

The African perspective in the General History of Africa (Unesco)

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Abstract: This article presents an analysis of the African perspective in the project *General History of Africa* (Unesco). It examines the institutional history of the project and the writing of history in this collection of eight volumes. Its purpose is to reflect on the unity and diversity of approaches of this “African perspective”, as well as the historical periodizations that it offers to the history of Africa.

Keywords: Historiography; History of Africa; Unesco.

A perspectiva africana na História Geral da África (Unesco)

Resumo: Este artigo traz uma análise da chamada “perspectiva africana” na coleção *História Geral da África* (Unesco). Para isso, em seus oito volumes, baseia-se no exame da história institucional do projeto que o originou e da escrita da história ali presente. Seu objetivo é refletir sobre a unidade e a diversidade de abordagens dessa “perspectiva africana”, assim como as periodizações históricas que ela oferece à história da África.

Palavras-chave: Historiografia; História da África; Unesco.

Introduction

This article synthesizes the reflections of a theoretical-methodological analysis of the writing of the collection *General History of Africa (GHA)*. A work in eight volumes – with an average of around 900 pages per volume-written by three hundred and fifty international specialists in the history of Africa. It is worth noting that this is not a simple collection of articles, but a collective work which, under the auspices of Unesco, took around thirty-five years in its first phase, between 1965 and 1999.

At present there are at least three primordial motives to revise *GHA*. First, the scientific quality of the work. Second, this Unesco project guaranteed that the point of view of African intellectuals in relation to the history of their continent would become accessible to those interested. As a result, since then there has been no excuse to work with African history without taking into account what African intellectuals think about the subject. The third reason is that *GHA*, despite the undeniable heterogeneity of contributions and authors, bequeathed a potentially post-Eurocentric scientific interpretation of the history of Africa: the ‘African perspective.’ The primordial aim of this article is to make a synthesis of this perspective, something which has gone unperceived in the international bibliography of the history of Africa. For this reason, it is intended to give it a definition, show its veracity in the work, and delineate the investigative lines that it constructed for the history of Africa, focusing on the writing of history in *GHA*.

The *General History of Africa* Project

The idea of producing a general history of Africa was presented at the 1st International Congress of Africanists, held in Accra, capital of Ghana, between 11 and 18 December 1962. This was an important event which, with the support of Unesco, brought together around 500 specialists in Africa from around the world. The idea of the project probably predated the meeting. Nevertheless, ratified in Accra in a public form was the desire to construct, with the help of Unesco, a work of international scientific cooperation, aiming to develop historic research in Africa.¹ In 1963, the idea of the project was returned to in the founding meeting of the Organization of African Unity (Vansina, 1993, p. 337). The following year, in 1964, it was submitted and approved as one of the international scientific cooperation projects of the 16th General Conference of Unesco. This was when the *General History of Africa* project began, strictly speaking.

Since its beginnings, two reasons were given to justify the participation of Unesco in the *GHA* project. First, this institution at the time was already concerned with the intensification

¹Unesco (1966, pp.2-3). Unesco-CLT-HIGENAF-ABIDJAN-3. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001432/143293eb.pdf>. Accessed on 09/10/2009.

of its work in Africa. This is evident, for example, in the deliberations of the 1960 15th General Conference of Unesco aimed at increasing educational efforts on the continent. Unesco's support of the above mentioned Congress of Africanists was part of this greater objective. In turn, this was a direction which responded to a large number of African countries becoming members of the organization. Above all recently independent ones at the beginning of 1960. It is sufficient to remember that in 1960, there existed only nine African countries in Unesco; while in 1963, this number had risen to thirty-two. The other reason is that Unesco could give the institutional and financial support that the project required. After all, since its beginning it was considered a large-scale international scientific project.

According to its idealizers some principal motives justified the creation of the GHA project. First, there was the danger that the sources for the history of Africa would be definitely lost, both written and oral. Something which could be reverted in part with the collection of sources and the organization of archives in Africa. These could accommodate both the existing documentation and that which was still to be investigated. However, this had to be done quickly. In second place was the desire for *GHA* to synthesize knowledge about the continent, still sparse and badly distributed in time and space. Only in this way would there be clarity about the gaps to be researched. Finally, there was the desire that *GHA* could propel a writing of history which could overcome colonist prejudice towards the continent, working to show African contributions to civilization in general. Something seen as extremely necessary to African nations in the post-colonial period, which was emerging in Africa.²

In becoming the institution responsible for *GHA* in 1964, Unesco assumed the institutional, administrative, and financial support of the project. However, in practice, as we will see, it was constructed in an autonomous manner, by a commission of well-known specialists from the area.

The primordial points of the *GHA* project were signed in the 1979 *Project Presentation*, signed by the then president of the committee, the Kenyan historian Betwhell Ogot:

- 1) Notwithstanding the best scientific quality possible, the General History of Africa does not seek to exhaust the subject and intends to be a work of synthesis that avoids dogmatism. In many aspects it constitutes an outline of problems indicating the current state of knowledge and the important currents of thought and research, not hesitating to highlight in these circumstances divergences of opinion. It thus opens the way for later publications.
- 2) Africa is considered here as a whole. The aim is to show the historic relations between the different parts of the continent, very often subdivided in previously

²Unesco (1966, p1). Unesco-CLT-HIGENAF-ABIDJAN-3. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001432/143293eb.pdf>. Accessed on 09/10/2009.

published works. The historic ties of Africa with the other continents receive due attention and are analyzed under the auspices of mutual interchanges and multilateral influences, in order to opportunely show Africa's contribution to the development of humanity.

