

LANGUAGES OF FREEDOM IN DECOLONISING AFRICA*

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ABSTRACT. The ‘triumph of liberalism’ in the mid-twentieth-century west is well known and much studied. But what has it meant for the way the decolonisation of Africa has been viewed, both at the time and since? In this paper, I suggest that it has quietly but effectively shaped our understanding of African political thinking in the 1950s to 1960s. Although the nationalist framing that once led historians to neglect those aspects of the political thinking of the period which did not move in the direction of a territorial nation-state has now been challenged, we still struggle with those aspects of political thinking that were, for instance, suspicious of a focus on the individual and profoundly opposed to egalitarian visions of a post-colonial future. I argue that to understand better the history of decolonisation in the African continent, both before and after independence, while also enabling comparative work with other times and places, we need to think more carefully and sensitively about how freedom and equality were understood and argued over in local contexts.

Gabriel Ruhumbika’s 1969 novel *Village in Uhuru* tells the story of the rise of Tanzania’s nationalist movement and the rocky first years after independence in 1961, as seen from the perspective of an island community living far from the capital Dar es Salaam. A striking moment in the novel comes when, in 1962, two government ministers visit the island to celebrate Saba Saba Day, a public holiday commemorating the founding of the nationalist party TANU. They hold a public meeting at which, Ruhumbika writes, they ‘explained democracy, and the important Bill their Government had passed in conformity with its resolution and promise to democratise society, the Chiefs’ Bill’.¹ The lesson that those who attended the meeting came away with was simple. It was that ‘their *mtemi* [chief] was no longer *mtemi*. Even if he were to come back they were no longer supposed to send him the traditional presents.’ In this time of *uhuru* (independence), ‘all people were equal. Their *mtemi* had become an ordinary person like themselves.’²

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¹ Gabriel Ruhumbika, *Village in Uhuru* (Harlow, 1969), 93.

² *Ibid.*, 94.

What are we to make of this encounter? On the face of it, the answer is simple. It is a familiar attempt by a modernising nationalist party in early post-colonial Africa to confront and to overcome the forces of tradition. In Ruhumbika's dramatic telling, we see party officials seeking to educate the citizens of the new state, to enable them to seize their new-found freedom with both hands and to discard old hierarchies. This was the moment when age-old tradition was swept away by the forces of progress and freedom: when the promises and dreams of independence were finally made a reality at the local level.

Ruhumbika's account is of course fictional, but encounters of this kind certainly did take place in African states as they gained independence and began building post-colonial states. And they rest at the heart of how historians generally assess the remarkable transformation of Africa in the mid-twentieth century, as it moved from a continent of empires to a continent of independent nation-states. At the moment of independence, nationalist parties in Africa typically rejected what they saw as outdated theories of society, defined by hierarchical bonds, in favour of a language of equality and of individual freedoms. In this sense, Ruhumbika's novel, and Africa's history more widely, seems to fit neatly into a global history of the twentieth century, in which the century's middle decades are defined by a 'triumph of liberalism' as a 'politico-intellectual tradition centred on individual freedom in the context of constitutional government'.³

If the basic outline of this transformation is not in doubt, in recent years the historiography of decolonisation in Africa has been dramatically rewritten. That historiography was once comfortably located within a nationalist framework which both took for granted that the outcome of post-war nationalist struggles would be a continent of nation-states, and tended to write the history of African independence from the perspective of the nationalist parties that eventually won power. In contrast, new work, much of it inspired by Frederick Cooper's analysis, has gone a long way towards reopening the sense of possibility which marked this period, and the many roads not taken.⁴ The 1940s and 1950s are now understood to have been characterised by, in Cooper's terms, both 'possibility and constraint'.⁵ Although a continent of nation-states came to be seen as inevitable, this future was not obvious to all in 1945.

At the same time, this new body of scholarship has reminded us that the thinking of the nationalist parties which took power at independence was itself only one aspect of a much broader spectrum of political

³ Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, 2016).

⁴ David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge, 2012); Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge, 2002).

⁵ Frederick Cooper, 'Possibility and Constraint: African Independence in Historical Perspective', *Journal of African History*, 49 (2008), 167–96.

thinking. Nationalist parties did not instantly capture the support of entire populations. Rather, they came to power as the result of a struggle which saw them marginalise alternatives. Some of those alternatives were based on political philosophies that would have been instantly recognisable to the nationalist parties which eventually triumphed, even if they disagreed on questions of emphasis.⁶ But other people put forward sets of ideas that were more challenging to those principles. Some were suspicious of the focus on individual rights which characterised nationalist movements, and profoundly opposed egalitarian visions of a post-colonial future.⁷

While this latter group have increasingly attracted the attention of historians, they continue to fit uneasily into narratives of mid-twentieth-century Africa. They are sometimes described as conservatives, sometimes as ethnic patriots.⁸ They were often older men, and the vision of society they promoted was a hierarchical and patriarchal one. The idioms which they used to make claims to power and influence are often unfamiliar. Yet the root concerns they had about society and the risks to it were often shared by nationalist parties, even if the remedies proposed were very different.

