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

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CHAPTER EIGHT

'A massive work of little worth.' Retrospective Perceptions of the Project by Africanists in the United States and the United Kingdom

Introduction

The first two volumes of the *General History of Africa* appeared in French in 1980 and in English in 1981. Later volumes followed gradually during the 1980s and 1990s, with the French edition of volume VIII making up the rear in 1998. By then the scholarly environment surrounding African history had changed markedly from the 1960s. African history was no longer seen as an oxymoron, but had, by 1980, become an established and accepted part of the historical discipline in various countries. The original premises with which the GHA had been launched in 1964 and carried out in the 1970s were no longer as relevant in 1980. Yet, the field of African history had also become less African with time as many universities on the continent had either lost funding for history departments or were suffering from state control as a result of anti-intellectual governments, if not both. African studies had meanwhile grown in the United States, mostly at historically

white institutions, even if neoliberal policies had impacted higher education there too.¹ And, whilst departments of African studies in the United Kingdom and continental Europe had equally suffered from a depletion of funds, an Africanist community was nevertheless firmly established by the 1980s.² The global centre for African studies, in other words, had moved away again from the African continent after a brief period of Africanisation in the 1960s. The atmosphere in which the GHA was published was different from when the project had been conceived.

This chapter focuses explicitly on the academic Anglophone critics of the GHA through an analysis of published reviews of the project in academic journals. These reviews are especially interesting because they were mostly written by white Europeans and Americans. Besides the shifting of the academic centre of African studies to the United States, another reason for this was because most of the African academic historians of the time had contributed to the volumes and could therefore not review them. These participants in the project, moreover, generally looked back on it in a much more positive and nostalgic light, a topic to which the following chapter returns. As such, this chapter's corpus of source material consists mostly of reviews written by American and British Africanists. I chose to focus on these reviews, explicitly, because of my primary interest in the academic reception of the *General History of Africa*. Its cultural reception within African Africanist circles is described in the next chapter. The question of whether the GHA was successfully incorporated into the mainstream of the Euro-American academy or not, and what that academy entailed, may therefore be best researched by scrutinising these written reviews for the volumes once they came out in the 1980s and 1990s. Generally speaking, the GHA was not reviewed very positively. What can these reviews tell us about the success of the GHA in terms of broad scholarly acceptance of the project and the, by the 1980s, established environment of African studies?

In order to answer these questions, the chapter also looks at the reviews written for the *Cambridge History of Africa* project, which was

1 William G. Martin, "The Rise of African Studies (USA) and the Transnational Study of Africa", *African Studies Review* 54:1 (2011): 59–83, 78.

2 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.

seen as a rival to the GHA. The British *Cambridge History of Africa* (hereafter CHA), like the GHA, consisted of eight volumes. The CHA was a very English project and it is in that context that the comparisons with the GHA should be placed. For this reason, too, the chapter mostly focuses on the Anglophone Africanist circles. The first CHA volume appeared in 1975. In some ways the project was seen as more successful than the GHA. It received the obvious critique that it was eurocentric, given most of its authors were white men from SOAS. However, in its attempt to create a synthesis of African history, it was not seen as less successful than the GHA. It was also compared to the GHA favourably for being less politically charged. Yet, most of the reviewers were also Euro-Americans. A comparison between the ways the two projects were reviewed therefore might provide an illustration of the specific way in which the GHA was seen to have failed or succeeded in the eyes of the reviewers. Although the view of these reviewers should of course not be taken as necessarily representative for all Africanists at the time, they do provide some insight into several existing opinions. They may also provide an answer towards questions concerning the acknowledgement and perceived importance of activism and the perception of racial difference within African studies at the time. Whereas many of the GHA Africanists were, broadly speaking, of the opinion that scholarship and activism or political engagement were not necessarily or not always in opposition to one another, other Africanists might have thought differently as they adhered to a different scholarly standard. A pertinent question that remains, and one which also follows from Chapters 6 and 7, is whether these differences were, to a large extent, racially or geographically organised. Of course, to some extent, African studies have always been racially organised in that the praxis of academic research about Africa has for the most part been external to the continent itself.³ African historiography and African studies more broadly has always had to reckon with the effects of European (epistemic) colonisation in its orientation. What was studied under the guise of African studies has largely been determined by factors from outside the continent.

To analyse the academic Anglophone perceptions of the GHA, the chapter first briefly details who the review writers were, followed by an analysis of the reviews for the GHA as published in academic jour-

3 Paulin J. Houtondji, "Knowledge of Africa, Knowledge by Africans: Two Perspectives on African Studies" *RCCS Annual Review* 1 (2009): 121–31, 127

nals and discussion on why some review authors choose to critique the GHA, sometimes in very harsh terms, whilst others found aspects to praise. Lastly, it discusses how the GHA and the CHA were compared to one another.

The reviewers

In total, this chapter analyses 35 reviews written for various volumes of the GHA (see Figure 5). Most of the reviews concern the first volume, or the first two, as these came out simultaneously in 1980 and 1981. The chapter also looks at 14 reviews written for the CHA (see Figure 6.) It bears mentioning that 41 out of a total of 49 reviews were written by Britons or Americans and some individuals reviewed both series at different points in time. It seems that, in the 1980s and 1990s, British and American scholars mostly decided what was and was not good scholarship within African history, at least within academic journals. Prominent British reviewers for the GHA were Basil Davidson and Roland Oliver, who was himself one of the series editors for the CHA. Prominent American reviewers included Joseph C. Miller. Jan Vansina, moreover, reviewed volume IV of the CHA. Bogumil Jewsiewicki reviewed volume I of the GHA. There were no African American reviewers, a telling absence given that a sizeable group of the reviewers were Americans. By the time the GHA came out African American scholars had claimed a place within the American academy and yet they were apparently divorced from this project of Africanisation. The relative lengthiness of some of the reviews, moreover, emphasises the importance of the project under review for the discipline. The entanglement and overlap between both the projects as well as who reviewed them reflects how relatively small and close-knitted the Africanist community was in the 1980s and 1990s.

The reviewers for both projects should be viewed in the context of the rise and consolidation of African studies within the United Kingdom and the United States. Once the study of Africa had become mainstream and more consolidated around historically white North American centres, it seemed to move away from some of its more radical anti-colonial roots — even if some of the British pioneers had been anti-colonial activists as well. Reviewers were mostly either part of this first generation of British and American pioneers, like Davidson and Oliver, but amongst which we can also count Vansina and Curtin. Or they belonged to the generation that came immediately after and

had been taught by them. Their foremost goals within the field of African history had in part been similar to that of some of the African founders: to see African history accepted as a valued and reputable epistemic activity. Though what that meant in different geographical, political and epistemic contexts, and whether it included pan-African perspectives, could differ markedly. The engaged scholarship of the African founders of the discipline on the continent was not always necessarily a part of the American Africanist academy.

