

Introduction: The Momentous 1960s – Reflections on an African Decade

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On 6–8 January 2019 the Tamar Golan Africa Centre at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, the “Apartheid Stops” European Research Council Project at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, and the Centre for Area Studies / Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) 1199 at Leipzig University organised an interdisciplinary international conference on the 1960s in Africa. The conference was held at both the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel. More than 50 scholars and students from Africa, the African diaspora, the United States, Israel and Germany participated and discussed some 30 presentations.¹

The 1960s was a decade of revolutionary changes throughout Africa. At this juncture across the continent, histories of colonialism, decolonization, the Cold War, nationalism, pan-Africanism and independence intermingled, with critical consequences for nations, communities and individuals. More than any other period of the 20th century, the 1960s was an era of immense, radical and contradictory possibilities. A massive range of ideologies, political agendas, economic developments, cultural styles and social changes were experimented with, and a sense of opportunity found expression everywhere. From the newly decolonized to those enduring the most extreme forms of racist minority rule, the 1960s was an era of heightened expectations and aspirations – some fulfilled and others held in abeyance. This conference aimed at consolidating a growing body of work

1 For the programme see <<https://in.bgu.ac.il/SiteAssets/Pages/events/african-60s/Momentous-60s.pdf>> (accessed 8 February 2020).

addressing the 1960s in Africa as an era of monumental significance that requires more scrutiny and analysis.²

Focusing on the 1960s opens up new opportunities for understanding how local, national, transnational and international phenomena intersect and give birth to new kinds of circulations, imaginaries, and initiatives. A wide-ranging examination of this era brought into focus the intersections and overlaps between local experiences across the continent at this time, despite the immense diversity that characterized the political, economic and cultural histories of the period. Participants discussed how the 1960s serves as a framework of analysis for understanding changes and continuities. Among others, debates centred on the following questions: What kinds of opportunities and innovations were unique to this era, and how were other alliances made obsolete at this time? How do we adjudicate the success or failure of momentous events or social movements, and at what scale of resolution—local, national, or transnational? How have African actors aimed at repositioning the continent and their societies in a new way in the changing global order? How did actors in other parts of the world re-evaluate the role of Africa in the potentially emergent new world order?³ How does the period look when we refrain from focusing exclusively on the behaviour of political elites? How do events in Africa impact events elsewhere, in anticipating, for instance, the revolutionary ferment of May 1968 in Europe, as recent scholarship is beginning to suggest? How have dynamics on the African continent challenged the position and strategies of former metropolises as well as those of the emerging superpowers of the Cold War? Might we develop arguments for the “long 1960s” modelled on notions of the “long civil rights movement” in the United States, for instance, to suggest that in some respects at least, the 1960s in Africa began in the late 1950s?⁴

As scholars increasingly grapple with the consequences of decolonisation, nation-building, liberation struggles, social development and economic expansion that characterised much of the continent’s history at this time, this conference enabled new understandings of both commonalities and exceptions in current research. Some emergent paradigms with regard to histories of the 1960s in Africa were successfully consolidated, and new models and trends introduced.

In this volume of *Comparative*, five articles are published which were developed from presentations at the “The Momentous Sixties: Reflections on an African Decade”. They are representative of the broad spectrum of topics discussed at the conference. First, in her article “‘A new phase of anti-imperialist cooperation’: The making of liberation alliances in 1960s’ (unliberated) Southern Africa” Ana Moledo from the Centre of Area Studies at Leipzig University traces the most significant forms of cooperation that existed

2 See, for instance, B. Talton, Introduction: 1960s Africa in Historical Perspective: An Introduction, in: *Journal of Black Studies* 43 (2012) 1, pp. 3–10.

3 A point that has been raised by, among others, P. Manning, African and World Historiography, in: *Journal of African History* 54 (2013) 3, pp. 319–330. See also A. Eckert, Scenes from a Marriage. African History and Global History, in: *Comparativ* 29 (2019) 2, pp. 36–51.

4 C.B. Strain, *The Long Sixties: America, 1955–1973*, Hoboken 2016.

among Southern African liberation movements over the decade and examines the agency of the movements themselves vis-à-vis the interference of international organisations in the creation of these alliances as well as their immediate outcomes. Second, in her contribution “Between Ideology and Policy: Dilemmas of Leadership in the Postcolonial 1960s in Zambia” Lynn Schler, a senior lecturer in African history in the Department of Politics and Government and the director of the Tamar Golan Africa Centre at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel, investigates the rise and fall of the Kafuba and Kafulafuta cooperative settlements established in the Zambian Copperbelt regime under the regime of President Kenneth Kaunda. Against the backdrop of both Kaunda’s ideology of humanism and Israeli-Zambian development cooperation, these cooperatives were modelled on Israeli *moshav* settlements, and established and run under the supervision of Israeli technical advisors who were brought to Zambia. The article focusses on the period 1968 to 1973 when the Organisation of African Unity called on member states to cut ties with Israel. Third, Ulf Engel from the Institute of African Studies at Leipzig University revisits the early history of the Organisation of African Unity (1963–1969). Four broad topics are discussed: the political aims of the organisation; the continental body’s role in global politics and the way independent African states have impacted on the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement and the Commonwealth; the development of intra-African relations; and possible reasons for the general underperformance of the OAU’s in particular with regard to violent conflict on the continent in those years. Fourth, Hakeem Ibikunle Tijani, based at the National Open University of Nigeria, discussed the International Labour Organisation and its Bureau for Workers’ Activities (ACTRAV) in Sub-Saharan Africa on the eve of independence. This article examines ILO’s roles and impacts in some African nations in the mid- to late-1950s as it strived to make a mark in the merging independent nations. It examines challenges and accomplishments particularly in the area of labour union education. Fifth, Jean-Léon Koné from the ÉHESS Paris discusses how independence accelerated the careers of Ivorian Teachers, 1958–1974. Using a biographical history approach within a micro history of primary education on Côte d’Ivoire, Koné reconstructs the opportunities to Francophone Africa in terms of recomposition of civic and institutional statuses that were intrinsic to colonialism.

Many questions raised by the conference, *The Momentous 60s: Reflections on an African Decade*, still need to be explored in more detail. From a comparative historiographical perspective, focusing on a decade may seem arbitrary, despite the major societal and cultural changes that took place across the continent in the Sixties. Yet, our collaboration confirmed that a decade provides a new lens from which to look at African history. Going forward, we should draw inspiration and comparisons from research rooted in other places, such as the vast body of studies looking at, or seeing through, the “60s” in the West.⁵ In the study of the 1960s in Africa, there are many that lingering questions

5 See, for instance, M.J. Heale, *The Sixties as History: A Review of the Political Historiography*, in: *Reviews in American History* 33 (2005) 1, pp. 133–152; H. Simon, *Framing the American 1960s: A historiographical review*, in:

that can serve as the foundation for more work: What are the key trajectories around the processes of decolonisation (also as compared to the academic state of the art of the 1960s and 1970s)? Where have political and institutional path-dependencies developed, and how can the concrete historic entanglements of various African and non-African actors be accounted for? How exactly are developments in Africa embedded in the global dynamics of the 1960s – how did changes in Africa, for instance, relate to mass movements for social and political change in what then was called “the first world”? And what are the various shadows the 1960s have cast onto the future? The early 1960s were clearly marked by collective and individual anticipation about future prospects in many fields, but by the late 1960s, these were already replaced by disenchantment in view of closed political and societal opportunities? And what about the 1970s? We suggest that looking at the 1970s also promises to trigger new ways of understanding African histories in all their complexity.

We will continue the debate.