had now been revised and had become ‘coherent.’<sup>23</sup> Chapter nine, which deals with *African initiatives and Resistance in Southern Africa*, by David Chanaiwa, too had ‘improved.’<sup>24</sup> In a letter to Chanaiwa, dated 19 December 1978, Boahen pressed the author to focus more on the ‘Afrocentric perspective’ in relation to Zulu resistance at the battle of Isandhlawana.<sup>25</sup> In other letters, for instance to Godfried Uzoigwe or Phares Mutibwa, Boahen too asked for more material on ‘the African dimension’ or concluded that ‘a more Afrocentric approach is called for.’ In the latter case Boahen explained that he wanted more on the reactions of the non-elite and the impact of colonial rule on both the state and the people.<sup>26</sup> Boahen and Ade Ajayi thus worked together to create a volume that would truly show their idea of ‘Africa from the inside’ and created a close personal friendship in the process. They visited each other regularly and kept an extensive professional as well as personal correspondence.<sup>27</sup>

Ade Ajayi too had studied the colonial period and specifically colonial historiography. In 1969 he produced a seminal essay on the question of the colonial history of Africa, entitled *Colonialism: an episode in African history*, for an edited volume on Colonialism in Africa, which was edited, ironically, by Gann and Duignan. They would be castigated by Boahen for being eurocentric years later.<sup>28</sup> In the seminal chapter, Ajayi makes a case for African history to be treated on its own terms and not just as an extension of European history. According to Ajayi, the history of West Africa, for instance, was more than the history

---

<sup>22</sup> UAP, SHC/75/CONF.613/3, April 1976, Third Plenary Session, Cotonou, Benin (Dahomey), 8 – 13 September, 1975, 9.

<sup>23</sup> JTLI, JAAP, Box 77, Third Report of the Reading Committee on Volume VII. By J.F. Ade Ajayi, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>25</sup> UAP, CLT CS 7, Adu Boahen to David Chanaiwa, 19-12-1978, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> UAP, CLT CS 7, Adu Boahen to Godfried Uzoigwe, 9-01-1980 and UAP, CLT CS 8, Adu Boahen to Phares Mutibwa, 19-12-1978.

<sup>27</sup> I have based these sentences on personal conversations with Christie Ade Ajayi, the widow of the late Jacob Festus Ade Ajayi, in the summer of 2018.

<sup>28</sup> J. F. A. Ajayi, “Colonialism: an episode in African history” in *Colonialism in Africa 1870-1960. Volume I The History and Politics of Colonialism 1870-1914*, ed. L.H. Gann and Peter Duignan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 497-510.

of the slave trade. African initiative, moreover, had to be researched as worthwhile in and off itself and not just as part of a reaction to European deeds. Ajayi argued that the influence of colonialism had been overstated and, moreover, that it could not be understood without reference to pre-colonial history, thereby placing Africans rather than European concerns at the centre of the history of colonialism. 'This is why the colonial impact cannot be fully understood or assessed except in the context of African history' Ajayi wrote. In other words; rather than see colonialism as an extension of European history, Ajayi chose to see it as a part of African history that happened to contain Europeans. Colonial historians, according to Ajayi, had impressed a teleology on African history by proposing the Christian imposition of European rule on Africa as a culmination of a biblical world history. He proposed a different view of history and historical scholarship on Africa that would emphasise continuity over disruption to see the colonial era for what it was; a relatively short interlude of less than a century in a history that contained millennia.<sup>29</sup> Underneath Ajayi's work on volume VII, therefore, lay a well-thought-out idea of how the history of colonialism should be approached. This idea, moreover, overlapped with Boahen's to a great extent and moreover, with that of the GHA as a whole.<sup>30</sup>

It was this idea of emphasising the continuity in African history from an Afrocentric perspective that underlay the editing of volume VII. One of the reading reports of volume VII explains that the first chapter had originally been drafted by Sylvanus John Sodienye Cook-ey, a Nigerian.<sup>31</sup> The Bureau was not happy with it, stating that it was 'not sufficiently in line with the general philosophy of the project as defined by the Scientific Committee at its 1971 session.' During the seventh meeting of the Bureau in Paris, in 1977, it became clear that the chapter, and indeed the volume, were not yet in line with the 'decisions [...] taken by the Committee, with particular reference to the need to write a history dealing with the continent as a totality, and to write it, 'viewed essentially from the inside.' The Bureau made it clear that 'ambiguous expressions and historical clichés which convey impressions derogatory of African life and historical achieve-

29 Ajayi, "Colonialism: an episode in African history", 497-510.

30 Partly inspired, as suggested in chapter one, by Ferdinand Braudel.

31 JTLI, JAAP, Box 77, Third Report of the Reading Committee on Volume VII. By J.F. Ade Ajayi, 1.

ments should be avoided.’<sup>32</sup> Boahen rewrote the chapter, extensively. The opening chapter thereby became a template for the whole volume which so clearly came to carry Boahen’s influence. In the end, Cookey’s name was removed all together. Generally, then, the Bureau, Boahen and Ajayi were all in agreement as to what message the volume and its chapters should carry and how this reflected the general philosophy of the GHA. That message combined a political and historiographical purpose regarding African history. It showed how the ideals of the GHA had to come to fruition in the actual work of historical scholarship that became volume VII. It also showed that Boahen, supported by the Bureau it seems, did not always draw a clear line between history and politics.

How political exactly that volume was going to be and what kind of politics it would espouse, however, became a point of contention for some. Boahen believed that the role of history was not only to create knowledge of the past, but also to build for the future. History should explicitly contribute to nation-building and for that purpose colonial history needed to be reinterpreted to show how Africans had resisted their European colonial oppressors, but also that they had been engaged in state-building. In the concluding chapter for volume VII, moreover, Boahen emphasises that African leaders would do well to study the impact of this chapter on contemporary society in order to ‘redress its shortcomings and failures’, a closing statement that underscored the political importance of the volume.<sup>33</sup> However, not all authors completely agreed with Boahen’s view of history, as some of the correspondence between the editor and his authors shows. The line between politics and history could be drawn in a myriad of different ways, as could the question what the purpose of history was.

An exchange between Boahen and the well-known historian of nationalism as well as African resistance, Terence Ranger became especially heated, partly due to a different perspective on the history of colonialism in Africa. Ranger had originally been commissioned to write a historiographical overview on African resistance to colonialism, in 1973, and Boahen at first had reacted positively, stating only

---

32 UAP, CC-77/CONF.602/2. Paris 30 September 1977. Seventh meeting of the bureau of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, Paris, 18–29 July 1977, Final Report, 23.

