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A “Quest for Relevance”: The Memory Politics of UNESCO’s General History of Africa

Abstract: In 1963, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launched the General History of Africa (GHA) project which ran for over three decades. The stated aim of the project was to produce “a scientific history of African unity and culture from the inside” – a history written by Africans for Africans on the continent and in the diaspora. Those involved in the GHA as contributors, editors and UNESCO officials were motivated by what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has labelled a “quest for relevance” which was felt strongly among African cultural elites during the decades after 1940. This quest for relevance involved contributing to the decolonisation of the mind based on the idea that the ending of formal colonial rule would be incomplete and meaningless without a cultural decolonisation in education, science, and the arts, including history. In this chapter I revisit the chequered history of the GHA and place the project in its historical context of Pan-Africanism and nation building. I unravel the institutional context and argue that the project was shaped by an agenda centred on the politics of historical memory shared by this generation of Africans and by UNESCO.

Africa scholars put more emphasis on showing that Africans had a history than on asking how Africans’ history-making was implicated in establishing or contesting power. (Frederick Cooper, 1994)¹

In November 2015, UNESCO – the UN special agency for education, science and culture – celebrated its 70th anniversary with proceedings that included a conference on the organisation’s history.² During the celebrations, former Director-General and Senegalese geographer and diplomat Amadou Mahtar M’Bow explained what UNESCO had achieved during his Director-Generalship from 1974 to 1983.

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1 Frederick Cooper, “Conflict and Connection: Rethinking African History,” *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1528.

2 Mads K. Mogensen and Ivan. L Christensen, “Report on: Making a Difference: Seventy Years of UNESCO Actions UNESCO Anniversary Conference, UNESCO, Paris, 28 – 29 October 2015,” *UNESCO Digital Library*, 2015, accessed 28 November 2019, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000244030>.

M'Bow was the first African to head a UN special agency and when he took the stand at the UNESCO anniversary conference, he was well into his nineties. M'Bow's speech focused on UNESCO's *General History of Africa* project (hereafter the GHA) as the most important undertaking during his tenure. The former Director-General explained how a group of gifted and dedicated African historians had come together under the auspices of UNESCO to rewrite the entire history of a previously marginalised continent "so that teachers in Africa no longer had to teach history using European textbooks in which the children could read that their ancestors were the Gauls."³ M'Bow pointed out that the GHA marked a watershed not only in the study of African history, but also in the history of UNESCO as the project instigated UNESCO's engagements with African history and heritage which had since grown to include African entries in the *World Heritage List*, *The Slave Route Project* (1994–), and the *UN International Decade for People of African Descent* (2015–2024).

The GHA was launched in 1963 and continued for more than three decades. The undertaking was instigated at the request of the Organization of African Unity and the idea for a new history of the African continent can be traced to the *International Congress of Africanists* held in Accra in 1962 with the support of UNESCO.⁴ The tangible outcome of the GHA project was a 6,500-page history of Africa in eight volumes published initially in French, English, and Arabic.⁵ In over 200 chapters, the GHA covered the history of Africa from prehistoric times to the 1980s. Distinct volumes and abridged versions were also published in several languages – Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, Swahili, Hausa, Pular and Fulani among others.⁶ Over the course of the project, UNESCO organised 12 conferences devoted to specific issues in African history that required special attention. Substantial proceedings from these meetings were published as *UNESCO General*

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³ Ibid, 8.

⁴ Muryatan Santana Barbosa, "The Construction of the African Perspective: A History of the General History of Africa," *Revista Brasileira de História* 32, no. 64 (2012): 196. Barbosa provides a concise institutional history of the GHA. Another informative overview and discussion is Chloé Maurel, "L'histoire "générale de l'Afrique de l'Unesco: Un projet de coopération intellectuelle transnationale d'esprit afro-centré (1964–1999)," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 54 (2014): 715–37.

⁵ The volumes are freely available from UNESCO's Digital library UNESDOC, accessed 4 January 2019, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org>. For a discussion of the archival sources relating to the UNESCO GHA, see Larissa Schulte Nordholt, "From Metropole to Margin in UNESCO's General History of Africa—Documents of Historiographical Decolonization in Paris and Ibadan," *History in Africa* 46 (2019): 1–10.

⁶ Maurel, "L'Histoire," 731.

History of Africa: Studies and Documents.⁷ A third component of the GHA project consisted of a program to develop and maintain archival and oral history resources in a number of African countries.⁸ The GHA was and remains a major achievement in the development of African history as an academic field.⁹

The GHA was launched in the wake of formal decolonisation at a time when newly independent African countries joined UNESCO. As one of the key members of the GHA organisation, historian Jan Vansina pointed out “the links between pan-African nationalism and this [GHA] project” were close.¹⁰ The main ambition was to write a history with Africans as active subjects rather than passive objects – a history written by Africans for Africans on the continent and in the diaspora. The GHA was a politically committed and self-confident undertaking that aimed to produce “useful pasts” for the needs of its time.¹¹ It was a scholarly undertaking but at the same time was regarded as a frame for the enactment of national and transnational memory political agendas that shifted during the decades the project spanned.

The aim of this chapter is to unravel and analyse these agendas. I will explore what kind of African history was considered relevant by whom and for whom in the GHA project. I am particularly concerned with understanding what the answers to these questions meant for the African historians who grappled with writing about Africa’s past in ways they considered useful and necessary for the present and future.

The memory politics of the GHA was profoundly influenced by UNESCO – an organisation that brought its own ideas and agendas into the GHA project. Indeed, UNESCO has played a prominent, but still insufficiently explored, role

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⁷ The Studies and Documents publications are available from UNESCO’s digital library UNESDOC.

⁸ UNESCO, *Ten-year plan for the study of African oral traditions and the promotion of African languages* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing 1972).

⁹ In 2007, a second stage of the project officially commenced, entitled “The Pedagogical Use of the General History of Africa.” Its purpose was to extend the use of the GHA in educational sectors, particularly in Africa. Currently, UNESCO is organizing a 9th volume to cover the last three decades of African history. The plan is also to update and revise the first eight volumes in light of new research findings and changing terminology. See UNESCO website, accessed 28 November 2019, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/general-history-of-africa/volume-ix/>.

¹⁰ Jan Vansina, “Unesco and African Historiography,” *History in Africa* 20 (1993): 337. Vansina was a very active member of the scientific commission for the GHA project from 1971 to its completion.

