

# 1960s Africa in Historical Perspective: An Introduction

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## Abstract

Scholars and other commentators have largely characterized the histories of African nations in terms of failed states, economic underdevelopment, political corruption, and civil war. This introduction and the articles that follow demonstrate the utility of breaking out of the mold of measuring African “successes” and “failures” in terms of national politics and economics, without due consideration of local political histories, popular culture, and the arts, which offer a dramatically different view of Africa’s and Africans’ influences and success within the continent and on the global stage. Toward that end, this introductory essay advocates mitigating the standard analytical model through close studies of relationships between Africans and people of African descent in which politics and economic “development” are placed alongside the arts, popular culture, and sports, with a particular emphasis on the critical decade of the 1960s as central to shaping the course of “post-colonial” African histories.

## Keywords

1960, independence, agency, postcolonial, imperialism

African political agency and interactions between Africans are central features of the legacy of African independence. This is most evident when one views the histories of Africa since independence through the lens of culture as

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opposed to politics. It is more evident still when viewed through the interplay of both. Yet with few exceptions, historical analyses of the continent during the second half the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st have not seriously considered the varied, dynamic, and complex artistic and cultural factors that have shaped African experiences alongside the more easily discernable economic and political. The prevailing view is of Africa reduced to the limits of its economic and political development and, most often, to the total sum of its relative failures within these categories. Analyses from such an angle are fruitful, but one should not accept them as definitive. Africans since the 1960s have been doing much more than “failing” economically and engaging in politics that perpetuate “weak states.”

The year 1960 is a significant symbolic marker for the start of many processes tethered to African political autonomy, including a more African-centered struggle against White supremacy fought on the continent and in the United Nations. The expanding cohort of politically autonomous African nations also strengthened links between African Americans and the African continent. “The combination of all this helped ensure the turning of a corner,” writes James Meriwether. “An Africa once marginalized as a place to uplift and redeem had transformed African American views of it and became instead a source of inspiration and pride, as well as a special international concern for African Americans” (Meriwether, 2001, p. 182). The history of the performing arts, particularly, dance, in Africa reveals one of Africa’s most viable cultural exports and one of its strongest links with its diaspora. Yet, the clock of African independence did not commence at 1960—the so-called year of African independence—or even in 1956, when an independent Sudan emerged. As Paul Nugent (2004) argues, one must account for the protracted process of decolonization that unfolded in the aftermath of the Second World War, which prepared the ground for much of what would follow. What African rulers inherited at independence consisted of what was left behind after the European powers pulled up their colonial stakes and what emerged during the course of Africans’ struggle for independence (Nugent, 2004).

When African political independence is seriously scrutinized, it exposes the insufficiency of speaking of a singular experience or moment as defining African independence or “postcolonial Africa.” Throughout the continent, African liberation came through myriad means of political assertion and at varying times. The events that surrounded Namibia’s declaration of independence in 1990 and its postcolonial experience are unique and profoundly different from experiences in Ghana, Nigeria, and Mozambique. The Algerian experience resembles only the barest details of Sudan’s decolonization and independence in 1956 and Zimbabwe’s since 1980. Liberia and Ethiopia

completely undermine the utility of an imperialism- or European power-centered analysis of modern Africa. Yet it remains common to collectively mark Africa after 1960 with a “post”—postcolonial, postindependence—although Portugal, Britain, and the White minority regime in South Africa clawed stubbornly to African territories into the 1970s and ‘80s.

To generalize about a postindependence Africa is to misrepresent Africa’s diverse historical relationship with Europe and Africans’ relationships with each other. African studies benefits from reflecting upon such quandaries to articulate some of the factors and events that shape African societies and politics (Cooper, 2002; Nugent, 2004; Young, 1997). It is best to explore the ways in which Africans have forged their own social realities, not only through politics but, perhaps more significantly, through culture—the arts, literature, and everyday sacred and temporal social interactions. African studies would benefit from less emphasis on, as Frederick Cooper (2008) describes, “a generic colonialism, capitalism, markets and governance or an ‘African culture’ and ‘African thought’ as generalizable constructs” (p. 185) in favor of the dynamism, variation, and transformation that has taken place since 1960 (Cooper, 2002, 2008). The overwhelming focus on stagnation, malaise, and “failure” has obscured these trends, which are palpable when Africa is examined on a societal level.

