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

Schulte Nordholt, L.R.C.

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CHAPTER NINE

The Nostalgic Remembrance of UNESCO's *General History of Africa*

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the retrospective perception of the project from inside, meaning by those who had either contributed to the project or who could be deemed its intellectual allies or progeny. The previous chapter deals mostly with the place of the GHA within academia and the development of African studies outside of the African continent, whereas this chapter pays attention to the reception of the project within its own circles and within a space that was mostly sympathetic to it. The chapter argues that the remembrance of the GHA was partly nostalgic because the GHA was reminiscent of a time when emancipation through scholarship seemed like an achievable goal, which had since become more difficult. It therefore researches the retrospective perception of the ideal of political emancipation, as discussed in Chapter 3, and its realities, as primarily discussed in Chapters 5 and 7.

I am mindful that 'nostalgia' as a concept is somewhat overused in the analysis of modernity, often in an effort to diagnose people's reac-

tions to rapid change or perceived cultural decline.¹ Here, I use nostalgia as a tool to characterise an emotional element accorded the history of the GHA by some. I thereby wish to convey that the GHA was meaningful to its contributors as more than just an academic project. That is not to say that the retrospective reflection on the GHA from inside its own ranks was not academic or analytical too, but simply that it was also permeated with a sense that the GHA, a project which ran for half a lifetime, had left an affect that allowed for it to be significant in more than one way. This nostalgia in the remembrance of the GHA from within its own ranks can be characterised as existing between a spectrum of restorative and reflective nostalgia. This typology was made by Svetlana Boym in her *The Future of Nostalgia*, wherein the former corresponds more clearly to a longing for home, *nostos*, or a wish to reconstruct the past, and the latter to the wistful longing itself, *algia*. The latter specifically does not necessarily conflict with the present or the future or with the complexities of modernity as it accepts that the past is past, although both forms of nostalgia long for a past that has never in fact existed as such.² Reflective nostalgia, moreover, bears resemblance to nostalgia for Empire as opposed to a restorative nostalgia for colonialism, which is most devotedly longed for amongst the descendants of returned colonial settlers, as argued by Patricia M. E. Lorcin.³ Lorcin connects a longing for Empire to a longing for political power for the state, whereas she locates a longing for colonialism more in the realm of the sociocultural, that is as part of the personal.⁴ The *algia* within the GHA could likewise be described as a longing specifically for the power the global south briefly held with the crumbling of Empire and the accompanying short window of possibilities for worldbuilding and epistemic breaks — a shared enemy to confront, which it is felt has since become much more opaque and less easily recognisable as such. Nostalgia, moreover, is tacitly connected with European nationalism in that it often desires a return to an imagined pure nation. It perhaps no coincidence that the nostalgia for the GHA is also connected to nationalism, albeit a very different sort.

1 See: Tobias Becker, "The Meanings of Nostalgia: Genealogy and Critique", *History and Theory* 57:2 (2018): 234–250.

2 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), XVIII.

3 Patricia M.E. Lorcin, "The Nostalgias for Empire", *History and Theory* 57:2 (2018): 269–285, 272.

4 Lorcin, "The Nostalgias for Empire", 269.

The nostalgia for the GHA is also one for the pan-Africanism that was a reaction to oppression, but which nevertheless managed to create a common bond for many. The first part of this chapter deals more obviously with a sense of such a pan-African *nostos*, a wish to idealise the past building of the field of African history, whereas the latter part is more engaged in the *algia* inherent in the realisation that a project like the GHA was unique and therefore carried a unique potential that was connected to the era of decolonisation.

This rhymes with the fact that when the GHA was launched in 1964 African history was in the making and its purpose could still be meaningfully shaped. The ISC and other (African) historians working on the GHA rightly saw the GHA as an extraordinary chance to create autonomous and meaningful African history. The ideal of a decolonised African history, however, turned out to be difficult to realise given the intellectual, academic, political and financial context of African historical studies in the second half of the 20th century. By the time the GHA volumes had actually been published, the landscape of African studies had changed considerably and the sub-discipline had been partly shaped by people from outside the continent, as has been discussed in the previous chapters. African history had lost its prime position as a shaper of national destinies, as money flowed away from institutions on the continent in the 1970s and 1980s and nationalist history increasingly seemed unable to cope with the economic and political problems of the postcolonial eras.⁵ The ideals of the 1960s seemed to be drifting further and further away, not just in terms of viability, but in terms of relevance as well. As a consequence of these struggles, the commemoration of the project, which started taking shape even before the last volume was published, in the 1990s, was surrounded both by a need for justification as well as mourning the loss of a time when real change had seemed possible. The nostalgia inherent in the remembrance of the GHA was not only mourning a loss, it was also a yearning for the time when African history could still be meaningfully shaped by Africans themselves rather than in Euro-American institutions. Calls for an African perspective and decolonisation grow ever louder in the 21st century, even if those calling for

5 Esperanza Brizuela-García, "African Historiography and the Crisis of Institutions" in *The Study of Africa. Volume I Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Encounters*, ed. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (CODESRIA: Dakar, 2006), 135–58, 149–58.

a decolonised academia on the continent have by and large moved on from the nationalist perspectives of the 1960s.⁶

This chapter starts by looking at the way the scholarly activism inherent in the early years of African historiography and therefore the GHA was reflected in the obituaries written for some of its key members and how, retrospectively, the combination of scholarship and activism was envisioned as much more compatible than it might have felt at the time. I have called this *Nostalgia for Scholarly Activism* because some of the obituaries reflect a longing for a time when it seemed like one could engage in activism and still be taken seriously as scholar as well. They seem to smoothen the tensions between politics and scholarship discussed in Chapter 7 to present an imagined unity between activism and scholarship.

Secondly, the chapter engages in reflections on the GHA that belong more wholly to Boym's *algia* through which conflicting realities could be expressed. In this remembrance, through a variety of commemorations, such as personal recollections as well as speeches, the past becomes a hyperreal space. The nostalgia that is apparent within it is not only about the past, but about the future as well, as Boym also argues is a distinct part of nostalgia. In this case the nostalgia deals with the simultaneous acceptance of a failure to deliver on some of the promises of independence as well as the very real appreciation of the anti-colonial pan-African successes of the GHA and the need to further this agenda. These reflections on the project therefore become a *pars pro toto* for larger questions of emancipation and liberation in its remembrance. For this reason, it is important to ask what the GHA insiders saw as the project's most lasting contribution, not just to scholarship, but to the emancipation of African history and Africans in society? I ask this question specifically in opposition to the relative outsiders whose views were discussed in the last chapter. What did these insiders think was the way forward for African history and what role, if any, could the GHA play in the future?

6 See for instance the numerous papers and panels on decolonizing the academy and/or Eurocentrism at the 2019 European Conference for African Studies. See, to name a few: "Epistemological legacies of empire: interrogating Eurocentrism in African Studies [Roundtable], "Decolonizing Africanist migration research? [CRG AMMODI], "Decolonize Now [CAS/CrAS roundtable] and "Decolonizing the academy in future Africa [Roundtable], *ECAS2019, Africa: Connections and Disruptions*. University of Edinburgh June 11-14 2019.

