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DEBATING THE FONTES HISTORIAE AFRICANAE PROJECT AND THE PRODUCTION OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE IN AFRICA

Some fifty or so years ago, in the 1950s and 1960s, existing historical knowledge about Africa started to be critically reassessed and radically redefined. By elaborating a new approach to the study of the African past, African historical studies started to move beyond the limitations of the previous historical scholarship denying Africa a valid past and an autonomous culture towards the production and publication of historical knowledge based on an African perspective or, better still, on a broader world perspective. Efforts to reassess and rewrite African history from the African perspective and to recover and reconstruct African pre-colonial history as the first and crucial stage of decolonising African history were baffled by the comparative scarcity of documentary source materials for early periods, differences in the character, provenance and volume of written sources and their uneven distribution in time and space. New historical sources, hitherto unused or little used, had to be discovered, authenticated and examined, approaches to non-conventional historical sources had to be developed and methods for the study of materials about the past that had been produced without writing practices elaborated and refined to demonstrate the possibilities of historical reconstructions based on oral historical traditions. The new African historical research and writing has drawn attention to different categories of historical sources whose existence clearly had tended to be ignored in the past, namely, oral historical traditions and early written material of African provenance, locally scripted African historical texts both in the Arabic script – Ajami, and in Latin script, historical source material kept in African territorial archives through which “the African voice” could be better documented, and Arabic sources whose importance and wealth was in the past clearly underestimated. Huge areas of documentation have started to come to light and the combination of all these sources with the records of early European activities in Africa have amassed a wealth of evidence of the kind which traditional Western historiography would recognise and respect.

The international editing and publishing project *Fontes Historiae Africae* was adopted in 1964 by l'Union Académique Internationale or the International Union of Academies based in Brussels on the initiative of the CIPSH UNESCO¹ and the Commission XXII was formed to sponsor the publication of written source materials for the history of Africa through wide-ranging international co-operation.² The *Fontes* project started to evolve parallel to another grandiose UNESCO project on the preparation of a General History of Africa in eight volumes, the first stage of which, from roughly 1965 to 1969, was devoted to gathering documentation and the collection

¹ Conseil International de la Philosophie et des Sciences Humaines.

² The project to sponsor the publication of written source materials for the history of Africa through wide-ranging international co-operation was originally proposed in 1962 by Prof. Ivan Hrbek, an Arabic and Africanist scholar from the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in Prague, in what was then Czechoslovakia.

of historical sources, compiling archival inventories and preparing a Guide to the Sources of the History of Africa, which was later published in nine volumes.

The project XXII. FONTES HISTORIAE AFRICANAE – Sources of African History is one of the many international publication projects under the general auspices of the UAI – International Union of Academies.³ The principal aims of the project as originally conceived have been to prepare and publish critical editions and translations of written and oral sources for African history, original historical texts or collections of documents assembled to address particular topics on the history of sub-Saharan Africa in the original language together with a translation into either English or French, unless the text itself was in one of these languages. Precedence was to be given to hitherto unpublished texts or collections of fragments concerning sub-Saharan Africa, while new editions of works already published might be tackled later. Several sub-series have been set up, grouping publications on the basis of the principal languages or language groups of the source materials under the principal languages of the source materials, Arabic, Ethiopic languages, other African languages, in Series Arabica, Aethiopia, and Varia. The Series Varia was established to accommodate languages where only a small number of works exist (e.g. Latin) with a provision that further series according to language may be created if this would seem desirable. A series entitled Subsidia Bibliographia was also created. New series have in the meantime been started by some national committees, namely British and Belgian, to publish volumes prepared and published by the respective committees.

The project was started as an international enterprise; each Series had its own International Editorial Committee composed of internationally known scholars from Africa and overseas. A number of national Academies agreed to adopt the project, and national committees were set up in several European and African countries.⁴ Little or rather nothing is known about the first years of the project's existence, but between the years 1973 and 1986 when the Fontes project was directed by Professor John Hunwick, great stress was laid on the discovery, collection and publication of Arabic and Ajami historical sources relating to Africa.⁵ From 1974 J. Hunwick started to publish annual Bulletin of Information giving news of the FHA project, other news relevant to the publication of African historical sources, a bibliography, and some articles containing

³ A member of the UAI is since 1994 also the Slovak Academy of Sciences (SAS).

