

FORUM: HISTORY AND THE PRESENT

Dialogues between Past and Present in Intellectual Histories of Mid-Twentieth-Century Africa

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This contribution reflects on the theme of intellectual history and the present from the perspective of recent intellectual histories of mid-twentieth-century Africa. I focus on two aspects of the intellectual historian's work which relate to the importance of putting the past into dialogue with the present. First, using new histories of the historical event of mid-twentieth-century decolonization as a case study, I consider the potential offered by investigating ideas which have been eclipsed or forgotten and trying to understand when and why possibilities closed down. Second, I consider the role of the intellectual historian in deessentializing concepts that underpin contemporary public discussion, focusing in particular on the concept of "democracy."

How might historians respond to a contemporary sense of existential crisis and contribute to exiting from it? What is driving this sense of crisis, and what role is there for historians in navigating it? In one sense, of course, it is not surprising given the upheaval and turmoil of recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic has constituted a global shock with far-reaching implications for individuals and societies across the world. But why have current world events produced an apparent sense of a world order unraveling, experienced in different ways in different places but certainly very apparent in the contemporary anglophone public sphere?

One aspect of the current crisis is the challenge it poses to assumptions about the linear trajectory of globalization, of a world becoming ever more connected, assumptions which the rise of populist nationalisms around the world in the 2010s had already begun to call into question. But another, perhaps deeper, reason may be the tenacious hold which unspoken narratives of "progress" and assumptions about "modernization" still have on intellectual life and public political discourse in the anglophone West.¹ Viewed from this perspective, such events as pandemics, the rise of exclusionary nationalisms, and the reemergence of borders appear not just as historical moments to be understood but also as somehow more existentially threatening, evidence that humankind is going "backwards" to a world thought to have been left behind. Such a perspective on events makes them appear all the more troubling.

¹Alexandra Walsham, "Introduction: Past and ... Presentism," *Past and Present* 234/1 (2017), 213–17, at 216.

In this, the experiences of 2021 echo those of people in other times and places who have experienced a similar sense of progress reversed. In his study of the Zambian Copperbelt, the anthropologist James Ferguson recounts what the decline of the copper economy in the 1970s meant to a generation who believed that “progress” was the natural direction of human history, that next year would always be better than last. In the 1950s, a song popular on the Copperbelt celebrated that “Our country is going forward / And we the people, too.”² But subsequent economic decline and structural-adjustment policies led to a different refrain. As one man told Ferguson, “From now on, it’s just down, down, down.”³

Another reason for a perception of crisis, others have suggested, is not a sense of moving backwards, but of being trapped in the present. For François Hartog, reflecting on his 2003 book *Regimes of Historicity* in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, one feature of the global crisis which had characterized the first years of the twenty-first century was a lack of intellectual resources to find a way out. For Hartog, the current state was one of “presentism”: the sense that only the present exists, a present characterized at once by the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of an unending now.”⁴

In this context, some have argued for intellectual historians and others to put aside their criticisms of what is often pejoratively termed “presentism,” and consider how to engage directly with contemporary events. In a forthcoming chapter the historian David Armitage argues, “If historians too freely use presentism as a slur or as a taboo, then we may be guilty of depriving our readers, and indeed ourselves, of one valuable resource for promoting human flourishing: history.”⁵

Historians have contributed to the task of understanding the present and offering resources for human flourishing in a multitude of ways. In my contribution I would like to think about this question from the perspective of writing about mid-twentieth-century decolonization and global histories from within a Scottish university and in the context of a recent flourishing of new histories of this period. I will do so by exploring two aspects of the intellectual historian’s work which pertain to the challenges of the present: first, the potential offered by shining a light on mid-twentieth-century ideas which have been eclipsed or forgotten and trying to understand when and why possibilities closed down; and second, the role of the intellectual historian in deessentializing concepts that underpin contemporary public discussion. Both are ways of putting the past into dialogue with the present, of history *and* the present, rather than histories *of* the present.

