

African Studies in the Czech Republic: Comments on J. Záhorský's paper

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0.

The paper *African Studies in the Czech Republic - from the early Czech-African contacts until the 21st century* published in this journal by Jan Záhorský (2006), will greatly disconcert any scholar at least partly acquainted with this field of study, as it disrespects the methodological criteria essential for a scholarly paper. Data and references are often incomplete¹, not objective and sometimes incorrect. This is displayed by:

- the non-correlation of references quoted in the paper with items given in the attached list of references²;
- the frequent absence of any correlation between particular references or reference labels given in the text and the list of references³;
- spelling mistakes in titles and author's names going so far as to 'hybridize' the names of two scholars, D. A. Olderogge and I. I. Potěkhin, into one fictive personality.

Although this type of presentation of a non-negligible part of Czech research heritage to the international public has thus suffered considerably in its quality, these types of errors could perhaps be partially excused by the author's youth and lack of experience.

1.

However, certain important aspects of Záhorský's conclusions simply disrespect facts, and such a procedure is not excusable in any research survey.

¹ To avoid subjectivity, I have refrained from commenting on Záhorský's approach to my own publications (other than in connection with data supplied by them). Readers who might be interested in my own papers are invited to email zimap@cesnet.cz for my full bibliography.

² Thus e.g. the collaborative volume quoted on p. 2 after *A History of Africa* has nothing to do with I. Hrbek. Its editors were Ladislav Holý and Milan Stuchlík (1968). Even its references in the Selected Bibliography are wrong, as the name of the second editor is missing, the entry itself is quoted twice, both forms with misprints and errors. In the first case, given alphabetically under Holý, Ladislav (1968) the editor is indicated as the author.

³ Thus, e.g., Vladimír Klíma is labelled correctly in the text as a literary scientist (p.3), but this is documented in the list of references only by a couple of his Czech booklets which give general information on certain contemporary African states. There is no mention either of his two major research monographies on African literatures published in English (Klíma 1969, 1971) nor of his participation in the collaborative monography Vladimír Klíma, K. F. Růžička, Petr Zima (1976). Several authors, such as L. Kropáček, are labelled as outstanding contemporary Czech Africanists, but this situation is documented in the list of Africanist publications either by marginal papers (such as an interpretation of Swahili proverbs, Kropáček 1997), or by Czech translations of popularising books compiled in English by other authors (Illife, 2001).

Referring to the pre-1989 period of African Studies and their roots in the Czech Republic, the author purports to find the academic beginnings of Czech African Studies in the work of three Czech classical Semitists active in the early 20th century at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University. The division of the history of Czech African Studies within the pre- and post-1989 periods proposed by Záhorský is, however, only partly acceptable, as several features transcend this dividing line: thus the very foundations of African Studies laid by Skalička and Růžička, though dated in the oppressive years of 1940s and 1950s, have their roots in the free spirit of the 1930s. Furthermore, the author refers to various historical attempts at African Studies in this area since the 16th century, the Czech Kingdom, existing for 300 years under Habsburg rule, and the Czechoslovak Republic, born in 1918, should be referred to as the predecessors of the Czech Republic. Without underestimating the importance of Semitic studies as one of the most ancient philological schools in Europe, and the role of Afro-Asiatic macro-family populations in modern African Studies since Greenberg's time, one should not forget that these very classical Semitic and Arabic studies all over the world paid only marginal attention to Africa south of the Sahara, so they can scarcely be credited with inaugurating African Studies. But this could be a matter for discussion.

1.1.

Turning further, the author writes that

"When we talk about African Studies in the Czech Republic, we have to distinguish two periods: The pre- and the post-1989 period, as each has brought different approaches ... After WW II there was a slow rise in African studies within the former Czechoslovakia. During the 1950s, African studies were constituted as a complex discipline consisting of history, anthropology, sociology, linguistics and politics of the people living in sub-Saharan Africa. The theoretical background of the African Studies was influenced at the beginning by the Soviet school of African studies, represented by Professor **Dauil Potechin Olderojge** by the Western theoretical framework called the British school of Social Anthropology, and further by the Vienna School of Historical Ethnology. The Prague Linguistic Circle also played a decisive role."

Záhorský's paper is thus mixing facts and their relative chronology. The PLC had to cease its legal existence in the 1950s, its influence surviving – often heavily attacked by the ruling ideologists – in theoretical research postulates. Thus, the PLC ideas and methods had a decisive role in creating Czech African studies prior to the 1950s, but not thereafter.