3) The *General History of Africa* consists, above all, of a history of ideas and civilizations, societies and institutions. It is based on a wide diversity of sources, here understood as oral tradition and artistic expression.

4) Here the *General History of Africa* is essentially examined from within. An erudite work, it is also to a great extent the faithful reflection of the way in which African authors see their own civilization. Although prepared in an international environment and drawing on all the current scientific data, the *History* is equally a capital element in the recognition of African cultural heritage, showing the factors which have contributed to the unity of the continent. This effort at examining the facts based on its interior constitutes the novelty of the work and can, in addition to its scientific qualities, confer on it a great current value. By showing the real face of Africa, the *History* can, at a time dominated by economic and technical rivalries, propose a particular conception of human values (Ogot, 2010a, p. XXVII)

This article aims to analyze the final point mentioned above. Both in relation to the problematization of its theoretical significance and the consequences derived from this for the construction of the history of Africa in the eight volumes of the work. What here is called the 'African perspective' of the *GHA* is a type of historiographic interpretation derived from an analysis of this final point.

Based on an initial reading of the point mentioned above, certain central elements can be highlighted. This is history essentially examined from within. For this reason, it is understood that to a 'great extent' it is a faithful reflection of how African authors see their own civilization. After all, it was to be a scientific history, a history which sought the recognition of African cultural heritage and, finally, a history which sought factors to contribute to the unity of the continent. Finally, it involved a particular conception of human values.

Undoubtedly, this is a large number of elements for a historic perspective. On the other hand, they are points which deserve to be problematized. What is most polemic is the affirmation that the history delineated there had to be "to a great extent, the faithful reflection of the manner in which African authors see their own civilization." The questionability of the definition is evident in the use of the expression 'to a great extent.' It reveals the difficulties of postulating a non-problematic conceptualization of the 'African perspective' for the history of Africa, which the organizers of the *GHA* sought to construct.

There was no doubt that *GHA* was intended to publicize the opinion of African intellectuals about their own history. As has been said, we consider this a fundamental legacy for the work. However, *GHA* was not a work organized and written only by African intellectuals. They were the majority in the directive councils of the project. On the other hand, the work counted on the participation of three hundred and fifty international specialists, mostly non-African. Similarly, the organization and effective implementation of the work also owed much to the active presence of non-African intellectuals. Five of them in particular: M. Gléglé (a French anthropologist), J. Devisse (a French anthropologist and historian), J. Vansina (a Belgian anthropologist and linguist), I. Hrbek (a Czech historian³), and J. Vercoutter (a French Egyptologist and historian). Above all for these reasons, it is difficult to imagine that a vision of the ‘African perspective’ in these terms, as the ‘faithful reproduction of the way Africa authors saw their civilization,’ could become dominant, or even exclusive, in the work.

Given this fact, two positions are possible. The first can be to show how this initial intent to construct an ‘African perspective’ of the history of Africa was distorted in the concrete implementation of the work. The second is to analyze how this ‘African perspective’ was always a problematic postulate for the organizers and participants of the project (*GHA*). As we will see, based on the reading of the primary sources (especially the minutes of project organization meetings) and the writing of the history of the *GHA*, it has to be concluded that the second interpretation is more true.

In this sense, in the article, an investigation of the construction and the meaning of this ‘African perspective’ is presented. For this reason, the institutional history of the project is analyzed seeking to define its essential significance. Second, it will be seen how this conception of the ‘African perspective’ was actually incorporated in the writing of history in the eight volumes of the work.

The African perspective in the institutional history of *GHA*

As has been stated, the *General History of Africa* began in 1964, when it was approved as one of the projects of international scientific cooperation at the 16th Unesco General Conference.

To start the project, the then Director General of Unesco, the Frenchman René Maheu, appointed the first Scientific Director of *GHA*. Chosen for the position was one of the first African academic historians: the Nigerian Kenneth Onwuka Dike; vice-dean of Ibadan

³As is the practice, it was decided to indicate country names and nationalities in accordance with the epoch when they were cited.

University and president of the 1st International Congress of Africanists (1962). It was thus under the supervision of K. O. Dike that the first project organizers were appointed.⁴

The first meeting of the specialists indicated by Unesco was held in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, between August and September 1966. In this meeting the first *GHA* organizing group was set up, called the *Commission of Specialists for a General History of Africa*. The president of this Commission was K. O. Dike. The historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo (the former Upper Volta) was its vice-president, and the historian M. Lacheraf (Algeria), its executive secretary. In addition, the following researchers took part in the meeting without specific positions, J. F. Ade Ajayi (Nigeria), M. Dagnogo (Ivory Coast), J. Devisse (France), H. E. M. El Fasi (Morocco), H. E. A. Hampaté Bā (Mali), H. Djait (Tunisia), D. Mc Call (USA), A. N'Daw (Senegal), D. T. Niane (Senegal), L. Yabloshkov (the former USSR). The Director General of Unesco was represented by N. Bammate, from the Division of Cultural Studies of Unesco.⁵

In this meeting, *GHA* was projected, with the following aims: a) the organization of sources; b) a summary of existing knowledge; c) the construction of a new history of Africa. In relation to the final point, of direct interest here, the Abidjan meeting traced some more long term questions, relevant for the writing of the history that was to emerge from the project. The first was the scientific nature of the history intended for *GHA*. Something else that can also be noted was the concern with emphasizing the essential nature that the oral tradition would play in this; as well as the centrality of interdisciplinary work. Especially the relationship between History, Linguistics, and Archeology. Also defended was the idea that the writing of the *GHA* should constitute a totalizing vision of Africa, aimed at the description of the continent as a related whole.⁶

After the Abidjan meeting, other meetings with smaller groups were held to normalize the collection of sources and the organization of institutions, which was done by Unesco between 1965 and 1969. In 1969, for example, there was an administrative meeting in Paris. This was important because it moved *GHA* forward to the second phase of the project, aimed at writing the work. However, many of the fundamental decisions in relation to this new path were taken in the following meeting of the *Commission for the General History of Africa*, held between 22 and 26 June 1970, in Addis Ababa, capital of Ethiopia.