Excavating the past

My first theme is that of the work of recovery of ideas that have been eclipsed or forgotten. This is the domain of the intellectual historian as excavator, uncovering in their contexts ideas which either never succeeded or were, at a certain point, discarded.

²James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley, 1999), 1.

³*Ibid.*, 13.

⁴François Hartog and Saskia Brown, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York, 2015), xv.

⁵David Armitage, “In Defense of Presentism,” in Darrin McMahon, ed., *History and Human Flourishing* (Oxford, forthcoming), at https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/armitage/files/in_defence_of_presentism.pdf.

In her powerful recent book *Time's Monster: History, Conscience and the British Empire*, the historian Priya Satia explores the forms of historical imagination which underpinned the modern British Empire, and the tenacious power of conceptions of “progress,” which was sustained in different forms across time and transcended ideological divides. This was a conception of time which understood the rest of the world in terms of “lack.” In view of this deep entanglement of history writing and modern imperial projects, is there still a case for studying the past? Satia argues that there is, and indeed that there is much to be gained in the present by studying the past. She writes,

Might we not resurrect “lost causes” or learn again from practices and thoughts long consigned to the dustbin of history? ... Dare we imagine that recovery of other ways of being and intellectual traditions—the dreams that “the modern represses in order to be”—might still have practical and institutional purchase, especially as we confront the planetary crisis produced by dominance of the European tradition?⁶

With this injunction in mind, let us turn to think about histories of mid-twentieth-century decolonization. The history of that process was once itself approached from the perspective of dominant mid-twentieth-century ideas about the progress of societies and “modernizing” visions of both left and right. The transition from colony to nation-state was understood by many, though never all, of the historical actors who drove the process and many of the scholars who wrote about it as part of a process of “modernization” which others may have passed through first, but which all societies would go through in a transition from “traditional” to “modern” society. The core elements of this transition come through in the speeches and writings of the leading political figures of that era. The Kenyan politician Tom Mboya’s posthumously published book *The Challenge of Nationhood*, for example, begins, “Africa is today a continent going through multiple transitions—all at the same time: from colonialism to independence; from illiteracy to literacy; from subsistence agriculture to a monetary modern economy; from tribal rural life to a new urban cosmopolitan life; from traditional tribal custom to new attitudes to our women and youth.”⁷ Mboya’s book was published in 1972, three years after his assassination in 1969 on the streets of Nairobi, his killing testament to precisely the challenges of nationhood which his book explores.⁸

Yet “modernization” was not simply a natural process which could be allowed to take its course. In his autobiography, published in 1957, the Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah wrote that after independence formerly colonized countries would need to be “jet-propelled” and that what “other countries have taken three hundred years or more to achieve, a once dependent territory must try to accomplish in a generation if it is to survive.”⁹ For Nkrumah, one of the main engines of

⁶Priya Satia, *Time's Monster: History, Conscience and Britain's Empire* (London, 2020), 266.

⁷Thomas Joseph Mboya, *The Challenge of Nationhood: A Collection of Speeches and Writings* (London, 1972), 2.

⁸Bethwell A. Ogot, *Tom Mboya: Life, Death and the Disintegration of the Nascent Enterprise, "Project Kenya"* (Kisumu, 2021).

⁹Kwame Nkrumah, *The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* (Edinburgh, 1957), x.

transformation was the Akosombo Dam project, intended to provide the electricity needed to drive forward Ghana's industrialization, which, as the historian Stephan Miescher has recently argued, "as the engine of Ghana's accelerated transformation would remind generations of how Ghanaians had not just removed the shackles of colonialism but created the conditions for a richer life in which they enjoyed the fruits of modernity."¹⁰

Frameworks of modernization shaped external understandings of decolonization too. For the American political scientist Rupert Emerson, writing in 1960, the history of the twentieth century was marked by a transition from a world of empires to a world of nation-states, for empires "have fallen on evil days, and nations have risen to take their place."¹¹ And as the sociologist Edward Shils set out in 1959, the central project of the newly independent states of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia was to create "modern" societies, which meant, he argued, societies which were "democratic and equalitarian, scientific, economically advanced and sovereign."¹²

The birth of newly independent nation-states across much of the world in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s once seemed to slot neatly into such modes of understanding historical change. Yet these frameworks did not last, and in recent years historians have returned to this moment with new sets of questions and a new attentiveness to voices which once struggled to be heard.