VOLUME GHA	N. OF REVIEWS	AUTHORS
V1	4	2 Britons 1 American 1 Frenchman
V2	3	1 American 1 Briton 1 Nigerian
V1+V2	6 (one incl. CHA)	5 Britons 1 American 1 Lithuanian
V3	3	1 Australian 1 Briton 2 Americans
V4	4	3 Americans 1 Britain
V5	3	2 Americans 1 Briton
V6	3	2 Americans 1 Canadian
V7	5	1 South African 3 Americans 1 Briton
V8	4	2 Britons 1 American 1 South African

Fig. 5 Table showing the number of reviews for each volume of the GHA, as well as the nationalities of the authors.

Volume CHA	N. of reviews
V1	3
V2	1
V3	0
V4	4
V5	0
V6	1
V7	2
V8	3

Fig. 6 Table showing the number of reviews for each volume of the CHA.

The General History of Africa reviewed

Most of the reviews for the GHA generally seemed quite critical of the project. These critical reviews are interesting because in offering criticism they may show what standards of scholarship the authors adhered to. By comparing the GHA volumes negatively with what these authors thought good scholarship ought to be, the reviews can reveal what their ideal image of African historical scholarship was. Reviews that tend to judge the work negatively inform us about the way the GHA might have differed from some established ideas about the way African history needed to be written. At the same time, less critical or even overtly positive reviews may tell us something about a possible sympathy towards the project and from that, shared values of scholarship, as well as a shared idea of the direction of African history. The reviews, therefore, may show in what way the GHA was accepted by the Africanist community that existed in the 1980s and 1990s in Britain and the United States.

The criticism the GHA received can be roughly divided into two main categories. The first type of critique was focused on the way the GHA lagged behind current historiographical debates. As time wore on, reviewers increasingly expressed their displeasure with the time lapse between the writing of chapters and their eventual publication, which caused chapters to be outdated. Secondly and perhaps more scathing, there were those reviewers who disapproved of the entire project due to the fact that it had a political agenda. The Cheikh Anta Diop chapter especially harvested harsh criticism and the accusation that the GHA was mostly a political project.⁴ Of course there is overlap between these two categories and neither are mutually exclusive. I will mostly focus on the diagnoses, made by review authors, that the project was either too political or too outdated, as these are the most telling regarding the whole of the GHA project. That is not to say there was not also a third type of critique centred on what was perceived as shoddy editorial work, issues of translation or typographical errors as well as, fourthly, more detailed criticisms for specific chapters

4 In the American context the chapter was most likely reminiscent of African-American Afrocentrism and the black American need to meaningfully connect 'western' history with Egyptian civilization. This could be interpreted as a threat by white Africanists who sought to produce 'objective' knowledge on Africa which they felt needed to be separated from domestic issues of cultural heritage. West and Martin, "Introduction", 10.

and specific historiographical issues.⁵ The third type of critique may sometimes illustrate other more fundamental critique and moreover, speaks to the difficulty of organising editorial work across three continents during a 34-year period. When the GHA was praised, conversely, it was often for its authenticity and its adherence to pan-African diversity. Praise was also directed towards specific well-known authors who had devoted their time and energy to the GHA, such as Jan Vansina or Terence Ranger.⁶ It is perhaps not coincidental that both valued scholars and trailblazers were Europeans.

Owing to the fact that the first two volumes appeared in the same year in English, 1981, quite a few reviews focus on both volumes at once. One such a review was written by Bogumil Jewsiewicki in French, next to an English review by Peter Shinnie. Jewsiewicki was a Lithuanian historian who had spent time teaching at Louvanium from 1968 until 1977, alongside Vansina. The remainder of his career as an academic took place in Québec. He was a specialist on Congolese history. His review concluded that the UNESCO project had failed in its mission to return history to the people. Specifically, Jewsiewicki

5 See: Peter L. Shinnie and B. Jewsiewicki, "Review: The UNESCO History Project / L'Histoire-monument ou l'histoire conscience. Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa, Vol. I by UNESCO and J. Ki-Zerbo; General History of Africa II, Ancient Civilizations of Africa by G. Mokhtar." *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 15:3 (1981): 539–51, 541 and J. Jeffrey Hoover, "Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa, Vol II: Ancient Civilizations of Africa b G. Mokhtar; The Peopling of Ancient Egypt and the Deciphering of Meroitic Script: Proceedings of the Symposium Held in Cairo from 28 January to 3 February 1974 by UNESCO" *African Studies Review* 24:4 (1981): 135–7, 135.

6 See: Donald R. Wright, "Reviewed Work(s): Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Centuries. Volume IV of General History of Africa by D.T. Niane" *Canadian Journal of African / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 20:1 (1986): 133–5, 133; Randall L. Pouwels, "Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa. Volume 5, Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century by B. A. Ogot." *The American Historical Review* 99:4 (1994):1371–2, 1371; John Hargreaves, "Reviewed Work(s): UNESCO General History Vol I: Methodology and African Prehistory by J. Ki-Zerbo." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 54:3 (1984): 111–2, 111; David W. Phillipson, "Review: The Unesco History: Volume One. Reviewed Work(s): UNESCO General History of Africa. Vol I: Methodology and African Prehistory by J. Ki-Zerbo." *The Journal of African History* 23:1 (1982): 115–6, 115; Ivor Wilks, "Reviewed Work(s): UNESCO General History of Africa. Volume I: Methodology and African Prehistory by J. Ki-Zerbo; UNESCO General History of Africa. Volume II: Ancient Civilizations of Africa by G. Mokhtar." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 15:2 (1982): 283–5, 284 and T C McCaskie, "Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa, VII: African under Colonial Domination, 1880–1935 by A. Adu Boahen." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 57:3 (1987): 401–3, 403.

thought the absence of a neo-Marxist perspective of history was ‘*une lacune déplorable*’ [a deplorable gap].⁷ He accused the project of being a servant of state power rather than a useful critique of the way African history had been done. The figures of Trevor-Roper and Hegel had been propped up as strawman by the project to chase off the old eurocentric myths that had long been defeated and proven untenable by the time the project came out.⁸ Here then, lies the tragedy of the GHA. As Jewsiewicki suggested, the GHA’s defining ideals and *raison d’être*, that Africa had a history apart from Europeans, had, at least within Africanist circles, become a commonplace by the time the first volumes were published. As a starting point for an eight-volume series of African history, the statement that Africa had a history worth telling seemed outdated and even beside the point. The debate had progressed beyond what the GHA had engaged itself in. As a result, Jewsiewicki identified the GHA as not radical enough in its rejection of either European oppression or African autocracies.