The Addis Ababa meeting was decisive because in it were established the general rules for the functioning of the Executive Committee (EC) and the International Scientific Committee (ISC, afterwards renamed the International Scientific Committee for the Writing

⁴Unesco (1966, p.3). Unesco-CLTHIGENAF-ABIDJAN-3. Available at: <http://unesdoc.Unesco.org/images/0014/001432/143293eb.pdf>. Accessed on 09/10/2009.

⁵Unesco (1966, p.1). Unesco-SHC-2. Available at: <http://unesdoc.Unesco.org/images/0012/001279/127997eb.pdf>. Accessed on: 09/10/2009.

⁶Unesco (1966, p.2). Unesco-SHC-2. Available at: <http://unesdoc.Unesco.org/images/0012/001279/127997eb.pdf>. Accessed on: 09/10/2009.

of a General History of Africa) responsible for the *GHA*. Furthermore, it was the meeting in which, after the analysis of the sources gathered by Unesco, that the number of the volumes (eight) which would form *GHA* and their essential content was established. These guidelines would be followed in the publication of the work in the 1980s and 1990s.

It is worth highlighted that the statutory points were created there to guarantee that *GHA* would be eminently a project coordinated by African researchers. In this sense, the Commission defended that the Committee establish in its statutes that African researchers form a majority of members of the Committee (two thirds) and of the EC (four members). Furthermore, it was decided that the editors of the volumes, chosen by the commission, be African researchers.⁷

Concomitantly, the Addis Ababa meeting decided on other important points in relation to the division and content of *GHA*. In this meeting, the formation of a broader picture and the completion of the points to be followed in the second phase of *GHA* was emphasized:

- a) The concept of the General History of Africa essentially signified that the continent should be understood as a totality;
- b) The General History of Africa should be seen from within, starting with the continent itself as the center of interest, considering Africans as subjects and not mere objects of history;
- c) The focus should be on the history of ideas and civilizations; a scientific summary of this was aimed at;
- d) The approach could not be dogmatic, but problematic, open, seeking current knowledge about the subject, in accordance with the current state of research, its tendencies, without omitting indications, when necessary, about divergences between specialists, and about what still needed to be known, in future research⁸

Thus, the Addis Ababa meeting was fundamental for the construction of *GHA*. First, because of the administrative organization of the project. Second, by the indication of the basic thematic project, which was followed afterwards. Third, because the meeting consolidated the position of the coordination of African researchers in the *GHA* project, as part of the statutes of the Scientific Commission. Something that was ratified at its first meeting in Paris (1971).

On the other hand, the Addis Ababa meeting (1970) is important for this analysis because it was in this meeting that the organizers explained for the first time the idea that one of

⁷Unesco (1970, pp.11-14). SHC-MD-10. Available at: <http://unesdoc.Unesco.org/images/0012/001269/126966eb.pdf>. Accessed on: 09/10/2009.

⁸Unesco (1970, p.3). SHC-MD-10. Author's translation. Available at: <http://unesdoc.Unesco.org/images/0012/001269/126966eb.pdf>. Accessed on: 09/10/2009.

its fundamental characteristics would be to construct an ‘internalist history’ of Africa, in which Africans were seen as the subjects of their own history. In the original terms: “The General History of Africa should be seen from within, starting with the continent itself as a center of interest, considering Africans as subjects and not the mere objects of history.”

The primordial questions raised in this Addis Ababa meeting were established statutorily in the first meeting of the International Scientific Committee for the Writing of a GHA, which occurred in Paris between 30 March and 8 April 1971. The first Executive Committee (EC) of the project was elected, responsible for the coordination of GHA. Also elected in Paris were the professors who became the editors of the eight volumes of the work, all Africans: a) Volume 1: Joseph Ki-Zerbo (the former Upper Volta); b) Volume 2: G. Mokhtar (Egypt); c) Volume 3: H. E. El Fasi (Morocco); d) Volume 4: D. T. Niane (Senegal); e) Volume 5: B. Ogot (Kenya); f) Volume 6: J. F. Ade Ajayi (Nigeria); g) Volume 7: A. A. Boahen (Ghana); Volume 8: Ali Mazrui (Kenya). Also consolidated there was the thematic content of each of these volumes, which did not really change afterwards.

The following years, between 1972 and 1978, marked the initial period of the concretization of the work. In this stage, as can be noted in the primary sources, there were four primordial difficulties imposed on the organizers. The first was the constant absences of important editors for the project, such as Bethwell Ogot and Ali Mazrui. Second was the delay in the writing and editing of the first volumes to be published, which were supposed to be finalized in 1974. Third was the lack of participation of many commission members, who did not reply to EC contacts. Finally, there were misunderstandings about the chapter contents between editors and authors. Also of importance in this period was the controversy about the ‘African perspective’ of the history of Africa, which was being constructed there.

Years of Controversy (1975-78)

The most controversial years of the project began in the 5th EC Meeting in Fez, Morocco in February 1975. Part of this controversy was a consequence of the different rhythms of the two bodies. By February 1975, the EC had met five times (Cairo, 1971; Butare, 1972; Lusaka, 1973; Addis Ababa, 1974; Fez, 1975), while the Committee had only held two meetings (Paris, 1971; Lusaka, 1973). This led to the two bodies being out of step.