1.2.

Having spent most of my life in Prague, studying and working here in the given field, I propose a different picture.

1.2.1.

The "beginnings" of Czech African studies as a research field oriented towards the sub-Saharan parts of Africa are certainly to be associated with the activities of the Prague team of academic nature operating since the 1930s, international in its free spirit and open membership, known as the Prague Linguistic Circle. One of its younger members,

Vladimír Skalička (1946) prepared the first research papers on Bantu and on certain languages of West Africa, published later in the research review *Archív orientální*. Skalička devoted most of his own further research to general linguistics but, under his guidance, several of the real founders of Czech African research studies were directed towards the African field. This was notably the case of [Růžička](#), who turned from his romantic dreams about Africa towards Bantu linguistics⁴, and his research on class systems, in particular on locatives, is generally accepted as an important part of the international Bantu linguistic tradition. Therefore, if anybody is to be considered the founder of modern scholarly Czech African studies, it should be Růžička under Skalička's⁵ linguistic tutorship.

1.2.2.

The institutional establishing of Czech African Studies came about (probably inspired by Skalička), with the re-organizing of the Oriental Institute in Prague⁶ by Jaroslav Průšek in the 1950s. A Department of the Near East and Africa was created in this Institute. For over a decade, the great Czech democratic scholar and specialist of Iranian studies, Prof. Otakar Klíma, headed the new department. Růžička became its first research fellow in African studies. From 1960 on, he was joined by a handful of us, young PhD students (Svetozár Pantůček, Vladimír Klíma, Milan Kalous, Otakar Hulec, Zbyněk Malý and others), cooperating with various colleagues in the Ethnographic Institute (L. Holý, Olga Skalníková, etc.), in the [Náprstek Museum](#), etc. During the 1960s, we enjoyed a relatively liberal atmosphere at the Oriental Institute which slowly grew throughout pre-1968 and early 1968 Czechoslovakia, and we established firm links with such traditional centres of African studies as SOAS in London (my teacher in Hausa, F. W. Parsons was allowed a month's research stay in Prague under an agreement between SOAS and the Oriental Institute), the [CNRS](#), [ELOV](#) and UNESCO in Paris, the growing Institut für Ägyptologie und Afrikanistik (today: [Institut für Afrikawissenschaften](#)) in Vienna, etc.⁷

⁴ For Růžička's life and work see Zima (1973).

⁵ As Růžička's papers were published in the late 1950s, they evidently preceded *Dějiny Afriky* (The History of Africa), which was compiled by Ivan Hrbek and a team of co-authors in Czech, and published in Prague in 1966 by Svoboda, the official publishing house of the Communist Party. I do share (though for different reasons) Záhork's opinion that the book was "unfortunately published only in Czech", and I agree that this book was "regrettably written under the influence of the regime." (both quotations from paragr. 2.1.)

⁶ Inspired and supported by the first President of Czechoslovakia, T.G. Masaryk, the Oriental Institute was founded in Prague in 1922 and began its activities in 1929. See details in A. Palát (1967). *The Oriental Institute*, in *Asian and African Studies in Czechoslovakia*, Moscow 1967, p.87 ff.

⁷ Direct personal contacts with West Germany remaining difficult for us even through most of the pre-1968 period, our contacts with the West German scholars were mostly started during our meetings in Africa, the congresses of the West African Linguistic Society (whose founding member I became at that time) serving as excellent pretexts for this paradoxical meeting of European scholars from neighbouring countries of the old continent. I am proud to have received the first reviews of my monograph (Zima, 1972) from such scholars as Prof. Johannes Lukas (Hamburg) and Prof. Herrmann Jungrathmayr (then Marburg), the latter continuing to support me and my professional activities through the "normalization" period. As for Eastern Germany, apart from the officially tolerated ties, these contacts also bore even unexpected fruits: I should

Having temporarily the opportunity to stay in Africa, most of us took indirect advantage of this to establish friendly professional links with colleagues in Western Europe. An embryo of real scholarly African studies was thus formed in the Oriental Institute in Prague, later yielding respectable research and gaining international recognition.

As for the role of Russian African studies referred to by Záhorkík: communicating and co-operating with them at a research level was unproblematic, especially with the Leningrad (now again Petrograd) school, which was at the time headed by the wise and serious Prof. D. A. Olderogge⁸, who visited Prague in the early 1960s, and shared with us reliable indirect influence from classical German African studies.