¹¹ Edmund E. Jabobitti, ed., *Composing Useful Pasts: History as Contemporary Politics* (New York: State of New York University Press, 2000).

as a transnational site for African memory politics for more than half a century. In this chapter I flesh out this dimension particularly by comparing the GHA with the *UNESCO History of Mankind* project launched in 1950 and which served as a model for the GHA with respect to organisational set up and structure.¹² Teasing out the UNESCO dimension opens a historiographical path for placing African memory politics in a wider international context.

The GHA engaged with issues concerning the politics and positionalities of knowledge production. These concerns are highly topical in the calls to decolonize African history and academic knowledge production more generally.¹³ Among other things decolonizing knowledge means to engage with thinkers, concepts and theories from the global south.¹⁴ The GHA was a collective project that enable us to engage with ideas of a number of significant African intellectuals and historians. Moreover, an equally important aspect of knowledge decolonization is an historical awareness of the context in which scholarly knowledge has been produced. The GHA helps us think through the complexities of this issue at a pivotal juncture in the field of African history.

The Quest for Relevance and Wholeness: Nationalism and Pan-Africanism

Those involved in the GHA as contributors, editors, and UNESCO officials were driven by what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has labelled a “quest for relevance” which was felt strongly among African cultural elites during the first decades after 1945.¹⁵ This quest for relevance involved contributing to the decolonisation of the mind based on the idea that the ending of formal colonial rule would be in-

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12 The first of the seven volumes in UNESCO’s *History of Mankind* was published in 1964. Poul Duedahl, “Selling Mankind: UNESCO and the Invention of Global History, 1945–76,” *Journal of World History* 22, no. 1 (2011): 101–133; Paul Betts, “Humanity’s New Heritage: UNESCO and the Rewriting of World History,” *Past & Present* 228, no. 1 (2015): 249–85. The history of mankind project was later renamed “History of Humanity.”

13 Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, and Siphamandla Zondi (eds). *Decolonizing the university, knowledge systems and disciplines in Africa*. (Durham North Carolina, Carolina Academic Press 2016); Gurminder Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nişancioğlu *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

14 Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Decoloniality as the future of Africa.” *History Compass* 13 no.10 (2015): 485–496; Raewyn Connell, Fran Collyer, João Maia and Robert Morrell *Knowledge and global power. Making new sciences in the south*, (Clayton: Monash University Press 2019).

15 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Curry, 1986), 87–111.

complete without cultural decolonisation in education, science, the arts and not least approaches to history. In the words of the Kenyan historian Bethwell A. Ogot, who chaired UNESCO's International Expert Commission for the project from 1971 to 1983, "political independence could only have meaning if it was accompanied by historical independence."¹⁶ A notable component in the quest for relevance was a sense of the need to restore African pride that had been compromised by outsiders who had denied Africans their rationality, humanity, and history. As Hannington Ochwada has noted, African scholars and historians were

faced with the challenges of building institutions to decolonize the minds of their compatriots and the masses by deliberately producing usable past knowledge. They were charged with the responsibility of producing the history of ideas relating to the socio-political and economic realities obtaining in the early years of independence.¹⁷

Moreover, the sense of urgency among African intellectuals and historians to produce this usable past was fuelled also by the conviction that a dislocation from one's past was morally destructive, particularly for the new African elites coming into power. Without a developed sense of history these elites would remain embarrassed by their African identity and could easily shrug off their obligations towards fellow Africans thus compromising the gains of independence.

In political terms, the quest was connected to ideas and processes of nation-building that among historians developed into what Toyin Falola has labelled "nationalist historiography," that is,

the use of history in the service of the nation, and a way of writing that makes history valuable in defining the nation and shaping its future. Nationalist historiography is the representation of elite interests in the nation, as the elite uses its knowledge to define its leadership role. It is a counter discourse for attacking European representations of Africa. It is a deliberate attempt to provide credible evidence for the achievement of Africa and the glories of the past in order to indicate possibilities for the future and combat racist views that Africans are incapable of managing themselves [...]. Nationalist historiography is about power: the ability of an intelligentsia to assert itself, to generate knowledge about its own people and continent.¹⁸

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¹⁶ Bethwell A. Ogot, "Towards a History of Kenya," *Kenya Historical Review* 4, no. 1 (2004): 1.

¹⁷ Hannington Ochwada, "Historians, Nationalism and Pan-Africanism: Myths and Realities," in *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*, ed. Thandika Mkandawire (London: Zed Books, 2005), 194.

¹⁸ Toyin Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 225.

Nationalist historiography dominated academic history writing in Africa during the 1950s and 1960s with main centres in Dakar, Legon, Ibadan and Makerere.¹⁹ This form of politically committed “history for self-government” has been subjected to intensive academic discussion. From the outset, nationalist historiography was criticised on political, historiographical and epistemological grounds.²⁰ However, the influences of nationalist historiography were considerable in the GHA. The Nigerian historian Kenneth O. Dike was the first scientific director of GHA project and listing the directors for the individual volumes reads like a roster of the towering figures in the tradition of African nationalist historiography: Joseph Ki-Zerbo (Vol. 1), B. A. Ogot (Vol. 5), J. F. Ade Ajayi (Vol. 6), Adu Boahen (Vol. 7), and Ali Mazrui (Vol. 8) each directed a volume.²¹ With good reason, Ade Ajayi has represented the GHA as the ultimate victory of nationalist history.²²

If nation-building and the commitment to nationalist historiography constituted one side of the quest for relevance among this generation of historians and intellectuals, then Pan-Africanist ideas and African unity constituted the other.²³ As Ngũgĩ has specified more recently, the quest for relevance was also “a quest for wholeness,” which he regards as the core of African political and intellectual struggle since the era of the transatlantic slave trade – a dismembering process that stifled African development but at the same time provided the foundation for an African Renaissance.²⁴ In connecting the quest for wholeness to the history of Pan-Africanism, Ngũgĩ underscores the importance of memory and remembering:

Creative imagination is one of the greatest re-membling practices. The relationship of writers to their social memory is central to their quest and mission. Memory is the link between past and present, between space and time, and it is the base of our dreams. Writers and

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19 Bogumil Jewsiewicki and David Newbury, eds., *African Historiographies: What History for Which Africa?* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1986); Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, 223–260.

20 See, for example, Donald Denoon and Adam Kuper, “Nationalist Historians in Search of a Nation: The ‘New Historiography’ in Dar-es-Salaam,” *African Affairs* 217 (1980): 329–349.

21 The term “Director” was preferred over the term editor as the editorial responsibility ultimately rested on the international commission. See Vansina, “UNESCO and African,” 339–340.

