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**Viera Pawlikova-Vilhanova.** 2013. *The Production of History and Culture in Africa Revisited: Problems, Methods, Sources*. Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press. Studia Orientalia Monographica. Vol. 4 pp. V-XXXII & 1-119, ISBN 978-80-8095-085-9.

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*African Historical Studies: A Central European's Perspective –*

*A Review Essay*

**Abstract**

As a field of specialization African Studies have, like other areas of focus, attracted much scholarly interest. Whilst much has been heard of about the field from those in the proverbial west, very little has been read from those who come from other regions such as Central Europe. Though Central and East European scholars have made their inputs, many of us who have concentrated on Africa are not familiar with their imprint. Viera Pawlikova-Vilhanova, who belongs to this group, has indeed made her mark and Pawlikova-Vilhanova's book, namely *The Production of History and Culture in Africa Revisited: Problems, Methods, Sources* that is being reviewed in this essay, bears testimony to that.

**Keywords:** African Studies, African Historical Studies, Central Asian Scholarship, Viera Pawlikova-Vilhanova

## **0. Introduction**

Scholars, who wish to write on African studies that have developed and expanded into an enormously rich area over the past half a century (circa 1960-2010), have indeed met major difficulties in capturing many of its facets in one volume let alone in an encyclopedia of five to eight volumes in an even-handed manner. Here mention may be made of two examples to illustrate the point. Everyone in African studies are generally well acquainted with the invaluable but dated eight volumes *UNESCO General History of Africa* series that began with its first volume (Paris: UNESCO & Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1995) in 1981 under Prof. Joseph Ki-Zerbo's (d.2006) editorship and that ended in 1993 with the eighth volume (Berkeley, California: UC Press & Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers) edited by Prof. Ali Mazrui (d.2014); each of the volumes had an editor that was teamed up with a number of scholars who made important contributions to the stipulated themes.

Even though some had problems in covering a topic adequately, they managed to, at least, stimulate subsequent researchers with their academic interventions. The same applied to the edited work of Mario Azevedo; the latter together with a group of Africanists had chapters in the very valuable *Africana Studies: A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora* publication (Durham: Carolina Academic Press 1998); they, like other editors and teams, tried their utmost to offer satisfactory scholarly insights into the topics that they tackled despite not being able to please all reviewers and readers. But then, one may argue that this largely depended upon what the scholar had planned to focus upon for his/her study; if he/she threw the research net too wide, he/she would inevitably find him/herself challenged by the vastness/shalowness of the subject, and from that moment onwards he/she would encounter all sorts of difficulties as regards, inter alia, the theory to apply, the method to adopt, and the contents to cover. And, by extension, the opposite would also apply, if he/she had confined himself/herself to a project that yielded little or insignificant results.

### **1. Viera Pawlikova-Vilhanova and the Monograph**

Despite the mentioned scholarly challenges, there are scholars who have demonstrated that they were able to undertake onerous projects and in the end produce meaningful outputs; here the name of Viera Pawlikova-Vilhanova comes to mind. Though Viera Pawlikova-Vilhanova's name might not be widely known in traditionally famous African studies circles, she has stealthily stamped her mark as a specialist in this field; one only has to glance through selected Eastern European journals such as the well-established *Asian and African Studies* journal, which has been issued by the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Slovak Academy of Sciences since 1965, in which she published on a regular basis.

Be that as it may, Viera Pawlikova-Vilhanova, who is a senior research scholar at the mentioned institute and professor of African Studies at Trnava's University of St. Cyril and Methodius, is presently the international director of the international project *Fontes Historiae Africanae* ([FHA] Sources for African History) that is under the wing of the Brussels-based l'Union Academique Internationale. Besides the organization's aim to produce critical editions of sources for African history, it has also been associated with numerous other projects and publications; one only has to browse through the tail end of this book – being reviewed here – that lists projects (pp.94 and 104) and publications (pp.107 to 111 [see Appendix]).

