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Between the Present and History: African Nationalism and Decolonization

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

It is now a half-century since most countries on the African continent saw the end of colonial rule. The first sustained scholarly attention to decolonization was authored largely by social scientists in the 1950s, who focused on ruling elites, party politics, constitutional development, and the transfer of power. Their successors, in the 1960s–1970s, brought new interpretive tools to the study of decolonization, including dependency theory, in order to make sense of the contemporary realities of political instability and economic underdevelopment. Since the 1980s, historians have brought the insights of women's history, labour history, and social history to the table in order to demonstrate that nationalist scripts were often written 'from below'. More recently, a focus on political imagination and political cultures, as well as the utilization of comparative and transnational approaches, has worked to free decolonization from its moorings as either the triumphal 'end' of colonial history or the opening scene in a postcolonial tale of 'what went wrong'.

Keywords: decolonization, independence, nationalism, nations, national liberation, Second World War, Cold War.

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content.¹

THE year 1960 was the 'Year of Africa', or at least that is what many in the world's media called those heady days of African independence that witnessed seventeen former colonies (of France, Britain, and Belgium) win their freedom from colonial rule in a single year. What began as a trickle—with the Sudan, Tunisia, and Morocco in 1956—gained momentum with Ghana's independence in 1957, followed by that of Guinea in 1958. By 1960, the flags of Britain, France, and Belgium were lowered on vast expanses of African territory. The Portuguese held on to their colonies until 1975 and 'independent' white settler regimes in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Southwest Africa (Namibia), and South Africa clung tenaciously to power (the last until 1994) despite rising international condemnation. But they did so as pariahs. By 1960, the direction of change was clear. As British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan famously announced that year in Cape Town, 'The wind of change is blowing through this continent. Whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact.'²

But in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, few had a sense of how powerful that wind would be, from what direction it would come, much less what changes it could bring, or what forces might deflect it. How, in only fifteen years, could the political map of the continent undergo such profound transformation? Although a half-century has passed since the Year of Africa, historians are just now (p. 225) beginning to grapple with the question, to explore the multiple, overlapping, and often contradictory political, social, and economic processes

that led to the rapid decolonization of the continent in the years after the Second World War. Indeed, until quite recently, the story of Africa's decolonization was left, for the most part, to social scientists, especially to political scientists, who focused their lens on nationalist party mobilization, the transfer of power, modernization, and processes of national integration.

African Historians and 'Nation Times'

In some ways, the fact that historians have only recently come to the topic of decolonization is a simple matter of chronology, endemic to the discipline. Decolonization has fallen within what John Kelly and Martha Kaplan call that 'middle distance between the present and history...Neither generally remembered nor yet well considered, these times pose a challenge to scholarship.'³ That challenge, of course, was and in some ways continues to be exacerbated by colonial and postcolonial national archives, whose documents have been sealed under 'thirty-' or 'fifty-year rules'. But the neglect of decolonization as a central topic of inquiry is not simply a by-product of the temporal limits of the historian's vision or the temporary inaccessibility of the late colonial archive. Well into the 1970s, the study of precolonial history, especially of African resistance, as Fred Cooper reminds us, was what 'constituted genuine African history, but bringing a similar specificity of inquiry to that which was being resisted risked having one's project labeled as a throwback to imperial history'.⁴

If African historians took some time to get to the story of decolonization, it is not because the discipline was unconcerned with or disconnected from the project of decolonization. To the contrary: the early research agenda of African history was profoundly shaped by the nationalist fervour of the 1950s and 1960s, and from the beginning its aim was to write back against a long tradition of racist, imperialist European scholarship that denied the continent any meaningful, authentic past worthy of the historian's craft. African history, in other words, as a professionalized field of academic inquiry, was born in the cradle of African nationalism and quickly harnessed to its mission. At new universities in Africa and in scattered institutions in the global North, pioneering historians such as Kenneth Onwuka Dike and Jacob Ajayi (of the 'Ibadan School') worked to document the rich histories of precolonial state-building, commerce, and governance on the continent. They were joined by others—such as I. N. Kimambo, A. J. Temu, and Terence Ranger (the 'Dar es Salaam School')—who detailed African resistance to early European encroachment and argued that the seeds of nationalism were planted with the first ('primary') acts of resistance to European encroachment. Nationalism and decolonization thus profoundly shaped the research agendas of Africa's first generation of professional historians, even as those historians worked to reconstruct histories that were focused almost exclusively on the precolonial period.

(p. 226) Social Scientists and the 'Wind of Change'

While historians crafted precolonial histories aimed at decolonizing Africa's past and explicating the connections between early resistance and nationalist consciousness, the first sustained scholarly attention to decolonization itself came in the 1950s and was authored primarily by social scientists, who, via country case studies, examined the forces that propelled colonies into nation-states. Those case studies—by David Apter, James S. Coleman, and others—established the basic outline for the metanarrative of decolonization, a story profoundly influenced by modernization theory and closely focused on governments, institutions, and leadership: the educated elite; the emergence of party politics; constitutional development; elections; and negotiations towards the transfer of power and self-rule.