⁴ National committees were set up in Ghana, the Sudan, Great Britain, Norway, Denmark and Israel, and a Consultative Committee was also formed.

⁵ Professor Hunwick's work on Arabic manuscripts began in the early 1960s at the University of Ibadan, and has been central to his entire subsequent career. From 1973 to 1986 when he was International Director of the Fontes Historiae Africanae project of the International Academic Union, he worked to collect, preserve, analyse and translate the Islamic Arabic heritage of Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa and was responsible for the publication of ten texts and translations of Arabic historical materials relating to Africa. He was also part of a group that played an active role in the establishment of the first research library in Timbuktu, Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Historiques Ahmad Baba (CEDRAB) in Timbuktu, now containing some 20,000 Arabic manuscripts.

original documents, especially in Arabic, with translations and commentaries. The issues of the FHA Bulletin were set up as a part of the Fontes Historiae Africanae Project and chronicled the project's growth and development in the 1970s and 1980s. Published between 1975 and 1987 in nine volumes, bilingually in French and English, the Bulletin was an extremely rich source of information on the Fontes Project, but it had a very restricted circulation and is now almost impossible to get hold of, because only a few libraries have complete sets of issues. Therefore a selection from the last five issues of the Fontes Bulletin was updated and republished as volume 13 in the regular annual series of the journal *Sudanic Africa*, founded in 1990 by Professors J. Hunwick, R. S. O'Fahey and K. Vikor of the University of Bergen to publish source materials or original documents in Arabic and African languages dealing with the history and culture of Muslim peoples in Saharan and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Considering its importance, between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s the FHA Project virtually lost its international character; there were very few national committees involved in the project since some had by then ceased to be active, and there was hardly any African participation in the project and little or no awareness of its existence on the African continent. The British Fontes committee continued to be the most active participant in the project, preparing and publishing new volumes.⁶

The weakness of the project in the late 1990s was thus its uneven functioning with national committees based solely in Europe and virtually no African participation. Since 1997, or rather 1998, when the direction of the project returned to the country of its original inspiration,⁷ efforts have been made to revive the International dimension of the project, to increase the number of national committees and scholars involved in it, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and in European countries with huge collections of source material, and to evaluate and improve the organisation of the Project and its external relations. Thanks to the UAI's support of the international dimension of the project, several meetings of the heads of the national committees of the *FONTES HISTORIAE AFRICANAE* project have been held to examine the state of documentation and to formulate plans for publication: in Slovakia, at Budmerice chateau, September, 2000, topic: *FONTES HISTORIAE AFRICANAE* Project: Retrospect and Prospect; in Accra, Ghana, January 2002, topic *FONTES HISTORIAE AFRICANAE*: Prospects and Challenges for the Future, in Dakar, Senegal, topic *Patrimoine et sources historiques en Afrique* and in Niamey, Niger, 2007 topic *Les manuscrits africains, arabes et ajamis, comme sources historiques en Afrique*.

The international colloquium held in Niamey between 30 January and 3 February, 2007 was organised by the Research Institute in Human Sciences of Abdou Moumouni University in Niamey, Niger (l'Institut de Recherches en Sciences Humaines – IRSH) and its Department of Arabic and Ajami Manuscripts (le Département des Manuscrits

⁶ Between 1986 and 1997 the Project was directed by Prof. Charles Beckingham and only the British committee was active. The Fontes project virtually ceased to be an international project and turned into a British enterprise.

⁷ Slovak Academy of Sciences took over the responsibility of the whole project and the present author became its International Director.

Arabes et Ajamis – MARA).⁸ The colloquium was held at the premises of CELHTO (Centre d'études linguistiques et historiques par tradition orale) and was attended by scholars from Niger, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, France, Australia, Hungary, USA and Slovakia, specialising in Arabic and Ajami sources for African history.