Other reviewers had similar opinions; they did not disagree with what the GHA had set out to do, but, did not consider the project a success on its own terms either, in part because new debates and questions had arisen. David Phillipson concluded that laudable as UNESCO’s original aims may have been, the times had changed so radically that the result was of ‘very doubtful quality.’⁹ John Hargreaves and Christopher Ehret drew similar conclusions. The latter also complained that volume I had failed to include enough African authors.¹⁰ Tom McCaskie pinpointed these thoughts articulated by other reviewers by contextualising in how far the GHA adhered to a political and scholarly ideology that had since become outdated and that he did not necessarily agree with either:

In a very real sense this book is an epitaph rather than a future directed effort; it sums up nearly two decades of ‘liberal’ scholarship on Africa, and in its breathless (almost ingratiating) plea for an ‘African past’ it encapsulates the mirror

7 Shinnie and Jewsiewicki, “Review: The UNESCO History Project”, 550.

8 Ibid, 543.

9 Phillipson, “Review: The Unesco History: Volume One.”, 115.

10 Hargreaves, “Reviewed Work(s): UNESCO General History Vol I.”, 111-2 and Christopher Ehret, “Reviewed Work(s): UNESCO General History of Africa, Vol. I: Methodology and African Prehistory by J. Ki-Zerbo.” *African Studies Review* 24:4 (1981): 133-4, 133.

image of decolonisation and independence — a curious mixture of defensive apologia and self (academic) congratulation about Africa's place on the world stage.¹¹

McCaskie then, like Jewsiewicki, thought the work was trying to make a point regarding the existence and importance of an African past that had lost its pertinence. It was the kind of scholarship that had 'mirrored' Euro-American academia and Euro-American modernity in an effort to decolonise without really being critical of the underlying logic of such scholarship. What both Jewsiewicki and McCaskie diagnosed, then, was the absence, largely, of postcolonial critique within the GHA. Given the suggestion that the GHA was perhaps not critical enough in its realisation of African historiography, it seems both reviewers did appreciate the project for what it had originally set out to do. Conceivably it was for that reason too that McCaskie, in another review for volume VII, changed his tune somewhat: 'Some time ago, in reviewing volume IV of this series, I was sceptical, even pessimistic. This volume has, on the whole, restored my sagging equanimity. It is a useful (and usable) decently priced teaching text.'¹² Judged by educational rather than scholarly standards, it seems the GHA could be seen as at least a useful project. Although it is hard to appraise what it was exactly that McCaskie meant to convey with his assessment that the GHA was indeed a useful teaching text. Was it perhaps a compliment, but a rather fatal one?

Following from this, the idea that the GHA had in fact copied Euro-American ideals of what scholarship had to be, thereby failing to provincialise Europe, appears in some reviews as well. William Cohen commented on the internalisation of 'western' ideals in volume VII by the GHA's referral to Africans that had received 'western' schooling as 'educated', showing that, despite Boahen's best efforts, some euro-centrism had crept into his volume.¹³ Joseph C. Miller, moreover, professor at the university of Virginia when he wrote a review for vol-

¹¹ T.C. McCaskie, "Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa: Volume IV. Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century by D.T. Niane." *African Studies Review* 28:4 (1985): 109–11, 109.

¹² McCaskie, "Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa, VII", 403.

¹³ William B. Cohen, "Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa. Volume 7, African under Colonial Domination, 1880–1935 by A. Adu Boahen." *The American Historical Review* 92:3 (1987): 716–7, 717.

ume IV on Africa from the 12th to the 16th century, stated that ‘these chapters [...] stress Africa’s contribution to the history of mankind in terms that reflect Western rather than African values.’¹⁴ Although he did not elaborate what he meant by ‘African’ or ‘Western’ values, he found that the history had mostly adopted a ‘western historiography’ and that this was problematic. At the same time, he also commended the volume for ‘formulating valuable African perspectives on Africa’s past.’¹⁵ It is therefore hard to appraise what Miller meant exactly in his judgement of the volume. In 2018, about a year before he died, Miller had articulated very clearly what his lifelong aspirations had been regarding African history: ‘a commitment to bringing Africans respectfully into the mainstream of the history they share with the rest of us, and us with them.’¹⁶ In other words, Miller shared those aspirations with Vansina, under whose tutelage he had worked towards a PhD at Wisconsin, and other GHA members who wanted to see African history accepted as an epistemic activity that was just as worthwhile as European history.¹⁷ However, Miller seemed to suggest that the GHA had mostly failed at its goal of decolonising that history in the process. Even though reviewers argued that criticising eurocentrism within the history of Africa had become somewhat of a commonplace, at least in terms of topic and focus, they also argued that the GHA had not gone far enough in its attempt at such a decolonisation.

The volume under editorship by Ali Mazrui, moreover, suffered, more than any of the other volumes, from a delay in publication, because it was conceived, written and edited before the major changes of the 1990s, but published after. For a work of history dealing with recent events this was a sure recipe for astonished and very sharp reviews. One review for volume VIII stands out especially, both because it

14 Joseph C. Miller, “Reviewed Work(s): General History Africa. IV: Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century by Djibril Tamsir Niane” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 17:3 (1987): 698–700, 698.

