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ARTICLE

The Importance of Place and Materiality in the Decolonisation of African History through UNESCO's General History of Africa (1962-1998)

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Abstract

In this article I discuss the issue of place in the creation of decolonised historiography and argue that the location from where a historian produces historiography matters in terms of both conceptual and ideological influences as well as in regards to material circumstances. Making use of a case-study on the UNESCO General History of Africa Project (1964-1998), I bring postcolonial critique on the conceptual nature of academic history writing into conversation with a study of the scholarly practice of the UNESCO project to show that conceptual critique has its limits if it does not take material circumstances into consideration. Political decolonisation in Africa was connected to history writing, thereby blending conceptual and material considerations. Secondly, I look at some of the discussions that were ongoing within the UNESCO project to show that the historians working on it discussed these issues amongst themselves and were aware of critique levelled against them. In doing so I argue that decolonisation of knowledge production as a result of becoming politically independent is a multivarious and ongoing process which has to take into account all these different elements.

Keywords: African history; decolonization; historiography; UNESCO; self-determination

Introduction

In the preface to the 2007 edition of his seminal work, *Provincializing Europe,* Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that to "provincialize Europe" was to ask a question about the importance of place in the creation of decolonised historical thought, echoing a sentiment also scrutinised in this special issue.[1] Although his approach to this question has been within the realm of ideas and intellectual history as a reflection on the possibility of a universal truth connected to the European enlightenment, I want to argue that the question of how a particular place relates to the decolonisation of historical thought is one that equally benefits from an added material or practical angle. By this I mean to say that the place from where a person writes histories does not just have an effect in terms of intellectual influences, but, also in terms of working conditions and how they are particular to a certain place or institution. These conditions, in turn, may influence the conceptual nature of the work and the possibility of 'provincializing Europe' – here understood as the effort to de-centre Europe

[1] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), XIII.

as the universal standard for historical development. This is a key decolonial point, criticising the obsession with theorising over real-world sovereignty and on-the-ground realities.[2] I argue that this observation is especially poignant regarding the history of African history as a field of study. Africa based historians of African history have been dealing with less-than-ideal working circumstances in comparison with historians based in Euro-America ever since the inception of their discipline, even if material realities have diverged greatly within Africa. This chapter delves into the history of African History as a field of study through the lens of Chakrabarty's question of place as an issue of working conditions and by making use of the eight-volume UNESCO General History of Africa (hereafter GHA) as a case-study.

This project forms an interesting case-study to explore the role of place and materiality in African historiography for two reasons. Firstly, the project ran from 1964 until 1998 and therefore spans over three decades during which tremendous changes took place on the African continent and within African studies itself. The UNESCO General History of Africa, or, *l'Histoire générale de l'Afrique* was a project of pan-African, anti-colonial nationalist history and intellectual decolonisation.[3] Its creation was a direct result of the independence of many West and East African countries and their growing influence in the UN.[4] As Eva-Maria Muschik has shown, the UN supported the establishment of new nation states in the postwar and cold war periods and as result, the UN also supported large-scale history projects underwriting that establishment.[5] Decolonisation, national sovereignty, and the ability to write one's own history from a nationalist perspective were all key and intertwined endeavours in the post-war African struggle for independence, as Moritz Mihatsch and Casper Andersen also emphasize in the introduction to this special issue.[6] As UNESCO's first regional history, the GHA then followed from the conviction that a new post-war world, one without empires, needed new histories. The GHA wanted to firmly emphasize the ability of historians from Africa to write and determine their own histories to contribute to political self-determination.[7] At the same time, writing one's own history, on one's own terms, was a way to work towards not just political, but epistemological sovereignty. This is defined in this special issue as the "interplay of telling one's own story to claim and reinforce one's self-determination and the self-determination to be able to tell one's own story."[8] Political and epistemological concerns mutually reinforced each other within the GHA.[9]

Although the GHA was first conceived of in the early 1960s, the eight-volume project did not reach completion until the late 1990s.[10] By then the context for writing African

[2] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1:1 (2012), 1-40.

[3] See: Toyin Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* (Rochester: The University of Rochester Press, 2001), 227, 237, Toyin Falola, "Nationalism and African Historiography," in *Turning Points in Historiography: A Cross-Cultural Perspective,* eds. Q. Edward Wang and Georg G. Iggers (Rochester: The University of Rochester Press, 2002), 209-236, 224, Georg G. Iggers and Edward Q. Wang, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2008), 298, Daniel Woolf, *A Global History of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 443-6.

[4] Raymond F. Betts, "Decolonisation. A brief history of the word," in *Beyond Empire and Nation. The Decolonization of African and Asian societies, 1930s-1970s,* eds. Els Bogaerts and Remco Raben (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 23–37, 26.

[5] Eva-Maria Muschik, "Managing the world: the United Nations, decolonization, and the strange triumph of state sovereignty in the 1950s and 1960s," *Journal of Global History* 13 (2018), 121-144, 143. See also: Nicole Eggers et al. eds., *The United Nations and Decolonization* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2020)

[6] Moritz Mihatsch and Casper Andersen, "Becoming Independent: Institutions and Epistemologies of Knowledge Production in the Age of Decolonisation," *Itinerario Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*

[7] Larissa Schulte Nordholt, "Africanising African History. Decolonisation of Knowledge in UNESCO's General History of Africa (1964-1998)," (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2021), 3-6, 11-13.

