

This chapter was published in: Herman Paul, *How to be a Historian. Scholarly Personae in Historical Studies, 1800-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019)

---

## What is an African historian? Negotiating scholarly personae in UNESCO's *General History of Africa*

Larissa Schulte Nordholt

### Introduction

Scholarly personae have been studied, so far, almost exclusively in European and North-American contexts. Given the recent 'global' turn in historiography and the social dynamics of in- and exclusion present in the history of historiography, this is remarkable.<sup>i</sup> This chapter therefore aims to study the emergence of African history as a (sub-)discipline in the second half of the twentieth century, to illuminate how templates of scholarly personae might have emerged outside a strictly European context. To do this, I will look at UNESCO's *General History of Africa*, a project in which historians actively sought to create a new way of looking at the African continent's history during a time that the discipline of African history was establishing itself as a reputable scholarly activity.

Studying scholarly personae through the prism of UNESCO's *General History of Africa* allows us to enrich existing literature in another way, too. Scholars employing the persona concept have mostly adopted micro or meso perspectives of historical scholarship, and focused on specific scholars and their ideals of virtue and vice and on cross-disciplinary comparisons of virtue catalogues, respectively.<sup>ii</sup> African historians engaged in the *General History of Africa*, by contrast, invite us to adopt a macro perspective, given that they

dissociated themselves from 'the' Western historian, no less, in its multiple, Eurocentric, incarnations. What could it mean for the study of scholarly personae to move to such a macro level and scrutinize a moment in the history of historiography that purposefully sought to combat existing models of 'good scholarship' from a decolonizing perspective?

The postcolonial actors who wrote history in this moment were caught in a paradoxical negotiation of the historical difference between their societies and the need to deal with Western projections of modernity on those societies. This led them to regard western historiography, at least as it pertained to the history of Africa, with scepticism. Therefore, whilst they were still embedded in a Western system of academia, they simultaneously agitated against that system. As a result the ideals they formulated were partly based on the antithesis of something as considerable as the 'Eurocentric historian'. The question this chapter asks is what these actors imagined that antithesis would look like? What, in other words, was an 'African' historian in the context of African historical studies in the second half of the twentieth century, according to various African historians and Africanists?

In In this chapter I will discuss the shared commitments and ideals that were part of the scholarly persona of historians working on a postcolonial history project funded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the *General History of Africa (l'Histoire générale de l'Afrique)*, which I will introduce in a more detailed way in the following section and refer to as the GHA. I will illustrate how the framework of the scholarly persona may be used to interrogate the paradox of 'double-consciousness', or working with different perspectives, within the GHA and how the historians working on the GHA constructed a shared vision of what a scholar should not be: a persona *non grata*. I will do so first by discussing the GHA's system of peer review for the various chapters that were part of the multi-authored eight-volume work. The reports of the so-called reading

committees show how historians in charge of the work meant to shape its content and by extent its authors. Secondly, I will look at a small *casus* of obituaries of eminent GHA historians to show the virtues and character traits that were used to praise them and fit them into the mould of an Africanist hero. Finally, I will discuss some cases where these constructed ideals became contested in order to illustrate the multiplicity of perspectives within the GHA and the difficulty of creating a postcolonial history and a postcolonial (or decolonial) scholarly persona that was completely free from vices belonging to the persona *non grata*.

### ***The General History of Africa***

African historical studies in the second half of the twentieth century emerged from a longer tradition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century African and black intellectual traditions. These traditions stemmed from resistance against the all-encompassing racism that had accompanied the European imperialist penetration of the continent and the Americas.<sup>iii</sup> In the twentieth century the focus of some intellectuals shifted from political philosophical tracts to the production of historical works.<sup>iv</sup> These historical works were meant to prove that Africa had a history that was worth telling and that it was not an image of eternal stillness, as it had been depicted by European intellectuals.<sup>v</sup> As a result, during the period of political decolonization 'doing' African history became associated with the retaking of control from the West. 'Mental decolonization', the effort to free not only the colonial body, but also the mind, therefore became tied to the production of African historiography. This need to move away from Western explanations within histories of colonized pasts has been a key problem within postcolonial thought.<sup>vi</sup> Relating specifically to African 'gnosis' (methods of knowing) Valentin Mudimbe has analyzed the creation of an African 'alterity'. He made it clear that the translation of historical difference in the context of African historiography is situated in a long

tradition of othering Africans and their history, while Africa has simultaneously played a crucial role in the creation of a Western epistemological system of superiority. He has described how the 'idea of Africa' in modernity had essentially been created by mostly Europeans, and some Africans, from the fifteenth century onwards, using Western epistemological systems, culminating in the creation of a colonial library, a constellation of Western mythologies concerning the 'dark continent'.<sup>vii</sup> Mudimbe argued that invariably the West had also been influenced by the colonial library and therefore by Africa, but that it was always Africa and 'the African' that ended up in a position of inferiority and otherness.<sup>viii</sup> It was this colonial library that African intellectuals in the nineteenth and twentieth century had to position themselves towards and that they were reacting against when writing a history of the continent seeking to position itself as different from the library.