15 Miller, “Reviewed Work(s): General History Africa. IV”, 698.

16 N.N., “UVA Law’s Goluboff, History’s Miller Elected to American Academy of Arts and Sciences.” *UVA Today* 18-04-2019, accessed on 15-5-2020, <https://news.virginia.edu/content/uva-laws-goluboff-historys-miller-elected-american-academy-arts-and-sciences>

17 Kenda Mutongi and Martin Klein, “In Memoriam: Joseph C. Miller (1939–2019)” *Perspectives on History. The newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* 20-05-2019, accessed on 15-5-2020, [https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2019/joseph-c-miller-\(1939%E2%80%932019\)](https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2019/joseph-c-miller-(1939%E2%80%932019))

is nine pages long and because it was published in *Présence Africaine* in 2006, post-apartheid. It was written by Christopher Saunders, a white South African historian working at the University of Cape Town. The Mazrui volume had missed describing the events leading up to the end of apartheid and as such it was unsurprising that Saunders was very critical of the volume. Saunders opened his review by comparing the GHA and the CHA and wondering why the GHA took so long to get published.¹⁸ The delay had not done the volume any favours. The lack of South African historians in this volume and within the project as a whole, moreover, may also explain why it had neglected to do the history of Southern Africa justice. Saunders identified that much of what was said in the volume about the liberation of Southern Africa was conceived and written during the 1978 seminar on the decolonisation of Southern Africa in Warsaw and had not been sufficiently updated by 1993, when the volume appeared in English: 'The volume, so long in gestation, only marginally took account of these dramatic changes.' Saunders concluded that it showed: 'a very blatant example of historians caught up in a present-day concern, in this case the struggle for liberation.'¹⁹ His criticism of the volume rested on the subjective way in which he felt the volume treated the struggle for liberation in southern Africa, as a result of the contemporary nature of the events the historians were trying to describe and analyse.²⁰ It had missed the mark in its description of recent events in Southern Africa — perhaps proving Vansina right when he had criticised Mazrui earlier on for wanting to include history that was too contemporary.²¹ As Jean All-

¹⁸ Christopher Saunders, "The General History of Africa and Southern Africa's Recent Past," *Présence Africaine* 173 (2006): 117–26.

¹⁹ Saunders, "The General History of Africa", 120. The same comments were made by Richard Rathbone, "Reviewed Work(s): The UNESCO General History of Africa, Vol. VIII: Africa since 1935 by Ali A. Mazrui", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28:1 (1995): 182–4.

²⁰ Saunders was, of course, not the only review author who commented on the lack of useful information and analysis on southern Africa as a result of the delay in publication and the lack of South African authors. Jean Allman too, in a review for the journal of African history published in 1995, stated that the work was outdated. It had failed to incorporate new scholarship. Jean Allman, "Review: The Burden of Time. Reviewed Work(s): Africa since 1935: General History of Africa by Ali A. Mazrui" *Journal of African History* 36:3 (1995): 528–30.

²¹ See chapter seven.

man put it in another review, the volume clearly carried 'the burden of time.'²²

Another reviewer, E. Ann McDougall, who had completed at PhD at Birmingham during the period that Fage was king of the castle, was decidedly negative about the way the pan-African aspirations of the project had guided its decision making policies in her review for volume VI. She chided the work for its lack of critical engagement in questions of identity and the philosophy of history underlying the work itself. Her comments pertain to M'Bow's preface and are therefore relevant for the whole series:

Most disturbing [...] is an agenda which echoes uncomfortably in our present 'politically correct' climate [...]. Amadou Mahtar M'Bow (former Director-General of UNESCO) introduces the series as a response to Africans' 'right to take the historical initiative', to their need to 're-establish the historical authenticity of their societies on solid foundations ... by demonstrating the inadequacy of the methodological approaches long ... in use in research on Africa' (pp. xxiv-vi). 'Western' historians grappling with recently articulated theoretical discourse(s) welcome changes in Africa which have allowed African historians to develop a new agenda. But to suggest that the simple inclusion of African authors allows for 'historical initiative', achieves 'authenticity' or redresses existing 'inadequacies' is at best naive; at worst, patronising. There is little evidence here that African contributors saw the sources, questions or answers any differently than their non-African colleagues. Ironically, 'what is 'African' about African history?', and 'what does being African mean for the writing of African history?' questions genuinely reflecting the concerns of the founders of this series, are today generating introspection by African and 'western' historians alike. This consciousness is influencing a growing number of publications but, unfortunately, this volume is not among them.²³

22 Allman, "Review: The Burden of Time.", 528.

23 E. Ann McDougall, "Review: The Sands of Time. Reviewed Work(s): UNESCO General History of Africa, Volume VI: Africa in the Nineteenth Century Until the 1880s by J.F. Ade Ajayi", *Journal of African History* 35:2 (1994): 314-16, 315-16.

McDougall vehemently dismissed what she identified as essentialism in the GHA's goals of incorporating as many African authors as possible. Like Jewsiewicki, Phillipson, Miller and others, moreover, McDougall established that the GHA was behind in its theoretical underpinning of the project and had failed to catch up to the times. Her critique echoes critique levelled at Africanist historiography by postcolonial thinkers, such as Frantz Fanon, who argued that Africanisation and nationalisation were not the same as decolonisation. There is, moreover, perhaps also some hedged praise within McDougall's review. Like others, she did seem to ascribe to the starting ideals of the GHA, but was ostensibly critical of the way they had been implemented. She seems to have been unaware or unwilling to take into account that the project had come into being during a different time.

Radical as it may have been in 1964, these review authors concluded that in 1981 the GHA had mostly been overtaken by new, even more radical, insights. In a way this is a testimony to the success of at least part of the GHA goals; to incorporate African history as a scholarly reputable endeavour. Yet, at the same time, what was seen as reputable scholarship had changed. It is an irony of progress that the GHA found itself criticised by authors from the global north for not being decolonised enough. It would likely not have been possible to voice critique of the sort mentioned above without first arguing that African history was a viable academic endeavour. Arguably the assertion that Africa had a history — and could therefore lay claim to a national past and self-government — had been a very political, or rather politicised, statement to make, even if the idea that Africa would be organised along the nation-state model was not, at least not within Africa itself. It is a testimony to the progress of African historiography that such statements as 'Africa has a history' had become depoliticised by the time the first volumes appeared.

