

## Introduction

We have learnt through bitter experience that World public opinion mainly reacts when danger has reached a critical stage [...] The number and importance of events which have taken place in the last ten years have no parallel in the history of mankind [...] This is the new world being born before our eyes. We do not need to refer to books to see its development; its events are part of our daily life; we are its witnesses and many amongst ourselves are its praiseworthy actors [...] we are the sons of this era

John Kale, *Colonialism Is Incompatible with Peace* (1958)

At the climax of the story that this book tells, John Kale, a man in his mid-twenties from a town in south-western Uganda, sits down in his office on Ahmad Heshmat Street, Cairo, to author a pamphlet.<sup>1</sup> Doing so, in 1958, appeared urgent and obvious, not only to him, but to a small cohort of young, educated activists from East and Central Africa. It would not have five years previously, nor would it five years later. Of course, political pamphlets had a long history extending in time and space beyond 1950s Cairo. But this act of pamphlet writing was specific. It carried the hallmarks of a particular anticolonial culture, by which I mean a set of norms linking ideas and practices – a shifting, unwritten script. This anticolonial culture explains how activists like Kale came to participate in a rapidly changing landscape of global anticolonial activism in the 1950s and 1960s. In other words, it tells us why writing a pamphlet in Cairo, and the many other episodes of transnational activism

<sup>1</sup> John Kale, *Colonialism Is Incompatible with Peace* (Cairo: Foreign Mission of the Uganda National Congress, 1958), extract at 10–19.

that this book documents, came to be seen as worthwhile – even while ‘bitter experience’ continuously suggested otherwise.

*African Activists* charts the life of the anticolonial culture captured in paper objects like Kale’s pamphlet and explains why it is significant to our understanding of the connected processes of decolonisation in the post-war world – processes not just legal and political, but social and intellectual too. The activists who populate the following pages had, as Kale hinted, a slippery relationship to the moment of global-historical change they inhabited. They were at once actors, witnesses, sons (and indeed they were overwhelmingly male); a loose-knit cohort of secondary political figures, elite in terms of their education and international mobility. Their daily lives, as Kale claimed, certainly did collide with the events, places and personalities that marked the terrain of post-war global anticolonial activism. In a flurry of activity that peaked in the late 1950s, these activists travelled to hubs of anticolonial activity – Delhi, London, Cairo, Accra, Dar es Salaam. They navigated Cold War internationalisms as students, exiles and political representatives. They attended conferences in the age of Bandung; they met the anticolonial patrons of the day; they formed committees, manned offices, published pamphlets, launched newsletters and corresponded with international organisations.

And yet, often, and of particular interest to this book, their committees collapsed, they struggled with stationery shortages, their pamphlet manuscripts were rejected, their newsletters were prevented from reaching readers and they were let down by organisations.<sup>2</sup> In the end, many of their initiatives unfolded at such remove from the high diplomacy of decolonisation that they made barely a historical ripple. These were the bitter experiences with which Kale was familiar. Such frustrations were, to some extent, conditioned by the fact that Kale and his peers arrived in this internationalised anticolonial world from a particular region. This was the space now encompassing Malawi, Zambia, Uganda and mainland Tanzania, countries that gained flag independence in the first half of the 1960s (Map 0.1). In the UN headquarters and the Bandung conference hall alike, national liberation struggles in this region were assumed to be relatively insular and unexceptional, late to the post-war wave of Afro-Asian-Caribbean decolonisation, marginal to the thrust of global anticolonial thinking and fighting.

We must confront, then, some tensions. The names of activists that appear throughout this book are mainly familiar within the context of

<sup>2</sup> On the imperative to write about ordinary failures, see Emily Brownell, *Gone to Ground: A History of Environment and Infrastructure in Dar Es Salaam* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 182–186.

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their respective national liberation struggles, but unfamiliar as a collective, and unfamiliar in accounts of coordinated activism beyond territorial borders. Their exceptional levels of mobility and education, relative to peers from East and Central Africa, were at odds with their limited leverage in cities like Cairo. Their own insistence in their global-historical significance as a cohort belied their experience of marginality in the world of anticolonial diplomacy. In one moment they were organising student associations; in the next they were representing political parties in the international field.

