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

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Conclusions to Part Three

RETROSPECTIVE REFLECTION

The difference in the way the GHA was retrospectively reflected on and judged between what I have dubbed ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ is stark. It underscores the fact that within the field of African history in the second half of the 20th century, there were very different ideas of what African history should be and should achieve and what role politics had to play therein or even what counted as political or not. Moreover, it underscores the GHA’s multiple nature. In Vansina’s words, the insiders to the GHA and those that wrote the reviews for the volumes had different ideas on what it meant to write meaningful history. The majority of the review writers judged the GHA for its academic qualities, which they sometimes found lacking and sometimes criticised it for mixing research standards with political imperatives. Insiders who retrospectively reflected on the project, conversely, appreciated that very blending together of political and academic ideals and saw it as an inevitable part of African history. It was precisely the combination between politics and academia that obituary writers seemed to long for in nostalgic accounts of the past. Moreover, in retrospective reflections on the GHA both contributors and others displayed a remarkable nostalgia for the time when it had seemed possible to create an African centre within the study of Africa. They mourned the possibilities that had come with the end of empire and connected the grieving to an assignment for the future: to once again recentre

African studies on Africa in order to create meaningful history of the continent. Of course, the categories of 'outsider' and 'insider' are not that clear-cut and some of the reviews also appreciated the GHA for its historic achievement, even if they found the end results lacking. Many reviewers also diagnosed the GHA as stuck in a time that had since passed and as unresponsive to new debates within historiography. In a way, they chided the GHA for the very thing that the commemorators described in this chapter nostalgically longed for.

The tension between political needs and desires and academic reputation is what the decolonisation of history within the GHA resolved around. Academic credibility for African history in Europe was contingent on the acceptance of the political agenda that was a part of the GHA from its very start. Of course, once a political agenda becomes 'accepted' it stops being perceived of as political and that is a form of boundary work in itself. Yet, when the project started, such academic credibility for African history had not yet arrived. This contingency therefore spoke directly to the question of whether incorporation into the academic world was more important than history writing for political emancipation on the continent itself. In the end, the GHA was praised for the very fact that it had represented the will to create African history as a reputable scholarly endeavour in a decolonising world. Yet, there was also an awareness of some of the problems that were pointed out by the review writers: that the GHA had essentially been overtaken by time and that its emancipatory goals were no longer relevant in the same way in the 1990s as they had been in 1964. The nostalgia inherent in the commemorative texts acknowledged that neither the GHA nor the African historians attached to it had solved all problems and that there were new problems that had arisen. Those new problems constituted an agenda for the continuing the struggle for authentic African history in the 21st century, albeit differently constituted.