### **2. The Monograph and Its Contents**

Since mention was made of the book that is being reviewed, it is best for one to straightaway turn to it. Viera Pawlikova-Vilhanova completed a monograph that she titled *The Production of History and Culture in Africa Revisited: Problems, Methods, Sources*. This text appeared as the fourth in the 'Studia Orientalia Monographica' series, and it complemented numerous other works that the FHA committee published in partnership with among others the British Academy over the years. One may therefore state that since the text's stress was on 'sources' (as it appears in the sub-heading of the title), it is indeed fitting that Pawlikova-Vilhanova's work had to be slotted in as part of this series and as one of the key texts for African Studies in general and for African history in particular. Pawlikova-Vilhanova divided her study into two main parts; the first part critically discussed 'the emergence of African Historical Studies' with its concentration on the 'problems and methods' (pp.7-76), and the second part concerned itself with the 'production of Historical Knowledge in Africa' with special

emphasis on the ‘sources, editions of sources, and projects’ (pp.77-104); each of these two parts has been accompanied by sub-headings. Before dipping into the contents of these two parts, a brief comment on some of the technical aspects will be in order.

Traditionally one finds that whenever books are published that their bibliography appears at the end; this was not the case with this text and one assumes that the same goes for the other publications in the ‘*Studia Orientalia Monographica*’ series. For this text, the bibliography (pp.VII-XXXII) was inserted immediately after the contents’ pages (pp.V-VI) that followed the title page. The bibliography had two sections; the first covered books (and book chapters), and the second included ‘papers and studies.’ Here the reviewer inserted ‘book chapters’ in brackets because this is not quite obvious as one scans through the books that were consulted for this study; one was under the impression that the bibliography’s books’ section only listed books and not the chapters in books. That aside and as already indicated earlier, the book contained a list of FHA publications and that specific catalogue was placed in the appendix (pp.107-111). And similar to most other works of this kind, this book had a user-friendly index (pp.113-119) that guided one to specific topics, themes, and titles. At this juncture, one needs to move on to the book’s contents and pick out some important issues that the author wrestled with and covered.

As stated in the introductory part of this review, any attempt to cover fifty years and more of African Studies will force one to definitely deal with countless challenges; this is indeed what Pawlikova-Vilhanova faced as she revisited this exciting discipline in order to critically review African historical studies’ development and to identify the numerous problems and diverse methods in the first part. Pawlikova-Vilhanova correctly pointed out in her introduction that over the many decades both historical and cultural knowledge about Africa as a vast continent has undergone processes of reconstruction and reinterpretation; and she observed that throughout this period the variety of research outputs illustrated that Africa’s rich and diverse cultures have had various representations depending from which angle the researchers approached the topics and themes. For this study, Pawlikova-Vilhanova set herself the task of tracing and documenting different types of historical activity associated with African studies and one of these dealt with the problem of historical sources for African history; so for her to undertake an assessment of these issues she returned to the origins of the African historical research and writing (p.3). Pawlikova-Vilhanova acknowledged that when she took on this onerous task that she was restricted by place and limited by sources, and as a consequence she only extracted a fraction of the material on the subject.

### **3. African Historical Studies’ Origins**

When Pawlikova-Vilhanova traced her footsteps to locate African historical studies’ origins, she rightly observed that its emergence was tied to the process of decolonization that diverged radically from the Eurocentric interpretations of the continent’s history. In this introductory section of Pawlikova-Vilhanova’s texts, one would like her to have brought in the North African born Ibn Khaldun’s (d.1406) – of whom she made mention in passing in the book’s second part - theory of social history since his ideas were in sync with some of the sociological and historical theories that were developed. Be that as it may, Pawlikova-Vilhanova then pointed to the fact that by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century African history was ‘rehabilitated as an academic discipline’ and that Indian-born English historian Roland Oliver (d.2014) and others were key players in this project. The eventual outcome of this was the formation of different strands of historical scholarship in countries such as Nigeria and Tanzania where it was

transformed into a very dynamic discipline. And she interestingly highlighted that whilst some scholars wanted to maintain the distinction between (Black) sub-Saharan Africa and (White) North Africa, Britain's founding fathers of the discipline were very much against this; unfortunately, despite their efforts to break down this 'wall' it still remains intact and some African and Arab scholars are partly guilty of reinforcing the idea in their writings and teaching. Nonetheless, as she progressed into her text she addressed the issue of 'situating the problems and issues;' she stressed the main concern in the early years of reconstructing the discipline had to do with the question of 'sources.' She stated that Jan Vansina's (d.2017) coherent articulation of and approach towards 'oral tradition' was indeed a major methodological breakthrough for African historical scholarship, and this caused it to develop into a separate intellectual source. Another important academic development that advanced the cause of this discipline, she posited, was the interdisciplinary method; this was undeniably a radical approach at that time.