[8] Mihatsch and Andersen, "Becoming Independent,"

[9] Schulte Nordholt, "Africanising African History," 39-40.

[10] Bethwell Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time* (Kisumu: Ayange Press Limited, 2003), 384.

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history had changed drastically both in terms of material circumstance as well as regarding the intellectual climate. Whereas nation-building and the creation of historiography to support it had been the most important task for African historians of the 1960s, it had become increasingly important to wrest free not just political but also mental and economic control of former colonial powers in the 1970s and 1980s. Postcolonial critique emerged from the realisation that decolonising history in terms of the topics studied was insufficient for writing Africa's history on its own terms.[11] African history itself, meanwhile, was no longer seen as an oxymoron but had become an established and accepted part of the historical discipline in various countries, partly thanks to the GHA and its generation of historians. Yet, the field had also moved away from the African continent with time as many African universities had either lost funding for history departments or were suffering from state control as a result of anti-intellectual governments. African studies in the United States, meanwhile, had grown and to some extent American production of African history had overtaken Africa-based African historiography.[12] The place from where the mainstay of African history was written, in other words, had shifted somewhat.

Secondly, the GHA received the critique that it had failed to incorporate the intellectual space inhabited by postcoloniality and was conceptually stuck in European categories of historical analysis, both while its eight volumes were still coming out from the 1980s onwards, as well as in later historiography.[13] Although scholars like Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Valentin Mudimbe praised the work for its vast collection of information about African history, they also analysed its conceptual lack.[14] Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Siphamandla Zondi have argued that the GHA was primarily invested in deracialising the study of history rather than decolonising it, while holding on to colonialist conceptualisations of history.[15]

Yet, the GHA was much more than that, as I will argue in this paper. It started as a project borne out of political independence and had slowly evolved into an expansive work of historiography that aimed to continuously shape historical understanding of the African continent from a diversity of African perspectives, yet was not always appreciated as such. The agency of African professional researchers has often been overlooked within the study of the General History of Africa and more generally within the history of Africanising African history, as Cassandra Mark-Thiesen also argues in respect to African based history journals.[16] The historians who worked on the GHA were deeply invested in the creation of an Africanised history of the continent, which they phrased as a history of Africa 'written from within' and by which they meant the ability for Africans to write their own histories.[17] They went through great lengths to achieve this aim and engaged in academic debate over the nature of African history, even if they did so in very different terms from the postcolonial and decolonial scholars that followed. But precisely because they did not always

[11] See: David Scott, *Refashioning Futures. Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 10-15 and Schulte Nordholt, "Africanising African History," 39-40.

[12] William G. Martin, "The Rise of African Studies (USA) and the Transnational Study of Africa," *African Studies Review* 54:1 (2011), 59-83, 78.

[13] See for instance: Andreas Eckert, "Auf der Suche nach der 'wahren' Geschichte Afrikas: Die UNESCO General History of Africa," *Periplus Jahrbuch für außereuropäische Geschichte 5* (1995), 178-83, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *Manufacturing African Studies and Crisis* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997), 91.

[14] Bogumil Jewsiewicki and V.Y. Mudimbe, "Africans' Memories and Contemporary History of Africa," *History and Theory* 32:4 (1993), 1-11, 2.

[15] Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Siphamandla Zondi, "Introduction: The Coloniality of Knowledge: Between Troubled Histories and Uncertain Futures." In *Decolonizing the University, Knowledge Systems and Disciplines in Africa,* eds. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Siphamandla Zondi (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2016), 3-26, 12.

[16] Cassandra Mark-Thiesen, "Neglected Historiography from Africa: The Case for Postindependence Journals," *The Journal of African History,* 64:1 (2023), 5-12.

[17] Unesco Archives Paris (hereafter UAP), SHC/WS/198, Guide for the Preparation of the General History of Africa. Paris 18 November 1971, translated from the French, 1-2.

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phrase their engagement in ways that are recognisable within the conceptual framework of postcolonial or decolonial parlance, this has often been overlooked by scholars criticising the project. Partly this is the result of the published outcome of the project, which various reviews of the work argued tended to overemphasise the creation of great kingdoms and glorious pasts rather than truly engaging with the conceptual issue of eurocentrism.[18] Yet, the published work also made methodologically novel contributions, particularly regarding oral history.[19] More, importantly however, I argue that the internal debates within the GHA have been overlooked as a result of the institutional constraints with which the GHA had to contend.[20] This contribution elaborates on this latter issue and reflects on the interaction between the emergence of postcolonial critique and the enduring inequalities within the production of African history by taking the GHA as a case study of intellectual nationalist decolonisation conceived of in the immediate post-independence period in Africa. The GHA may be considered a partially decolonised history of Africa and those working on it reflected on this themselves, both during and after the drafting had finished.

