

SOME REFLECTIONS ON EAST AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY*

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The success achieved over the past twenty-five or thirty years by historians investigating the history of East Africa in the pre-Imperial period has made it necessary to begin work again, urgently, upon the history of the Imperial era also, right up to independence. There are two main reasons for this. First, the important results achieved by the study of oral traditions suggest that the memories of those who lived through the Imperial era might also provide important additional information to supplement the relatively inadequate documentary source material. Second, because excessive moralising about imperialism has so coloured contemporary thinking that the historian might well benefit from submitting his tentative conclusions to the criticisms of some of those who determined policy in the period he is studying as well as to some who were subjected to those policy decisions.

As far as the supplementation of documentary evidence by oral evidence is concerned possibly the period of greatest importance is that prior to 1945. For that period the records in the Public Record Office dealing with high level decisions are full and are readily available. For the historian, however, they constitute a record of colonial theory rather than of practice. The pattern of administration in East Africa was determined far more by local conditions and the convictions of district officers than by any Colonial Office generalisations. Unfortunately district records have been unevenly preserved, and although Rhodes House, Oxford, has made a useful attempt to collect the diaries and correspondence of people living in East Africa, twentieth-century letter-writers and diarists are, for the most part, notoriously less informative and possibly even less disingenuous than their Victorian counterparts. In any case the voice of the African population is not heard with any degree of clarity from records such as those.

The post Second War period presents a rather different problem. During this era decisions taken in London appear to have been of vital importance in determining the road to East African independence. Local conditions clearly influenced the more detailed aspects of the question, but the broad policy was almost certainly the result of wider pressures than those exerted in East Africa itself. It is therefore of particular importance that the thirty year rule is already beginning to make available the Colonial Office documents for this post-war period while men are still alive who can comment upon them from personal experience. Here, too, one must not overlook the views of Africans. Although a lively vernacular press, particularly in Uganda, was beginning to provide a vehicle for the expression of African opinion, in the East African context, possibly even more than in one where

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the press has a longer tradition, it is important to try to estimate the extent to which the newspapers reflected opinion rather than attempting to mould it and also to discover just whose opinion was being reflected or moulded. Hence the value of oral evidence.

It is necessary to stress the importance of the official archives now being opened to students, and the urgent need to make use of them while they can still be checked against living memory, for a further reason. The very success of investigations into the pre-Imperial period might easily have an adverse effect upon the study of more recent history. This is partly because the techniques employed by investigators have tended to break with the traditional methods of the historian and consequently have led to some questioning of the validity of the historian's approach. Partly, too, the pre-occupation with purely African institutions, coupled with the guilty feelings experienced by many liberal thinkers regarding imperialism, might well lead to a serious misjudgement of the role of Europeans in Eastern Africa.

At a time when it was necessary to convince not only Regius Professors of History in Oxford but even Africans themselves that East African history consisted of something more than was contained in those two excellent works of scholarship, *East Africa and its Invaders* and *The Exploitation of East Africa* it was important to lay stress upon the purely African contribution to events. Indeed, in the pre-Imperial era there was virtually no other contribution. Historians were, however, ill-equipped some years ago to justify this claim. Challenged to produce evidence that Africa had something more to offer than simple barbarism they looked hopefully in the direction of anthropologists, who, for some considerable time, had been writing confidently about the structure of African societies, and even to linguists who appeared to regard the study of Bantu languages as a serious academic discipline. They were quick to realise that if they were to make any progress they must adopt some of the methods employed by those other disciplines — to learn African languages, to be prepared to recognise new criteria by which to assess motives in the societies they were studying, to construct questionnaires, and to cast the net of their enquiry more widely by employing sampling methods rather than by the more specifically individual selection of source material which historians normally employ. While this was a salutary development it was not without its dangers. It is one thing to adopt the techniques of other disciplines, but it is a different matter to begin to ask the same sort of questions. The latter involves the loss of the distinctive character which the historian can bring to the study of his problem. Recognising this danger, some scholars argued that their distinctive contribution was to add a chronological dimension to the work of anthropologists. But dynamic anthropology is still anthropology, and not history.

