

Russian African Studies: Past and Present

by

Kristina Bekenova, MA (Int. Rel.)
Researcher, School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan
Correspondent, *African Politics and Policy*

Abstract

The relationship between African art and the Avant-garde artists, from Western Europe, is well documented and well known. Much less is known about the Russian discovery of African art. However, it is thanks to the efforts of Russian artist and art theorist of Latvian origin Vladimir Markov (Voldemārs Matvejs) with his seminal work *Negro Art* that African art received not anthropological but rather aesthetical and theoretical attention. Russia's contribution to advancing the understanding of African art is often neglected because the English-speaking world generally overlooks Russia's contribution to African studies. This article is a preliminary attempt to fill this knowledge gap and to see how Russia ventured in the realm of African studies. The paper is divided in three logical parts. In the first section I will look at the beginning of African studies in the Russian Empire; then I will examine the different periods African studies went through during the Soviet time; and the final section will give a picture of the current state of African studies in Russia.

Introduction

The discovery of African art's aesthetic significance, paradoxically, came many years after Europeans had had their first encounters with African art. This paradox is due to two sets of factors. First, what eventually Europeans came to regard as African art had not been produced and used as an art object or as an art form by the African populations. Second, at first, Europeans were more concerned with African art for ethnographic and anthropological purposes than for aesthetic ones.

Europeans, thanks to their colonial experience, were able to organize several international exhibitions of African and non-European art (Leipzig, 1892; Antwerpen, 1894; Brussels, 1897) and they also set up several ethnographic museums (Trocadero, 1879; Zwinger, 1903) where the African objects were displayed for the first time. These objects, however, were treated and admired as the expression of exotic, “primitive” even “savage” societies and not as proper art objects or as manifestations of “refined art” (Mirimanov, 1970, 1986).

The artistic and aesthetic value of African art was recognized, for the first time, by avant-garde artists such as Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Vlaminck, etc. who were inspired by the geometric features of African sculptures. This is why European avant-garde artists started to discuss, understand and promote African art and its ‘philosophy’.

While the relationship between African art and the Avant-garde artists, from Western Europe, is well documented and well known, much less is known about the Russian discovery of African art. Yet, as I claim in this paper, Russia also made an important contribution to the ‘discovery’ of African art thanks to the efforts of Vladimir Markov (Voldemārs Matvejs, 1877-1914) with his seminal work *Negro Art* (1914, published 1919). In fact, Markov’s book was, along with Carl Epstein’s *Negro Plastics* (1915), the first attempt to fill the gaps in a literature that had, up to that point, failed to acknowledge the aesthetical and theoretical dimensions of African art.

Markov’s book went beyond the ethnographical perspective, and by doing so it was the first effort to treat African sculptures as a true art. During the Soviet period, Markov and his *Negro Art* went eventually into oblivion until 1967 when an exhibition in Dakar introduced his study of African art to an international audience.

Russia’s contribution to advancing the understanding of African art is usually neglected, because, more generally, Russia’s contribution to African studies is generally neglected. This article is a preliminary attempt to fill this knowledge gap and to see how Russia ventured in the realm of African studies¹.

The paper is divided in three logical parts. In the first section, I will look at the beginning of African studies in the Russian Empire; then I will examine the different periods African studies went through during the Soviet time; and the final section will give a picture of the current state of African studies in Russia.

Part 1: African Studies in the Russian Empire

African studies in the Russian Empire could be traced back to the end of the 18th century and started with linguistics. As Olderogge noted in his great article on the history of learning African languages in the Russian Empire (1975), the interest in African languages was determined by the decision of the Russian Academy of Science to publish a comparative dictionary of all languages of the world. In its second edition (1789), words from 33 African languages – 2 from North Africa, 23 from Western Sudan, 6 from the Bantu people, Khoekhoe language of southwestern Africa and Arab language of Madagascar – were included.

In this regard, one should also recall the contribution made by Junker², the famed traveler who, during his several trips to Africa in 1879-1886 period, collected precious information on languages of Eastern Sudan and Congo and then published his findings in *Zeitschrift für Afrikanische Sprachen* (1888-1889).

Junker's first trip across Eastern Sudan, Central Africa and Northern Congo in 1875-1878 immensely enriched the collection of the first Russian museum – the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, or Kuntskamera – with 1896 items of weapons, clothes, domestic utensils, figures, sculptures, masks, jewelry, musical instruments, etc. of various African ethnic groups. A great study on Junker's collection was done by Sobchenko in the mid-fifties (1953; 1955).