There are two important centres located in Niamey containing important collections of historical sources for African history. MARA (le Département des Manuscrits Arabes et Ajamis), one of the seven departments of the IRSH (l'Institut de Recherches en Sciences Humaines de l'Université Abdou Moumouni), is an important centre of Islamic learning, housing a precious collection of ancient manuscripts, in Arabic and African languages written in Arabic script – ajami. The collection was estimated in 1995 to consist of roughly four thousand volumes or pieces of uneven length covering different disciplines: history, namely pre-colonial history (ta'rikh), Muslim theology (tawhid), astrology ('ilm al-falak), Arabic literature (al-adab al-'arabi), religious poetry in African languages and Arabic (al-unshudat diniyya), treatises on occult sciences (sirr), dissertations on law (tahrir fi 'l-fiqh), Islamic mystic (tasawwuf), local medicine (al-tibb al-mahalli), pharmacy (as-saydala), political treatises (ar-rasa 'il-as-siyasiyya) and biographies, hagiographies, pamphlets and biographical notes on political and religious personalities. The other centre located in Niamey is Centre d'études linguistiques et historiques par tradition orale – CELHTO.

The meetings of the heads of national committees and international colloquia held in Ghana (2002), Senegal (2004) and Niger (2007) have proved to be extremely valuable in the promotion of awareness of the project among African scholars, and by facilitating African participation and involvement in the project led to an enlargement of the international dimension of the project, to closer international cooperation between scholars based in Africa and overseas, and the exchange of information about research and publication plans, activities and priorities.⁹ The number of national committees

⁸ The colloquium was prepared under the auspices of the University Abdou Moumouni, the Rector of the University Prof. Allassan Yénikoye, and some ministries (the Ministre de la Formation Professionnelle et de l'Insertion des Jeunes, celui-ci assurant l'intérim du Ministre de l'Enseignement secondaire, supérieur, de la recherche et de la technologie), which joined the IRSH and MARA to provide institutional support, framework and leverage for the colloquium. Together they offered warm hospitality to conference participants and provided the congenial and conducive atmosphere within which this exchange of ideas took place. The colloquium planning stage benefited immensely from the untiring and enthusiastic cooperation of the local coordinator Seyni Moumouni with the International Director of the Fontes Project and the Bureau of the UAI.

⁹ Apart from several editions of sources, two volumes of papers presented at the international conferences in Africa have been recently published. Thioub, Ibrahima (ed.): *Patrimoine et sources historiques en Afrique*. Dakar, L'Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar & Union Académique Internationale, 2007. ISBN 978-92-990020-7-0, and Seyni Moumouni & Viera Pawlikova-Vilhanova (dir.): *Le temps des Ulémas. Les Manuscrits africains comme sources historiques*. Collections Études Nigériennes No.

involved in the project has increased and individual African scholars from countries which do not have functioning Academies or institutions of similar standing have either joined the project or expressed their wish to join in.¹⁰

The goals and procedures as originally conceived have been somewhat modified as the project evolved. The established policy of concentration on Arabic and Ajami sources for African history was not appropriate for some national committees, namely the British FHA committee, which started to place more emphasis on European historical materials. A New Series was instituted by the British Committee in 1997 and since then all the volumes prepared by the Committee of the British Academy are now published. With the creation of new national committees, a shift of emphasis has become also noticeable from the pre-colonial to the colonial period. This is the case of Belgium, where the bulk of source material related to the colonial period. The reactivated Ghanaian national committee and African representatives generally wished to see more emphasis placed both on oral as well as written sources.

Since the 1960s the study of African history and the discovery and deployment of sources have matured considerably and even though the spirit of the guidelines laid down by the UAI continues to be the starting-point for the Fontes programme, it should reflect the current and future needs of African history, as identified in the new millennium. Despite different priorities reflected in research and publication plans and the shift of emphasis in the past years from Arabic and Ajami sources to other historical source materials, there remains an eminent interest among African and Africanist historians in this category of sources relating to Africa, which is much richer than was expected when the Fontes project was adopted by the UAI.

