

# AFRICAN STUDIES IN HUNGARY: THE AFRICAN RESEARCH CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PÉCS<sup>1</sup>

Loránd Szabó

**Abstract:** The paper gives a short overview of the history of Hungarian research concerning Africa which has been conducted over the past two centuries, and it concentrates on the activity of the Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest and the University of Pécs, especially on the creation and achievements of the African Research Centre of the latter.

**Keywords:** *Africa Studies, Hungary, Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest (ELTE), University of Pécs (PTE), Africa Research Centre of the University of Pécs*

African studies in Hungary have a certain tradition and they have been changing their form throughout the past few centuries. During the last decades some places have emerged as African research centres, amongst them the University of Pécs (PTE). In the following paper, I will deal first with the antecedents in a rapid overview of the last two and half centuries, and then I will describe the situation after 1990, the change in the regime in Hungary, and finally the situation in the new Millennium and the emergence of a research centre in Pécs.

During the 18th and the 19th centuries and also in the beginning of the 20th century African studies were basically represented by the travellers or adventurers, they were the “early Africanists” of Hungary and their travel journals contributed to the Western and international scientific knowledge on Africa. In the last half of the 18th century, count Móric Benyovszky (1741–1786), an adventurer and world traveller went twice to Madagascar and wrote his memoirs in English (Benyovszky 1790) about his experiences on the island

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in the 1770's and 1780's. The next important traveller was László Magyar (1818–1864), a naval officer who, in the 1850's, went to Angola and wrote his geographic and ethnographic observations in Hungarian. In the 1860's, Samuel Baker was on a mission to find the source of the Nile, and his wife, Flóra Sass also known as Anne Baker accompanied him and saved his life. In the 1880's count Sámuel Teleki went to the Great Lakes and the region of Mount Kenya and came back with important geographic descriptions. The region of Mozambique was the target of two Jesuit fathers in the 1880's and 1890's: István Czimmermann who wrote linguistic studies and László Menyhárt who worked as biologist and meteorologist. In the 1900's Emil Torday went to the Congo Free State (the future Belgian Congo) as a bank clerk, but he made some very important ethnographic observations during his missions in the Congo basin. From the 1900's till the 1920's Kálmán Kittenberger, a hunter and traveller wrote zoological works about his journeys in Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika. Finally, in the 1930's a pilot and sales representative, László Almásy was an explorer in Egypt and of some places in the Eastern Sahara.

After the Second World War, Hungary became part of the Soviet Bloc, and during the Soviet era, Endre Sík, Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs (1958–1961) was the only Hungarian scientist of Africa who, in the second half of the 20th century, could obtain an international—although very contested (Darch and Littlejohn 1983)—notoriety for his huge Marxist history enterprise, 4 volume *History of Black Africa* (1961–1973) published first in French (*Histoire de l'Afrique Noire*) then in Hungarian (*Fekete-Afrika története*), and in English.<sup>2</sup> Other engaged Marxist researchers and also reporters like Tibor Köves, Prof. István Kende, Prof. Tamás Szentes, László Salgó were writing about the Third World including Africa. The ethnographer Tibor Bodrogi and the linguist István Fodor should also be mentioned.

From the 1960's a “new generation” of scientists from different fields (humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences) emerged with a common interest about Africa and were ready to do fieldwork. These scholars included, amongst others, the late Géza Füssi Nagy<sup>3</sup> (who was by the way the only Hungarian researcher with a degree in African studies because he graduated in the Soviet Union), Mihály Benkes, Szilárd Biernaczky, Prof. Sándor Csizmadia,

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2 Between 1918–1945, he lived in the Soviet Union and he wrote the major part of this book there, in the 1930's. When he returned to Hungary in 1945, he was working in the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and he was heavily influenced by his long stay in the USSR. He tried as a politician to help Hungary to get out of the political isolation after 1956. Also he made to distribute the above mentioned book in the diplomatic services throughout the world; that is why in most of the important libraries of the world his book can be found.

3 Géza Füssi Nagy died in 2008.

Csaba Ecsedy, Prof. Gyula Gábris, Árpád Juhász, Prof. Endre Kanizsai, János Kubassek, Prof. Tamás Pócs, Prof. Mihály Sárkány, Éva Sebestyén and András Vojnits. The Soviet Bloc's stance towards helping the Third World and the developing countries meant research on Africa got official support.