In 1964 UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, became the vessel through which a group of mostly African intellectuals, , put into practice this need to move away from a colonial library and officially embarked on what the Nigerian historian J. F. Ade-Ajayi later dubbed 'the climax' of Africanist historiography: the production of an eight-volume *General History of Africa*.<sup>ix</sup> *The General History of Africa* (hereafter GHA) was to provide the whole continent, including North Africa, with a synthesis of the written academic history it so far lacked. Work on the GHA lasted for over three decades, from 1964 until 1998.<sup>x</sup> The project was pluralistic in its historiographical outlook and expressly stated that it wanted to avoid the vice of dogmatism. The GHA is usually seen as an expression of Africanist historiography, associated with the Ibadan school of history in Nigeria, from which Ade-Ajayi also hailed. But authors who have been situated in different historiographical schools, such as the Dar Es Salaam school of 'useful', Marxist-inspired history or the Parisian creed of *engagé* historians, also contributed.<sup>xi</sup> Like most historians of Africa working in the

early postcolonial years, the GHA was more concerned with the content than the context of historiography.<sup>xii</sup> As such the work can be seen as a genuine sample of African historical studies in the second half of the twentieth century. In line with pan-African ideology, moreover, contributing authors came from all parts of the continent as well as the diaspora.<sup>xiii</sup> The pan-Africanism practised in the GHA included Arabic north Africa. The historians who led the project came together as the 'International Scientific Committee for the drafting of a general history of Africa'. This ISC was thirty-nine members strong, two-thirds of whom were Africans or of African descent. I will use the GHA as a case study to explore how scholarly personae can be used as a framework to interrogate African historiography and vice versa, how the GHA might help broaden the scope of the framework of the scholarly persona.

### **Reading committees**

As mentioned above, the contributors to the GHA made use of a system of peer review to edit chapters. I will use the reports of reading committees for volumes 4 and 5, dealing with Africa from the twelfth to the sixteenth, and the sixteenth to the eighteenth, centuries, to show how these reading committees actively helped regulate what Afrocentric history looked like. It was stated in the GHA statutes that all chapters had to be approved by a multitude of different readers. A *rapporteur* was assigned to each reading committee and had to collate the various comments made, both by members of the committee and other members of the ISC.<sup>xiv</sup> *Rapporteurs* could come from inside or outside Africa. The ISC and the reading committees wielded a considerable amount of power over the scholarly atmosphere within which these authors and editors functioned. As a consequence, the international epistemic community of historians working on the GHA was regulated by a set of implicit rules set both by the ISC and by the various reading committees, which were mostly staffed by ISC members.

A big issue *rapporteurs* had to deal with was the use of outdated terminology. Reading committees consistently resisted the use of what they saw as racist and outdated terms to describe Africa or its inhabitants. These were often colonial terms that had originated in the West's long history of othering Africans and African history. The reading committee for volume IV identified the words and phrases 'natives', 'dark continent', 'bushmen', 'hottentots', 'animism', 'magic' and 'black African specialists' as problematic in its first report. Moreover, the Kenyan historian Bethwell Ogot, the only African member of this particular reading committee, noted that the word 'tribe' had been 'overused'.<sup>xv</sup> The reading committee for volume V also objected to a myriad of words. ISC members David Chanaiwa and Isaria Kimambo both objected to the use of '*noir*' [black] and '*continent noir*' [black continent].<sup>xvi</sup> Moreover, readers objected to the use of words such as '*sorcellerie*' [sorcery]. F. A. Albuquerque Mourao, a member of the ISC from Brazil, stated that 'to interpret any incantation, any secret ritual as *sorcellerie* would be to inverse reality' and went on to argue that these rituals needed to be explained with greater care so as to not perpetuate a lack of understanding of African culture.<sup>xvii</sup> Moreover, Adu Boahen, editor of volume VII, suggested that references to cannibalism should be deleted 'since it will feed the stereotype of a universal practice rather than a desperate reaction to catastrophe'.<sup>xviii</sup> The avoidance of perceived racist and colonial terminology signifies the ongoing positioning of historians within the GHA *vis-à-vis* other historians, and *vis-à-vis* the colonial library. Moreover, it provides a glimpse into the kind of values and (political or moral) ideals that denoted the 'right' kind of historian of Africa. It seems that a willingness to go against the grain in order to challenge Eurocentric ideas of African historical and racial inferiority was a key characteristic of the scholarly persona of historians within the GHA. The French historian Jean Devisse, who acted as a *rapporteur* for the seven member body that regulated the GHA's everyday business, also

fulfilled these criteria, when he confessed to being shocked at times at the use of what he dubbed outdated and racist terms.<sup>xix</sup>

Eurocentrism became the biggest error that the reading committees sought to correct. This was abundantly clear in all the reading reports, where Eurocentrism was often used to disqualify chapters.<sup>xx</sup> In the reading report on volume V the discussion regarding chapter two reveals a difference of opinion: 'Boahen finds the chapter most unsatisfactory and totally unacceptable. Slater finds it a beautiful piece of work, which reaches a very high level of scholarship indeed.' Boahen thought the 'spirit and Eurocentric stress run counter to the spirit of this history'. Henry Slater, a historian from Dar Es Salaam, stated regarding the chapter, conversely, that 'Africa's place in the world is masterful'.<sup>xxi</sup> The rest of the committee and the ISC agreed with Boahen that the chapter was Eurocentric and therefore bad. In a summary of another reading report for the same volume, the charge of Eurocentrism surfaced again.<sup>xxii</sup> Slater's opinion seems to have been somewhat of an anomaly. However, the kind of Afrocentrism that was espoused by the ISC throughout most of the GHA was not necessarily commonplace in Africanist circles.<sup>xxiii</sup> Although Slater was never a key player within the GHA, the anecdote shows that it was not always clear what writing African history 'from the inside' looked like within the somewhat amorphous ranks of the GHA.<sup>xxiv</sup>

It was clear, however, to Ivan Hrbek, the Czech *rapporteur* for the reading committee for volume IV, what African history should *not* look like, when he enforced the replacement of an author who had produced a sub-par chapter. He wrote that the chapter 'does not give the impression of being written by a modern scholar', thereby placing the author outside accepted scholarly discourse.<sup>xxv</sup> Hrbek was especially unhappy with the use of outdated literature, which referred to the much hated Hamitic hypothesis as a valid theory to understand and explain African history. The Hamitic hypothesis has had various incarnations,

but usually refers to the idea that agricultural and civilizational progress in African history stemmed from outside the continent.<sup>xxvi</sup> Hrbek's dismissal of the chapter was largely based on the author's use of this theory. He summarized his dissatisfaction with the continued reliance on Hamitic theories as follows:

When will there be an end with all these strange hybrid and mixed peoples coming from Arabia, Egypt and other parts of the world and crossing the Sahara to and back founding states and dynasties and then changing their colour, names, customs, religions, languages so that nothing is left?... Let us finish once forever with all this even if some traditional accounts tend to support it.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The last sentence is, of course, especially telling as it shows how important it was to get rid of seemingly racist theories. Hrbek was not the only one within the reading committee for volume IV who found the chapter problematic because of its use of the Hamitic 'curse'. In his reaction to the various reports on volume IV, the editor, Djibril Tamsir Niane, seemed to share Hrbek's annoyance with the attribution of external influences as an explanation of historical facts in Africa: '[I]a tendance est souvent manifeste chez les uns et les autres d'attribuer une influence par trop grande aux influences extérieures et aux recherches des écoles historiques extra-africaines [it is often perceivable that people attribute too great an influence to exterior forces and to research of historical schools outside Africa]'.<sup>xxviii</sup> In the end the author was indeed replaced. Eschewing 'Hamitic theories', which were seen as racist and unscientific, not just because of the lack of evidence for them, but predominantly because of their focus on extra-African factors, was another important point of Afrocentric positioning within the GHA.

As all of the above shows, the reading committees exerted a high degree of control over the final product and the authors of the *General History of Africa*. Through their commentary the reading committees implicitly created a set of rules and guidelines for authors to abide by and therefore set the standards for what was needed to be a good and effective scholar within the project: a commitment to Afrocentrism and therefore a



condemnation of Eurocentrism and racism, in other words a willingness to change perspectives on African history and position oneself as the opposite of a Eurocentric historian. The aims connected to these commitments were activist in nature. The circumvention of Eurocentric and colonial perspectives through, for instance, the removal of certain terms – or indeed authors – showed what was important to the editors of the GHA not just on an epistemic, but also on moral and political levels. Nonetheless, a certain conformism with Western scholarship is also evident from the way in which some readers worried about chapters being intelligible to the non-initiated.

### **Social-justice scholarship**

Scholarly activism was an inevitable part of historical work aimed at changing the way historians and others perceived African history. Nevertheless, GHA historians were embedded in the culture and practices of the historical discipline, in which they sought to carve out a place for African history. This shows all the more obviously in the plethora of scholarly obituaries that were written for some of the 'greats' of the GHA. The obituaries provide us with a clear picture how members of the ISC, such as Adu Boahen, Jan Vansina and Joseph Ki-Zerbo, as well as the somewhat more controversial political scientist Ali Mazrui, were presented to the outside world. What tropes surfaced in that presentation and in how far is there a sense of repetition across different obituaries? These are pertinent questions because scholarly obituaries are not just a description of scholars' lives; they are a scholarly genre as well. They are part of a system of scholarly justification aimed towards other scholars. Obituaries therefore are interesting source material when it comes to the study of scholarly templates. They can serve as models of what a scholar should or should not be like and they sometimes conform the life of the dead to set standards.<sup>xxix</sup> This is precisely why obituaries

are so worthwhile when we want to know more, not about the actual life of the scholars portrayed, but about the ideals (or faults) they embodied. Scholars who are outliers, who do not necessarily fit a mould, are all the more interesting in this respect. Mazrui, for instance, functioned as the editor of volume VIII and was chosen to do so despite the fact that he was not, strictly speaking, a historian.<sup>xxx</sup> Although he was a respected political scientist and a historical thinker in his own right, his ideas concerning African history, or rather the way it should be written, did not necessarily fit with those of other members of the ISC. In a similar vein, the obituaries written for the pioneering European historian Jan Vansina, who passed away recently (February 2017), are interesting as well. Vansina, as a European within a group of Africans, did fit the mould of African historical scholarship within the GHA, despite the fact that the GHA aims had stated that the project would privilege Africans writing African history over Europeans.

The eldest of the four scholars mentioned above, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, born in the Upper Volta in 1922, was one of the first Francophone intellectuals who concerned himself with black African history, publishing a monograph on the history of Africa as early as 1964. He spent his entire career engaged in both scholarship and politics, serving as both professor at the University of Ouagadougou and as a member of parliament. When he passed away in 2006, *Présence Africaine* devoted a special issue to his memory. In it, Pathé Diagne, who was also involved in the writing of the GHA, celebrated Ki-Zerbo's intellectualism, his patience and his insistence that African history needed to be treated with precision in a time of passionate history. But he also noted that Ki-Zerbo was known as 'Joseph Ki, le militant [Joseph Ki, the advocate]'. Moreover, 'Joseph Ki aimait convaincre [Joseph Ki loved to convince]', Diagne wrote when referring to Ki-Zerbo's work for the GHA as the editor for volume I.<sup>xxxi</sup> In another obituary, which appeared in the same issue of *Présence Africaine*, similar virtues were

attributed to Ki-Zerbo. He wanted to change things and, along with other prominent Francophone African historians who were active in the GHA, such as Cheikh Anta Diop, Ki-Zerbo thought intellectuals should be engaged in politics and public debate. But the writer of this obituary, Mangoné Niang, also mentioned Ki-Zerbo's clear mind and strict work ethic.<sup>xxxii</sup> Another *Présence Africaine* obituary writer, Adame Ba Konaré, situated Ki-Zerbo within the historical discipline, by calling him the 'father of African history'. She praised his commitment and precision in advocating oral tradition as valuable sources with which to research African history. However, she also meaningfully emphasized that Ki-Zerbo's way of dealing with African history did not mean he was not preoccupied with questions of objectivity towards the facts.<sup>xxxiii</sup> What all three of these obituaries show, however, is that the most important quality the writers awarded Ki-Zerbo was his engagement in politics and advocacy for African history. Nevertheless, they also emphasized characteristics such as precision and the ability to stay objective, in order to position Ki-Zerbo as what Hrbek would have called 'a modern scholar'.

