Conclusion: Another Region, World, and Nation

Practising East Africa

Writing in 1968, the Ugandan academic, novelist and poet Okello Oculi surveyed East African intellectual life from his temporary vantage point in Britain as a postgraduate student at the University of Essex. Setting aside arguments about indigenous forms of intellectualism, Oculi tackled the narrowly constituted field of academics and writers that had, until recently, been dominated by Europeans. They had, Oculi argued, worked in the region during the colonial period as "partners with the colonial administrators and other functionaries, working within the same system, supported by the system, and with a collective vested interest in maintaining the system." This situation was, however, transformed from the 1950s onwards by the "'Africanisation' of learning" that was "assertive, rebellious, bold, optimistic, and clinical."

The new intellectuals of East Africa had, Oculi concluded, several distinguishing characteristics. One was an easy relationship with political leaders. Another was a determination "to capture the essence or the substance of what might be lost by the interferences of change and abandonment." Summarising the impact of this ethos across the humanities and social sciences, Oculi characterised the very best examples of this new intellectualism as sharing a common central theme: "Africa meeting other cultures." Two notable arguments were implicit in Oculi's essay. The first was that East Africa self-evidently existed despite the absence of federation. In an essay otherwise driven by an effort to categorise scholarship, Oculi felt no need to define East Africa. There was clearly no need to do so. Oculi (rightly) assumed that the great majority of his readers would take as natural an intellectual community that encompassed the three territories, centred on the respective capital cities and other major towns and cities. Moreover, implicit to Oculi's argument was an idea of East Africa centred on the three constituent parts of the University of East Africa: Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, and, especially, Makerere.[1] Similar urban geographies became visible to us in a visualisation of biographic data created by Anna Adima as part of the research project from which this book grew.

The second argument implicit in Oculi's essay was that East Africa was not primarily an identity or a territorial space, but rather a "cultural construct" that, as Peter Burke writes of early modern Europe, "became a thing in the sense of

1 Okello Oculi, "East African Intellectuals Remain Trapped at the Surface Layer of Current Events," *East Africa Journal* 5, no. 3 (1968).

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being treated as natural and influencing later behaviour."[2] Oculi's East Africa, not just its constituent nation states, was created in print, in broadcast media, and in the lecture hall.[3] His East Africa was globally connected, characterised by its relaxed cosmopolitanism, moved by the great energy of its Europhone young writers and thinkers, but dependent on unsustainable financial models connected to the global Cold War. Oculi urged his compatriots to think (with his own emphasis) "*Whose money will support your research?*"[4] This East Africa came of age in a time of a rapid growth in literacy; significant expansions in higher education; new publishing ventures; a wide range of foreign funders, and the emergence of outstanding, creative intellectual talent. To publish, to write, to read, and to debate was to be East African. The region constituted a distinctive space of intellectual freedom, dissent, and vibrant print cultures that enabled at least the literate to think and engage with range of different global influences and actors. Notably, this East Africa existed despite the failure of the federation project that was supposed to accompany independence in the region. The longer-lasting East African Community certainly smoothed the path of the East African intellectual project, but the imagining of East Africa as an intellectual and cultural space was not contingent on economic or political integration. As elsewhere, regionalism in East Africa was an intellectual practice as much as a political one.[5]

Oculi's East Africa seemed in 1968 to be a region on the rise. Oculi's account of East African intellectual life captured a sense of the confidence and power of the actors, networks and cultural organisations that constituted this regional cultural eco-system. A vibrant news media, successful young universities, and publishing houses with burgeoning lists of East African books and authors all pointed towards the imminent further integration of the region's cultural activities.

Hindsight, however, reveals that Oculi was writing at the apogee of this particular moment in East Africa's cultural history, not (as he thought at the time) in the early stages of the emergence of a nascent intellectual movement. Issues such as that of dependence on external funding he perceptively identified proved to collectively constitute the hidden constraints that acted upon intellectual and cul-

2 Peter Burke, "How to Write a History of Europe: Europe, Europes, Eurasia," *European Review* 14, no. 2 (2006), 237.

3 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

4 Oculi, "East African Intellectuals".

5 Rosaria Forlenza, "The Politics of the *Abendland*: Christian Democracy and the Idea of Europe after the Second World War," *Contemporary European History* 26, no. 2 (2017).

tural life in the region in the years following Oculi's intervention. East Africa, like other regions of the continent, became defined by such hidden constraints.[6]