The burgeoning field of the intellectual history of the historical event of mid-twentieth-century decolonization is serving to open up new vistas from another time when the world appeared to be in flux, in ways that are surely productive for understanding our present world.¹³ Instead of assuming a transition from colony to nation-state, historians have focused on the ideas that have been forgotten and the political formations which might have been. These modes of exploration recover a sense that political communities other than the nation-state and radical projects of social transformation may have been possible in the past and may be so again. In some cases, the recovery of radical ideas can be a direct resource for political action in the present.

If historians once took for granted a transition from colony to nation-state, the middle twentieth century was in fact a time when, as the historian Frederick Cooper has emphasized, it was possible to pursue an anticolonial politics while rejecting the nation-state form as its necessary consequence. The Senegalese political leader Mamadou Dia wrote in 1955, "It is necessary in the final analysis that the imperialist concept of the nation-state give way to the modern concept of the

¹⁰Stephan F. Miescher, "Nkrumah's Baby: The Akosombo Dam and the Dream of Development in Ghana, 1952–1966," *Water History* 6 (2014), 341–66, at 342.

¹¹Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation: The Rise of Self-Assertion of Asian and African Peoples* (Cambridge, MA, 1960), 3.

¹²Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, 2003), 1.

¹³See, for example, Frederick Cooper, "Possibility and Constraint: African Independence in Historical Perspective," *Journal of African History* 49 (2008), 167–96; Merve Fejzula, "The Cosmopolitan Historiography of Twentieth-Century Federalism," *Historical Journal*, 2020, first view, at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X20000254>; Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, "Manifesto: Networks of Decolonization in Asia and Africa," *Radical History Review* 131 (2018), 176–82.

multinational state,” while Léopold Senghor argued forcefully against the “balkanization” of West Africa and in favor of a reconfigured French Union.¹⁴

For Gary Wilder, rereading Senghor and Césaire’s vision for decolonization, “decolonisation without national independence” may offer an alternative to the dark sides of today’s “nationalist internationalism.”¹⁵ In a similar vein, the political theorist Adom Getachew has shown how nationalist leaders like Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere not only were state-builders but also engaged in a project of “worldmaking,” seeking to “remake the international order,” a vision which failed but nevertheless has critical potential for today.¹⁶

Within as well as between states, a wide range of visions of reordering society were debated at the time. As empires came to an end, anticolonial thinkers engaged with the question of how to heal the fractures wrought by colonialism and build a better society. For many, intellectual resources were offered by the socialist thinking of the preceding century and the answer lay in some form of democratic socialism embedded in local contexts, variously described as Islamic socialism, African socialism, and other socialisms. Over time, those ideas were squeezed out between “scientific” socialism on the one hand and capitalism on the other. The Ghanaian leader, Kwame Nkrumah, in exile following his overthrow in 1966, wrote that “African socialism” as a term had become “meaningless and irrelevant. It appears to be much more closely associated with anthropology than with political economy”. He now insisted that there was “only one true socialism, scientific socialism, the principles of which are universal and abiding, there is only one way to achieve the African revolutionary goals of liberation, political unification and socialism.”¹⁷ That polarization is often reflected in contemporary public discourse.

But increasingly historians have returned to the ideas of mid-century African socialism and begun to explore them in the intellectual context of the time, taking seriously the way in which many were drawn to noncommunist or anticommunist alternatives to the excesses of capitalism. Exploring these ideas in context can provide imaginative resources for the present. In his 2015 book *Give a Man a Fish*, James Ferguson explored the power of distributionist ideas in the twenty-first century, in contrast to a focus on production. One important moment in the long tradition of distributionist thinking which Ferguson traces, going back to Kropotkin, was the development of these ideas in the African socialist thinking of the 1950s and 1960s, notably in that of Julius Nyerere.¹⁸

The radical potential of that moment has been reclaimed in recent years by activists and intellectuals, such as the group Post-Colonialisms Today. They have turned to the ideas of the early postcolonial years as a moment when African states across the ideological spectrum “challenged the neocolonial exploitation of the

¹⁴Frederick Cooper, *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 68–9.