These tensions, when taken together as a historical problem, direct us to questions of scale. We might intuitively imagine that anticolonial activism happened at multiple scales: the pamphlet and the international conference, the national and the global. Instead, *African Activists* begins by unthinking scale as an analytical category and treating it instead as a social and historical construct – a subject of enquiry.<sup>3</sup> A microhistorian's reading of paper objects like Kale's pamphlet brings to the fore social practices and categories of understanding across multiple, connected contexts. The scales and spaces that emerge from such a reading are the ones that guide this book: the story unfolds on a map of the global that these activists drew and redrew in dialogue with *their* idea of an East and Central African region. It is somewhat disorienting to visit the founding conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in the same story as a congress that never happened, the Algerian War of Independence in the same story as a newsletter that ran for three issues. But for activists like Kale, for a relatively short period of time, this was daily life.

This book is an intellectual history of unrewarding transnational activism and a social history of the ephemera it produced. The connected nature of anticolonial activism across national contexts, researched in increasing depth, is one reason why historians are now inclined to refer to decolonisation as a process that was global in scope and even globalising in effect.<sup>4</sup> The protagonists in *African Activists* participated in precisely this sort of activism. They did so, collectively, in a more coherent way than histories of nationalism in East and Central Africa have yet accounted for.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Christian G. de Vito, 'History without Scale: The Micro-Spatial Perspective', *Past & Present*, 242:14 (2019), 348–372.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson, 'Rethinking Decolonization: A New Research Agenda for the Twenty-First Century', in Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–22.

<sup>5</sup> The 'external' aspect of these four national struggles is well acknowledged, for example A. M. Kirunda Kivejinja, *Uganda: The Crisis of Confidence* (Kampala: Progressive Publishing House, 1995), 11–12. It has not received sustained historical enquiry comparable to other cases, such as Sebatso Manoeli, *Sudan's 'Southern Problem': Race, Rhetoric and International Relations, 1961–1991* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).



MAP O.1 East and Central Africa, c. 1953.

This alone may not make them significant for how we think about decolonisation. More critical is that, for a brief period of time, they believed in the usefulness of this activism. This was despite the minimal results it yielded in terms of concessions from the colonial state and despite reflecting critically on frequent obstacles. This is important, because any explanation of the role of transnational activism in the unfolding of decolonisation needs to account for why, in cases like those dealt with here, that role was small in terms of numbers of people involved, short-lived and of apparently minor consequence – *and* to account for the zeal with which certain individuals pursued these methods regardless. Transnational modes of activism were not the default when it came to twentieth-century struggles for political change: they must be not only described but explained.

## THE HERE AND NOW

The first defining feature of this cohort's anticolonial culture was a sense of regional-generational responsibility. Like others in this book, John Kale frequently articulated his own position within a cohort defined along generational and regional lines. Kale had moved to Cairo following his expulsion from Makerere University College in Kampala, an explicitly regional institution and the only in Anglophone East and Central Africa awarding university degrees in the early 1950s. Kale's Makerere years overlapped with those of Abu Mayanja, another Ugandan student. Kanyama Chiume, a student from Nyasaland who had spent his school years in Tanganyika, protested (unsuccessfully) against the expulsion of six Makerere students, including Mayanja. One of those travelled to study in India, where he met Munu Sipalo, who had arrived from Northern Rhodesia to study law in Delhi. The trajectories of these four men – Kale, Mayanja, Chiume and Sipalo – situated within a larger cohort, weave through the following chapters.