Nostalgia for scholarly activism

There are, broadly speaking, two forms of activism to consider here, political and scholarly activism, both of which could earn a scholar the name of scholar activist. By scholarly activists I mean those academics who advocate for change within academia itself. For instance, by arguing for the inclusion of a new disciplines or the enlarging of source materials or topics to be studied within a discipline; such as LGBTQ studies, women's history and black studies. Such advocacy, however, is always also connected to larger society. The wish to create new fields of study within existing academic frameworks almost always stems from some kind of social movement and the rising social mobility of a specific group — for instance (black) women.⁷ This activism within the academy is somewhat different although not distinct from political activists who also operate as scholars, or scholars who spent time as politicians or political activists next to and often informed by their scholarship. The first characterisation pertains to scholars who, influenced by greater societal changes, wish to influence the way knowledge is produced as a result of those changes, whilst the second characterisation pertains to scholars who primarily wish to use their scholarship to change society. Of course, these two goals mutually influence one another. This is subject to critique from those activists who argue that intellectualisation of the cause may create too great a distance between theory and practice.⁸ Institutionalisation has been criticised as having had a de-radicalising influence on the field of study to be incorporated. As Judith Bennett has noted: 'the greatest challenge to women's history may come, indeed, from the debilitating effects of institutionalisation itself, which has nurtured the field's slow and ongoing severance from feminism.'⁹ To become incorporated, rather than to become accepted as equal, into academia was possibly to be neutralised and we have seen this effect take place in the previous chapter, as well. Once African history became more mainstream, its anti-colonial roots were sometimes forgotten. There is, moreover,

7 Stefan Berger, "Introduction. Historical Writing and Civic Engagement" in *The Engaged Historian: Perspectives on the Intersections of Politics, Activism and the Historical Profession*, ed. Stefan Berger (New York: Berghahn books, 2019), 1–31, 1–3.

8 See for instance: Paulo Freire's assertion that true liberation cannot be reduced completely to either practice or theory, Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (London: Penguin Random house, 2017[1970]), 98.

9 Judith M. Bennett, "Feminism and History", *Gender & History* 1:3 (1989): 251–272, 253.

considerable overlap between these two conceptualisations of what it means to be an activist and a scholar at once. By scholarly activism I here therefore mean something different from political activism to denote specifically advocacy within the academy for certain fields of knowledge, methodologies or epistemologies. Political activism, conversely, I shall use to describe activism in the realm of national or international politics, and not so much the realm of academic politics.

It is specifically in the obituaries written for Jacob Ade Ajayi that we find scholarly activism as pertaining almost exclusively to the realm of academic politics. These obituaries tend to centralise Ajayi's achievements during the so-called 'golden years' of African history on the continent, the 1960s. Toyin Falola, for instance, remembers Ajayi's ability to favour and argue for research into the African perspective within African history.¹⁰ JD Peel, who was a close personal friend of the Ajayis and whose obituary is therefore of a personal nature, describes the enormous task the first generation of African historians had to complete, mentioning Trevor-Roper's remark as an example.¹¹ Moreover almost all of the obituaries that are contained in the book of tributes published in Ibadan shortly after his passing celebrate Ajayi for his role in decolonising African history.¹² These tributes are of a different nature from academic obituaries even though they are mostly written by other Nigerian historians and academicians; they emphasise the writer's personal connection to Ajayi and are addressed directly to his family, making it all the more noteworthy that most highlight his role as an academic trailblazer.

There is one tribute that stands out because the author, Olufunke Adeboye, also wrote an official scholarly obituary for the journal of the International African Institute. Whereas her tribute is devoted to her personal relationship with 'Baba Ajayi', who, she emphasises, was invested in the personal wellbeing of his doctoral students, the official obituary serves to defend her mentor against possible detractors.¹³ In the book of tributes, Adeboye writes for her compatriots, friends and

10 Toyin Falola, "Professor Jacob Festus Ade-Ajayi (1929-2014): A Eulogy with a Dirge" Website African Studies Association, August 14, 2014, Accessed March 31, 2020, <http://www.africanstudies.org/news/391-professor-j-f-ade-ajayi-1929-2014>

11 J. D. Y. Peel, "J. F. Ade Ajayi: A Memorial" *Africa* 85:4 (2015): 745-49, 747.

12 I was gifted a copy when I visited the Ajayi library in 2018. N.N., *A Book of Tributes for Emeritus Professor Jacob Festus Ade Ajayi*. (Ibadan: University of Lagos Press and Jadeas Trust, 2014)

13 N.N., *A Book of Tributes*, 83.

family, whereas her obituary for the International African Institute is geared towards a much wider audience of scholars and is therefore more academic in nature. In the obituary she highlights Ajayi's success during the formative years of African historiography and connects that success to the *General History of Africa*:

Together with Dike, he defined the essence of African historiography. This generation challenged the claims of European colonial historiography about the African past. Their mission was to decolonise African history from the grip of Eurocentric authors who claimed that Africa had no history worth studying. [...] Nationalist historiography has been criticised as being too empirical and lacking in theoretical rigour. Some critics claim that it is irrelevant to the challenges of underdevelopment and perennial poverty facing post-independence Africa. However, it must be noted that the Ibadan approach to history [...] served the needs of the moment. It helped to decolonise the African past and foster national identity.¹⁴

All of the commemorations of Ajayi's life remember him for his contribution to the creation of the field of African history in the face of European scepticism. Yet, tend to emphasise the scholarly nature of this endeavour, rather than its political side. Adeboye's obituary is especially interesting in that light because it is implicitly aimed at the Marxist historians of the Dar es Salaam school and other underdevelopment scholars. Adeboye clarifies that Ajayi's scholarship was necessary at the time and necessary for the demands of decolonisation that existed when Ajayi was working. This is also a point Peel implicitly makes by emphasising the nature of resistance Ajayi and others were up against.

¹⁴ Olufunke Adeboye, "J.F. Ade Ajayi, 1929–2014", *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, 85:4 (2015): 741–4, 742.

This need to defend Ajayi to the outside world can be found in the 2014 multi-authored biography for Ajayi as well.¹⁵ Akinjide Osuntokun, the editor, and Tunji Oloruntimehin explicitly disavow Ajayi of any overt ideological or political allegiances. They write that he did not indulge in ‘sloganeering’ or the ‘propagation of political catch-phrases.’¹⁶ They may have retrospectively felt a need to defend Ajayi against the association of political activism and concurrent issues of perceived inadequate scholarship. As they write elsewhere: ‘the hallmark of a good historian like Ajayi is to avoid distortion of fact and as a well-rounded scholar he is definitely above this kind of temptation. [...] We have made the point that Ade Ajayi is liberal in his orientation as a scholar, and is therefore not to be compared to radical scholars like Cheikh Anta Diop, Alioun Diop with his *Societe Africaine de Culture* [sic] or even Joseph Ki-Zerbo.’¹⁷ These biographers seemed to adhere to an ideal of historical scholarship that separated politics from scholarship. They seem to have done as such to upholster Ajayi’s work as a trailblazer in African history. Simultaneously, however, the authors pressed that Ajayi had chosen to pursue nationalist historiography because ‘for him building a nation [...] is the most important challenge facing most African states.’ Ajayi, of course, was not just an average Nigerian historian, but had, alongside Kenneth Dike, been the founder of academic historical scholarship in Nigeria. Throughout the biography he was not only praised for academic virtues, but for his duty to the Nigerian nation, for being a good Christian, husband and father, as well. He provided a good example on multiple axis of being.¹⁸ In a sense, Ajayi here had become a symbol for the early years of African history in very much the same way as the GHA, and he is

15 The Ajayi GHA volume is also praised as “the most important volume” in the GHA by one of its contributors in the multi-authored Ajayi biography because the 19th century had hitherto only been seen in the light of European expansion, Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim, “Ajayi and the UNESCO General History of Africa” in *J.F. Ade Ajayi: His Life and Career*, eds. Akinjide Osuntokun and Tunji Oloruntimehin (Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2014), 350–7, 355.