It was a complex collective work, which could only be done with the participation of dozens of committed intellectuals. However, the organizers were few in number. In the 1970s, a crucial period for the concretization of the work, there were probably only around twenty intellectuals involved, who were obviously overloaded. In addition to the eight editors (Ki-Zerbo, Mokhtar, El Fasi, Ogot, Niane, Ajayi, Boahen, and Mazrui) also contributing, to the best of our knowledge, were: J. Vansina (Belgium), C. A. Diop (Senegal), J. Devisse

(France), J. Franco (Cuba), M. Gléglé, F. Mourão (Brazil), J. Fage (United Kingdom), A. Letnev (USSR), A. Kagame (Ruanda), J. Vercoutter (France), A. Habte (Ethiopia), T. Tshibangu (the old Zaire), M. Shibeika (Sudan), I. Hrbek (Czechoslovakia), and V. Grottanelli (Italy). Vansina (1993, p. 342) especially highlights the importance of the participation of the anthropologist Maurice Gléglé in the construction of the project.

Generally speaking, this effort had two primordial objectives. First, to increase to the maximum the informative and explanatory nature of the texts. Second, make them more didactic. However, this detailed analysis led to considerable delays. Nevertheless, it is worth stating that despite this preciosity, in the analysis of the minutes of the meetings of the EC and the Committee no criticism of the interpretative perspective of the authors can be found before 1975. What exists are generally wide-ranging statements, aimed at the discussion of the contents of the volumes.

However, there are two exceptions to this rule between 1975 and 1978, which deserve to be commented on. The first is the debate about Volume VIII, edited by the political scientist Ali Mazrui. This volume consumed two days of work in the Cotonou meeting in 1975.

Generally speaking, this is explicable because it is a volume which dealt with current themes, namely Africa after 1935. Nevertheless, observing the Cotonou report, it can be seen that most of the debate was centered on another question – the approach which the editor, Ali Mazrui, gave to the theme. This is made explicit in the EC report which states that the theme required an approach concerned with a “more African point of view” than what was being produced by the editor. In its words: “(...) the EC expects that the Editor of the Volume should make an effort to characterize the question from a more African point of view, instead of a purely post-colonial one.”⁹ In the minutes what this was is not defined. However, the subject is returned to afterwards, when the organizers sought to summarize their comments to the editor:

Each chapter should start with a section dealing, from a continental point of view, with the problem being analyzed. This general consideration should be illustrated with individual case studies. The EC has frequently found cases that are not very representative in this sense. Furthermore, the possibility of speaking about more than two individual cases for comparison should not be rejected a priori.

Various proposals have been submitted to the Editor of the Volume in Lusaka and on other occasions, and have been presented to him by other members

⁹Unesco (1975, p. 7). SHC-75, da tempo-CONF. 611-2. Available at: <http://unesdoc.Unesco.org/images/0001/000120/056845eb.pdf>. Accessed on 10/10/2009. Author's translation.

of the Committee. The EC expects that these proposals will be reflected in a new list of contents.¹⁰

In other words, a ‘more African point of view’ was understood, in this case, as the capacity of the editor to look at the problem of analysis of his volume from a continental and totalizing perspective, which was to be illustrated with particular cases.

Seeking to reach a solution to the problem, the EC in Cotonou (1975) raised the possibility of a co-editor for the volume.¹¹ This debate about Volume VIII undoubtedly differs from the others in the work, which contained occasional criticisms of the authors but practically none of the editors. This leads us to believe that the criticisms of Mazrui revealed that the *GHA* organizers saw his theoretical posture as a threat to the progress that had been made in the work. After all, he was the editor of one of the volumes.

The central participation in the theoretical and methodological aspects of the writing of *GHA* reappear directly in the discussion of Volume VII, referring to the nineteenth century in Africa. This can be noted when the editor of the volume, the Ghanaian historian A. Boahen, informed the EC that he had needed to notify the authors of his volume that it was “a history of Africa seen as a whole, from an essentially internal vision.”¹² In relation to this, the EC took a position saying that the authors should seek to overcome the vision of history in which Africa and Africans were passive in history, waiting to be conquered by European superiority. In the words of the EC:

It is convenient to avoid ambiguous expressions and historical clichés which give a bad impression of African life and the striking facts of its history. In this sense, in various chapters, especially the first, the idea has been found that Europe conquered Africa due to the ‘inherent deficiencies of African societies,’ without these deficiencies being defined by criteria from African societies, but solely by a comparison with European technological civilizations. Similarly, it is convenient to discard all expressions which perpetuate the old cliché of ‘African passivity’ or the eternal reference to ‘African reactions’ at this time. The EC does not demand that the authors abandon all critical spirits or that African peoples and societies are systematically praised, but the automatic vilification and the errors of perspective should be avoided which have so prejudiced the quality of work about Africa. If an African sovereign is shown to be bloodthirsty, it is necessary to describe him as such and justify your affirmations, but describing all African heads of state who opposed Europeans

¹⁰Unesco (1975, p. 9). SHC-75-CONF. 611-2. Available at: <http://unesdoc.Unesco.org/images/0001/000120/056845eb.pdf>. Accessed on 10/10/2009. Author's translation.

¹¹In 1984, C. Wondji, from the Ivory Coast, was indicated as co-editor (Vansina, 1993, p. 345).