22 Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, 237.

23 Thandika Mkandawire, “African Intellectuals and Nationalism,” in Mkandawire, *African Intellectuals*, 10–55; Toyin Falola and Kwame Essien, *Pan-Africanism and the Politics of African Citizenship and Identity* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014). For a critical discussion of this theme in the GHA see Stephen Howe, *Afrocentrism. Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 180–85.

24 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Something Torn and Something New: An African Renaissance* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2009).

intellectuals in these [Pan-African] movements are aware that without a reconnection with African memory, there is no wholeness.²⁵

Pan-Africanism came in many variants during the 1950s and 1960s. In geographical terms, the dominant form of Pan-Africanism expressed in the GHA was what Ali Mazrui, the director of Volume 8, has called “continental Pan-Africanism” which stressed African unity across the Sahara.²⁶ Chapters analysing connections with the diaspora, particularly in the Americas, supplemented this continental perspective. The basis of African unity differed between volumes. For example, Volume 3 which covered the period from the seventh to the eleventh century saw the basis for African unity in the spread and response to Islam while Volume 7 on the period 1880 to 1935 found African unity in resistance to colonial rule. In Volume 8 on the years since 1935, the basis for African unity was found in the idea of “Africa’s triple heritage” of Islam, Eurocentric colonialism/capitalism and indigenous cultural traditions – an idea that had been promoted by Ali Mazrui, who directed this volume.²⁷

Pan-Africanism stressed African unity in ways that had to be reconciled with nationalist commitments. Indeed, the birth of new African nations was regarded by many as the triumph of independence, but intellectuals involved in the GHA were keenly aware that the separations of people of African descent created by the slave trade still existed and that colonial borders remained intact after decolonisation. A notable ambivalence towards the nation as the unit for African history and memory therefore fuelled the intellectual endeavour to provide a unifying historical perspective in the GHA.

The UNESCO Context for the GHA

The Pan-African dimension of the GHA received further impetus from the fact that UNESCO – an institution with its own quest for relevance during the de-

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²⁵ Ibid, 39.

²⁶ Ali Mazrui, *Africa’s International Relations: The Diplomacy of Dependency and Change* (Chicago: Westview Press, 1977); Ali Mazrui, “Pan-Africanism and the Intellectuals: Rise, Decline, Revival,” in Mkandawire, *African Intellectuals*, 56–78; Ali Mazrui, “Pan-Africanism: From Poetry to Power,” *A Journal of Opinion* 23, no. 1 (1995): 35–38.

²⁷ Ali Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1986). The concept of Africa’s triple heritage also formed the conceptual basis of a BBC documentary written by Mazrui.

colonisation era – organised the project.²⁸ Founded in the immediate aftermath of World War Two as the intellectual branch of the UN system, UNESCO embodied a specific form of idealist internationalism with an explicit aim to create a new foundation for humanity.²⁹ It was idealist in the sense that UNESCO was based on the conviction that it was in the realm of ideas that a new foundation for peaceful co-existence and progress among the world's nations (and remaining empires) had to be created.³⁰ The oft-quoted UNESCO preamble written in 1945 stated that, "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed."³¹

While the stated aim of UNESCO's diverse post-war activities was to create a new peaceful foundation for humanity based on programs in education, science and culture, the organisation was also preoccupied with making the past useful for the present. This involved the preservation of "global patrimony" which from the 1970s evolved into the World Heritage List.³² From early on, the preoccupation with humanity's "global past" – an idea that came into being through the activities of organisations such as UNESCO – also involved writing history in the form of the UNESCO History of Mankind project.³³ Originating in the 1950s and completed during the 1970s, the *UNESCO History of Mankind* was published in six volumes. The project was born out of the perceived need to restore a sense of common humanity after 1945. The history focused on exchanges and connections between cultures and so-called "civilisations." It prioritised ideas in science, culture and technology over political history, nationalism and wars, and it sought to adopt an explicitly non-Eurocentric view to explain how the world had come to its present state of interconnected *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (commu-

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28 Casper Andersen, "Capacity Building, Scientific Independence, and the Establishment of UNESCO's Science and Technology Agenda for Africa," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 50, no. 3 (2017): 379–393.

29 Fernando Valderrama Martinez, *A History of UNESCO* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1995); Chloé Maurel, *Histoire L'Unesco. Les Trente Première Années 1945–74* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008).

30 Jean-Jacques Renoliet, *L'UNESCO: La Société des Nations et la Coopération Intellectuelle (1919–1946)* (Paris: UNESCO, 1999); Betts, "Humanity's New Heritage," 249–251.

31 UNESCO's constitution was signed November 1945. "UNESCO Constitution," *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, 16 November 1945, accessed 4 January 2019, http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=15244&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

32 Lynn Meskell, "UNESCO's World Heritage Convention at 40: Challenging the Economic and Political Order of International Heritage Conservation," *Current Anthropology* 54, no. 4 (2013): 483–494.

33 Duedahl, "Selling Mankind."

nity of shared destiny).³⁴ This kind of history reflected the ideas of “one-worldism” and anti-nationalism among the Western scientists and intellectuals whose views dominated UNESCO during the organisation’s founding decade.³⁵

The History of Mankind project predated the GHA by a decade and set a precedent in important respects. It was organised and edited by an international committee of experts who oversaw the project on behalf of UNESCO. A similar course was adopted for the GHA. In the case of the History of Mankind, the international committee consisted almost exclusively of Western scholars. Despite the presence of notable non-western scholars and intellectuals, such as Leopold Senghor, the History of Mankind was shaped by the ideas of “one-worldism” and positivist progressivism of Julian Huxley, Joseph Needham and others with whom the idea originated. For the GHA, however, it was established from the outset that at least two-thirds of the members of the organising committee should be Africans representing different parts of the continent. Moreover, the director of each of the eight volumes should be selected from different African countries with a suitable geographical spread across the continent.³⁶ The difference between the History of Mankind and the GHA in this respect is indicative of gradual but notable shift in UNESCO’s cultural and educational sector during this period towards an emphasis on Africanization of programmes and structures.³⁷

The international GHA committee was established in 1971 with 39 members. It boasted an impressive list of the foremost African historians, scholars and writers. Notably, there were only two female members of the committee, and they appear to have played only minor roles.³⁸ The international expert committee met every two years until 1985. At UNESCO, a small secretariat headed by Maurice

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³⁴ Betts, “Humanity’s New Heritage.”