Adu Boahen was likewise celebrated, even more so than Ki-Zerbo, as an activist scholar. In 1959 he had been the first Ghanaian to receive a PhD in history and in 1967 the first to chair the department of history at the University of Ghana Legon. Like Ki-Zerbo, he had been active in both the political and the scholarly spheres. In an editorial in the *Journal of African History* he is described as '[a] scholar-activist' who 'demonstrated a consistent opposition to dictatorial rule and military regimes that earned him stints in prison'. Boahen, moreover, was 'a prolific scholar', whose work earned him numerous prizes.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In 1992 he became the presidential candidate for the New Patriotic Party and ultimately he lost the controversial election to Jerry John Rawlings. Mazrui commented on this, in a letter to a UNESCO representative, Monique Lesueur, stating that Boahen's presidential campaign might

have hampered his ability to work for the ISC somewhat.<sup>xxxv</sup> Scholarly activism, then, could be hampered by actual political activity – at least according to Mazrui. It seems there was a difference between the way Mazrui (or Vansina) engaged simultaneously in scholarly activism and public intellectualism and the way Ki-Zerbo and Boahen actually functioned as elected representatives. It is not surprising, therefore, that Boahen’s obituary writers emphasize his ability to combine scholarship with political activity.

Nevertheless, Mazrui himself was also praised for his activist work, in the *Journal of Pan African Studies*:

Defining features of Mazrui’s intellectual legacy include courage and controversy. A principal theme of his work was to identify and criticize abuses of political, economic and military power, whether by colonial or imperial nations, including the United States, or by leaders of developing countries, including African nations.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Mazrui had been born in Kenya in 1933 to a family of Islamic scholars. He earned a DPhil at Oxford University in 1966. He would later become a critical postcolonial thinker, who was somewhat controversial both in the West and in Africa. As the editorial obituary by the *Journal of Pan African Studies* states, he was a fierce debater. Nevertheless he strived to treat all people with respect and dignity. Mazrui, moreover, was a dedicated teacher who went to great lengths for his students. His ‘great humanitarian’ qualities caused him, like Boahen, to put himself at risk for causes he truly believed in. ‘Mazrui also risked his reputation, even when not his life, by taking positions of principle that generated sharp criticism and condemnation.’<sup>xxxvii</sup> Another commemoration of the professor emphasized his transition from ‘universal scholar’ to ‘Pan-Africanist political activist’, caused by his period in the ‘belly of the anti-black, anti-Muslim imperial beast of the United States’. This commemoration also described him as a pioneer, who, through the GHA, engaged in a ‘methodological subversion [of] Eurocentrism’ in the volume he edited for the GHA. It also noted his commitment to social

justice caused by a mind that was ‘increasingly agitated by oppression in all its forms’. It gave him the title *griot*, meant for storytellers in West Africa, thereby connecting him to oral traditions and the core methodological battle of early African historical studies.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Both obituaries described here painted a picture of Mazrui as larger than life, an example for others to live up to. It is made abundantly clear that Mazrui fought against the oppression and obscurity of Africa.

This theme is also present in the obituaries for Jan Vansina. Vansina stood for social justice in his scholarship, writes David Schoenbrun, but he did not let his identification with the oppressed hamper his scholarship: he was also critical.<sup>xxxix</sup> Schoenbrun thereby emphasizes the importance of ‘social-justice scholarship’ while simultaneously normalizing it by connecting Vansina’s activism to a well-known historical virtue. The obituary written about him by Michele Wagner for the African Studies Association highlights the same combination of Vansina’s critical judgement and passionate scholarship. Vansina, Wagner writes, was committed to research that he was passionate about. He was a pioneer who gave voice to those who had previously been ignored in historical research. Wagner moreover echoes Vansina’s own semi-autobiography, *Living with Africa*, when she describes the arduous journey Vansina undertook in order to be able to earn a PhD in history, owing to his unconventional dealings with oral source material. She also, again echoing the autobiography, connects Vansina’s identification with the oppressed of the world to his own oppression as a Flemish boy in Belgium during the early twentieth century.<sup>xl</sup> Wagner, and Vansina himself too in his autobiography, describes Vansina as intellectually open and committed to combatting Eurocentrism out of a need to uncover hidden pasts. None of these virtues or character traits are either completely epistemic, or completely moral or political, therefore blurring the boundaries between the personal, the academic and the political.

What this small collection of obituaries might show is that in the twentieth century a commitment to 'social-justice' scholarship was seen as an important part of the character of Africanist scholars. Unsurprisingly so, since, as has been established, African history was not yet a recognized and reputable (sub-)discipline. The obituary writers recognized the ability to advocate for the field and, more broadly, for the recognition of the history of African peoples, as something positive and something necessary in order to be a good historian of Africa. Even so, the writers also realized that in order for politically charged activism to be recognized as sound scholarly behaviour, they had to situate it squarely within the boundaries of what was perceived as acceptable scholarship. They did this by emphasizing GHA historians' critical thinking, objectivity, hard work, responsible handling of source material and didactic qualities, alongside their activism or political activity. That is not to say that such qualities were not to be found in traditional African ways of dealing with the past, nor that these qualities belong exclusively with the West, but rather that they were attributed to institutionalized Western historiography.

