

African Studies in the Czech Republic-from the early Czech-African contacts until the 21st century¹

Jan Záhořík (Prag)

1. Early contacts

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We cannot talk about African Studies in the Czech Republic without first mentioning the preceding tradition of mutual Czech-African relations. The Czech Republic has quite a unique position among other countries of Central or Eastern Europe for its long tradition of travelling to the African interior. Among the first Czech travellers in Africa we have to stress the name of [Václav Remedius Prutký](#), a missionary who visited Ethiopia between 1751-1753 and not only described his travels but also compiled a vocabulary of the Amharic language in his so-far unpublished *Vocabularium linguae Gallicae, Arabicae et Abyssiniacae*. His travels (Itinerarium, 2005) in Ethiopia and India were translated from Latin and published in English by J.H. Arrowsmith-Brown (1991) under the title *Prutky's Travels in Ethiopia and Other Countries*. His contribution to understanding and describing the history and culture of Ethiopia is unquestionable, but the importance of his work was outshined by the Scottish traveller James Bruce's five-volume work *Travels to discover the source of the Nile* (1790) that enjoys worldwide renown. Václav Remedius Prutký was a Franciscan missionary, who travelled to Ethiopia from Cairo, but he was not the only one, other Czech missionaries in Ethiopia were Jakub Římař (1682-1755) and Martin Lang.

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In the 19th century there was a much more important Czech traveller, Dr [Emil Holub](#), whose works are also available in English. He crossed South Africa as far as the Zambezi River and published several books concerning his contacts with the local population. His importance of discovering the South-African interior can be compared to that of David Livingstone or Henry Morton Stanley. Emil Holub is our most famous traveller, so I have to say a couple of words about his experiences in Africa. He was born in 1847 and died in Vienna 1902. He graduated in medicine and was preparing himself in order to follow the footsteps of David Livingstone. In 1872 he organized his first travel to South Africa, and worked a couple of months as a physician in Port Elisabeth. His major expedition was arranged in 1875 and he discovered the Zambezi river. He also collected a large amount of cultural and scientific materials that he sent to Prague to the Náprstek museum. Emil Holub travelled to South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe and also visited the Victoria Falls. After his arrival in Prague he began to plan another journey on the African continent but he had to change his ideas after the rise of the Mahdist movement in Sudan. Despite this he travelled to the Victoria Falls and entered areas, which until then had remained undiscovered. Unfortunately, this was during the time of tensions between the Lozi tribe and some neighbouring populations and the expedition was robbed in the vicinity of the Kafue river by the Ila tribe. After a couple of years the first missionaries arrived there. In 1887, Holub delivered rich collections to Prague and Vienna and afterwards he travelled around the world and gave a series of lectures on the African interior. In 1894 and 1895 he lectured also in the USA and was awarded several prizes (Charles Darwin also stressed his contribution²). From his work we can name e.g. *Eine Culturskizze des Marutse-Mambunda Reiches in Süd-Central-Afrika* (1879a); *The Victoria Falls. A few pages from the Diary of Emil Holub, M.D., written during His Third Trip into the Interior of Southern Africa* (1879b).

¹ The author of this article would like to thank Dr. Helma Pasch and Prof. Václav Blažek for their help, suggestions and support.

² It is documented in a list of [correspondences](#) (16.08.2006) between Charles Darwin and Emil Holub.

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Other Czech travellers in the 19th century, who visited Ethiopia and South Africa, were Dr. Antonín Stecker and Čeněk Paclt. In the first half of the 20th century, Dr. Adolf Parlesák was an advisor to the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Sellassie, and he is jointly responsible for the long tradition of good relationship between the Czech Republic and Ethiopia. He wrote a book about his experiences from that period (Parlesák 1948).

2. Academic beginnings

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In the first half of the 20th century, three Professors of Semitology at Charles University, A. Dvořák, R. Růžička and A. Musil, started to study Ethiopian languages and history, so we may consider this time the beginnings of the later African and Ethiopian Studies at Charles University. The well-known Austrian scholar of Czech origin, Dr. Pavel Šebesta, became one of the leading figures in the anthropology and ethnography of the Pygmies (cf. Schebesta 1935, 1952).

