

“RETURNING AFRICANS TO HISTORY”:
THE INTERNATIONAL PROJECT *FONTES HISTORIAE*
AFRICANAE AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO AFRICAN
HISTORIOGRAPHY

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This article is based on the introductory lecture delivered at the *Sources for African History* conference, held at the Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters and Art Beit al-Hikma in Carthage on 13 April 2023. At the heart of the article is the project *Fontes Historiae Africanae* (Sources for African History), adopted by the International Union of Academies in 1964, when African history was breaking away from Eurocentric narratives to establish itself as an independent academic discipline. It explores the project's foundation in the historical context following the Second World War and its impact on the development of African historiography. During the era of decolonization, efforts to reconstruct African history from an African perspective required new methodological approaches, particularly in identifying and interpreting historical sources. The *Fontes Historiae Africanae* project was created in response to this need, with the goal of publishing critical editions of historical sources, both written and oral. By focusing primarily on sub-Saharan Africa, a region long marginalized in global historiography, the project significantly contributed to reevaluating Africa's place in world history. Today, as discussions on the decolonization of knowledge and historical interpretation continue, *Fontes Historiae Africanae* remains highly relevant to current efforts to reconstruct African history.

Key words: African history, sources, editions, colonialism, decolonization

Introduction and Historical Context

In 1962, the Czech Arabist and Africanist Ivan Hrbek from the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in Prague proposed the establishment of an international scholarly project on sources for African history

in collaboration with UNESCO. His vision was to create a project dedicated to the systematic research and publication of critical editions of sources on African history. Hrbek's initiative was part of a broader wave of renewed interest among European scholars in reassessing and reconstructing African history in the first decades following the Second World War. The Council for Philosophy and Humanities (CIPSH) within UNESCO recommended this project to the International Union of the Academies, based in Brussels.¹

The International Union of Academies (*Union académique internationale*, UAI) was founded in 1919 in Paris, with its headquarters established at the Palais des Académies in Brussels. Its creation reflected a broader aspiration for peaceful international cooperation in the aftermath of the Great War, bringing together national academies and scholars engaged in the study of history, epigraphy, archaeology, and the philosophy of the ancient and medieval worlds (Lieu, 2019, pp. 11-25). By 1960, UAI was already established as a prestigious scientific association of different national academies from America, Europe and Asia and covered international cooperation on approximately 20 projects, predominantly in the field of humanities. However, none of these projects had concerned the history of sub-Saharan Africa. In 1964, the UAI finally accepted Ivan Hrbek's proposal as its project number 22, entitled *Fontes Historiae Africanae* - Sources for African History (FHA) (Lieu, 2019, p. 21).

The fact that the FHA project was initiated on UNESCO's recommendation and adopted by the UAI at this particular time was no coincidence and has its roots in the wider global context. Until the middle of the 20th century, African history in European academic circles was largely viewed through a Eurocentric lens and considered primarily as an extension of colonial history. With the exception of North Africa's coastal regions, most of the continent was commonly depicted in Europe as having remained outside world history until the arrival of Europeans and African societies were rarely seen as creators of unique cultures (M'Bow, 1989, pp. vii-viii).

According to Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová (2013), the roots of this rejection of Africa's historicity lie in the development of European historiography in the 19th century, especially in the Hegelian philosophy of history as well as Leopold von Ranke's concepts of history (p. 9). She argues that European historical thought of the 19th century, influenced by nationalism and imperialism, did not take non-European nations and regions seriously. With the exception of classical civilizations such as Carthage, ancient Egypt or Ethiopia, African societies were generally considered stagnant or even unhistorical in European academic circles. One of the criteria for the historicity and non-historicity of nations was the use

¹ For more information, see the official website of the project (<http://www.fonteshistoriae-africanae.sav.sk/>)

of writing and the existence of a literature (p. 10). However, writing was not used on most of the African continent until the arrival of Europeans, or was used only sparingly, and according to Pawliková-Vilhanová, it was precisely these criteria that placed a large part of Africa and its inhabitants outside “real” historical development (pp. 9-10).

It is important to emphasize that not all European historians shared these views. In the first decades of the 20th century, the French ethnographer Maurice Delafosse (1912) openly criticized the claims that the people of sub-Saharan Africa did not have a “real” history. On the basis of his extensive research in the Niger valley he came to the conclusion that West African societies had created a specific “Negro-African” civilization. Delafosse was a top colonial official in Dakar, the capital of French West Africa, and his works were driven by the desire and need to know and understand the people under French colonial rule. The very fact that he acknowledged in African societies their own history before European colonization was pioneering in the period. Another French historian and colonial official in Dakar, Jean Louis Monod (1931), shared Delafosse’s view in a book entitled *History of French West Africa*. In this work, he distinguished a specified period before the “arrival of the French” in which he included the empire of Ghana, Mali and Songhay.² However, the works of Delafosse and Monod did not receive much attention in mainstream French national and imperial historiography. As Pawliková-Vilhanová (2013) pointed out, what was already considered African history in the second half of the 20th century was until then perceived as a research field for anthropologists who studied the cultural history “of uncultured, uncivilized, and exotic people” (p. 10).

