

The construction of the African perspective: a history of the *General History of Africa* (Unesco)

A construção da perspectiva africana: uma história do projeto História Geral da África (Unesco)

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RESUMO

O artigo analisa a construção da ‘perspectiva africana’ no projeto da *História Geral da África* (HGA), focando o período entre 1965 e 1979. Contando com a participação de mais de uma centena de especialistas internacionais sob auspícios da Unesco, a HGA foi um dos maiores projetos intelectuais do século XX. Fundada em fontes primárias, esta análise dá ênfase aos conflitos internos engendrados na construção dessa ‘perspectiva africana’, enquanto linha hegemônica da HGA. Tal investigação revela dois momentos críticos do projeto: os anos polêmicos (1972-1978) e os pragmáticos (1978-1982). Dessas disputas resultaram os parâmetros teórico-metodológicos e o conteúdo dos oito volumes da obra, publicados na década de 1980 e recentemente republicados no Brasil. Palavras-chave: história da África; história da historiografia; Unesco.

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the construction of the African perspective in the General History of Africa project (GHA), focusing on the period between 1965 and 1979. With the participation of over two hundred international experts under the auspices of Unesco, this was one of the greatest intellectual projects of the twentieth century. Based on primary sources, this analysis emphasizes the internal conflicts involved in the construction of the African perspective as a hegemonic line of thought in the GHA. Two critical moments of the project were found in the investigation: the controversial years (1972-78), and the pragmatic years (1978-82). As a result of these disputes, theoretical and methodological parameters were constructed, in addition to eight volumes of material published in the 1980s, and recently republished in Brazil.

Keywords: African history; history of historiography; Unesco.

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THE BEGINNINGS OF THE PROJECT (1965-1969)

The *General History of Africa* project originated at the I International Congress of Africanists, held in Acra, the capital of Gana, between 11-18 December 1962. This was a large event which, with the support of Unesco, involved around 500 African specialists from all over the world. Although the idea most probably predated the congress, the desire to construct with the aid of the Unesco an international scientific cooperation work was publically ratified there, with the aim of developing historical research in Africa.

There were two reasons for Unesco's participation in the GHA project from its conception. First, at this time Unesco was concerned with intensifying its work in Africa. This intention was evident, for example, in the decision of Unesco's 15th General Conference in 1960 to make greater efforts for education in the continent. Unesco's support of the Africanist Congress was part of this greater purpose. This new direction was, in turn, a response to the large number of African countries becoming members of Unesco at the beginning of the 1960s, especially recently independent states. It should be noted that in 1960 Unesco only had nine African member states, while in 1963 this number had risen to 32. Furthermore, Unesco was able to provide the institutional and financial support that the project demanded. After all, since its very beginning it had been seen as a scientific project with great scope.

Three principal motives justify the creation of the GHA project, according to those who designed it. First, there was a danger that both written and oral sources for African history would be irrevocably lost. In part this threat could be reversed through the collection of sources and the organization of archives in Africa, which would be able to house both existing documentation and what had still to be investigated. This needed to be done quickly. Second, it was hoped that the GHA would be able to summarize knowledge about the continent, which was still dispersed and badly distributed in terms of time and space. Only in this way could the gaps that needed to be researched be identified. Finally, it was also intended that the GHA would be able to propel a written history which could overcome colonialist prejudices about the continent, helping to highlight African contributions to human civilization. Something seen as urgent for African nations in the post-colonial period that was commencing in Africa.¹

A consensus among specialists in African history and culture, in 1964 the idea of the GHA was submitted to and approved as one of the international scientific cooperation projects at the 16th General Conference of Unesco.

Following this approval, Unesco became the official sponsor institution of the GHA, the first stage of which was completed in 1999, with the publication of eight volumes in French, English and Arabic. This sponsorship meant that Unesco provided institutional and financial support for the project. In practice, as we will see, it was constructed in a relatively autonomous manner by a commission of renowned specialists from the area.

To start the project, the then director general of Unesco, the Frenchman René Maheu, appointed the first scientific director for the GHA project. Chosen for the position was one of the first African academic historians: the Nigerian Kenneth Onwuka Dike, vice-rector of Ibadan University, director of Ciaf and president of the 1st International Africanist Congress (1962). With the advice of K. O. Dike, the first organizers of the project were appointed (Unesco, 1966a, p.3).

The first meeting of the specialists appointed by Unesco was held in Abidjan, Ivory Coast in August-September 1966. Here the first GHA organizing group was formed, called the *Commission of Specialists for a General History of Africa*. The president of the Commission was K. O. Dike. Its vice-president was the historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo (Upper Volta), and the historian M. Lacheraf (Algeria) was executive secretary. The following researchers also took part in the meeting, though without any specific positions: J. F. Ade Ajayi (Nigeria), M. Dagnogo (Ivory Coast), J. Devisse (France), H. E. M. El Fasi (Morocco), H. E. A. Ampaté Bā (Mali), H. Djait (Tunisia), D. McCall (United States), A. N'Daw (Senegal), D. T. Niane (Senegal) and L. Yabloshkov (Soviet Union). The director general of Unesco was represented by N. Bammate, from the Division of Cultural Studies (Unesco, 1966a, p.1, 2).