¹²Unesco (1977, p.24). CC-77-CONF.602-2. Available at: <http://unesdoc.Unesco.org/images/0003/000324/032498fb.pdf>. Accessed on 10/10/2009.

as bloodthirsty tyrants, who oppressed their people and pillaged neighboring territories should be avoided.¹³

In addition to this general observation, the EC made a detailed critique of the chapters which made up this volume, asking for corrections and additions. New sources, materials, and terminologies were indicated (suppressing terms previously common such as paganism, fetishism, animism, etc.)¹⁴ In some cases when authors did not respond to the communications of the editor it was proposed to replace them. This was a radical positioning on the part of the organizers, trying to adapt the vision of the authors to a ‘more African perspective’ of the theme, according to their own words. Something which the EC qualified as a ‘change of spirit.’

This posture by the EC showed its support for the ‘African perspective’ constructed by *GHA* and by Boahen, in contrast with the vision of history of some of the authors in this volume. This example shows that when the EC believed that this ‘perspective’ was not being incorporated in the writing of *GHA*, there was strong opposition from the organizing group of the work. This position would be changed to a more pragmatic posture in 1978.

The ‘African perspective’ and its approaches in *GHA*

The empirical analysis carried out here has pointed to various elements and themes which problematized the idea of the ‘African perspective’ on which the writing of *GHD* was grounded. Or, at least, a large part of the work.

Initially, based on Bethwell Ogot’s *Presentation*, it can be observed that this ‘African perspective’ can be interpreted as a historical vision internal to Africa. Something which was to be established ‘to a large extent’ by the study of Africa from African authors’ point of view of their own civilization, African cultural heritage, and the factors which contributed to the unity of the continent. However, it can be noted that the expression ‘to a large extent’ revealed the difficulties of postulating a non-problematic definition of the ‘African perspective’ which the organizers of *GHA* tried to build.

The investigation of this perspective of the institutional history of the project revealed some of the aspects of this quarrel. The primordial question appeared to be the struggle of the *GHA* organizers, above all in the EC, to ensure that the history being written was from ‘a more African point of view.’ What did this effectively mean? On many occasions it was an ‘internalist’ history of Africa, in which Africans were to be seen as the subjects of their own

¹³Unesco (1977, pp.24-25). CC-77-CONF.602-2. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0003/000324/032498fb.pdf>. Accessed on 10/10/2009. Author’s translation.

¹⁴Unesco (1977, p.29). CC-77-CONF.602-2. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0003/000324/032498fb.pdf>. Accessed on 10/10/2009.

history, as stated in Addis Ababa (1970): “The General History of Africa should be seen from within, starting with the continent itself as the center of interest, considering Africans as subjects and not mere objects of history.” The same idea was returned to in 1975, when the EC defended the posture of A. Boahen, editor of Volume VII, for a “history of Africa seen as a whole, from an essentially internal vision.” However, at other moments, this defense of a more African vision appears as a history written from a “more continental point of view,” as in the minutes of the Cotonou meeting (1975).

The ‘internalist’ vision of Africa, as the core of this ‘African perspective’ constructed here, is also central in the considerations of the historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo, an important organizer of the project, in his *Introduction* to the work. Here he talks about history from the African perspective as an option and the optic of a self-examination. According to Ki-Zerbo, it is an interior vision of identity, authenticity, and self-awareness which, without denying the demands of universal science, could recover the entire historical current of the African continent, in new models (Ki-Zerbo, 2010, pp. LII-LIII).

In summary, an initial investigation which covered the institutional history of the project sought to show that there was an essential meaning of the ‘African perspective’ which was being constructed: an ‘internalist’ and ‘totalizing’ vision of Africa, in which Africans were seen as subjects – and not just objects – of their own history. Given this perception, increasingly dominant and recurrent, the vision of the ‘African perspective,’ such as the point of view of African intellectuals on their own civilization, would become increasingly secondary.

This perception becomes stronger when the history written in the eight volumes of this history is analyzed. In this analysis, which cannot be detailed here due to a question of space, consolidated here was initial image of the ‘African perspective’ – ‘internalist,’ ‘totalizing,’ concerned with ‘subjects’ –, as an effective theoretical-methodological conception of the writing. In what sense are these terms used? Definitions are required here. ‘Internalist’ history in *GHA* is understood here as the emphasis given to the internal dynamics – in opposition to external ones –, in the explanation of the history of Africa. By ‘totalizing’ is understood the continental, African, focus. This is the entirety of object of study, which will be examined in all its particularities in all the volumes of the work. How these parts are linked to the whole is something which it is intended to show in this article. But here there is not necessarily a dialectic vision of this relationship, through which the parts are essential elements of the whole. What was important was to construct a total history of Africa, avoiding images of particular parts of Africa: ‘Black Africa,’ ‘Subsaharan Africa,’ ‘Islamic Africa,’ ‘Atlantic Africa. It was only a history of Africa. Finally, the question of African subjects. Although this recommendation appeared in various chapters of the work, it would not receive uniform treatment in specific chapters. Some did this in an ostensive manner (in particular in Volume 7 of the work, edited by A. Boahen), but the majority did so only tangentially.

Perceiving this leads to a reflection about the reason for this difference. Was it only a question of the personal disposition of the authors to incorporate this premise in their texts? Was it a difference between positions of African and non-African authors about the theme? These findings can have meaning in specific situations and moments. However, the basic question is that there exist various forms of incorporating Africans (men and women) as subjects of their own history. The same can be said of the so-called internalist or totalizing perceptions discussed here. In particular the former.