These early accounts of decolonization feature a postwar imperial or global context, riddled with crises and contradictions, and a locally authored anti-colonial or nationalist script. The 'happy ending', as Bill Freund opined in 1984, was always 'national independence'.⁵ The story typically begins with the global economic depression of the 1930s, which is characterized as laying bare the hollowness of colonial rhetoric of advancement in the face of massive retrenchment and economic stagnation. The heightened tensions among the European powers and the invasion of Ethiopia by fascist Italy in 1935 are seen as then fuelling the early fires of anti-colonial agitation. But it is the Second World War that figures most prominently as a watershed moment in the metanarrative of decolonization, for its impact both on the global balance of power and on local scripts of nationalist mobilization.

Although military battles were fought only in North Africa and the Horn, the entire continent was profoundly impacted by the 'total war' economy. Hundreds of thousands of African troops fought in the war, some playing a

critical role in decisive battles, including those that liberated Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea from Italian occupation. But it was not only African soldiers who were recruited into the war effort. Forced labour pulled many Africans into production of foodstuffs for export and of raw materials in support of imperial war efforts. The end of the war, moreover, witnessed the emergence of a very different global order: the colonial powers were in a weakened state; they were poorer and far less stable. The United States and the Soviet Union were poised to become the new 'super-powers' and neither had a vested interest in buttressing the existing systems of colonial rule. In addition, the United Nations Charter reaffirmed the right of nations to self-determination first outlined in the Atlantic Charter, and shortly after the war ended, European power in Asia began to crumble with the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947 and Ceylon and Burma in 1948. Finally, it was in the immediate postwar context, at the Pan-African Congress of 1945, that future nationalist leaders such as Obafemi Awolowo, Jomo Kenyatta, and Kwame Nkrumah would begin to connect the incipient African struggle against colonial (p. 227) domination to older pan-African movements for freedom and racial justice with roots in North America and the Caribbean.

It is into this global, imperial context that the early authors of the decolonization narrative such as James S. Coleman, Dennis Austin, Robert I. Rotberg, and Ruth Schacter Morgenthau inserted the local script.⁶ Those scripts tended to focus on the contradictions of colonial rule, heightened by the depression and the war, and the new kinds of historical actors who were both 'produced' by colonialism and best positioned to challenge it: a mission-educated elite, which would begin to articulate a nationalist vision, narrow though it was, even before the outbreak of the Second World War; peasant producers of cash crops, who were increasingly vulnerable to food shortages, while the prices for their crops rose and then fell, depending on the vicissitudes of the world market; migrant workers, who, through systems of either voluntary or forced migration, spent years away from their rural homes toiling on plantations, in mines, or on public works projects; urban dwellers, who fled to cities, especially during the war, to escape deepening rural poverty, only to find overcrowded slums, with no sanitation or services; wage labourers, who in the rapidly expanding colonial cities, struggled to earn a living wage and to organize in new kinds of associations and trade unions; ex-soldiers, who had fought alongside European soldiers in the war and returned believing that they would be looked after for their service and that the freedom for which they fought would be extended to their own people.

The local script for decolonization, then, became the story of how new social actors forged mass nationalist movements capable of winning national sovereignty from a colonial power at the very same time that those powers sought to undertake a 'second colonial occupation'. By extending social services, infrastructure, and some educational opportunities and by encouraging secondary industry and the development of a small urban working class, colonial governments believed they could pay off their war debts and stabilize their possessions; they were, in other words, digging in for the long haul. But postwar nationalists, as Thomas Hodgkin first argued in 1956, had other plans.⁷ For much of the African continent, the story of decolonization from 1945 to 1965 is the story of how a rather narrowly cast elite nationalism, like that of the early African National Congress in South Africa or the National Congress of British West Africa, was transformed by a new breed of nationalist leader, in alliance with workers, peasants, school-leavers, teachers, and veterans, in the wake of the Second World War, into a mass nationalist movement capable—at least in most instances—of forcing European withdrawal.

Nkrumah's Black Star and Sékou Touré's 'Non!'

In many ways, Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana and Sékou Touré's Guinea served to set the stage and outline the plot for the decolonization story. The postwar account of Ghana—the first sub-Saharan country to win independence from colonial rule—usually (p. 228) begins, as it does with Austin's account, with the founding in 1947, by a small number of educated men in the south, of the United Gold Coast Convention, whose aim was to push the British gradually towards independence through a process of modest reforms.⁸ Then, enter Kwame Nkrumah. Nkrumah had been studying in the United States and Britain for over a decade and the leadership of the UGCC invited him to return to become their organizing secretary. He accepted the invitation, but quickly came into conflict with the more conservative leadership because he believed it was important to mobilize the masses in the struggle for independence. But while conflict simmered within the UGCC, the masses, as it were, took the lead in early 1948—first with a boycott of European goods and then with demonstrations and riots, in the wake of police firing upon a peaceful demonstration of ex-servicemen who were demanding their pensions and jobs for the future. By 1949, the political momentum had shifted from the more conservative members of the UGCC to Nkrumah and his followers, who then founded their own political party, a mass-based party called the Convention People's Party. From that

point on, non-violent protest or Positive Action, as Nkrumah termed it, was the name of the game. By 1951, the colonial government had no choice but to negotiate its way through the devolution of state power. In a 1951 election, the CPP won a resounding victory and Nkrumah became the 'Leader of Government Business'. Through two more general elections in 1954 and 1956, the CPP was able to affirm its leadership role, despite the emergence of regionally and tribally based opposition groups, and stood as the ruling party on 6 March 1957, when the Union Jack was lowered and the Black Star raised.