It could be argued that when it was possible to observe only the external changes taking place in societies it was unreasonable to expect historians to do more than to give fairly broad and tentative explanations of events. The danger is that the acceptance of such limitations might be carried over into the study of much better documented periods and even treated as a virtue because of its immanent concern with African, as opposed to European, interests. From this position it is an easy step to assume

that only African issues are important and the age of imperialism can be dismissed as non-history.

One cannot help sensing in this flight from history the influence of continuing guilt feelings about white minority domination of southern Africa. It is as if by denying the significance of imperialism one is contributing to the destruction of minority rule in areas where white power still persists. But is this the historian's function? At a time when it was necessary to justify the study of African history a case could be made for stirring up ethnic pride in order to encourage Africans to search their memories for evidence about the past. Now that the case has been triumphantly made, now that historians are profoundly aware of the need to investigate African sources and to give them their due attention, is it not time to take up again the old documentary tools of the historian's trade, without of course jettisoning the new equipment he has acquired over the past quarter of a century?

If it is suggested that this would be to take a backward step, to return once more to the study, pre-eminently — because of the nature of the sources — of the activities of Europeans, and even worse, of individual Europeans, one might answer first, that it is possible now to guard against overemphasis of that kind, and second, that perhaps the contribution of those individuals to history was peculiarly important. Perhaps I might suggest one or two examples. First, any student of Tanganyika's advance to independence must recognise the importance of Julius Nyerere and the influence of T.A.N.U. Without the organisation supplied by this latter body under the direction of Nyerere independence could never have been achieved. Nor would it be possible to overlook the significance of Tanganyika's position as a trust territory and the encouragement given by the United Nations Trusteeship Council. Looking back from the vantage point of 1975 Tanganyika's march to independence even has something of the appearance of an inevitable development. Yet to most observers in East Africa the fact that Tanganyika became independent as early as 1961 and was the first East African territory to do so was a matter of astonishment.

Nor were those observers wholly insensitive to the march of events. What they did see was that Tanganyika's economy was, as it still is and for equally good reasons, in a precarious condition. There were, moreover, very few Africans trained for positions of responsibility even compared with the numbers in Uganda or Kenya. There had, too, until very recently been very little agitation for independence and Nyerere himself was looking to the 1970's rather than to the early 1960's for the achievement of his goal.

It seems necessary to look further afield for an explanation of this surprising development, the timing of which had such important repercussions upon subsequent events in East Africa. One is impelled, for example, to ask what lay behind the appointment of Sir Richard Ramage to make recommendations on the future constitutional development of the country. How, too, does one explain his revolutionary proposals at a time when Tanganyika's Governor was still stressing the importance of the chiefs as the main agency through which development would take place? And how to account for the surprising role of that chameleon-like figure, Sir Richard

Turnbull, whose coming to Tanganyika, fresh from his success as co-ordinator of the anti-Mau Mau campaign in Kenya and before that from his role as paternalistic provincial commissioner, aroused such forebodings? After his first meeting with Turnbull, Nyerere, who for some time had been persistently harassed by government officials, felt deeply encouraged, because the new Governor had assured him of his co-operation and subsequent events showed that his promises were not empty ones. Is it not possible, then, that the behaviour of both Ramage and Turnbull was influenced to some extent by events outside the country and by emotions springing from within themselves? To understand the nature of these impulses one needs to study both documentary evidence and whatever recollections of events can be traced from some of those directly involved.

Turning to Uganda, A.B. Adimola, a senior official of the High Commission in London, delivered an address in 1963 on his country's achievement of independence. An African member of his audience asked if in her fight for independence Uganda had looked to Ghana as her pattern. Adimola replied that he had no doubt that Ghana's experience had encouraged Uganda, but added that the latter country had not in fact had to fight for independence.