There are two public reports about the 1966 Abidjan meeting, which are essential for understanding the motivations and objectives of the first GHA organizers: UNESCO-CLT-HGINAF-ABIDJAN-3 and UNESCO-SHC-2. They are similar, but not identical, reports. Only the former indicates authorship, having been written by professors Lacheraf, Ajayi, McCall, Niane, Devisse and Yabloshkov.

These reports confirmed that from the very beginning, the GHA was a project aimed at the development of historical research in Africa, justified by the three basic principles already mentioned: a) organization of sources; b) summary of existing knowledge; c) construction of a new history of Africa. What the Abidjan meeting achieved was to create an agenda for the GHA with an order of priority, ranging from the most urgent work to the long-term. The most important results of the meeting was the organization of the collection

of sources in Africa which took place between 1965 and 1969. In relation to this, a task to be carried out by Unesco, the Commission highlighted the following points:

- a) Training of African technical staff to collect data;
- b) Survey of sources not yet known, especially those from the oral tradition;
- c) Holding of meetings with specialists in oral tradition, with the aim of constructing a scientific methodology for the subject;
- d) Publicizing knowledge about source conservation methods;
- e) Assistance in the training, organization and integration of documentation centers in African countries;
- f) Advising Unesco and International Council of Archives members to focus on the collection and diffusion of sources about Africa, especially privately owned ones;
- g) Publication of guides to African sources to be used in writing the GHA.

Due to its practical implications the meeting was considered by its participants as the final meeting of the preliminary phase in the preparation of the GHA (Unesco, 1966a, p.5).

In addition to the definition of short-term objectives related to writing the GHA, the Abidjan meeting traced out some long-term questions, relevant for writing the history that the project was intended to produce. The first was the scientific nature of the history conceived for the GHA. In addition, there can also be noted a concern with emphasizing the essential character that oral traditional had for this, as well as the centrality of inter-disciplinary work, especially the relationship between history, linguistics and archeology. Also defended was the idea that the writing of the GHA should construct a totalizing vision of Africa, concerned with the description of Africa as a related whole.²

The practical direction of the Abidjan meeting determined the following steps in the GHA. During 1965-1969 fieldwork was organized, centers of research and documentation (especially of oral tradition) created, and inventories and archives compiled. After this work at the beginning of the 1970s the publication of the material collected began, with the title *Guide to the Historic Sources of the History of Africa*. This initial work was essential for writing the GHA.

CONSOLIDATION (1969-1975)

After the Abidjan meeting, other meetings with smaller groups were held to prepare guidelines for researching sources and the organization of institutes, which was carried out by Unesco between 1965 and 1969. In 1969, for example, an administrative meeting was held in Paris. This was important as it was the meeting which led to the second phase of the GHA project, concerned with writing. However, the fundamental decisions for this new path were taken at the following meeting of the Commission for the General History of Africa, held on 22 - 26 June 1970, in Addis Ababa, capital of Ethiopia.

The Addis Ababa meeting was organized by a new Commission. The new president was Professor Akilulu Habte (Ethiopia), while there were three vice-presidents, Mohammed El Fasi (Morocco), Abbé A. Kagame (Rwanda) and J. Franco (Cuba). Profs. J. F. Ajayi and J. Devisse held the positions of executive secretary. In this central group three had been at the Abidjan meeting: J. Devisse, M. El Fasi and J. Ajayi. Furthermore, another three intellectuals had been present at the two meetings but did not hold any specific positions in Addis Ababa: J. Ki-Zerbo, Hampaté Bâ and D. McCall. These six intellectuals were fundamental in this initial moment of the GHA, since they were constantly present in the project meetings. The Commission also had new members: Cheikh Anta Diop (Senegal), Musa Galal (Somalia), V. L. Grottanneli (Italy), E. Haberland (Germany), I. Hrbek (Czechoslovakia), A. Letnev (Soviet Union) and I. Tshibangu (Democratic Republic of Congo). At this meeting Unesco's representatives were Profs. N. Bammate, R. Uwechue, G. Provenchere and M. Gleglé.³

The Addis Ababa meeting was decisive because it was where the general rules were established for the Executive Committee (EC) and the International Scientific Committee (ISC, after this called the *International Scientific Committee for the Writing of a General History of Africa*), responsible for GHA. Furthermore, during the meeting, after the analysis of the sources collected by Unesco, the number (eight) and the essential content of the volumes that would form the GHA were decided. This would essentially be followed in the publications in the 1980s and 1990s.