³⁵ Aant Elzinga, “Unesco and the Politics of Scientific Internationalism,” in *Science and Internationalism*, ed. Aant Elzinga and Catharina Landström (London: Taylor Graham, 1996), 89–132; Glenda Sluga, “UNESCO and the (One) World of Julian Huxley,” *Journal of World History* 22, no. 3 (2010): 393–418.

³⁶ Maurel, “L’histoire générale.”

³⁷ Damiano Matasci, “Assessing needs, fostering development: UNESCO, illiteracy and the global politics of education (1945–1960),” *Comparative Education* 53, no.1 (2017): 35–53; Damiano Matasci, Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo and Hugo Gonçalves Dore, *Education and Development in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa: Policies, Paradigms, and Entanglements, 1890s–1980s*. Springer Nature, 2020: 14–18.

³⁸ Discussions of gender representation did not play a prominent role in the GHA which confirms Amina Mama’s assertion that “whether their consciousness was nationalist or Pan-Africanist, however, African intellectuals have continued to display a quite remarkable reticence over questions of gender.” Amina Mama, “Gender Studies for Africa’s Transformation,” in *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*, ed. Thandika Mkandawire (London: Zed Books, 2005), 105.

Glélé from Benin was in charge of the difficult task of ensuring coherence and progression across all volumes and steering it through internal controversies among editors, expert committees and contributors as well as external concerns arising from volatile geopolitics influenced by Cold War tensions and the decolonisation process, particularly in southern Africa.³⁹ Internal and external factors caused continuous delays and at certain points the project was in real danger of collapsing completely. According to Jan Vansina, who was a member of the scientific committee for the duration of the project, it was thanks to the work of rarely credited UNESCO officials – and particularly Maurice Glélé – that the project was completed despite continuous delays.⁴⁰

A Scientific History of African Unity and Culture Written from the Inside

In one sentence the intention of the GHA was to produce a scientific history of African unity and culture written from within. The starting point emphasised several times in all the GHA volumes was that the history of Africa had been neglected and marginalised as racial, cultural, and historiographical prejudice largely denied Africans of any history at all. Ki-Zerbo wrote the succinct opening sentence in the GHA that stated simply: “Africa has a History.”⁴¹ In the volumes and numerous UNESCO reports about the GHA as well as in articles in UNESCO’s widely circulated magazine, *The Courier*, references to assertions by G.W.F. Hegel and Hugh Trevor-Roper that Africa was not part of history were invoked to underscore the need for a new UN-backed history of the continent.⁴² The Director-General’s preface to the GHA volumes stated that:

African societies were looked upon as societies that could have no history [...]. In fact, there was a refusal to see Africans as the creators of original cultures which flowered and sur-

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³⁹ Andersen, “Capacity Building,” 381–383.

⁴⁰ Vansina, “Unesco and African Historiography,” 341.

⁴¹ Joseph Ki-Zerbo, “General Introduction,” in *General History of Africa: Vol 1: Methodology and African Prehistory*, ed. Joseph Ki-Zerbo (London: Heinemann, 1983), 23.

⁴² See, for example, Kenneth O. Dike, “The Scientific Study of Africa,” *The UNESCO Courier* 20, no. 6 (1967): 8–13; Barbosa, “Constructing the African Perspective,” 196–198. The agenda to insist on Africa’s place in history had been present in UNESCO prior to the start of the GHA project. In 1959, *The Courier* devoted a thematic issue to “Africa’s Lost Past.” It emphasised Africa’s neglected prehistory – what Basil Davidson in the opening article referred to as “pre-European Africa.” Basil Davidson, “The Rediscovery of Africa,” *The UNESCO Courier* 12, no. 10 (1959): 5.

vived over the centuries in patterns of their own making and which historians are unable to grasp unless they forgo their prejudices and rethink their approach.⁴³

The GHA was to fill this critical gap and provide a new approach. To achieve this, the international expert committee of the GHA adopted four principles at an important project meeting in Addis Ababa in 1970.⁴⁴ According to the first principle, the GHA should be a history of the highest scientific standard. This meant that it was not intended to be a dogmatic, exhaustive history of Africa. Rather, it should state the problems and current knowledge in the scientific study of African history with a view on the main trends in research. It should also display a willingness to show divergence of opinion where such existed. This principle was, for example, employed in *Volume II: The Ancient Civilizations of Africa*. A chapter by Cheikh Anta Diop presented his controversial thesis that ancient Egypt had been populated by a homogeneous black African race from the earliest times to the Persian invasion in the sixth century BC. Because the Egyptian civilisation in Diop's interpretation was purely black African in origin, he concluded, "Egyptian antiquity is to African culture what Graeco-Roman antiquity is to Western culture. The building up of a corpus of African humanities should be based on this fact."⁴⁵

Diop aimed to restore the historical consciousness of African peoples as a basis for an African renaissance – a point and agenda he also developed in his widely read and influential books.⁴⁶ However, Diop's chapter in the GHA was criticised in the ensuing pages of the volume, which featured a lengthy extract from a UNESCO symposium on "The Peopling of Ancient Egypt" held in Cairo in 1974. At that symposium, Diop had presented his analysis which was criticised severely by other experts who claimed that his interpretation was based on selective evidence. They also noted that Diop's claim of the blackness of ancient Egypt rested on an outdated, essentialist notion of race. The critics

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⁴³ Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow "Preface," in Ki-Zerbo, *General History of Africa: Vol 1*, xviii.

⁴⁴ UNESCO, *Guide for the Preparation of the General History of Africa* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1971), accessed 4 January 2019, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000000408?posInSet=4&queryId=N-EXPLORE-fc2f4f6e-a4a5-4f52-8848-4236e473d574>; Barbosa, "Constructing the African Perspective," 200–204; Bethwell A. Ogot, "Description of the Project," in Ki-Zerbo, *General History of Africa: Vol 1*, xxiii–xxvii.

⁴⁵ Cheik Anta Diop, "Origin of Ancient Egyptians," in *General History of Africa: Vol 2: The Ancient Civilizations of Africa*, ed. G. Mokhtar (London: Heinemann, 1983), 49.