In contrast with the British, who responded to postwar demands with constitutional plans for the devolution of power to increasingly independent nation-states, France responded with more ambitious plans to assimilate its colonies into a 'greater France', beginning with its new constitution in 1946 which extended voting rights for the French National Assembly to some Africans. In that same year, as Morgenthau recounted in 1964, political party leaders from throughout the twelve territories of French Equatorial and West Africa met in Bamako and formed the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA), which worked within the framework of union and 'association' to extend citizenship and voting rights.⁹ By 1951, the RDA leadership, which included a young Guinean trade unionist, Sékou Touré, was advocating the creation of two strong federations—West and Equatorial—within the French Union, but President de Gaulle had other ideas and pushed for the balkanization of France's African colonies into twelve self-governing, but weaker, states. In an effort to forestall demands for independence, the French government granted the colonies some autonomy in 1956, but the momentum towards independence was strong. Within Guinea, Sékou Touré had moved sharply away from assimilationist strategies and autonomy within a French union by 1951. He built a mass party linked to the RDA, the Parti Démocratique de la Guinée, from a strong trade union foundation and then expanded its base into rural areas by gaining the support of farmers who opposed the rule of French-installed chiefs. When de Gaulle returned to power in 1958, his primary aim was to create some kind of stability in how France ruled its overseas territories. Through a 1958 draft constitution, he (p. 229) offered each of the twelve colonies autonomy within a French Community or immediate independence. The former came with promises of aid, education, and trade; the latter—with nothing. In the September 1958 referendum on the constitution, all of France's African territories voted in favour of de Gaulle's plan, except for Guinea, where an overwhelming majority of voters (94 per cent) said, 'Non!' France immediately withdrew all aid and support and whatever infrastructure it could pack into cargo ships. Guinea became independent, under the leadership of Sékou Touré, on 2 October 1958.

The independence of Ghana and Guinea set the stage for African decolonization in dramatic ways. There appeared to be no turning back. By 1960, the remaining French territories south of the Sahara were granted their independence. Nigeria, the most populous country on the continent, negotiated its way to independence as a federation in the same year. Even in Kenya, where colonial forces fought to uphold white settler domination against armed risings of 'Land and Freedom' armies ('Mau Mau'), the wind of change was blowing by 1960. The Kenya African National Union was founded in that year and the momentum was clearly towards African majority rule and independence, which would follow in 1963.

But perhaps the biggest surprise during the Year of Africa came from the Congo, where the Belgians had done almost nothing to prepare their vast territory for sovereignty. By the late 1950s, they permitted the formation of political parties and local elections, but reforms were minimal. Then after major anti-colonial riots rocked the capital Léopoldville in 1959, Belgium suddenly offered independence in January 1960 and formally withdrew six months later, convinced, perhaps, that a quick independence would mean no real independence at all. Only one political party—Patrice Lumumba's Mouvement National Congolais—had any national reach and, with independence, Lumumba became prime minister. The other political parties were all regionally or ethnically based; the army had no African officers and colonial civil servants immediately packed up and went home. In the end, it was a recipe for disaster and it was not long before the Congo was in full crisis, facing army mutinies and regional secession. Only three months after independence, Joseph Mobutu staged a coup, with Belgian and US support. Fleeing the capital, Lumumba was captured by forces loyal to Mobutu in December. The Year of Africa thus ended with the political disintegration of one of the continent's largest countries and with the arrest of one of its most dynamic young leaders. His subsequent murder, at the hands of secessionists (and, as many would later speculate, with the knowledge, if not approval, of Belgium and the United States) would mark the opening of 1961.

But Whose Dream was it Anyway?

That the grand narrative of decolonization—of Whiggish progress towards independence and modernization—would not stand the test of time was apparent before the ink had even dried on the 1960s social science tracts. In the first instance, the wind of (p. 230) change collided with the obdurate colonialism of the Portuguese, who would fight three wars—in Angola, Guinea Bissau, and Mozambique—for over a decade, before a coup in Portugal in 1974 would oust the dictatorship and bring negotiated settlements in 1975. And wherever nationalist movements confronted entrenched white settler colonialism—in French Algeria (until 1962), Kenya (until 1963), Southern Rhodesia (until 1980), and in South Africa (until 1994), the stakes were higher and the long, bitter struggles waged with arms. The Year of Africa, we should recall, was also the year that sixty-nine peaceful protesters in Sharpeville, South Africa were gunned down by the police for refusing to carry passes.