Ancient manuscripts are the most outstanding treasure of Timbuktu (Tombouctou) famous in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as an important centre of Islamic learning and of a significant African literary tradition. Timbuktu is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and home to several institutions and libraries preserving ancient manuscripts. The Centre de documentation et de recherches historiques Ahmad Baba – CEDRAB in Timbuktu was the first research library, which has been since 2000 transformed into a full-fledged Institute of higher learning – Institut des Hautes Études et de la Recherche Islamique Ahmad Baba – IHERI-AB. La Bibliothèque de l'Institut Ahmad Baba founded in 1970 has collected some 20,000 Arabic manuscripts,¹¹ many

61. Université Abdou Moumouni de Niamey – Union Académique Internationale, Bruxelles 2009. 260p. ISBN 2-85921-061-X.

¹⁰ The number of national committees involved in the project: has increased to eight (Belgium, Denmark, Ghana, Israel, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, UK) Other countries have expressed an interest to join the project (Senegal, Niger, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria). The FHA Project was one of the fifteen projects submitted to a four-year evaluation during the 80th General Assembly of the UAI held in Brussels from 30 May till 4 June, 2006. An anonymous evaluation report ranked the FHA between the most prestigious projects of the UAI and appreciated progress made in the publication as well as in the international cooperation.

¹¹ A five volume handlist of the first 9,000 items has been published by the Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation.

thousand more are preserved in numerous private libraries. One of the largest private libraries in Timbuktu, the Mamma Haidara Memorial Library (La Bibliothèque Mamma Haïdara) houses over 6,000 volumes of manuscripts that the Haidara family has been collecting since the 16th century. The library rivals the Ahmad Baba Centre for the sheer volume of ancient material it holds. There are other libraries holding collections of precious manuscripts, la Bibliothèque Allimam Essayouti, la Bibliothèque Al Wangari, la Bibliothèque Fondo Kati, la Bibliothèque Almoustapha Konaté de Maïgala, la Bibliothèque du Cadi Ahmed Baba Abul Abbass, la Bibliothèque Al-Ansary, la Bibliothèque Mohammed Tahari or la Bibliothèque Cheick Zayni Baye of Boujbeha, to name just a few of the most important. It is expected that to this day there remain about sixty to eighty private collections of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts, ancient reminders of Timbuktu's once golden past as an intellectual and spiritual centre of Islamic Africa. Many ancient manuscripts preserved in Timbuktu are kept by local families or still remain hidden.¹²

Abundant as the known ancient manuscripts of Timbuktu are, they constitute in all probability only a fragment of the existing material. It has been estimated that manuscripts kept in Timbuktu make only ten to fifteen percent of Africa's heritage of historical manuscripts.¹³ Apart from Mali, huge collections of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts have been preserved in other African countries.¹⁴ They are scattered across the African continent along the so-called "African Ink Road" stretching from Senegal in the west to the East African littoral and located in the ancient cities and centres of Islamic learning, such as Djenne, Gao, Agadez, Mombasa, Malindi and many other. In this huge region of the African continent there must still remain innumerable places that have not been as yet tapped for ancient written records relating to African history, which may enrich our knowledge of the African past. In view of all this truly impressive richness, only a joint effort can save hidden treasures which could change our entire outlook on certain periods of African history.

Apart from Arabic and Ajami historical materials relating to Africa category (I.), there are other categories of sources for African history awaiting publication.

II. Oral historical sources.

III. Interconnected to this is another category of sources, early historical texts in African or European languages written by Africans themselves in the Latin script. Often they are recordings of local historical traditions.

IV. European source materials related to pre-colonial and colonial periods.

As has been mentioned, one of the *Fontes Historiae Africanae* project's principal priority and mission at the time of its inception was, and still remains to be, to provide support to research programmes dedicated to the study, preservation and publication of ancient manuscripts of Islamic Africa, and explore ways for a closer association with

¹² Many manuscripts are kept by marabout families, who do not want to give them up, while some others sell the manuscripts to foreign tourists.

¹³ Another important centre in Mali is Djenne.

¹⁴ In Senegal, Ghana, Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria, Kenya or Mozambique.

ongoing work by African scholars.¹⁵ In view of all this truly impressive richness, only a joint effort can save hidden treasures which could change our entire outlook on certain periods of African history.