⁴⁶ Cheik Anta Diop, *Nations Nègres et Culture* (Dakar: Présence Africaine, 1955); Cheik Anta Diop, *The African Origins of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Westport: Laurence Hill, 1974).

thus claimed that Diop's interpretation adhered to a now scientifically discredited racial model that posits three well-defined races of white, black and yellow.⁴⁷

Readers of the GHA were thus presented with two opposing views followed by a passage from the volume director who explained why divergent opinions were to be found therein.⁴⁸ This exposed a tension in the GHA. The new scientific history should challenge longstanding assumptions about the inferiority of Africa and African peoples that had been undergirded by appeals to science and history carrying the stamp of academia. Yet, as Ki-Zerbo's general introduction argues,

[t]he history of Africa needs rewriting, for up till now it has often been masked, faked, distorted, mutilated, by force of circumstance – i. e. through ignorance or self-interest. [...] And this image has been projected and extrapolated indefinitely in time, as a justification of both the present and the future. It is not our purpose to write a history which will be a mere settling of scores, with colonialist history backfiring on its authors, but rather to change the perspective and revive images which have been forgotten or lost. We must turn once more to science in order to create genuine cultural awareness. We must reconstruct the real course of events. And we must find another mode of discourse.⁴⁹

The general introduction insisted on the need to turn *once more* to science in order to accomplish the dual purpose of creating cultural awareness and reconstructing the real course of events. The GHA was based on a belief that the new history could only serve its purpose if it met the highest scientific standards and, when necessary, question entrenched biases and unscientific assumptions within academic disciplines. The idea was thus that false assumptions in science could be eradicated through improved science. To do so required disciplinary boundaries to broaden. In particular, sustained efforts were made in the GHA to develop scientific methods in oral history and include these approaches in the scientific repertoire for writing about Africa's past.⁵⁰

The idea that the biases and prejudices of false or pseudo-science could be dismantled through and by improved science lay at the core of the positivist ide-

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⁴⁷ UNESCO, *The Peopling of Ancient Egypt and the Deciphering of Meroitic Script: Proceedings* (Paris: UNESCO publishing, 1978).

⁴⁸ G. Mokhtar, "Annex to Chapter 1: Deciphering of the Meroitic Script," in Mokhtar, *General History of Africa: Vol 2*, 59–84.

⁴⁹ Ki Zerbo, "General Introduction," 3.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of oral history methodology by one of its pioneers, see Jan Vansina, "Oral Tradition and its Methodology," in Ki-Zerbo, *General History of Africa: Vol 1*, 142–166.

alism prominent in UNESCO.⁵¹ The most notable example was the *UNESCO Statements on Race* which were issued during the 1950s. In the wake of World War Two, UNESCO gathered a group of international scientific experts to debunk myths about race and provide an authoritative view on the issue.⁵² In different wordings, the UNESCO statements on race agreed that science demonstrated that the concept of race lacked any foundation in modern biology and that from a scientific standpoint "race was a social myth rather than a biological fact."⁵³

In the context of the GHA, the UNESCO-sanctioned scientific dismissal of the concept of race, however, turned out to be complicated and contested as when critics argued against Diop's race-based interpretation of Egypt as a black civilisation by pointing out that his analysis adhered to a scientifically disproved, essentialist race model.⁵⁴ Diop, however, defended the validity of the idea of distinct black, white and yellow races. In an intervention that hardly left readers any less confused about the scientific status of the concept of race, Maurice Glélé insisted that UNESCO had in fact not abandoned the term "race" in its work and that "the authors of the *General History of Africa* would make use of words to which readers were already accustomed."⁵⁵ Using science to reform science is always a complicated exercise. In the GHA, it involved balancing the highest scientific criteria of its time with the need to provide a basis for African unity.⁵⁶

The principle of highest scientific standard was connected to the interpretation of another foundational principle of the GHA, which stated that the GHA should be a history of Africa "from the inside."⁵⁷ Opinions diverged about what "from the inside" entailed. According to John D. Fage – who contributed

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51 Casper Andersen, "The Zero Hours of Technology and the Founding of UNESCO," in *Zero Hours: Conceptual Beginnings Vol. 2*, ed. Hagen Schulz Forberg (Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021 [forthcoming]), Ch. 6.

52 Ashley Montagu, *Statement on Race: An Annotated Elaboration and Exposition of the Four Statements on Race Issued by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1972), 54.

53 Michelle Brattain, "Race, Racism, and Antiracism: UNESCO and the Politics of Presenting Science to the Postwar Public," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 5 (2007): 1386–1413; Anthony Q. Hazard, "A Racialized Deconstruction? Ashley Montagu and the 1950 UNESCO Statement on Race," *Transforming Anthropology* 19, no. 2 (2011): 174–186.

54 Vercoutter, "Annex to Chapter 1," 68–69.

55 M. Glélé, "Annex to Chapter 1," 72.

56 Robin Derricourt, *Inventing Africa: History, Archaeology and Ideas* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 110–115.

57 Ogot, "Description of the Project," xv.

to the GHA and co-edited the *Cambridge History of Africa* published during the same decades – state of the art history of Africa produced at this time was written from the inside in the sense that it studied African societies based on sources and approaches from within the continent. Specific challenges emerged when writing the history of different parts of Africa, not least with respect to available sources, but according to Fage, the study of Africa's past belonged to the same scholarly tradition used to study other parts of the world.⁵⁸

Other contributors understood the meaning of “the inside view” differently. In the words of Ogot, “from the inside” meant that the GHA should be “a faithful reflection of the way in which African authors view their own civilisation. While prepared in an international framework and drawing, to the full, on present stock of scientific knowledge,” the history was to offer a particular “conception of human values” associated with African heritage and unity.⁵⁹ Again the general introduction is striking in its attempt to balance the opposing views:

The brand image of Africa has been shaped by so many interested external attitudes, right up to those of present-day films, that it is time to turn a new look on Africa – one from the inside, one of identity, authenticity, awakening [...]. A real Copernican revolution is needed, a revolution which would be semantic in the first place, and which, without denying the demands of universal science, would take up the whole historical flow of Africa and guide it into new moulds.⁶⁰

The search for these new moulds was a central epistemological concern of the GHA. In Ngũgĩ's terms, the quest for relevance involved the search for “a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe.”⁶¹ In the context of the GHA this aspect of the quest for relevance was a search for a “third space” – to paraphrase Homi Bhabha – that would connect the demands of science with the perspective from within.⁶²

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⁵⁸ John D. Fage, “The Development of African Historiography,” in Ki-Zerbo, *General History of Africa: Vol 1*, 25–43.

⁵⁹ Ogot, “Description of the Project,” xxiii–xiv. For an elaboration of Ogot's view on this matter, see Bethwell A. Ogot, “Rereading the History and Historiography of Epistemic Domination and Resistance in Africa,” *African Studies Review* 52, no. 1 (2009): 1–22.