Generational cohorts come together in the concurrence of particular historical circumstances and the narratives formed around them, allowing certain cohorts to set themselves apart in apparent moments of flux.<sup>6</sup> The post-war decades – when this cohort came of age – were

<sup>6</sup> This formulation, relating to post-war East Africa, is drawn from Thomas Burgess and Andrew Burton, 'Introduction', in Andrew Burton and H el ene Charton-Bigot (eds.), *Generations Past: Youth in East African History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 7. My treatment of generation also draws on R. F. Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890–1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), 6–7.

one such moment, in East and Central Africa as elsewhere. This book's protagonists were all born in a small window of years around 1930. They were thus a generation removed from the internationalist connections that defined interwar anti-imperialism: the formation of the League Against Imperialism, communist internationalism across Asia and the Atlantic, a revival of pan-Islamic thought, the spread of Wilsonian self-determination, the gathering of radical intellectuals and artists in imperial metropolises.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, very few men or women from Uganda, Zambia, Malawi or mainland Tanzania physically participated in these internationalist endeavours: the post-war history told here does not have direct threads of continuity with this interwar world. Interwar East and Central Africa nevertheless witnessed lively debate about colonial society, belying characterisation as protonationalism, through councils and welfare associations, government or missionary newspapers, and scholarly links to the Islamic world on the Swahili coast and around Lake Victoria.<sup>8</sup> Tanganyika, previously part of German East Africa, became a British League of Nations mandate after the First World War, linking areas under British

<sup>7</sup> On turn of the century transnational anticolonialism, see Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London: Verso, 2005). On interwar anticolonialism, see Michele Louro et al. (eds.), *The League Against Imperialism: Lives and Afterlives* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2020); Ali Raza, *Revolutionary Pasts: Communist Internationalism in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), chap. 5; Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt against the West and the Remaking of Asia* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), chap. 4; Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), chaps. 5–6; Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> For a foundational account of interwar protonationalism, see A. J. Temu, 'The Rise and Triumph of Nationalism', in I. N. Kimambo and A. J. Temu (eds.), *A History of Tanzania* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1969), 189–213. In contrast, more recently: Patrick W. Otim, 'Local Intellectuals: Lacito Okech and the Production of Knowledge in Colonial Acholiland', *History in Africa*, 45 (2018), 275–305; Carol Summers, 'Young Buganda and Old Boys: Youth, Generational Transition, and Ideas of Leadership in Buganda, 1920–1949', *Africa Today*, 51:3 (2005), 109–128; Harri Englund, 'Anti Anti-Colonialism: Vernacular Press and Emergent Possibilities in Colonial Zambia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 57:1 (2015), 221–247; Emma Hunter, "'Our Common Humanity": Print, Power, and the Colonial Press in Interwar Tanganyika and French Cameroun', *Journal of Global History*, 7:2 (2012), 279–301; Derek R. Peterson, 'The Politics of Transcendence in Colonial Uganda', *Past & Present*, 230:1 (2016), 197–225; Kai Kresse, *Swahili Muslim Publics and Postcolonial Experience* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), chap. 3.

influence to the north and south: the bordering countries of Uganda, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland had been British protectorates since the turn of the century. During the interwar period, with events like the Maji Maji Rebellion (1905 in Tanganyika) and the Chilembwe uprising (1915 in Nyasaland) in living memory, political demands focused on improved opportunities for education and secure livelihoods, but rarely on national independence.

As we know, this would soon change. ‘Four-fifths of mankind have entered on new independent status since the Second World War’, Kale wrote in his 1958 pamphlet.<sup>9</sup> As the Second World War ended, he and his peers were competing for limited secondary school places; they might have heard the stories of colonial troops returning from Burma or Ceylon.<sup>10</sup> They came of age during a period when political claims-making across sub-Saharan Africa increasingly reiterated the organising concept of self-determination, while the colonial state came under international pressure to demonstrate a commitment to socio-economic and political development.<sup>11</sup> As newly independent countries like India and Indonesia joined the UN (a fate that appeared distant in East and Central Africa until the 1960s), this cohort, like political leaders across the decolonising world, drew on the language of the UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights – both featured in Kale’s pamphlet. They, like others, joined and sometimes played prominent roles in avowedly nationalist political parties – although this happens only in the background of this book. We now know that there was nothing natural or uncontested about organising demands for citizenship or rights through national organisations, nor about notions of belonging that mapped onto territorial borders: anticolonialism was not always nationalist; nationalism was not always anticolonial; anti-colonial nationalism was not always the *modus operandi* of liberation

<sup>9</sup> Kale, *Colonialism Is Incompatible with Peace*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> On East African troops returning from Burma and Ceylon, see James R. Brennan, *Taifa: Making Nation and Race in Urban Tanzania* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), 136–145.