33 A. Adu Boahen, “30. Colonialism in Africa: its impact and significance” in *General History of Africa VII. Africa under Colonial Domination 1880–1935*, ed. A. Adu Boahen (Paris: UNESCO, 1985), 782–809, 809.

that Ranger had to provide more background information for the lay reader, if his chapter was to fit with the general aim of the GHA. In 1978, however, Boahen wrote Ranger again, asking him to completely revise the chapter, pointing towards ‘the general psychological approach’ which needed correction:

The Bureau took particular exception to [...] the notion that some states were new and therefore lacked legitimacy and consequently could not resist Europeans. [...] It appears to me now that many historians, including you, have considered African reactions to the imposition of colonial rule from the 1880s to the 1940s and 1950s as essentially a *simple phenomenon* [my emphasis] [...] And as for the terms collaboration and collaborators, I, as an African, abhor their use.<sup>34</sup>

Ranger angrily replied to Boahen on 4 January 1979: ‘I seek to be cooperative man but I can do very little of the things you suggest in your letter.’ His first point of contention was the amount of time that had passed between Boahen’s original editorial comments and his most recent letter, ‘it is certainly true that because of the very long delays in publication my chapter [...] now reads as out of date.’ Secondly, Ranger simply did not agree with the Bureau’s comments on the legitimacy of African states, writing:

it is unclear to me why the Bureau took particular exception to the idea that some states lacked the legitimacy required for effective resistance. Do they merely dislike the thought? Or are they prepared to say on scholarly grounds that it is unfounded? To my mind the idea of an important aspect of making African historiography fully mature as well as true in fact. [...] Moreover, this emphasis is one which characterizes a great deal of recent, radical work on African resistance by both black and white scholars. It is in no sense part of the psychology of colonialism or neo-colonialism.<sup>35</sup>

---

34 UAP, CLT CS 7, A. Adu Boahen to Terence Ranger, 19-12-1978.

35 UAP, CLT CS 7, Terence Ranger to A. Adu Boahen, 04-01-1979.

In Ranger reading of Boahen's letter, then, he had been accused of neo-colonialism and he did not take that accusation lightly, having been an active member of the anti-colonial nationalist movement in what was then Rhodesia.<sup>36</sup> As he explained, his intention was for African history to be treated seriously, with the same rigour as European history. It seems the Bureau's brand of nationalist history no longer fit the mould of historiographical maturity according to Ranger. Thirdly, Ranger took exceptional injury at Boahen's suggestion that his account of African resistance had been too simple. He intimated that perhaps it was Boahen who oversimplified matters in his analysis of colonialism. Ranger ended the letter by stating that it was 'absurd' to ask him to make substantial changes to the chapter, at such a late stage.<sup>37</sup>

Boahen in turn responded equally angrily in a very short letter. He took offense at Ranger's use of the word absurd: 'I never expected that one could use such a word in a letter to a colleague, even if that colleague happens to be an African.'<sup>38</sup> Twice, therefore, did Boahen emphasise his identity as African in his letters to Ranger, more or less accusing the latter of racism in the process. In a letter to Glélé, Boahen suggested scrapping Ranger's contribution altogether. But, as the final volume bears witness, this did not happen, for Glélé did not think it was a good idea — a testament to his influence on the GHA.<sup>39</sup> The altercation between Boahen and Ranger rested on two very different interpretations of the function of African history and resistance within that history.

Terence Ranger, whose Dphil supervisor, incidentally, had been Trevor-Roper, had come into the study of African history through a focus on African initiatives, making use of innovative archival research methods that aimed to look for the African perspective.<sup>40</sup> By 1978, however, Ranger had come to take a critical position towards the connection between pre-colonial movements, which he had previously dubbed 'primary resistance', and modern mass political movements. He criticised the idea that 'primary resistance' as such could be mapped

---

36 As a result of his anti-colonial activities there, he eventually lost his residence permit and was forced to leave the country. Megan Vaugh and Luise White, "Terence Ranger", *Past & Present* 228 (2015): 3-14, 6.

37 UAP, CLT CS 7, Terence Ranger to A. Adu Boahen, 04-01-1979.

38 UAP, CLT CS 7, A. Adu Boahen to Terence Ranger, 30-01-1979

39 UAP, CLT CS 7, Maurice Glélé to A. Adu Boahen, 15-10-1979.

40 Vaugh and White, "Terence Ranger", 6-7, 9.

onto nationalist movements as well as the semblance of too much unity within African groups, emphasising the inherent elitism in some nationalist movements.<sup>41</sup> He also connected the endeavour of history for nation-building to what he called, following Frantz Fanon, bourgeois history and argued that the role of African nationalist history had purely been to contribute to cultural nationalism.<sup>42</sup> Not all African resistance was directed towards Europeans. For the bulk of the people, Ranger surmised, European colonialism only meant a change of political overlord, rather than a loss of sovereignty and resistance could therefore also be understood as resistance to local elites. Ranger, moreover, had founded the Dar es Salaam school of history in 1963, after he had left Rhodesia, which also came to house Rodney. Originally Dar es Salaam had, under Ranger's leadership, come to focus on resistance, but it later turned from a nationalist orientation to a Marxist one and, as a result, became more and more concerned with theory.<sup>43</sup> The school came to self-criticise for a failure to engage in the implication of colonialism and global interactions.<sup>44</sup> Ranger also came to believe that his previous writings on African resistance needed to be corrected and that African history needed to become more relatable to a larger section of the population to prove Trevor-Roper wrong 'that the emperor of African historiography had no clothes' because its only purpose was nationalist pride.<sup>45</sup> 'African historiography has been important in Africa for reasons of pride because it could not possibly have been useful for anything else. [...] There are many reasons for this. One of them has been the largely political emphasis of most African historical writing and a consequent emphasis on state structures rather than on local realities', Ranger wrote in 1976.<sup>46</sup>

---

41 Terence Ranger, "Review: The People in African Resistance: A Review," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 4:1 (1977): 125-146 and Cooper, "Conflict and Connection", 1520.

42 Terence Ranger, "Towards a Usable African Past", In *African Studies since 1945. A Tribute to Basil Davidson*, ed. Christopher Fyfe (London: Longman Group United, 1976), 17-29.

43 Michael Twaddle, "Historians and African History" In *The British Intellectual Engagement with Africa in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Douglas Rimmer and Anthony Kirk-Greene (London: MacMillan Press LTD, 2000), 138-155, 144-5.