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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 to African Studies which will be discussed here. After the WWII there was a slow rise in African Studies within the former Czechoslovakia. During the 1950's, African Studies were constituted as a complex discipline consisting of history, anthropology, sociology, linguistics and politics of the peoples living in sub-Saharan Africa. The theoretical background of the African Studies was influenced at the beginning by both the Soviet school of African Studies, represented especially by Professor DauII Potechin Olderogge, by the Western theoretical framework called the British school of Social Anthropology (represented namely by Bronislaw Malinowski, Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, Meyer Fortes, and Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard) and further by the Vienna School of Historical Ethnology. The Prague Linguistic Circle also played a decisive role. In the field of history and social anthropology, the Czechoslovak Africanists played quite an important role in finding original ways of investigation: This is documented especially in Ivan Hrbek's (ed.) *Dějiny Afriky* ('A History of Africa') (1966) and *Social Stratification in Tribal Africa* (1968).

2.1. 1960's

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The 1960's were, not only in my opinion, the famous period of the Czechoslovakian African Studies for its international reputation as well as for its surprisingly more western-oriented paradigm, while the late 1960's, the 1970's and 80's are defined by the strict Marxism-Leninism paradigm. In the 1960's, there were a couple of Institutes dealing with African Studies. First of all, it was the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, which had a special Department of African Studies, something that we do not have nowadays. The major figure of the whole African Studies in the Czech Republic was undoubtedly Professor Ivan Hrbek (1923-1993), who was also the editor of the already mentioned two-volume book '*A History of Africa*' which unfortunately was published only in Czech and regrettably was written under the influence of the regime. Ivan Hrbek carried out his fieldwork on oral traditions connected with the resistance of Sheikh Mamadu Lamine against the French in Senegal in the last quarter of the 19th century. His findings, together with the data he obtained in colonial archives, were published in the collection of essays called '*Studies in the History of Islam in West Africa*.' Ivan Hrbek (1992-98) later co-operated on the eight-volume General History of Africa project by the UNESCO as an author of several articles and as assistant editor of the third volume (Mohamed El Fasi being editor-in-chief).

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Dr. Karel F. Růžička has worked for several years on Bantu linguistics and has published some interesting analyses published in *Archiv Orientální* (1953, 1956, 1959). Karel Růžička was our greatest scholar in Swahili of that time.

Dr. Petr Zima, a linguist specializing in West African ethno-linguistics, conducted a fieldwork in West African Countries, especially in Ghana and Nigeria. In the second half of the 1960's he worked as a research fellow at the Department of Linguistics of the University of Ghana. Petr Zima was engaged primarily in the problems of the extreme northwestern Hausa dialects in Niger and dialects in Ghana. Most of his publications (Zima 1981a, 1981b, 1985, 1994, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003) are dedicated to general and comparative problems of West African linguistics.

In the 1960's there were some other Africanists at the Oriental Institute that have to be mentioned. Dr. Milan Kalous published several articles dealing with history, society and culture of the Gold Coast region (1966, 1967/68, 1968a, 1968b). Dr. Zbyněk Malý was a specialist of modern history of Kenya and he was also a lecturer at the University College of Dar es-Salaam, Tanzania. Dr. Otakar Hulec dedicated all his professional life to the culture and history of South Africa. Dr. Vladimír Klíma is a literary scientist specializing in African literature written in European languages.

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The second most important centre of African Studies was the Department of Asian and African Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague. The major figure of African Studies at that time was Professor Karel Petráček. He was a well-known Semitist and expert on Ethiopia. He also contributed some chapters on the history of Northeastern Africa to the General History of Africa. His major works are *Drei Studien über die semitistische Volkspoesie* (1967), *Altägyptisch, Hamitosemitisch und ihre Beziehungen zu einigen Sprachfamilien in Afrika und Asien* (1988) and *Introduction to the Afroasiatic linguistics*, the last one written in Czech (1989).

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Professor Luboš Kropáček was a specialist of Islamic revolutions of the 19th-century Sudan. In 1968, when he still was a Doctor, he was a member of the Expedition Lambaréné, which visited 13 African countries, whose task was to bring some new types of medicine to Lambaréné Medical Centre, founded by Albert Schweizer at the beginning of the 20th century. Professor Kropáček devoted his professional carrier to Islam.