### **Ideals in practice**

The reading committee reports and the obituaries both show that engagement in activist scholarship was a key characteristic of the scholarly persona of Africanists. However, the reports also show that it was not always clear what that meant in the context of the GHA. The obituaries discussed, moreover, not only show which character traits and virtues were idealized, but also emphasize the difficulty of attaining an institutional position such as Vansina's or Ki-Zerbo's. Although the point of these obituaries is surely to emphasize the capacities of their subjects, they also advance a point concerning the (institutional) circumstances in which early historians of Africa worked. It is not without reason that many

of the leading GHA historians received the label 'pioneer' and it was undoubtedly harder for black Africans to reach a particular position than for Europeans. It has to be emphasized here that the axis of the scholarly persona as a tool of analysis is only one point of understanding when it comes to the historiography of the GHA. Likewise, when answering the question why ideals of mental decolonization within the GHA were sometimes difficult to realize, more than just the framework of the scholarly persona needs to be taken into account. Yet that very framework, by emphasizing the actual doings of historians, might put some flesh on the bare bones of a political analysis. Simultaneously, adding political undertones to the persona analysis might enrich the latter as well.

One reason why mental decolonization was difficult to realize was because it was hard to decide which African perspectives should carry the most weight. The effort to allow marginalized histories to be heard and to liberate oppressed people by endowing them with modern history went beyond a simple dichotomy between 'African' and 'European' perspectives and interests. The GHA aimed at including neglected identities and histories within smaller geographic spaces than the enormous philosophical concept of 'Africa'. During the writing of what would eventually become chapter seven of volume V, dealing with Africa from the sixteenth until the eighteenth century, a conflict emerged concerning one of Africa's most heated political struggles during the twentieth century; the divide between north and south Sudan. The original author, the North Sudanese Professor Yusuf Hasan, and the editor of volume V, the well-known (Kenyan) Bethwell Ogot, had a difference of opinion that was based upon questions of inclusion or exclusion of marginalized histories. Ogot had altered Hasan's chapter in order to include the history of non-Arab South Sudanese ethnic groups. This angered Hasan. He deemed it a distortion of history and, gravest of historiographical errors he thought, a projection of twentieth-century political problems back into a sixteenth-

century past.<sup>xli</sup> Ogot, however, had included South Sudanese history in the chapter in order to avoid writing history from a single perspective.<sup>xlii</sup> The heart of the conflict between Hasan and Ogot, therefore, had to do with different views of what exactly constituted the history of the Sudan and how it should be written. The ISC favoured a diversity of views and the inclusion of a more pan-African point of view and therefore chose to include the alterations made by Ogot. Nonetheless, both Boahen and Maurice Glélé, the UNESCO official in charge of the GHA, urged Ogot to try to make amends in order to salvage Hasan's authorship.<sup>xliii</sup> Ogot needed considerable diplomatic skills in order to pacify and convince Hasan to change the chapter, which carried the latter's name. The conflict apparent in the writing of politically sensitive histories made it necessary for Ogot to possess skills that were more than academic. In an effort to contribute to mental decolonization and practice scholarly activism, he had to push against an existing historical hierarchy, in this case that of the Arabic predominance in the existing historiography about the Sudan.

A difference in interpreting which issues were important or not sometimes caused problems when European voices were raised. Even though the project aims had made it clear that the GHA had to be written predominantly by African authors, this proved to be difficult to realize at times. Unsurprisingly, the subsequent dominance of European authors and therefore European points of view – for origin was inextricably linked to epistemic convictions – led to critique both from participating African historians and, ironically, Europeans.<sup>xliv</sup> In 1979, a Ugandan Professor, a specialist in the history of Madagascar and member of the ISC, Phares M. Mutibwa, wrote a letter of complaint to the Director-General of UNESCO, the Senegalese Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow. In the letter he identified several ongoing problems with the GHA. The influence of European points of view was one of them. The reconstruction of African history could potentially be undermined by the presence of too many Europeans



because their concerns did not necessarily reflect African concerns and because they were ideologically motivated along Cold War lines. This was specifically problematic for the writing of volume VIII, which dealt with African history from 1935 onwards.<sup>xiv</sup> The already marginalized history of African peoples could be at risk of being silenced or distorted by European voices once again, Mutibwa argued:

Whatever may be our shortcomings, we cannot abdicate our responsibility of reconstructing our history and in the way we want to project that history. Here I do not wish to suggest that we should bend or alter history to fit our own wishes; but I hold it to be true that while others can assist us in the reconstruction of our past, it is we ourselves, in the last resort, must decide what we were... In short, while we should have as contributors non-African historians, who moreover have greater resources than we ourselves have in carrying out research and even writing, the new General history of Africa should principally be written by Africans regardless of the paucity of their experiences and resources.<sup>xvi</sup>

Mutibwa put the responsibility for creating an Africanist historiography in African hands, rather than argue that Europeans had to leave the project altogether. Europeans, he relented, had been instrumental in making the writing of African history possible. The professor had accepted that the involvement of Europeans was inevitable owing to institutional difficulties. Mutibwa understood that Africans and the African past did not have the same amount of institutional and ideological power as Europeans and their historiography, even when it came to shaping the African past. This, however, he decided was all the more reason to guard against a predominance of Europeans in the GHA and, as Africans, to take responsibility in the writing of African history.

Institutional difficulties concerning the writing of African history are also described in the autobiography of Bethwell Ogot and the account that Jan Vansina wrote of his life as a historian of Africa. In his autobiography Bethwell Ogot described an arduous journey to earn a PhD in the 1950s. During this time he had been continuously thwarted in his aims as a result of a lasting conviction amongst predominantly European historians that African history, or at

least history of Africa before the arrival of Europeans, did not exist.<sup>xlvii</sup> As described above, Vansina told a similar tale concerning his PhD in his semi-autobiographical book. There was unwillingness in Belgium, where he earned the degree in 1957, to classify his work on the Kuba as history, and instead it was constantly relegated to the realms of ethnography.<sup>xlviii</sup>

To return to Mutibwa's letter: he also wrote that African historians should not become too wrapped up in matters of political administration, lest their scholarship evaporate. Not all scholars involved in the GHA necessarily thought that political activity was virtuous behaviour. Combined with Mazrui's comments concerning Boahen's political activities, it seems that for some GHA scholars the virtue of political or social 'engagement' ought not to be carried to its logical conclusion by actually becoming a scholar-politician.

