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

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CONCLUSIONS

The *General History of Africa* was a complex and multifaceted project. How the project aimed to decolonise the writing of history in its specific historic moment and why it was difficult to do as such has been the starting question of my research into its history. It has been a historiographic study in which the intellectual motivations of the GHA historians and their practice of history writing as followed from those motivations have been the primary objects of analysis. I have described and contextualised the ideals connected to the aim of writing an Africa-centred history of Africa and analysed their practice as part of the history of decolonising knowledge. Of course, this thesis has not offered an all-encompassing account of all aspects of the GHA. There are indubitably worthwhile questions that have been left unasked and unanswered in this thesis. What can the case of the GHA nevertheless tell us specifically about the process of intellectual decolonisation given the challenges of creating independent historical scholarship under conceptual prerequisites and methodology developed in Europe? How, as I put it in the introduction to this work, can we use the GHA to understand the practice of decolonising or Africanising knowledge? This thesis has been about the history of decolonising African history in practice. It has shown that the decolonisation of knowledge in its current form has a history of its own. This conclusion section first summarises my arguments loosely following the three-part structure of this thesis, then moves on to a general conclusion to bring together the various strands of my argument. Next, I describe how UNES-

CO further developed the GHA in the 21st century. I delve into the meaning of my research for the 21st century and draw some parallels between contemporary calls for decolonisation and the GHA as a historical phenomenon, before conveying what I think could be fruitful avenues for follow-up research.

In the first part of this thesis, I have shown that the *General History of Africa* first and foremost aimed to establish African history as a scholarly and epistemically reputable activity within the imagined larger Euro-American academy. It aimed to prove, put differently, that African history existed and could be studied academically, just like European history. Secondly, in proving as such, the GHA aimed to contribute to the political emancipation of the continent. The GHA wanted to contribute to nation building through the writing of history. Epistemic and political concerns, therefore, were intertwined in the objectives of the GHA. These goals, I have argued, were articulated through three distinct ideals: the ideal of anti-eurocentrism, of pan-African diversity and of political emancipation. The analysis of these ideals, placed in the context of the project, has shown why the GHA took on the shape that it did and why it strove towards the two goals mentioned above. The GHA was a collaborative pan-African project of emancipation which produced African history on a large scale because it vehemently believed that the African past needed to be studied as seriously as the European past had been studied. Political decolonisation thus needed to be accompanied by historiographical decolonisation and because the African continent had come to share a common history of colonial oppression, this was envisioned from a pan-African perspective.

Anti-eurocentrism was perhaps the most important epistemic ideal marshalled in order to create independent African history in reaction to the colonial historiography that had come before. It was articulated as an anti-ideal and connected to bias in individuals. Eurocentrism, personified by the figures of Trevor-Roper as well as Hegel to a lesser extent, was conceptualised as an epistemic vice connected to individuals rather than the historical discipline as a whole. It was seen as an epistemic vice, related to dogmatism, which led to shoddy scholarship. As a result, it was connected to bias, subjectivity and racial prejudice and historicised, and thereby made outdated, through reflection on the history of the historical discipline itself. Because eurocentric histories of Africa had denied it its past apart from contact with Europeans, research into pre-colonial history, moreover, became the favoured means to move away from eurocentrism and oral history was envisioned as

the historical method to accompany research into the pre-colonial past.

Ideals of anti-eurocentrism worked in concert with a focus on pan-African collaborative diversity. This was an ideal that, through an embrace of perspectivity, was imagined to contribute to the objectivity that eurocentric history of African pasts had so far lacked. The inclusion of many different (African) points of view moreover, had a political motivation as well. It was imagined that the stipulation that African authors should be preferred over non-Africans would contribute to Africanisation of the historical discipline and thereby emancipation of African historians within that discipline. It was an anti-colonial ideal. Yet, the positioning documents were relatively vague as to how authors needed to be selected beyond a focus on Africans.

Politics played a decisive role within the *General History of Africa*. How the work would contribute to political emancipation, in the form of widespread dissemination of the volumes or by providing the continent with a pan-African nationalist history, was made important. I therefore argue that the GHA saw itself as civically responsible for not just the creation of African history but for developing it in such a way that it could contribute to the education of new national citizens, both at the university level as well as throughout the rest of society. It wanted to reach both academics as well as a general public. As a result, there was some tension regarding the various intended audiences for the project.