The reflection of this fact and the continuity of this investigation led to the discovery of three distinct approaches which constructed by the authors of *GHA* to highlight the aspects that most interested them, assuming that they had to follow the general orientation of the African perspective of the work: internalist, totalizing, subject oriented. These approaches were called: a) regionalism; b) intra-African diffusionism; c) resistance. New definitions are required.¹⁵

Regionalism was a type of African perspective approach present in *GHA*, in which the authors emphasize a long-term analysis of the fundamental elements which explained the history of an African *region*, in particular. The primordial object of study of this type of approach is African subjects as producers of eco-systemic adaptations over time, highlighting for this technical and socio-political developments. It was thus a regionalized internalism.

Another type of approach is what we call 'intra-African diffusionism.' This is another type of internalist interpretation. Here, the fundamental elements which explained the history of Africa lay in the *diffusion* of elements and the internal dynamics of the continent; even though these were not were in its origin. Focused on here are the idea of movement and exchange in historical explanation, as well as the facts which certified this interpretation. Typical themes include the migratory movements, economic networks, and cultural influences, of some African peoples over others.

The explanation for resistance is another internalist approach to the history of Africa in *GHA*. It is used here as a historical explanation which aims to highlight the *resistance* of the African subject. Its presence is striking, above all, in the historical moments when external factors are structurally dominant. This is the case, for example, of the colonial epoch in

¹⁵In addition to these, 'externalist' positions about the history of Africa will not be discussed, even though, albeit to a small extent, they can also be found in *GHA*. In other words, the visions which defend that external dynamics were fundamental in the understanding of the history of Africa. However, it is worth stating that this does not mean that if someone is an African intellectual then they are an 'internalist,' and the same can be said in relation to non-African specialists and 'externalism.' This is one of the principal reasons why the 'African perspective' worked with here should not be confused with the point of view of African intellectuals about their own history. Nor are other articles from *GHA* discussed here which were not committed to essential causes for the historical explanation they presented. Or, on the other hand, which listed various factors (both internal and external), all supposedly 'important' and 'inter-related' to explain a specific historical fact. In these cases, to avoid unreasonable generalizations, their typification in the models established was avoided.

Africa, which began at the end of the nineteenth century. It is thus an approach which seeks in African resistance the final object of study of internalism in the history of Africa.

In summary, what the article has sought to show until the moment, based on extensive research which is being summarized, is that, in addition to the heterogeneities, there existed a general conception of the history of Africa which was effectively used in the writing of *GHA*. This is what we call the African perspective, as a vision of internalist and totalizing history aimed at subjects. Furthermore, we have also stated that in the writing of the history this vision produced three distinct approaches (regionalist, diffusionist, and resistance¹⁶), which complement each other in the attempt to construct a new history of Africa. From this results the character of unity in the diversity of the African perspective. We will now show, in a syncretic manner, how these approaches also tended to produce perceptions of the periodizations of the history of Africa, to the extent that different structuring facts are highlighted in their historic construction.

Periodizations

After the analytical reading of the eight volumes of *GHA*, which substantiated this research, it was examined how these approaches pointed to different periodizations of the history of Africa, in the writing of the history present in this work.

Intra-African diffusionism was the approach most present in this work. It points to the following historical periodization: a) Neolithic and Ancient Africa (10,000 BCE – 6th Century CE; b) Africa between the 6th and 16th Centuries; c) Africa between the 17th century and 1880; d) Africa from 1880 to the present.

On which is this periodization based? For the period of ancient Africa, between the Neolithic period and the sixteenth century CE, this historic vision is based on two fundamental themes: population movements (Clark, 2010; Ehret, 2010a, 2010b; Huffman, 2010; Hugot, 2010; Sutton, 2010; Vansina, 2010a, 2010b; Phillipson, 2010a, 2010b; Lwango-Lunyiigo & Vansina, 2010; Ngcongco, 2010a, 2010b; Ogot, 2010b; Parkington, 2010)¹⁷ and international trade. The primordial difference is the transformations in world trade, which moved from the centrality of the Mediterranean of antiquity (Salama, 2010a, 2010b; Kobishanov, 2010) to the Muslim world (Devisse, 2010; Matveiev, 2010), and later to the Atlantic one with the slave trade (Malowist, 2010; Inikori, 2010; Diagne, 2010; Izard & Ki-Zerbo, 2010; Barry, 2010; Sheriff, 2010). A fact that possesses important implication for the African regions directly and indirectly affected by this trade. Such as, for example, the specialization of

¹⁶From here on these terms shall be used without inverted commas, since they have already been defined.

¹⁷Above all, this involves the narrative of the expansion of the Bantu, Kushite, Nilotic, and Khoikhoi peoples, amongst others, in Southern Africa.

African populations in this trade (Person, 2010; Niane, 2010a, 2010b). The rupture of the seventh century, highlighted in this periodization, is justified by the expansion of Islam in Africa. This occurred, according to the authors which defend this historical interpretation in *GHA*, because the Islamic religion and the cultural complex to which it belongs were central factors in the consolidation and evolution of complex societies in the continent until the sixteenth century at least (Hrbek, 2010; Fasi & Hrbek, 2010).

Concomitantly, for the Intra-African diffusionists this century would also be relevant as the beginning of a new stage in the history of Africa, with the consolidation of the slave trade and West European economic expansion on the continent. This vision of history remained in these parameters until the end of the nineteenth century with the advent of colonialism. With the entrance of this new actor the elements which had previously been essential for the history of Africa – world trade, slave trade, Islamism, population movements – became practically irrelevant in the diffusionist history of *GHA*. These were substituted by others, directly or indirectly derived from the colonial system being formed or already made concrete, in the formation of new social layers (Boahen, 2010b, 2010c; Afigbo, 2010), the ascension of the urban over the rural world (Afigbo, 2010; Osuwu, 2010), the deepening of economic dependence (Rodney, 2010; Adedeji, 2010; Chinweizu, 2010; Osuwu, 2010; Kaniki, 2010; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2010a; 2010b), state authoritarianism (Elaigwu & Mazrui, 2010; Ki-Zerbo *et al*, 2010), the reproduction of colonial education (Mazrui, 2010), the demographic challenge (Caldwell, 2010; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2010b; Kipre, 2010; Boahen, 2010c), etc.