However, it could be difficult to decide where activism employed to reach a decolonized history stopped and political subjectivity started. This was the case when the drafting of volume VIII, and thereby of the whole GHA, came to an end in the late 1990s. Upon completion of the volume Mazrui had written a postscript because a considerable time gap opened between the writing of the final chapter and publication of the work. As a result important historical moments in African history, such as the end of apartheid or the Rwandan genocide, had not been discussed or even mentioned in volume VIII because they occurred after the chapters were drafted. The postscript was not a great success amongst the ISC members who still bothered to involve themselves with the GHA in 1997; Vansina stated:

tout cela est beaucoup trop actuel et superficiel pour mériter une inclusion dans ce volume – Il ne faut pas donner une arme capitale aux détracteurs en puissance de cette histoire de l'Afrique qui sont tentés de l'accuser d'être partisane et un outil politique, ce que la commission et son bureau ont en général évité depuis 25 ans! [all of this is much too current and superficial to merit inclusion in this volume – one should not provide a lethal weapon to powerful critics of this history of Africa, who are inclined to accuse it of being partisan and a political tool, which is what the Committee and its Bureau have generally avoided for twenty-five years!]<sup>xlix</sup>

Evidently, Vansina had done his best to aid the GHA in walking the fine line between scholarly activism aimed at making African history known and actual political advocacy. Mazrui had crossed this line in the wrong direction. Vansina's statement that the postscript was not historical enough also sheds light on his criticism. Mazrui was a political scientist and not a historian and had evidently crossed a boundary between disciplines. Another ISC member, Diouldé Laya, was unimpressed by Mazrui's postscript, calling it 'très subjectif au plan scientifique, très erroné au plan politique, et nocif au plan intellectuel [scientifically very subjective, politically very erroneous, and intellectually harmful]'.<sup>i</sup> Although Boahen was decidedly more positive about the postscript, he too was not without criticism. Tellingly, however, his critique was more focused on what political issues Mazrui had left out.<sup>ii</sup> Evidently not all ISC members agreed on what constituted 'virtuous' behaviour when it came to the writing of the postscript. Mazrui's tendency to favour a political science-oriented approach over a historical one had also created problems when the table of contents for his volume had to be prepared. Social-justice scholarship could be interpreted differently by different types of scholar.

Inescapably, then, the ideals and goals sketched in the sections above were not uncontested. The historians working on the GHA ran into a multitude of difficulties whilst trying to achieve their goals. A paradox plagued the GHA. It functioned within a European system and therefore had to conform to certain scholarly standards and practices established in the West. This, among other things, meant that the presence of Europeans in the GHA was hard to avoid, as Mutibwa reluctantly admitted in his plea for African responsibility in the creation of an African past.

### **The paradox of African history**

As has become clear in this chapter, writing African history from an Afrocentric perspective in order to prove the existence of a past of great value was partly motivated by feelings of moral and political indignation. As such, the historians who worked on the GHA set out to write African history partly because they were convinced that it was the right thing to do and partly because they wanted to right a wrong. Owing to this focus on historiographical justice the scholarly persona, with its virtues and vices that transcend the scholarly sphere, seems an apt framework within which to regard this emergence. Scholarly persona in this chapter could be read as what Herman Paul has dubbed an 'embodied image of a regulative ideal', from which 'contrastive models of virtue' emerged.<sup>lii</sup> GHA authors and what they wrote were regulated by an ISC that was invested in managing the gaze from the outside; after all, they were concerned with how 'the West' might perceive topics such as cannibalism or magic. In the obituaries of scholars, the templates used for the subjects were adjusted ever so slightly to fit ideals of 'Western' or 'modern' scholarship, while simultaneously moving away from those very archetypes. One of the key critiques by GHA historians of Western historiography was the West's false assertion of objectivity when it came to African history. As such, the ideal that was crafted was mostly contrasted against and around the ideal of 'the Western historian'. Moreover, the writing of the GHA almost coincided with the emergence of African history as a (sub-)discipline. Boundary work, the need to demarcate the emerging field of study from other fields of study, was therefore an important part of the everyday work of the International Scientific Committee that was in charge.<sup>liii</sup>

The emergence of new ideals of scholarly personae were influenced by, first, an emphasis on identity as a key organizational factor within the GHA and, second, being situated within a Western academic system and, more specifically, the discipline of history, which had been developed in nineteenth-century Europe. It is important to stress that the experience of

Europeans within the project was different from that of Africans. It is also necessary to stress that the GHA was, first and foremost, a top–bottom initiative and, on top of that, its authors were almost exclusively male. Although the project aims had stated that the volumes were to reach a large audience on the African continent, the Africans who worked on the GHA were invariably highly educated.<sup>liv</sup> The need to conform to scholarly standards taught in European and North American universities, and the epistemic virtues that accompanied those standards, such as a particular Eurocentric ideal of objectivity, sometimes collided with the need to express an African identity through history and develop distinct character traits and virtues that belonged to the emerging (sub-)discipline for the African historians that worked on the project.