In what follows I will present a study of the scholarly practice of the post-independence period of history writing. I bring "place" into the discussion to show that postcolonial critique that focusses primarily on the output of scholarship has its limits. I want to argue that the material reality of writing African history has been understudied, but that it might shed light on the difficulty of achieving epistemological sovereignty.[21] There was more at play hindering the development of Africa based African historiography besides the epistemic barriers thrown up by a coloniality of knowledge. Within the GHA, the material realities of researchers working in "Africa" were sometimes juxtaposed with those working in "the West." Or, the conditions in "Southern Africa" were compared with those parts of the continent that had already been politically decolonised, reflecting the different timelines of decolonisation on the African continent.[22] I will discuss this in more detail in section one of this article. Decolonisation promised not just political independence, but material freedom as well. Yet, without political power and sustained financial support, writing African history as an effort of self-determination remained an unfinished business. Practical concerns and institutional dynamics, as well as geo-political changes and power structures influenced the production of Africa-based African history and the development of indigenous theoretical frameworks.

I approach this history from a practice-based perspective. The practice of the GHA has not been explored in detail by other historians. Rather, the GHA has mostly been studied in two distinct ways. First of all, in connection to UN history and its role in the history of post-war international cooperation.[23] Secondly, plenty of overview studies deal with the GHA as part of the history of African historiography. However, most of this work places the GHA

[18] See IE: T.C. McCaskie, "Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa: Volume IV. Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century by D.T. Niane." *African Studies Review* 28:4 (1985), 109-11, 109 and Peter L. Shinnie and B. Jewsiewicki, "Review: The UNESCO History Project / L'Histoire-monument ou l'histoire conscience. Reviewed Work(s): General History of Africa, Vol. 1 by UNESCO and J. Ki-Zerbo; General History of Africa II, Ancient Civilizations of Africa by G. Mokthar." *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 15:3 (1981), 539-51.

[19] Larissa Schulte Nordholt, "The General History of Africa, 1964-1998," *History of Humanities* 9:2 (2024), 361-368, 364.

[20] Schulte Nordholt, "Africanising African History," 245-252.

[21] However, see: Derek R. Peterson and Giacomo Macola, eds., *Recasting the Past. History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009)

[22] Ali Mazrui, "Independent African states and the struggle for southern Africa," in *The decolonization of Africa: southern Africa and the Horn of Africa. Working documents and report of the meeting of experts held in Warsaw, Poland, from 9 to 13 October 1978,* ed. N.N. (Paris: Unesco, 1981), 13-23, 14-15.

[23] Chloé Maurel, "L'histoire générale de l'Afrique de l'unesco: Un projet coopération intellectuele transnationale d'esprit afro-centré (1964-1999)," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 54:215 (2014), 715-737.

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within a narrow framework of post-independence nationalist historiography and hardly engages in the debates that were ongoing behind the scenes, although Casper Andersen deals with the memory politics present in the GHA project.[24] In earlier writing moreover, I have focused on the GHA as part of the history of decolonising knowledge, emphasising its history as a scholarly endeavour. In this paper I further explore the material circumstances that contributed to difficulties in fulfilling the project aim to Africanise African history. I do so to shed further light on the question of decolonisation of non-European history as a partially successful endeavour in the postwar world and to show that the GHA historians themselves were aware of and reflected on this issue. I thereby show that "place" does 'leave its imprint on thought,' to quote Chakrabarty, if only due to the material constraints connected to a certain place as a result of historical developments.[25]

I draw on evidence mainly from official UNESCO publications and archives as well as some personal correspondence belonging to a few key GHA historians. I also make use of the so-called Studies and Documents Series. These were edited volume type books based on several expert-meetings that the GHA organised alongside its drafting process for historiographical issues that needed further debate. They constitute a kind of historiography in the making because they include reports of the discussions that took place during the meeting. By taking these, the archive and in particular the correspondence and mass of meeting minutes and notes connected to the GHA as a starting point, the article aims to showcase the inner workings of this project of post-independence historiography, rather than its published output.

The article first addresses some of the aforementioned material constraints present during the drafting of the GHA as it was experienced by those working on the project. It shows what historiography in the making looks like by focusing on what preoccupied those drafting the GHA volumes beyond the actual content. Secondly, the article moves on to the question of critical self-reflection within the GHA in order to analyse how GHA historians reflected on material constraints and how this had impacted their ability to move further historiographically. I focus on Ali Mazrui, who served as the editor of the eighth and final volume of the original GHA project and who was somewhat of an outsider within the project. As a result, he was perhaps most critical of it. Another important figure for this purpose is Jacob Ade Ajayi, who is often seen as a representative for the kind of nationalist history with which the GHA was associated. How Ajayi reacted to the critique levelled against "his" kind of historiography makes it clear how he saw decolonisation of history. It also elucidates what 'epistemological sovereignty,' the ability to write one's own history in connection to self-determination, meant for Ajayi. Finally, the article offers some concluding remarks on the issue of "place" within the writing of African history in the wake of political decolonisation in the mid-twentieth century and the decolonisation of historiography connected with it.

The Changing Circumstances of Drafting The General History of Africa

In 1964 the UNESCO General Conference decided to start to fund the GHA project until at least 1975.[26] While the project had been planned in the 1960s during a period of ideological nationalism and optimism, the brunt of the work actually took place when postcolonial crises on the African continent and, more importantly, within the African academy had

[24] Muryatan Santana Barbosa, "The African Perspective in the General History of Africa (Unesco)," *Tempo. Niterói.* 24:3 (2018), 400–21 and Casper Andersen, "UNESCO' General History of Africa, memory and the quest for relevance," in *The Politics of Historical Memory and Commemoration in Africa,* eds. Cassandra Mark-Thiessen, Moritz Mihatsch and Michelle Sikes (Melton: James Curry, 2022), 47-73.

