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AFRICAN STUDIES IN THE OTHER EUROPE: A LEGITIMATE PERSPECTIVE ON AFRICA

ABSTRACT

African Studies in the countries that were under communist rule and that today are known as post-communist, have originally developed an interest in Africa based on ideological, political and economic interests of the state. There has been a gradual shift from ideology to economy while the study of African politics seems to follow the vagaries of the influence that Africa exerts on the world scene. Characteristically, until recently AEGIS did not include a single centre or association based in post-communist Europe even though in countries such as Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary African studies currently experience considerable growth. This reflects both the hegemony of Western Europe with its strong colonial and neo-colonial emphases and weak official interest that post-communist Europe shows for Africa. The article describes changing emphases of eastern European Africanist scholarship and discusses the question of legitimacy of the marginal but non-colonial approach to African studies. In contradistinction to the Western European African studies and with Eastern European approaches it shows that the latter perspective is useful for a critical look at the hitherto dominant paternalistic style of African studies in Europe.

Keywords: African studies, east-central Europe, AEGIS, a non-colonial approach

The purpose of this essay is to advocate African studies and teaching which are free of hidden agendas and colonialist hangovers, for African studies that, wherever practiced, would be considered valid and recognized by the academy in Africa and beyond. African studies have until now depended too much on the political and economic demand of the metropolitan countries which followed the neo-colonial agendas too closely. The time has come that the near monopoly for the production and dissemination of knowledge, including publication, maintained by the Africanists from former colonial powers, is overcome by a joint effort at production of knowledge by African and non-African scholars. This paper deals especially with the share and the specific position of east-central European Africanists in the world-wide research on Africa. It is not a history but rather an engaged look at the changing role of African studies in the Other Europe, i.e. the post-communist Europe which thus far was outside of scope of AEGIS.

From the outset one has to emphasize that the countries of east-central Europe, under communist rule following the World War II, did not participate in the colonial conquest¹. Africa was a continent whose North was somewhat familiar to the people of the former Austrian/Austro-Hungarian Empire through its adversary/ally Ottoman Empire and its geopolitical interests in Arab-Moslem North Africa. There was also awareness about Abyssinia/Ethiopia as a Christian outpost in north-eastern Africa. The so-called Black Africa was virtually absent from the consciousness of an average Czech, Slovak, Pole or Hungarian. South Africa entered the outlook of these nations due to the two Boer Wars, in particular the second one (1899-1902). Public opinion was then on the side of the national self-determination of the Boers versus the British Empire. However, Black Africans did not play a role except as a cliché known as 'Zulukaffirs'. Another cliché was the 'King of Madagascar' known as Count Móric/Maurice Benyovszky, claimed at once by Hungarians, Slovaks and Poles, who was an adventurer who helped France to become colonial master of world's fourth largest island. An Ashanti village with people exhibited as animals toured Prague, Vienna and other cities in the mid-1890s.

TRAVELLERS AND THE FIRST AFRICANISTS

The relation to Sub-Saharan Africa was also romantic. This sentiment was expressed in a traveller tradition among the landlocked Europeans of the east-centre of Europe. In the late 19th century Emil Holub, the medical doctor born in the East Bohemian town of Holice, followed in the steps of David Livingstone and reached with his party beyond the Victoria Falls². A museum-monument was recently modernized in his na-

¹ Communist-ruled East Germany, also known as the German Democratic Republic, can be seen as a successor state to imperial Germany which, of course, was a colonial power in Africa and Oceania. The German colonial archives were/are in Potsdam near Berlin, on the territory of East Germany. East German African studies enjoyed relatively strong support of the government.

² E. Holub, *Seven Years in South Africa. Travels, Researches, and Hunting Adventures, between the Diamond-fields and the Zambesi, 1872-79*, trans. by E. Frewer, Cambridge 2009.

tive town. The exhibition contains, among other things, his office furniture brought there from Vienna where Holub died in 1904. Hungarians had László Magyar, an explorer and map-maker of Southwest Africa who spent 17 years mostly in Angola of the mid-19th century. The early 20th century saw first instances of scientific research by east-central Europeans. Another Hungarian, Emil Torday, who was in British service, collected rare specimens in the Congo³. The Polish anthropologist Jan Czekanowski joined a German expedition to the Congo in 1906-1907⁴. The Czech-born Austrian SVD priest Pavel Šebesta (Paul Schebesta) distinguished himself as a specialist on African and Asian short growth populations⁵. Andrzej Waligórski, one of Malinowski's Polish students in London, did his fieldwork in East Africa in 1946-48⁶. The traveller tradition continued after World War II. Two Czech business engineers Jiří Hanzelka and Miroslav Zikmund crossed the whole of Africa in a Tatra air-cooled passenger car in the late 1940s and their three-volume work, *The Africa of Dreams and Reality*, was translated into a number of languages⁷. In Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia university students became seriously interested in studying Africa after they returned from travelling expeditions to various parts of Africa. Well-known Africanists such as Tymowski, Kropáček and Vorbrich started their respective careers as student travellers. The Czech student Expedition Lambaréné tried to deliver medicine to the hospital in Gabon that was founded by Albert Schweitzer.