<sup>11</sup> This now widespread formulation of ‘claims-making’ with an emphasis on development owes much to the scholarship of Frederick Cooper, notably Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See also Cheikh Anta Babou, ‘Decolonization or National Liberation: Debating the End of British Colonial Rule in Africa’, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 632:1 (2010), 41–54.



struggles in post-war Africa.<sup>12</sup> This is the historiographical starting point – rather than the argument – of *African Activists*.

It is the ‘anticolonialism’ part of this story that I pursue here, through a regional lens. As Tim Harper has recently shown for early twentieth-century Asia, following a regional cohort, on their own terms, as they move outside of the spaces they sought to liberate, allows nationalism to slide into the background and other anticolonial practices to emerge.<sup>13</sup> This book’s East and Central African cohort of activists had no uniform relationship to the swerving trajectories of party politics at home. When we follow them abroad, contestations over the nation and party – so crucial both to foundational and revisionist histories of nationalism – appear less central. Equally, thinking through an anticolonial culture takes emphasis away from the legal-territorial goal that actors had in mind and places it on the social and intellectual processes that accompanied the pursuit of this goal.<sup>14</sup> Attending to the scales that this anticolonial culture constructed directs us away from questions of belonging and towards the *strategic* role of regional imaginaries.

It was not until the 1950s that this book’s specific idea of an East and Central African cohort came together, as Chapters 1 and 2 explain. Describing, as

<sup>12</sup> Scholarship on the rise of (mass) nationalism and birth of nations in Africa is increasingly well historicised. See Miles Larmer and Baz Lecocq, ‘Historicising Nationalism in Africa’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 24:4 (2018), 8693–917; Oswald Masebo, ‘New Thematic Directions in History at the University of Dar Es Salaam’, *Tanzania Zamani*, 9:2 (2017), 1–67; Walima T. Kalusa and Bizeck J. Phiri, ‘Introduction: Zambia’s Post-colonial Historiography’, *Zambia Social Science Journal*, 5:1 (2014), 1–11. Key recent work on citizenship and belonging in non-nationalist frameworks includes Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel, *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Kate Skinner, *The Fruits of Freedom in British Togoland: Literacy, Politics and Nationalism, 1914–2014* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Emma Hunter, *Political Thought and the Public Sphere in Tanzania: Freedom, Democracy and Citizenship in the Era of Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Julie MacArthur, *Cartography and the Political Imagination: Mapping Community in Colonial Kenya* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016); Jan-Bart Gewald, Marja Hinfelaar, and Giacomo Macola (eds.), *Living the End of Empire: Politics and Society in Late Colonial Zambia* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Tim Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), xxvii. Other relevant collective biographical work includes Joseph-Gabriel, *Reimagining Liberation*; Imaobong Denis Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> On culture as a focus for understanding decolonisation beyond constitutional process, see Ruth Craggs and Claire Wintle (eds.), *Cultures of Decolonisation: Transnational Productions and Practices, 1945–70* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).



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this book does, a region that encompasses Malawi, Zambia, Uganda and mainland Tanzania (Map 0.1) means cutting across typical (British colonial) regional distinctions for this period: East Africa (present-day Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, including Zanzibar) and Central Africa (present-day Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe).<sup>15</sup> The separate trajectories of these two colonial-administrative regions appeared, to outsiders, to harden with the 1953 formation of the Central African Federation, a settler-governed semi-dominion, imposed in the name of racial ‘partnership’, against the will of the African majority. For this book’s protagonists, however, the crisis of Federation occurred *alongside* that of the 1952 Mau Mau uprising in Kenya. Bringing both into dialogue, they began to delineate the particular version of East and Central Africa that this book works through. This region was sometimes committed to paper and acted out through meetings and committees, most concretely in the Pan-African Freedom Movement of East and Central Africa (PAFMECA) discussed in Chapters 3 and 6. This did not happen consistently, nor always with the same borders, nor, in this case, as an alternative political unit to the nation-state.<sup>16</sup> That this definition of the region served a useful purpose in certain fora – particularly Anglophone ones – does not diminish the importance of other described or lived spaces of anticolonial activity, crossing borders into, for example, present-day Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique or the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The particular version of East and Central Africa that I describe is thus one of those temporally delineated, constructed spaces of meaningful activity from which *African Activists* takes its parameters.