Many reviewers, however, still objected to what they identified as an overtly political ideology within the GHA. They did not necessarily object to the flavour of that ideology, but rather to the presence of a political agenda as such. Often Diop's chapter seemed to serve as a catalyst for that sentiment. Peter Shinnie intimated that he did not subscribe to what he perceived as the political ideology that underwrote the GHA. He reviewed volume II, including the Diop chapter, when he wrote: 'Sadly, this volume of the long-awaited UNESCO sponsored history of Africa is a warning of how such a book should not be produced. A distinguished Egyptologist to edit it, and a varied

array of contributors have managed to produce a massive work of little worth. [...] Perhaps it was inevitable that political considerations and a wish by UNESCO that different opinions should be represented should have led to such an unfortunate result.²⁴ One of the most important reasons for Shinnie's disapproval was the chapter by Diop on the origin of the ancient Egyptians: 'He presents once again his peculiar view about the nature of the ancient Egyptian population [...] It seems that UNESCO and Mokhtar were embarrassed by the unscholarly and preposterous nature of Diop's views but were unable to reject his contribution.'²⁵ He was also critical of the inclusion of some aspects of the Hamitic hypothesis in volume II: 'surely by now historians of Africa can do better than to describe Kushite kings as having 'features ... more akin to those of Hamitic pastoralists with an undoubted strain of black blood' (pp. 282–83). This is writing virtually on the level of Anta Diop.'²⁶ The reading committee had not been able to weed out all references to Hamites, an unforgivable error in the eyes of Shinnie. A concept that had originated in the European academy was now, half a century later, criticised by a European author when it appeared in print. He concluded that the work had all together been too ideological and politically charged in order to function as serious scholarship. Shinnie was one amongst many of the reviewers who thought the Diop chapter was problematic.²⁷ J. Jeffrey Hoover, an American who, at the time of writing the review in 1981, worked at the University of Lubumbashi in Zaire wrote he 'was sadly struck by the stale aroma of racism' when referring to Diop's chapter. He quickly dismissed all discussions about skin colour and nose length as 'the dirty laundry of Egyptology.'²⁸ The inclusion of Diop was seen as proof that the GHA had been unable to rid itself of political pressure to include such chapters, even if they did not actually concern 'real' scholarly work. And as discussed in Chapter 4, the inclusion of the Diop chapter was partly the result of the GHA's wish to contribute to political emancipation. Nevertheless, the demarcation between

24 Shinnie and Jewsiewicki, "Review: The UNESCO History Project", 539.

25 Ibid, 540.

26 Ibid.

27 See for instance: Michael Brett, "Review: The Unesco History: Volume Two" *The Journal of African History* 23:1 (1982): 117–20 and Wilks, "Reviewed Work(s): UNESCO General History of Africa. Volume I", 283–5.

28 Hoover, "Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa, Vol II", 136.

political and epistemic concerns was not as clear-cut as the reviewers sometimes supposed. The inclusion of Diop's chapter, moreover, was seen by some insiders as part of the GHA's emphasis on the political as well as epistemic affirmation that the inclusion of different ideas and perspectives was important.

Diop's chapter, however, was not the only reason reviewers reacted negatively to what they perceived as political intrusion into a work of scholarship. Ivor Wilks, a British specialist on the Asante kingdom in Ghana, wryly noted: 'Those of us who are perturbed by the whiff of an Orwellian Nineteen Eighty-Four in all of this [...] will not find their fears assuaged by UNESCO Director-General Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow's statement of purpose, that the *General History of Africa* will be "widely disseminated in a large number of languages"²⁹ What to make of his sarcasm? In his review, Wilks seems particularly disturbed by the idea that the Bureau exerted a large amount of control and wondered whether UNESCO could not have better spent its money on fundamental research rather than a large-scale publication functioning, foremostly, in his estimation it seems, as a summary of existing research.³⁰ Possibly, this is a critique of UNESCO more generally as much as towards the GHA itself. Much harsher critique even was levelled against the GHA for *Itinerario* by Robert Ross in his review for volume I and II.³¹ He considered the GHA's attempt to create a history that would encompass the whole of the African continent failed and questioned whether it was even sensible to treat Africa as one historical entity, thereby implying he did not agree with the project's pan-African ideology or did not think it had a place in serious historiography. 'At first sight [...] the only criterion to be used would be that of race, a highly dangerous and outmoded concept, although not one that has been avoided in these volumes', Ross wrote, referring to the Diop chapter, which he called a 'valueless undertaking.'³² As a historian of South Africa, Ross may have been particularly set against the use of race as an organising principle. It is, moreover, notable that two of the GHA's harshest critics, Saunders and Ross, were both South African historians, given that the GHA had neglected to include South African historians. Although Ross' review may have been one

²⁹ Wilks, "Reviewed Work(s): UNESCO General History of Africa", 283.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 285.

³¹ Both author and journal are situated at the same university as I am.

³² Robert Ross, "The Mountain has Gone into Labour." *Itinerario* VI (1982): 149–52, 150.

of the harshest in terms of phrasing, essentially, he, Wilks and others agreed about the quality of the work. Ross even referred to the review written by Phillipson pointing out that the latter had already phrased some worthwhile criticisms.³³

A plethora of editorial errors moreover, further emphasised the reviewers' conviction that the necessity to include multiple perspectives had resulted in a lack of quality control. Reviewers seem to have been somewhat uninterested in the challenging circumstances under which the GHA was drafted. This is telling given the disparities in funding and support between the global north and global south at the time the reviews were written from locations in the global north. The errors were sometimes also read as the result of conscious policy though. As Phillipson stated: 'in its effort to be dispassionate, the Drafting Committee has evidently followed a policy of allowing several conflicting views to be presented with, one suspects, minimal editorial guidance.'³⁴ Cohen called what he correctly identified as a 'pluralism of views' confusing.³⁵ Roland Oliver, moreover, joined this type of critique by suggesting that editorial decisions had 'not always been actuated by purely scientific considerations.' He was referring specifically to volume VII, which he chided for an excessive focus on resistance to colonialism and the rise of nationalism.³⁶ Delays in publication, moreover, made some of the editorial errors incomprehensible. Some of the authors discussed above then, did not agree with or trust the pan-African UNESCO inspired outlook of plurality that was a part of the GHA and they did not think such politics belonged in scholarly writing about Africa in the first place. For them, African history had to be independent of the very political ideologies that had made it possible in the first place. Although their scepticism towards the GHA's political ideology was often induced by the Diop chapter and sustained by what they saw as a lack of critical engagement in the concepts the GHA deployed.

33 Randall Pouwels, from the University of Arkansas, moreover, also dismissed the GHA because of its politics in his review for volume V: 'It is clear [...] that pan-African politics took precedence over scholarship.', Pouwels, "Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa. Volume 5", 1372.

34 Phillipson, "Review: The Unesco History: Volume One", 115.

35 Cohen, "Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa. Volume 7", 717.

36 Roland Oliver, "Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa Vol. V: Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century by B. A. Ogot." *The English Historical Review* 108:428 (1993): 681-3, 681-2.

Nevertheless, the kind of history of Africa they adhered too was one that had shed both its anti-colonial and colonial origins.