[25] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, XIII.

[26] UNESCO, *Records of the General Conference. Thirteenth Sessions Paris, 1964. Resolutions.* (Paris: UNESCO, 1965), 66-7.

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already started to surface. To illustrate this, I will take the first three GHA meetings in 1966, 1969, and 1971 as an example, before contrasting it with the actual working conditions under which the GHA project was completed, reflected in both correspondence as well as meeting reports connected to the Studies and Documents Series. Throughout the 1960s, UNESCO organised preparatory meetings to decide upon the basic structure for what would become the GHA. The preparatory meetings produced "Introductory Documents" and a "Guide for the preparation of a General History of Africa," describing the main goals and the main framework for the massive production of historical knowledge about Africa that would later become the *General History of Africa*. The first of these meetings took place from 31 August to 5 September 1966, in Abidjan, Côte D'Ivoire, led by Kenneth Dike, also attended by some of the important contributors to the project later on such as Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Cheikh Anta Diop and Ade Ajayi.

The project essentially had two goals, this document stated: to fill gaps in knowledge and to promote international understanding regarding African history and, it was implied, African nation states. The GHA aimed to dispute the colonial racist historiography that had come before and, in particular, set the record straight in regard to the still somewhat acceptable notion at the time that the African continent possessed no real history to speak of. Although the document stated that the GHA never implied or aimed to be a total or all-inclusive history, it would nevertheless consider the African continent as a whole, linking its various parts together – an obviously pan-Africanist goal. It would do so through an international cooperation between the various existing experts on Africa.[27] Taking a historiographical approach that was at least partly inspired by the Annales school of history, the experts emphasised the GHA would be a history of ideas, cultures, and civilisations. The GHA would not focus on single events, but on the "mountain range" of African history.[28] The influence of Ajayi and his emphasis on treating the colonial period as an "episode" in African history is clear, as this undoubtedly meant that the GHA should not focus too much on the arrival of Europeans or the colonial period as such.[29]

Most importantly, then, the GHA had to be written from the inside, with reference to African norms rather than European norms, a "consideration of African authors of their own civilisation," as was reiterated in the 1971 final positioning meeting, again in Paris.[30] This document also emphasised the importance of African diversity for the project. In particular the wish for authors from as many different African countries as possible to participate.[31] In practice it was mainly West and East Africans who contributed. These positioning documents reflect the drive to epistemological sovereignty and were filled with the ambition and optimism of the 1960s.[32] The actual drafting of the GHA, however, did not start to take place until the early 1970s. As a result, most of the correspondence to be found in the archives is from the 1970s and 1980s and they reflect the issues of those time periods rather than the optimism of the 1960s.

[27] UAP, UNESCO/CLT/HIGENAF/ABIDJAN/3, Committee of Experts on the General History of Africa, Abidjan, 31 August – 5 September, 1966, Introductory Document, 23 August 1966.

[28] UAP, SHC/CONF.27/1., Meeting of Experts on the Measures to be taken for Drafting and Publishing a General History of Africa, Unesco, Paris – 23-27 June 1969, Final Report, 6 August 1969. Translated from the French, 2, 5.

[29] J.F. Ade Ajayi, "Colonialism: an episode in African history," in *Colonialism in Africa 1870-1960 Volume 1,* eds. L.H. Gann and Peter Duignan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 497-510.

[30] UAP, SHC/WS/198, Guide for the Preparation of the General History of Africa. Paris 18 November 1971, translated from the French, 1-2.

[31] UAP, SHC/CONF.70/8 rev, First Plenary Meeting of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa. Unesco, Paris, 30 March – 8 April 1971. Paris 5 April 1971. Translated from the French. Rules of Procedure. 1

[32] Ogot, *My Footprints,* 115.

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From the late 1970s onwards it slowly became clear that the hopes and dreams of African independences as they had been established in the 1960s had not come into fruition for many countries and peoples. The discipline of history started to fade to the background within African universities as nation-building increasingly seemed less useful.[33] Funding issues arose in the late 1970s, as the project took longer than the anticipated ten years. Originally budgeted at $100,000 per biennium, it was clear by 1970s that not all eight volumes would be published by 1975.[34] Funding was deferred until 1978, and additional funds were sourced. Committee members pointed to the overall financial difficulties on the African continent when responding to fundraising queries.[35]

Although the General History of Africa (GHA) was eventually completed, the project faced significant challenges throughout its duration, including a lack of engagement and a maddeningly slow pace of progress, partly due to these shifting circumstances. Formed in 1971, the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa (ISC) was tasked with attending meetings and contributing to the work both during sessions and in the periods between them. With 39 members spread across multiple continents, the committee was also responsible for addressing queries about meetings, chapters, and authors. These factors inevitably led to substantial delays.[36] The slow progress of the work was closely tied to a lack of engagement from some key African contributors, often due to their increasingly demanding schedules as members of the emerging elite in post-colonial African nations. While some committee members went above and beyond to ensure the project's success—enduring long journeys to attend meetings—others were overwhelmed by competing responsibilities.[37]