In relation to the first point, the Addis Ababa meeting indicated the parameters that would later be adopted in the institutional functioning of the project. This structure included two permanent bodies: the Executive Council (EC) and the International Scientific Committee (ISC). In order to accelerate the work the former had a small number of members and more regular and

less expensive meetings. The idea of the Commission that met in Addis Ababa was that in this way the existing financial funds – considered insufficient by those who took part in the meeting – could be spent on research for the GHA and not on administrative meetings.

EC members were chosen by vote in the Committee and had a two year mandate. It consisted of a president, five vice-presidents and a general secretary. The rules governing the EC were also defined by the Committee, the maximum authority for the project. The Committee had to meet at least once every two years. It was to decide on the general questions of the GHA – by vote if necessary. It also had to keep in constant contact with the members of the EC and Unesco's Director General, to keep them informed about the project's progress. Committee members were also elected, in accordance with the indications of Unesco's Director General or of its members. The secretariat of the Committee was also appointed by the Director General.⁴

In addition to this more general administrative organization, the Commission indicated some specific points. Among these it is worth highlighting those that were created with the clear intention of guaranteeing that the GHA would be a project predominantly coordinated by African researchers. The Commission thus argued that the Committee stipulate in its statutes that the majority of the Committee (two thirds) and the EC (4 members) be African researchers. Furthermore, it was decided that the editors of the volumes, chosen by the Commission, be African researchers. These points were submitted to the Commission as part of the statutes for the Scientific Committee to be created in Paris in 1971. There the statutes for the body were to be voted on (Unesco, 1970b, p.15-20; Unesco, 1970a, p.18-20).

At the same time decisions were made at the about other important points in relation to the division and the content of the GHA. What was most significant was the drafting of a broader and more complete list of the points to be followed in the second phase of the GHA:

- a) The concept of the *General* History of Africa essentially signifies that the continent needs to be understood in its totality;
- b) The General History of Africa should be looked at from within Africa, taking the continent as the center of interest, and seeing Africans as subjects and not mere objects of history;
- c) The focus should be on the history of ideas and civilizations; it should aim at a scientific synthesis of this;

- d) The approach cannot be dogmatic, but problematic, open, seeking current knowledge about subject, in accordance with the current state of research and its tendencies, without omitting indications, when necessary, of divergences between specialists, and about what needs to be discovered in future research.⁵

The analysis carried out for this paper shows that the Addis Ababa meeting was fundamental for the GHA. First, due to the administrative organization of the project and, second, due to its indication of the basic thematic content which would be followed later. Third, because the meeting consolidated the coordination position of African researchers in carrying out the GHA project, as part of the statutes of the Scientific Committee. These were ratified at its first meeting in Paris (1971).

The primordial questions raised at the Addis Ababa meeting were rectified at the first meeting of the *International Scientific Committee for the Writing of a GHA*, held in Paris between 30 March and 8 April 1971. Present at this meeting were a majority of those indicated in previous meetings. Its first task was to approve the statutes of the Scientific Committee of the GHA. Afterwards the project's first EC was elected. This was responsible for coordinating the GHA work. The following professors were elected: a) president of the EC: Aklilu Habte (Ethiopia); b) vice-presidents: Bethwell Ogot (Kenya), Cheikh Anta Diop (Senegal), Ivan Hrbek (Czechoslovakia), J. F. Ajayi (Nigeria) and G. Mokhtar (Egypt). J. Devisse (France) was chosen as executive secretary. The other participants in the first meeting of the Committee – in addition to those elected to the EC – were the following professors: A. Adu Boahen (Ghana), J. D. Fage (England), J. L. Franco (Cuba), M. H. I. Galaal (Somalia), V. L. Grottanelli (Italy), E. Haberland (West Germany), E. Boubou Hama (Niger), H. E. A. Ampaté Bâ (Mali), F. A. Kagame (Rwanda), I. N. Kimambo (Tanzania), J. Ki-Zerbo (Upper Volta), A. Letnev (Soviet Union), D. F. McCall (United States), L. Ngcongco (Lesotho), D. T. Niane (Guinea), Ravoajanahary (Madagascar), M. Shibeika (Sudan) and J. Vansina (Belgium, but based in the United States). The secretariat for this Committee meeting was the responsibility of the following Unesco representatives: R. Hoggart, N. Bammate, M. Gléglé, G. S. Métraux and G. Provenchere. It should be noted that African researchers were in the majority among those participating in the meeting and the members of the EC and the Scientific Committee of the GHA.

The 16 articles of the statutes established by the Committee stipulated the general outline of the administrative organization established in the preparatory meetings of the GHA, especially in Addis Ababa. In addition to creating

the Committee and the EC, also included in the final draft of the statutes were the percentage rules (2/3 of the Committee; 4 members of the EC), according to which African researchers were officially guaranteed the central positions and the majority of members of the project. Furthermore, the mutual obligations among the principal parties involved in the project were also regulated, in other words, the EC, the Commission, the editors, the authors and Unesco, through the intermediate of its director general and its secretariat. In relation to the Commission, the Paris meeting also established the specific norms for its functioning, with a total of 33 articles.⁶ Here can be clearly seen the intention of the organizers to normatize in great detail the functioning of the GHA.