The finding of these facts led to the perception that in this diffusionist vision of Africa, there are two originally external historical facts which should be seen as decisive ruptures. The first is Islamism. Second, and more striking, is colonialism.

A different history of Africa was unveiled by the approach to the African subject based on resistance, also present in *GHA*. This approach had the following periodization: a) The Egyptian-Pharaonic experience: 4000 BCE – 1085 BCE; b) The Berber-Maghrebian civilization: last millennium BCE – fourteenth century CE; c) The African diasporas: seventh – nineteenth century; d) African resistance to European colonialism and neocolonialism: nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Something interesting that is worth highlighting about this periodization is that its essential substance – the action of African resistance – was made concrete in relation to an Other, who did not remain static, becoming corporified in various forms. In relation to the Egyptian-Pharaonic experience, for example, it was analyzed by Cheikh A. Diop (Diop, 2010) who saw this subject in opposition to Indo-European peoples (Semites, Greeks, 'Mediterraneanites,' etc). The same occurred in relation to the subject of the Berber-Maghrebian civilization. It was formed in the struggle against the invaders of the Maghreb: Romans, Arabs, Vikings, Byzantines, Italians, Portuguese, Spanish, etc (Majhoubi, 2010; Salama, 2010b). In this context, Islam is seen as a fundamental element in this struggle and is integrated in this

history. There is also the subject of the diaspora which became concrete in struggle against types of slavery. In particular, slavery in the Americas (Harris, 2010; Harris & Zeghidour, 2010; Knight, Talib & Curtin, 2010). Finally, in the last periodization African resistance to colonialism is focused on (Abdel-Malek, 2010; Laroui, 2010; Mutibwa & Escoavelomandroso, 2010; Pankhurst, 2010; Uzoigwe, 2010; Boahen, 2010a)¹⁸ and neo-colonialism, focusing on Pan-Africanism (Chanaiwa & Kodjo, 2010; Asante & Chanaiwa, 2010).

This summary of the investigation carried out shows that there is an essential continuity in this Other, which exists beyond this apparent heterogeneity that created the African subject. This continuity seemed to be a phantasmagorical idea of Europe and Europeans. After all, they are the opposition which created the African subject in its various forms of resistance, black or Berber-Maghrebian. Hence the silence of the *GHA* about colonial elements in Muslim expansion in the history of Africa.¹⁹

Finally, the regionalism approach was analyzed as part of the African perspective. This investigation also allowed a periodization of the history of Africa: a) Neolithic and Ancient Africa (10,000 BCE – twelfth century CE); b) Africa between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries.

The first period, between the Neolithic and Ancient Africa, is seen by regionalism as a long process of sedentarization of African peoples. This process was not homogenous on the continent. However, independent of these temporal differentiations, it is certain that in Africa by the twelfth century, this long process of sedentarization had been completed. Above all, as singular evolutions of the adaptation of man to his ecosystems, with the use of iron metallurgy, the formation of their own agricultural complexes, domestication and raising of animals, etc. Therefore, in this periodization, the twelfth century not only marked the end of one era, but the beginning of another, characterized by the generalization of complex societies in Africa. In summary, from then on regionalism would investigate how in the long term man in these societies would continue to achieve at the highest level this adaptation to the environment in which he lived.

For regionalists, this evolutionary process was interrupted at the end of the nineteenth century by the emergence of colonialism. This was fundamental because after this the African peoples lost a good part of their sovereignty. And, thus, the capacity for self-determination. Therefore, for the authors of *GHA*, there was no regionalism possible in the contemporary history of Africa.

¹⁸Also included here are chapters 4-10 and 23-28 of Volume VII. This homogeneity shows the dedication and strength of the editor of the volume, A. Boahen, in the construction of a specifically African vision of colonialism in Africa.

¹⁹In *GHA* there cannot be observed a vision of the African subject affirmed against Islam. This can be stated even when studying relations between African peoples who opposed resistance to Islamism, such as the Mossi and Bambara. See: IZARD, M. & KI-ZERBO, J. Os povos e reinos da curva do Níger e da bacia do Volta, do século XII ao XVI. In: NIANE, D. T. (Ed.). *África do século XII ao século XVI*. 2. ed. rev. Brasília: Unesco, 2010.

This synthesis permits some comparative considerations about the principal continuities and discontinuities present in the African perspective in *GHA*. In relation to periodization, the discontinuities are greater than the continuities. To be precise, the only common points are points (d) of intra-African diffusionism and African resistance, which highlighted the growing influence of colonialism, from the middle of the nineteenth century (in the Maghreb and Egypt) onwards, as a rupture in the history of Africa, for various reasons. Does this fact imply primordial difference of content in the history of Africa?

To a great extent yes, at least in relation to what stands out in studies of African history. For intra-African diffusionism, populations movements, world trade, Islamism, and colonialism are essential historic facts in the history of Africa. From another point of view, for the African subject, the relevant historical facts are the political criticism of ‘western colonialisms:’ Indo-European, Mediterranean, Roman, European, etc. For the regionalists, however, the only fundamental fact in his history was the generalization of complex societies on the continent, from the twelfth century onwards. The choice of these types of periodization (or other approximate ones) implied epistemological and methodological considerations which deserve to be explained and specified.