In the second part of this thesis, I have analysed what happened to the ideals discussed in part one. Getting rid of eurocentrism within the history of Africa sometimes proved difficult partly because it was sometimes difficult for epistemic and political ideals of emancipation to work in congruence. When Cheikh Anta Diop argued for the black origins of the ancient Egyptians by making use of racialist science it seemed eurocentrism could be criticised by deploying the tools of eurocentrism, namely racialism, itself and the international scientific committee in charge of the GHA found it difficult to withstand such epistemically unsound, but politically appealing arguments. Diop's stature as one of the most prominent African historians of African history contributed to the appeal of his argument, suggesting that the internal politics of the burgeoning sub-discipline of African history were hard to ignore. It turned out, moreover, that the ISC strategy of focusing on African history from the inside was not always easy to bring into practice because African history had fundamental connec-

tions to extra-African pasts. The goals of creating African history as scholarly reputable and creating African history to contribute specifically to political emancipation through nation-building on the African continent were sometimes, but not always, incongruent.

This was all the more visible in the way that Adu Boahen aimed to shape his volume VII on the history of the colonial period in Africa. Politics and history for him could not be artificially separated and he therefore envisioned a history of the colonial period that focused on resistance to Europeans as well as the histories of proto-nationalist groups. This however led to conflict between him and Terence Ranger, who had a different idea on the nature of resistance to colonialism and who had developed different political ideas regarding the use of African history. Equally, Ali Mazrui had ideas on what it meant to decolonise history that deviated somewhat from the rest of the ISC in his volume VIII on decolonisation. He thought it was of importance to show the connections between the colonial and post-colonial period through a focus on the political realities that colonialism had created, yet the rest of the ISC wanted to move away from what they perceived as a European perspective. Mazrui was, moreover, often understood by some as too engaged in contemporary issues and overtly political in his treatment of the postcolonial past. It was here that tensions between scholarly respectability and political and moral ideals came into conflict once more.

Questions of positionality in the portrayal of the African past played an important role in terms of power and possibility as well, moreover. Who could argue for a decolonised history of Africa and who was allowed to determine what that meant? Racial inequality in terms of global epistemic positioning, I have argued, is part of the answer to why it was difficult to decolonise or Africanise African history within the *General History of Africa*. African and Euro-American historians of Africa came to occupy very different positions within the landscape of global knowledge production. Their voices eventually came to carry an unequal weight, even within a project of decolonisation as a result of growing inequalities in material circumstances and funding. These differences mattered primarily because Euro-Americans retained the upper hand within the global politics of knowledge production on Africa and such different positionalities carried with them differences in opinion as to what was most important regarding the decolonisation of African history. Even though the *General History of Africa* had wished to create a collaborative pan-African work of his-

torical scholarship, Euro-Americans actually came to play crucial roles as a result of disparate material circumstances.

The Africanisation of African history therefore was hindered perhaps most seriously by the growing inequality in the politics of knowledge production about Africa in the 20th century. Whereas the 1960s had been the golden years of Africanised African history, the 1970s proved a rude awakening from dreams of decolonisation and epistemic independence, as well as economic independence. These two are, unsurprisingly perhaps, intimately connected. As a result of financial crises in many African countries in the 1970s and the rise of authoritarian political regimes, budget cuts were made in many African universities, often sacrificing the study of African history in favour of what were deemed more useful areas of study. At the same time, funding for the study of African history at American universities had only increased in the 1960s as a result of Cold War politics. Political realities therefore created practical difficulties in the realisation of all three GHA ideals. Africanisation, anti-eurocentrism and political emancipation became more difficult to realise as the centre of African studies repositioned around American institutions. The materiality of scholarly work therefore played an important role in who decided what it meant to Africanise African history.

Practical problems were therefore perhaps amongst the most devastating barriers towards the creation of an Africanised history of the African continent. Many of the GHA's most important contributors were increasingly bogged down by administrative duties in their respective countries. As a result, the pace of the work slowed down considerably from the 1970s onwards. Yet, the GHA historians largely refused to change their work practice in response to changing realities. They clung to the importance of a collaborative work ethic, sending papers across the world for criticism by dozens of people in order to create what they thought was a more well-rounded GHA. At the same time, the brunt of the work was carried out by less than 10 contributors, most of whom were either from West or East Africa, Europe or North America. Despite the GHA's adherence to pan-African ideology, very few northern or southern Africans played significant roles in the project, nor were African women meaningfully involved. Marxist-oriented historians, moreover, remained at the periphery of the project, despite the importance of Marxist ideologies for the liberation of Southern Africa. The GHA aimed not to take sides in the Cold War even though it was unmistakably influenced by it.

