

OBITUARY

JOSEF KANDERT (22 JULY 1943 – 2 DECEMBER 2022): REMEMBRANCE ON THE SAD OCCASION OF SAYING GOOD-BYE

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Josef Kandert has dedicated much of his professional life to the study of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly its social and cultural structures and history. His professional activities, publishing and organizational contribution to the development and deepening of Czech academic interest in anthropology, African Studies and Oriental Studies or, more generally, in the broad spectrum of social sciences has laid a solid and valuable foundation on which we can build. I am only too reluctant to write this obituary of Josef Kandert, a colleague for whom I have always had great respect. However, besides memories, his extensive work on various themes and cultural regions, particularly in Africa, remains with us. This will be a reminder of his memory to younger colleagues interested in gaining a more scholarly and informed understanding of the dynamically growing populations of Africa.

Josef Kandert was among the first group of Czech university students to enter the newly established field of African Studies. The field reflected a great interest in the history, culture and multifaceted potential of the nations that were gaining independence from colonial rule. In 1960, the year that went down in world history as the "Year of Africa", seventeen countries were gaining independence. This development was reflected in the dynamic growth of academic research and study programmes, museums, monographs and periodicals, and in the distinct growth of a new field of study in the traditional educational centres (with different emphases) in Europe and America as well as in many African countries. At this time African Studies were established at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University,

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Prague. Its first cohort was realized between 1961 and 1966. Several prominent personalities emerged from this class. In their later life, they worked in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and variously in Europe, the USA and several African countries. In this context, they laid a good foundation for the further development of African Studies in the Czech Republic that was built on interconnecting with world science and with the practical needs for a better understanding in an increasingly interconnected world. From the outset, academic African studies in Prague were conceived as a complex discipline bringing together a wide range of humanities and social science approaches. Naturally, the interests of individual students varied to some extent, and the differences were also related to the discipline with which the student combined African Studies. It could be a linguistic, historical or social science discipline. However, until the late 1980s the Czechoslovak communist regime tried to enforce approaches and concepts different from English-language anthropology, which were common in world African Studies. Josef Kandert did not submit to this pressure and combined African Studies with ethnography and folklore Studies. He concluded his studies with a thesis entitled *The Importance of Matrilineal Relationship Groups for the Cohesion of Bilinear Societies* (1966). The successful completion of his studies at the faculty allowed him to advance to a postgraduate course, which he completed in 1966-69 at the Institute for Ethnography and Folklore Studies of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. He concluded it with the successful defence of his thesis *Membership in Total Groups and Individual Behaviour*. Two years later, he added CSc (candidatus scientiarum, corresponding roughly to the English PhD) to the PhDr¹ degree he had received in 1967.

With the acquired expertise, Josef found employment for a substantial part of his life at the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures in Prague. After years of work there as a volunteer and documenter (1960-66), he was entrusted with the care of the museum's African collections as their curator. In this position, he was known to Czech and foreign visitors interested in Africa for more than forty years (1969–2010). During his work at the museum, he also worked as head of the ethnographic department or as deputy director. He left the museum in 2008, at the age of 65 to make way for younger people. Beside his close ties to the Náprstek Museum, he also applied and further developed his anthropological and particularly Africanist and sociological erudition and research enthusiasm through external work

1 PhDr. (philosophiae doctor) is a degree awarded in the Czech Republic. Sometimes it is called the “small doctorate“, however it is not a PhD.

or various forms of internal work at university faculties. He was among the founders of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University (1990) and its Institute of Sociological Studies, which he headed until 2016. Here he also defended his habilitation thesis, based on long-term research on the life of Slovak villagers in recent decades, and was appointed Associate Professor of Political Science (1996). In the atmosphere of research trips and scientific work, he was later appointed as Professor of Sociology. He also taught at the Faculty of Humanities for almost twenty years since its foundation in 2000. He enjoyed the respect of its founders (Associate Professor Zdeněk Pinc and Professor Jan Sokol were among his friends) and appreciated the climate of freedom that prevailed in this Faculty. He was also involved as an external lecturer in teaching African Studies at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University. A good, peaceful family background was provided by his harmonious marriage to his colleague, Olga, an ethnologist working on the Indian cultures of South America.