Conversely, the reviews that are positive in a general way mostly praise the GHA along lines that are very reminiscent of the project's original goals: its pan-African orientation, the focus on 'Africa from within' and the inclusion of a diversity of different perspectives on the same historiographical issues. These were the very things that some negative reviewers were hesitant about. The review by Basil Davidson is illustrative of this point. It was one of the earliest and most positive reviews for volume I and II. In it, Davidson praised the project for its pan-African aspirations and, strikingly, for its anti-nationalism! In Davidson's estimation it was the GHA's focus on a diversity of African views that made it laudable as a project that transcended national interests. He, moreover, seemed to praise the annex that was added to Cheikh Anta Diop's second chapter:

On one or two knotty controversies, for instance, the editors are not content to leave the recording of alternative versions to a single hand, but go out of their way to provide discursive "annexes" [...] There is a lively and attractive promotion of the awareness that historiography is also "history in the making".³⁷

This, of course, seems like an improbable positive comment on the controversy around Diop's contribution, given that the debate over the ancient Egyptians created an uproar within the GHA community and well beyond. Davidson's positive appraisal of the GHA stands out because it is one of few positive reviews and because Davidson himself was such a towering figure within the field of African history. It may be that Davidson, because he was not an academic by trade originally, was less inclined to police the boundaries of scholarship than others. He was, moreover, not against political positioning as his radical anti-colonial stance and efforts to aid in the struggle against Portuguese colonialism show. As Caroline Neale has argued moreover, Davidson had aligned himself very closely with the same Africanist ideals of scholarship as the GHA. He too aimed to pro-

³⁷ Basil Davidson, "Review: General History of Africa by UNESCO" *Third World Quarterly* 3:3 (July 1981): 559–60, 560.

vide Africans with a past that could be inspiring.³⁸ What is surprising, however, is that he, unlike Jewsiewicki, did not assess in how far the GHA had actually managed to satisfy those goals. It may also be, therefore, that he was being polite. Or he may have felt a sympathy towards the project, its original political anti-colonial aspirations and specifically its pan-Africanism and therefore may have attempted to, in the face of critique, draw attention to what could be deemed positive about the Diop contribution. Or, may it have been that praising an overtly political project could only be done by established Africanists such as Davidson without sustaining injury to one's own career?

Yet, others also wrote positive reviews. Anthony Kirk-Greene wrote a relatively positive review of both volumes I and II. Like Davidson, he aligned himself with the GHA goals, praising the project for creating a view of 'Africa-from-within'.³⁹ Richard Lobban, moreover, an American specialist on the history of the Sudan, praised the whole project for its historic accomplishments in a review for volume IV, which dealt with Africa from the 12th to the 16th century. Furthermore, Lobban stated that the volume 'correctly stresses an Afro-centric perspective'.⁴⁰ Jacques Hymans had very similar words of praise for volume VI on Africa in the 19th century. He wrote that the work was a 'faithful reflection of the way in which African authors viewed their own civilisations', which was literally copied from Ogot's introduction to the project published in every volume.⁴¹ He moreover praised the volume's treatment of the Mfecane period in Southern African history, stating that the volume had used internal African factors to explain events, rather than emphasise the European impact.⁴² Given his mimicry of

38 Caroline Neale, *Writing "Independent" History. African Historiography 1960-1980* (London: Greenwood Press, 1985) 44-46.

39 A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, "Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa, Vol I: Methodology and African Prehistory by J. Ki-Zerbo; General History of Africa, Vol. II, Ancient Civilizations of Africa by G. Mokhtar." *The English Historical Review* 99:391 (April 1984): 461-2.

40 Richard Lobban, "Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa, IV: Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century by D.T. Niane." *The International Journal of African historical Studies*, 18:3 (1985): 551-2, 551.

41 See: B.A. Ogot, "Description of the Project" in *The General History of Africa VI: Africa in the Nineteenth Century until the 1880s*, ed. J.F. Ade Ajayi (UNESCO: Paris, 1989), xxix-xxxi, xxx.

42 Jacques L. Hymans, "Reviewed Work(s): The UNESCO General History of Africa. Volume VI: Africa in the Nineteenth Century until the 1880s by J.F. Ade Ajayi." *African Studies Review* 34:1 (April 1991): 140-2.

the GHA documents I would say it is safe to say this was not a very engaged or critical review altogether.

Where some of the reviewers thought the pan-African aspirations of the project had led to politically correct but academically unsound historical work, others aligned themselves with the GHA and seemed to argue that these political aspirations could not be seen apart from the historical work itself. Contrary to many of the more critical reviewers they did not think the project was too political for they judged the work by different standards and were sympathetic to its political outlook. The positive reviews by and large seemed to appreciate the GHA for its historic contribution to African historiography enough to praise it as such. These authors placed the GHA within the larger context of resistance against European prejudice.

The political and epistemic ideals the GHA espoused, as discussed in the first chapters, were originally hard to separate or identify as independent concerns and only became identifiable as somewhat separate endeavours after African history had already been accepted as worthy of academic research. In fact, those that disapproved of the project's political aspirations did so only in degree. That the GHA received both the critique that it had lagged behind current discussions in African historical scholarship as well as the criticism that it was too political is telling regarding the continued intertwining of politics and scholarship within the historiography of Africa. What was deemed too political or perhaps not political enough could change over time. Whether reviewers appreciated the GHA or not, deemed it successful or not, largely hinged on whether they judged the GHA as a primarily academic project or as something that was academic, but which also served different purposes. Some reviewers may have thought that to seem political was in fact damaging to the field of African history if it was to be seen as equal to other fields of history and, by extension therefore, contribute to African emancipation.

The *Cambridge History of Africa* in comparison

The Cambridge History of Africa was similar to the *General History of Africa* in more ways than one. It consisted of eight volumes, was first conceived of in 1966 and written mostly during the 1970s. The eight volumes all had a different editor, except for volumes III and VI, which were both edited by Roland Oliver. The biggest differences between the two projects were that the GHA insisted on appointing African

editors and mostly African authors thereby attempting to write an Africa-centred history of the continent, which was moreover a collaboration between both the Francophone as well as the Anglophone world. With John Fage and Oliver as its chief editors, the CHA, on the other hand, was very obviously a British project. Fage had also been an active member of the ISC, commenting on chapters and proposing authors, until his resignation from the committee in 1981 as a result of overcommitment.⁴³ It is possible that this in part referred to his work as an editor for the CHA, although he did not mention this in his letter of resignation. Fage was a valued ISC member as Glélé attempted to persuade Fage to rethink his resignation.⁴⁴ Fage nevertheless choose to leave the ISC, but did continue working on the CHA. The CHA was itself part of a longer series of Cambridge history volumes, which had started with Lord Acton's *Modern history* in 1899.⁴⁵ The CHA was a lot less complicated than the GHA. It was mostly contained on a single island, instead of three different continents and published only in English, instead of English as well as French. As a result, the CHA published its first volume in 1975 and it's last in 1986. Compared with the GHA, which was published between 1980 and 1999, this was at almost a breakneck speed. How then was the CHA judged in comparison to the GHA? How was the difference between the CHA and the GHA reflected in the written reviews for both projects?