16 Akinjide Osuntokun and Tunji Oloruntimehin, “J.F. Ade Ajayi and His Intellectual Contribution to the Study of History” in *J.F. Ade Ajayi: His Life and Career*, eds. Akinjide Osuntokun and Tunji Oloruntimehin (Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2014), 293–305, 295.

17 Osuntokun and Oloruntimehin, “J.F. Ade Ajayi”, 304–5.

18 Much like Henri Pirenne in fact did in the context of Belgium national historiography, Camille Creighton et al., “Virtue language in historical scholarship: the cases of Georg Waitz, Gabriel Monod and Henri Pirenne”, *History of European Ideas* 42:7 (2016): 924–36, 927.

equally defended in the same way: by reference to the early necessity of writing African history for nation-building. He had also become a representative of a united Nigeria, a country which has suffered from regional tensions. This remembrance, moreover, aims to present the amalgam of politics and academics in Ajayi's professional and personal past as more harmonious than it might have been relative to the creation of African historical studies in Nigeria in the face of its colonial denial. It thereby seems to project an idealised and nostalgic image of Ajayi back in time. Peel's obituary, conversely, offers a slight contrast in that he draws attention to Ajayi's protest against government interference at the University of Lagos (UNILAG) during his tenure as Vice-Chancellor.¹⁹

Perhaps it is because activism, scholarly or political, speaks to a longing for a better world, retrospective reflection on it easily becomes nostalgic. Activism and nostalgia therefore meet one another specifically in the obituaries written for prominent African historians, such as Ajayi. The obituaries for the African pathfinders within the academic study of African history emphasised their activist focus on an African perspective to include them in the disciplinary history and its continued need for advocacy. Obituaries, moreover, serve a function as a reflective practice towards not just the individual who is being commemorated, but towards their field of scholarship as well and as such they lend themselves to both nostalgia and boundary work.²⁰ The lives of those passed may be fitted into a mould that endorses an ideal of scholarship as forwarded by the biographer, rather than the commemorated.²¹ They therefore project an ideal-typical image back in time that may not have existed in exactly that way — like nostalgic remembrance does as well. Obituaries can serve to present a field or discipline to the outside world, whilst serving as a system of justification towards other scholars, as is the case in the Ajayi biography. In that sense, obituaries were sometimes used to wage 'battles in

¹⁹ Peel, "J. F. Ade Ajayi", 748

²⁰ In the history of science, the term 'boundary work' is used to describe instances where divisions between fields of knowledge as well as between scientific and non-scientific knowledge are created, enforced or attacked. Thomas Gieryn, "Boundary-Work and The Demarcation of Science From Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists.", *American Sociological Review* 48:6 (1983): 781-795.

²¹ Léjon Saarloos, "Virtue and Vice in Academic Memory: Lord Acton and Charles Oman", *History of Humanities* 1:2 (2016): 339-54, 340-1.

the shadow', as Anna Echterhölter has aptly characterised this system of inter-academic justification in the case of 18th- and 19th-century German scientists.²² This need to emphasise certain parts of disciplinary history over others may be especially pertinent in a context of disciplinary innovation or when engaged in boundary work, as was the context of the GHA. According to Ian Hesketh, moreover, boundary work 'if the goal is to expand authority', which it was within the GHA, 'heightens the contrast between rivals'.²³ Within the obituaries written for GHA members, this often means there is an emphasis on activist scholarship, whilst emphasising that the commemorated work is nevertheless of the highest scholarly quality. The activist scholarship in these obituaries therefore serves to connect the scholar being commemorated to an epistemic and moral imperative to do the right thing, to further both knowledge that has been hidden by obscurantists and to further the emancipation that was made possible by that knowledge. This observation follows from those made by Herman Paul and Léjon Saarloos in their work on scholarly virtues, namely that they are most meaningful as constellations.²⁴ Activism here then, is meaningful in that it is upholstered by a simultaneous focus on objectivity and critical scholarship. In remembering, the two are merged as if harmoniously fitting together.

Following also what Creighton et al have shown in their article on *Virtue language in historical scholarship*, I argue that the virtues showcased in the obituaries discussed here were part of a constellation of virtues that transcended the merely epistemic.²⁵ Virtues, like having a critical disposition towards colonial and/or European knowledge, were seen as necessary for conducting good historical research on Africa because they showed the historian had moral as well as epistemic norms. It was the combination of those goals that made 'activism' a virtue to be celebrated. Activism, in the context of decolonisation, was a positive descriptor because it emphasised that the historian was willing to go against the grain of colonial historiography and, moreover, use their learning for a public good — liberation — rather than just

22 Anna Echterhölter, *Schattengefächte: Genealogische Praktiken in Nachrufen auf Naturwissenschaftler (1710-1860)* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2012), 10, 20-1.

23 Ian Hesketh, "Diagnosing Froude's Disease: Boundary Work and the Discipline of History in Late-Victorian Britain", *History and Theory* 47:3 (2008): 373-95, 384.

24 Saarloos, "Virtue and Vice in Academic Memory", 341-2.

25 Creighton et al, "Virtue language in historical scholarship", 925-6.

the academic advancement of knowledge. In that light it is important to note that commemorative scholarly practices in general can be used to look not just at the past, but specifically at the imagined future as well.²⁶ And, moreover, that this can be a distinct feature of nostalgia too. Predecessors were honoured in order to create continuity with the present, as well as the imagined future. Jo Tollebeek argues that their function therefore contributes to community building, at least in his analysis of commemorative practices in the humanities in Europe around 1900.²⁷ In the context of the GHA this may mean that the (African) historians who wrote obituaries for ISC members who had also been eminent historians of a first generation of post-colonial historiography, felt the need to commemorate not just the individual historians who were the subject of the obituary, but, through them, the whole field of African history as it had existed at its inception in the 1950s and 1960s. It may be that by commemorating the first generation, the biographers aimed to invoke their success, which had since been elusive. The predecessors had to be acknowledged for their contributions not just personally, but possibly in an attempt to redirect African history back to the continent, or to at least situate its origins there.

A heightened contrast between rivals as suggested by Hesketh is certainly present in the obituaries written for Adu Boahen. The value of political engagement played a considerable role in those obituaries. When Boahen died in 2006, the journal of African history published an editorial obituary for 'Ghana's foremost historian and a distinguished statesman.' It stated that Boahen had been a political activist all his life: 'A scholar-activist, he demonstrated a consistent opposition to dictatorial rule and military regimes that earned him stints in prison.'²⁸ The importance of Boahen's politics for his historical work, moreover, becomes more evident in the obituaries written for him by and for Ghanaians in an English-language pan-African publication, *the New African*. The two obituaries in this publication, moreover, mention the *General History of Africa* and connect the UNESCO project to

26 Pnina G. Abir-Am, "Introduction" in *Commemorative Practices in Science: Historical Perspectives on the Politics of Collective Memory*, eds. Pnina G. Abir-Am and Clark A. Elliot (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1-33, 17-8.

27 Jo Tollebeek, "Commemorative Practices in the Humanities around 1900", *Advances in Historical Studies* 4:3 (2015): 216-31.

28 N.N., "Editorial: Professor Emeritus Albert Adu Boahen (1932-2006)", *The Journal of African History* 47:3 (2006): 359-61, 359.