This “new generation” achieved two major contributions to Hungarian studies on Africa in the 1980's. They organized and ran between 1981–1992 a free research association called the Africa Research Program (Afrika Kutatási Program) at the Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest (ELTE). The participating partners were universities and later individuals from different fields (engineers, doctors, economists, etc.). This Program organized three international conferences in 1982, 1984 and 1989 in Budapest (and one of the very active members of the Program, Szilárd Biernaczky edited a review partly in English, *Africana Budapest* which was published twice, in 1984 and 1986), but after 1990 interest became scarce in the overseas territories and the program ceased to exist. In 1987–1988, they organized the biggest Hungarian scientific fieldwork about Africa in the 20th century, the Hungarian Scientific Africa Expedition (Magyar Tudományos Afrika Expedíció) with a dozen scientists and experts (mostly from the abovementioned “new generation”) led by Prof. Gyula Gábris, and they visited several places in Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire.<sup>4</sup>

After the change in the regime, from 1990, Hungarian scientific policies were more oriented toward Euro-Atlantic integration, and the former official and scientific relations with African partners lacked financial support. African research remained active in Budapest and in Szeged. The African Research Program was transformed into an African Studies Course Program (Afrikanisztika Oktatási Program) from 1992<sup>5</sup> at the Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest with lecturers mostly from the “new generation”, but other younger scientists joined them as well, like Gábor Búr, Győző Lugosi, Gábor Berczeli, Tamás Régi or László Máthé-Shires. They published—with a major contribution of Prof. Mihály Sárkány as editor in chief along with Attila Horváth but not mentioned—in 1998 two editions of a planned quarterly review of the Hungarian African Society (Máthé 1998b) called *Africana Hungarica* (Máthé 1998a) which was resurrected for one more edition in 2007. However, the Program failed to acquire a strong official backing and in lack of financial support, it faded away around 2000. Since then, Gábor Búr from the Modern and Con-

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4 They were partly retracing the 1887–1888 route of count Sámuel Teleki and Ludwig von Höhnel (Imperato 2006: 30).

5 While Géza Füssi Nagy indicated 1992 (amongst others: ELTE BTK and “Interjú...”), Mihály Benkes indicated 1994 (about the author in the online review *Kül-Világ* 2004/1) as the first year of the Program.

temporary History Department of the Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest is one of the leading figures of the renaissance of African Studies in Budapest along with some other researchers from the Department of Cultural Anthropology of the same university (e.g. András A. Gergely, Sába Tesfay, and Ildikó Szilasi), or the International Studies program of the Corvnius University, like Beáta Paragi or András Hettyey and Lt. Col. János Besenyő from the National University of Public Service, or Attila Horváth from the Budapest University of Technology and Economics (BME). The scholars of Budapest have a common goal; they plan to launch an MA Program in African Studies.

In Szeged, the research about Africa in the Faculty of Humanities is gravitating around the Department of Modern History and Mediterranean Studies in the Institute of History of the University of Szeged (SZTE) led by Prof. László J. Nagy and other researchers like Péter Ákos Ferwagner, but they deal essentially with the region of Northern Africa and the Arab world (the Middle East).

At the turn of the Millennium a brand new generation of researchers grew up in Pécs who were interested about the overseas territories and amongst them Africa. They tried to concentrate their efforts at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Pécs (PTE), but, with an inter- and multidisciplinary approach, they paid careful attention to integrate scholars from other faculties like the Faculty of Sciences, Medicine and Law. In 2001, the Africa–America–Asia University Research Group, a free research association was born, integrating also scholars from Budapest and Szeged.<sup>6</sup> The group organized national conferences in 2001, 2002, 2003 in Pécs and published the proceedings (2002, 2006) (Szabó, Ölbei and Wilhelm 2002 and Szommer et al. 2006), an Africa Session in 2003, and a workshop in 2004. Evolving from the “overseas group”, the Africanists of Pécs, like Prof. Sándor Csizmadia, Erika Gúti, Edina Kicsindi, Loránd Szabó, István Tarrósy, Prof. Gábor Ternák, András Trócsányi, Róbert Varga and Bea Vidacs<sup>7</sup>, began a stronger co-operation in the field of the African research at the University of Pécs. The growing importance

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6 A short overview in Hungarian about the group's history: PTE BTK TTI Újkortörténeti Tanszék. “Az Újkortörténeti Tanszék tevékenységéhez kapcsolódó kutatócsoportok: Afrika–Amerika–Ázsia Universitas Munkacsoport.” (PTE Faculty of Humanities, Institute of History, Dept. of Modern History. Research Groups Related to the Activities of the Department of Modern History) Available at: <http://ujkor.tti.btk.pte.hu/menu/29/27> (26. 6. 2013).

7 Bea Vidacs made a summary of the Hungarian Africa Studies in the early 1980's. Vidacs, Bea. 1984. “Outline history of Hungarian African Studies.” In: *Folklore in Africa Today/Folklore en Afrique d'aujourd'hui. Proceedings of the Workshop. Budapest 1–4. XI. 1982. Artes Populares, 10/11*. Ed. Szilárd Biernaczky. Budapest: s. n., Vol. I, 119–129.

of Pécs in African Studies in Hungary was demonstrated by the publication in 2006 of a book in Hungarian on the situation of Hungarian research about Africa (Sebestyén, Szombathy and Tarrósy 2006) which presented a tribute at the same time to the oeuvre of Géza Füssi Nagy. In December 2007, the 2nd National Conference of Africanists was organized in Pécs by Edina Kicsindi, István Tarrósy and Loránd Szabó under the auspices of the Regional Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences showing also the growing importance of Pécs in African matters at a national level (“Program...” 2007).