44 Atieno-Odhiambo, "From African Historiographies", 17.

45 Ranger, "Towards a Usable African Past", 23.

46 Ibid.

Ranger had thus come to take a critical position to the kind of historiography Boahen espoused, although he never quite committed to a materialist stance either.<sup>47</sup> The difference between the two ideas on (African) history were essentially differences in what it meant to create a 'usable past'. What was the purpose of (African) history? For Boahen it was important to focus on state-building and African resistance through nationalism. He saw colonialism chiefly as imposition on African indigenous rule and saw historical scholarship as part and parcel of the nationalist project. Ranger, on the other hand, increasingly came to favour history that would focus on African agency and that would be relatable to the local realities. Both wanted to be relevant towards society, however.

Although it is important to note that both were concerned with the political aim of writing history, for Ranger that also seemed to mean making the discipline of African history more academic and more rigorous. This was equally a political action in and off itself and a goal shared by the GHA as well. Boahen, nevertheless, had less use for Ranger's specific type of politics as he saw them as obstructing the main goal of African history, namely to provide for historical narratives for new states. Importantly, Ranger was not the only one who disagreed with Boahen on the importance of the 'state' as an analytical category within African history. Bethwell Ogot too had come to call for an approach to African history which would move beyond a focus on the state in an effort to counter the critique levelled against nationalist history. Yet, he did not think that nationalist history was necessarily bourgeois and believed that the Marxist or dependency schools gave too much weight to capitalism and colonialism. He therefore called for African history develop its own autonomous approach to history.<sup>48</sup> In the readers report for volume VII, moreover, Curtin wrote: 'While recognising that one intention of the *General History of Africa* is to redress the balance and to correct past distortions of African history, that objective is not really accomplished by simply reversing the polarity of "good guys" and "bad guys"'. Curtin then, believed that the colonialist historiography was not simply redressed by mimicking it. He also noted that too much emphasis had been put on political and military history, echoing earlier critique by Isaria Kimambo, also from Dar es Salaam, that the history was too focused on 'Kings and Wars'. Curtin

---

47 Vaugh and White, "Terence Ranger", 7-8.

48 Twaddle, "Historians and African History", 146-7.

too referenced Trevor-Roper to argue that it would not do to simply meet his standards of ‘good history’.<sup>49</sup> The wish to correct eurocentric historiography, therefore, could also be taken too far to produce politically desirable, but historiographically flawed accounts of the African past.<sup>50</sup>

Boahen himself, moreover, went through a development during the period of time that elapsed between his first and last letter to Ranger. He changed his mind about use of the word ‘collaborator’ halfway through the editing of volume VII, for instance. When the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa (ISC) and Boahen started work on volume VII, it was 1973. Boahen started accepting the first drafts in 1975 with limited criticism. By 1978, he had developed his thoughts on the history of colonialism and African resistance, specifically its terminology, and started writing to authors again in a plea to update their final chapters — often to these authors’ chagrin.<sup>51</sup>

The time lapse between Boahen’s first editorial remarks in 1975 and the second series in 1978, which so irked Ranger, was the result of his connection to a series of political upheavals in Ghana. Boahen was sent to prison for several months by Ignatius Kutu Acheampong’s military regime on account of his involvement as co-founder in the *People’s Movement for Freedom and Justice*.<sup>52</sup> He had therefore developed first-hand experience with political insurgency of some sort and may have developed his view on African resistance as a result of that too. Perhaps it was because of this experience with autocracy that he also started to look beyond the importance of the state himself, for instance in his comments to Mutibwa. It had, however, not been Boahen’s final

---

49 JTLI, JAAP, Box 77, P.D. Curtin. Reader’s Report on Volume VII, Chapter 6, 4th version (October 1981), 1. Elsewhere in the reading report allusions were made to Hegelian influences as having corrupted the history of Africa. UAP, CC CSP 38, General History of Africa Volume IV. First Supplement to the Report of the Reading Committee. Rapporteur: Ivan HRBEK, 2.

50 This has been noted as well by Finn Fuglestad, “The Trevor-Roper Trap or the Imperialism of History. An Essay” *History in Africa* 19 (1992): 309–326.

51 Godfried Uzoigwe also replied to Boahen’s letter from December 1978, in which the latter asked for revision, by stating that he would only comply with his requests out of friendship, given that the demands were absurd. UAP, CLT CS 7, Godfried Uzoigwe to Adu Boahen, 31-01-1979.

52 N.N., “Acheampong, Ignatius Kutu (1931-1979)” in *Dictionary of African Biography Volume I: Abach-Brand*, eds. Emmanuel K. Akyeampong and Henry Louis Gates, JR (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 78–9.

foray into politics proper with a capital 'P'. In 1992 he made national headlines again by running for president, causing Ali Mazrui to jokingly write to Monique Melcer Lesueur, a UNESCO official, that it was perhaps Boahen political campaigning that was 'partly to blame for the uncertainty!!' regarding new bureau meetings.<sup>53</sup> Mazrui, moreover, referred to Joseph Ki-Zerbo as well, who had just returned out of political exile in Senegal to Burkina Faso and became politically active once again. 'If he and Professor Ki-Zerbo become presidents of their respective countries, I would be tempted to consider changing my own career as well!!!' — Mazrui wrote. Although Mazrui was evidently joking, given his generous use of exclamation marks, his comments, as well as those made by Ranger and others, do betray some sort of hesitance vis-à-vis historians becoming politicians proper.

In combination with Ranger's specific reflections on the politics of African history, and his critique of nationalist history writing, it seems that what was and was not the right kind of politics for the history of colonialism in Africa in general and the GHA in specific was in the eye of the beholder and subject to change over time. The question of and the need to position the GHA vis-a-vis 'Europe' within the history of colonialism in Africa brought out these political-epistemic tensions. Where then did historical scholarship end and political activity begin?

## **Volume VIII: How to write contemporary history of Africa**

Concerns over the importance of colonialism for African history and related questions of political engagement lingered during the drafting of volume VIII on decolonisation, which the committee envisioned as encompassing cultural changes as well as the struggle for political independence.<sup>54</sup> The last volume, therefore, because it dealt with contemporary history, functions as an ideal case study to investigate how the ISC and Mazrui as editor, thought politics and history should be balanced in the writing of contemporary history. The volume editor espoused a broad idea of what decolonisation had meant for the

---

<sup>53</sup> UAP, CLT CID 99, Ali Mazrui to Monique Melcer Lesueur, 3-08-1992.