In relation to the content of the GHA, the Paris meeting re-established what had been raised in the previous meetings in relation to the general themes and approach of the work. The following points were indicated to define the characteristics of the writing of the GHA:

- 1) With the intention of achieving the best scientific quality possible, the *History* does not intend to be exhaustive, rather it is an work of synthesis which will avoid dogmatism. In many aspects, it will constitute a report of problems which indicate the current state of knowledge and the main current of research, while in these circumstances there should be no hesitation in emphasizing divergences of opinion. In this way the path for future work will be prepared.
- 2) Africa will be considered in this work as a whole. The objective of this position is to show the historic relations between the different parts of the continent, which in the work published until now generally appear subdivided.
- 3) The *General History of Africa* is, above all, a history of ideas and civilizations, societies and institutions. It will introduce the values of oral tradition, as well as the multiple forms of African art.
- 4) In this project the history of Africa is focused on from the point of view of Africa. An erudite work, it is also to a great extent the true reflection of how African authors see their own civilization. Although it is being prepared within an international framework and uses current scientific data, the history will also be a capital element for the recognition of African cultural patrimony and place in evidence the factors which have contributed to the unity of the continent. These efforts to examine the facts from within is the singular characteristic of the project and should,

alongside its scientific qualities, give it great importance. By showing the true face of Africa, this work can, at a time dominated by economic and technical rivalries, propose a particular concept of human values.⁷

Here can be seen the intended general characteristics of the work: a) a scientific and democratic approach; b) perspective of Africa as a totality, including its regional inter-relations; c) focus on the history of societies, civilizations and institutions, valorizing the contributions of tradition and African art; d) the search for a knowledge of Africa from within itself, from the point of view of African authors about their own history, the recognition of African cultural heritage and the factors which contributed to the unity of the continent.

Also chosen in the meeting were the professors who would become the editors of the eight volumes of the work, all of whom were African: a) Volume I: Joseph Ki-Zerbo; b) Volume II: G. Mohktar; c) Volume III: H. E. El Fasi; d) Volume IV: D. T. Niane; e) Volume V: B. Ogot; f) Volume VI: J. F. Ade Ajayi; g) Volume VII: A. A. Boahen; Volume VIII: Ali Mazrui. Also consolidated there was the thematic content of each of these volumes, which would change little later. As this was restricted to a Commission appointed by the Committee for this purpose, the researchers appointed to prepare this basic content are known: Ajayi (president), Ki-Zerbo (executive secretary), Fage, Vansina, Diop, Kagame, Kimambo, Boahen, Grottanelli, Niane, Shibeika, Haberland and Letnev.

Another important decision voted on by the Committee in Paris was that, in order to accelerate the GHA and taking into account the researchers participating and the sources collected for the project, the first volumes to be produced and published would be numbers I, II and V (Unesco, 1971, p.3-24).

The fact is that at the 1971 Paris meeting, six years after the project had approved by Unesco, the general characteristics of the GHA project were finally delineated, both in relation to administrative and thematic aspects. Following this, the writing and publication of the work had to be organized.

It can also be noted that, in general terms, the Paris meeting sought to continue the works of the preceding meetings, especially that of Addis Ababa (1970). This fact tends to show that it was the intention of the agents to make the project advance, irrespective of occasional divergences. It was this intention that Prof. Fernando Mourão (2009), the only Brazilian participant in the project, notes as one of the merits which made possible this wide-ranging project of intellectual cooperation. According to Mourão, the GHA was believed to be

something that was socially and scientifically important for the time, due to the advances of African peoples towards political independence.

1972-1975 marked the beginning of the concretization of the project. From what can be seen in the primary sources, the organizers were confronted with four primordial difficulties at this stage. The first was the constant absences of African historians who were important for the project, such as Bethwell Ogot and Ali Mazrui. The second was the delay in the writing and editing of the first volumes to be published, I and II, which were supposed to have been completed by 1974 (but which would only be ready in 1978). The third was the lack of participation of many Commission members, who did not reply to EC contacts. Finally, there were misunderstandings about the content of chapters between editors and authors.⁸ These incidents helped to raise tensions between 1975 and 1978. During this period the question of the 'African perspective' related to the history of Africa, which was being adopted for the project, was also quite evident.