⁶⁰ Ki-Zerbo, “General Introduction,” 19–20.

⁶¹ Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing the Mind*, 87.

⁶² Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man. The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, 28 (1984): 125–133.

Unity, Connections and Resistance

Two further foundational principles of the GHA stated that the project should focus on ideas and culture and that it should be a history of African unity within the continent and between all people of African descent. These principles aimed to emphasise Africa's place in the world and its contributions to the development of humankind. Using Ngũgĩ's terms, the "quest for relevance" and "the quest for wholeness" were intimately connected in the memory politics that guided the GHA.⁶³ Unity meant that the history was to focus more on connections rather than boundaries – be they ecological boundaries (such as the Sahara) or political boundaries. The two GHA volumes covering the period after 1880, for example, did not divide chapters according to colonial or national-state boundaries but rather adopted a mix of regional and topical divisions.

The focus on unity and connections across continents mirrored the direction adopted by UNESCO in the History of Mankind Project, which presented a history of exchanges and growing interconnectedness among the peoples of the world in explicitly anti-nationalist terms in line with "the one-worldism" of UNESCO. However, the GHA differed from the History of Mankind project with respect to what connections were considered important. The volume on the late nineteenth century emphasised how linkages "between what became the two principal spheres of the black world – Africa and the Americas – were maintained over time through exchanges of personnel, cultural materials, and political ideology."⁶⁴ In the preface to the GHA volumes, Director-General M'Bow stated that the GHA was important because it shed "light on the historical unity of Africa and also its relations with other continents, particularly the Americas and the Caribbean" and because it brought out "Africa's relations with southern Asia across the Indian Ocean."⁶⁵ UNESCO devoted a GHA conference to this latter topic in 1975.⁶⁶ M'Bow did not mention European connections. This was a form of anti-Eurocentrism that differed markedly from the 1959 *UNESCO Courier's*

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⁶³ Ngũgĩ, *Something Torn*, 38.

⁶⁴ Richard D. Ralston with sections on Latin America and the Caribbean by Maura Albuquerque, "Africa in the New World" in *General History of Africa: Vol. 7: Africa under Colonial Domination, 1880–1935*, ed. Adu A. Boahen (London: Heinemann, 1985): 780

⁶⁵ M'Bow, "Preface," xx.

⁶⁶ UNESCO, "Conference: Meeting of Experts on Historical Contacts between East Africa and Madagascar on the One Hand, and South East Asia on the Other, across the Indian Ocean," *GHA Sources and Documents* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1974).

take on “Africa’s Lost Past” in which re-assessment of African history maintained a division between pre- and post-European colonial presence in Africa.⁶⁷

The focus on the GHA as “a history of ideas, and civilisations, societies and institutions”⁶⁸ also followed UNESCO’s previous approaches to history. Like the GHA, the History of Mankind project had also been, primarily, a history of ideas, technology, belief systems and exchanges that prioritised developments in science and culture. In the GHA, the focus on belief systems, ideas and culture was notable in the selection of themes and also with respect to contributors which included several non-professional historians. Vansina hinted that the appointment of Africans who were not professional historians as contributors resulted from a shortage of trained professionals in some parts of the continent.⁶⁹ Yet the inclusion of authors and public intellectuals was integral to UNESCO’s engagements with Africa’s history and heritage at this time.⁷⁰ The most prominent example in the context of the GHA was that of the Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka who contributed a chapter on “The Arts in Africa During the Period of Colonial rule” to Volume 7 which covered the period 1880 to 1935.⁷¹ In his chapter, which surely ranks among the best in all the GHA volumes, Soyinka detailed a wide range of art forms and historical contexts. The chapter discussed the role of the colonial state, connections across the Atlantic and the patronage of black missionaries to exemplify “processes of transposition from traditional to adaptive modes” in African art forms.⁷² Soyinka emphasised African agency and how this heritage continued to inspire creative artists in the present. “The reality that we extract from this period,” he concluded, “is the resilience and even increased vitality of the forms and values of the authentic cultures of the peoples” in spite of the violent intrusion of the European colonisers.⁷³ A creative third space had been carved out through the resistance to colonialism. This inter-

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⁶⁷ UNESCO, “Africa’s Lost Past,” 4–9.

⁶⁸ Ogot, “Description of the Project,” xxiii.

⁶⁹ Vansina, “UNESCO and African Historiography,” 47–48.

⁷⁰ One early example is Chinua Achebe whose first affiliation with UNESCO was in 1961 when he received a UNESCO creative artist travel grant. UNESCO, “1961–1962: Regular Programme. Creative Artists. Albert Achebe. Writer,” UNESCO Archives. EDU/TE/26: 2003.35–44. Accessed 6 January 2019, https://atom.archives.unesco.org/uploads/t/5c00_m/5/55059/EDV-FE-26_-_1961-62_Regular_Programme_-_Creative_Artists_-_Nigeria_-_Albert_Achebe_-_Writer_compressed.pdf.

⁷¹ Wole Soyinka, “The Arts in Africa During the Period of Colonial Rule,” in *General History of Africa: Vol. 7: Africa under Colonial Domination, 1880–1935*, ed. Adu A. Boahen (London: Heinemann, 1985), 539–564.

⁷² *Ibid*, 549

⁷³ *Ibid*, 540

pretation of a past capable of inspiring the present was in line with the memory politics of Volume 7 as a whole.

Adu Boahen and the View from the Inside

In 1985, UNESCO published *Volume VII: Africa under Colonial Domination, 1880–1935*. The illustration on the volume jacket featured a relief from the walls of the Palace of the Kings of Dahomey. It depicted a white figure pointing a giant loaded firearm at the nose of a black figure carrying a bow (Fig. 1). Judged by the jacket illustration, the message of the volume seems clear: Europeans exploiting their superior military strength to wage merciless warfare against Africans. However, for the director of the volume, the Ghanaian historian Adu Boahen, this was not the primary idea. Rather, he explained that he chose the illustration of “an African armed only with bow and arrow defiantly and squarely facing a European armed with a gun” because it showed “the weight of the odds against them [the Africans] on the one hand and the strength of the determination to resist at any price on the other.”⁷⁴ It was a message of resistance.

Boahen’s influence on volume 7 was profound. He wrote the introduction and the concluding chapter and authored and co-authored several other chapters. His correspondence with contributors and with UNESCO officials shows that he had a firm editorial hand in appointing contributors and revising their contributions particularly to present “the view from the inside” firmly in all chapters.⁷⁵ His influence in the GHA was further enhanced in 1983 when he replaced Ogot as chairman of UNESCO’s International Expert Committee.

