

doc. PhDr. Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová Csc., founder of African studies in Slovakia, in memoriam

Writing an obituary is never an easy task. Particularly when it is about an exceptional academic figure, as well as a close friend towards whom we feel respect, esteem and gratitude. PhDr. Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová Csc, to whom I am devoting these lines, was a prominent Slovak and Czechoslovak historian of Africa, and her work gained her a reputation far beyond the borders of the Central European region. She was part of an exceptional generation of European scholars of African studies which tried to bring back Africa into world history, from which it was excluded by colonialism. She passed away suddenly on 26 September 2019 at the age of 74, and she holds a highly respected, leading place in the history of Slovak social sciences.

Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová was born in 1944 in the village of Turček near Turčianske Teplice. She spent most of her life, however, in Bratislava. She completed her university studies at Charles University in Prague in the field of African studies and English. She was a graduate of the first Prague school of African studies, which was literally a pioneer in this field in Czechoslovakia. After graduating in 1966, she joined the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava, where she worked for almost 54 years. Since beginning her work at the Institute of Oriental Studies SAV, she was responsible for social science research into Africa, thus bringing to Slovakia a completely new academic subject.

Shortly after starting work, she completed her postgraduate studies at the University of Makerere in Uganda, eastern Africa. During her stay, she studied Ugandan colonial and missionary archives, and also worked on historical and anthropological field research. Later, she conducted archival research in London and Rome. In 1971, however, the Communist regime of the time in Czechoslovakia banned her from travelling to western and African countries. She lost the possibility of making direct contact with the environment to which she had devoted herself professionally. Her previous archival and field research, however, had enabled her to accumulate enough material and data for long-term, systematic academic work. It was only with the end of the Communist regime in 1989 that she was able to travel once more to Africa and to western Europe. This situation opened up entirely new opportunities for her, which she used to renew contacts with the African environment and new international cooperation.

At the beginning of her career, Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová devoted herself mainly to the pre-colonial and early colonial history of Africa as well as the anti-colonial resistance of African societies. From this period, we can mention

her thesis published in English entitled *History of Anti-Colonial Resistance and Protest in the Kingdoms of Buganda and Bunyoro 1862 – 1899*. It can be found in the libraries of several important universities in Europe and the USA, and has been quoted in prestigious academic journals.

Another area of Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová's research was the activity of Christian missions in sub-Saharan Africa, devoting much space in particular to the so-called White Fathers, founded in 1868 by the Archbishop of Algiers, Charles Lavigerie. She was interested in the beginnings and the spread of Christianity as an important sociological factor in the life of Africans, while also looking for records of the history and languages of African communities in the missionaries' works. She published several significant and cited studies in Slovakia and abroad on this subject.

From the point of view of the phenomenon of religion, she also worked on the spread of Islam, primarily in the area of the eastern part of sub-Saharan Africa. The significance of her contribution to global knowledge in this field is shown by the fact that in 2015 she received an invitation to an important international academic conference in Burundi devoted to the spread of Islam in the area of the so-called great lakes in eastern Africa. It is worth noting that assistant professor Vilhanová was one of only two experts from the whole of Europe invited to this event.

She devoted a large part of her professional life to the development of modern African historiography. Within this field, she worked on the nature of written sources concerning the pre-colonial history of sub-Saharan Africa, the interpretation of African history during colonialism, as well as the problems of modern African historiography after 1960. She published several significant articles on this topic, and was the co-author of several monographs. The most important output on this topic is the English-language monograph *Production of History and Culture in Africa revisited* from 2013. From the point of view of international research, it is a key publication which maps out the development and problems of historiography in the Anglophone and Francophone countries of sub-Saharan Africa, from the end of the colonial period to the beginning of the 21st century. The monograph is a great contribution to this field of historical research and was well received by reviewers.

One of Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová's long-term professional interests, but mainly a personal favourite, was the popularisation of African literature and fairy-tales. Thanks to her translations from Swahili and English, Slovak readers were able to delve into the cultural wealth of human societies living in eastern and western Africa. From among her academic publications, her study *Swahili and the Dilemma of Ugandan Language Policy* published in English in 1996 deserves the most attention, listed by UNESCO on its portal as recommended reading.

Alongside literature, Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová was an enthusiastic populariser of African history as well as the everyday life of Africans in Slovakia. She published many popularising articles in magazines and daily newspapers. She also made appearances on radio and television, where she gave expert opinion on current issues concerning the African continent.

As well as academic work, assistant professor Vilhanová was also active in the past as a university lecturer. At the beginning of the 1990s, she lectured on the specific geopolitical features of Africa at the Institute of International Relations at the Faculty of Law of Comenius University in Bratislava. From 2000, she was active as a lecturer at the Department of Ethnology and World Studies of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. However, she did not succeed in achieving her lifetime dream and personal goal: to found African studies at the Faculty of Arts of Comenius University in Bratislava,

Despite her long period of activity – over 50 years – in the field of academic research into the modern history and languages of Africa, Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová remained active in her publications even recently, and continued to take part in various academic events. From 1998 until the end of her life, she was the main coordinator of the important international academic project for African studies entitled *Fontes Historiae Africanae*, based in Brussels. Its objective is to collect and document sources on the history of Africa and to publish critical studies on them. In the past, Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová organised several important work sessions at this level for the leaders of the national committees, both in Slovakia in 2000 or in African countries themselves, such as Ghana in 2002, Senegal in 2004 and Niger in 2007. Her unfinished contribution to this project remains her critical series of sources on the activities of count Móric Beňovský in Madagascar.

Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová was also the Slovak delegate of the *Union Académique Internationale* (hereafter UAI), also based in Brussels, which officially oversees the above-mentioned project *Fontes Historiae Africanae*. As a delegate, she represented the Slovak Academy of Sciences in UAI at several prestigious events, such as the general assembly of CIPSH UNESCO in Porto-Novo in Benin in 2002 and in 2006 in Alexandria, Egypt. In 2008, she also participated in the session of the presidency of the UAI in the western Africa town of Timbuktu in Mali. She worked in various UAI committees, such as the foreign affairs committee, the internal affairs committee, as well as the committee for accepting new members in the UAI Presidency. As part of this committee, she prepared the necessary evaluations for accepting the Belgian Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences (*Académie royale des sciences d'outre-mer*) as well as the African Academy of Languages (*Académie africaine de langues*) as UAI members. In addition to her membership of the UAI, she was

also a member of the prestigious British academic society the Institute of Commonwealth Studies of the University of London. She received the Ľudovít Štúr Honorary Plaque of the Slovak Academy of Sciences award for her work in social sciences.

In conclusion, I can state without exaggeration that Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová will always belong to the elite among Slovak academics. She was the first professional Africanist in Slovakia, and one of the pillars of Slovak Oriental sciences, with a significant presence at international level, too. Her work can be found today in the libraries of prestigious universities in western Europe, the USA, Russia and on the African continent. Those who knew her in person will remember her as a great philanthropist with a deep-seated interest in world cultures, whose positive approach to life helped inspire a wide range of people around her.

We honour her memory!

Silvester Trnovec