¹⁵Gary Wilder, “Apart Together,” *Aeon*, 29 Sept. 2015, at <https://aeon.co/essays/how-cesaire-and-senghor-saw-the-decolonised-world>.

¹⁶Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, 2019), 36.

¹⁷Kwame Nkrumah, “The Spectre of Black Power, 1968,” in Nkrumah, *Revolutionary Path* (London, 1973), 421–8, at 422–3.

¹⁸James Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* (Durham NC, 2015), 52–57.

continent” and saw their primary task as “securing their political and economic agency by breaking out of their subordinate place in the global economy and imagining a new one.” Recovering the ideas of the time offers, they argue, a potential “anchor for development alternatives.”¹⁹

Looking to the past can also provide a way of bringing into public discourse ideas which seem to challenge current assumptions. In 1967, Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda came together to form the East African Community. Although all three countries had earlier professed a desire to form a far-reaching federation, the community that emerged in 1967 had a limited ambition.²⁰ This was no political union, but focused instead on economic cooperation. However, even the limited goals of the EAC proved difficult to achieve, and its life was short and troubled. Always dependent on close relationships between the three East African presidents, the community barely survived the 1971 coup which saw Ugandan president Milton Obote replaced by General Idi Amin. Although normal business resumed later that year, its troubles were not over. The community finally collapsed in 1977, and a year later two of its former members, Uganda and Tanzania, were at war.

Accounts both at the time and since present the failure of the community as almost overdetermined. By common consensus, it lacked both the popular support and the political will to succeed. And yet, although the first East African Community failed, this turned out not to be the end of regional integration in East Africa. In the year 2000 a new East African Community was established, and today this reborn community is thriving. The community has often been seen, both at the time and since, as a technocratic project, distant from popular concerns, in ways which echo some contemporary critiques of the European Union. Yet there was another, often forgotten, public discourse which was far more positive about regional integration, and sought to speak in favor of integration on behalf of ordinary citizens, against national governments who were portrayed as putting their own interests ahead of those of their citizens.²¹

Returning to the middle twentieth century allows us to recover the sense of possibility of that time. It was a time of optimism, captured in footage of Kwame Nkrumah at the All African People’s Conference in Accra in 1958 proclaiming that “this mid-twentieth century is Africa’s.” But all too soon, that sense of possibility seemed to close down. As the historian of Ghana Jean Allman wrote in 2018, “the momentous decade of the 1960s, in countless ways, began as an African decade, a decade fueled by an African spirit of resistance to empire and colonialism ... But if the global 1960s began as an African decade, there was certainly no triumphal African end to that decade.” If 1968 signalled the potential for global revolution in many parts of the world, the writing was already on the wall for many of

¹⁹Adeboyo Olukoshi, Tetteh Hormeku-Ajei, Aishu Balaji, and Anita Nayar, “Reclaiming Africa’s Early Post-independence History” (2020), at <https://africasacountry.com/2020/07/reclaiming-africas-early-post-independence-history> (accessed 3 Feb. 2021).

²⁰Chris Vaughan, “The Politics of Regionalism and Federation in East Africa, 1958–1964,” *Historical Journal* 62/2 (2019), 519–40.