Boahen had obtained a degree in history in Ghana before the country became independent and a doctorate from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London in 1959. He lectured at Legon from that year on and was chairman of the history department for nearly two decades. In 1999, he was awarded the UNESCO Avicenna Silver medal for his contributions to the *General History of Africa* project.⁷⁶ As Toyin Falola has stressed in a short intellectual biography, Boahen saw it as his mission to contribute to the Africanisation of history in order to transcend a Eurocentric perspective of the continent, an agenda

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⁷⁴ Albert A. Boahen, “Africa and the Colonial Challenge,” in Boahen, *General History of Africa: Vol. 7*, 10.

⁷⁵ UNESCO Archives, CLT/CS/7.1 Auteurs VOL VII 1973/1982.

⁷⁶ For a brief biographical sketch see: “Boahen, A. Adu 1932–2006,” *encyclopedia.com*, 2020, accessed 12 January 2019, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/boahen-adu-1932-2006>.

Fig. 1: Jacket for GHA Vol VII (1985).

that he had pursued in his widely read textbooks on the history of West Africa published between 1960 and 1987.⁷⁷ Like many of his generation of African historians, Boahen believed that the role of the historian was not only to educate, but also to create relevant knowledge for Africa's newly independent nations. Boahen thus incarnated the spirit of the GHA.

For Boahen, the aspiration to contribute to post-colonial nation-building through writing and teaching history involved a reinterpretation of the colonial period. This reinterpretation was conveyed in the jacket illustration. Africans had been resourceful and engaged in developing strong states before the late-nineteenth century when they encountered the European colonisers supercharged by their industrial tools of empire and ideas of racial superiority. Africans then mobilised deeply rooted cultural and political resources to initiate diverse but according to Boahen united forms of resistance against the colonial oppressors.⁷⁸

This perspective was notable throughout the entire GHA volume. Covering the period 1880 to 1935, it devoted seven chapters to different regions under the headline “African Initiatives and Resistance.” “From the inside” in this context meant an emphasis on African initiative and agency. As Boahen summarised in the volume's introduction, history showed that an “overwhelming majority of

77 Toyin Falola, “Adu Boahen: An Introduction,” in *Ghana in Africa and the World: Essays in Honor of Adu Boahen*, ed. Toyin. Falola (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2002), 4.

78 Adu A. Boahen, *Topics in West African History* (London: Harlow, 1966); Adu A. Boahen, *Ghana: Evolution and Change in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (London: Longman, 1975); Adu A. Boahen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987).

African authorities and leaders were vehemently opposed to colonial conquest."⁷⁹ From what he called "the African perspective," the colonial period "saw African kings, queens, lineage and clan heads all dominated by one overriding consideration, that of maintaining or regaining their sovereignty, patrimony and culture by the strategy of confrontation or alliance or submission."⁸⁰ This interpretation aimed to demonstrate beyond doubt the agency of Africans as they mobilised resources against colonial conquest. Boahen therefore dismissed the use of terms such as "collaboration" and "collaborators" in the colonial encounter as "Africans were all faced with the question of surrendering, retaining or regaining their sovereignty."⁸¹

The centrality of "the inside" perspective in the volume is underscored further in Boahen's correspondence with contributing authors. A heated exchange with Terence Ranger is particularly illuminating in this respect. The GHA committee commissioned Ranger in 1973 to write an overview of the on-going debate amongst historians about African resistance to colonial rule.⁸² Ranger submitted his chapter in 1975 subject to the director's approval.⁸³ By this time, Boahen was caught up in the political upheavals taking place in Ghana and incarcerated by Acheampong's military regime for his role as a founding member of the People's Movement for Freedom and Justice.⁸⁴ Upon his release in 1978, Boahen wrote to Ranger and demanded substantial changes to the chapter. The analysis, Boahen argued, presented "a simplified view" of African responses. He found the title "African Resistance to the Imposition of European Rule: An Overview and Reassessment" highly problematic as it denied "the African of any initiative and puts him always on the defensive or reacting to external stimulus."⁸⁵

Ranger's response was swift and angry. He argued that he had done what had been expected of him, that his interpretation was not influenced by "the psychology of colonialism and neo-colonialism" as Boahen (in Ranger's reading) had implied and that the deadline for changes demanded by Boahen was "absurd after so long a silence."⁸⁶ Boahen's reply to Ranger was short. He took

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⁷⁹ Boahen, "Africa and the Colonial Challenge," 10.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 17.

⁸¹ Ibid, 18.

⁸² For one of Ranger's contributions to the longstanding debate over resistance in African history, see Terence Ranger, "The People in African Resistance: A Review," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 4, no. 1 (1977): 125–146.

⁸³ M. Glélé to T. Ranger, 4 March 1975, UNESCO Archives, CLT/CS/7.1.

⁸⁴ A. Boahen to M. Glele, 7 Jan. 1979, UNESCO Archives, CLT/CS/7.1.

⁸⁵ Boahen to Ranger, 15 Dec. 1978, UNESCO Archives, CLT/CS/7.1.

⁸⁶ Ranger to Boahen, 4 Jan. 1979, UNESCO Archives, CLT/CS/7.1.

strong exception to the tone of Ranger's letter and, referring to the use of the word "absurd," stated that he "never expected that one could use such a word in a letter to a colleague, even if that colleague happens to be an African."⁸⁷ Maurice Glélé in the UNESCO secretariat intervened to negotiate a compromise. He reminded Boahen that the committee had in fact previously approved Ranger's chapter.⁸⁸ The word collaboration was, however, taken out of the chapter and the title changed to "African Initiative and Resistance in the Face of Partition and Conquest."