This intense activity of the Africanists of the University of Pécs was recognized by the leaders of the University, and at the end of 2009 it led to the creation of the African Research Centre (ARC, Afrika Kutatóközpont) (“Flyer” 2010) at the Faculty of Humanities. The Centre was led by Prof. Sándor Csizmadia and its secretary was István Tarrósy. This is the first research centre of its kind in the Hungarian higher education system, and the research of North–South and South–South relations together with the other research centres (Asian, Ibero-American, Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean Area) exists exclusively at the University of Pécs in Hungary which enhances the good cooperation between the centres. The aim of the African Research Centre is to establish the research potential and the education of professionals in Hungary who understand and know the problems and the opportunities in Africa.

The activities of the ARC consists of organizing conferences, participating in conferences and in publications, academic co-operation, multi-sector co-operation, dissemination and networking, all of which help the University’s tasks of research and education.

The Centre organized two successful international conferences. The first one was held in English and French in May 2010 and was entitled Africa 1960–2010–2060. A Century (Re)visited: What Next? (“Program...” 2010) The keynote lectures were given by Prof. Goran Hyden (University of Florida, USA) and Richard Dowden (Royal Africa Society, UK). A second one was held in English in June 2012 and entitled Emerging Africa: Old Friends, New Partnerships and Perspectives for the 21st Century. (“Program...” 2012) The keynote lectures were delivered this time by Prof. Ian Taylor (University of St. Andrews, UK) and Prof. Goran Hyden.

Members of the African Research Centre are participating in the international conferences of the Africa–Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies (AEGIS) in 2009 (Leipzig, ECAS 3) (Tarrósy 2009), in 2011 (Uppsala, ECAS 4) (Tarrósy 2011 and Szabó 2011) and in 2013 (Lisbon, ECAS 5) (Tarrósy 2013). They also present regularly at the yearly Viva Africa conferences organized in the Czech Republic in 2008 (Pilsen) (Szabó 2008 and Tarrósy 2008), in 2009, 2010, 2011 (Hradec Králové).

The Centre worked hard to publish a book in 2011 for the international public mostly about Hungarian research on African Studies (Tarrósy, Szabó and Hyden 2011) and there was a close co-operation with the Pécs based think tank IDResearch Ltd. and the only Hungarian scholarly journal on Africa, the *Afrika Tanulmányok* (Africa Studies) also published in Pécs since 2007 (with its seventh volume this year).

The ARC is assisting and managing the training grant of young doctors and nurses of the University of Pécs in the field of tropical diseases in Kenya (in the hospital of Eldoret). (University of Pécs Medical School 2013) The Centre is also involved in the BA and MA Programs of International Studies of the University of Pécs.

In 2010–2011, the ARC worked together with the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs (HIIA), and many Hungarian NGOs (a symposium was held in Pécs and several meetings in Budapest) in order to elaborate the African Development Strategy of Hungary (the recommendations were published in 2011 – fifty pages co-edited by István Tarrósy and Péter Morenth) (Morenth and Tarrósy 2010–2011). The Centre is also helping to organize and participate at photo exhibitions on African issues in Pécs.<sup>8</sup>

In 2012, the local synergy on African issues became even stronger, because István Tarrósy was named the director of the African Research Centre and he is also the owner of the IDResearch Ltd. and the executive editor of the quarterly review *Afrika Tanulmányok*.

The ARC has several plans for the future. A BA Program in African Studies is under preparation at the University of Pécs, and also there is a will (and already collected volumes) to establish a scientific library collection on African Studies in the Regional Library of Pécs.

The Centre is also planning to establish co-operation with foreign Africa Studies Association like that of the United Kingdom (ASAUK), and trying to create an ERASMUS exchange with the Visegrád and Central European countries. The result of the latter is that in 2013, the first four-country project took place: the Visegrad Africa Days with film seminars and conferences. Closer Central European co-operation at a scientific level is on its way, too: preliminaries were made to launch the Central European Africa Studies Review (CEASR) edited by a board of researchers coming from the Visegrád Countries. Finally, the Africa Research Centre is lobbying hard to convince the

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8 A recent example is the photo exhibition of Ismael Miquidade, a photographer from Mozambique at the University of Pécs in April 2013 organized in part by the Camões Institute of Budapest. (Centro de Língua Portuguesa do Camões 2013).

decision makers to establish a Scientific Working Group on African Studies within the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

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