This collision of worlds has been described by many African, Caribbean and African-American intellectuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. W. E. B. Du Bois called it a ‘double-consciousness’, by which he meant the need of African-American people to always regard themselves through the eyes of white folk in order to survive.<sup>lv</sup> Frantz Fanon, moreover, related it to the writing of history specifically in his *Les Damnés de La Terre*. He observed the estrangement of native intellectuals, as he called them, from their own soil and their subsequent wish to learn more about their own traditions and history.<sup>lvi</sup> African historians working on the GHA were enmeshed in this estrangement; they experienced a constant need to refer to two different epistemological frameworks. Ali Mazrui too recognized this dilemma as it pertained to the GHA specifically when he reflected on the project in a paper delivered as part of a symposium about the methodology of the GHA. Strikingly, he argued that the ability to combine a Western education with a ‘view from within’ would lead to better scholarship. ‘The very initiation into Western academic culture, and the power of comparative observation linked to his familiarity with both the West and his own society, provide the

requisite exposure to discover salience and appreciate significance in Ibo society', Mazrui wrote, hypothesising an imaginary Nigerian Ibo historian. The combination of a Western education with an insider view was in line with academic ideals in the field of anthropology, Mazrui stated, thereby acknowledging the ties between African history and the emergence of the discipline of anthropology, which Mudimbe has described as well. Having a double consciousness was an epistemic virtue, which was acknowledged by the academy through anthropology, Mazrui theorized.<sup>lvii</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As this chapter has shown, the idea of the scholarly persona can be used as a critical perspective from which to regard the frame-of-mind in which scholars active within the GHA saw their work. In an effort to legitimize their perspective on African history as a valid historical exercise they clothed their commitment to social-justice scholarship and a historical liberation of African peoples in scholarly virtues such as objectivity or the need to be critical. The scholarly persona inherent in the GHA was to a certain extent a reflection of the location of the emerging discipline itself: it moved between the wish to create a new Afrocentric history that would do away with racist theories, such as the Hamitic one, and the wish to make the continent's history legible to educated elites and Western readers. This was reflected in the emerging template for scholarly personae. My hypothesis that the African intellectuals within the GHA possessed a 'double-consciousness' or needed to obtain one, seems to be confirmed by these challenges. Obtaining such a double consciousness, or the skill to navigate different epistemological environments, became a key virtue within the GHA. After all, there was a constant need to refer to both the 'new' Afrocentric history and the existing discipline of history. European intellectuals within the project, such as Vansina and Hrbek, seem to have

identified with this struggle. A question for further research then might be whether Europeans (and other non-Africans) navigated the boundary work and moral questions of African history and the emerging ideals for scholarly personae differently from Africans, and if so, how and why?

What, moreover, does this tell us about the use of scholarly personae from a macro perspective? The macro perspective used here, as well as the context of protest against existing historiographical structures, presents a narrative in which historians had a clearer idea of a historian *non grata* than of an ideal-typical model of ‘good’ scholarship. What the GHA produced most decisively was an antithesis; as a result of the weight of the colonial library GHA historians strived to avoid the spectre of the ‘Eurocentric Western historian’. ‘Good’ historical scholarship was contrasted against ‘bad’ historical scholarship – a Eurocentric approach – and it was around this antithesis that the ideal of the GHA historian was regulated and that templates of ideal-typical scholars were shaped.

---

<sup>i</sup> See Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (eds), *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>ii</sup> Mineke Bosch, ‘Scholarly personae and twentieth-century historians’, *Low Countries Historical Review*, 131:4 (2016), 33–54; Christiaan Engberts and Herman Paul, ‘Scholarly vices: boundary work in nineteenth-century orientalism’ in Jeroen van Dongen and Paul (eds), *Epistemic Virtues in the Sciences and Humanities* (Cham: Springer, 2017), pp 79–90; Herman Paul, ‘What is a scholarly persona? Ten theses on virtues, skills and desires’, *History and Theory*, 53 (2014), 348–71; Lorraine Daston, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

<sup>iii</sup> Toyin Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* (Rochester, NY: Rochester University Press, 2001), pp 26–7, 32.

---

<sup>iv</sup> See Kenneth Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830–1855* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).

<sup>v</sup> See Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), pp 9–11, and Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>vi</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>vii</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 1–23.

<sup>ix</sup> J. F. Ade-Ajayi, ‘Africa at the beginning of the nineteenth century: issues and prospects’, in Ade-Ajayi (ed.), *The General History of Africa*, vol. 6 (Paris: UNESCO, 1989), p. 1.

<sup>x</sup> The French version of the last volume, volume 8 *Africa since 1935*, was published in 1998, thereby completing the original goal of the project. However, UNESCO is currently working on a ninth volume focused on the diaspora or ‘global Africa’.

<sup>xi</sup> See Horace Campbell, ‘The impact of Walter Rodney and the progressive scholars on the Dar Es Salaam School’, *Social and Economic Studies*, 40:2 (1991), 99–135.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibrahima Thioub, ‘Writing national and transnational history in Africa: the example of the “Dakar School”’, in Stefan Berger (ed.), *Writing the Nation. A Global Perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 198.

<sup>xiii</sup> UNESCO, *Preparation of a General History of Africa* (Paris: UNESCO, 1983), p. 6.

<sup>xiv</sup> Jan Vansina, ‘UNESCO and African historiography’, *History in Africa*, 20 (1993), 339.

<sup>xv</sup> UNESCO Archives Paris (UAP), CC CSP 38, Report of the Reading Committee 1977, pp 7–29 and UAP, CLT CID 89, VOLUME V – READING COMMITTEE / COMITE DU LECTEURS, date unclear.