The Year of Africa provided decisive impetus for African studies. In Prague, African studies were opened at Charles University as a separate department of study in 1961. Students were sent to study African languages to the Leningrad State University (among them Szymon Chodak, Zdeněk Poláček, Petr Skalník and Géza Füssi Nagy). By the mid-1960s the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences opened several research positions on Africa (well-known Africanists such as Petr Zima, Milan Kalous, Vladimír Klíma and Otakar Hulec started their careers then). As early as 1961 the ethnographer and later social anthropologist Ladislav Holý was sent by the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences to the Sudan in order to carry out field research among the Berti of Darfur⁸. The University of Warsaw opened the Studium afrykanistyczne as a special research and coordination centre that published a scholarly journal *Africana Bulletin*. Hungarians also opened a special institution for the study of the economy in Africa. Mihály Sárkány and Csaba Ecsedy pioneered Africanist anthropological research in Hungary. Of course, the interest behind these research and study initiatives

³ E. Földessy, *Torday Emil kongói gyűjteménye. Emil Torday Congo Collection*, Budapest 2015.

⁴ J. Czekanowski, *Forschungen in Nil-Kongo-Zwischengebiet*, Vol. 1-5, Leipzig 1911-1927 (*Wissenschaftliche Ergebnisse der Deutschen Zentral-Afrika-Expedition 1907-08*, 6).

⁵ P. Schebesta, *Among Congo Pygmies*, trans. by G. Griffin, London 1933.

⁶ A. Waligórski, *Spółeczność afrykańska w procesie przemian 1890-1949 r. Studium wschodnioafrykańskiego plemienia Luo*, Warszawa 1969.

⁷ J. Hanzelka, M. Zikmund, *Afrika snů a skutečnosti*, Vol. 1-3, Praha 1952. Their travelogue was perhaps most influential on the first cohort of Czech Africanists who started their university study in 1961.

⁸ L. Holý, *Neighbours and Kinsmen. A Study of the Berti People of Darfur*, London 1974.

was to facilitate the political and economic entrée to Africa of the Communist-ruled countries of east-central Europe. But at least initially academic research on Africa was meant to be very serious and independent. For example, the Czech Arabist Ivan Hrbek initiated the publication of a two-volume History of Africa⁹ and later participated in the UNESCO History of Africa project. After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, following the Soviet example, special emphasis was placed on the study of African socialism and especially of those countries deemed to be socialist-oriented (Ghana, Mali, Congo-Brazzaville, Benin, Angola, Mozambique, Madagascar and a number of other countries). Research on Africa in east-central Europe was to a greater or lesser extent dependent on Soviet interests. Perhaps paradoxically no formal political science existed in those years in the communist countries. The research on socialist orientation was in the hands of historians or specialists on Marxism-Leninism.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

The demise of communist rule in east-central Europe was considered as a new opening for African studies. African countries ostensibly embarked on the path towards democracy, thus following ex-communist countries of east-central Europe. However, post-communism in east-central European countries also meant their almost exclusive orientation on European integration, European politics and economy. Whereas African studies in the western part of continent expanded, the Afro-European Group for Interdisciplinary Studies (AEGIS) was established in 1991 and eventually its first European Conference on African Studies (ECAS) took place in London in 2005, the official interest in Africa faded in Czechoslovakia and Hungary while it stagnated in Poland. For example by 1990 the 12-people-strong department of Africa in Prague's Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences slowly diminished until it entirely disappeared during the first decade of 21st century. Nevertheless, the bibliography for the years 1980-2000 counts more than 1500 items¹⁰. Regrettably, also the African studies teaching programme at Charles University that still in 2000 proudly celebrated 40 years of its existence by an international conference¹¹ has meanwhile ceased to exist¹². Whereas the Polish Association for African Studies was launched in 1990 and until now has organized four well-attended national conferences, in the Czech Republic enthusiasts from the "Cultura Africa" civic association opened the first Viva Africa academic conference in 2006. From 2007, it became a yearly international conference organized first in Plzeň (Pilsen) and then since 2009 four times at Hradec Králové. The

⁹ I. Hrbek et al., *Dějiny Afriky*, Vol. 1-2, Praha 1966.

¹⁰ P. Hereit, O. Hulec, *Africana Bohemica II. Bibliographia 1989-2000*, Praha 2001.

¹¹ L. Kropáček, P. Skalník (eds.), *Africa 2000. Forty Years of African Studies in Prague*, Prague 2001.