Boahen's role as a trailblazer in African history. As one of the obituary writers, Ivor Agyeman-Duah, put it: 'Recognising him as Africa's voice to its post-colonial past, Unesco made him the president and consultant (1983–1999) of its International Scientific Committee for the eight-volume *General History of Africa*.²⁹ Both obituaries, moreover, place the figure of Trevor-Roper as a historian non grata opposite their pan-African hero, Boahen, evoking a different time of perhaps simpler dichotomies of good and bad.³⁰ Referring to Trevor-Roper's infamous phrase about Africa Cameron Duodu writes: 'When the British don, Hugh Trevor-Roper, wrote this, little did he know that an African colossus, Albert Adu Boahen, would one day rise and make him look quite foolish.'³¹ Duodu continued on to place Boahen opposite the whole establishment of British history, including Oliver and Fage, calling the latter 'probably racist.'³² He relished in narrating how Boahen had once corrected 'the high and mighty of African Studies in Great Britain' on their own turf.³³ Duodu and Agyeman-Duah both also celebrated Boahen's political activities, describing him as an Ashanti warrior who challenged not just the racist historiography from Britain, but also the authoritative politicians from Ghana.³⁴ Boahen, then, was a scholarly activist as well as a political activist, though it is questionable whether his obituary writers thought the two could be separated. Most importantly, however, they appealed to scholarly precision and a critical attitude to show how exactly Boahen had put the arrogant Britons in their place. Boahen is remembered as the critical hero historian of the golden days. Importantly, activism is here shaped as a corrective to bias to European predecessors. It functions to increase scholarly accuracy and is therefore both moral as well as scholarly. In fact, it could be argued that the moral claim was connected to an assertion of truthfulness. The reference to Trevor-Roper specifically seem to suggest this: scholarly activism was meant as

29 Ivor Agyeman-Duah, "the historian who made history himself." *New African*, July: 58–60 (2006)

30 Agyeman-Duah, "the historian who made history himself." and Cameron Duodu, "The man who rescued African history." *New African*, July: 60–63 (2006)

31 Duodu, "The man who rescued African history."

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Agyeman-Duah, "the historian." and Duodu, "The man who rescued."

a correction to (previously) existing scholarly bias, here personified through Trevor-Roper, as also discussed in Chapter 1.

The connection between good historical scholarship and activism or rather, history and public political activity, is even more pronounced in the obituaries written for Joseph Ki-Zerbo. When Ki-Zerbo died in 2006 *Présence Africaine* published a special issue in his honour: '*L'histoire Africaine: l'après Ki-Zerbo*.' It was filled with obituaries for Ki-Zerbo written mostly by West African historians and one former French colonial officer, historiographical essays, including Christopher Saunders' critical review of volume VIII of the GHA and a few essays by Ki-Zerbo himself.³⁵ The obituaries written for Ki-Zerbo not only mention but also emphasise his connection to the *General History of Africa*.³⁶ The editorial introduction, which we will return to in more depth in the second part of this chapter, focuses almost exclusively on Ki-Zerbo's contribution to the GHA and the problem of a continuing European denial of African historicity that Ki-Zerbo and the GHA had reacted to. Pathé Diagne explicitly links Ki-Zerbo to the *General History of Africa* and to some of the other celebrated historians that were connected to it, such as Jacob Ade Ajayi and Cheikh Anta Diop.³⁷ Of course, for Ki-Zerbo, the connection with Diop is more evident, as both scholars were engaged in the circle of Francophone West African anti-colonial intellectuals who formed networks in Paris in the 1940s.³⁸ They were politically engaged and conceived of history as a purposeful producer of identity and, at the same time, realised how Euro-American history had utilised that identity making power to create the otherness Africans had difficulty escaping from.³⁹ Ki-Zerbo was born in 1922 in what was then the Upper-Volta. He was the product of French colonial education. He eventually moved to Paris where he

35 N.N., "L'histoire africaine: l'après Ki-Zerbo," *Présence Africaine* 173:1 (2006)

36 Assane Seck, "Un nationaliste sans concession", *Présence Africaine* 173:1 (2006): 37-44, 42.

37 Pathé Diagne, "Une nouvelle image du Professeur Africain", *Présence Africaine* 173:1 (2006): 23-26, 24.

38 Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism. A History* (London: Bloomsbury publishing, 2018), 187-9.

39 For a reflection on the philosophy of history connected to *Présence Africaine*, see: Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "Présence Africaine as Historiography: Historicity of Societies and Specificity of Black African Culture" in *The Surreptitious Speech. Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987*, ed. V.Y. Mudimbe (Chicago: The University of Chicago press, 1992), 95-117.

studied, amongst other things, history at the Sorbonne, after which he became a teacher. In 1957 he founded the *Mouvement Libération Nationale* to campaign for a 'no' vote in France's constitutional referendum that offered colonial territories to become part of a French community ('yes') or independence ('no').⁴⁰

In the obituaries for Ki-Zerbo an image develops of the Burkinabé historian as an anti-colonial political activist who fought valiantly against colonial stereotypes but who was equally a critical scholar. The characteristic that is reiterated most in the obituaries, was of Ki-Zerbo as a man who did not identify a difference between being an intellectual and a politician.⁴¹ As one of the obituaries stated: '*Joseph Ki-Zerbo, lui, n'a jamais accepté la césure fictive entre intellectuels et politiques*' [Joseph Ki-Zerbo never accepted the fictional divide between intellectuals and politicians].⁴² We should read that comment to understand how Ki-Zerbo and arguably other African Africanists of his generation, understood the historical discipline.⁴³ History to many of them was and always had been at the service of a political or social cause, be it nationalism or Marxism or something else again. The construction of history for the reinstatement of a specific identity was therefore as much an academic as it was an anti-colonial political project during the era of independence.⁴⁴ Ki-Zerbo consequently felt a responsibility to develop a new way of thinking and writing history that would capture the specificity of the African past in order to contribute to the development of his country and his continent.⁴⁵ Mangoné Niang, who was the director of the centre for oral tradition in Niamey, illustrated this point further by sketching a scene in which Cheikh Anta Diop and Ki-Zerbo, who were great friends according to Niang, pondered

40 The 'yes' vote won with 99%, but the French community had a short lifespan as it fell apart in 1960.

41 See: Salim Abdelmajid, "Joseph Ki-Zerbo: Le Savant, Le Politique et L'Afrique", *Esprit* (2007/8): 83-108, 85.

42 Mangoné Niang, "Le veilleur de jour", *Présence Africaine* 173:1 (2006): 21-22, 22.

43 Assane Seck, a Senegalese politician who served as the minister of foreign affairs in the 70s, in an interesting reversal of what one would expect while reading the obituary for a prominent historian, even mentions that Ki-Zerbo's accomplishments lie beyond the political realm as well, Seck, "Un nationaliste sans concession", 40.

44 Mamadou Diouf and Mohamad Mbodj, "The Shadow of Cheikh Anta Diop" in *The Surreptitious Speech. Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987*, ed. V.Y. Mudimbe (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1992), 118-135, 122-3.

45 See: J. Ki-Zerbo, "Histoire et conscience nègre", *Présence Africaine* 16 (1957)

whether there was a difference between intellectual and political engagement.⁴⁶ In the obituary written by Adame Ba Konaré, moreover, there is decisive defence of activist historiography:

*Et justement, c'est là où se trouve le mérite de la science historique, qui seule permet de garrotter les falsifications, les interprétations arrangeants les faux refuges, tout en sachant qu'ils sont lestes et inévitables, d'où cette exigence d'inscrire dans la pensée historiographique, la place qu'il faut à un mécanisme de veille et de vigilance. Mais n'y a-t-il pas là un aveu de militantisme, quand bien même il est scientifique? [And this is precisely where we find the merit of the historical science, as it is the only way to curb falsifications, conveniently reassuring interpretations, knowing that they are nimble and inevitable, hence the need to make room in historiographic thinking for a mechanism of observance and vigilance. But is this not an admission of activism, even if it is scientific?]*⁴⁷

As Ba Konaré sees it, African historians seem to have had no choice but to be 'activists', given the role of history in society and the falsifications that surrounded and continue to surround African history. This, however, did not mean it was 'unscientific.' And this identification of Ki-Zerbo with activism focused on scholarly accuracy may be the reason that the obituaries written for him so explicitly link him to the *General History of Africa*, a civic project that aimed to rehabilitate African history within the Euro-American academy.