#### **4. Themes of African History: The 1960s**

After Pawlikova-Vilhanova reflected on the problems and methods, she shifted her focus to 'emerging themes of African History' that turned out to be the longest chapter in this part of the book. She opened this chapter by referring to scholars of African historiography and she raised the question of Africa's regeneration as part of the post-colonial process that was underway in the 1960s; for this section, she seem to have overlooked E.A. Ayandele's *African Historical Studies* (London: Frank Cass, 1979 and repr Taylor & Francis, 2005). She posited that various themes were gradually tabled, discussed, and researched; from among the list that received much attention were colonialism, anti-colonial resistance, and nationalism. These were tackled by the different schools of African history that emerged particularly in Nigeria (that is, the Ibadan school) and Tanzania (that is, the Dar us-Salam school). Whilst she gave insightful comments on a few Francophone and Anglophone countries and reflected the key figures and their writings, she did not say much about Anglophone states such as Ethiopia and Sudan or Lusophone countries such Angola and Mozambique. Several questions regarding the contents of this chapter come to mind and they are: What was the status of African historical scholarship in those countries that were not mentioned? Was the scholarship in African history sterile and moribund? To what degree did Portuguese historical scholarship differ from the British and the French? And did Portuguese scholarship not have any influence on Angolan and Mozambiquen historical scholarship? And since much of the attention was given to West Africa (Nigeria, Ghana, & Senegal) and East Africa (Tanzania & Kenya), the question is: why did the author not scribble in South(ern) Africa where (White) African scholarship adopted a markedly different approach to the subject? After all, that region's historians were heavily influenced by the apartheid racist system and that was indeed a major concern for African historians from that region and beyond. But one should say in Pawlikova-Vilhanova's defense that she did mention some of the developments in Mozambique and South Africa in the chapter that followed.

#### **5. African Historical Studies: Beyond the 1960s**

Well, speaking about a crisis that emerging African historians from Southern Africa faced, this was certainly the concern of Pawlikova-Vilhanova's chapter that addressed 'the period of the sense of crisis in the study of African History and of the fundamental questioning and reassessment of the field since the 1970s.' The radicals of the 1970s critiqued and questioned their predecessors, and, according to Pawlikova-Vilhanova, they redirected African historiography by identifying new theories (such as Marxist theory of development), fresh

approaches (such as the social sciences), and additional themes (such as underdevelopment and poverty). Pawlikova-Vilhanova correctly mentioned that the social science research techniques and methods did definitely impact upon the African academic undertakings that were also accompanied by Marxist/socialist models. From the 1970s onwards, she averred, colonial and post-colonial cum contemporary history developed into formidable African historical research topics. It was during the mid-1970s when the *UNESCO General History of Africa* series got off the ground even though attempts were made in the 1960s to push it ahead.

However, alongside this project the British historians such as Prof. John Fage (d.2002) embarked on another ambitious academic venture called the *Cambridge History of Africa*; this series reflected serious British-African historiography. Though Pawlikova-Vilhanova mentioned significant historical developments as regard the disciplines, she said little about the important role that a few of the Africa-based academic journals played; periodicals that were instrumental in advancing African historical studies' scholarship in various parts of the continent. Whilst one hastily add that she did make mention of some, one would like her to perhaps have given a comparative overview since these were important intellectual platforms. Turning to 'African Historical Research and Writing: The Current State of the Specialty and Challenges for the Future' in which she referred to *Afrika Zamani* – that was established in 1972 by the Association of African Historians in Senegal's Dakar (p.69) - having been a forerunner continentally, one noted that she forgot to mention University of Witwatersrand's *African Studies* journal that replaced on 1942 the previously known *Bantu Studies* (1921-1941).

## 6. African Historians and the Question: 'What is African History?'

In Part One's final chapter, Pawlikova-Vilhanova appropriately opened up with a few quotes from the British-born Edward Carr's (d.1982) influential work *What is History?* (Cambridge: CUP, 1961). Apart from having created an intellectual commotion as a consequence of Carr's approach to historical studies that interrogated how historians used 'facts,' one would like to know to what extent African historians were persuaded by Carr's arguments assuming that some of them went on to tweak the question and asked: 'What is African History?' At that critical occasion in the discipline's evolution, this was and - to this day - it remains a critical inquiry. Another query that comes to mind and that relates to this debate is Bogumil Jewsiewicki & David Newbury's question: *African Historiographies: African History for Which Africa?* (Beverly, California: Sage, 1986); both queries, one must stress, were and still are awfully thought-provoking to retort. Leave that aside and briefly go back to a few issues that Pawlikova-Vilhanova addressed.