If the intransigence of some forms of colonialism belied the inevitability of decolonization predicted by Macmillan in 1960, events in the Congo only sharpened questions, already in circulation, about the real meaning of independence for those countries that had already raised their sovereign flags. Did the wind of change actually change anything at all? Or was it only independence of the flag—*uhuru wa bendera* in Swahili—that affirmed forms of neo-colonial power? In many ways, the critique of decolonization unfolded with the very process of decolonization itself, with one of the early and most devastating, on the ‘pitfalls of national consciousness’, coming from West Indian psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). In Guinea Bissau, Amílcar Cabral warned in 1964 that decolonization was in the interests of the imperial powers: ‘The objective of the imperialist countries was to prevent the enlargement of the socialist camp, liberate the reactionary forces in our countries stifled by colonialism, and enable these forces to ally themselves with the international bourgeoisie.’¹⁰ After the 1966 coup that overthrew him, Nkrumah would come to a critique not very different from Fanon or Cabral: true national liberation, ‘the next crucial phase of the Revolution’, would require armed struggle.¹¹

The revolutionary critique of nationalism and independence that developed alongside the very processes of decolonization in the 1960s and gained momentum in the wake of the Congo crisis, military *coups d’état* in Ghana and Nigeria (1966), the Biafran War (1967–70), and entrenched settler colonialism would also shape the direction of Africanist scholarship—historical and otherwise. By the late 1960s and into the 1970s, ‘radical pessimists’, as Bill Freund termed them, such as Colin Leys, Bob Fitch, and Mary Oppenheimer would bring new tools—class analysis, dependency theory, neo-Marxist approaches to underdevelopment—to African history writing and to deciphering political economy in a postcolonial context. For those scholars, much of what had been heralded in the 1960s as progressive change, as independence and sovereignty, was nothing but an illusion.¹²

Yet embedded within this radical pessimism was a profound, enduring optimism about the possibility of revolutionary change. Scholars such as John Saul looked first to Tanzania and to Julius Nyerere’s African socialism before turning to the armed insurrections of peasants and workers in Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, and Zimbabwe for the promise of substantive revolutionary change in Africa that could transcend ‘independence of the flag’ and fulfil Fanon’s vision of an entire ‘social structure being changed from the bottom up’.¹³ Indeed, well into the 1980s, after the revolutionary wars (p. 231) of independence had, in many cases, degenerated into national civil wars fuelled by Cold War hostilities, scholars still looked to the very southern tip of the continent, to Apartheid South Africa—the last bastion of white rule—for a new, alternative ‘happy ending’. In the final paragraph of his important survey of contemporary African history published in 1984, Bill Freund typified that revolutionary optimism:

An Africanist perspective would suggest that a victory for African nationalism in South Africa simply places it at the end of a long trail of victories for nationalism in Africa with South African joining the more than four dozen national entities created in the continent over the last twenty-five years. A Marxist perspective suggests, on the contrary, that revolution in South Africa would bring the working class to the fore and have explosive international consequences, providing Africa with its first industrialized socialist economy and bringing about a storm that would be likely to sweep aside crisis-ridden regimes over half the continent.¹⁴

Yet in striking ways, the radical tale of decolonization, as it was told after 1966, was no less linear or Whiggish, no less structured by a grand and modernizing metanarrative, than were earlier versions. It still pointed towards a happy ending, but one wrenched from the long arms of neo-colonialism and white settler regimes by the revolutionary forces of national liberation.

Complicating the Metanarrative

Twenty-five years after the Year of Africa, some historians were beginning to ask different kinds of questions about decolonization—questions less directed towards obvious answers or happy endings. Although decolonization was still caught in a kind of dead zone between history and the present, others began to call historians to action with questions such as, ‘Whose dream was it anyway?’¹⁵ Indeed, by the 1980s, armed with the new tools of social history and the perspectives opened up by women’s history and labour history, Africanist historians began to focus far more attention on the lives of ordinary women and men during the colonial period and follow those stories into the era of nationalist mobilization. They began, in other words, to chip away at the edges of the metanarrative—in both its positivist and pessimist guise—by demonstrating that the authors of nation dreams were not only political parties and their leaders.

Some of the earliest and most powerful challenges were launched from African universities (Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, and Ibadan, in particular),¹⁶ but we should take note that the key sites for the generation of historical knowledge production on Africa were shifting dramatically at this very moment. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the cutting-edge institutions for history-writing were located on the continent—at Ibadan (Nigeria), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Dakar (Senegal), and Legon (Ghana). Foreigners who wanted to study African history considered it an enormous privilege to be able to study at African institutions where, as Cooper has written, ‘historians...were well organized (p. 232) and conscious of their role in making and writing history’.¹⁷ But the 1980s saw not only new kinds of questions about Africa’s pasts, but very serious concerns about its present and its future.¹⁸ The oil shocks of the 1970s, the draconian structural adjustment plans of the 1980s, conflict within and among African states, and increased political repression on many fronts all took a heavy toll on higher education. Budgets were cut, salaries and libraries stagnated, protest was quelled, and the African brain drain accelerated. The impact on historical writing—on the questions asked, the priorities set, and perhaps most importantly, on the organic connections between history-writing and what John Lonsdale termed in 1989 the development of ‘effective political language’—was enormous.¹⁹

The shifts in method and in questions, therefore, that marked the new historiography of the 1980s were often generated from outside African universities (though they encompassed the work of African scholars now working in the global North) and mirrored the turn in North America and in Europe towards questions of historical agency, towards reconstructing the lives of ordinary people, and writing history from the bottom up.²⁰ Feminist and women’s historians, for example, were becoming increasingly interested in exploring the roles of women in colonial Africa—in agricultural labour, in trade, in resistance—and, indeed, it was the field of women’s history that wielded some of the earliest and most decisive challenges to the received decolonization narrative.²¹ Work such as LaRay Denzer’s on West Africa or Susan Geiger’s on Tanzania did not just add women to the narrative, it shifted its focus in fundamental ways by demonstrating that women were a central force in constructing and, in TANU’s case, performing nationalism through their organizations and their collective memory. Women, in other words, were not simply an audience for the nationalist message and historians needed to place them at the creative core of the nation-state story as those who generated and performed nationalism’s ‘culture of politics’.²²