Furthermore, systematic studies on Ethiopian language and culture were regularly carried out in Russia because of the fact that Ethiopia, just like Russia, professes Christian Orthodoxy. The Ethiopian church was the focus of a special interest: “it was very common to see in the Russian newspapers of that time a reference to ‘our faith Black brothers’ (Tsyarkin, 2001). Moreover, the idea to bring the churches closer and the understanding that far away there is a country with similar Christian religion helped to eliminate the prejudice on the “African continent as a place populated with Black savages, pagans and cannibals” (Tsyarkin, 2014, 67). It was the first and the only one state in Africa south of the Sahara with the special mission of the Russian Empire (1898-1919).

In 1829, B.A. Dorn was the first professor who started teaching Ge'ez language in Kharkov University (Olderogge, 1975). The first works on Russian and Ethiopian churches appeared in the 1870s by Archimandrite Porfiriy Uspenskiy.

Bolotov and Turayev³ should also be mentioned among the pioneers of Ethiopian studies because, thanks to their knowledge of Ethiopian languages (Ge'ez, Amharic), they provided the foundation for Ethiopian studies (after the October revolution) by researching Ethiopian manuscripts, church literature (Bolotov, 1887), history of the lives of Saints of the Ethiopian Church, and hagiological sources (Turayev, 1902, 1905).

Part 2: African Studies during the Soviet Time

African studies, in Europe, evolved out of anthropology and ethnography, while, as noted by Balesin (2001), in Russia it emerged from political science. Its orientation, research questions, etc. were defined by the Soviet state. Even the periodization of the development of African studies offered by Davidson (2001) is based on the level of the state's interest in Africa. According to him, the Soviet Union was particularly interested in Africa during the 20s – mid 30s, and from the end of the 50s up to the 80s; and there were also two periods where the level of interest to Africa was declining: the mid 30s – 50s and the end of the 80s. Following this typology, the overview of Russian literature on Africa will be given in the next section.

20S – MID 30S

After the October Revolution and serious political changes in the country, to study and examine African languages was still a priority for Russian Africanists. In 1932, the Linguistic Commission on African languages was set up with prominent Africanist linguists, historians and ethnographers such as Danilov, Zusmanovich, and Potekhin. The study of the languages was not only done by relying on academic materials, but also Moscow scholars had a unique opportunity to get Jomo Kenyatta's (Kenya's future President and Prime Minister) Swahili and Albert Nzula's (South African politician) Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho language classes and consultations (Gromova, 2009).

A new feature of Russian-African relations was the establishment of the Comintern that was the main channel that coordinated the relations between Russia and African countries. The objective of the organization was the same as elsewhere – proletarian revolution against imperialism. The Comintern recognized only revolutionary methods of struggle that approached decolonization as 'absurd and nonsense', and, as noted by Gorodnov (2001), this explains why for a long time Soviet studies defined by political and ideological conjuncture focused only on revolutions on the continent (Potekhin, 1950; Madzoyevskiy, 1959; Oganisian, 1965). Based on the archives that became available in the 1990s, Gorodnov, Filatova and Davidson published a collection of documents on the Comintern and its activities in South and Tropical Africa (2003).

MID 30S – 50S

During this period of time, African studies went through a difficult time. At the moment, the most important source on the tragedy Soviet scholars on Africa had to go through is Davidson (2012), where the author tries to return from oblivion the undeservedly forgotten names and their ideas as a precondition to give a full picture of African studies in the USSR.

According to Davidson (2012), by 1937, the African departments in Moscow were almost totally destroyed. Those who focused on African politics, culture and economy were repressed and/or sent to prisons and concentration camps (Gerngross, Danilov, Nasonov, Zusmanovich, etc.). The only Africanists who avoided the deportations were those who studied linguistics, literature and philology in Leningrad/Saint-Petersburg (Yushmanov, Olderogge). One of those who survived in that period was Krachkovskiy who worked in the traditions of Bolotov and Turayev. He read lectures in Leningrad University on Ethiopian philology and later published a book, where he not only introduced history and development of Ethiopian languages, but also relations between Ethiopia and Russia since the 17th century (1955).

Of course, nobody during that period ever had a chance to go to Africa to work in the field or to participate in the international conferences; all the information that was received came from rare Western editions and from African students.

