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Czech and Slovak African Studies: A Critical Hindsight

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University of Hradec Králové
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**CZECH AND SLOVAK AFRICAN STUDIES:
A CRITICAL HINDSIGHT.
CONFERENCE AT THE OCCASION OF THE
50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PUBLICATION
OF HISTORY OF AFRICA (IVAN HRBEK
AND COLLECTIVE). HRADEC KRÁLOVÉ,
11 NOVEMBER 2016**

Petr Skalník

This one-day conference, organised by the Department of Politics and held in Hradec Králové, was meant as a stocktaking of Czech and Slovak efforts at establishing viable African studies that started a half century ago. Even though the teaching of African studies at Charles University already began in 1961, the publication of a two-volume original Czechoslovak contribution to African historiography in 1966 was arguably the beginning of the past often turbulent fifty years. After their ascent during the 1960s, the Soviet military invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 has had a negative impact on the fledgling African studies there. The open publication policy was soon discontinued and the so-called normalisation (1969–89) prompted several towering figures to leave the country for good. Ladislav Holý, Milan Kalous and Magdalena Hauner are best-known Africanists who made careers in the West. Elena Bertoncini married out and became one of the leading Africanists in Italy. The writer of these lines defected to the Netherlands in 1976 and later worked in South Africa, but returned to Czechoslovakia after the demise of communism only to witness the breakup of Czechoslovakia into two states.

Another blow to African studies was its disappearance from the curriculum at Charles University during the early 2000s, ironically soon after the celebrations of 40 years of African studies at Prague.¹

¹ Lubos Kropáček and Peter Skalník (eds.). 2001. *Africa 2000: Forty Years of African Studies in Prague*. Prague: Set Out. Luboš Kropáček. 2015. *Afrikanistika na Filozofické fakultě UK: Ambice a bolesti / African Studies at the Faculty of Arts*

Of late, however, there is an upswing in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia as cohorts of young adepts take over from the founding generation and dynamically act on both the national and international stages. The study of African politics in Hradec Králové and the tradition of the international conferences „Viva Africa“ (both since 2007) as well as the foundation of the Czech Association for African Studies (in 2013) and its association with AEGIS are milestones of this revival. From 2007 on Czech and Slovak Africanists have attended the biennial European Conferences on African Studies (ECAS) and they have welcomed African and other foreign Africanists in their respective countries.

Though the conference under review necessarily had a somewhat nostalgic allure, it is important to note that a critical evaluation of the past was long overdue and served as an indispensable prerequisite for the successful development of African studies in the two countries that lack a colonial past but not enthusiasm to study and better understand the African continent. The conference was to open with a key note address by the linguist Petr Zima, a veteran of African studies in the Czech Republic, but a cold prevented the numerous participants, especially students, from having a chance to listen to someone who has a very clear picture of what African studies are and what should or should not be included. The first session of lectures was devoted to the special export article: Czech Swahilist ladies who talked about their experience. The listeners were first privileged to hear the story of Magdalena Slavíková-Hauner, who was in the first cohort of students of African studies. They were twelve and one half of them studied Swahili from K.F. Růžička alias Waridi while the other half learned Hausa from Petr Zima. First she won a doctoral scholarship at SOAS in London and did her linguistic fieldwork in Kenya among the Davida. Later she joined the staff of African languages in Madison, Wisconsin, and became Professor of Swahili and African Linguistics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The second paper was delivered by Elena Zúbková-Bertoncini, who as a trained Arabist studied Swahili facultatively, moved to Italy in 1968 and became Professor of the Swahili language and literature at the University L’Orientale in Naples. Both papers were illustrated by photographs of predecessors

of Charles University: Ambitions and Constraints. In Adam Bedřich and Tomáš Retka (eds.), *Rytíř z Komárova – K 70. narozeninám Petra Skalníka / Knight from Komárov – To Petr Skalník for his 70th birthday*. Praha: AntropoWeb.

and teachers of the two authors. The third paper was not delivered because of family obligations of the lecturer. Alena Rettová is the youngest female Swahilist who after completion of her studies with Professor Kropáček profited first from an Erasmus study sojourn in Leipzig and eventually won a lectureship at SOAS where she now is a Reader in Swahili Literature and African Philosophy as well as the Associate Head of the Department of the Languages and Cultures of Africa. Her paper, according to her abstract, was to trace the careers of two female scholars mentioned above and try to assess the impact of their innovative work on the discipline of the present-day and future situation of Swahili Studies. Recently when I was collecting papers from this conference for publication as a book, Dr Rettová informed me that she intends to publish it elsewhere in English. Perhaps then it can be translated into Czech.

The second session comprised information about African studies. Otakar Hulec spoke about the beginnings of African studies at the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. Vlastimil Fiala introduced his view of African studies structure in the world. Vít Zdrálek in his vivid presentation touched upon music as a legitimate part of African studies. The third session was devoted to historiography, namely the role the historian and Arabist Ivan Hrbek, initiator and main writer of the two-volume *History of Africa* (in Czech), played in the establishment and further development of Czechoslovak African studies (Luboš Kropáček). Viera Pawliková, who studied with Hrbek as a member of the first study group, spoke about Hrbek's conception of African history and his participation in the UNESCO General History of Africa. Josef Kandert, another member of the first cohort of students, commented on the Czech "effort" at Africa. The fourth session dealt with African studies in Slovakia that have been dominated by the towering figure of Viera Pawliková ever since she assumed her research position in the Slovak Academy of Sciences by the end of the 1960s. The three papers (Silvester Trnovec, Emília Bihariová with Veronika Danielová, Getnet Tamene) were supplemented by a report on African studies department at Vienna University, presented by a Slovak-Czech tandem Dorota Pucherová and Jitka Kloudová who work and study there.

Finally, the fifth session brought in papers on African studies at the University of Hradec Králové presented by Jan Prouza, head of the

Department of Politics. Maciej Kurcz, a Polish Africanist, who also lectures in Slovakia, talked about the history of student expeditions to Africa which took place in communist Poland against all odds of the era. Finally, Petr Skalník characterised the import of Central European Africanists to knowledge production on Africa. One paper announced for this session by Linda Piknerová of the West Bohemian University at Pilsen could not be presented. It was to evaluate the place of Africa in Czech political science and international relations.

The conference was crowned by a goose feast in a nearby restaurant. The participants praised the quality of the presentations and the fact that so many protagonists had met after years. The revised papers will be edited by Petr Skalník and published with a financial grant from the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Hradec Králové.