The African Perspective and the History of Africa: epistemological and methodological questions

One of the best known appreciations of *GHA* in Brazil is that of the Guinean sociologist Carlos Lopes (1995). For him, the final result of the work, due to its breadth and plurality, was something greater than the history projected by the generation of the ‘inverted pyramid’ (author’s terms) of the 1960s and 1970s. In summary, a vision concerned in defending in *GHA* a ‘faithful history of Africa’: endogenous, anti-dogmatic, honest, rigorous, objective. From this arose the richness of *GHA*. It was, at the same time, the symbolic representation of two generations of African historians, the ones from before (the ‘inverted pyramid’) and a new one from the 1980s, already supposedly freed of the need to impose an ‘African superiority.’ We tend to agree with his observations. However, we have sought in this research so that, beyond this divergence, there can be observed here the theoretical and methodological elements of a new history of African (which here we entitle the ‘African perspective’). A history which as well as being a symbiosis of these generations, was also the representation of what some of the most famous Africanists of the time (1970s and 1980s) thought about the history of Africa.

An important conclusion of this work is that, from our point of view, based on the directives discussed here, from the African perspective, regionalism is the most coherent approach to the history of Africa amongst those cited. The primordial reason for this

affirmation is that it is what best manages to establish a historical periodization whose content justified an internalist vision of Africa: the action of Africans as producers of long-term eco-systemic adaptations.²⁰ Above all because the majority of elements referring both to intra-African diffusionism and the African resistance approach, in the final instance, depend on factors, directly or indirectly, exterior to the continent to be affirmed: world trade, Islamism, European colonialism, Western colonialisms.

In this sense, it can be concluded that regionalism is the first foundation of this internalist history of Africa, which to a great extent *GHA* sought to promote. It is the primordial place from where to see Africa, which exists beyond external determination. It is thus the core of the African perspective. However, saying this does not imply considering unnecessary the perspective of the other approaches cited. To the contrary, they are interpretations which enrich and bring scientificity to the African perspective. They are not opposing approaches. They are complementary. However, this complementarity has a defined direction: from regionalism to the other approaches mentioned.

Finally, it is worth summarizing the theoretical and methodological consequences which the epistemological option of this perspective implies. It defends an explicitly 'perspectivist' method of historiographical work: the internalism of the African perspective. This begins with the adoption of a regionalist approach, complementing it, when necessary, with the intra-African diffusionism and the resistance approach. It judges itself a scientific vision of history, for various reasons. Above anything else, its own existence, as well as its demonstration, is based on empirical work. This signifies that it can, in principle, be contested by any other researcher from the area. It is thus a non-dogmatic, verifiable, truth. On the other hand, this is a universalist historiographic prerogative, which can be used and refined by researchers from all over the world, independent of national, ethno-racial, or even ideological belonging. In third place, it is an interdisciplinary historiographic vision, which believes it can distinguish the essential from the secondary, in historical explanation. Furthermore, this vision is anchored on a materialist, realist, and empirical conception of historiographical work – as in all of *GHA*. These five points, thus, synthesize the African perspective, which is analyzed here: a) verifiable definition; b) universalist principle; c) separation of the essential from the secondary in historical explanation; d) interdisciplinary, materialist, realist, and empirical history; e) internalist method: from regionalism to intra-African diffusionism and the subject of resistance.

We believe that these characteristics of the African perspective brought by *GHA* allow it to be situated in the broadest field of the possible contemporary alternatives to the

²⁰However, this does not involve a determinist vision of this eco-systemic adaptation, as certain nineteenth century theorists have proposed. It is the study of actions of people aimed at this adaptation, which is always something temporary and conjunctural. For a more recent vision, see, amongst others, the studies of the Nigerian archeologist Bassey Wai Andah (1988; 1995).

Eurocentric paradigm within the sciences, in general, and in historical science in particular.²¹ In this context, it was constructed as an alternative both to relativism, and to positivism, dominant in contemporary social theory. After all, the African perspective is a hybrid, a scientific perspectivism.

I think that the value which may or may not be given to this approach depends, however, on the acceptance of two assumptions which it is worth clarifying. The first is that it is believed that science is a place of relevant enunciation – although not the only one – of the self-knowledge and the self-determination of peoples and societies. The second is that the actual idea of Africa, assumed here, even if seen as an invention (V. Mudimbe, 2013) is still relevant today, both from the political and theoretical point of view. More than this, that an internalist vision of the same Africa, in other words from Africa to the world, is something to be valorized. The author of these lines has no doubt about this. And in this sense, it has sought to contribute, through this historiographic debate, to a more federalist vision of the Pan-African ideal, which has been reconstructed by various contemporary African intellectuals.²² Thus, its attempt, through *GHA*, to show the amplitude of what is gained by thinking of African history through its interlinked regionalist centers, instead of a single original unity (Egyptian, Nubian, Saharan) which was diffused to the rest of the continent, as the classical historiography with a Pan-African slant has tended to highlight, in Cheikh Anta Diop, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Théophile Obenga, and others.

²¹I refer here to the following theories: post-colonial, subaltern studies, Afrocentrism, de-colonial studies, and epistemologies of the south. The differences and similarities between the proposal presented here and these other tendencies is unfortunately not something that fits within the scope of this article.

²²It is worth citing, amongst others, Basseyy W. Andah, Issa Shivji, Rhoda Reddock, Elikia M´Bokolo, Amina Mama, Timothy Murithi, Toyin Falola, Dzodzi Tsikata, Sam Moyo, Thandika Mkandawire, Paul Zeleza.

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