END OF 50S – 80S

The end of the 1950s – the early 1960s, years that became a watershed for African history and for African scholars worldwide, marked also the change in the Soviet approach to the continent. As Davidson (2009) recalls, the Middle East sector in the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (CPSU) was transformed into the Middle East and Africa sector; a department of Africa was established in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and the African direction was introduced in the State Committee for Economic Relations, the State Committee for Cultural Relations, the Soviet Committee for the Protection of Peace, the Union of Soviet Friendship Societies and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, etc. The African departments were opened in the TASS and in the *Novosti* news agency; the African editorial offices were set up in the publishing houses of foreign literature; and the African languages sector at the Institute of Linguistics, the African Literature Sector at the Institute of World Literature, and the Center for African Studies at the Institute of World History were opened. In 1960, the Institute of Asia and Africa (Moscow State University) started Swahili, Amharic, Hausa, Bambara/Bamana, Fulah/Fulani, Malagasy, Lingala/Ngala, Afrikaans, Somali and Yoruba language courses. During those years, Moscow radio stations broadcasted in eight African languages for a total 126 hours per week and dominated African airwaves (Hale, 1975).

One of the remarkable features of this period was the opportunity for Soviet scholars actually to go to Africa; however, the trips were still short-term and strictly controlled. The first academic trip was permitted to I.I. Potekhin in 1957. After his three-month stay in Ghana, he published *Ghana Today* (1959) in a form of his diary notes where he informed readers about the historical, political and economic situation of the country, based on Ghanaian national archives.

During those years, specialists on Africa published their articles in such journals as *Sovetskoe Vostokovedenie* (*Soviet Oriental Studies, 1955-1958*), *Narody Azii i Afriki* (*Peoples of Asia and Africa, 1962-1990*), *Aziya i Afrika segodnya* (*Asia and Africa Today, 1967-now*), *Sovetskaya Etnografiya* (*Soviet Ethnography, 1931-1991*) and others.

These almost twenty years of the USSR's interest in developing African studies were indeed rewarding. Publications on Africa included a diverse spectrum of issues, focusing from current issues in politics and African relations (Korotkova, 1963; Davidson, 1963; Malysheva, 1971; Katsman, 1977) and economy (Shpirt, 1958, 1963a, 1963b; Polshikov, 1963; Penzin, 1964; Golubchik, 1964; Volin, 1966; Lobachenko, 1971) toward an analysis of the political and economic history of the countries (Pokrovskiy, 1963).

Of course, within the line of USSR ideology, the establishment and development of proletariat in Africa caused a big interest among Pribytkovskiy (1960), Pribytkovskiy & Fridman (1962), Braginskiy (1964, 1971), Meier (1964), and Kuznetsova (1970), while others were attracted by studying colonialism (Potekhin, 1960) and imperialistic rivalry in Africa (Bogoslovskiy, 1959; Goncharov, 1961; Usov, 1962; Filshtinskiy, 1962; Datlin, 1951; Lavrinenko & Anuchkin-Timofeev, 1973) with the focus on Ethiopia (Voblikov, 1957; Khazanov & Rait, 1973), Congo (Sharevskaya, 1962) and the struggle of Africa for independency (Entin, 1960; Zusmanovich, 1963). Agriculture and system of landholding is another area of expertise of Soviet scholars (Svanidze, 1960, 1964; Potekhin, 1962; Gavrilov, 1962; Kriventsov, 1963; Krylov, 1965; Ighia, 1966).

Interest in culture was built, to a greater extent, around literature and linguistics. The grammatical, phonetical and morphological features were analyzed within the languages of Bantu (Toporova, 1965; Koptilina, 1971; Illarionov, 1982), Hausa (Zhurkovskiy, 1966), and Bamileke (Vinogradov, 1971) people. Literature of Ghana (Vavilov, 1962), periodization of Bantu literature (Saratovskaya, 1963), novels of Tropical Africa (Ivasheva, 1964), Portuguese literature of Africa (Ryauzova, 1970), and Somalian poetry (Bukalov, 1963) caught the attention of Soviet scholars as well.

Some of the best publications on African studies with the focus on ethnography and culture are the edited volumes of the N.N. Miklukho-Maklai Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology (established in 1933 as Institute for the Study of Ethnic Groups of the USSR), where the research papers are based on the rich collection of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, and thus very beautifully illustrated.