The fact that *Présence Africaine* took upon itself the task of remembering Ki-Zerbo is significant as well. *Présence Africaine*, like the GHA, had what one could call explicit ideals of emancipation. Both could be identified with the urge to build new systems of representation. As Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and Bogumil Jewsiewicki both emphasise in their contribution to a history of *Présence Africaine*, however, African Africanists were well aware of the predicament in which they found themselves vis-à-vis the historians' imperative to be objective. As Coquery-Vidrovitch aptly writes:

46 Niang, "Le veilleur de jour", 22.

47 Adame Ba Konaré, "L'histoire africaine aujourd'hui" *Présence Africaine* 173:1 (2006): 27-36, 35.

While making their history, the African historians were perfectly aware of the affective mode from which they could not escape because of both the recent wounds inflicted by Europe and the urgency to construct a new political and cultural identity. African history claimed itself to be objective, but not neutral.⁴⁸

It was the oxymoron of African history that African historians of Africa had to overcome. The difference between being 'objective' and 'neutral' alluded to here, relates to the idea that political imperatives and historical knowledge could not be separated. The very act of writing scholarly African history was, for a long time, political. The GHA aimed to change that status quo and could therefore never escape some semblance of political engagement. A historian, as follows, had to be both critical and militant in order to rehabilitate African history. Coquery-Vidrovitch, moreover, writes that *Présence Africaine* 'did not cease to alert the conscience of African historians to the risks and duties of the profession.'⁴⁹ There were dangers in activist history and therefore the most rigorous analysis of source must take place. In a chapter on *objectivity and impartiality*, Lorraine Daston suggests that, within 19th century European historical scholarship, objectivity, as a modern scientific scholarly virtue, distinct from impartiality, was connected to the methods of source criticism.⁵⁰ The methods of historical source criticism, and an awareness of their limits, could qualify a historian as objective in their work.⁵¹ Although Coquery-Vidrovitch uses different language, neutral and objective, she also seems to suggest the possibility of a form of historical scholarship that allows for political engagement via the methods of critical historical scholarship. African history could not be impartial because of the historical moment which it inhabited and the assignment which it had given itself:

48 Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "Présence Africaine: History and Historians of Africa" in *The surreptitious speech: Présence Africaine and the politics of otherness, 1947-1987*, ed. V.Y. Mudimbe (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1992), 59-94, 75.

49 Coquery-Vidrovitch, "History and Historians of Africa", 77.

50 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, 32-3.

51 Daston, "Objectivity and Impartiality", 31-3.

to be anti-colonial and nationalist. Therefore, it was of the utmost importance to emphasise the critical analysis of sources and the African historians' critical stance towards existing historical material. In other words, their objectivity towards the sources they encountered. As such, scholarly activism engendered political activism in equal amounts as vice versa. Scholarly activism was political, but the obituaries argued, that did not necessarily disqualify scholars engaging in it from striving towards the academic element of truth. They made the claim that excluding African perspectives was inaccurate and unscholarly more than they argued that it was morally wrong. Ki-Zerbo's life, moreover, was easily adapted to such a juxtaposition of objectivity and activism, given his anti-colonial political view on African history and activities as a public intellectual.

And this is what Ba Konaré does as well in her obituary for Ki-Zerbo, not only in the quote placed above where she emphasises that history can get rid of falsifications, but also elsewhere in the obituary where she reiterates that the '*mots clés*' [keywords] of a historian, and indeed Ki-Zerbo, are: '*relation de faits, refus de jugement moral, objectivité*' [relations between facts, refusal of moral judgement, objectivity].⁵² In the editorial introduction emphasis is placed on how the GHA under Ki-Zerbo's guidance was an objective history of Africa. In another non-*Présence* appraisal of Ki-Zerbo's life before he died, the combination of critical scholarship and activism surfaces again. Here Amadé Badini, a compatriot of Ki-Zerbo, wrote that Ki-Zerbo had understood that knowledge of history was in fact a weapon when used correctly: 'he felt a moral, almost sacred duty to repay the debt he owed to his country.'⁵³ Moreover, Badini wrote that 'the epistemological benchmarks of Professor Ki-Zerbo's thought are self-confidence based on self-knowledge, thinking by oneself for oneself, a sound understanding of otherness, critical reference to the past and the 'irreplaceable importance of research based on popular African wisdom.'⁵⁴ In other words, he posited Ki-Zerbo as a critical thinker.

Whereas the obituaries for Ki-Zerbo function to smoothen the inherent tension between political activism and scholarly distance, the availability of an anti-persona in the obituaries for Boahen served to heighten the contrast between the historian commemorated and the

52 Ba Konaré, "L'histoire africaine aujourd'hui", 31.

53 Amadé Badini, "Joseph Ki-Zerbo (1922-)" *Prospects* XXIX:4 (1999): 615-627, 616.

54 Badini, "Joseph Ki-Zerbo", 617.

history he sought to disprove. The obituaries described above use a combination of praise for scholarly and/or political activism or nation building, with an emphasis on their subject's scholarly qualities in order to place them in opposition to European historiography. At the same time, they present an image of scholarly activism and political activism as harmoniously integrated in a nostalgia for the making of African historiography in the 1950s and 1960s. The obituaries thus lay bare the conflict between the practice of historiography for decolonisation and its remembrance. Moreover, the obituaries, most ardently in the cases of Boahen and Ki-Zerbo, display a yearning for a time when it seemed possible to agitate against racist historiography without necessarily suffering negative consequences as a serious scholar with a serious career. However, as Coquery-Vidrovitch has noted, this imagined past was perhaps a mirage as such a harmony between scholarship and politics never really existed, nor was it ever possible for African historians of Africa to criticise historical scholarship on Africa entirely without it impacting their careers as scholars. What we see in these obituaries, then, is a longing for past ideals more than realities. As Boym points out: 'the stronger the loss the more is it overcompensated with commemorations, the starker the distance from the past and the more it is prone to idealisation.'⁵⁵ The expectations of early African historiography, that European intellectual intrusions upon the interpretation of African history could be done away with, had not come to fruition, at least not in the way as envisioned perhaps by Boahen, Ki-Zerbo or Ajayi. The obituaries therefore present an idealisation of an era that seemed unequivocal at the time but which, in retrospect came to be recognised as unique.

My analysis of the obituaries has focused on how the individuals within the GHA were represented towards the outside world because the obituaries' function to commend their subjects is part of the nostalgia described above in as much as it was part of boundary work in the field of African history. As such they attempt what Boym has called a 'transhistorical reconstruction' of times that are perceived as better.⁵⁶ In fact, because the field on the continent of Africa itself was, and arguably still is, weathering a storm of underfunding and political instability, the retrospective boundary work that concerned the first generation of academic African historians, is almost by defini-

55 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 17.

56 Ibid, XVIII.

tion nostalgic in its longing for the past and its challenge towards the future. This kind of nostalgia may suggest a longing for a return to that time of the post-independence period, when, to some, it seemed like the 20th century would be Africa's century. When, put differently, the break of empire promised the making of a new world. At the same time, the intensity of the longing suggests the impossibility of return and this is where the future appears as a possible outcome. It is towards this field of tension, between past regrets and future possibilities, that we now turn.