¹² L. Kropáček, 'African Studies at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University: Ambitions and Constraints' in A. Bedřich, T. Retka (eds.), *Rytíř z Komárova. K 70. narozeninám Petra Skalníka. Knight from Komárov. To Petr Skalník for his 70th Birthday*, Praha 2015, pp. 157-170 (*AntropoEdice*, 4).

8th Viva Africa conference returned to Plzeň in October 2013. At Plzeň the Czech Association for African Studies was established and the 9th Viva Africa conference was organized by the association in Prague at the Metropolitan University Prague in October 2015. Several joint monographs came out of these conferences¹³.

A revival of African Studies in the Czech Republic was heralded in 2007 by the launching of an M.A. African studies programme in the Department of Politics at the University of Hradec Králové. Under the leadership of Vlastimil Fiala, the PhD. programme was soon added and the first doctor degree was awarded in 2014. Today Hradec political studies have established themselves as a postgraduate centre. Hradec students are being sent to Africa on the basis of special agreements (heretofore to Ghana, Cape Verde, Nigeria and South Africa) in order to study and carry out their research. Africanists from Africa attend events at Hradec and African students arrive to pursue their studies at Hradec Králové. The staff is engaged in several research projects financed nationally and internationally. The emphasis is placed on various aspects of political parties in Africa. One can say that at Hradec Králové there emerged a school on political parties in Africa that is busy to gain an international reputation. Heretofore several monographs in the Czech Republic were published¹⁴. Another member of the Hradec Králové African studies team is Jan Klíma, a historian of Africa whose work has centered on Lusophone Africa but who recently published a history of Africa and a series of works about the history of the particular countries¹⁵. Since 2013 the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Hradec Králové publishes the biannual journal *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society* of which Petr Skalník is the editor. The latter was also responsible for the preparation of the Czech Association for African Studies (CAAS) that was established in October 2013 during the 8th International Conference on African Studies Viva Africa. The association has taken over the task of the organization of subsequent Viva Africa conferences. Meanwhile the CAAS has joined AEGIS as an associate member.

Jan Záhořík of the West Bohemian University in Plzeň (Pilsen) established a small Centre of African Studies within the Department of History. The centre was accepted as an associate member of AEGIS in 2013. His activities in the field of African studies are numerous. He organized "The 1st Central European African Studies Conference"

¹³ P. Chabal, P. Skalník (eds.), *Africanists on Africa. Current Issues*, Berlin 2010; V. Fiala (ed.), *Multiple Identities in Post-colonial Africa*, Hradec Králové 2012; H. Horáková, P. Nugent, P. Skalník (eds.), *Africa. Power and Powerlessness*, Berlin 2011 (*Afrikanische Studien*, 43); G. Klute, P. Skalník (eds.), *Actors in Contemporary African Politics*, Berlin 2013 (*Afrikanische Studien*, 51).

¹⁴ V. Fiala, *Politické stranictví v afrických lusofonních zemích. Ostrov sv. Tomáše a Princův ostrov*, Olomouc 2010; idem, *Politické stranictví v západní Africe (Senegal a Gambie)*, Ústí nad Orlicí 2015; idem, J. Prouza and J. Záhořík, *Politické stranictví v subsaharské Africe. Botswana, Malawi, Ghana, Etiopie a Eritrea*, Olomouc 2010; V. Fiala et al., *Teoretické a metodologické problémy výzkumu politických stran Afriky, Asie, Latinské Ameriky a Oceánie*, Ústí nad Orlicí 2011; V. Fiala et al., *Politické strany Afriky, Asie a Latinské Ameriky. Rysy politického stranictví*, Brno 2013 (*Politologická Řada*); J. Prouza, *Ghana. Volby, politické strany a stranictví*, Olomouc 2010 (*Studie a Analýzy*).

¹⁵ J. Klíma, *Dějiny Afriky. Vývoj kontinentů, regionů a států*, Praha 2013; idem, *Dějiny Namibie*, Praha 2015 (*Dějiny Států*); idem, *Dějiny Guineje-Bissau*, Praha 2015 (*Dějiny Států*).

in 2013 and since then his ambition has been to coordinate the Central European *African Studies* Network (CEASN). In 2015 his centre published the first issue of an electronic *Journal of African History, Politics, and Society* (JAHPS). Since 2013 he also has organized biennially the “Africa Days in Pilsen”. Záhorký also engages with other Pilsen Africanists in the travel business to Africa.

Hana Horáková, who has been mostly interested in modern South Africa, is an employee of the private Metropolitan University Prague. It was in the Czech Republic that she published her PhD thesis on the national formation in post-apartheid South Africa¹⁶ and co-edited a publication comparing the Czech Republic with South Africa¹⁷.