The museum artefacts became an essential source to study the material culture of African people⁴. The list of artefacts includes:

- the Baongo wooden statuette of drummer that appeared in the museum in 1889 and that was the focus of Ganyushkina (stylistic classification, 1964);
- the Bayaka masks of Kwilu-Kwango region, Congo, their stylistic features and ceremonial usage (Golovanova, 1975);
- the paintings “How Saint Socinius killed Versilia/Ursula”, “The Queen of Sheba’s visit to Solomon” that were analyzed from an artistic point of view (Turayev & Ainalov, 1913) and as the basis to examine the history of the legend and mythology (Chernetsov 1975a, 1981);
- Ethiopian handwriting amulets, or magical scrolls, their classification and the character of the images (Krachkovskiy, 1928; Chernetsov, 1975b);
- Bambara female sculpture in the context of various cultural aspects (Arseniev, 1981);
- a loom from Cameroon and the way of producing textile from Raffia palm fiber (Sobchenko, 1957) and so on.

Olderogge focused his ethnographical interest on Oromo clay figures (1929) and on the already-disappeared Bari wooden sculptures that were used as a symbol of deceased ancestors and were hung in huts (1949). 33 bronze objects of Benin art⁵ received by the Museum in 1901 were studied by Olderogge very scrupulously. His first article based on an extensive literature overview raised the question of the origin of Benin bronze art (1953). His later articles highlighted the ritual symbolism and writing system of people based on the images on the ‘Oba’ altars and bronze heads (1955) and based on the carvings of elephants’ tusks and calabash utensils (1957).

Another remarkable literature on the art and culture of Africa is an edited 3-volume book *Sokrovishcha iskusstva stran Azii i Afriki (Art Treasures of Asia and Africa; 1975, 1976, 1979)* published by the Institute of History of Art under the USSR Ministry of Culture. The chapters assembled in the book were aimed “to present not specialized historical art research but rather artistic and aesthetic information based on the art research knowledge” (1975: 5). The idea to publish the volume with such an orientation was determined by the existence of, on the one hand, very narrow-specialized literature, and, on the other hand, popular literature in the magazines *Ogonyok (Light)*, *Vokrug Sveta (Around the World)*, etc. where Asian and African art were introduced by journalists. Thus, in order to give high-quality information to Soviet readers without technical specialized nuances, and to show the aesthetic value and beauty of world art treasures, the three volumes were produced.

On Africa, there are three articles written by Grigorovich, “Sculptures of Ife” (1975), “The Head of Queen-Mother from Benin” (1976), and “Sculptures of Yoruba people” (1979), where he presented traditional art intrinsically linked with religious and social life. Actually, archeological discovery of Benin and later Ife culture created a great interest around the world, including Russia. There are several other scholars who researched the culture of the Nok and Ife: Mirimanov (1967a) with his analysis of terracotta sculptures, and Kochakova (1967) and Koschevskaya (1966), who looked at ethnocultural relations between Yoruba and neighboring societies.

With the similar objective – to show the Soviet people the aesthetic beauty and cultural legacy of an ‘awakening continent’ – were published *Afrika yeshche ne otkryta (Africa Has Not Been Discovered Yet; 1967)* and *Afrika: iskusstvo (Africa: Art; Mirimanov, 1967c)*, where Mirimanov talks about rock art of Fezzan valley and Nok sculptures (Mirimanov, 1967a, 1967b, 1967c), Kobischanov introduces African coins (1967a), African writing systems (1967b), the civilization of Ethiopia (1967c, 1967d) and together with the composer Michailov African music (Michailov & Kobischanov, 1967), and as was mentioned before, the culture of Nok, Benin, Sao (Mirimanov, 1967a) and Ife (Kochakova, 1967) are also discussed in the books.

Also as one of the remarkable Africanists in the USSR during this period, Iordanskiy should be mentioned. His interest in mythology of Tropical Africa was expressed in several articles where he analyses the character, structure and nature of mythic power (1979a, 1979b, 1980) and such aspects as perceptions of old age and death (1982), opposition of men-women (1986), sacred numbers (1989), the image of the blacksmith (1985), and the trouble-maker god (1988) in the mythology, literature, fairy tales and proverbs of Tropical Africa.

In 1971, the Center of African Studies was set up at the Institute of General History at the Russian Academy of Science. Taking into account the limited travels abroad and the Soviet Union’s ideological battle for Africa, the Center led by truly prominent scholars was focused on “sources of African history, history writing in Africa, historical ties between Russian and Africa, colonialism and colonial societies in African countries” (Balesin, 2001). Although the research activity at the Center was very fruitful, the Center was closed in the end of the 1970s exactly because of “the lack of class approach to African problems”, and it was only re-opened in 1984 and offered new opportunities to scholars: access to the archives, international grants, lectures and research abroad.