Pawlikova-Vilhanova evaluated and commented on, among others, the African brain drain, the field's intellectual epicenter shifting from Europe to North America, the growth in the proverbial West of professional historians of Africa, the debate regarding the recognition and use of the local languages vis-à-vis the colonial languages, the production of local African histories, the question of western epistemologies dominating African historical studies' scholarship, and the debate whether Western historiography has much in common with African historiography. Towards the close of this chapter, she listed a few pertinent questions – that this reviewer slightly altered - such as: 'How adequately is Africa's history being integrated into world history?', 'Is there a place for an African concept of history that would result in the reassessment of the facts

of African history...?, and 'Can Africa's historical studies outputs impact bring about a general reorientation of the world...? These and other related questions, she emphasized, need to be dealt with by African historians. One certainly agree with many of the issues that she highlighted in this chapter and with the fact that these historians have an enormous task of reasserting African scholarship's centrality in the production of knowledge process in and beyond Africa.

### **7. Monograph's Final Part: Africa's Historical Knowledge – Its Production**

Moving to the second part of this monograph that described the 'Production of Historical Knowledge in Africa,' Pawlikova-Vilhanova carved it into two; the one evaluated the 'sources and editions of sources', and the other identified the different projects of FHA and thus needs no comments. Returning then to the first section of this part, she reflected on the production by discussing the sources and their respective editions. Here Pawlikova-Vilhanova could have footnoted in Marianne Andersson and Asa Lund Moberg's edited text titled *Studying Africa: A Guide to the Sources* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2011) and Funso Afolayan's online *Historiography and Methods of African History Bibliography* (Oxford: OUP, 2012) as well as Jonathan Reynolds' online *History and the Study of Africa Bibliography* (Oxford: OUP, 2013) as useful sources for further research.

Nevertheless, among those sources that she identified and described were the 'Oral Historical Sources', 'Historical Texts in African or European Languages Written by African Amateur Historians', and 'Arabic and Ajami Sources Relating to Africa.' Interestingly, the Ajami manuscripts have, of late, received a great deal of scholarly attention from, inter alia, Northwestern University's Prof. John Hunwick (d.2015) and his co-editor Prof. R. Rex O'Fahey; both of them have played a tremendous role in identifying and cataloguing the West African manuscripts and together they produced the six volume series entitled *Arabic Literature of Africa* (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1990). One, however, wishes to state that Pawlikova-Vilhanova has also been involved the conference proceedings that addressed this subject; the papers she co-edited with Seyni Moumouni *Voices from Africa's Past* (Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press, 2014).

### **8. Towards a Conclusion**

In bringing this review to a close, one should state that Viera Pawlikova-Vilhanova undertook an onerous task in tackling such a vast area. She, however, was fully aware of its enormity and she thus acknowledged the monograph's shortcomings in her introduction. As one read the chapters/sections, one could sense that she was well-acquainted with the theories, methods, sources, and debates in African Studies as a whole and in African historical studies in particular; this has been borne out by her extensive bibliography that appears at the beginning of the book. One can also firmly argue that despite the critical questions that one may wish to pose in each of the chapters and sections, she was able to share her scholarly inputs in a very pleasing and readable style without the reader getting confused or lost in the arguments that she had put forward.

What was also interesting about this monograph was the fact that it was written by one of the handful of East European women who specialized in African history and who brought Central African European thinking on this topic to the fore; this point is being stressed to underline that scholarly interventions from Central and East European women have generally been non-existent and, in addition to this, not much is known about the research outputs of

Central and Eastern European scholars regarding African Studies. Bearing this in mind, one wholeheartedly welcomes Pawlikova-Vilhanova's intellectual interventions that were stimulating and informative. Having said that and by way of ending this review, one would like to pose related questions that should be the concern of African studies researchers. The questions are: 'what about Japanese, Chinese, Turkish, Korean, and Indian scholarship regarding African studies?' 'In which way have these scholars influenced developments, if any, in African Studies?' And 'what about the contribution of North African and Southwest Asian (aka Middle Eastern) scholars – apart from Ibn Batuta (d.1368) and Ibn Khaldun (d.1406) - to the field?' For emerging African studies scholars, there is much to think about and chew on as the years lay ahead, and the final question is: 'Quo Vadis: Where are African studies - as a discipline - heading into the future?'

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