YEARS OF CONTROVERSY (1975-1978)

The most controversial years in the project began with the 5th Meeting of the EC in Fez, Morocco, in February 1975. In this meeting, due to the delays in the writing of the chapters for various reasons, it was noted that the volumes I and II, initially promised for the end of the 1974, would only be sent for translation and review at the end of 1975. The progress of the other volumes was also discussed in a detailed manner in this meeting. Once again the EC alerted the Committee members to be more helpful when asked to make commented readings or to indicate authors, in order for the work to progress. In relation to this the report clearly stated that "as is obvious only some members of the Committee answered the queries [from the Unesco secretariat through the EC] asking for their points of view."⁹

It is difficult to know the exact reason for this problem. On the one hand, these 'organizers,' especially when they were part of the EC, complained of low levels of cooperation from other Committee members. On the other hand, when the Committee met, it accused the EC of the excessive centralization of the organizational work of the GHA. The fact is that this quarrel revealed an growing dispute between the EC and the Committee in relation to the project's progress.

In part, this dispute was the consequence of a difference of rhythm between the two bodies. By February 1975, the date of the EC meeting mentioned

here, it 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), resulting in a lack of synchronization between the two bodies, especially in relation to EC decisions, which depended on Committee approval to be ratified.

The fact is that this timid participation by members of the Committee delayed the hard task of the readings and re-readings which each chapter underwent in accordance with the internal rules and regulations of the project. This was evident in the Committee (3rd) and EC (6th) meetings held simultaneously in Cotonou, Benin, in July 1975. The preciosity in the discussion of the criticisms made about the hundreds of chapters of the work is impressive. This resulted in an enormous quantity of corrections of and additions to the original texts, adding or eliminating photos, words or phrases, maps, glossaries, notes, and bibliographies. It was complex work which could only be done with the participation of dozens of committed intellectuals.

However, few organizers were involved. In the 1970s, a crucial period for the production of the work, it is possible that this number was more or less twenty intellectuals, obviously overloaded. Apart from the eight editors (Ki-Zerbo, Mokhtar, El Fasi, Ogot, Niane, Ajayi, Boahen and Mazrui) there can also be mentioned, to the best of our knowledge: Vansina, Diop, Devisse, Franco, Fage, Letnev, Kagame, Vercoutter, Habte, Tshibangu, Shibeika, Hrbek and Grottanelli. Among the professors who met in 1975, only Obenga, Mourão, Talib and Mutibwa began to regularly participate in meetings. Among all of the above, the participation of Diop, Devisse and Ajayi especially needs to be noted, as they, in addition to work outside of meetings, were present at all the EC meetings between 1971 and 1977.¹⁰

Generally speaking, this involved an effort which had two primordial objectives. First, increasing as much as possible the informative and explanatory nature of the texts; second, making them more didactic. Such detailed analysis resulted in considerable delays. This was the case of the first volume. Begun in 1971, it was supposed to have been ready in 1974, but went through a process of rewriting between 1976 and 1977 and was only finalized in 1978.

However, it is worth noting that, despite all this preciosity, in the analysis of the minutes of the EC and Committee meetings up to 1975, no criticisms were found of the interpretative perspective of authors. What was usually found were general points aimed at the discussion of the content present in the volumes.

Between 1975 and 1978 there were two exceptions to this rule, which deserve to be commented on. The first was the debate about volume VIII of the work, edited by Prof. Ali Mazrui. This volume merited two days of work at the Cotonou meetings in 1975. Certainly this was explained by it being a volume dealing with current issues – Africa since the Second World War. However, looking at the Cotonou report, it can be seen that most of the debate was about the approach that the editor, Ali Mazrui, had adopted to the theme and not the content. This is explained in the EC report: the theme required a perspective involving a “more African point of view” than what had been adopted until then by the editor. In the words of the report: “The EC expects that the Editor of volume should take efforts to deal with the question from a more African point of view, rather than purely post-Colonial.”¹¹ What this more African perspective was, is not defined in the minutes, but the questions was raised again when the Committee sought to summarize the comments to the editor:

Each chapter should commence with a section looking at, from the *continental point of view*, the problem being analyzed. This general consideration needs to be illustrated with individual case studies. In relation to this, the EC has frequently found cases which are not very representative. Furthermore, the possibility of talking about more than two individual cases or 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 has also been submitted to him by members of the Committee. The EC expects that these proposals will reflect a new list of content. (Unesco, 1975b, p.9, original emphasis)

In other words, a ‘more African point of view’ can be understood in this case as the capacity of the editor to present the question of analysis in his volume from a continental point of view, which can be illustrated with particular cases.

Seeking to find a solution to the problem, the EC raised the possibility of a coeditor for the volume. Mentioned was the Belgian, Prof. A. Zolberg, from the University of Chicago. However, the EC came out in favor of an African, who could complement the knowledge of the editor in relation to West Africa (Unesco, 1975b, p.10).

This debate about volume VIII was undoubtedly echoed in the other debates of the work, with occasional criticisms of the authors and almost none

of the editors. However, the criticism of Mazrui seem to reveal that the organizers of the GHA saw a threat in his theoretical approach to the progress already made. After all, he was an editor of a volume.