The political tides were already turning. The Arusha Declaration of 1967 signalled Tanzania's turn to the politics of self-reliance amid a tightening of Nyerere's grip on power. At the time of it publishing Oculi's article, the *EAJ* was already operating under intense pressure following the banning from Kenya of the journal's German and American principal financial supporters. Restrictions on more radical figures in politics were even more severe as the Kenyatta government sought to exert control in the face of the challenge from the new Kenya People's Union. Across the border in Uganda, the African Labour College was closed down later in the same year amidst the early stages of Obote's "Move to the Left" and more exclusionary brand of nationalism. Neogy was arrested within months of Oculi's article appearing in the *EAJ*. Familiar landmarks in the history of East Africa's move towards greater authoritarianism and economic crisis soon followed: Mboya's assassination; Amin's coup and subsequent tumultuous violence; the expulsion of Uganda's Asian community; forced villagisation in Tanzania; the oil crisis; the collapse of the EAC; war between Tanzania and Uganda; the triumph of Moi's brand of conservative authoritarianism in Kenya; the return of Obote and civil war in Uganda; and economic crisis in Tanzania. As Frederick Cooper writes, "[t]he era of decolonization was a time when the range of political possibilities seemed to open up, only to close down again."[7]

In her explanation for the closure of the space open to Africa's world-makers, Adom Getachew rightly emphasises external factors, most notably policy changes in the United States towards the newly independent states of the world and the pernicious effects on sovereignty of processes such as structural adjustment.[8] We do not disagree. However, our emphasis on the category of East Africa and its practice reveals much about the domestic consequences of global politics and economics. The winnowing of the possibilities for global engagement by the citizens of East Africa should not be mistaken for a retreat from the world by the states and governments of the region. Far from it. The economies and political institutions of the independent nation states became ever more dependent upon finance and power sourced elsewhere. This resulted in the states and societies of East Africa exhibiting a high degree of vulnerability to external shocks – most notably the oil crisis and, later, structural adjustment – that in turn had profound effects

6 Frederick Cooper, "Possibility and Constraint: African Independence in Historical Perspective," *Journal of African History* 49, no. 2 (2008).

7 Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

8 Getachew, *Worldmaking*, 176–81.

on political ideas and imaginations, as well as on the nature and form of intellectual and cultural production.[9] Within East Africa, what Atieno Odhiambo and Cohen refer to in reference to Kenya as duelling spheres of internationalism emerged. One – which can be expanded from Atieno and Cohen's interests in institutions to include the cultural activities discussed in this book – constituted the progressive and creative networks in which "the values of shared African interests could be turned to the advantage of Africa." Previously the dominant of the two, as the post-colonial period progressed this first sphere became dwarfed by the second, "in which virtually any international initiative – from development to monetary reform to debt consolidation to structural adjustment – could be turned to the financial advantage of Kenya's most powerful citizens."[10]

Adapted to incorporate the region at large, Atieno and Cohen's concept can usefully illustrate how the conduct of post-colonial governance by East Africa's rulers promoted particular international relationships based on investment, aid, and military assistance that increased the prospects of regime survival. Among the costs of these relationships were the global cultural and intellectual networks that allowed the region's peoples to re-imagine a different kind of world and their place within in. The idea of East Africa, which had been such a powerful vehicle for such re-imaginings, was lulled. It was only to be reawakened in the late 1990s with the re-establishment of the East African Community in an era of political and economic homogeneity, an effort that continues to this day. When the EAC was resurrected, it was notably under a cadre of leaders – Benjamin Mkapa, Mwai Kibaki (both graduates of Makerere) and Yoweri Museveni (University of Dar es Salaam) – who had studied in precisely the setting that our book explores. In 1996, Francis Muthaura, then Secretary-General of East African Cooperation evoked a shared past in explaining the rationale for reviving the Community. "The East African region", he told the *Financial Times*, "is unique – we're talking about three countries which for a long time were managed as one federal

9 Emily Brownell, "Reterritorializing the Future: Writing Environmental Histories of the Oil Crisis from Tanzania," *Environmental History* 27, no. 4 (2022); George Roberts, "The First Oil Shock: February 1974 and the making of our times", *African Arguments*, 20 February 2024, accessed 4 March 2024, https://africanarguments.org/2024/02/the-first-oil-shock-february-1974-and-the-making-of-our-times/; Emma Park, Derek R. Peterson, Anne Pitcher and Keith Breckenridge, "Intellectual and cultural work in times of austerity: Introduction." *Africa* 91, no. 4 (2021): 517–531.