Few capture the promise and excitement of independence better than writers and artists. Writers were among the most cautious with regard to celebrating the prospects of the postcolonial African political project. Yet, the field of African literature flowered (Anyidiho, 2000, p. 2). In 1962, to offer but one example, writers from throughout the continent, together with a sampling from the diaspora, met at Makerere University in Uganda for the first African Writers’ Conference. The participants included writers who would chronicle the emotional arch of Africa’s first decades of independence, including Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o. The African American writer Langston Hughes was there from the United States. The result was a wholly African assessment of the promise of African political autonomy and the prospective place of writers and artists in shaping it.

Similarly, the performing arts in Africa were dramatically transformed and elevated during the late 1950s and 1960s, as two of the contributors to this volume wonderfully reconstruct, and served as a principal articulator of African cultures on the world stage. The performing arts, together with sports—particularly, football—acted as a vehicle to forge and strengthen national identities and loyalties, tightly linking both to national politics. In this regard, Senegal serves as a useful example. Throughout the 1960s, president Leopold

Senghor supported numerous art institutions and programs to cultivate a strong Senegalese national identity and sense of belonging. One such effort was *École des Arts* in Dakar, Senegal's capital. Under the leadership of Papa Iba Tall and Iba N'Diaye, the nation's most celebrated and successful artists, the school for the visual arts sought to deemphasize the Western influences among Senegalese artists and served as the most visible repository for the expression of Negritude in West Africa. The two teachers and their students embraced Senghor's decolonization and postcolonial projects as anticolonial and aspirant and took up the challenge of incorporating their philosophical and sociopolitical ideas, embodied in Negritude, into visual forms (Hamey, 2004, p. 56).

One could not stand in Dakar, Kampala, Accra, or any African capital city in the 1960s and gauge the forward trajectory of African development. At the advent of the second decade of the 21st century, untangling the cultural, political, economic, and environmental direction of Africa collectively remains daunting and fraught with misperceptions and exceptions to the rule. Rather than consider Africa as an aggregate of political and economic projects, it is most useful, conscious of the continent's diversity, to historically trace particular cultural, economic, or political threads. Reconstructing the significance of institutions such as *École des Arts* in Senegal in the development of national culture illuminates the significance the arts in the postcolonial project. But it would be misleading to take this example and apply it to Uganda, Tanzania, or even the Gambia. Collapsing the history of African liberation as a singular process gives short shrift to the rich diversity of African political experiences and cultural, intellectual, and political production during the second half of the 20th century.

Tanzania's experience is distinct from Senegal's. Julius Nyerere shifted the Tanganyika political paradigm that the nation inherited from the British. He imposed an idealized sense of precolonial African communalistic tradition in which all citizens worked in egalitarian agricultural peace. This was a self-consciously African creation and an effort to truly break free of European economic and political structures. This was a project of self-help to replace dependency, within which there was only limited space for the arts. In contrast with Senegal, in Tanzania, those who endeavored to link politics and cultural production were looked upon with suspicion (Askew, 2006; Plastow, 1996, p. 129). Art schools in Senegal were part of Senghor's and other nationalists' nation-building project; indeed, Senghor was one of Africa's foremost writers. In Tanzania, drama and dance schools were organized on an ad hoc basis in much the same way as they had prior to independence.

Nyerere created a space in which the state privileged left-wing intellectualism. Soon after the state opened the University of Dar es Salaam, it became a powerhouse of radical, left-wing political thought on the African continent and in the African diaspora. The university's history department sparked historiographical and methodological debates that stretched well into the 1980s and spawned innumerable scholars that further shaped the field of African history.<sup>1</sup> Nyerere's *ujamaa* attracted many socialist intellectuals from abroad to the university as students and lecturers. Staff and students alike were consequently radicalized, and the university's administration created departments throughout the 1960s with explicitly socialist mandates (Plastow, 1996, p. 131). Investigating the practices that accompanied policy exposes the negotiation that has taken place between the state and its citizenry.

