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

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Conclusions to Part Two

REALITIES

The three ideals discussed in part I were sometimes hard to align. The reason for this is that all three ideals, anti-eurocentrism, pan-African collectivity and the ideal that the GHA should contribute to political emancipation, when brought to fruition, were enmeshed and entangled in the political realities of decolonisation, both inside and outside of academia. The reality of anti-eurocentrism was complicated to implement because it was perceived to be both political and epistemic. The ideal of pan-African collectivity was difficult to implement because of practical realities regarding the funding of a project as enormous as the GHA as well as changing political circumstances and moreover, the fact that Euro-Americans retained the upper hand within the global politics of knowledge production. The ideal of political emancipation, lastly, directly clashed at times with what some scholars, mainly Euro-Americans, saw as reputable scholarship.

It remained difficult for the GHA to truly decolonise African history because, firstly, it was not always clear exactly what that meant. Did it mean moving away from European categories of thought, such as race, thereby deracialising the writing of history? The problem with that approach was that race could, in some instances, be made useful for analyses that put the primer of history back in African hands, as was the case with Diop. Or did decolonising history mean to provide political decolonisation with historical narratives? The answer to these

questions, unsurprisingly, depended on who was asked. The GHA, although it often articulated its wishes in one voice through minutes of meetings, was made up of many different individuals who each had different ideas on what the ultimate goal of the GHA should be. Moreover, these goals were not just hampered on occasions because of substantive debate on the role the GHA was to play. In fact, such debates may have contributed to an intellectual climate within the GHA which helped further the growth of African history, as Vansina noted. More problematic perhaps than internal discussions, were external practical problems connected to funding, the demise of the African academy and the subsequent and connected growth of Euro-American, but particularly American, expertise on African history.

The challenges the GHA encountered are a testimony to the continuing efforts towards historiographical and intellectual decolonisation. The project struggled partly, I think, because its premise, that historical knowledge about Africa had to be written from an African perspective, was incongruent with the way the global politics of knowledge production developed, partly as a result of Cold War manoeuvring. Perhaps what I mean is best explained by reversing the age-old adage of 'knowledge is power'.¹ 'Power is knowledge', rather, would explain why the *General History of Africa* could come into being in 1964, but did not quite live up to its promise when the last volume was published in 1998. Those who had envisioned a decolonised history of the continent had lost power on the global stage — even if we can debate what exactly it means to move beyond European categories of thought. The fact is that many of the terms used throughout this work — eurocentrism, Provincialisation, pan-Africanism — were not invented by Euro-Americans. What we see as a European category of thought may, in part, equally be decided by who has the power to determine. Following decolonial scholars then, I want to argue that the GHA, in part, could not always fully succeed at decolonising because, although the colonial period had ended, the legacy of colonialism still impacted the global politics of knowledge production.

1 Attributed to Francis Bacon, *Scientia potentia est*.