The central participation of these organizers in the theoretical and methodological aspects of the writing of the GHA reappears directly in the discussion of volume VII, referring to the nineteenth century in Africa. The editor of the volume, A. Boahen, warned the EC that he needed to notify the authors of his volume that it involved “a history of Africa seen as a whole, from an essentially internal perspective”.¹² In relation to this, the EC adopted a position that the authors should seek to overcome a vision of the history in which Africa and Africans were passive in history, in the expectation that they would be conquered by European superiority. In the words of the EC:

It is useful to avoid the ambiguous expression and historical clichés which give a bad impression of African life and the striking facts of its history. In relation to this, in several chapters, notably the first ones, there has been found the idea that Europe conquered Africa due to the ‘inherent deficiencies in African societies’, without these deficiencies being defined according to the criteria of African societies, but solely in 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 ‘European initiative’ and to ‘African reactions’ in this epoch. The EC does not require authors to abandon completely the critical spirit or to produce texts that are systematically laudatory of African societies and people, but rather to avoid the automatic vilification and errors of perspective which have so much prejudiced the quality of work about Africa. If an African sovereign is found to have been bloodthirsty, it is necessary to describe him as such and to justify his affirmations, but all the African heads of state who opposed the Europeans should not be described as bloodthirsty tyrants who oppressed their peoples and pillaged neighboring territories. (Unesco, 1977b, p.24)

In addition to this general observation, the EC made a detailed criticism of the chapters that were part of the volume, asking for corrections and additions. New sources, materials, and terminologies (suppressed previously common terms such as *paganism*, *fetishism* and *animism*) etc. were also requested (Unesco, 1977b, p.29). In some cases it was proposed to replace authors who did not answer the editor’s communications. Here a radical position can be seen to have been adopted by the organizers, aiming at adapting authors’

visions to a 'more African perspective' of the theme, in accordance with their own words. Something which the EC qualifies as a 'change in spirit.'

This posture on the part of the EC showed its support for the interpretative line of the 'African perspective' constructed by GHA and Boahen, in contrast with the vision of history of some of the authors of the volume. This example shows that there had emerged a strong opposition to the organizing group of the work since the EC believed that this 'perspective' was not actually being incorporated in the writing of the GHA. This position would be altered from 1977 onwards.

THE VICTORY OF PRAGMATISM (1978-1982)

After the Paris EC meeting, two simultaneous meetings in Nairobi, Kenya, between April and June 1978, of the EC (8th) and the Committee (4th), provided continuity for the implementation of the project. They had practically the same format as the previous meetings.

The Nairobi meetings were concerned, above all, with the discussion of administrative questions related to the publication of the work, unlike the previous meetings. In particular the first two volumes were focused on, which were to be published the following year: *Methodology and the prehistory of Africa* (1) and *Ancient Africa* (2). Most notable was the concern of members of the Committee to guarantee the widespread publicizing of the work, especially in Africa. Highlighted in these, for example, was the need to have the volumes translated into Arabic – since they were initially to be published in French and English; the reduction, by contractual means, of the final price of the work, and the publicizing of the GHA by public mass communications programs.

In relation to the discussion of the other volumes, it can easily be noted that in Nairobi, formal and pragmatic questions became dominant in relation to discussions of content, predominant in previous meetings. The change was drastic. Even in relation to Volume VIII, coordinated by Mazrui, the report highlights that the discussion, according to the minutes, took place in a 'more constructive atmosphere' than previously.¹³ What explained this sudden change of direction?

Some reasons can be suggested. The first of these discussions of content may, perhaps, have been less necessary, because a consensual appreciation of the question and thematic line may already have been constructed, and perhaps because the organizers had already consolidated their position in relation

to the others. A second reason could have been the delay in the stipulated deadlines. After all, the project had initially been scheduled to finish in 1978, when only two volumes would be ready.

Both hypotheses are in theory valid, but it is difficult to believe that they justified this sudden change in the progress of the project, especially because many questions remained unanswered: for example, the content of Volume VIII, edited by Ali Mazrui.

The answer to this question appears to actually be a new question, highlighted in the minutes of the Committee meeting in Paris in 1977, which state that “for the first time during the progress of the project,” the Director General of Unesco appeared at an organizational meeting. This director general was the Senegalese M. A. Mahtar M’Bow, who, since his election in 1974, played a fundamental role in sustaining the GHA project in Unesco (Mourão, 2009).

In this visit, described in great detail in the minutes of the meeting, M’Bow came to guarantee Unesco support for the GHA project. It is interesting that in his talk, M’Bow made a point of highlighting the importance of GHA not being a dogmatic work, but rather democratic and open, showing what still needed to be researched about the history of Africa. The minutes stated:

The Director General insisted on the idea that this history, as the Committee has emphasized since its first session, should not be dogmatic, that it should not hide either the insufficiencies nor the current gaps in research; after all, it will bring a renewal of great importance in the methodology of historians from all countries and a source of information about the African past, irreplaceable for African, but also necessary for the other inhabitants of the world. (Unesco, 1977b, p.34)

Looking at the history of the GHA project, as is being done here, it is evident that by highlighting its democratic principles, the Director General of Unesco sought to defend a position that he considered to be under threat, due to the actions of some of the organizers of the work. The criticism of dogmatism, reinforced there, served as an indirect criticism, thus the reference for the necessary democratic spirit of a work like this, exactly at the moment when its organizers found themselves under pressure from the excess of work, the increase in controversies and the delay.