Such a view of African history dominated European academic circles until the 1950s. Developments after World War II resulted in new geopolitical circumstances that led to the decolonization of the African continent so that colonial ideologies about backward races and human societies in Africa became discredited on the international level. The emergence of the United Nations and new African states had a significant impact on understanding and revaluating African history.

The global condemnation of imperialism played a crucial role in shaping the conceptual distinction between “African history” and “colonial history”, facilitating the gradual establishment of African history as an independent academic discipline. At the institutional level, one of the first significant outcomes was observed within British academic circles. In 1948, Roland Oliver was appointed to the chair of African History at the University of London and later became the president of the School of Oriental and African Studies. And the same year, John Fadge took up the chair of African history at the University of Legon in the Gold

² Monod’s book *History of French West Africa* (1931) was designed primarily for teachers at schools in French Africa and was largely based on Delafosse’s work.

Coast (today Ghana) (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2013, p. 112). In 1953, the first-ever scientific conference on African history was also held in London, and one of the symbolic signs of this new development was the founding of the *Journal of African History* at Cambridge University in 1960 (Pawliková-Vilhanová, 2013, p.11). Academic departments specializing in African history began to be established in the 1950s and 1960s in other European countries, in the USA, as well as in Africa (Pawliková-Vilhanová, 2013, p.11).

This period also marked the emergence of the first generation of African historians trained at European universities. Scholars such as Cheikh Anta Diop, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Adeniyi Ajayi, Onwuka K. Dike, Amadou Hampâté Bâ, and many others played a pivotal role in shaping the development of African history and historiography (Pawliková-Vilhanová, 2013, pp. 18-45). In the early 1960s, scholars widely embraced the optimism that a new era of African history would be driven primarily by African historians and African universities (Pawliková-Vilhanová, 2013, pp.60-61). The history departments at universities in centres such as Dar es Salaam, Ibadan or Dakar soon became important and influential “schools of African history” (Pawliková-Vilhanová, 2013, pp. 18-45; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2013, pp. 111-115).

The renewed enthusiasm and advancements in African historiography were exemplified by one of UNESCO’s most significant initiatives, the *General History of Africa*, launched in 1964 (UNESCO, 1964 – 1993). A central objective of this ambitious project was to rewrite African history from an African perspective.³ This approach to promote the “African voice” opened up one of the main methodological problems of this project: the “African” sources for the history of Africa. From the beginning, it was clear that European sources could not be omitted in the reconstruction of African history. However, the emphasis on the African perspective and the “decolonization” of knowledge required, above all, the identification and evaluation of African sources, including the oral tradition (Ki-Zerbo, 1989, pp. 1-9). Contemporary historians generally agree that the acceptance of oral sources as legitimate and authoritative historical evidence is what makes the *General History of Africa* project groundbreaking.⁴ Another significant aspect of this initiative was its comprehensive approach to the African continent, encompassing not only sub-Saharan Africa but also North Africa and Madagascar (Ki-Zerbo, p. 8).

³ The project originally published eight volumes between 1981 – 1993 (UNESCO, vol.1-8, 1981-1993). For more information about particular volumes and on the project as a whole see the official website (<https://www.unesco.org/en/general-history-africa>).

⁴ In 1961, Belgian anthropologist and africanist Jan Vansina published a seminal work, *De la tradition orale*, in which he described the methodology of using oral tradition or oral sources as relevant historical sources for the study of African history (Vansina, 1961).

Fontes Historiae Africanae

Within this historical context and following UNESCO’s recommendation, the Union Académique Internationale (UAI) adopted the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* (FHA) project in 1964. That same year, the project’s presidium commenced its activities, with its initiator, Ivan Hrbek from the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in Prague, serving as its first director. The project’s objective – then and now – has been the publication of critical editions of sources for African history, encompassing both written and oral traditions. From its inception, the project placed its primary emphasis on sub-Saharan Africa and its pre-colonial history. This focus necessitated the development of methodological approaches for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of historical sources. The primary objective was to prioritize sources of African origin while also incorporating Arabic sources relevant to the history of sub-Saharan Africa. Since its launch, the project has remained dedicated to these key categories of sources for African history:⁵

- Arabic and Ajami historical documents relating to Africa
- Oral historical sources
- Interconnected sources in African or European languages written in Latin script or in the African Tifinagh, Vai, or Ethiopian scripts, by Africans themselves. These are often recordings of local historical traditions.
- European sources related to the pre-colonial and colonial periods

Although preference is still given to sources originating from Africa, this last category has remained the main focus of the project in recent years. This is mainly due to the fact that the main research activities of the project are still in Europe. On the other hand, Portuguese, French, English, Danish, and other sources have left us valuable accounts of the African societies with which European traders, travellers, and military personnel came into contact.