<sup>54</sup> 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, 145.

continent that went further than purely giving historical meaning. It had awakened Africans to a pan-African consciousness and it was for that reason that the dust jacket of this volume depicts the nations of Africa together at the Organisation for African Unity<sup>55</sup> (see Figure 4). Mazrui, unlike Boahen, was quick to point towards European influences on Africa, and, crucially, African influences on Europe. ‘What about the reverse impact of Africa upon the West?’<sup>56</sup> He asked. ‘What emerges from the story of this period is, in part, how Africa helped to re-humanise Europe, and how Europe helped to re-Africanise Africa’, Mazrui wrote, capturing one of the GHA’s guiding ideals of Africanisation.<sup>57</sup>

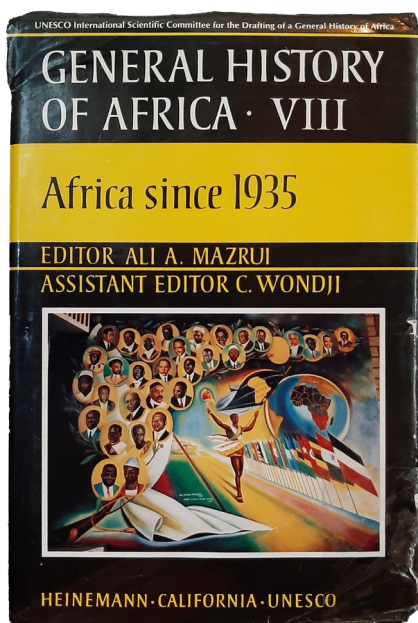


Fig. 4: The dust jacket of volume VIII of the GHA, English edition.

As Priyamvada Gopal has shown in her *Insurgent Empire: Anti-colonial resistance and British Dissent*, it was often anti-colonial thinkers who emphasised the false paternalism present in European colonialism. Anti-colonial movements were not only inspired by values, such

<sup>55</sup> Dust jacket, *General History of Africa VIII. Africa since 1935*. ed. Ali A. Mazrui, ass. ed. C. Wondji (Paris: UNESCO, 1993)

<sup>56</sup> Ali A. Mazrui, “Introduction” in *General History of Africa VIII. Africa since 1935*, ed. Ali A. Mazrui, ass. ed. C. Wondji (Paris: UNESCO, 1993), 1–25, 9

<sup>57</sup> Mazrui, “Introduction”, 7.

as liberty and democracy, as they had come to be shaped in Europe, but also taught Europeans in ways that not only expanded upon existing ideas but created new ones, she argues.<sup>58</sup> Mazrui emphasised a similar reversal of the flow of ideas in the introduction to his volume. Liberation in volume VIII therefore was not just political liberation from Europeans, but also a liberation from the idea that freedom and democracy were solely European inventions. In a move away from what most of the GHA had emphasised throughout its lifespan, Mazrui did not want to ignore the contact between Africa and Europe during the colonial period and was of the opinion that it had mattered for both continents. That meant that colonialism had mattered for African history, but in a different way than the colonial historians so beleaguered by Boahen had argued. For Mazrui, the colonial period had not determined African identities, but added on to them and the same was true for Europeans.<sup>59</sup> In reaction to colonial conquest and imperialism the resisters to colonialism shaped new political realities that both shaped and mutually influenced the history of the metropole.<sup>60</sup> Mazrui repeatedly pointed towards the importance of entangled histories between metropolises and colonial territories, between Africa and Europe. Mazrui's view on decolonisation thus pointed towards a rejection of the colonial relations between Africa and Europe. Mazrui's interpretation was not any less political than Boahen's or the Bureau's, but simply different in how Mazrui wanted to operationalise history to identify problems in African societies rather than for the purpose of nation-building. The rest of this section will detail in what way Mazrui's view on the writing of contemporary history differed from that of the rest of the ISC.

The difference of opinion between several ISC members and Mazrui on how important Europe had been for post-colonial and colonial Africa and therefore in what way contemporary history had to be approached, lay at the heart of a drawn-out debate about the table of contents for volume VII. The political dimensions of the last volume made it exceedingly difficult to agree on a table of contents, as Glélé explained during an opening speech for one of the symposiums that

---

58 Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire. Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London: Verso Books, 2019) 10–27.

59 Mazrui, "Introduction", 25.

60 Gopal, *Insurgent Empire*, 452.

had been organised to discuss the volume.<sup>61</sup> The first version of the table of contents had been created in 1970 during the first plenary session of the ISC, but the debate did not commence until much later, in Fez in 1975, during the fifth meeting of the bureau.<sup>62</sup> The reason for this being that proper drafting of Volume VIII did not start before that time. During the Fez meeting the Bureau discussed the table of contents as it had been proposed by the volume editor, Mazrui. The Bureau did not like Mazrui's comparative approach and thought it infringed upon the GHA's wish to treat Africa as a whole, stating that chapters surveying the whole of Africa were needed.<sup>63</sup> The Bureau thought Mazrui had neglected to follow the GHA guidelines and proposed 'radical alterations.' It 'hoped that the Volume Editor would endeavour to treat the questions handled there from a more African point of view rather than from a purely post-colonial one.' Mazrui was perhaps more interested in drawing wider implications from the history of African decolonisation, whereas the rest of the committee, or at least as it spoke through its reports, wanted to focus on Africa itself. Although the Bureau did not want to rule out a comparative approach altogether, they favoured an approach where continent-wide chapters would introduce each section.

The continental approach, moreover, was a way to safeguard the GHA's wish to include many African perspectives. As shown in Chapter 2, the inclusion of as many diverse African perspectives as possible was seen as a way to make sure that through an inclusion of different viewpoints an objective whole could be constructed from many parts. During a seminar that was organised for the benefit of volume VIII, Ajayi acknowledged the difficulty of writing detached contemporary history and argued that the GHA's 'continental approach', by which he meant the inclusion of many different African perspectives, was a way to guard the 'sincere search for historical truth — as distinct

---

61 Maurice Glélé, "Appendix I: Speech by the representative of the Director-General of Unesco" in *the general history of Africa. Studies and documents 5. The decolonization of Africa: southern Africa and the Horn of Africa*. (Paris: Unesco, 1981), 159-161, 161.

62 UAP, SHC/MD/10, Meeting of experts for the drafting and publication of a general history of Africa, Addis Ababa, 22 to 26 June 1970, Final Report, 10-11 and UAP, SHC-75/CONF.601, 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, 4-9. (Hereafter: UAP, Meeting of the Bureau, 5th meeting, Fez, 1975)

63 UAP, Meeting of the Bureau, 5th meeting, Fez, 1975, 5-6.

from propaganda.’<sup>64</sup> Ajayi therefore restated an idea of detachment or objectivity — he used the two interchangeably — that reaffirmed the GHA’s focus on emancipatory history that would include all.