In the last part of this thesis, I have made clear how the GHA was received after it had been published in the 1980s and 1990s. This reception was not always positive, in part because the GHA had been overtaken by time. The realisation that a decolonisation of representation alone was not enough emerged in the 1970s as a result of postcolonial critique. Whilst the GHA was being written, ideals of knowledge production changed. New problems centred around the theory of history arose whereas African nationalism as a goal within history writing became less important. Although the GHA should be seen as more than a part of the so-called nationalist school of African historiography, it did after all include chapters on economic disparities and cultural history, it was largely seen as not having focused on theory enough. This became all the more obvious in the various reviews that were written for the work. Reviewers often deemed the work out of date and judged it for neglecting to really engage in newer, postcolonial and Marxist, scholarship. Some also thought the work was too overtly political. In my analysis of the reviews written for the GHA in the 1980s and 1990s, I have deliberately chosen to look at mostly American and British judgments, as it was around American and more broadly Anglophone scholarship that African studies globally had come to be centred. Moreover, the judgment the GHA received that it was too overtly political in relation to its British counterpart, the *Cambridge History of Africa*, is exemplary for my conclusion that what was seen as political was partly in the eye of the beholder. What we deem decolonising on an epistemic level and what we dismiss as merely political is at least partly decided by one's positionality, as is the question of whether epistemic and political concerns can be separated as such. If that positionality consequently has more power on the stage of global knowledge production, as a result of various historically determined factors, the conclusion must be not only that knowledge is power, but equally that power determines who can produce knowledge and what knowledge is valued. It was precisely this realisation moreover, that caused the GHA historians themselves to reflect on the work after it was finished with a remarkable nostalgia. They had realised that the window of opportunity for decolonisation, at least pertaining to the materiality of knowledge production, may have closed when the euphoria of the end of empire and related possibilities slipped away.

Finally, to move on to general concluding remarks, I conclude that decolonising history takes place on different levels: epistemic, economic as well as political. In this thesis I have brought postcolonial critique

on the conceptual nature of academic history writing and the history of knowledge production about Africa — the colonial library — into conversation with studies of scholarly practice to show that such criticism has its limits. There is more at play hindering the development of autonomous academic knowledge production in Africa besides the epistemic barriers thrown up by a coloniality of knowledge. Without political power as well as financial support it seemed decolonising the writing of history at the university level was unfeasible. I have presented a case study on the practice of decolonisation to supplement theoretical reflections. Practical concerns and institutional dynamics, as well as geo-political changes and power structures, influenced the production of African history just as much as the development of theoretical frameworks. The analytical wall between studies of scholarly practice and histories of Africa needs to be broken down further, however, in order to enrich both. I have, moreover, analysed the role of Euro-American researchers in shaping the history of Africa on a daily basis to show that they remained and remain influential within the academic community that produces knowledge about Africa. I therefore also conclude that the practice of decolonisation should be studied in conjuncture with a more thorough examination of the role of their countries and institutions in financing African studies within specific national contexts. The context of decolonisation matters greatly in terms of global political shifts in power as well as the financial situation of individual universities. Within the GHA, moreover, as with any large-scale project of an overtly ideological nature, there were differences of opinion and subsequent contention, which were reinforced by problems of logistics. However, the specific dynamic regarding the GHA was influenced heavily by the quickly changing realities of the African continent in the 20th century. In fact, it could be concluded that it is a small miracle and a testimony to the GHA historians' perseverance that the project was brought into print at all.

Another conclusion that aligns with work done by decolonial scholars is that universities who have historically emerged in Europe and have been transplanted to Africa, are not the best places for a decolonisation of historical knowledge. The *General History of Africa* never managed to disentangle itself completely from Euro-American frameworks of knowledge production. And although the GHA also made a moral claim about the exclusion of African history, it mostly remained invested in emphasising scientific rigour and accuracy as part of a politics of scholarly respectability. In that respect the project offers

a stark contrast to both the postcolonial critique that followed as a result of changing circumstances, as well as contemporary calls for decolonisation. I now want to move on to the state of affairs for the GHA in the 21st century as well as what this thesis may conclude about some contemporary issues.