1.2.3.

In the early 1960s, this 'embryo' of African studies at the Oriental Institute in Prague was approached by [Karel Petráček](#)⁹ with an invitation to join him and other scholars in founding and running a M.A. program to teach African Studies at the Philological Faculty of Charles University. The first dozen (or so) of our students of this program provided us with a second generation of Czechoslovak specialists in various Africanist disciplines dealing with the languages, literatures, history and sociocultural anthropology of sub-Saharan Africa (Josef Kandert, Petr Skalník, Magdalena Slavíková-Haunerová, Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová and many others). This second generation of Africanist scholars joined most of us, the first generation, in facing our destinies in the difficult "normalisation" post-1968 time. After all, for almost two decades, we all were "alone facing our own consciousness."¹⁰

2.

The 1989 return of parliamentary democracy and freedom was obviously no arrival of paradise for African studies in such a landlocked, medium-size country without any past colonial links with Africa, as is the Czech Republic. Top-ranking, well paid academic posts are few, if any, especially in the field of African studies, and funds for research are certainly not easy to get. Yet if Záhorkík purports in his Conclusions (<22>) that they hardly exist as a research field in this country, writing that

"it's not a simple matter to talk about African studies in the Czech Republic, as we do not have such large amounts of personalities, journals and possibilities to take part in inter-

record here the brave action of my friend [Prof. Dr. Siegmund Brauner](#), who, having heard about my forced departure from all academic posts in Prague in the late 1970s, offered me a post at the Karl-Marx-University in Leipzig. Although neither accepted nor actualized, this mere invitation greatly helped the lives of myself and my family at that time.

⁸ Záhorkík's hybridization of the names of two Russian scholars, Olderogge and Potěkhin is not a simple misprint, but almost an offence especially towards the former, who was a real Africanist scholar with deep ties to the classical German Africanist school, a pupil of [Diedrich Westermann](#). See, e.g., Olderogge's obituaries published by Siegmund Brauner (1987) and by A. Zhukov & Phil Jaggar (1988).

⁹ In 1987, I was invited to write an obituary (Zima 1988) of this great Czech Arabist who always maintained his deep interest in Sub-Saharan Africa.

¹⁰ I am paraphrasing the words of Prof. Průšek at one of the final meetings of the Czechoslovak Oriental Society at Liblice, shortly before his dismissal.

national projects and as African studies in our country is rather stagnating. The only solution, in my opinion, is to integrate the young generation of scholars into some international researches concerning any field of study, be it history, languages, social anthropology or other..."

he is overlooking the significant amount of work which has been carried out in this field over the last twenty years. Moreover, he is displaying that he is not acquainted with the content of the publications given in his own list of references. Otherwise he should have mentioned at least four or five internationally coordinated Czech projects focused entirely or partly on Africa operated during the last twenty years in the Czech Republic, granted either by Charles University, or by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic (called today The Czech Science Foundation). Most of these projects have been conducted by Czech Scholars in cooperation with various scholars from Germany, France, Austria and other European countries, two such projects having been integrated within the Common European Research Project coordinated by the C.N.R.S.¹¹ Similarly, the *Certificate Program in languages and cultures of Black Africa*, which was set up by the present author in cooperation with Josef Kandert at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, has nurtured a third generation of young students who have participated in these Prague based research projects, and of whom many are now disseminated to various fields of African studies in Europe and elsewhere. There is no excuse for Záhorský (or anybody wrongly advising this young scholar) to pass over all this activity in silence, explicitly purporting that none of this existed, even though the evidence of its existence is published in the references cited in his own paper.

If there has been any stagnation of African studies in the Czech Republic, then it is most likely to have occurred at the Philosophical Faculty of the Charles University, because, methodologically, scientifically and pedagogically speaking, the same deformed line that was followed during the pre-1989 period, continues to be followed virtually unchanged there. But this is worth another paper.

Abbreviations

CNRS	Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (France)
ELOV	Ecole des Langues Orientales Vivantes (France)
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies (London)

Sources:

Anonymus 2007

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(14.08.2013)

¹¹ Information about these activities, projects, results and the cooperating persons is abundantly available in the prefaces, footnotes and technical remarks of the following publications quoted in Záhorský's own bibliographical list: Zima, Jeník and Tax (2003), Zima-Nicolai (2002), Zima (2000) etc. However, not a single one was connected with the Philological-/Philosophical Faculty of the Charles University or the Oriental Institute, since the mid-1970s till today.

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