Another more serious point of contention were Mazrui’s ‘references to the colonial past’, however.<sup>65</sup> In September 1975, a few months after the Fez meeting, at the third plenary session of the ISC in Cotonou, the volume was discussed again.<sup>66</sup> The Bureau and Mazrui debated whether ‘his’ volume should be based on colonial watersheds in history, rather than a logic of Africa ‘from the inside’. But, as noted above, for Mazrui the difference made between these two perspectives was perhaps a false one. Mazrui also wanted to ‘give greater prominence’ to contemporary African problems that had not been discussed in previous volumes. The Bureau largely accepted Mazrui’s outline during the meeting, but not without changing the titles of many chapters in the proposed table of contents, often to include more countries or territories in Africa or to create more ‘general overview’ type chapters.

A matter in which Mazrui and the Bureau did agree surrounded the title for the whole volume, however. Although the title that was finally chosen was *Africa since 1935*, the Bureau and Mazrui seriously considered a title that included the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. During the Cotonou meeting they decided on *Africa since the Ethiopian War*.<sup>67</sup> The invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 had been a watershed in anti-colonial history and the development of pan-Africanism.<sup>68</sup> It was described by Nkrumah as a defining moment in his own path towards nationalist insurgency.<sup>69</sup> The GHA explained their initial choice of title by explaining that for Africans the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 marked the beginning of the Second World War. It awakened such

---

64 J.F. Ade Ajayi, “Problems of writing contemporary African history” in *The General History of Africa. Studies and documents 8. 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, 50.

65 UAP, Meeting of the Bureau, 5th meeting, Fez, 1975, 7.

66 UAP, SHC/75/CONF.612/3, International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, 3rd plenary session, Cotonou, Benin, 8–13 September 1975, 11–19. (Hereafter: UAP, 3rd plenary session 1975)

67 UAP, 3rd plenary session 1975, 55.

68 P. Olisanwuche Esedebe, *Pan-Africanism. The Idea and Movement. 1776–1963* (Washington D.C: Howard University Press, 1982)

69 Kwame Nkrumah, *Ghana. The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* (New York: International Publishers, 1971[1957]), 27.

fierce reactions in Nkrumah and Africans across the globe because it constituted the fall of the last independent African state at the time. The attendant absence of a response from other European nations marked a reification of all Africans and African states as subjugated and 'less than'. It therefore signified a cognitive shift in the history of pan-Africanism and national struggles for independence. The invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 was about Euro-African relations, or rather the lack of recognition of such relations by Europeans.<sup>70</sup> The GHA chose to recognise this moment explicitly by starting the last volume in 1935 — the African start of World War Two.

Nevertheless, the discussion on the importance of colonialism for volume VIII was not over. Discussion on the volume continued properly in 1978, in Nairobi, during the eighth Bureau meeting and the fourth plenary ISC session. Here the whole ISC could weigh in on decisions. The title was changed again, this time to *Africa in a decade of world conflict*. 'Ethiopia' as part of the title was definitely dropped here. Perhaps in an effort to draw less attention to a single event and rather, in the vein of the GHA, focus on Africa as a whole. Most importantly, the ISC reached a decision on the importance of colonialism, at least with reference to the section on independence struggles: 'a clear-cut choice was made by the Committee, in that references to the former colonial powers were deleted.'<sup>71</sup> That this was a momentous decision did not go unnoticed, as the report states: 'The Committee having thus deliberated, the earth shook in Nairobi, on Wednesday 5 April 1978, at 9 p.m.'<sup>72</sup> It is important to note here that this decision did not mean that the committee wanted to ignore colonialism altogether, as they did impress upon Mazrui and future authors that 'study should be made of all relevant factors in the former colonial structures which cast light on some of the situations which continued to exist after independence.' For Mazrui this may have been a central issue rather than an aside. Like in volume VII, however, overall, the committee decided that the importance of the impact of colonialism should

---

<sup>70</sup> Gopal, *Insurgent Empire*, 318–28.

<sup>71</sup> UAP, CC-78/CONF.607/3. Paris June 1978. Final Reports of the Eighth 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, 38. (Hereafter: UAP, Final Reports Eighth Meeting of the Bureau and Fourth Plenary Session 1978)

<sup>72</sup> UAP, Final Reports Eighth Meeting of the Bureau and Fourth Plenary Session 1978, 38.

be minimised as far as possible. Implicitly the decision suggested that the ISC did not see the colonial period as an important historiographical marker, but, along with Ajayi, as an ‘episode’ in African history.

Although Mazrui carried out the committees’ wishes, he did not wholeheartedly agree with them. In a working document for the volume sent to the GHA secretariat on 16 July 1979, more than a year after the decision had been made, Mazrui could not help but comment:

Did the Nairobi meeting go too far in the shift from imperial categories to geographical categories? Particularly controversial may have been the Nairobi decision to exclude Mozambique and Angola from Southern Africa. [...] Would this decision unduly complicate work on chapters 8, 9 and 10? Chapters 8 and 9 would have to deal with three linguistic areas [...] instead of two. Chapter 10 would be unilingual (Anglophone) but at the cost of splitting the frontline states. [...] The new geographical regions of Section II are more complicated than the imperial regions recommended in the previous outline of the volume as presented at Nairobi.<sup>73</sup>

Recent political events influenced Mazrui’s thinking about the appropriate organisation of the volume, as the frontline states were an anti-apartheid alliance, including Angola and Mozambique. It seems Mazrui wanted to emphasise the unity between these states. From this particular passage it also seems that Mazrui’s complaints bore directly on the practical costs of deemphasising the colonial impact on Africa. ‘Nairobi’ became quite the headache for Mazrui. Throughout the working document he constantly referred to the difficulties of finding authors who could deal with two or more ‘imperial languages’, implicitly making the point that the colonial period had made an impact on post-colonial Africa — if only linguistically.<sup>74</sup> The introduction that was finally published in the volume certainly suggests that Mazrui was of that opinion and that he was interested in questions pertaining to

---

73 UAP, CLT CID 137, Concerning Authors for Volume VIII of the UNESCO General History of Africa. (Working documents prepared by the Volume Editor) (Received by the Secretariat on 16 July 1979), 1

74 UAP, CLT CID 137, Concerning Authors for Volume VIII of the UNESCO General History of Africa. (Working documents prepared by the Volume Editor) (Received by the Secretariat on 16 July 1979), 3.

the impact of colonialism for Africa. Nevertheless, the final table of contents was organised along thematic and continental lines and decidedly not ‘imperial’ regions, whereas that had been the case pre-Nairobi. For instance, before the Nairobi meeting, the table of contents spoke of chapters on ‘The British Colonies’, ‘The French Colonies’ and others, whereas afterwards it read: ‘North Africa and the horn’, ‘Equatorial West Africa’, ‘Southern Africa since 1945’ etc.<sup>75</sup>