It increasingly became clear however, that it was easier for some than others to bear this responsibility. The situation in Southern Africa, for instance, impressed upon the GHA the inequality and subsequent need for solidarity within the continent in terms of the possibility to write history or engage with professional academic work in general. From 7-11 March in 1977, the GHA organised an expert meeting in Gaborone, Botswana, focusing on the historiography of Southern Africa. The issue of resources was addressed during discussions among participants, including Jean Devisse, Bethwell Ogot, David Chanaiwa, and Lennard Ngcongco, all members of the drafting committee for the General History of Africa. As the report on the discussion stated:

> The meeting emphasised the fact that, as a result of the present situation in this region of the world and especially in the southern part of Africa, the universities of southern Africa were experiencing difficulties in organizing research and teaching in the field of history that were immeasurably harder to overcome than those of other universities on the continent of Africa.[38]

These issues were troublesome enough in and off themselves, but:

> if this state of affairs lasted much longer it would be bound to aggravate the imbalance, so frequently mentioned by the International Scientific Committee, between

[33] Olutayo C. Adesina, "Teaching History in Twentieth Century Nigeria: The Challenges of Change," *History in Africa* 33 (2006), 17-37, 23, 27-33.

[34] UAP, 85 EX/10 Rev. Executive Board. Eighty-fifth Session. Paris 6 October 1970, 5.

[35] UAP, CLT CID CW/95.01, Christophe Wondji á Monsieur le Secrétaire général de la Commission française, 3-10-1996 and CLT CID 159, Directeur général to Monsieur le Professeur Pierre Kipre, Ministre de l'Education nationale Côte d'Ivoire, 15-03-1998.

[36] Schulte Nordholt, *Africanising African History,* 176-83.

[37] Ibid, 155.

[38] N.N., "Summary of the discussions" in: *The historiography of southern Africa. The general history of Africa Studies and documents 4,* ed. N.N. (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), 101-102.

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> this region of Africa and the others. An exceptional effort was therefore needed, both within Africa and at an international level, to find a way out of the present situation and facilitate the take-off of research and high-quality teaching in a region of Africa where, as was obvious, research workers were very keen to investigate, innovate and discover, but were deprived—unless they worked in universities outside Africa—of the means and time needed to conduct serious research projects. In many cases, everything was lacking, including libraries.[39]

These quotes as well as the other parts of the discussion that took place in Botswana in 1977 make clear that part of the reason why East and West African authors were overrepresented in the GHA was connected to the material circumstances under which some colleagues in countries in Southern African had to work. They were still in the midst of a freedom struggle for political sovereignty and the GHA largely failed to incorporate this perspective. As a result, the last GHA volume, dealing with African history since 1935, which came out in 1993, was heavily chided for its lack of reflection on the end of apartheid and decolonisation in Southern Africa. The volume was not up to date.[40] This criticism was fair, but the point here is not to judge the volume on the quality of its content, but rather to ask what factors other than intellectual or conceptual paucity might have contributed to the volume being out of date. Partly it was connected to the difficult working circumstances under which the final volume of the GHA had to be completed and the resulting lack of engagement from authors from Southern African states. It is enlightening to look beyond the actual content of the work to understand its history and legacy.

In respect to Southern Africa the meeting also noted the lack of archival management in many African countries, as Mazrui put it in a paper of the Studies and Document Series focused on the *methodology of contemporary African History*, held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, from 17-22 May 1979.

> This can sometimes pose moral problems for those Africans who do have a substantial collection of papers that are of historical relevance. Should they deposit those papers in their own national archives, with a high risk of loss or destruction over the years, or should they hand over those precious documents to some major library in western Europe or America—a library equipped for archival work, organized for efficient preservation, and systematic enough to ensure that the documents are carefully catalogued and made accessible to bona fide scholars?[41]

Mazrui honed in on the undue influence of Euro-American academia. The Africanisation of history during this period was encumbered by European frameworks of reference, but also by an inequality in material privilege and an inequality in access to source materials or the ability to store them. Of course, the idea that sources should be stored a certain way, i.e., in specialized archives, was itself entwined with European frameworks of reference.

As time drew on, it also became increasingly clear that it was much easier for those working at American or European institutions to keep up the work than it was for those situated at African institutions. A letter from Phares M. Mutibwa, a Ugandan professor of history at Makerere University and an ISC member since 1975, written on 16 March 1979 to Amadou Mahtar M'Bow, director general of UNESCO, illustrates this further:

[39] N.N., "Summary of the discussions," 101-102.

[40] See: Christopher Saunders, "The General History of Africa and Southern Africa's Recent Past." *Présence Africaine* 173 (2006), 117-26.

[41] Ali A. Mazrui, "Subjectivism and the study of current history: political, psychological and methodological problems" 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), 27-46, 38.

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> Perhaps to emphasise the predominance of non-African historians on many of the Committee's work (which is a result of non-attendance of African scholars) I should mention the fact that the ISC's report which was adopted in Nairobi on Saturday afternoon, 8 April 1978, was attended only by 16 members of whom only 6 were Africans. I do appreciate the tremendous contribution which non-Africans have made to the research and writing up of African History [...] I am also mindful of the fact that up to now the non-African scholars are more equipped than Africans themselves to contribute to the writing of African History. But while all this remains true, we cannot escape from the fact that we, Africans, are writing our own history. [...] 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.[42]

While underlining the importance of telling one's own history, Mutibwa simultaneously pointed out the difficulty of achieving the self-determination to do so. Gradually throughout the GHA project, historians based in Euro-American institutions had moved into positions of greater importance as a result of the institutional and material privilege they had, and which committee members based in Africa lacked. Ajayi also commented on this in a short paper he delivered for the SOAS African history seminar on 29 November 1978: "African scholars have sought to retain some clear initiative in the shaping of African history to give it meaning in African life, but have never had the personnel or the resources to support a dominant role."[43] He connected this to the recent history of the discipline of African studies, and argued the lack of resources in Africa was further undermined by "Western Liberal and scholarly influence on the post-war decolonisation of Africa" and "the contemporaneous expansion of higher education in both Europe and North America."