Indeed, in almost every case where historians added new actors to the story of decolonization, the metanarrative was not just expanded, it began to transform in significant ways. When peasants or rural struggles came into sharp focus, the very discourse of nationalist mobilization—especially the meanings of independence—acquired a much longer and more contested history, one that was located as much in peripheral rural areas as in urban centres.²³ Elizabeth Schmidt’s work on Sékou Touré’s ‘Non!’ in 1958 powerfully demonstrated that nationalist scripts were written and often driven ‘from below’.²⁴ Popular pressure from women, from peasants, from workers, and from veterans—rather than decisive leadership from above—led to the no-vote in that historic referendum. Similarly, Lonsdale’s work on ethnicity and ‘tribal nationalism’ focused on the importance of ‘moral ethnicity’ in the development of political language—on the centrality of the local in shaping broader political debate.²⁵

Some of the most significant challenges to the metanarrative of decolonization, however, have been launched by Frederick Cooper, whose initial work on the labour question in East Africa has been followed by a series of field-defining publications that explore the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of nationalism and decolonization. Cooper’s work persistently transcends the imperial history/nationalist history divide that has long separated the work of Africanists from that of historians of European empires and reveals the important insights that can be garnered from (p. 233) comparative research.²⁶ Perhaps most importantly, Cooper has opened up the

realm of political imagination to rigorous historical scrutiny and reminded historians, time and again, that we should not read history backwards. In the era of decolonization, a range of social and political possibilities opened up and the nation-state was neither the only nor the inevitable outcome.²⁷ In the political imaginations of workers, of peasants, of urban women, we can trace motivations, goals, and struggles that do not always fit neatly within the nationalist rubric, nor should they be forced to. Even some of the most famous of nationalist leaders had visions, at least initially, that transcended the nation-state: Léopold Senghor wished to transform French Empire, not escape it, to build a federation in which free citizens shared equal rights and responsibilities. And Nkrumah's ultimate aim was not the independence of the colonial Gold Coast, but a United States of Africa.²⁸ In its call for non-linear histories of decolonization, in its posing of the national question in dynamic dialogue with other political questions, and in its search for the sovereign African state in a conjuncture of movements, Cooper's work has not only challenged the decolonization metanarrative, but has set the agenda for the next generation of historians.

Whose Dreams and Which Dreams?

The next generation is as concerned with *which* dreams as it is with *whose* dreams narrated decolonization. Increasingly, decolonization is being freed from its moorings as either the triumphal 'end' of colonial history or the opening scene in an ongoing tale of 'what went wrong'. In part, this is a consequence of what has gone before—that is, debates within the historiography—but it also reflects new and very different political, economic, social, and academic realities. Globalization and the consolidation of a neo-liberal world order have foregrounded the seemingly endless reach of the multinational corporation, which at times seems to trump the nation-state as the most significant form through which power, might, wealth, and hegemony are organized and exercised. It is perhaps easier now than it was fifty years ago to imagine a nation-state that is neither natural nor inevitable. And as they begin to conceive of alternative forms of protest and power, historians today are also drawing from new kinds of theoretical models, such as postcolonial theory, cultural studies, and queer theory, and they are in dialogue, across the global South, with scholars of other parts of the vast postcolonial world. Of equal, if not more, significance for historians of decolonization today is the fact that, with the passing of fifty years since the Year of Africa, most, though certainly not all, of the documentation relevant to decolonization housed in various government archives is opening up. There are now, for the first time, fairly extensive archival records to consult about the era of decolonization, while some of the individuals who were witnesses to the events unfolding around struggles for sovereignty are still here to share their stories. New sources, new perspectives, new questions, in other words, mark the current juncture.

David Anderson's reconstruction of the Mau Mau rebellion and the end of empire in Kenya is a notable example of how new archival sources are transforming histories (p. 234) of resistance and decolonization. Historians have been grappling with the meanings of Mau Mau for decades. Was it a nationalist movement, a tribal rebellion, or a Kikuyu civil war? Did it contribute to decolonization or was it an obstacle? What, if any, were its connections to effective nationalist mobilization in Kenya? Anderson uncovered a vast repository of trial records pertaining to the over one thousand Mau Mau detainees who were sent to the gallows by the colonial government during one of the most brutal suppressions of African resistance in British imperial history. (At one point the colonial state had imprisoned 12 per cent of all male Kikuyus.) From the trial records and from a broad range of government documents housed both in Kenya and Britain, Anderson has crafted a complex story focused on the lives of ordinary men and women who were caught in the devastation that became known as 'Mau Mau' and provided unparalleled insight into its long-term consequences for Kenya's unfolding political landscape.²⁹