10 David William Cohen and Elisha Stephen Atieno Odhiambo, *The Risks of Knowledge: Investigations into the Death of the Hon. Minister John Robert Ouko in Kenya, 1990* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2004), 187–8.

state which more or less speak the same language, whose citizens went to the same schools. These countries feel they have to be united."[11]

There are, as in the earlier period, striking cultural and intellectual projects running alongside this renewed effort towards regional integration. It is not difficult to trace a thread connecting ventures such as *The East Africa Journal* and *Transition* to *The East African* weekly newspaper or the *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* journal. In 2017, the Makerere College of Humanities and Social Sciences relaunched *Mawazo*, a highbrow academic journal founded in June 1967 by Ali Mazrui and others. When Rodney Muhumuza founded *The Weganda Review* in 2023, he considered it "scream-worthy that in a country that was producing intellectual journals by independence in 1962, until today there has been practically nothing to speak of". He noted *The Uganda Journal*, founded a century previously, as one precursor to what he intends will be "the most instructive journal of its kind south of Khartoum", its "roots in Uganda" paired with "pan-African ambitions", but *Transition* could certainly also feature in its genealogy.[12]

However, in its current guise, the making of contemporary East Africa is tied much more explicitly to institutions and the formal process of integration than in the period we discuss in this book.[13] Without the same wider cultural notion of being, thinking, and writing as East Africans as in the 1950s and 1960s, print media in the present day has struggled to promote any great sense of regional consciousness.[14]

The winnowing of the global engagement that produced such coherent and cogent notions of East African consciousness in the 1950s and 1960s was not, however, solely about governance. It was also about nationalism. Much studied by historians for the period up to and including independence, some but too little thought has been given to the changes in nationalist thought into the post-

11 Cited in Peter O'Reilly, "African regionalism, economic nationalism and the contested politics of social purpose: the East African Community and the 'new developmentalism,'" *Journal of Modern African Studies* 61, no. 1 (2023), 58.

12 Rodney Muhumuza, "The Weganda Imperative", *The Weganda Review: A journal of culture, art and ideas* 1 (July-Sept 2023): 2–4.

13 Korwa Gombe Adar et al., eds. *Popular Participation in the Integration of the East African Community: Eastafricanness and Eastafricanization* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

14 Ceaser James Odhiambo Oranga, "The Role of the Print Media in Regional Integration: The Case of the East African Community," (PhD thesis, University of Nairobi, 2014).

colonial period.[15] The fate of the many regional projects discussed here tells a great deal about how nationalism changed from the broad, inclusionary project of the late colonial period to more autochthonous, exclusionary strands of political thought less compatible with global and regional consciousness.[16] The ideas and practices of the region discussed throughout the book were initially formed in creative tension with those of the nation and wider world. There is no better intellectual illustration of this creative tension than in the work of Bethwell Ogot, a historian of Pan-Africanism; the continent; the region; the nation; and his own Luo-speaking peoples.[17] But as the demise of Ogot's ventures with the EAISCA shows (see above), this intellectual endeavour was incompatible with the prevailing political culture of independent Kenya. The region came to be set against the nation in, for ideas of East Africa, "repressive antagonism."[18]

Despite the fate of the regional intellectual project amidst the triumph of the second of Atieno and Cohen's international spheres, the idea of East Africa at large in the age of decolonisation and the wider contemporary global engagement by East Africans tells us much of value, and it is some of these wider implications which we turn to now.

The Region in Time and Place

The imagination of African historical actors were not corralled neatly within the abstract confines of the global, the regional, the national, and the local as defined retrospectively by professional historians working largely with Eurocentric no-

15 Miles Larmer and Baz Lecocq, "Historicising Nationalism in Africa," *Nations and Nationalism*, 24, 4 (2018): 893–917; Emma Hunter, "African Nationalisms" in Cathie Carmichael, Matthew d'Auria and Aviel Roshwald, eds. *Cambridge History of Nationhood and Nationalism*, Volume 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

16 Glassman, *War of Words*; Brennan, *Taifa*; Jeremy Prestholdt, "Politics of the Soil: Separatism, Autochthony, and Decolonization at the Kenyan Coast," *The Journal of African History* 55, no. 2 (2014).

17 Among the many relevant examples of Ogot's work, see Bethwell Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967); Bethwell Ogot and William Ochieng', eds. *Decolonization and Independence in Kenya: 1940–93* (London: James Currey, 1995); Bethwell Ogot, *Africa and the Caribbean* (Kisumu: Anyange Press, 1997). and his leading role in UNESCO International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, ed., *General History of Africa*, 8 vols. (London: James Currey, 1981–).