The situation described above was partly the result of a decrease of funding for African universities in the 1970s which coincided with the increase of funding for African studies in the United States thereby undermining efforts to retain the initiative for African histories on African soil.[44] Of course not all Euro-Americans were situated at American institutions and not all Africans were located on the continent. In fact, African academics increasingly moved towards North America. However, generally speaking, it was due to the privileged positions most Euro-Americans enjoyed that they were able to stick with the project up until the end. Euro-Americans played crucial roles, even though this predominance was not in accordance with the epistemic and political goals of the GHA. Simultaneously, overcommitment, combined with worsening material and political conditions, made it challenging for African ISC members to dedicate their full attention to the project.[45] The responsibilities conferred upon the UNESCO secretariat overseeing the project also increased throughout the 1970s and 1980s.[46] During the latter years of the project, for instance, the UNESCO secretariat became increasingly involved in fundraising in order to finish the project and the ideals of the earlier years became harder to fulfil as a result. Meetings were also increasingly organised in Paris rather than in African cities making it more difficult for African

[42] UAP, CC CSP 33, Professor Phares M. Mutibwa to His Excellency Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, 16th March 1979, 4-5.

[43] Jadeas Trust Library (hereafter JTL), J.F. Ade Ajayi papers, Box 77, Paper for African History Seminar, Wednesday 29th November 1978 at 11.15am.

[44] Jean M. Allman, "#HerskovitsMustFall? A Meditation on Whiteness, African Studies, and the Unfinished Business of 1968", *African Studies Review* 62:3 (2019), 6-39, 10.

[45] Ogot, *My Footprints*, 193-380.

[46] Marie Huber, *Developing Heritage – Developing Countries. Ethiopian Nation-Building and the Origins of UNESCO World Heritage, 1960-1980* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 168.

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members to attend and shifting the centre of the project from Africa to Paris, if only symbolically. Paradoxically, UNESCO's enduring support nevertheless made it possible for the GHA to be finished, while at the same time contributing to moving the project away from an African centre.[47]

A set of letters between Ali Mazrui and Omare Kokole from 1987 allows for some further insight into the difference between institutional life in the global south and north. In the letters, Mazrui and Kokole discussed whether Mazrui had been more productive whilst working for the University of Michigan, an American institution, or when at Makerere, in Uganda. Kokole was of the opinion that the environment in which Mazrui conducted his work mattered, juxtaposing a "northern infrastructure" with a "lack of facilities in African schools."[48] Mazrui and Kokole were both aware of the institutional privileges one gained when moving to the United States and of the factors inhibiting research by academics employed at African universities.

The issue of productivity was also commented upon by Adu Boahen in a lecture for the Canadian African Studies association. He argued that the lack of new monographs and research done by his generation of African historians was not to be blamed on their lack of commitment or the paucity of their work, but was rather the result of both the need to produce previously non-existent textbooks on African history as well as increasingly heavy workloads. Many of the first-generation of African historians did not produce new fundamental research after their PhD theses, instead focusing on the production of textbooks and works of overview — like the GHA itself. He noted that perhaps the expectations put upon Ogot, Ajayi and, indeed, himself, were too high: "It is absolutely true that the Dikes, the Biobakus, the Ajayis, the first academic historians, did not live up to expectations. [...] because right from the beginning, they were all saddled with such heavy administrative responsibilities that made it impossible for them to embark on any new original piece of research."[49] Boahen argued there was an absence of a sustainable pace of growth for the academic discipline of African history in African countries.

The GHA project would finally come to an end, at least in terms of the publication of the final volumes, in the 1990s. The correspondence of that last decade is emblematic of the mood in which the work was finished. In a letter to Ali Mazrui, editor of the final volume, from 10 January 1994, Christophe Wondjii congratulated him on the completion of "this very difficult and much awaited volume."[50] In a reflective document written to look back on his own life, moreover, one of the most active members of the ISC, Jan Vansina, would conclude, that the 1990s was the era when the promise of creating a "vibrant African historiography" had vanished, not in the least because it had become increasingly difficult to write African history from Africa as a result of the twenty-first century unicentric academic system.[51]

Self-reflections and interventions within the General History of Africa

How were African historians of African history supposed to position themselves vis-à-vis these realities? And in what way did they reflect on these issues and the implications of place on the project? What could it mean to develop African historiography under

[47] Lynn Meskell, *A Future in Ruins UNESCO, World Heritage and the Dream of Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 223.

[48] Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ali Mazrui Papers, Box 7, folder Mazrui Biographical Materials, letter, Omari Kokole to Ali Mazrui 13-04-1987

[49] Adu Boahen, "The Historiography of Anglophone West Africa in the 1980s" in *Africa in the Twentieth Century. The Adu Boahen Reader,* ed. Toyin Falola (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004), 625-36, 631-2.