It was not the last difference of opinion regarding volume VIII, however. Nor was it the last time Mazrui was accused of deviating from GHA guidelines. Mazrui was a polemicist and advocate for various causes. Although other GHA scholars could also be classified that way, Mazrui was particularly outspoken.<sup>76</sup> When UNESCO tried to remove the name of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic from Chapter nineteen, for instance, on *the development of modern literature since 1935*, Mazrui wrote an impassioned letter of protest. He spoke of a breach of African sovereignty, stating that ‘this censorship violates not only the author’s own academic independence. It also violates the whole philosophy of the UNESCO *General History of Africa* as an African interpretation of African history.’<sup>77</sup> Mazrui was motivated, it seems, by anti-colonial commitments. It was the Polisario Front which had named the state Sahrawi Arabic Republic, arguing that the land had been colonised by Morocco. His argument was that the organisation of African Unity had recognised the state by what Mazrui and other more radical anti-colonialists’ thought was its proper name, even if UNESCO had not. ‘I thought the whole UNESCO History of Africa was partly intended to let Africa tell its own history according to how Africa saw it. Now you want us to tell the African story according to how UNESCO sees it.’<sup>78</sup> Evidently, ‘how Africa saw it’, was not a singular point of view and Mazrui seems to have been adamant to again underline the connection between anti-colonialism and

---

75 UAP, CC CSP 33, Volume 8 Africa Since the Ethiopia War. 1935–1975. Editor: Ali A. Mazrui. Revised Table of Contents for Approval by Nairobi Meeting, 1978 and Ali A. Mazrui, ed. and Christophe Wondji, ass. ed. *UNESCO General History of Africa VIII. Africa since 1936* (Paris: UNESCO, 1993) v–vii.

76 Chaly Sawere, “The Multiple Mazrui: Scholar, Ideologue, Philosopher and Artist.” In *The Global African. A portrait of Ali A. Mazrui*, ed. Omari H. Kokole (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1998) 269–90 and Seifudein Adem, “Ali A. Mazrui, the Postcolonial Theorist”, *African Studies Review* 57:1 (2014): 135–152, 141.

77 UAP, CLT CID 99, Ali Mazrui to Monique Melcer Lesueur 20–07–1992.

78 Ibid.

the GHA. By the time volume VIII was being drafted, largely in the 1980s, the original political connections of the GHA, to Nkrumah for instance, had been diluted or severed altogether. The GHA was no longer an anti-colonial torchbearer in the 1980s. Mazrui insisted that because the OAU had recognised the state, 'Africa' had, and the name should therefore be in the volume.<sup>79</sup> He triumphed this time and the name was printed in volume VIII, although between parentheses, as a note, added to the name 'Western Sahara'.<sup>80</sup> It seems that he felt a somewhat greater need to incorporate current continental issues within the GHA, something to which some of the GHA historians tended to have allergic reactions as they were trying to prove that African history could be a detached scholarly endeavour. Yet, the idea that the GHA needed to incorporate current political problems did appeal to at least a part of the ISC, including Boahen, who also did not draw as sharp a line between politics and history as some others within the GHA. That there were different ideas on judging what was and was not too political and what history should and could be used for, became evident within the debate between Ranger and Boahen as well. Different stakes were involved for the two men and in that regard their background mattered. A similar dynamic suggests itself in an argument surrounding a possible postface to be added to the French translation of volume VIII.

Because the GHA ran out of its original UNESCO sponsored funding halfway through the process of drafting volume VIII (see Chapter 5), the French translation of that volume took much longer than expected. Whereas the English version was published in 1993, the French version did not appear until 1998. Obviously, the years between 1993 and 1998 were not devoid of changes in Africa — ranging from the tragic in the form of the Rwandan genocide to the ecstatic regarding the formal end of apartheid in South Africa. Christophe Wondji, who had been asked to function as an assistant French-language editor to Mazrui, therefore, came up with the idea to add a postface to the volume. When Mazrui drafted this postface, however, protest erupted.

---

79 Regarding the African Union and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, see: N.N., "Western Sahara", *Africa Research Bulletin: Political, Social and Cultural Series* 54:1 (2017): 21278

80 UAP, CLT CID 99, Fax transmission Gaynor Bartagnon to Ali Mazrui, 22-07-1992 and Volume VIII, 576.

Jan Vansina rejected the postface completely, stating that it undermined the very goal the GHA had set out to achieve:

*Tout cela est beaucoup trop actuel et superficiel pour mériter une inclusion dans ce volume — il ne faut pas donner une arme capitale aux détracteurs en puissance de cette histoire de l'Afrique qui sont tentés de l'accuser d'être partisane et un outil politique, ce que la commission et son bureau ont en général [sic] évité depuis 25 ans!* [All of this is much too current and superficial to merit inclusion in this volume — one should not provide a lethal weapon to powerful critics of this history of Africa, who are inclined to regard it as partisan and a political tool, which is what the Committee and its Bureau generally avoided for 25 years!]<sup>81</sup>

Vansina's commentary on the postface may tell us more about his general idea of what the GHA was to achieve than about the postface itself. Vansina shied away from an overtly political, and therefore, in his estimation, biased GHA. Mazrui had evidently crossed the boundary guiding professional scholarly behaviour in the direction of political partisan involvement. Another critic was Diouldé Laya, a sociologist who had theorised how oral tradition could be used for research within the social sciences.<sup>82</sup> Like Vansina, he did not approve of the postface, calling it '*très subjectif au plan scientifique, très erroné au plan politique, et noctif [sic] au plan intellectuel*' [scientifically very subjective, politically very wrong, and intellectually harmful].<sup>83</sup> Another similarity with Vansina was Laya's investment in the acceptance of oral tradition as viable and reliable source material. Although not quite the same as wanting to shy away from political partisanship, there is a tacit link between needing to be seen as a respectable scholar, with respectable source material, and shying away from overt political involvement. Scholarly respectability, in this instance, seems to have been contingent on scholarly values associated with 'the' imagined or perceived academy. Vansina had, strategically, applied the method of historical

---

81 UAP, CLT CID 103, Jan Vansina to Christophe Wondji 08-02-1997.

82 For a short biography of Diouldé Laya see: N.N., "Diouldé Laya", *Africulture*, accessed 11 February 2020, <http://africultures.com/personnes/?no=29071>

83 UAP, CLT CID 103, Diouldé Laya to Christophe Wondji 16-05-1997.

source criticism to oral traditions because that could prove to the historical scholarly community that oral traditions were in fact legitimate historical sources.<sup>84</sup> For him, scholarly respectability was important and it could be achieved by playing by the rules of scholarship, even now that African history was an established scholarly endeavour — he wrote the letter in 1997. Therefore, Mazrui's apparent failure of doing as such in his political partisanship and his supposedly incorrect application of method, because the postface pertained to recent and current events that could not count as history, were linked. That Vansina did not think the postface should be published in the volume, therefore, was perhaps connected to his wish to be seen as a respectable scholar and to have African history accepted as a respectable scholarly discipline. Fundamentally, Vansina did not like the postface because it did not align with his idea of what historical scholarship ought to be.