New archival sources are, in part, also responsible for a burgeoning literature on political imagination, which builds from some of the scholarly work the 1980s and 1990s by locating the origins of political discourse outside the nationalist frame or at hybridized meeting places between the local and national. James Brennan's work on Tanzania, for example, takes aim at a historiography that has been primarily concerned with the structures of nationalist mobilization and has, for the most part, not taken seriously the intellectual content of Tanzanian nationalism. By tracing a shifting Kiswahili political vocabulary in Dar es Salaam, Brennan demonstrates that TANU had no monopoly on the generation of nationalist discourse.³⁰ Focusing on village politics in the Grassfields of Cameroon, Meredith Terretta undertakes a similar excavation of political imagination, demonstrating how the anti-colonialism of the UPC (Union des populations du Cameroun) and village concepts of sovereignty and nation coalesced to form a 'hybrid' political discourse of 'village nationalism'.³¹

It is not simply in excavating and analysing a range of political discourses that recent historians have complicated and at times subverted the metanarrative of decolonization. By exploring the varied ways in which political imagination was expressed, articulated, and performed, they have drawn insight from postcolonial and cultural studies scholarship and encouraged us to look beyond the print capitalism so central to Benedict Anderson's explanation of 'imagined communities'. Inspired by Geiger's work on the performance of nationalism by TANU women, for example, Marissa Moorman's *Intonations* turns to 'sonorous capitalism' (riffing on Anderson), specifically to popular music in Luanda and the vibrant dance clubs where it was played. 'Angolan musicians and audiences', Moorman argues, 'transformed autonomous spaces into an experience of sovereignty as they began to imagine an Angola in and on their own terms'.³²

Pointing a wide-angle lens at political imagination and discourses of self-determination in the era of decolonization, historians have also brought into focus new political actors, who have seldom been taken very seriously. While 1980s and 1990s scholarship brought women, workers, and peasants into the frame of decolonization, some fascinating recent scholarship has looked at the particular role of youth in both imagining and contesting nation dreams. Most recently, Jay Straker's *Youth, Nationalism, and the Guinean Revolution* places Guinea's youth at centre stage in a story of mobilization (p. 235) and nation-building that defies the pessimism of earlier generations of scholars. In this account, Sékou Touré emerges not as an inevitable despot-in-the-making but as a 'beleaguered political artisan trying to come to terms with a youth-centered social dynamic'.³³ Straker follows the 'youth across the border of independence', right up to the death of Touré in 1984, in a narrative that is never overwhelmed by 'what went wrong', but rather foregrounds the complex nature of national citizenship and national imagining.

While much of the recent literature on decolonization is still generally situated within the confines of individual nation-states, there has been a growing scholarship that is comparative and transnational, and is blurring the boundaries between European imperial and African nationalist histories. Because of the assimilationist imperative of French decolonization, the literature on French West Africa has been the most expansive in this regard, but there are interesting developments in other areas as well.³⁴ Historians with very different repertoires of area expertise, for example, are bringing fresh insight to the study of decolonization. Kevin Gaines's *American Africans in Ghana*, for example, follows stories of freedom and nation through a cast of extraordinary women and men of African descent who converged on Ghana in the midst of the US civil rights movement, the Cold War, and the decolonization of the continent. Christopher Lee has looked to Bandung and the rise of Afro-Asian solidarity at the dawn of African independence and James Brennan, in a similar vein, has explored the impact of Radio Cairo on the East African freedom struggle—a context in which the global aspirations of Afro-Asian solidarity confronted the real political and economic disparities between Africans and Asians in East Africa.³⁵ In these recent transnational accounts, the Cold War figures far more prominently than it has in earlier scholarship and, indeed, grappling with the real impact of the Cold War on African decolonization is a critical area of investigation at the current juncture.³⁶

Finally, historians are beginning to historicize their own discipline in the context of decolonization, and to examine questions of memory and public history as fiftieth-anniversary golden jubilees of independence are celebrated. This scholarship has taken a number of forms. Some of it is aimed at exploring knowledge production about Africa generally over the past fifty years.³⁷ Toyin Falola's recent work has grappled with nationalism, the academy, and the role of African intellectuals, while some of the early European scholars involved in the establishment of African history as a subject of professional academic inquiry have penned their memoirs.³⁸ In addition, historians have joined a range of scholars from other disciplines in probing sites of national memory and of public or popular culture in the context of decolonization.³⁹

'Leave the Dead Some Room to Dance'

The Year of Africa is now a half-century behind us; it is emerging out of the shadows, out of what Kelly and Kaplan term the 'twilight of history'.⁴⁰ But what does the future of this history hold? Certainly, historians of decolonization over the next decade must continue to heed Cooper's warning not to read history backwards, not to interpret every (p. 236) word, action, or reaction as leading always and inevitably to the constitution of a single sovereign postcolonial nation-state. Historians of decolonization must, to borrow the words of Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, 'leave the dead some room to dance'.⁴¹ We know from the scholarship of the past two decades that in 1960 women and men were imagining new worlds of all kinds. We must continue to reconstruct these political

imaginaries, the dreams of winners and of losers. What was deemed possible in those critical years? How and why did those possibilities, that promise, begin to narrow? In answering these questions—of dreams deferred or, worse, disappeared—we cannot just look to the ‘failed’ or ‘compromised’ nation-state or to its former colonial overlord. African decolonization unfolded as a transnational, not just as an imperial, story, and we must work to capture its multifaceted and multi-sited complexity, from Manchester to Bandung and beyond.⁴² And though we must look beyond nation-state borders in reconstructing histories of decolonization, we must also be cognizant of those ever-tightening borders. How did they come to be marked or enacted, and engaged as lived experience? How did they define or demarcate citizenship: who belonged and who did not?