First of all, the project was chided much less than the GHA about inconsistencies and editorial errors.⁴⁶ There, moreover, was only a single comment pertaining to one chapter in the CHA's volume VIII that suggested that the volume was maybe less than politically neutral.⁴⁷

43 UAP, CLT CID 103, D J Church to M. Makagiansar 9 July 1981 and UAP, CLT CID 103, J.D. Fage to the Director-General UNESCO 23-03-1981.

44 Glélé wrote "I, personally, have greatly enjoyed working with you and have learned much from you [...] your continued presence on the Committee is necessary." Fage replied that he really could not give the GHA the attention it merited but also wrote: "I shall miss you all very much!" UAP, CLT CID 103, Maurice Glélé to Professor Fage, 03-04-1981 and UAP, CLT CID 103, J.D. Fage to Maurice Glélé, 27-04-1981

45 Roland Hill, *Lord Acton* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2000), 394.

46 Though John McCracken, in an overwhelmingly positive review, jokingly noted that he had been ascribed authorship of a book that he never wrote. John McCracken, "Review: The Partition. Reviewed Work(s): Cambridge History of Africa, Volume 6, c. 1870-1905 by Roland Oliver and G.N. Sanderson", *The Journal of African History*, 28:2 (1987): 301-3, 303.

47 J.G. Darwin, "Reviewed Work(s): The Cambridge History of Africa, Vol. 8, c. 1940-c.1975 by Michael Crowder" *African Affairs* 86:342 (1987): 117-18.

Unlike the GHA, the CHA was not told off for having a ‘political agenda’ or for reeking of the ‘stale aroma of racism.’ In other words, it was not accused of being politically partisan, nor of being racist. Rather, it was mostly judged as a fair assessment of African history. Only a few reviewers commented on the CHA’s overtly British flavour — Vansina chief amongst them. In fact, Vansina’s review of the CHA is the only one that is relatively critical in comparing it with the GHA, though not the only CHA review that leans towards a negative appraisal of the project. The other reviews that explicitly compare the two projects are either quite negative towards the GHA, as is the case with a 12-page long reflection written by Joseph C. Miller, already mentioned above for his separate review of volume IV of the GHA, or judge both projects relatively equally. When they do have something positive to say about the GHA, it pertains to the GHA’s more successful inclusion of African authors.⁴⁸

The Miller review is especially telling. After acknowledging the importance of leaving the idea of a ‘timeless African past’ behind, Miller goes on to review first volume I of the CHA and thereafter, volume I and II of the GHA. He is critical of both, doubting whether the CHA volume is actually historical, rather than archaeological, thereby policing the boundaries between disciplines.⁴⁹ But, whereas the negative comments pertaining to the CHA are mostly of a rather technical or methodological manner, the negative comments towards the GHA dismiss the entire project on very general grounds: ‘There is an effort to justify Africa’s past partly in the characteristically African manner of asserting prestige through proof of antiquity; but partly also by a less authentic search for achievement in terms alien to Africa, phrased so that the rest of the modern world might find the claims readily intelligible. The goal of authenticity thus comes into conflict with the urge to win understanding and acclaim abroad.’⁵⁰ Miller struck the central nerve of the GHA’s most ardent struggle — how to decolonise whilst remaining respectable? At the same time, the comment also makes clear how difficult it was for the GHA to be treated on mer-

48 See: Lobban, “Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa, IV”

49 Joseph C. Miller, “Review: History and Archaeology in Africa. Reviewed Work(s): The Cambridge History of Africa I: From the Earliest Times to c. 500 BC By J. Desmond Clark; General History of Africa I: Methodology and African Prehistory by Joseph Ki-Zerbo; General History of Africa II: Ancient Civilizations of Africa by G. Mokhtar”, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 16:2 (1985): 291–303, 293.

50 Miller, “Review: History and Archaeology”, 298

it. It seems that something that was ‘characteristically African’ was seen as negative per definition. Moreover, ‘asserting prestige through proof of antiquity’ is hardly a distinctly African pursuit, but rather a nationalist one. Miller, moreover, spoke of ‘political objectives barely concealed amongst the multiple goals of UNESCO’s project’ when referring to a chapter on early hominids in Africa.⁵¹ It seemed then that, ‘the respectful mainstream of history’ he would refer to later, in 2018, had not been achieved yet by the GHA. Miller preferred the CHA: ‘the chronological imprecision of the UNESCO volumes, their preoccupation with inherently static continuities, origins, and legacies, their resulting historicism, and the reflection in them of contemporary political issues, leaves them less historical in effect than the solid volume I of the Cambridge History.’⁵² The GHA according to Miller had attempted to write history influenced by contemporary ideals and preconceived notions of what that history should be — which the CHA had not done. Additionally, the one quality that might have set the GHA apart from the CHA — its authenticity — was executed poorly. Even though the ideal of authenticity could arguably be seen as a preconceived concern as well.

For Vansina, however, the lack of authenticity was a real problem for *The Cambridge History of Africa*. He began his review of volume IV, on Africa from 1600 until 1790, by asserting that the volume was centred on the London School of Oriental and African Studies, whose scholars he had described as being ‘happily surprised that Africans could be rigorous academics’ in his autobiography.⁵³ ‘The lead established by British scholars may explain in part why all the volume editors of the Cambridge History are British; most are also associated with SOAS in one capacity or another. Nine of the ten contributors to the volume under review also have close ties with SOAS.’⁵⁴ This, Vansina continued meant the volume was left with a certain tone:

51 Miller, “Review: History and Archaeology”, 299

52 Ibid, 303

53 Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (The University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1994), 52.

54 Jan Vansina, “Review: The Cambridge History of Africa. Reviewed Work(s): The Cambridge History of Africa by J.D. Fage and R. Oliver; Volume 4 c. 1600 to c. 1790 by Richard Gray” *Journal of African History* 17:3 (1976): 441–445, 441.