That point may be underlined more clearly by looking at those ISC members who did like the postface, or who did not like it, but for reasons completely different from Vansina's. Boahen thought the postface was 'interesting and a typical Mazrui piece — informed, well-written, contrasting and analytical.' Nevertheless, he had a few suggestions:

Ali has left out completely one of the most crucial issues confronting African states in this decade, namely, how to achieve sustainable, self-reliant, human-centred economic and social development [...] There have also been pro-democracy movements which have forced a military ruler either to return to the barracks or to run for usually farcical elections as a civilian candidate of a political party formed by himself.<sup>85</sup>

Although no longer as pre-occupied with history for self-governance in 1997, Boahen still emphasised the civic responsibilities of history. In contrast with Vansina, he did not at any point suggest that the piece was too political or that the history of the early 1990s was too recent to be included in the volume. His critique, rather, suggested

---

84 David Newbury, "Contradictions at the Heart of the Canon: Jan Vansina and the Debate over Oral Historiography in Africa, 1960-1985" *History in Africa* 34 (2007): 215-216.

85 UAP, CLT CID 103, Adu Boahen to Christophe Wondji, 13-02-1997.

that the piece was not relevant enough nor sufficiently engaged in the continent's affairs. Kimambo, too, responded positively to the postface. Given his personal history as a Marxist historian who searched for societal relevance in the context of the Dar es Salaam school of history, his approval of Mazrui's piece makes sense.<sup>86</sup> Both he and Boahen had ideas on the purpose of academic history that were radically different from those of Vansina. Whereas Boahen and Kimambo thought of African history as overtly political, albeit in different ways, for Vansina it was only covertly political. As a result, they judged the Mazrui piece very differently.

This difference in judgment on how to write contemporary history echoed throughout volume VIII, in the debates on the place of colonialism in postcolonial history as well as in the postface. This was at least partly connected to the question of how political a historian could be before they would no longer be taken seriously and more importantly, what kind of politics that historian espoused. What was perceived as impartial scholarship or not — whether political or not and whether politics could infringe on scholarly impartiality — was based on different ideals and rules of scholarship. What was seen as political was not a neutral judgement. Related to that, the question of whether as a scholar it was desirable to be perceived as political or not, depended on whether the scholar wanted to appeal to ideals of scholarly respectability, or to African political realities. For that decision, identity seemed to have mattered.

## **What politics and for whom within the GHA?**

Who was perceived as an impartial professional historian within the GHA and who was not, was contingent on the perceived goal of the project. Given at least one of the goals was emancipatory, the GHA also received critique from within when contributors thought it did not live up to this potential. Ogot was amongst those who critiqued the GHA from within, arguing for the emancipation of non-centralised societies. He worried about the legitimacy of African history after critiques were increasingly levelled against the Nationalist school and

---

<sup>86</sup> Isaria Kimambo, *Three Decades of Production of Historical Knowledge at Dar es Salaam* (Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press, 1993), 4–12 and Bertram B. B. Mapunda, "A Critical Examination of Isaria Kimambo's Ideas Through Time" *History in Africa* 32 (2005): 269–79, 274–5.

suggested that an emphasis on the state was part of an intellectual dependence on the west — specifically Hegel.<sup>87</sup> Ogot had written a dissertation on non-centralised states in East African pre-colonial history.<sup>88</sup> He had pioneered the collection of oral traditions and the writing of history of non-centralised political entities. Early on in his career Ogot had become the president for the Kenyan historical association. In that capacity he published and edited the proceedings of the same society and in its very first edition argued that to only pay attention to the great states of the African past, was to play into European hands.

There is no need to comment on the impression [...] that those African peoples who developed forms of centralised states are the only ones worthy of attention [...] current research on the pre-European history of Africa has effectively disposed of it.<sup>89</sup>

In the GHA itself, too, Ogot emphasised how ‘court-centred histories’ could never be sufficient source material to write the history of the Great Lakes region of East Africa.<sup>90</sup>

As the editor of volume V on the 16th and 17th century, Ogot got into a conflict over the history of the Sudan with Yusuf Hasan, one of the authors, because he thought the chapter was too focused on the history of the centralised Islamic state in the north of the country.<sup>91</sup> This seemed antithetical to the ideals and goals of the GHA to Ogot as it denied the history of non-Islamised peoples, the southern Nilotes who had also been non-centralised. Or as he wrote in a letter to Hasan:

<sup>87</sup> Twaddle, “Historians and African History”, 146.

<sup>88</sup> Ogot, *My footprints*, 96, 105–6. Ogot’s thesis was later adapted into a book: Bethwell Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967).

<sup>89</sup> Bethwell A Ogot, “Some approaches to African History” in *Hadith I, Proceedings of the annual conference of the Historical Association of Kenya 1967*, ed. Bethwell A. Ogot (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968) 1–10, 7.

<sup>90</sup> B. A. Ogot, “20. The Great Lakes region” in *The General History of Africa IV. Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century*, ed. D.T. Niane (Paris: UNESCO, 1984), 496–524, 499.

<sup>91</sup> For more on the conflicting histories of the Sudan see: Elena Vezzadini, “Identity, history and power in the historiography of Sudan: some thoughts on Holt and Daly’s *A History of Modern Sudan*” *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue canadienne des études africaines* 46:3 (2012): 439–451.