When approached together, as a regional cohort, these activists and their anticolonial culture come into focus – come to appear noteworthy – in ways that they do not when partitioned along national lines. The reasons why Kenya, Zimbabwe and Zanzibar were frequently pushed out of this cohort’s idea of the region overlap with the reasons why these countries have attracted sustained scholarly attention: each witnessed episodes of physical violence stemming from the contested relationship between settlers, race and land.<sup>17</sup> These were questions that certainly mattered to

<sup>15</sup> Geert Castryck, Achim von Oppen, and Katharina Zöller, ‘Introduction: Bridging Histories of East and Central Africa’, *History in Africa*, 46 (2019), 217–229. See also the contributions to this special issue.

<sup>16</sup> Recent historiography on federations and federal thinking is discussed in Merve Fejzula, ‘The Cosmopolitan Historiography of Twentieth-Century Federalism’, *The Historical Journal*, 64:2 (2021), 477–500.

<sup>17</sup> For an impression of the prominence of these themes in each case, see E. S. Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (eds.), *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003); Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Pedzisai Ruhanya

the activists in this book too – activists from the space ‘between’ these ‘trouble spots’. They thought at length about what the problems of powerful white settler populations in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia meant to *them*. These problems would soon emerge more violently still in Algeria, all against the backdrop of apartheid South Africa. In this cohort’s anti-colonial culture, each of these places took on symbolic capital that relied on the international press coverage they attracted.

In the construction of a historic role for this East and Central African cohort, institutions of education – and ideas *about* education – were crucial. ‘The eyes of East and Central Africa are looking to us for leadership’, asserted the president of the Makerere Political Society, to an audience that included several of this book’s protagonists.<sup>18</sup> Being highly educated and young in 1950s East and Central Africa came with an elevated sense of self-importance and, in this, these men were part of a larger phenomenon.<sup>19</sup> Across the early Cold War world, the social and cultural spheres were coming to bear on high politics in new ways: a generation of students, born out of post-war demographic and educational booms and rallied through a shared ‘language of dissent’, would soon shape international diplomacy through domestic social protest.<sup>20</sup> During the 1950s, despite fierce constraints on access to education, this cohort worked through educational networks of the sort that formed the foundations for the upheavals of the 1960s. It was often through self-styled youth and student organisations that Chiume, Kale, Mayanja and Sipalo crossed paths with some of the other protagonists of this book: Tanzanian youth and union leader Sam Kajunjumele, Nyasa-Tanzanian student Dennis Phombeah, Ugandan student Chango Machyo and the Zambian Wina brothers who graduated from Makerere and Fort Hare. Sometimes these networks were of activists’ own making, like the Committee of African

(eds.), *The History and Political Transition of Zimbabwe: From Mugabe to Mnangagwa* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Abdul Sheriff and Ed Ferguson (eds.), *Zanzibar under Colonial Rule* (London: James Currey, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> E. D. Sawe, ‘Presidential Address to the Makerere College Political Society’ (1953), in *Politica*, 1:1 (May 1953), 4–5, Makerere University, Kampala (hereafter Makerere), Archives of Makerere University (AR/MAK) AR/MAK/57/5.

<sup>19</sup> On the elevated sense of self-importance among Zanzibari youth of the same generation, see Thomas Burgess, ‘An Imagined Generation: Umma Youth in Nationalist Zanzibar’, in Gregory Maddox and James Leonard Giblin (eds.), *In Search of a Nation: Histories of Authority & Dissidence in Tanzania* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 227–230.

<sup>20</sup> Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Detente* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 88–130.