Borders mattered, especially in the Cold War world in which African decolonization unfolded. Indeed, one of the many challenges historians currently face is understanding just how Cold War rivalries shaped, facilitated, constrained, or subverted not just processes of decolonization, but how the postcolonial world could be imagined. For example, it was in the context of the Cold War that international espionage came into its own. Although it is unclear at this stage how much of the documentary record will survive, we must more firmly take on global questions of Cold War politics in histories of African decolonization, including grappling with the new forms of intelligence gathering that emerged after the Second World War. Who was collecting information, from whom, and how, and to what end? How did those global practices refract locally, within families, between generations? Equally important, given the critical role it would assume in seizing and holding state power in so many countries, is the military. While I suspect access to records will plague this area of research in the years to come, new histories of decolonization must begin to interrogate far more carefully the legacy of colonial militaries in the postcolonial era.

The challenges scholars face, as decolonization moves into the light of historical inquiry, are not just about the big players on the big stage—US and USSR rivalries, military power, or the CIA. One of the more exciting directions towards which current scholarship points is the gendered politics of decolonization. While we now have a much better sense of the critical roles women played in mobilizing, performing, and imagining nation in the years of nationalist struggle, we have much to learn about the gendered dynamics of citizenship, politics, and governance in the immediate postcolonial period.⁴³ What, for example, is the fate of women activists in the context of the centralization and consolidation of state power after independence? Does decolonization inevitably result in a masculinization of the political sphere, no matter how central women were to independence struggles? Connected to questions of gender, state power, and politics are issues of marriage, family, and sexuality. How (p. 237) are these reinvented, articulated, and consolidated in the new ‘modern’ sovereign nation-states?

Fifty years on, the questions are many, but one thing is certain: the grand social science metanarrative of decolonization is under assault; it is being complicated, overturned, fractured into multiple micro-histories, and grafted onto transnational histories. It no longer fits neatly within borders of any kind. How, indeed, can we tell the story of any territorially bound nation-state as a singular story of triumph or tragedy when, for the very women and men who sought to build a new world in 1957, 1960, 1975, or 1994, it was not a singular, linear story? Certainly the archives for this project-in-the-making must be similarly nuanced and complex. Our research cannot be confined to the national archive of the postcolonial state or the former imperial power. Evidentiary fragments are strewn across the globe, from Cape Town to Cairo, from Beijing to Moscow to Washington, DC. They are in the intelligence archives of the CIA and the KGB, in the paintings of Tshibumba Kanda Matulu and Tom Feelings, in the prose of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and Maya Angelou, and in the memories and tin trunks of ordinary women and men. The challenges, of course, are immense and daunting: how to grapple with such an extraordinary, transnational range of sources and still ‘discern the movements’, as Fanon insisted, that gave decolonization ‘its historical form and content’. Can we, in other words, recount this story so that it is neither a triumphal end nor a tragic beginning?

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Notes:

- (1.) Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 36.
- (2.) 'Harold Macmillan: Winds of Change', in Jussi M. Hanhimäki and Odd Arne Westad, eds, *The Cold War: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 357.
- (3.) John D. Kelly and Martha Kaplan, *Presented Communities: Fiji and World Decolonization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. vii.
- (4.) Frederick Cooper, 'Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History', *American Historical Review*, 99/5 (1994), 1522.
- (5.) Bill Freund, *The Making of Contemporary Africa: The Development of African Society since 1800* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984), 8.
- (6.) James S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1958);

Dennis Austin, *Politics in Ghana, 1946–1960* (London: OUP, 1964); Robert I. Rotberg, *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa: The Making of Malawi and Zambia, 1873–1964* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965); Ruth Schacter Morgenthau, *Political Parties in French-Speaking West Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

(7.) Thomas Hodgkin, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa* (London: Frederick Muller, 1956).

(8.) Austin, *Politics in Ghana*, see esp. 49–102.

(9.) See Morgenthau, *Political Parties in French-Speaking West Africa*.

(10.) Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*; Amílcar Cabral, 'Is Colonialism Rationalized Imperialism?', in William Worger, Nancy Clark, and Edward Alpers, eds, *Africa and the West: A Documentary History, ii. From Colonialism to Independence* (New York: OUP, 2010), 181.

(11.) Kwame Nkrumah, *Class Struggle in Africa* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 9.

(12.) Bob Fitch and Mary Oppenheimer, *Ghana: End of an Illusion* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966); Colin Leys, *Underdevelopment in Kenya: The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism, 1964–1971* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1975).

(13.) Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 35. See e.g. John S. Saul, *The State and Revolution in Eastern Africa: Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979); Lionel Cliffe and John S. Saul, *Socialism in Tanzania: An Interdisciplinary Reader* (Dar es Salaam: East African Publishing House, 1972); John S. Saul, ed., *A Difficult Road: The Transition to Socialism in Mozambique* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985).

(14.) Freund, *Making of Contemporary Africa*, 288.