END OF 80S

In the end of the 1980s the state's support of African studies was significantly decreased and this certainly reflected on the number of publications. During this period, such scholars as Kochakova (1988) and Iordanskiy (1986, 1988, 1989) kept working on their research of Tropical Africa, and Balesin (1986, 1987) looked at the transformation process of the institution of traditional authority during the colonial period in Eastern Africa. Davidson, Vyatkina, Tsyppin, Ovchinnikov, and Gorodnov were also among the most active Africanists during that period.

Part 3: African Studies in the Russian Federation

African studies in contemporary Russia is trying to recover from the crisis the science experienced in the 1980s. Of course, as pointed out by Deryagina (2009), there is a shift away from the Soviet rhetoric and political and economic focus towards the socio-cultural direction of scientific research, and "the leading role belongs to a progressive view of the future of Africa: the authors reflect on the ways of its inclusion in global processes based on the preservation of cultural identity." The cultural turn in African studies is expressed in the various studies conducted by Russian scholars on cultural self-identification after decolonization (Vysotskaya, 2005), on cultural nationalism in politics (Zakharova, 2015), on the importance to study the socio-cultural interaction between Africa and Europe (Nikitin, 2005; Naidenova, 2017), and on the traditional culture as a way to find solutions for Africa (Kutsenkov, 2017).

Currently, in spite of the fact that African Studies is claimed to be part of the Oriental Studies academic curriculum in 22 Russian Universities, only two Universities have a strong focus on Africa: Saint Petersburg State University (languages and culture of Western Africa) and with wider and much stronger profile Lomonosov Moscow State University, Institute of Asian and African Studies. MSU has three main specializations for Bachelor, Master and PhD programmes: Linguistics, Study of Literature, and History. All students get profound knowledge in geography, economy, and international relations of Africa and study Swahili, Amharic, Hausa, Afrikaans and Zulu languages.

Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the Kunstkamera) also plays an important role not only in preserving the African artifacts but also in conducting research. Currently, the Museum has following projects on Africa: "Africa in the 21st century: traditions and modernity in languages and culture" (supervised by Dr Zheltov) and "Ethno-cultural text in traditional and modern *universum*: synchronic and diachronic aspects" (Dr Vasilkov and Dr Albedil).

Nonetheless, after two big African trips made by Russian Presidents in 2006 and 2009, and the recent African tour of the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov in March 2018, the scholars are expecting to see as a result of the renewed political interest in the continent the increase of academic interest in and prestige of African studies.

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to show that the contribution of Russia in African studies is undeniable. Russia/Soviet Union conducted extensive research on and made extensive contributions to furthering our understanding of a wide range of topics and to the advancement of African studies more generally. Russia/Soviet Union promoted research on a wide range of issues: linguistics, historiography, Ethiopia, culture and aesthetics that had an obvious and possibly self-evident cultural value, but it also promoted research on issues – the origin and development of African proletariat, national movements – that were valuable for Russia/Soviet Union and for either political or ideological reasons. Davidson (2001) noted that the world Africanist community has a prejudiced approach toward Russia – “what can you expect from the people who never were in Africa, and even if were there, were with controlled and short-term visits”? Hopefully that evidence showed in this article will help to overcome this attitude and to strengthen the world of Russian African studies relying on the earlier-isolated academic community’s research.

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Notes

¹ African Studies in Russian include only Africa south of the Sahara (Tropical and South Africa), while Northern Africa is part of Arab studies.

² On Junker's travels across Africa, see Smirnov (1950).

³ Turayev's academic interest was not only on Ethiopia. His contribution to Ancient Egyptian studies is immense.

⁴ On the history of the African collection of the museum, see Gotsko (1980).

⁵ Taking into account the debates that emerged relatively recently on returning the Benin artifacts, I contacted Dr Anna Siim (Moskvitina), Senior Researcher at the Department of Africa of Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the Kunstkamera). According to Dr Siim (Moskvitina), such discussions have never been conducted in Russia. The Benin art collection came to the Museum not from Benin, but rather from Germany and was acquired with the funds of patrons, and thus, Russia is not perceived as an expropriator of art from the Benin Kingdom.