In relation to this aspect, A. Ajayi – one of the presidents of the EC – mentioned some of the difficulties that arose. He explained that due to these difficulties, it would be necessary to extend the existence of the Scientific

Committee and the EC from 1978 – as originally planned – until 1982, at the very least. The promise was that the first two volumes of the work would be ready for publication at the end of 1978. M'Bow's response was not recorded.¹⁴

The sudden change in the progress of meetings between Paris (1977) and Nairobi (1978) leads to the belief that the presence of the Director General of Unesco at the Paris meeting meant that the pressure for a more tolerant environment in relation to the dominant position of the 'African perspective' had had an effect.

In this new environment some controversial topics were revised in Nairobi, such as Volume VIII, coordinated by Mazrui. In the EC meeting there emerged some occasional criticisms of the chapters of this volume. Rejecting these, Mazrui defended the adoption of a collective edition of the volume, something with the secretariat of Unesco deemed impossible due to the statutes of the work.

The theme was returned to at the Committee meeting in the same city a few days later. Faced with the impasse, Committee members decided to change opinion, – according to the minutes with the objection of some – and decided to accept Mazrui's original proposal about the contents of Volume VIII, as presented at the Cotonou meeting (1975) (Unesco, 1978, p.40ss).

The final decision about the contents of this volume was only taken in 1979, in a new meeting of the Committee in Paris. There it was established that Mazrui's original proposal would be maintained, with an addition of chapters that would allow questions related to African internal politics to be maintained. In other words, the solution was a conjugation of interests between what the editor originally wanted and what was added by Committee members. This was made possible thanks to an expansion of the volume, which came to have thirty chapter, eight more than usual for the GHA. However, this victory on the part of the editor is undoubtedly an example of the new environment that had been internally created, conditioned by the pressure of the Director General of Unesco for a more 'democratic environment,' aimed at completing the project.

After 1979 it can be noted that questions of form, translation and access to the work became the preeminent concerns of the organizers of the GHA and of the EC and Committee. What was now involved was the completion of the work which had consumed decades of work on the part of the organizers.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Between 1982 and 1999, in addition to its complete publication in French, English and Arabic, distinct volumes of the GHA were published in Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, Japanese, Swahili, Pular, Hausa, Italian and Fulani. In 2007 the second stage of the GHA officially commenced, entitled “The pedagogical use of the *General History of Africa*.” The objective of this phase was to expand the diffusion and pedagogical use of the knowledge of the GHA, and was conceived in the meetings organized by Unesco in Dakar (1986), Nairobi (1989) and Tripoli (1999). Its organization resulted from a formal request from the African Union, which intends to adopt a common curriculum for the History of African among its members states, based on the lines established by the GHA. The current president (2010) of the *Scientific Committee for the Pedagogical Use of the General History of Africa* is the historian Elikia M’Bokolo.

In Brazil, with the support of the Ministry of Education, the complete publication of this classic work on the history of Africa was arranged at the end of 2010. In addition, this vast range material will be summarized and updated.

Undoubtedly, new dilemmas will emerge in the attempts to renew, based on the GHA, universal knowledge about the history of Africa in current projects. This involves acknowledging the latter, rather than making a *tabula rasa* of this historic knowledge, based on extensive historical knowledge, which counted on the best specialists in the area over a period of four decades. However, the success of these ventures, from our point of view, will depend on critical reflection in relation to the meaning and the importance of the search for the ‘African perspective’ constructed in the GHA as a scientific criteria for the historic understanding of the continent. What has to be investigated is not only the institutional history of the project, as has been done in this article, but also its presence as a theoretical and methodological premise for the writing of the GHA.¹⁵

In relation to the institutional history of the project, the African perspective is related, above all, to the four points raised at the 1971 Paris meeting, which are:

- a) A scientific and democratic approach;
- b) Looking at the totality of Africa, with its regional inter-relations;

- c) Focused on the history of societies, civilizations and institutions, valorizing the contributions of tradition and African art;
- d) Looking for Africa's own knowledge of itself, from the point of view of African authors' about their own history, the recognition of African cultural heritage and the factors which contributed to the unity of the continent.

These points are restated in the 1979 *Project Presentation*, written by the then president of the Committee, Prof. Betwhell Ogot.¹⁶

These points from the 1971 Paris meeting would be reaffirmed by the organizers of the work during the institutional history of the project. As has been noted here, this fact was especially striking between 1975 and 1978, when the organizers interfered directly in the choice of the authors, the direction of content, and the interpretative approach of the work. Two points were highlighted here. First, the need to reaffirm Africans as the subjects of their own history. In second place, the decision to see Africa from a more internal point of view, as shown in the controversies about Volume VIII, edited by Ali Mazrui.