(15.) Michael Crowder, 'Whose Dream was it Anyway? Twenty-Five Years of African Independence', *African Affairs*, 86/342 (Jan., 1987).

(16.) Cooper, 'Conflict and Connection', 1522–3.

(17.) Frederick Cooper, 'Africa's Pasts and Africa's Historians', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 34/2 (2000), 304.

(18.) John Lonsdale, 'Africa's Pasts in Africa's Futures', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 23/1 (1989), 126–35.

(19.) Lonsdale, 'Africa's Pasts in Africa's Futures', 130.

(20.) An exception, perhaps, is the History Workshop, founded by radical white scholars at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1977.

(21.) Nina Mba's University of Ibadan Ph.D. dissertation, which was published as *Nigerian Women Mobilised: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900–1965* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California, 1982), laid important groundwork for what would follow in the 1980s.

(22.) Susan Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955–1965* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997), 15. See also LaRay Denzer, 'Towards a Study of the History of West African Women's Participation in Nationalist Politics: The Early Phase, 1935–1950', *Africana Research Bulletin*, 6/4 (1976).

(23.) Steve Feierman's *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), laid important groundwork.

(24.) Elizabeth Schmidt, *Mobilizing the Masses: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Nationalist Movement in Guinea, 1939–1958* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005).

(25.) John Lonsdale, 'The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought', in Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley, ii. Violence and Ethnicity* (Athens, O.: Ohio University Press, 1990), 315–504. My own work on decolonization and the National Liberation Movement in Ghana sought to add to the metanarrative actors whose histories long predated the nation-state and whose visions of sovereignty differed

markedly from Nkrumah's—grounded as they were in the long and contested past of Asante as a precolonial state: Jean Allman, *Quills of the Porcupine: Asante Nationalism in an Emergent Ghana* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

(26.) Cooper has also demonstrated the importance of engaging theoretical paradigms from outside African studies: see esp. his 'Conflict and Connection', and *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005).

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

(28.) Frederick Cooper, 'Possibility and Constraint: African Independence in Historical Perspective', *Journal of African History*, 49/2 (2008), 174–5.

(29.) David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: Norton, 2005). For an example of the importance of new sources for understanding decolonization in Francophone Africa, see Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 5.

(30.) James R. Brennan, 'Blood Enemies: Exploitation and Urban Citizenship in the Nationalist Political Thought of Tanzania, 1958–1975', *Journal of African History*, 47/3 (2006), 391.

(31.) Meredith Terretta, "'God of Independence, God of Peace": Village Politics and Nationalism in the Maquis of Cameroon, 1957–71', *Journal of African History*, 46/1 (2005), 75; see also David Anderson, "'Yours in Struggle for Majimbo": Nationalism and the Party Politics of Decolonization in Kenya, 1955–64', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40 (2005), and James R. Brennan, 'Lowering the Sultan's Flag: Sovereignty and Decolonization in Coastal Kenya', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50/4 (2008).

(32.) Marissa J. Moorman, *Intonations: A Social History of Music and Nation in Luanda, Angola, from 1945 to Recent Times* (Athens, O.: Ohio University Press, 2008), 7.

(33.) Jay Straker, *Youth, Nationalism, and the Guinean Revolution* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2009), 10; see also James R. Brennan, 'Youth, the TANU Youth League and Managed Vigilantism in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 1925–1973', *Africa*, 7/6 (2006).

(34.) See e.g. Shepard, *Invention of Decolonization*, and Tony Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa* (New York: Berg, 2002).

(35.) Kevin Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Christopher J. Lee, ed., *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives* (Athens, O.: Ohio University Press, 2010). In Lee's volume, see esp. James R. Brennan, 'Radio Cairo and the Decolonization of East Africa, 1953–1964'.

(36.) See Elizabeth Schmidt, 'Cold War in Guinea: The Rassemblement Démocratique Africain and the Struggle over Communism, 1950–1958', *Journal of African History*, 48/1 (2007), and *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea, 1946–1958* (Athens, O.: Ohio University Press, 2007); Matthew Connelly, 'Rethinking the Cold War and Decolonization: The Grand Strategy of the Algerian War for Independence', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 33 (2001), 222; Ebere Nwaubani, *The United States and Decolonization in West Africa, 1950–1960* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2001).

(37.) Paul T. Zeleza, *The Study of Africa* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 1996 and 1997), i and ii.

(38.) Toyin Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2001); see also Toyin Falola and Saheed Aderinto, *Nigeria, Nationalism and Writing History* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011). Two notable examples of these memoirs are Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), and Roland Oliver, *In the Realms of Gold: Pioneering in African History* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

(39.) See e.g. David E. Apter, 'Ghana's Independence: Triumph and Paradox', *Transition*, 98 (2008); also Cooper, 'Possibility and Constraint'; and Annie Coombes, *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

(40.) Kelly and Kaplan, *Represented Communities*, 7.

(41.) Wole Soyinke, *A Dance of the Forests, from his Five Plays* (London: OUP, 1964), 39, cited in Lonsdale, 'Africa's Pasts in Africa's Futures', 126, 141.

(42.) Lee, *Making a World After Empire*.

(43.) Andrew Ivaska's recent *Cultured States: Youth, Gender and Modern Style in 1960s Dar es Salaam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) is an excellent example of where these new areas of inquiry might lead.

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