There is also a specific subcategory: documents from the period of colonial administration. The FHA project has not paid too much attention to these sources since its inception, primarily for the reasons mentioned above. On the other hand, the colonial bureaucracies produced an enormous amount of material and documentation on the populations they administrated and cannot be simply avoided in any meaningful reconstruction of African history. For this reason, several critical editions of colonial sources have been published in recent years within the FHA project.⁶

⁵ This description and categorisation of source comes from the official website of the project and was written by its long-term director Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová (<http://www.fonteshistoriaeaficanae.sav.sk/>). See also Pawliková-Vihanová, 2013, pp. 94-97.

⁶ See for example, Vanderlinden (2015), Macola (2018).

The FHA project thus continues to be an important part of international research on African history. Since 1964, when the project was created, more than 70 critical editions of sources on African history have been published within its framework, with translations into English or French. Individual publications also contain introductory analyses and critical notes that provide the sources with important an historical and geographical contextualization.⁷

One significant challenge facing the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* (FHA) project in the future is its position within the broader development of African historiography in the 20th century. Despite the enthusiasm and efforts of the 1960s, African academic institutions have not emerged as the primary centres for research and knowledge production on African history. Various factors, including economic and political instability across many African countries during the 1960s and 1970s, hindered the ability of African academies and university departments to compete with institutions in the global North. From an international perspective, Western academic institutions and universities continue to play a dominant role in the study of African history (Pawliková-Vilhanová, 2013, pp. 60-61).

This trend is also clearly evident within the FHA project, as its activities are currently primarily driven by academic institutions in Europe. Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová, who in 1997 became the 4th director of the FHA, made this problem one of the central issues of her mandate and she attempted to involve more African historians and African academic institutions in the project. As director of the FHA project, she organized several important conferences and workshops in Ghana, Senegal, Mali, Niger, Mozambique, and Ethiopia (Pawliková-Vilhanová, 2019, pp. 7-14). Despite her efforts, however, the main activities of the project still take place at institutions in Europe, namely the British Academy, the Académie des sciences d'outre-mer in Paris, the Académie royale des sciences d'outre-mer in Brussels, the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, and the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava.⁸

Until very recently, the African historian actively involved in the project was Professor Seyni Moumouni (2017) (Pawliková-Vilhanová & Moumouni, 2009, 2014) Affiliated with the Institute of Human Sciences Research at the Abdou Moumouni University of Niamey, he is a renowned expert on Ajami manuscripts from Niger.

However, the Tunisian Academy Beit el-Hikma is currently the only African academy that is officially active in the project and is working on the valorization of Tunisian archival sources in relation to the history of the African continent.

⁷ For the complete list of the project's publications, see the official website, the section publications (<http://www.fonteshistoriaeafricanae.sav.sk/>).

⁸ There are also ongoing discussions about prospective collaboration with scholars and academies in Italy, Portugal, and Spain.

An important partner of the project is also the Ahmed Baba Institute of Higher Learning and Islamic Studies in Timbuktu, Mali, whose director Mohamed Diagayété is officially the FHA coordinator for Africa. However, the current geopolitical situation in the West African Sahel creates significant obstacles for active academic cooperation at the international level.

Concluding Remarks

In contemporary scholarly discourse, there is no doubt regarding the historicity of the African continent, or its place in world history. However, in broader Western society, this understanding is not universally accepted. Various colonial myths and stereotypes about Africa and its peoples continue to persist, particularly the portrayal of Africa as stagnant, backward, or even as the “dark continent”. This image has been constantly reproduced in the global media.⁹ Despite the efforts of several generations of historians to return Africa to world history, the colonial stereotypes continue to affect the perception of the African past in the West. As the famous French historian of Africa Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch noted in a recent interview:

There is still a certain rejection of African history in the West. Africans have been marginalized for a very long time for historical reasons. This has happened since the beginning of black slavery; it started with the contempt for Black people and the construction of anti-Black racism. This then becomes almost definitive in the 17th century. It is ingrained in Western thought and therefore hard to uproot. (Richard & Schulte, 2022, p. 10)¹⁰

For all these reasons, publishing projects like the FHA continue to be very important even today. In their efforts to research different aspects of African history, contemporary historians still struggle with the availability of and access to the sources. These are located on several continents and are often in archives and languages that are completely unknown to the wider community of researchers, or are only very difficult to access. Not to mention the sources of oral tradition and their transcriptions.

In conclusion, the FHA project has made, and continues to make, a significant contribution to a deeper and more systematic understanding of African histo-

⁹ In October 2024, the organization Africa Practice published a study according to which Africa is losing billions of dollars annually because of stereotypical narratives in global media. The study is available online (<https://resources.africappractice.com/the-cost-of-stereotypes-to-africa>)

¹⁰ The full interview is available online (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S016511532200002X>)

ry. Contemporary global discussions on the legacy of colonialism, particularly its political and cultural impacts, are closely linked to the past, present, and future of Africa and its peoples. In this context, the core objectives of the FHA project remain as relevant and vital today as they were in 1964.

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