The following is the first in a series of interviews with some of the foundational scholars in the field of Islamic Studies in Africa. The study of the history, societies and cultures of Islamic Africa has undergone many changes in the past 50 years, from an emphasis on oral traditions to a focus on the written heritage of Africa, towards current research combining historical and anthropological methods. This interview series aims to shed light on the history of the field, as well as highlighting the source materials, methodologies and networks available to researchers from the 1960s until today.

R. Sean O’Fahey spent the main part of his career at the University of Bergen in Norway, and was vital there in building a research milieu focusing on Islamic Africa, and particularly the Sudan. He came to Bergen as a lecturer in 1971 and was later appointed professor of History of the Middle East and Islamic Africa. His work on Dar Fur and later on the Idrisi tradition was based on new textual sources and was part of a greater movement towards a new African Islamic history based on written sources. Professor O’Fahey was instrumental, alongside the late Professor John O. Hunwick, in starting the *Arabic Literature of Africa* series (published by Brill), which aims to be an overview of writings produced in Africa, in Arabic but also in vernacular languages like Hausa, Swahili, Fulfulde etc. Professor O’Fahey retired from the University of Bergen in 2013.

**AKB:** You did your degree at SOAS in the 1960s. That must have been a period marked by change – both politically and for research on Africa?

**RSO:** The first undergraduate degree in African history at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, was launched in 1961 (History, Branch VII). By that time, Africa was still in the process of decolonizing, and both the teacher and the student mass were marked by the colonial
encounter. When I started as an undergraduate in 1962, we were four students, and in fact we all came from some sort of colonial background. I had spent part of my childhood in Mombasa, where my father worked for a shipping company and my mother ran a pharmacy. One of my fellow students was the daughter of the head of the legal administration in the Gambia, another the son of a representative of a tobacco company in South Africa. The fourth came from a missionary background.

We were all highly motivated by the decolonization process, and much of the interaction consisted of going to anti-apartheid meetings, gatherings with African students at SOAS, and so on.

Our teachers were Roland Oliver and John D. Fage, both of whom were instrumental in setting up African history as a discipline, in Europe and in Africa. Fage had by this time already spent a decade at the University of the Gold Coast (now University of Ghana), and Oliver, too, had spent long periods on the continent, mainly in East Africa. Together, they also set up the Journal of African History, which became formative for the discipline. Soon after I started at SOAS, Fage left and moved to the University of Birmingham, where he established the Centre of West African Studies.

Also influential for me personally was Basil Davidson, whom I met on many occasions. I lived in Barnes, quite near the Davidson’s house on Barnes Common. Basil held an open house on Sundays, to which I often went. This was particularly inspiring, as negotiations over independence were held in London (Lancaster House), and representatives from all the emerging African colonies came to visit Davidson. A journalist with an impressive war record, he was particularly involved in the Portuguese colonies. He came from a radical left tradition in England, to which I was very sympathetic.

In sum, those of us who came into African history in this period did so with a very activist agenda. It had a clear anti-colonial tone, but how you interpreted this depended on your own inclinations. For me it was to give Africa the dignity of having a history.

AKB: As African history was emerging as a discipline, how would you say its methods and orientations were being transmitted to you as students?

RSO: At the time when African history was set up at SOAS, the school administration would not allow a degree that was entirely focused on Africa. You in effect had to combine it with something else, and I did Middle Eastern Studies with Bernard Lewis. Lewis, who saw African history as very much based on oral traditions, as developed by Jan Vansina (Oral Tradition. A Study in Historical Methodology, London 1965), did not think Africa had much of a history. He was