- 
- <sup>xvi</sup> UAP, CLT CID 89, GENERAL HISTORY OF AFRICA – VOLUME V. First Reader’s Report, June 1982, p. 3.
- <sup>xvii</sup> UAP, CLT CID 89, GENERAL HISTORY OF AFRICA – VOLUME V. Second Reader’s Report, 15 June 1983, pp 28–30.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Second Reader’s Report, p. 12.
- <sup>xix</sup> UAP, CLT CID 89, Interim Report Volume V, chs 5, 9, 17, 18 and ch. 2 by J. Vansina, 15 January 1984, p. 1.
- <sup>xx</sup> UAP, CLT CID 89, Reading Report by David Chanaiwa, date unclear, p. 1.
- <sup>xxi</sup> UAP, CLT CID 89, Fifth reader’s report V.V, 24 June 1984, p. 2.
- <sup>xxii</sup> UAP, CLT CID 89, Revised Reading Report after Brazzaville, date unclear, p. 36.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> See Chinweizu, *Decolonising the African Mind* (Lagos: Pero Press, 1987).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> UAP, SHC/MD/10, Meeting of experts for the drafting and publication of a *General History of Africa* (Addis Ababa, 22 to 26 June 1970), p. 2.
- <sup>xxv</sup> UAP, CC CSP 38, Report of the Reading Committee 1977, 21.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Chinweizu, *Decolonising*, pp 76–80; Toyin Falola, ‘Nationalism and African historiography’, in Q. Edward Wang and Georg G. Iggers (eds), *Turning Points in Historical Thinking: A Comparative Perspective* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1999), p. 210.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> UAP, CC CSP 38, Report of the Reading Committee 1977, 23.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> UAP, CC CSP 38, Lettre circulaire Niane à messieurs les membres du comité de lecture du volume IV de *l’Histoire générale de l’Afrique*, 7 July 1977.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Anna Echterhölter, *Schattengefechte: Genealogische Praktiken in Nachrufen auf Naturwissenschaftler (1710–1860)* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012), pp 10, 20–21.
- <sup>xxx</sup> This was done because no historian could be found. Vansina, ‘Unesco’, 344.

- 
- xxx<sup>i</sup> Pathé Diagne, 'Une nouvelle image du professeur Africaine', *Présence Africaine*, 173 (2006), 23–6.
- xxx<sup>ii</sup> Mangoné Niang, 'Le veilleur du jour', *Présence Africaine*, 173 (2006), 21–22.
- xxx<sup>iii</sup> Adame Ba Konaré, 'L'histoire africaine aujourd'hui', *Présence Africaine*, 173 (2006), 27–36.
- xxx<sup>iv</sup> 'Editorial: Professor Emeritus Albert Adu Boahen (1932–2006)', *The Journal of African History*, 47:3 (2006), 359–61.
- xxx<sup>v</sup> UAP, CLT CID 99, Ali Mazrui to Monique Melcer Lesueur, 3 August 1992.
- xxx<sup>vi</sup> 'Ali Al'Amin Mazrui: pan Africanist, scholar and teacher', *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 7 (2014), 4.
- xxx<sup>vii</sup> 'Ali Al'Amin Mazrui', 5.
- xxx<sup>viii</sup> 'Ali Mazrui – a tribute to an intellectual *griot*', presented at the Ali A. Mazrui International Symposium, Southern Sun, Westlands, Nairobi, 16 July 2016.
- xxx<sup>ix</sup> David Schoenbrun, 'Jan Vansina (1929–2017): a founder figure in the study of Africa's past, early and recent', *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa*, 52:2 (2017), 269.
- x<sup>l</sup> Michele D. Wagner, 'Obituary – Jan Vansina (14 September 1929 – 8 February 2017)', *History in Africa*, 44 (2017), 5–9 and Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), p. 5.
- x<sup>li</sup> UAP, CLT CID 92, Yusuf Hasan to Bethwell Ogot, 12 August 1986.
- x<sup>lii</sup> UAP, CLT CID 92, Bethwell Ogot to Yusuf Hasan, 15 April 1981; UAP, CLT CID 92, Bethwell Ogot to Maurice Glélé, 24 September 1982.
- x<sup>liii</sup> UAP, CLT CID 92, Adu Boahen to Bethwell Ogot, 26 October 1986; UAP, CLT CID 92, Maurice Glélé to Bethwell Ogot, 26 June 1986.
- x<sup>liv</sup> UAP, CS CSP 39, Observations Jean Devisse, date unclear.

- 
- <sup>xlv</sup> UAP, CS 1408, CC CSP 33, Phares M. Mutibwa to His Excellency Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, 16 March 1979, p. 3.
- <sup>xlvi</sup> Mutibwa to M'Bow, pp 3–5.
- <sup>xlvii</sup> Bethwell A. Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time* (Kisumu: Ayange Press, 2003), pp 94–7.
- <sup>xlviii</sup> Vansina, *Living with Africa*, pp 37–9.
- <sup>xlix</sup> UAP, CLT CID 103, Jan Vansina to Christophe Wondji, 8 March 1997.
- <sup>l</sup> UAP, CLT CID 103, Diouldé Laya to Christophe Wondji, 16 May 1997.
- <sup>li</sup> UAP, CLT CID 103, Adu Boahen to Christophe Wondji, 18 March 1998.
- <sup>lii</sup> Herman Paul, 'The virtues of a good historian in early Imperial Germany: Georg Waitz's contested example', *Modern Intellectual History*, 15 (2018), 681–709.
- <sup>liii</sup> Thomas F. Gieryn, 'Boundary-work and the demarcation of science from non-science: strains and interests in professional ideologies of scientists', *American Sociological Review*, 48:6 (1983), 781–95.
- <sup>liv</sup> Meeting of Experts (Addis Ababa, 22 to 26 June 1970), pp 1–2.
- <sup>lv</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1903), p. 2.
- <sup>lvi</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: François Maspero, 1961), pp 195–8.
- <sup>lvii</sup> Ali Mazrui, 'Dilemmas of African historiography and the philosophy of the UNESCO *General History of Africa*', in *The Methodology of Contemporary African History: Reports and Papers of the Meeting of Experts Organized by UNESCO at Ouagadougou, Upper Volta, from 17 to 22 May 1979* (Paris: UNESCO, 1984).