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When talking about the 1960's we may also mention the [Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures](#), named after [Vojtěch Náprstek](#), famous Czech traveller who collected a large amount of artifacts from all around the world; the Cabinet of Oriental Studies of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore of the Academy of Sciences in Prague. What is more important in this time is its historical context, because in August 1968 the Soviet Army entered Czechoslovakia and this twenty-years long period influenced all aspects of life in Czechoslovakia including African Studies. Scholars, who did not want to cooperate with the regime, were forced to leave their occupation and others left the country. There is a long list of people who went to exile, e.g. Dr. Petr Skalník, social anthropologist and Africanist (a student of Ivan Hrbek, Karel Petráček and Prof. D. Olderogge), who went to the Netherlands, where he worked as a lecturer between 1976-1983. Afterwards he spent nine years in Cape Town, South Africa, and is now a lecturer at the University of Pardubice and Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. During his long career he conducted several fieldworks: In Ghana from 1978 until today, in South Africa since 1982 and in Cameroon in 2001. He specializes in problems of chieftainship, state and political culture. He published dozens of articles, chapters, reviews and books in English on

these topics and recently he became editor of *Transition to Democracy: Czech Republic and South Africa Compared* (Set Out 1999), and co-editor of *Africa 2000: Forty Years of African Studies in Prague* (in cooperation with Luboš Kropáček). Among others, we may mention the famous social anthropologist Ladislav Holý, who moved from Zambia, where he spent four years as a director of the Livingstone Museum, to Great Britain. Ladislav Holý was one of our most remarkable ethnologists and specialists on Africa. In 1961 and 1965 he conducted series of fieldworks among the Berti in Sudan, followed by fieldworks focused on Berti social and religious life in 1977, 1978, 1980 and 1986. Between 1968 and 1972 he was a director of the [Livingstone Museum in Zambia](#), but afterwards he did not return to Czechoslovakia but started lecturing at Queens University in Belfast and, from 1979 up to his death in 1997, he was a Professor at St. Andrews University. After 1989 he gave lectures at the Faculty of Arts, CU, Prague as a visiting Professor. Among his works are *Masks and Figures from Eastern and Southern Africa* (1967), *Social Stratification in Tribal Africa* (1968), *Neighbours and Kinsmen: A Study of Berti People of Darfur* (1974), *Strategies and Norms in a Changing Matrilineal Society: Descent, Succession and Inheritance among the Toka of Zambia* (1986), and *Religion and Custom in a Muslim Society. The Berti of Sudan* (1994).

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Other emigrants were e.g. Milan Kalous (1966, 1968a, 1968b), who lives in New Zealand; Magdalena Slavíková-Haunerová (1974, 1976), a linguist, who is now a Professor at the University of Wisconsin, USA; Zdeněk Červenka (1971, 1973), a political scientist, who teaches at the University of Uppsala, Sweden, and many others (Hulec 2001).

2.2. Twenty years of disappointment

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The so-called normalisation period (i.e. the period from ca. 1970 to 1989) presented serious challenges to Karel Petráček, Ivan Hrbek or Vladimír Klíma. At the beginning of the 1970's the African Department at the Oriental Institute grew to 15 persons who were supervised by Karel Lacina, a political scientist and ideologist, whose works on Africa are influenced by his ideological rhetoric from the contemporary point of view. Although the Oriental Institute did not thrive for obvious reasons, many books and articles were published on Africa, but as I already mentioned, many of them were written under strong influence of the Communist regime, but on the other hand, irrespective of their Marxist and Leninist jargon, which is uninspiring and unexciting for today's readers, such books were full of historical facts and information. It is almost a miracle that there were several publications uninfected by the contemporary context, written by authors somehow tolerated by the Institute. After the fall of the regime, a historiography of the African Studies in Czechoslovakia called *Africana Bohemica*, Bibliographia 1918 to 1988 was published by Jaroslav Černý and Otakar Hulec. The second volume of *Africana Bohemica* was published in 2001 by O. Hulec & P. Hereit, and it covers the period from 1989 to 2000.

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To compare the two periods of African Studies in Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic it is difficult to make some generalizing assessment. Even though the era before 1989 was not a time to breathe fresh air in any field of scientific research, the Oriental Studies or International Affairs in particular were richly financed due to its strategic importance in the bipolar world. This is a problem that we are dealing with at present. The ruling regime wanted to develop its relations with the socialist countries in Africa and indeed, Czechoslovakia had a reputation as a 'socialism-exporting country'. In this sense, to study the politics and societies of the countries, with which Czechoslovakia was on friendly terms, was a well payed job. On the other hand, scholars didn't have much of a chance to work on international projects and to exchange their knowledge on international conferences etc. There were, of course, some

exceptions like the aforementioned Ivan Hrbek or Karel Petráček, but generally, we may say, that African Studies in Czechoslovakia before 1989 were determined by Soviet policy.