Nostalgia for the end of empire

This second section of the chapter pays attention to nostalgia as a directive towards the future through a reappraisal of questions posed towards the function of African history and a lamentation on opportunities lost that were connected to the end of Empire. The end of empire offered many of the early Africanists and African historians of Africa discussed in reference to the GHA the opportunities to shape the world in new ways. Yet, by the end of the 20th century that new world had not necessarily arisen in the way they had imagined. A consequent longing back to the era of decolonisation, though, had an almost perverse taste to it, especially for Euro-American scholars of Africa, who would not have had the academic opportunities they did without imperialism. Take, for instance, the grand journeys Curtin could make through Africa thanks to French and English territorial possessions. Or, beyond the Euro-American Africanists, the endless hours spent on planes by virtually all of the ISC members as a result of global networks at least in part brought into existence as a consequence of the dismantling of empire. This was a globalisation which for a brief period of time seemed to work in favour of African powers. In a way then the nostalgia for the GHA could be compared to Lorcin's nostalgia for empire in that it was focused on political power. Power which made it possible for epistemic agents to follow. By nostalgia here then, I refer to something akin to what David Scott describes in his *Refashioning Futures* and again in *Conscripts of Modernity*. It was the nagging feeling that both the questions asked in the 1960s as well as the adopted narrative in which the answers were cast, had perhaps

become irrelevant with time.⁵⁷ Political and historical representation had not been enough to wrest free control from Africa's former colonial overlords it seemed. There could be no decolonisation of history without an excavation of the 'colonial library' — that is, the epistemological assumptions concerning history, subjectivity, culture, class, race and knowledge generally, that accompanied and were shaped by the European imperialist penetration of Africa.

The source material used for this second section is concerned with Boym's reflective nostalgia because the sources themselves are more consciously reflective and, as a result, are more open to the complexities of both past and present than the obituaries discussed above. I will here concentrate explicitly on the commemorative texts that concern the *General History of Africa* as a project, rather than its individual contributors to show what that reflective nostalgia meant to the project specifically. The most important sources for that purpose are the 'De Vita Sua' that Vansina wrote about a year before he would pass away in February 2017 as well as a series of interviews with Vansina conducted by Florence Bernault in April 2016. Secondly, I will look in detail at the editorial introduction to the *Présence Africaine* special issue for Ki-Zerbo — which reads almost like an obituary for the GHA rather than for Ki-Zerbo. I will also look at some archival material, including a speech which was of a commemorative nature given by Niane when the project was presented in the 1990s and an interview with Christophe Wondji, also from 1994 — when the final volume appeared for the first time in English.

Niane's speech was part of the reflection on the project during its finalisation in the 1990s. When the Guinean national committee for UNESCO organised a day at the national museum of Guinea in Conakry to present the finished project on 14 April 1994 (even though it had not yet been translated into French by then), the day inevitably also took on a commemorative nature and was meant as a sort of reflection on historical research within and about Guinea. Djibril Tamsir Niane, the Guinean editor of volume IV, reflected on the GHA ideal of African history from the inside. Such a wish was an old one, he

57 David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: criticism after postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton university Press, 1999), 10–15 and David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity. The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 1–9.

noted, making the GHA a relatively 'old project'.⁵⁸ Niane recognised that the concerns of African history had changed and that researching African history 'from within' was no longer the most pressing matter within African historiography on the continent. It was not that history should no longer be written from within, but rather that doing as such, was not enough. The problem space of African history had expanded. In February of the same year, the UNESCO Courier had published an interview with the co-editor of volume VIII, Christophe Wondji, in which the same sentiment was reflected: the GHA had aged in the values it exemplified.⁵⁹ The GHA had made it possible to regard African history in a different way as before, for instance in its attempt to use a different kind of periodisation, and was at least partly responsible for the acceptance of oral history as serious scholarly methodology. Something for which, Niane stated, the authors of the GHA had been ostracised for from the historical community.⁶⁰ Niane also looked to the future and pondered how the GHA could be used for Guinea. It, he concluded was a project that could spur on further research, that needed to be translated into local languages and that could possibly even be adapted to comic book form for illiterate audiences. For such a programme of public outreach to be possible, Niane appealed to the Guinean minister for education. Furthering research into Guinean history could only be done with the aid of the ministry.⁶¹ During the day itself the ministry announced that it would indeed develop such a programme.⁶² What the day of presentation for the *General History of Africa* in Guinea makes clear is that, whilst Niane thought the GHA was a project of past glory, it did hold continued value beyond the realms of academia.

The idea that the GHA was not an endpoint is also to be found in the editorial introduction to the special issue for Ki-Zerbo, which strikingly focuses almost exclusively on his contribution to the *General History of Africa*. The introduction quotes the very first sentence on

58 UAP, CLT CID 50, PRESENTATION L'HISTOIRE GENERALE DE L'AFRIQUE. Quelques suggestions à l'attention du Ministre de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique en vue de la relance de la recherche historique en Guinée, 1.

59 Betty Werther, "Into Africa. Just-completed: General History: a new look at Africa's past." *UNESCO Courier* 55 (February 1994)

60 UAP, CLT CID 50, PRESENTATION L'HISTOIRE GENERALE DE L'AFRIQUE, 1-2.

61 Ibid, 4.

62 Ibid, 3.

the eight-volume series: 'Africa has a history.' It reads almost as an ode to the General History:

Cette grande entreprise de réflexion sur l'histoire de l'Afrique fut exemplaire à plus d'un titre. Elle révélait ce qui avait été si souvent et si complaisamment tu, et fut menée selon les formes et les méthodes que requiert la recherche historique. [...] S'il n'est pas possible de rendre compte ici de tous les acquis de cette aventure intellectuelle, ni de témoigner [...] — notre — reconnaissance à tous ceux qui ont œuvré à son succès, il est loisible de rappeler les enjeux de cette vaste entreprise d'une histoire de l'Afrique afin de mieux envisager les différentes tâches qui restent à accomplir [This great undertaking of reflection on the history of Africa was exemplary in more ways than one. It revealed what had been so often and so complacently concealed, and was conducted according to the models and methods required by historical research. [...] While it is not possible to give an account here of all the achievements of this intellectual adventure, nor to express [...] — our — gratitude to all those who worked for its success, it is possible to recall the stakes of this vast undertaking of a history of Africa in order to better envisage the various tasks that remain to be accomplished].⁶³

The editorial acknowledged the importance of the GHA for African history, but also impressed upon its reader the sense that continued work was necessary. *Présence Africaine* described how the GHA, under Ki-Zerbo's direction, had as its task to further knowledge on the African continent, as they put it: '*Lenjeu de cette entreprise était aussi d'ordre épistémologique*' [The challenge of this undertaking was also epistemological].⁶⁴ That epistemological mission, however, could not be separated from the people it was subsequently made to serve. Knowledge and epistemology could not be separated from the struggle that had become part and parcel of the African past as *Présence Africaine* saw it. African history then was a public and therefore political enterprise

63 N.N., "Écrire L'Histoire de L'Afrique Après Ki-Zerbo" *Présence Africaine* 173:1 (2006): 5–8, 5.

64 N.N., "Après Ki-Zerbo", 5.

as opposed to a detached endeavour, as seems to have been the case in most of the reviews discussed in the previous chapter.