²¹Emma Hunter, Julie MacArthur, Gerard McCann, and Chris Vaughan, “Thinking East African: Debating Federation and Regionalism, 1960–1977,” in Frank Gerits and Matteo Grilli, eds., *Visions of African Unity: New Perspectives on the History of Pan-Africanism and Unification Projects* (Basingstoke, 2021), 49–75.

the heroes of independence struggles and, she writes, “By 1968, most African freedom dreamers understood the inevitability of the nation-state and the entrenchment of a world order in which they had to face either east or west.”²²

In some cases, radical visions lost out to more conservative visions. And the internationalisms of an earlier era were increasingly hard to sustain in a Cold War world of nation-states. “The 1950s,” the historian Gerard McCann writes, “was a more open, permissive era when African freedom fighters traversed blurred state/non-state Afro-Asian, European, American and pan-African institutions.”²³ Such overlapping connections became more difficult to develop and maintain in the tighter environment of 1960s nation building. Ideas, as well as institutions, were increasingly “nationalized,” prompting what Carolien Stolte has termed the “more closed and fractured world” of the 1960s.²⁴

The question of how and why that happened is an important one for historians to try to answer, and one aspect of my current research is focused on exploring this question from the perspective of East Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. It is certainly the case that living through a time when the United Kingdom is putting up new borders and taking away freedoms that had been taken for granted provides powerful insights into what living through such experiences in an earlier time may have been like. But the dialogue between present and past goes the other way too. If assumptions about a world becoming ever more connected may underpin some current anxieties about the rise of nationalisms and the reassertion of borders, exploring the tumultuous decades of the middle twentieth century reminds us that while worldly connections are sometimes brutally broken, broken connections can be repaired and reforged for a new age.

Provincializing the present

The second angle I would like to consider is that of intellectual history as a way of questioning and challenging the assumptions and categories that often underpin public discourse, of challenging essentialisms and bringing out the ways in which concepts and ideas are not fixed and timeless but change over time and space. This opens the way to what the historian David Bell describes as a “deconstructive” approach, which questions the assumption “that certain concepts, categories, and practices are ‘natural’ and timeless (regarding gender, religion, nationalism, etc).”²⁵

The example I would like to explore here is that of “democracy.” Conversations about democracy often proceed as if democracy has the same meaning in all places and at all times, and corresponds to an agreed set of institutions and practices. But these have always been contested, and exploring moments in the past when concepts were being argued over provides one way of provincializing contemporary understandings.

²²Jean Allman, “The Fate of All of Us’: African Counterrevolutions and the Ends of 1968,” *American Historical Review* 123/3 (2018), 728–32, at 731.

²³Gerard McCann, “Where Was the Afro in Afro-Asian Solidarity? Africa’s Bandung Moment in 1950s Asia,” *Journal of World History* 30/1–2 (2019), 89–123, at 120.

²⁴Carolien Stolte, “Introduction: Trade Union Networks and the Politics of Expertise in an age of Afro-Asian solidarity,” *Journal of Social History* 53/2 (2019), 331–47, at 344.

²⁵Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, “Beyond the End of History: Historians’ Prohibition on ‘Presentism’ Crumbles under the Weight of Events,” *The Chronicle*, Aug. 2020, at www.chronicle.com/article/beyond-the-end-of-history.

New histories of the middle twentieth century have been a productive space in which to do this. It was a time when political concepts seemed to be in the process of being universalized, spreading rapidly across the world. New international institutions such as the United Nations provided a forum in which common languages for discussing political society and its nature were embedded in public political debate.²⁶

And yet apparent uniformity masked differences in how such apparently universal concepts were worked out and argued over in practice, and the contexts in which they were embedded. In the 1940s and 1950s, the growing traction of the word “democracy” and its power to deauthorize existing political formations went alongside ongoing argument over what it meant. What did it mean to conceive of the authority of government as coming from the people, and what practical systems could be instituted to make this possible? What kinds of intermediary might serve to represent the people to government, and who had the right to speak for which people?