You have left out from your account the history of Southern Sudan. Indeed, you have dismissed the whole region in three lines on page 9 [...], on the ground that 'remained outside the influence of Islam and Arabic culture until the nineteenth century', thereby confirming the assumption that the history of the Sudan during this period must be equated with the history of its Islamisation and Arabisation!<sup>92</sup>

Ogot may have been partly motivated to do this because he himself was a Luo from Kenya. The Luo belonged to the Nilotic ethnic group, the same group which was also part of South Sudanese history. Ogot's insistence that African history had to include not just the narrative of great states, but also that of decentralised peoples was not to be seen apart from his own particular context. The tensions between north and south, moreover, were high when Ogot wrote the letter in April 1981. Civil war broke out in June 1983. Northern dominance of Sudan was a key grievance in this conflict and it may therefore be that Ogot was not satisfied with a chapter that was skewed towards the North. Conversely, when Ogot had changed the text, it was Hasan's turn to critique him. Ogot had committed the gravest of historical errors in adding anachronistic elements to the chapter:

Professor Ogot [...] had introduced some fundamental changes which to my mind are not relevant to the period under discussion but are probably more relevant to the "History of the Sudan in the Twentieth Century".<sup>93</sup>

Hasan noted that he thought the 'ethnic struggle' had only come into being after 1821, when Sudan was created as a political entity and that any reference to such struggles before that time, and specifically

---

<sup>92</sup> Ogot, moreover, was unhappy with Hasan's use of the term 'Hamitic', pointing out that the term was "obsolete and meaningless." UAP, CLT CID 92, Bethwell Ogot to Yusuf Hasan, 15 april 1981 and UAP, CLT CID 92, Bethwell Ogot to Maurice Glélé, 24 september 1982.

<sup>93</sup> UAP, CLT CID 104, Yusuf Fadl Hasan to Bethwell Ogot, Maurice Glélé and the members of the Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, 12-08-1986, 3 (Hereafter: UAP, Hasan to Ogot, 12-08-1986)

before the 1947 Juba convention, would be ideological.<sup>94</sup> Glélé urged Ogot to salvage the chapter and handle the situation diplomatically.<sup>95</sup> Eventually, Ogot decided to accept Hasan's point of view, even though he did not agree with it, because it was in the spirit of the GHA to do so and because his volume had already suffered delays. He recognised that the conflict between himself and Hasan was essentially a conflict between northern Sudanese and southern Sudanese perspectives, but since the GHA was 'a work of synthesis involving several authors with different perspectives', he was willing to resist the urge to revise the chapter further.<sup>96</sup> In the end, Hasan too consented to adding Ogot's name to the chapter. The situation was resolved. What this shows is how difficult history writing for emancipation can be. What is seen as emancipatory is open to debate. Here again the origins of the two authors mattered greatly in what perspective they adopted — northern or southern.<sup>97</sup>

As this example shows, what it meant to write impartial, non-ideological, history was dependent on who judged. The opinion of that judge in turn could be dependent on where they came from and what their ethnic background was. As the example of Ogot's and Hasan's dispute shows, however, the GHA goal of embracing different perspectives and authors, seemed to have reigned supreme. What the example also shows is that the inclusion of multiple perspectives is perhaps without end and, moreover, not without conflict. After all, not all perspectives are congruent with one another. Choices will always have to be made regarding the inclusion of perspectives, specifically when it comes to political emancipation. The inclusion of one group perspective may mean obscuring or amending that of another, as the example with Ogot and Hasan shows, even, or perhaps especially, beyond the exclusion of eurocentric perspectives. Beyond that exclusion were a multitude of perspectives and ideas that could not always be made to fit the same mould. Once the prime enemy of the GHA, eurocentrism, had been dealt with, there were still a multitude of other incongruent

---

94 UAP, Hasan to Ogot, 12-08-1986, 4.

95 UAP, CLT CID 92, Adu Boahen to Bethwell Ogot, 26 october 1986 and UAP, CLT CID 92, Maurice Glélé to Bethwell Ogot, 26 june 1986

96 UAP, CLT CID 104, Bethwell Ogot to Maurice Glélé 04-11-1986.

97 Another example of background influencing how an author interpreted changes to their chapter occurred when Tadesse Tamrat wrote Maurice Glélé in protest when he found his chapter for volume IV had been altered as part of the editing process. See: UAP, CC CSP 40, Adu Boahen to Tadesse Tamrat, 17-05-1983.

perspectives and narratives. This makes it apparent that the pan-African ideals of the GHA were contingent upon the historical reality of colonialism. The choice what to include and what not, moreover, was, of course, at least partly motivated by politics. The wish to move beyond the Trevor-Roper trap described by Ranger, Kimambo and others, moreover, was not so easily fulfilled because a history focused on state-formation served the immediate needs of some GHA historians.

## Conclusions

What the role of politics should be and how politics was related to the writing of history was interpreted in various ways within the GHA. This became clear in the various debates surrounding the role of Europe and the perceived imposition of colonial categories on African history within volumes VII and VIII.<sup>98</sup> The interpretation of the histories of colonisation and decolonisation remained essentially politicised. The reason for this was that the place of Europe within the history of Africa as seen by the GHA was focused on emancipation from Europe. Europe was cast as the enemy to be defeated in the narrative of colonialism and decolonisation within the GHA. This served the purpose, at least regarding volume VII under Boahen's editorship, to rally citizens of new nation states to the national cause. As the altercation between Boahen and Ranger shows, not everyone was on board necessarily with this specific political agenda. Most of the scholars working on the project were sympathetic to its political goals, although some more than others. For some scholars, however, the most important goal, unmistakably political as well, was not to provide burgeoning nation states with a supporting historical discipline, but to develop the field of African history academically as part and parcel of the larger historical academy. African history had to be accepted as a respectable area of historical inquiry and overt political activism could damage that need. Political and scholarly ideals were therefore hard to separate when it came the history of Europe in Africa, namely the history of (de)colonisation, resulting in tensions between GHA historians who had different interpretations on what it meant to contribute to political emancipation and how important that ideal should be made. They also

---

<sup>98</sup> The arguments surrounding the Hamitic hypothesis, for instance, could also be dubbed 'colonial' as the Hamitic hypothesis itself had been a 19th century, colonial, invention.

had different interpretations on just what exactly constituted politics and even on what kind of politics would be permissible or necessary within the GHA. Mazrui, for instance, notoriously disagreed on some matters with the rest of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa (ISC). When it came to the importance of colonialism within volume VIII; he did not feel the same need as the rest to emphasise that Africa had moved on from colonialism and that it had just been an episode. Mazrui's reluctance to neatly follow the path the ISC had carved out for him, highlights the contested nature of some of the GHA ideas. Emancipation and inclusion of different narratives became key issues within the GHA.

This chapter has offered a narrative of the, sometimes arduous, relationship between political imperatives and scholarly standards in the writing of history. It has therefore shown that the ideal that the GHA should contribute to political emancipation was difficult to implement in reality because it was not always clear what kind of political emancipation was meant by that, or for whom. At the same time, it is safe to conclude that the various controversies around the inclusion or exclusion of some forms of history, or the ethnic and national sensibilities that influenced the writing of chapters were fitting testaments to the (pan-African) ideal of plurality that was set out in the positioning documents. At the same time, it was precisely that diversity that sometimes made it difficult to come to a shared understanding regarding the way African history should be written and what role politics should have therein.