The editorial introduction placed the legacy of the GHA partly outside academia. Its point was not only to convince academia of the existence of African history, but, society as a whole. It is telling, for instance, that the introduction denounces Nicolas Sarkozy's 2007 Dakar Discours, in which the 23rd president of France had imperiously stated that the 'African' had not yet entered history.⁶⁵ The *Présence Africaine* introduction to the Ki-Zerbo special issue deemed this a Hegelian and decidedly racist conception of history that, once again, proved the importance of Ki-Zerbo's work as well as the need for the UNESCO *General History of Africa*, whilst mirroring that project's early goals as well as the problems of the 1960s.⁶⁶ However, the authors of the editorial made clear that the battle of today was not the same as Ki-Zerbo's. Histories of Africa had been written and the academic discipline had grown and even prospered, but, paradoxically, this had not necessarily created a greater understanding of African history. In global media, Africa was still portrayed as a war and conflict-ridden continent, a place of poverty and disease, replacing old stereotypes by new ones.⁶⁷

Le succès de l'histoire générale de l'Afrique a rendu paradoxalement plus tendues les relations des historiens africains avec les progrès qui sont accomplis dans leur discipline [The success of the general history of Africa had paradoxically made the relationship of African historians with the progress made in their discipline more strained].⁶⁸

What this means has largely been described in the last chapter: the success of African history as discipline, which *Présence Africaine* here links decidedly to the GHA, has, as a result of geo-political power structures, caused the discipline to move away from the continent itself, putting the endeavour of African history in the hands of Euro-Americans. *Présence Africaine* concluded that the GHA itself needed to be disseminated more widely on the continent and that was argua-

⁶⁵ The 2006 issue was actually published the year after.

⁶⁶ N.N., "Après Ki-Zerbo", 7.

⁶⁷ See also the Economist of 13th May 2000 on *The hopeless continent*

⁶⁸ N.N., "Après Ki-Zerbo", 8.

bly where the UNESCO project had failed. The editorial introduction then, seemed to long for a chance to revisit the GHA and the possibilities encased within it.

This nostalgia expressed a longing to reclaim the African particular away from the perceived Euro-American universal. Nostalgia, more broadly, is sometimes seen as a reaction to the losses brought on by globalisation, often connected to specific localities; in the form of paraphernalia of past colonial empires, for instance.⁶⁹ In this case, it could be argued that the nostalgia for the African historiography, or rather its possibilities, of the 1950's and 1960s is also located in a particular place, albeit a rather larger one: Africa itself. Once African history was pulled into and accepted by the academic historical disciplines in Europe and North America, it partly lost its orientation towards Africa and thereby possibly its meaning towards the people it concerned. The above then is a nostalgia for an African centre within a globalised web of mobility around the world; the precise condition in which the GHA could briefly flourish during the end of Empire.

Another reflective and nostalgic document that mourns the loss of an African centre is the *De Vita Sua* written by Jan Vansina.⁷⁰ In her obituary for Vansina, Michele Wagner draws on the text to illustrate to her reader the emotional life of her friend and mentor.⁷¹ The remarkable text is indeed filled with personal remarks and emotional reflections, as one is wont to do near the end of one's life. Maybe Vansina felt it was time to take stock of what he had achieved and, perhaps more importantly, what his failures had been.⁷² The reason he himself stated for writing a *De Vita Sua*, a defence or justification of one's conduct, becomes clear early on in the text. Vansina wrote because he

69 This idea of nostalgia as opposed to universalism, even if it is a universal experience, and connected to particular places is described in more detail in: Seth Graebner, *History's Place. Nostalgia and the City in French Algerian Literature* (New York: Lexington Books, 2007), 1-25. See also: Lorcin, "The Nostalgias for Empire", 273, Becker, "The Meanings of Nostalgia", 235 and Alastair Bennett, *The Geography of Nostalgia. Global and Local Perspectives on Modernity and Loss* (London: Routledge, 2015)

70 Vansina died on February 8th, 2017 and had published the final word on his life on April 4th 2016, Jan Vansina, "De Vita Sua", *Society* 53 (2016, published online 4-4-2016): 240-5.

71 Michele D. Wagner, "Obituary - Jan Vansina (14 September 1929 - 8 February 2017)", *History in Africa* 44 (2017): 5-9, 8-9.

72 Wagner, "Obituary - Jan Vansina"

wanted to offer context to the extraordinary endeavour that had been African history during his lifetime. It had been extraordinary because:

The main body of historiography about Africa is foreign to Africa: it stems from foreigners, is published elsewhere, often out of reach to locals, often about topics that are of concern elsewhere, and most often in the so-called 'west'. In Africa many of those accounts are seen as barely relevant. [...] Unlike most of my colleagues who probably see what I have thus far described as a minor hindrance at best, I have become gradually convinced over time that this issue constitutes a major problem for non-African historians of Africa, if only because of the role histories play in sustaining or even creating collective identities.⁷³

This external orientation of African studies deeply concerned Vansina. In a way this very thesis is a testament to the problem he describes, given the fact that it was written from a European university by a European researcher. It is also an attempt at a reflection on the meaning of that European position. Vansina was not an opponent of foreign historiography on Africa per definition, but he worried about the attitudes of those foreign historians he had observed during his career. In this account of his life, which is different from his autobiography in that it concerns itself more with the life of the mind and less with events, Vansina almost seems to be speaking directly to the establishment of African historiography in the United States — of which he himself was a part. 'Many academic scholars tend to write more in analytical ways, than to compose a continuous narrative and instead write primarily for their peers "to advance knowledge."' But, Vansina wondered, is that what the primary purpose of African history should be? 'I have [...] witnessed directly the pent-up demand of so many Congolese, and other Africans who have sought a history that is meaningful to them' and therefore not just advancement of knowledge in Europe or North America. Vansina constructed history, therefore, as a 'meaningful' endeavour as different from history as an academic endeavour — meaningful in that it should carry a 'social' responsibility. That responsibility was often absent in a 'foreign' context

73 Vansina, "De Vita Sua", 240-1.

according to Vansina: 'Foreign historiography is authoritative and foreign historians are by far the most numerous. There is no congruence between their concerns which are instead usually dictated by concerns, fashions and careers in their own societies, rather than the concerns of many African historians, much less with those of African elites, and even less with those of the general public in those countries.'⁷⁴ And, Vansina continued, this problem of a divergence of interests between those writing the history of Africa and those living it, did not look like it would be solved anytime soon. The promise of creating a 'vibrant African historiography [...] vanished by the mid 1990's.'⁷⁵ The historiography Vansina observed around him in 2016 was no longer that of the old 'colonial vintage', yet he thought it was divorced from African interests. 'My awareness of this "disconnect" between producers and natural audience and of its impact on that audience has been growing over my whole working life, and it motivated me ever more to carry out the research that I did pursue.'⁷⁶

That is not to say that Vansina thought there had been no meaningful contributions to African historiography from Africa itself. Indeed, for him the *General History of Africa* was exactly that. Vansina perceived of the GHA as one of his most important contributions to scholarship. Even if he did not realise this at the time:

It would take many years, many observations and countless conversations with leading African scholars on the UNESCO committee before I truly understood how much our collective and individual identities are involved here and that the imposition of a foreign interpretation of history usually induces a disastrous lack of self-confidence and a deprecation of one's self in those who are the so-called objects of such history. This struggle for Africa's own view about its history was one that could not be abandoned. So, I gave that history and UNESCO all the possible time I could find so that a few years later I became one of the four members of

74 Vansina, "De Vita Sua", 241.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

its bureau that prodded and supervised the whole operation, until well into the mid 1990's.⁷⁷

Vansina's belief in the importance of meaningful history that spoke to the people who one wrote history about, stemmed from his immersion in the *General History of Africa*. His conviction that history was an emotional affair that spoke to much more than the augmentation of academic knowledge, but that had to be socially meaningful for the everyday reality of the people who functioned as the subjects of history, grew during his time spent with historians such as Ajayi, Ogot, Ki-Zerbo and others. In a series of interviews conducted by Florence Bernault at his home in Madison in April of 2016, around the time the *De Vita Sua* was published, Vansina explained that he had come to realise that identity was one of the main drivers of history. 'All history has to do with identity and all identity has some form of history in it' — Vansina spoke during the interview.⁷⁸ For that reason too, Vansina saw himself more opposed to what he called the foreign interpretation of African history, which he saw materialised in the form of *the Cambridge History of Africa*:

Over time this kind of historiography was to become the most dominant and most damaging enemy of an African understanding of history. It recruited most foreign historians at western universities and the more scientific and abstruse the publications became, the better they were regarded. Hence, as time went by, I rebelled more and more against similar views; however reasonable or well-founded they might be in theory. [...] recently, the banked fires of the old colonial or imperial histories have been rekindled in the former metropolises and are slowly eroding the effects of UNESCO's achievements, not only internationally but in Af-

⁷⁷ Vansina, "De Vita Sua", 243.