[50] UAP, CLT CID 99, Christophe Wondjii to Ali Mazrui, 10-01-1994.

[51] Jan Vansina, "De Vita Sua," *Society* 53 (2016): 241.

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these working conditions? What did they think of decolonisation as an explanatory framework? Within the GHA it was necessary to navigate these realities both in terms of historiographical positioning as well as regarding the material realities of the work. During a GHA organised debate on the decolonisation of Southern Africa, held in 1978, the experts there gathered concluded that perhaps "decolonisation" was not the right word to refer to the gaining of independence. They concluded "independence struggle" would be a better term to use for what they called "merely a transfer of sovereignty and administration." At another time, a different GHA liaised group, discussing the historiography of Southern Africa in 1977, equally concluded that historians needed to be careful to try to avoid to "rigidly fit an African society into Europocentric typologies." As it stood then, they established "that the approach of African historiography to the question of the impact of colonialism has not yet been satisfactorily defined."[52] In other words; these historians were engaged in a conceptual discussion over Eurocentric explanatory frameworks for African history.

Two scholars who specifically reflected on the issue of decolonisation and place in African historiography as it related to the GHA, but also in general, were Mazrui, editor of Volume VIII and Ajayi, editor of Volume VI. Through those reflections this section highlights how the GHA dealt, or did not deal, with some historiographical issues related to working conditions of post-independence African scholarship. Ajayi is particularly interesting in this regard because he is often seen as a quintessential part of the Ibadan or nationalist school of history, which is itself often seen, somewhat unfavourably, as an African attempt to adapt nineteenth century European historiographical philosophy to twentieth century African historiographical realities.[53] Ajayi was aware of this criticism and the critique levelled against him and his peers from a Marxist point of view, which primarily criticized the Ibadan school for not having developed a critical analysis of colonialism itself.[54] In a letter dated 2 February 1981 to Peter Ekeh, a Nigerian sociologist, he addressed some of these issues. Ajayi explained that at the time, from the place they were then speaking, it had been necessary for the Ibadan school to study and emphasize the importance of African pre-colonial history to boost national self-confidence and to refute the colonialist historiography that had stated that Africans had no history to speak of before the coming of Europeans.[55] Regarding the history of colonialism itself, Ajayi argued for the importance of decolonisation as a framework to understand the history of colonialism. He saw decolonisation as an ongoing process with shifting meanings – an analysis that has become a truism as noted in the introduction to this special issue. The focus on political independence and self-identity that he and the GHA had taken, Ajayi argued, de-emphasised the importance of western style modernisation and thereby made it possible to focus on issues of neocolonialism. The last volume of the GHA would accordingly be focused on decolonisation in an effort to critically appraise modernisation.[56]

This volume would be edited by Mazrui. In 1979 the committee organised a special studies and documents meeting in Ouagadougou for Mazrui's sake to discuss contemporary African historiography and methodology. Mazrui was one of the few intellectuals within the GHA who explicitly tried to reflect on the positionality of African scholars within global academia during the period of decolonisation. Coincidentally, he was also the only figure

[52] N.N. ed., *The decolonization of Africa: southern Africa and the Horn of Africa. Working documents and report of the meeting of experts held in Warsaw, Poland, from 9 to 13 October 1978* (Paris: UNESCO, 1981), 95-96

[53] Woolf, *A Global History*, 443–6 and Falola, "Nationalism and African Historiography," 209–236, 224.

[54] Táíwò Olúfémi, *Against Decolonization. Taking African Agency Seriously* (London: C.Hurst&Co, 2022), 141-44.

[55] JTL, J.F. Ade Ajayi papers, Box 77, J.F. Ade Ajayi to Peter Ekeh, 02-02-1981.

[56] J.F. Ade Ajayi, "Problems of writing contemporary African history" in *The General History of Africa. Studies and Documents 9. The methodology of contemporary African history. Report and papers of the meeting of experts organized by Unesco at Ouagadougou, Upper Volta, from 17 to 22 May 1979*, ed. N.N. (Paris: UNESCO, 1984), 47-58, 47-8.

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within the GHA who was actively trying to engage more African women with the project.[57] In the paper Mazrui presented for this symposium, he used the controversial figure of Hugh Trevor-Roper to illustrate a point, calling the Regius professor culturally arrogant due to his inability to transcend his own cultural context.[58] It was precisely because of such epistemic vices connected to Euro-American academia that it was necessary to include more Africans than Europeans in the GHA, Mazrui argued, because they had already learned to transcend their own culture by virtue of being enmeshed in a Euro-American system of academia. And this insider–outsider view lent them an advantage when it came to a scientific assessment of the historical societies they studied.[59] Now that Africa had produced "modern historians", the time had come for an African historiography, "embodied in the perception and techniques of African historians," Mazrui argued, echoing the importance of epistemic sovereignty for the GHA.[60] It only made sense that African history, situated between the African past and the "western" academy, would be written by historians who were equally situated between the two. Mazrui framed this ability to transcend cultural contexts as an epistemic virtue in the context of a Euro-American academic sphere. The explicit positioning of Africans as such could be seen as a tentative answer to the realities of African historians navigating the unequal territory of the Euro-American academy.