This orthodox vision of the African perspective, however, for the reasons already listed, ran out of steam after 1978, when the first volumes of the work began to be published. It was also during this period that it was sought to finalize the other volumes, finally published in the 1980s.

Despite the controversies about the African perspective in the history of the GHA project, without a doubt the construction of the collective approach of the work, carried out by hundreds of specialists from all over the world, was the greatest contribution they made to knowledge about Africa. The actual authors were aware of this fact. For this reason, the following statement can be found in the general points of the project in Paris: "This effort to examine the facts from their interior is a singular characteristic of the project and should, alongside their scientific qualities, give them great significance" (see note 7).

Understanding and updating this collective reflection about the 'African perspective' is to inherit the greatest legacy which the GHA left for the history of Africa, and for a post-Eurocentric vision of historic knowledge.

NOTES

¹ UNESCO-CLT-HIGENAF-ABIDJAN-3 (UNESCO, 1966a), p.1. Available at: unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001432/143293eb.pdf; Accessed on 9 Oct. 2009.

² UNESCO-SHC-2 (UNESCO, 1966b), p.6-8. Available at: unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001279/127997eb.pdf; Accessed on 9 Oct. 2009.

³ SHC-MD-10 (UNESCO, 1970a), p.1. Available at: unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001269/126966eb.pdf; Accessed on 9 Oct. 2009.

⁴ SHC- CONF- 66-4-p. 15ss. UNESCO (1970). SHC-CONF-66-4 (UNESCO, 1970b), p.15ss. Available at: unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0000/000000/000090eb.pdf; Accessed on 9 Oct. 2009.

⁵ UNESCO, 1970a, p.3. Original italics. All the citations from the minutes were translated by the author (MSB).

⁶ SHC-MD-16 (UNESCO, 1971), p.28-36). Available at: unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0000/000002/000233eb.pdf; Accessed on 10 Oct. 2009.

⁷ UNESCO, 1971, p.7. There are two differences between this text, approved in 1971, and what appears in the final version of the first volume in 1979. The first is item 2. In this the phrase above is maintained, but complemented with the following statement: “The historic ties of Africa with the other continents will received due attention and will be analyzed from the point of view of mutual exchanges and multilateral influences, showing, to an adequate extent, the contribution of Africa to the development of humanity.” The other change refers to point 3. The former is maintains, while the latter is reformulated as follows: “It is based on various sources, including oral tradition and artistic expression.” These are subtle changes which do not substantially later the meaning of the texts.

⁸ The last four points are cited, for example, in the letter (confidential at the time) sent in June 1976, by the president of the Committee, Habte, and the Secretary General of the project, J. Devisse, to the Director General of UNESCO, about the problems to be solved for continuity of the project. See: CC-CS-76-WS-18 (UNESCO, 1976), p.1-6. Available at: unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0002/000213/021386eb.pdf; Accessed on 10 Oct. 2009.

⁹ SHC-75-CONF. 601-2, p.5 (UNESCO, 1975a), p.5. Available at: unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0001/000118/011828eb.pdf; Accessed on 10 Oct. 2009.

¹⁰ In relation to the participation of new members of the Committee and of those present at EC meetings, see CC-77-CONF.602-1 (UNESCO, 1977a), p.19. Available at: unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0003/000324/032484eb.pdf; Accessed on 10 Oct. 2009.

¹¹ SHC-75-CONF.612-3 (UNESCO, 1975b), p.7.

¹² CC-77-CONF.602-2 (UNESCO, 1977b), p.23. Available at: unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0003/000324/032498fb.pdf; Accessed on 10 Oct. 2009.

¹³ CC-78-CONF. 607-3, p.11 (UNESCO, 1978), p.11. Available at: unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0003/000349/034909eb.pdf; Accessed on 10 Oct. 2009.

¹⁴ UNESCO, 1977b, p.40. The extension of the Committee’s mandate, to 1984, was confirmed at the 27th Meeting of the Executive Council of UNESCO in 1979. See: 107 EX-13 (UNESCO, 1979). Available at: unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0003/000357/035760eb.pdf; Accessed on 10 Oct. 2009.

¹⁵ Something done in my doctoral dissertation: BARBOSA, Muryatan Santana. *A África por ela mesma: a perspectiva africana na História Geral da África* (Unesco). Doctoral dissertation in history – FFLCH/USP. São Paulo, 2012. Adviser: Marina de Mello e Souza.

¹⁶ OGOT, Bethwell. Apresentação do projeto. In: KI-ZERBO, Joseph. *Metodologia e pré-história da África*. (História Geral da África, v.1). São Paulo: Ática; Unesco, 1982.