Given the enduring inequalities within the politics of global knowledge production it is perhaps not all that surprising that the problems GHA historians were dealing with are similar, though not the same, to problems scholars are still dealing with in 21st century African studies. This is reflected in revived calls for the decolonisation of knowledge production, most notably the Fallist movement in South Africa. They, and others, contend that the history of Africa has not yet been provincialised or decolonised in a meaningful way, in part as a result of the same global neoliberal structures of power that frustrated the GHA. Increasingly, moreover, historians are starting to frame the question of intellectual decolonisation as a European problem, rather than a purely African one. The role of global power structures is brought into question more than before. I have shown in this study why an integrated study of scholarly practice and global politics of knowledge production is so important and that by connecting the everyday minutiae of scholarship to larger structures, we may come to a greater understanding of the way in which scholarship works and is entangled with these larger structures.

The *General History of Africa* itself, moreover, has not yet thrown in the towel and its history has not yet come to an end. UNESCO has, first with the aid of Elikia M'Bokolo who contributed a chapter to volume V, started a series of online lectures as well as podcasts in cooperation with *Radio France Internationale* (RFI) for a general audience in an effort to disseminate the GHA, but more importantly knowledge of African history, ever more widely.¹ In an effort to retroactively fulfil some of the ideals articulated in 1970, UNESCO has started several projects to integrate the GHA into school curricula. More notably, UNESCO has also embarked on the drafting and publication of three new volumes in order to update the older volumes. UNESCO has chosen to focus these volumes on what they dub 'Global Africa' in an effort to connect the history of the continent more deeply to its various diaspora's. As such, it could be said that, once again, UNESCO is speaking

¹ "Histoire Générale de l'Afrique", #HistoireAfricaine RFI Savoirs, accessed 3 May, 2021, <https://savoirs.rfi.fr/fr/comprendre-enrichir/histoire/histoire-generale-de-lafrique>.

to the times. Given the rise in recent years of global movements of black emancipation, Black Lives Matter first amongst them, it seems that a study of the afterlives of transatlantic slavery is especially pertinent at this time. UNESCO's continued investment in the GHA project is a result of the continued need to argue for the validity, relevance and importance of Afrocentric perspectives on the African past.

UNESCO's role as a funding body within an unequal landscape of global knowledge production suggests there is more to investigate, to move on to avenues for further research. My thesis has demonstrated that the role of UNESCO as a producer of historiography, given also these recent activities, is understudied. Further investigation into UNESCO's role as a catalyser for historical knowledge is therefore needed, especially regarding the other general history projects that the organisation funded. Further research could also be conducted regarding the everyday scholarly practices of African historians and African scholars more broadly as it took place at African universities such as Ibadan and Makerere during the post-independence period, the so-called 'Golden Years'. Such analysis may help us understand what the early period of decolonisation within the humanities at these institutions looked like, even if we do not want to mirror it.

Moreover, my analysis of the history of the GHA has suggested that the GHA was not just important for the actual content of history it produced, but perhaps also for the networks of intellectuals it engendered. The GHA functioned for decades as a meeting place for like-minded academics and intellectuals who were all concerned with the historiography of Africa. As such it inspired, encouraged and connected many historians of Africa, both African and Euro-American and exerted influence far beyond the GHA itself. It is hard to pin down exactly what this has yielded in terms of historiographical content. However, scholars of historiography and knowledge more broadly may be stimulated to investigate the importance of projects such as the GHA not only for the texts they produce, but also for the environment of scholarship and the networks they create. This thesis has measured the GHA against its own ideals. Yet, another way to look at the project would be to investigate what it has contributed to the emergence of African studies within the United States or somewhere else entirely. This would not only entail a different perspective and a different type of research, but would also illuminate the importance of both global inequalities in knowledge production as well as create an

awareness of the importance of networks for researching and writing African history.

The tension between politics and knowledge production that I have described as an integral part of the GHA, moreover, can be found more broadly in what I call historiography for emancipation. This tension partly corresponds with the tension between the ideals and the practice of historiography that I have described. The need to break through traditional barriers and ideas of what scholarship is by means of scholarly activism can be observed in various histories of historiographical inclusion. These various histories of emancipation need to be brought in conversation with one another. What can the study of the history of inclusion of LGBTQ narratives in historiographical practice tell us about shifting paradigms in African studies and vice versa? What, moreover, may an investigation of gender history or feminist history, add to the question of what decolonisation is and what it means to reinterpret history from a different epistemological point of departure?

Along the course of this study, I have come to understand decolonisation as something that both pertains directly to the end of empire in the 20th century and to broader questions of inclusion and epistemic diversity in the study of history. The reasons for this are that decolonisation of history, and indeed the GHA project, spoke to questions of justice in the representation of historical knowledge. The GHA historians were engaged in fundamental questions on the nature of historical knowledge about Africa as well as fundamental questions about identity.