This controversy demonstrates the challenge that UNESCO faced to keep the project afloat and the importance attached to the interpretation of "the view from the inside." This was politically committed history. Indeed, the volume offered an interpretation of the colonial period but, as Boahen explained, it also intended to address the question "what the significance of colonialism was for Africa and her history?"⁸⁹ In his concluding chapter, Boahen returned to this issue in light of the "inside perspective" which ran through the preceding chapters.⁹⁰ In his view, colonialism was certainly not a boon bestowed upon Africans as the defunct colonialist historiography had claimed. Nor was it exclusively the "one-armed bandit" that Walter Rodney had claimed in his chapter of the volume.⁹¹ Colonialism had positive and negative effects politically, socially and economically. The crucial point for Boahen, however, was that the positive effects – which for him included the rise of nationalism and Pan-Africanism as well as science and education – had come about *despite* the intentions of the colonisers. It resulted from the initiative and power of Africans faced with oppressive and technologically advanced European colonisers. The point for Boahen was that Africans had displayed agency and a will to defend their sovereignty in the face of the European oppressors.⁹²

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⁸⁷ Boahen to Ranger, 30 Jan. 1979, UNESCO Archives, CLT/CS/71. There was also a scholarly disagreement between the two historians as Ranger was an early critic of "history for self-government," which he considered a hinderance to the development of African history. See: Terence Ranger, "Introduction," in *Emerging Themes of African History*, ed. Terence Ranger (Heinemann: Nairobi, 1968), 1–23.

⁸⁸ Glele to Boahen, 16 Feb. 1979, UNESCO Archives, CLT/CS/71.

⁸⁹ Boahen, "Africa and the Colonial Challenge," 19.

⁹⁰ Adu A. Boahen, "Colonialism in Africa: Its Impact and Significance," in Boahen, *General History of Africa: Vol. 7*, 782–810.

⁹¹ Walter Rodney, "The Colonial Economy," in Boahen, *General History of Africa: Vol. 7*, 332–351. Boahen agreed that the image of the one-armed bandit was "almost correct" in the economic sphere but less so in political and social spheres.

⁹² Boahen, "Colonialism in Africa," 803.

This historical message was relevant for present leaders and peoples in Africa and it was they whom Boahen addressed in the conclusion to the volume. Paraphrasing Ade Ajayi, Boahen claimed that colonialism was indeed “a mere chapter in the numerous chapters of the long history of the continent” but one that:

Marks a clear watershed in the history of Africa and the subsequent development of Africa, and therefore its history has been and will continue to be very much influenced by the colonial impact on Africa, and destined to take a course different from what it would have taken had there not been any colonial interlude. The most expedient course of action for African leaders to embark upon today, then, is not to write off colonialism but rather to be conversant with its impact, and to try to redress its shortcomings and its failures.⁹³

Viewed in this light, Volume 7 of the GHA is testament to the quest for relevance amongst those involved in the project. In this case not least Adu Boahen, a leading representative of the dominant view among the African historians in the GHA project.

Conclusion

Commentators have primarily assessed the GHA in relation to the development of African history as an academic field.⁹⁴ In this chapter, however, I have used the GHA to unravel how African intellectuals worked to produce a UNESCO-backed history that they considered relevant to the present and future of the African continent.

UNESCO significantly shaped the GHA with respect to organisational set-up, historical perspective, contributors and memory politics. An important UNESCO influence consisted in the inclusion of important African intellectuals in the transnational engagement with African memory politics. For Diop, Soyinka, Boahen and their generation of historians, historical interpretations had direct and profound impact on the future of independent Africa. The quest for relevance and wholeness among the contributors helps to explain why the GHA was a much more politicised history than the UNESCO History of Mankind. The History of Mankind did not ignore colonialism and decolonisation. Instead, it labelled

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⁹³ Ibid, 809.

⁹⁴ In general, the first volumes covering the oldest histories of the continent were most positively reviewed while reviews of the last two volumes covering recent history have been decidedly more mixed.

decolonisation “the most important event of the twentieth century” and devoted more pages to Nkrumah than to Hitler.⁹⁵ However, it was a history almost completely devoid of conflict. The GHA differed in this respect with its emphasis on resistance and struggle. The GHA was clearly an ideologically engaged history. Yet the project also expressed a firm belief in the value of science and an equally strong conviction that the politics of memory mattered; that ideas, knowledge and scholarship were prerequisites for coming to terms with a difficult past, for setting the course in the present and for creating a more peaceful future. In this respect, the makers of the GHA were heir to the idealism that had constituted UNESCO’s foundation in the first place.

As has been stressed in several chapters in this volume, ideas about the nation, memory and African identity changed fundamentally during the first decades after independence. The ways in which the intellectuals involved in the GHA viewed the project of nation-building also shifted during the decades that the project spanned. An increasingly difficult relationship with what Ki-Zerbo in the late 1990s referred to as the “tropical leviathan” greatly influenced the changing outlook of this generation of intellectuals.⁹⁶ As nation-building projects on the continent began to collapse after 1970, it was not possible for historians in Africa to maintain the academic and institutional momentum of the early 1960s when the GHA was launched. As such the GHA project cuts across the rise and decline of African academia and of nation-building more broadly.⁹⁷

Yet in the GHA, the commitment to Pan-Africanism and nation-building continued to resonate. When Volume 8, *Africa since 1935*, was published in 1993, the now older generation of intellectuals and historians wrote about the historical period that had seen the beginning of the GHA project as well as their own youth. A chapter on “Nation-building and Changing Political Structures” written by Mazrui, Boahen, Ki-Zerbo and assistant volume director Christophe Wondji identified the years from 1945 to 1960 as the period during which ideas of nationalism and liberal democracy dominated Africa’s political and intellectual scene. They argued that this was followed by an era which from 1960 to 1985 saw the spread of authoritarian rule across the continent.⁹⁸ But their chapter ended on a note of temperate hope that democracy and pluralism would again gain momen-

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⁹⁵ Betts, “Humanity’s New Heritage.”

⁹⁶ Joseph Ki-Zerbo, “African Intellectuals, Nationalism and Pan-Africanism: A Testimony,” in Mkandawire, *African Intellectuals*, 78–94.

⁹⁷ Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, 261–295.

⁹⁸ Joseph Ki Zerbo, Ali Mazrui, Christoph Wondji, and Adu A. Boahen, “Nation Building and Changing Political structures,” in *UNESCO General History of Africa Vol 8: Africa since 1935*, ed. Ali Mazrui (London: Heinemann 1993), 468–500.

tum in Africa – not as a side effect of “the *glasnost* and *Perestroika* of Gorbachev or the pressure of international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF or by aid-donors such as the United States, Britain and France” but because of developments and historical trajectories within the continent:

Herein lies the heart of the democratic revolution sweeping through Africa in the early 1990s. What Africans are demanding, then, is a return not only to liberal democratic values but also to those values embodied in and symbolized by their national mottoes, anthems and flags: national unity, development, freedom and social justice.⁹⁹

Viewed in the *longue durée*, continental perspectives presented in the GHA, the struggle for national integration and state-building in Africa had, according to the authors, only just begun.

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⁹⁹ Ki Zerbo et al., “Nation Building,” 492.

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