Kandert's extensive work, which was cut short only by serious illness and death, includes more than ninety scientific publications. A significant part of it – if we set apart the publications focusing on his study of the life of the villagers of central and southern Slovakia – was devoted to sub-Saharan Africa. He has always tried to deal with these topics in the context of a carefully professional perception of the cultural history of the societies in question, or their confrontation with a certain sphere of the world of thought, especially religion. Working in the Náprstek Museum gave Josef many inspiring impulses for the study of African material and spiritual culture. This interest, also stimulated by public interests, led to his contribution to the first book publication *Drugs of Black Africa* (together with F. Šita and C. Votrubec, 1978). Later, his book *Afrika* (published by Mladá fronta in 1984) was a great success. Twenty years after the publication of the monumental two-volume *History of Africa* (1964, by a team of authors led by Ivan Hrbek), his book brought to Czech readers additions, corrections and a more recent holistic perspective on the historical development of the awakened continent. Kandert's book *Afrika* added new findings and made it more attractive for the reader with a clear layout and beautiful photographs by Bedřich Forman. The democratic transformations since 1989 in Czechoslovakia allowed him to considerably expand his publishing activities in terms of content and volume. In particular, he could engage with his anthropological interest in religious systems. He published the books *Normative and Lived Religion* (1999), *Journeys to the Other World: Death and the Afterlife in the World's Religions* (2005) and, as a culmination of his

efforts to find a common religious denominator, *Religious Systems: Religious Man and How to Understand Him* (2010, initiated by Grada Publishing). He devoted his book *African Art* (2002), actually a catalogue of a permanent exhibition opened by the Moravian Museum in Brno, to another, visually attractive topic.

Josef Kandert gradually focused his interest in Africans and their culture according to the needs of Prague collections, to world events and to the opportunities offered by his travels to the field. He first dealt with the Azande of southern Sudan, then with other ethnic groups. He was inspired by the collections sent to Prague by missionaries at the beginning of the century. Martin B. Lány from the Tanganyika region below Kilimanjaro deserves special mention here. However, the richest source and the first African country he himself could visit in 1973-74 was Nigeria. Later, short study tours to the Côte d'Ivoire, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Morocco, Angola and Zambia followed. In addition to direct knowledge of contemporary African life, contacts and exchanges of knowledge played an important role. Research trips to European and American centres, especially in Portugal, the USA and the UK, made a great contribution to his professional knowledge.

If we are saying goodbye to him today in a journal devoted to the study of Africa, it is appropriate to recall at least briefly the contacts that co-determined his interests and work. In the 1960s, he was strongly influenced by the towering figures of emerging social anthropology, Professors Ladislav Holý and Milan Stuchlík. Both were Kandert's supervisors during his postgraduate studies. They published a non-Marxist work, *Social Stratification in Tribal Africa*, in the dramatic year of 1968. In the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, both preferred to emigrate: Holý to Britain (d. 1997), Stuchlík first to Chile and then to Cambridge and Belfast (d. 1980). Of this older generation, Kandert spent the longest time at the Náprstek Museum meeting and in many ways following Erich Herold (1928-1988). Originally an Indologist, Herold, during his time at the museum from 1959, devoted himself intensively to the study of African ritual, masks and art in general. He served as the museum's director in 1968, and was demoted to a professional staff member with limited publishing opportunities during the normalization era (1968-1987). Herold gained recognition in Africanist circles for some of his interpretations of African cultures. He worked amicably with Josef Kandert in the management and evaluation of the collections, or in the organization of events such as the *Exhibition of African Art* in Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1983. Its 96-page catalogue contains many interesting insights from both collaborating experts.

In this context, we should also mention another personality from the circle of Josef's friends and colleagues, whose name belongs to the history of Czech African studies. This is Herold's former wife Věra Šťovíčková (1930–2015). She gained considerable popularity in the 1960s when, as a correspondent for Czechoslovak Radio, she visited African countries that were then gaining or had just gained independence. She published four books about this. She was fired from the radio during the normalization in 1970 and for two decades was only able to publish her translations of important literature, most of them classics of anthropology under somebody's else's name, a "borrowed" name. Josef Kandert was one of these. After the fall of the communist regime, they could collaborate publicly. Together they prepared as co-authors the exhibition *African Ornament and Shape* (1993).

Josef Kandert went to eternity quietly and humbly, as he had lived for most of his life. His passing did not attract much attention, but his important work is still around. In a short obituary from the Faculty of Social Sciences, words of appreciation remain on the internet and on behalf of other departments: for many years he was the one who gave shape to social anthropology and African studies in the Czech Republic.