There were no straightforward answers to these questions, but in tracing the ways in which they were argued over in public and the arguments were mobilized on all sides, we can better understand how new political systems were ultimately authorized. Such debates can be hard for us to access, but sometimes they leave traces in newspapers or in the archival record for the intellectual historian to explore, as, for example, in the case of a Constitutional Committee set up in 1958 in Kilimanjaro in northern Tanzania to consider the future of the paramount chief, Thomas Marealle, who had been elected just a few years earlier, and of local government in the district.²⁷

For members of the committee associated with Tanganyika’s nationalist movement, TANU, the committee provided an opportunity to introduce what they termed “Utawala wa Democracy” or democratic governance in the district. But the question of what would constitute democratic governance was open for discussion. And so an advertisement was published in the local Swahili-language newspaper, *Komkya*, asking for comments and ideas on what constitutional change should look like. The responses show a range of ideas as to how to create accountable governance. Many were emphatic that regular elections should be held, arguing in general terms that if a leader did not face reelection regularly corruption would result. But others disagreed, arguing that a regularly elected president would indicate “instability, change of mind and unbalanced determination,” and just because regularly elected presidents were popular in some states did not mean that the institution should be copied blindly. But if the dominant tone was in favor of elections, this did not mean opposition to having a strong local government with an accountable head. This could be a president of Kilimanjaro, elected for a defined term, but could also be compatible with chiefship.

Where the term “democracy” appeared in the letters it was often alongside a set of “modern” political attributes, linked with support for nationalism and anticolonialism. But throughout the letters was a concern with the question of how to hold

²⁶Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, 2009).

²⁷This section draws on Emma Hunter, *Political Thought and the Public Sphere: Freedom, Democracy and Citizenship in the Era of Decolonization* (Cambridge, 2015).

power to account, and a search for a new approach to ensure that an individual could not again gain too much power, as Marealle was thought to have done.

Ideas were developed in specific historical and geographical contexts, and often had echoes of older arguments, even as new challenges appeared as well as new intellectual resources to tackle them. In his study of the Shambaa kingdom in northeastern Tanzania, for example, Steven Feierman shows how political battles dismissed by colonial authorities as anticolonial agitation or resistance to progress were part of a long-running contest over political authority in the region, in which the right to rule depended on the balance struck between healing and harming the land. Feierman traced arguments over the meaning of terms like freedom and slavery and uncovered the salience of the term “democracy” in mid-twentieth-century debates in the region. These meanings and terms were in turn picked up by national leaders like Julius Nyerere in the era of independence.²⁸

Exploring past ideas can pose specific challenges when sources speak in unexpected ways, with ideas which do not fit easily into dominant contemporary global frameworks. This is the domain which a recent *American Historical Review* forum described as “vernacular ways of knowing.” While there is a large and growing body of work exploring the intellectual worlds of past societies in Africa and elsewhere, too often this research remains confined to conversations between specialists. The forum’s editor, Camilla Townsend, offers a powerful call to historians to “try to do better,” both as readers and as writers, “to show how understandings stemming from another, far-distant culture may after all be interesting to a wider world.”²⁹ One way of doing this is to look at how the same or similar questions, such as that of what constituted legitimate political authority, have historically been addressed in particular contexts, taking seriously ideas produced from below.

Tracing the arguments of the past serves as a reminder that contemporary categories and definitions are not timeless, and are not fixed in stone. They are themselves the products of debates, and will in turn change again in the future.

Conclusions: the past and the present in dialogue

To return to where I started, a powerful criticism of intellectual histories of the present is that they can all too often serve to strengthen the powerful and reinforce the ideas which won. But a dialogue between the past and the present offers ways to think about our present challenges, and to create intellectual space, and to do so in a way that other disciplines may struggle to do.³⁰ The past in this sense provides a resource, rather than a source of comparisons, lessons, or roots. It enables a critical questioning of the unspoken frameworks of the present, and intellectual inspiration at a time when new ideas may seem to be in short supply.

²⁸Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Wisconsin, 1990).

²⁹Camilla Townsend, “Introduction: Breaking the Law of the Preservation of Energy of Historians,” *American Historical Review* 123/3 (2018), 779–88, at 783.

³⁰Emma Hunter, “Introduction,” in Hunter, ed., *Citizenship, Belonging and Political Community in Africa: Dialogues between Past and Present* (Athens, OH, 2016), 1–16.