In relation to this, it is noteworthy that both Ajayi and Mazrui commented on the issue of European style universities on African soil as this was and is where both institutionally determined material circumstances and historiographical conceptualisations met. Mazrui argued, within the intellectual sphere of the GHA, that the impact of universities in Africa had been an alienating one as the idea of the university had been directly "transplanted" from an "uncompromisingly foreign" context. Through the transplanted university, he argued "a whole generation of African graduates grew up [...] scrambling to imitate others. [...] Those African graduates who later became university teachers themselves have on the whole remained intellectual imitators and disciples of the West." As a result, African scholars were "products of this Eurocentric intellectual tradition."[61]

The issue of the 'transplanted university' as Mazrui framed it was mostly an issue of intellectual decolonisation, in the sense that Mazrui called for African universities in various countries to ground themselves in their specific geographical contexts. Ajayi's intervention in this debate, however, makes clear that institutional constraints played a role in this imagined decolonisation as well. In a letter he wrote to Robert July, commenting on a chapter written for the GHA on the history of African studies, Ajayi questioned the very premise of "African studies" at African universities. Elaborating on the history of Ibadan university, Ajayi reminisced that "the basic belief was to do everything to Africanise the content of courses in every department of the University." At a truly African university, Ajayi explained, there was no particular space for African studies as such because Africa had to be at the epistemological root of everything the university did. Ajayi then lamented that such an epistemological Africanisation was difficult to accomplish because funding for research often did not come from Africa: "Dike bought the idea of a special institute of African Studies only when the RF [Rockefeller Foundation] was willing to finance it."[62]

[57] UAP, CLT CID 137, Concerning Authors for Volume VIII of the UNESCO General History of Africa, Received by the Secretariat on 16 July 1979.

[58] Ali A. Mazrui, "Dilemmas of African historiography and the philosophy of the Unesco *General History of Africa*" in *The General History of Africa. Studies and Documents 9. The methodology of contemporary African history. Report and papers of the meeting of experts organized by Unesco at Ouagadougou, Upper Volta, from 17 to 22 May 1979,* ed. N.N. (Paris: UNESCO, 1984), 15-26, 17

[59] Mazrui, "Dilemmas of African historiography," 20.

[60] Mazrui, "Dilemmas of African historiography," 23.

[61] Ibid., 15-26, 24-5.

[62] JTL, Ade Ajayi papers, box 67, letter from Ajayi to Robert July, 14-12-1982.

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What this shows is in how far funding conditions and institutional constraints dictated the epistemological Africanisation of African universities. Reflection on these issue was not absent from the GHA nor was it absent from the broader sphere of Africanist nationalist scholarship, as represented by Ajayi. How could universities in Africa explore what it meant to intellectually decolonise their institutions as Mazrui suggested in this way without long-term financial and institutional support?

Conclusion

What the above has shown is that issues connected to 'place,' including institutional constraints, influence the possibility of decolonising history as a result of disparaging working conditions which are themselves the results of historically grown inequalities related to colonial history. Material differences in circumstances and conceptual constraints in terms of the content of historiography influenced one another. Within the GHA, this translated into a greater influence for Euro-American scholars. One of the prevailing concerns within the GHA was that the presence of too many Euro-Americans could endanger the GHA's positioning ideals of Africanising African history, understood here as the wish to write African history based on a diversity of African contexts and experiences and by African authors. It, in other words, endangered the aim of epistemological sovereignty.

Some actors within the GHA argued, similar to arguments made in recent years by Ndlovu-Gatsheni, that there was a contradiction in the functions of universities in Africa. They were meant to bring development but were instead transmitting western culture in African society – a sentiment which is very much alive still in the twenty-first century. During the workshop which has formed the incubator for this special issue and paper, Toyin Falola noted that Euro-American academics have damaged African academics by supervising African students and directing them to study things that are irrelevant to Africa. An observation also made by Vansina in 2016 when he wondered whether the Euro-American focus on certain theoretical problems had done African history as a discipline any good.[63] The roots of this problem lay in the decades after political decolonisation and are connected to working conditions, which have made it more difficult for an African academy to develop as an equal partner to American and European academia. The place from where someone works, therefore, matters in more ways than one.

Place or locality can be understood here in multiple different ways; in terms of the positioning of individual authors, frameworks of knowledge as rooted in specific historical traditions connected to specific places, and in terms of material conditions in a specific location or at a specific institution. Through a study of the GHA I have shown that these issues of place are entangled and mutually influence one another. Decolonisation of knowledge as a result of becoming politically independent is a multivarious and ongoing process which has to take into account all these different elements. The vision of the past that the GHA aimed to change, as explained by Ajayi, was one that reacted directly to obscurations that had come before in the form of European imperial history, which had produced a false image of Africa. The GHA aimed for epistemological sovereignty: for African history to be produced on its own terms as part of African political self-determination. Yet because political decolonisation was not a singular event, but an ongoing process with vast difference within Africa as well, the same should be understood for the decolonisation of historiography of which the GHA was a part. How this process took place as well as the end-product therefore tend to reflect the circumstances under which they were produced. The GHA perhaps constitutes a decolonised history of the continent in as far as was possible at the time. In that sense, this contribution has shown how local circumstances resulting from

[63] Vansina, "De Vita Sua," 240-1.

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historical inequalities do affect historiographical change and that this needs to be researched in more depth before the possibility of a global history can be truly considered.

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