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The current research team at the Faculty of Arts comprises Professor Luboš Kropáček, the Ethiopian lecturer Dr. Alemayehu Kumsa, and several external scholars like Petr Skalník. Professor Josef Kandert, who is specialized in ethnography and social anthropology has moved to the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University and he is also the head of the Ethnographic Department of Náprstek Museum in Prague. He is also the author of the richly illustrated book *Afrika* (1984). Zdeněk Poláček, the former Ambassador of Czechoslovakia to Ethiopia and current Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, published in cooperation with M. Azzän and T. Täsfay *A Concise Sociopolitical Dictionary: English-Amharic* (1990). Petr Zima, who is in close contact with many linguists abroad, edited an important study called *Areal and Genetic Factors in Language Classification and Description, Africa South of Sahara* (2000). Dr. Otakar Hulec published a *History of South Africa* in the Czech language in 1997 and some important works on African Studies in Czechoslovakia or the Czech Republic, respectively (2001), and Vladimír Klíma (2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2004) has recently published a couple of short books on Ghana, Nigeria and popular books about his experience from his diplomatic position in Ghana, Togo and Burkina Faso.

3. African Studies as a discipline at CU

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There are two types of studying African studies at CU: Masters studies and post-gradual or Ph.D. studies. The normal length of masters studies is five years or ten terms. At present there should be about eight students in masters studies and two in post-gradual as internal, and some others as external. The masters programme of African studies has to be studied in combination with another discipline, i.e. Ethnology, Political sciences, French or Anglistics and Americanistics. The goal of the study is to educate specialists in history, languages, social and cultural problems of African countries, as an official statement says. Students are obliged to pass all the exams and attestations prescribed for every single subject, to attend lectures, seminars, and to compile a piece of work as part of bachelor or advanced exam after the sixth term, and after the tenth term he or she can pass the Masters exam that includes exams of one African language, African history, and African culture and of course a diploma work. Inseparable of the studies are the languages as every student is obliged during his studies to pass an exam in two world languages (usually English and French or German) and at least one African language (usually Swahili).

4. African Studies outside Charles University

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This was the case of our most famous University, but I am glad to have the possibility to present some other fields of research, I would say 'new-born' in other academic institutions, outside Charles University. In my opinion, the Department of Anthropology, University of West Bohemia in Pilsen might play the main role in African studies in the future. There is a young generation of people, led by the internationally well-known linguist Professor Václav Blažek, who is the author of dozens of articles concerning mainly comparative linguistics. Though originally he is an Indo-Europeanist, African languages are his central point of research. He also studied at the Institut für Afrikanistik in Cologne in 1993 and 1994, sponsored by the Humboldt Foundation. His most recent work is the *Beja Etymological Dictionary*, which is currently in the process of being published. The work has its origins in the period of Blažek's stay in Cologne as he writes in the introduction: "The idea of an Etymological Dictionary of Beja has its origin in one Viennese café in summer 1990, where the author met with Andrzej Zaborski, one of the greatest specialists for Cushitic languages and specifically

Beja. Thanks to Zaborsky's energy and the positive reaction of Bernd Heine and Hans-Jürgen Sasse the author got a Humboldt's fellowship for this project and study the material at the institutes headed by latter two scholars, Institute of African Studies and Institute of Linguistics of the University of Cologne respectively. In the end of the stay (1993-94) the raw manuscript was in principle ready. Unfortunately, it was a real manuscript, written by hand. Only after the computer revolution in the home of the author organized by his wife Marcela, the author was able to start gradually to rewrite the thick file into the electronical text." (Blažek 2006: 1).

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I would like to mention one person that I am very much obliged to: Dr. Pavel Mikeš, former Czech Ambassador to Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Kongo) and former Africanist and Orientalist at the Oriental Institute in Prague. He was a member of an expedition to southern Ethiopia in 1990 under the leadership of the linguist Harold Fleming from Boston University at the beginning of the 1990's. This team 'discovered' a new language and ethnicity called Ongota or Birale, which was then described in some detail by Graziano Savà and Mauro Tosco.