African liberation from formal European political dominance also looks different when viewed through the lens of sports, specifically football. African national football associations came together in 1957 to form the Confédération Africaine de Football, which opened a new era in African soccer and the place of Africans on the world stage (Alegi, 2010). Football matches had been a critical part of anticolonial political organizing during the 1940s and '50s, and during the 1960s, new political regimes staged matches as part of their independence celebrations. Similar to the arts, football contributed to citizens' sense of territorial identity and legitimated the nation-state. Leaders buttressed their support by building new stadiums in capital cities. As Peter Alegi (2010) explains, "Supported by the construction of national stadiums and mass media coverage, the establishment of sovereign football associations and countrywide leagues contributed to the production of nationhood and the centralization of power in independent Africa" (p. 57). Football intersected with politics to define relations between the state and citizens and made it possible for African nations to engage non-African nations on more equitable terms than politics and economics allowed.

Political independence brought an explosion of artistic creativity and political imagination in Africa during the late 1950s and 1960s, along with acute economic and political challenges. The essays included in this issue emphasize African agency in shaping the postcolonial world. The focus is on Africans defining themselves culturally and politically in relation to each other rather than vis-à-vis Europeans, to show the level of control, however compromised, that Africans have maintained over their cultural and political spaces.

Josh Cohen, in "Stages in Transition," wonderfully reconstructs the interplay between national liberation, the performing arts, and cultural change in Guinea under Sékou Touré. He does so through an examination of Les Ballets

Africans during the politically charged years of 1959 and 1960. Similarly, Angela Fatou Gittens, in "African Dance and the Fight for Flight" explores the Wolofization of African dance that began during the late 1950s and early 1960s and the ways in which choreographers have incorporated it into their programs. She positions the broad embrace of African dance within "Black" dance as both politically charged and liberating. Through their studies of African dance and politics, these scholars demonstrate the significance of African liberation for exporting African culture, the links between the performing arts and nation-building projects, and how central the African diaspora, particularly, African Americans, have been in the development and evolution of African dance within and outside of the continent.

Shifting from performing as art to performing politics, Chimee Nkemijika and Yolanda Covington-Ward present alternative analyses of transformative nationalist and postcolonial events. Covington-Ward, in "Vive l'ABAKO! Vive l'indépendence!," refocuses the narrative of Congo's struggle for independence away from Patrice Lumumba to Joseph Kasa-Vubu and his Alliance des Bakongo, or ABAKO. She positions Kasa-Vubu and ABAKO as the true driving forces behind liberation activism in Congo during the late 1950s and describes their practice as a method of performing ethnic nationalism, which helped to provide a sense of ethnic identity for ethnic Kongolese and provided the foundation for broader-based Congolese nationalism. Chimee Nkemijika, in "Civil Conflict and Human Rights in 1960s Nigeria," examines the politics behind Nigeria's Biafra war and discusses the atrocities that the government committed within the context of human rights. Chima Korieh's article, "African Studies: The State of the Field," rounds this issue out with a broad view of African studies. He reconstructs the directions that African studies took during the 1950s and 1960s and how it has changed since. He also advocates for a specific direction that it must go. Finally, Carla Stephen's review essay examines the role of Cuba in liberation and postcolonial struggles in Africa as pedagogical tools. Taken together, these articles demonstrate the imperative of breaking away from conventional models for examining African liberation as a European-African discourse. In addition, they illustrate the level of agency that Africans and people of African descent exercised in shaping their place in the world and the significance of their own interactions, debates, and tensions for defining the history of African independence.

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## Note

1. On the intellectual activism within the department of history at Dar es Salaam, see Kimambo (1994). For a more contextualized critique of Kimambo's history, see Susan Geiger's (1997) review. The group of historians, including Kimambo, Walter Rodney, Terrence Ranger, and others, has been identified, erroneously, as leaders within the "Dar es Salaam School" of history. Donald Denoon and Adam Kuper (1970) sparked a debate on the scholarship that historians at the university produced by labeling it as nationalist and constituting a specific historiographical school. Terrence Ranger (1971) responded to their critique with a full contextualization of his own scholarship to date.

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## **Bio**

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