The last international gathering organised in Africa as part of the programme and activities of the UAI's *Fontes Historiae Africanae* project, was the International Seminar on "*Arabic Manuscripts in West Africa: Their Preservation and Publication*" which was held from 7th June to 10th June 2010 at Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, the capital city of the Sokoto Caliphate, founded by the leader of Fulani jihad and Muslim scholar Usmanu Danfodiyo. The international seminar was a continuation of a similar conference held at Abdou Moumouni University, Niamey, Niger, 30 January – 3 February 2007 and was co-organised by the Department of Arabic, namely Prof. Sami Umar Musa, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria and l' Union Académique Internationale and its Project *Fontes Historiae Africanae*. The conference was attended by participants from different parts of Nigeria and of the world: Australia, Slovakia, and different African countries – Mali, Cameroon, Tunisia, Uganda, Niger and Morocco. In addition, many students and interested people from different departments of the Usmanu Danfodiyo University attended, with the total number reaching 100 or more. More than fifty-six papers were presented, mostly in Arabic, some in English and one in French, and were debated and discussed in Arabic.

The Seminar recommended that the leaders of Sokoto State (Caliphate) establish in collaboration with the University – a Centre for the editing and publishing of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts. It also recommended that a series of International Seminars or Conferences for the study of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts be held in different countries of the West African region and called upon the governments of West African countries to support the project and upon scholars in different parts of West Africa to prepare a compendium of Arabic and Ajami manuscripts giving a clear bibliographic description of each manuscript. It was also decided to prepare and publish the proceedings of the International Seminar or a volume of revised papers presented at the conference as soon as possible.

The project *Fontes Historiae Africanae* was conceived from the first as open-ended and indefinite in duration. Unless sufficient alternative outlets for source publication became operational (Internet publication etc.), there seems little prospect of the FHA project in its current form becoming redundant for the foreseeable future. History belongs to people, access for local communities to historical sources should always be a priority, African archivists, librarians and historians should be accorded an active role in the care and disposition of their countries' patrimony.

¹⁵ The International Colloquium on African manuscripts as Historical Sources which was held in Niamey, Niger, January 30th – February 3rd 2007, as part of the programme and activities of the UAI's project *Fontes Historiae Africanae*, was organised jointly by the UAI and l'Institut des Recherches en Sciences Humaines (IRSH) of l'Université Abdou Moumouni de Niamey, one of its seven departments, le Département de Manuscrits arabes et ajamis – MARA, holding a collection of four thousand manuscripts.

L'Union Académique Internationale has an eminent interest in helping preserve the rich African heritage that is threatened. Considering the importance of the project, the greatest potential for future work in the context of the Fontes Project lies in close international cooperation between scholars based in Africa and overseas. The meetings in Accra, Dakar, Timbuktu, Niamey and Sokoto were convened to discuss with representatives of African institutions possibilities of participation of African institutions in the activities of the UAI. At the invitation of l'Académie Africaine des Langues (ACALAN), the session of the Bureau restreint or the steering committee of the UAI took place in Timbuktu, Mali from 18 to 20 November 2008 in the Centre Ahmed Baba.¹⁶ Among the invited African experts were: MM. Mame Thierno Cissé (Conseil pour le développement de la recherche en sciences sociales en Afrique – CODESRIA), Sénégal, Ali Diabiguilé (Association des Historiens Africains), Mme Irène K. Odotei (Historical Society of Ghana), MM. Seyni Moumouni (Institut de Recherche en Sciences Humaines, Niamey), Emmanuel Sagara (ACALAN, Mali) et Albakaye Ousmane Kounta (Mali).

Since many African countries have no Academies, strategies of the development of Academies of Human and Social Sciences in Africa and hence their membership in the UAI were debated. It was suggested to establish contacts with learned societies or historical societies and to cooperate very closely with African Academy of Languages. To enable such institutions to become members of the UAI, a new category of membership « membres partenaires » – in English « affiliated members » was discussed and approved. This may solve the problem of the participation of African historians in the FHA Project and by promoting links between African academics help them to establish contacts and some kind of collaboration with scholars in other African or Western countries and publish the results of their work in the FHA Series. The membership of African institutions in the UAI would also enable African scholars to participate in other international projects and to propose new projects under the auspices of the UAI.

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¹⁶ Among the participants were Miklós Maróth, then President of the UAI, both Vice-Presidents Janusz Kozłowski and Lise Hannestad, Honorary President Shaul Shaked, members of the Bureau Adama Samassékou and Peeter Tulviste, Jean-Luc De Paepe, *secrétaire général adjoint* and Viera Pawlikova-Vilhanova, International Director of the « *Fontes Historiae Africanae* » Project.