5. Journals

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Unfortunately, the scientists of African Studies in the Czech Republic do not have great possibilities to publish. What about our journals? I register only four journals in which specialists of African Studies can publish, but on the other hand, none of them is devoted only to African Studies. There is the *Annales of the Náprstek Museum*, published since 1962. All contributions are made by scholars connected with the Museum and it is dedicated especially to material cultures of Asia, Africa, Australia and America. Languages of publication are English, German, French and Spanish.

[Archív Orientální](#) is a scientific quarterly of the Oriental Institute at the Academy of Sciences in Prague, which brings innovative scientific articles on languages, cultures, history and societies of Asian and African countries. It was founded in 1929 by Professor Bedřich Hrozný (1879-1952) who deciphered the Hitite language. Between 1976 and 1988 the scope of the journal was enlarged for political reasons, now including Latin America. The contents of the journal were rather incoherent reflecting somehow the political situation in the 1970's and 1980's. It is obvious that the articles were in majority full of political and economical topics, written in the rhetoric of Marxism-Leninism.

New Orient Bimonthly was published from 1960 to 1968 and its scope was to popularize the results of scientific research. The language of publication is English and the journal aims at a foreign readership.

One of the journals with a long tradition is [Nový Orient](#), which has been published since 1945 and devoted to all those interested in African and Asian history and culture. It is published only in Czech, at present as a quarterly, but I have to say, that it is a good opportunity for young scholars to make their first experience with publication. In Slovakia the major oriental journal was always [Asian and African Studies](#) published by the Cabinet of [Oriental Studies in Bratislava](#) (Skalník 1969: 217).

6. A word on Egyptology

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I have to mention also our Egyptology, though, it is being considered outside the field of African Studies. The reputation of the Czech Egyptology rates a couple of words. Egyptology was established in the 1920's at Charles University and the major figures of this subject were Professors [František Lexa](#) and [Zbyněk Žába](#) (cf. Martinova 2006). In the 1950's and 1960's

they carried out research in Egypt and this tradition survived until nowadays. Others are Professors Evžen Strouhal and [Břetislav Vachala](#). (Hulec 2001) [Evžen Strouhal](#) (1974, 1984) is the author of dozens of books and articles on anthropology in ancient Egypt. Professor Verner is now a leading figure of researches in Abusir and Egyptology is one of the subjects that the Czech Republic may be proud of for its international importance. [Miroslav Verner](#) has worked since 1964 in Abusir under the projects of UNESCO, his major research sites are connected with the King's burial ground in Abusir. He is also one of the founders of the International Association of Egyptologists and he authored dozens of publications concerning ancient Egypt.

7. Africa as a non-academic field of study

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It is a great pleasure for me to talk about Africa being now an independent field of study and research, because the situation has improved considerably. After the 'Velvet Revolution' in 1989 there was a great influx of thoughts and ideas about how to redefine, recover and extend the Czech-African relations. In the Czech Republic there are a couple of societies and organizations seeking to improve and extend the tradition of long Czech-African relations. In 1990 the [Czech-African Friendship Society](#) was established as a leading organization composed mainly of people who lived in Africa as engineers or technical advisors in African socialist countries. Its main aim is to organize lectures and seminars on African history and contemporary situation in politics, society and culture.

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A fairly recent organization is [Cultura Africa](#), a group of young students of medicine in Pilsen, including several Africans. They want to present Africa as a living continent full of different cultures, tastes, colors etc. They play African theatre, organize lectures for grammar school students and scientific conferences. The author of the present article is one of the members and his role in Cultura Africa is to organize conferences and seminars. The last event organized by Cultura Africa was Viva Africa 2006 ([Mwesigwa 2006](#)), a conference that took place in Pilsen in which many Czech scholars participated.

8. Conclusion

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As you have seen, 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 international 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. Presently, there are only few specialists in African Studies within the academic field: Professor Luboš Kropáček, Professor Josef Kandert, both above sixty; Dr. [Alena Rettová](#)³, specialist in Bantu linguistics, now a lecturer at Bayreuth University, Dr. [Jana Jiroušková](#) (2005), ethnographer at the Náprstek Museum and the Faculty of Arts in Pilsen, and Dr. [Alemayehu Kumsa](#), a sociologist, specialized in the Horn of Africa. Let us hope that the situation, especially the financial, will improve in the future and that the Czech and German or other international scholars will meet more frequently whether within some projects or at least on international conferences.

³ See Rettova's [publication list](#) (21.07.2006).

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