⁷⁸ This entanglement of history and identity was especially central to the history of Rwanda, he went on. Jan Vansina, "Maturation of African history", interview by Florence Bernault, April 8, 2016, video, 03:36-03:42, accessed 08-01-2021, <https://jan-vansina.africa.wisc.edu/interviews/>

rica, as well. Reacting today against this, as I still do, feels ever more as just a rearguard action.⁷⁹

In the context of this thesis, the above reads almost like a direct response to the reviews discussed in the previous chapter. Near the end of his life, then, Vansina had become partial to the kind of history he had rejected as post-modernism in his autobiography from 1994:

After 1990 post-modernism began to underline the flaws of the 'scientific' and 'objective' history more and more. [...] when I wrote *Living With Africa* in 1994, I failed to see that, in Africa by itself postmodernism was not the main historiographical challenger. Instead, the universalising hegemonic movement with its metropolitan colonialist outriders was that challenge. Whatever the reason, it remains an inexcusable failure that I did not fully recognise, at the time.⁸⁰

Vansina's self-critical attitude here and his wish to call out in favour of what he called 'inside accounts' of African history shows an urge to set the record straight regarding his own position and opinions before the end and is perhaps characteristic of one taking stock of one's life in old age. Vansina also shows himself averse to the universalising tendencies he identified in historical science and as such, expressed the same kind of nostalgia for the particular as mentioned above. In the position Vansina took by critically assessing the establishment of which he himself was a part for most of his life, he essentially placed himself alongside the editors of *Présence Africaine* who introduced the special issue for Ki-Zerbo.

Vansina felt responsible for the way African history had moved away from the continent. In the end, however, he did not plead for a purely indigenous history of Africa, but a history of Africa wherein foreign historians, like himself, are tuned into the needs of the continent they are concerned with. His *De Vita Sua* contains a clear directive for future generations: to write history that is meaningful outside of academia and for the people who it concerns and to do this in the face of critique and struggle if necessary. Vansina's reflection on his

79 Vansina, "De Vita Sua", 244.

80 Ibid.

own position and his retrospective recognition of the importance of African historians in his own trajectory — a recognition he had not yet made as earnestly in his 1994 autobiography — is deeply reflexive and motivated by morality. In these texts, Vansina is longing for the period when it seemed that real change could be made, but when he had not sufficiently heeded its call, he thought. What binds these texts together, then, is their acknowledgement of the *General History of Africa* and its recognition of African perspectives as worthwhile. In 1981 Boahen equally reflected on the loss of African perspectives during a lecture for the Canadian Association of African studies, already mentioned in Chapter 6. The problem of African history was not that it was too far removed from ‘real issues’, but rather that it had failed to live up to the expectations of the 1950’s and 1960s to centre African history on Africa.⁸¹ The texts betray a sorrowful longing for a time gone by and an imagined opportunity lost, for it is questionable whether it was ever possible to live up to the expectations of the 1950s and 1960s. Most importantly, however, these texts find a sense of salvation in an assignment for the future.

The nostalgia that is present in the reflection on the GHA, furthermore, does not necessarily only bring to mind a longing for an era when decolonisation of history seemed possible, but specifically reflects the ongoing necessity of decolonisation itself. Not simply because one cannot return to the past, but also because the kind of decolonisation that postcolonial critique identified as necessary could probably not have come into being without there first being the decolonising efforts that focused on political and historiographical self-representation — the problem space of the anti-colonial project as Scott puts it.⁸² Not because, as Scott is careful to explain, ‘the anticolonial nationalists were simple minded essentialist, but because it [the post-colonial excavation of the origins of colonial knowledge itself] had not yet become visible as the question of the moment’, that question being ‘the decolonisation of self-representation itself, the decolonisation of the conceptual apparatus through which their political objectives were thought out’ and, as I would like to add, the conceptual apparatus of

⁸¹ Adu Boahen, “The Historiography of Anglophone West Africa in the 1980s” in *Africa in the Twentieth Century. The Adu Boahen Reader*, ed. Toyin Falola (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004), 625–35, 631.

⁸² David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: criticism after postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton university Press, 1999), 10–15.

history writing.⁸³ As Scott makes clear in his second book, the emplotment of the anti-colonial moment which sought a romantic narrative of vindication — as Boahen had constructed regarding the history of resistance to colonialism in volume VII of the GHA — no longer seemed realistic. Criticism on the status moulded into a romantic narrative with a vision towards a postcolonial utopia had lost its narrative power and had been made redundant as a result of a neoliberal world order.⁸⁴

Conclusions

This chapter shows how nostalgia can be used as an analytical tool to illustrate the retrospective reflection on the *General History of Africa* from within its own ranks and largely from within the continent itself. Those who looked back at the project with sympathy after it was finished regarded it with a sense of melancholy because they rightly regarded the project as a unique chance at decolonising. At the same time, historians of Africa were invested in according the project, and the remarkable historians who worked on it, with retrospective honours. By doing as such, they were engaged in nostalgic boundary work because, as is often the case with obituaries, they moulded the past into an idealised image, not just with the aim of making it fit the present, but also and more importantly, whilst yearning for that past as for some it retrospectively seemed like the pinnacle of anti-colonial success.

Within the obituaries written for Ajayi, Boahen and Ki-Zerbo and largely containing a reflection of the early years of Africanist historiography, the conflict that existed between political and scholarly imperatives in the writing of African history as shown in earlier chapters seemed to have abated. The combination of scholarly activism, or even political activism and what was perceived as epistemically sound objective historical work had become a celebrated epistemic and moral virtue belonging to the very foundation of African history. Retrospectively then, a more congenial image of African historical studies was projected back in time.

The nostalgia that was apparent within reflections that were specifically focused on the *General History of Africa*, rather than its editors

83 Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 12, 14.

84 Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 9.

and authors, was much more wistful. Unlike in the obituaries, reflections on the project itself and African history more broadly carried within them the unmistakable acceptance of the past as past. As a result, they mourned a period in history that had made it possible for the GHA to come into existence in the first place: the end of empire and the global power shift that briefly came along with it. These reflections then, the editorial by *Présence Africaine* and Vansina's musings most importantly, echo a sense of loss that is akin to the waning of optimism after independence. Peculiarly, it was the end of empire that had brought so much opportunity for both African as well as Euro-American scholars. The GHA was a truly transnational and pan-African project that nevertheless could only have come into being as a result of empire. This realisation marks the nostalgic reflection on the project after it had finished as paradoxical. It was not until the advent of postcolonial critique that this paradox became all the more apparent again and again. Nevertheless, these reflections also point the way forward for African historical studies by reiterating the importance of an African history connected to the African continent. What they had in common then, is how they valued the GHA most for its authenticity and its related moral as well as epistemic advocacy for African ownership of knowledge about Africa.