Given the common background shared by all the writers, one may well ask if this is a Fage and Oliver history writ large. Is there a British school in African History? [...] Their concerns are still the concerns of the 1960s: political organisation of states and long-distance trade, Islam and Christianity. [...] But if these essays are compared with many works written recently by Africans or by Francophone authors certain differences are noticeable. [...] In this way it is a product of a certain 'school' albeit not a trend limited strictly to SOAS alone. Compared with this the UNESCO history will be much less homogeneous, much harder to read, but will give a truer feeling for all the intellectual trends at work in African history today.⁵⁵

As a result of this, Vansina wrote to drive his point home, the CHA, was too 'categorical', did not make enough use of primary sources from the continent itself and left one with the feeling that 'Ibi sunt leones' was a preferable way to write African history — the very words with which Joseph Ki-Zerbo started the introduction for volume I of the GHA to make the point that African history had been glossed over for too long.⁵⁶ In other words, Vansina thought the CHA did not leave enough room for new insights from Africa itself. Put differently, he politely, and in hedged language, referring to the 'lead established by British scholars', deemed the work just a touch too eurocentric and, in the process, used the review to advertise the GHA, the African History project to which he had pledged his allegiance. Vansina therefore certainly used his review of the CHA to advocate for his own project. He, writing in 1976 when none of the GHA volumes had yet come out, seemed to have held hope that GHA could present a genuinely African version of history. He turned out to have been partly right, but his prediction that the work would therefore be harder to read, also seems to have been justified.

Vansina was not the only reviewer who noted the Anglocentric nature of the CHA. John Hargreaves, who reviewed both volume VII

⁵⁵ Vansina, "Review: The Cambridge History of Africa", 443–4.

⁵⁶ John Thornton too thought that the GHA, in his case volume V, contained more 'focused' chapters. John Thornton, "Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa: Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century by B.A. Ogot" *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26:3 (1993): 654–5.

and VIII of the CHA, made similar comments and complained that treatment on colonialism had been restricted to the British Empire.⁵⁷ David Schoenbrun, moreover, added that the inclusion of more African authors by the GHA provided an 'important counterweight' to the CHA.⁵⁸ Another reviewer, however, concluded that although the GHA may have been more Africa-centred, that did not make the CHA eurocentric: Thurstan Shaw, an archaeologist who contributed a chapter to volume I of the GHA, stated that out of the

two cooperative attempts to produce a detailed general history of Africa [...] on our imagined scale from extreme Eurocentrism to ardent demonstration of African achievement, many authors of the latter must be judged to stand fairly over towards the latter end of that scale. The Cambridge volume would be placed pretty much in the middle.⁵⁹

In other words, although the GHA was very obviously an expression of African success, the CHA was not necessarily its eurocentric polar opposite.

The one critique then that the CHA received that put it in a negative light in comparison with the GHA was that it was too British. Importantly, the CHA hardly received the allegations of political bias that were directed towards the GHA. That is not to say that the CHA was not criticised for other reasons. Volume VIII, for instance, like its UNESCO counterpart, did not receive very many positive reviews. One reviewer commented that both volumes seemed to have been the 'runts of the litter' for having failed to do contemporary history justice.⁶⁰ A testimony perhaps to the difficulty of writing history in the making. Yet, crucially, the CHA was mostly judged on technical, methodologi-

57 J.D. Hargreaves, "Reviewed Work(s): The Cambridge History of Africa. Vol 7: 1905 to 1940 by A.D. Roberts" *The English Historical Review* 102:405 (1987): 987-9, 987.

58 David Schoenbrun, "Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa II, Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century by I.Hrbek" *The History Teacher* 27:2 (1994): 233-5, 234.

59 Thurstan Shaw, "Review: African Beginnings. Reviewed Work(s) The Cambridge History of Africa, Vol I: From the Earliest Times to c. 500 B.C. by J. Desmond Clark." *The Journal of African History* 24:1 (1983): 105-8, 105.

60 Rathbone, "Reviewed Work(s): The UNESCO General History of Africa, Vol. VIII", 182.

cal and historiographical matters, rather than political ones. The only review author who really homed in on the idea that a predominantly British series of African history could not possibly do justice to the diversity of that field was Vansina's.

Conclusions: The GHA as academic outsiders

The question posed in this chapter is that of whether the *General History of Africa* was seen as a successful and thereby accepted scholarly endeavour within the field of African studies as it existed when the volumes first started appearing. The mostly American and British reviewers who retrospectively passed judgement on the project objected to its overt political nature as such. The political agenda that the GHA espoused no longer seemed relevant to them. This becomes apparent even more in comparison with the *Cambridge History of Africa*, a project that, despite its Anglocentrism, was seen as more scholarly and less politically charged. The majority of the reviewers were not enthused by the GHA's overtly pan-African goals and perspective. To them, the chapter by Cheikh Anta Diop in volume II especially discredited the GHA's scholarly aspirations, suggesting the project may have placed more weight on politics than it did on scholarship.

Reviewers mostly wished to separate the overt politics connected to decolonisation and the period of anti-colonial agitation that had spurred the GHA into existence from the scholarship that had become associated with African history in the global north. Since its transformation from an imperial eurocentric project to a more African endeavour in the 1950s and 1960s, African history had become more and more incorporated and accepted into the Euro-American academy that had at first denied its existence. That left the need for overt scholarly activism less and less pertinent for those who inhabited the discipline. The reviews make it clear that there were several different ideas as to what African history had to achieve. This divide between African history as a political tool and African history as a mostly epistemic endeavour hits at the heart of the conception and growth of African studies.

It may be concluded, therefore, that the GHA had not fully succeeded in its goal to be accepted as a reputable scholarly endeavour, even if African history as a field of study was. The British and American (based) historians who by the 1980s had again come to overshadow the Africans in African studies, deemed the project either too political

or outdated in its criticism towards eurocentric ideas of what African history entailed. The GHA had not incorporated newer ideas on decolonisation developed in the late 1970s and 1980s under the guise of postcolonial critique. The GHA at its conception in 1964 had been at the forefront of innovation and intellectual resistance to colonialism, whereas the very goals it had set out to accomplish seemed less pertinent by 1980, and other goals were also being formulated.

The GHA was to be admired for its historic accomplishment, but, as such, became more of a remnant of a different activist past, than a work of state-of-the-art scholarship. At the same time, the reviewers seem to have lost sight of that activist past and the important political and anti-colonial origins of African history — something which Basil Davidson did seem to recognise as worthwhile in and of itself. Did the Euro-American Africanists of the 1980s and 1990s overlook how much they owed to the GHA and its generation of African historians?