18 Frederick Cooper, "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1519.

tions of space.[19] Instead, actors and historical forces ranged across these different levels of historiographical categorisation with remarkable ease in the 1950s and 1960s. Our purpose in writing this book is not to suggest that the region trumped all other spatial arenas in which East Africans operated in this period, but rather that its significance to political consciousness has been missed in other efforts that concentrate solely on the local, the national, or (more recently) the global.

The importance of East Africa as a region to its peoples, particularly its intellectuals, in the 1950s and 1960s, does not just tell us about imagined space but also about time. As the literary theorist Pheng Cheah argues of the "world", an apparently geographical term such as "region" also needs to be understood as a "temporal category."[20] The idea of the East African region enacted by the individuals and organisations we discuss in this book was shaped profoundly by the historical period in which they were at work. The colonial origins of notions of East Africa identified throughout the book helps explain why the boundaries of this imagined East Africa were relatively uncontroversial: few of our subjects seem to have questioned the logic that East Africa comprised of the Anglophone former British colonies of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. In other words, the very definition of the territory of East Africa was a product of the historical moment of the mid-twentieth century in which it took shape.

Periodisation is important to us for other reasons too. The history of the idea of East Africa and its place within the wider global engagement by the peoples of the region reminds of the contingency and fragility of transnational political imaginaries. Writing in 1968, Oculi did not entertain the possibility that the world of East African intellectualism he was describing was at risk. This is not surprising. After all, he was writing after a quarter of a century in which the tide of history towards regionalism and other transnational projects seemed to be flowing in only one direction. Transnationalism was, he and others were soon to discover, not a permanent condition but rather a temporary one, shaped by a coincidence of different historical trends and processes. The fate of East Africa's regional thinkers and actors reminds us again, as we have written elsewhere, that transnational connections – be they global or regional – "are fragile, that they can exist

19 Steven Feierman, "African Histories and the Dissolution of World History," in *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and the Humanities*, eds. Robert Bates, Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Richard Reid, "Time and Distance: Reflections on Local and Global History from East Africa," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 29 (2019).

20 Pheng Cheah, *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

unevenly across and between national contexts, and that they can disintegrate, even in very short periods of time."[21]

Intellectual Cultures in a Cold War World

Over the course of this book, we have seen the ways in which East Africa's intellectual culture in the 1960s was shaped both by late colonial legacies and by the very present reality of a Cold War world. Journals and public talks were supported by international institutions which sought to create intellectual cultures which would marginalise radical ideas. The clandestine – and not so clandestine – activities of Western governments served to promote the circulation of anti-communist liberal and social democratic ideas, just as the texts from the Soviet Union, China and elsewhere in the communist world also circulated through East Africa's public spheres. The term liberalism itself carried a particularly stinging charge in East Africa, associated as it was with late colonial efforts to thwart African nationalism and pan-Africanism through political projects framed in terms of "multi-racialism". One of many charges set against Rajat Neogy was that he was a "liberal". Arguments about the future of the University between Dar es Salaam on the one hand and Makerere on the other in the late 1960s similarly turned on the charge of a misplaced liberalism which served only to replicate the institutional structures of the colonial, or neo-colonial, university, with all that meant in terms of Eurocentric and racialised hierarchies of knowledge production.

In part, perhaps, as a consequence of this trajectory, liberalism has not attracted the kind of historiography of other political ideas generated in the region, and in dialogue with the world, such as African socialism and Marxism. But this book brings into the spotlight intellectual discourses situated in a broadly liberal tradition, discourses alert to the potential excesses of state power, that prioritised plurality, individual freedoms, the separation of powers and to some extent the free movement of capital. This strain of intellectual and political thought was strongly critiqued at the time and since, but never squeezed out entirely. In shining a spotlight on the institutions and ideas we have explored here, one theme which comes through strongly is the importance of an East African liberal tradition which deserves further study.

This in turn leads us to think about what revisiting this moment in East Africa's intellectual and cultural history means for contemporary debates about

21 Milford et al., "Another World", 409.

knowledge production and the decolonizing of knowledge.[22] Reading the debates of the 1960s, there are sharp echoes of the arguments of our own time. In the years immediately before and after political independence, a new generation of writers, journalists, academics and other culture brokers sought both to turn colonial-era institutions to new ends and create new ones. And yet, in so many spheres what happened was that the structures were not overturned and colonial-era hierarchies which privileged expatriate, often white, expertise were consolidated. The role played by external funding, and the limits on transformation which this imposed, has been a theme throughout this book. Revisiting this time period captures an earlier moment of possibility, but also helps us see when and why change proved hard to achieve.

22 Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously* (London: C. Hurst and Co, 2022).