In Hungary African studies were always concentrated in Budapest. In the 1970s through 1990s, several internationally-known Hungarian Africanists worked in different institutions. Mihály Sárkány, an economic anthropologist, was especially interested in East Africa. The Bantuist Géza Fussi Nagy (1946-2008) initiated the Hungarian Africa Society and educated a group of Africanists while Éva Sebestyén researched archives on Angola and published *inter alia* the works of László Magyar. The anthropologist Csaba Ecsedy worked as a museologist and published theoretical works on African societies. Bea Vidacs, who wrote the first survey of African studies in Hungary¹⁸, returned to Hungary after a long sojourn in the United States. Her research about political aspects of football in Cameroon was well received by the international Africanist community¹⁹. Tamás Régi wrote another discussion on African studies in Hungary²⁰, taught in Korea for some time, and continues to be interested in the promotion of African studies in his country. However, African studies of late seem to have moved from Budapest to Pécs²¹. István Tarrósy founded the Africa Research Centre in the Political Science Department of Pécs University and has organized several international conferences. He also analysed the general involvement of Hungary with Africa²² (Tarrósy 2013).

In Poland after decades of Warsaw-based language and society research on Africa, the initiative was taken over by Cracow where Robert Kłosowicz has initiated the study of African politics within the Institute of Political Science which he heads and in 2014 founded the interfaculty Jagiellonian Research Center for African Studies. Three

¹⁶ H. Horáková, *Národ, kultura a etnicita v postapartheidní Jižní Africe*, Hradec Králové 2007.

¹⁷ Eadem, S. Rudwick (eds.), *Global Challenges and Local Reactions. Czech Republic and South Africa*, Berlin 2014.

¹⁸ B. Vidacs, ‘Outline History of Hungarian African Studies’ *Artes Populares*, Vol. 10-11, No. 1 (1984), pp. 119-129.

¹⁹ Eadem, *Visions of a Better World. Football in the Cameroonian Social Imagination*, Münster 2010.

²⁰ T. Régi, ‘A magyar Afrika-kutatás tudománytörténetének története’, *Africana Hungarica*, Vol. 2, No. 1-2 (2007), pp. 147-156.

²¹ L. Szabó, ‘Africa Studies in Hungary: The Africa Research Centre of the University of Pécs’, *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2013), pp. 125-133.

²² I. Tarrósy, L. Szabó, G. Hyden (eds.), *The African State in a Changing Global Context. Breakdowns and Transformations*, Berlin 2011 (*Afrikanische Studien*, 42); I. Tarrósy, P. Morenth, ‘Global Opening for Hungary: A New Beginning for Hungarian Africa Policy?’, *African Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 1-2 (2013), pp. 77-96.

young specialists on Africa work at the University of Wrocław²³. These younger scholars in fact follow the path initiated by two senior scholars who have reached the retirement age recently although they continue to be active. The historian Michał Tymowski published his summarizing monograph on pre-colonial statehood in Africa in English²⁴ while the opus magnum of Ryszard Vorbrich, an anthropologist, who mostly worked in Cameroon and other West African countries, is accessible in Polish²⁵.

In Slovakia the pioneer of African studies has been since 1970s the historian Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová who drew on her early study sojourn in Uganda and published a number of studies on this country. She has a number of followers who guarantee that Africanist research in Slovakia will continue to develop.

CONCLUSION

Can African studies exist in countries without colonial tradition such as the countries of east-central Europe? The answer that is offered in this contribution is in the affirmative. Actually one can see an advantage in the situation where there is no bias for studying particular countries which were colonies "of one's own" before. As I tried to show, the interest of Africanists from east-central Europe is not limited to any particular African country or group of countries, especially not following the division of Africa into formerly colonial territories. Is the communist past a disadvantage for these countries to become hotbeds of fertile African studies? Actually it is not a hindrance because the present phase of post-communism displays comparative moments with post-colonial Africa and thus opens a research perspective not conceived before. The unusual comparisons may eventually inspire Africans to look for a better understanding of African problems through the looking glass of east-central Europe. One can imagine that Africa will produce Europeanists in the same way as Europe produced Africanists. African studies in east-central Europe thus contribute to the equality of knowledge production between Europe and Africa, in order to balance and eventually overcome the dependence of African studies on the knowledge produced in the metropolitan countries with vested interests derived from their colonial past.

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- ²³ K. Czernichowski, D. Kopiński, A. Polus, 'Polish African Studies at a Crossroads: Past, Present and Future', *Africa Spectrum*, Vol. 47, No. 2-3 (2012), pp. 167-185.
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- ²⁵ R. Vorbrich, *Plemienna i postplemienna Afryka. Koncepcje i postaci wspólnoty w dawnej i współczesnej Afryce*, Poznań 2012 (*Etnologia i Antropologia Kulturowa*, 27).

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