"So it was handed to you on a plate?" challenged his interlocuter. "I suppose you could say that," Adimola replied.

Now was Adimola a running dog of the imperialists? I venture to doubt it. Although the Uganda National Congress and the conservative forces of the Buganda kingdom had in their somewhat conflicting ways played a part in shaping Uganda's future, it would be an unbalanced story which failed to take into account the driving force of Sir Andrew Cohen and the part played by the instrument which he shaped, the legislative council. The latter body was the training ground for the leaders of the Uganda Peoples Congress which effectively led Uganda to independence, but the leading figures of the U.P.C. were not leaders of a mass movement in any sense comparable to Nkrumah's C.P.P. or even to Nyerere's T.A.N.U. As late as 1959 Obote, Magezi and others were racking their brains to discover how they could organise mass support in a country linguistically and historically divided so as to provide a response to the initiative contained in the proposals of the Wild Committee on constitutional reform. One must wait for another fifteen years before the documents of this crucial period will become available, but in the meantime it would be worthwhile to make a preliminary statement about what happened on the basis of the written and oral evidence available, before too many myths develop.

Nor is it only in relation to the European contribution to the history of East Africa that myths have to be exploded and preferably while those who took part in events are still available to express their views upon the conclusions which historians are attempting to draw. A case in point is the story of the Mau Mau rising in Kenya. Already a considerable volume of material has been published about that subject. First in the field were the attempts of the British Administration to explain the rising in terms of an atavistic struggle, but these were soon discredited. It is perhaps

unfortunate that they could be so easily dismissed because of the lack of skill with which the case was presented, as a result of which it was not difficult to establish as accepted dogma a theory of Mau Mau which gave it a questionably modern veneer. This development probably owed something too to the popularity of the doctrine of praiseworthy African resistance. This doctrine, which appeared to single out for commendation every instance of African resistance to European encroachment upon African traditions, was dangerous in two ways. First, it led to the underemphasis of African response of a different character — for example by paying more attention to African religious separatist movements than to the multifarious activities of those thousands of Africans who joined and remained within the mission churches — and second by stressing often tenuous and sometimes even non-existent links between resistance movements separated widely in both time and motivation.

To return to the Mau Mau question, it has been suggested that the movement, far from helping to expedite Kenya's achievement of independence in fact retarded it. This merits investigation. And so too does the question of the extent to which its leaders, at the time and not retrospectively, conceived their activities as contributing to the emergence of the modern state of Kenya. This issue has been considerably befogged by the British Administration's association of Kenyatta with the management of Mau Mau, so that his triumphant emergence as leader of an independent Kenya inevitably brought credit to the Mau Mau rising. Meanwhile, the generation of educated Kenyan politicians, many of them not Kikuyu, were forced into a state of semi-inaction by British restrictions upon political activity during the emergency. Though it was they who were on hand as soon as the bans were lifted to carry the country forward to independence, they were nevertheless forced to pay homage to Mau Mau in order to win the approval of the simple people who could not judge between the effectiveness of a violent struggle and of the ability to think constructively in terms of administering a sophisticated modern state.

My argument is that the myth of Mau Mau, so ably expounded by Rosberg and Nottingham, is in danger of being superceded by new myths, which are partly the product of subsequent events and partly arise from an endeavour to rationalise the past by reference to contemporary thinking about the continuing independence struggle in other parts of Africa. In short I would suggest that here, as in the other types of situation I have mentioned, there is need for a historical reappraisal particularly when the official documents become available, as they soon will, and while there are still on hand to express their opinions some of those who took part in the events under consideration. Moreover I would say that the investigation would be greatly helped if it were recognised that the old struggle to justify the study of African history has been won and that to go on waging it is to act like Menelaus "who waxed garrulous and sacked a thousand Troys betwixt noon and supper". Equally, historians must remember that their special contribution to scholarship lies in their handling of the unique and the particular rather than in creating models or in classifying social structures and generalising about political or economic trends.