Early histories of the political thought of decolonisation in Africa were shaped by assumptions about the naturalness of nation-states which many historians shared with the subjects of their research. It is largely because historians have learned not to treat nation-states as natural and to shed the nationalist assumptions of an earlier generation that the last two decades have seen a radical rewriting of the history of decolonisation in Africa, as elsewhere. But moving outside nationalist frameworks has only taken us so far. It has led to a renewed recognition that there were other possibilities in 1945 beyond the territorial nation-states and nationalist regimes which eventually emerged.⁹ But it remains hard to see where the growing power of a conservative vision of society after independence came from. It makes it hard, too, as the anthropologist Harri Englund has recently observed, to identify ways in which the exercise of power beyond agreed limits

⁶ Giacomo Macola, *Liberal Nationalism in Central Africa: A Biography of Harry Mwaanga Nkumbula* (New York, 2010).

⁷ Harri Englund has called on scholars to ask 'harder questions about the place that the liberal values of equality and freedom might have both among the instances being studied and in scholars' own commitments'. Harri Englund, 'Zambia at 50: The Rediscovery of Liberalism', *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, 83 (2013), 670–89, at 685.

⁸ Derek Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent c. 1935–1972* (Cambridge, 2012); Miles Larmer, *Rethinking African Politics: A History of Opposition in Zambia* (Farnham, 2011), 4.

⁹ Summarising a body of new research in this vein, Harri Englund has described a 'rediscovery of liberalism' among historians. Englund, 'Zambia at 50'. Though at the same time, it is unclear how far other options were realistic possibilities. Samuel Moyn, 'Fantasies of Federalism', *Dissent*, 62 (2015), 145–51.

continued to be challenged even as political space was tightly constrained after independence, sometimes in unexpected ways.¹⁰

In this article, I want to suggest that to move the historiography of the decolonisation era forward, we need to go beyond simply provincialising nationalism. The first generation of scholars who wrote about nationalism in Africa certainly often did so within a nationalist framework. Yet, I would suggest, their vision was also shaped by the unspoken assumptions of a distinctively mid-twentieth-century liberalism. While we no longer view the political thought of the time through the prism of nationalism, we perhaps still have a tendency to view it through the prism of mid-twentieth-century liberalism, and therefore tacitly to privilege some voices above others. This means that while we understand the political thinking of decolonisation to have been concerned with 'freedom', we have not fully appreciated the diversity of thinking about what freedom meant to contemporaries. I would like to explore what happens if we historicise mid-twentieth-century liberalism and set the diverse political thinking of mid-twentieth-century Africa more firmly in its contemporary context.

To do so, I start by considering the ways in which mid-twentieth-century liberalism has shaped the scholarship of the history of decolonisation in Africa, and what it might mean to historicise it. I then turn to explore evidence from colonial Tanganyika in eastern Africa, which suggests that we can identify two broad families of political thinking in the 1950s, one making claims for equality and individual rights, the other making claims in idioms which explicitly recognised hierarchies. Putting both clearly into the same analytical framework helps us more effectively set the era of independence in context and, by allowing us to identify neglected continuities across the conventional dividing line of independence, helps us make better sense of post-colonial trajectories.

I Liberalism in context

When historians in the early twenty-first century looked back at the 1950s and 1960s, they were struck by the way in which it had become axiomatic that the basic building blocks of international society were nation-states.¹¹ Empires, which just a few decades before had dominated the globe, had been swept away, and come to be understood as an outdated and illegitimate form of political organisation. As Rupert Emerson wrote in 1960 in an evocative phrase which captures this transition, 'Empires have fallen on evil days and nations have risen to take their place.'¹²

¹⁰ Englund, 'Zambia at 50'.

¹¹ For example, Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 2010).

¹² Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation: The Rise of Self-Assertion of Asian and African Peoples* (Cambridge, MA, 1960), 3.

For many people in the continent of Africa, this moment constituted a rejection of European domination, and a claim to equal standing in an emerging world order of nation-states. A new and powerful body of historical writing, often by scholars who shared the nationalist perspective of their subjects, was produced which told of and celebrated the struggles that led to African nationalist movements winning independence. But this moment in the history of international thought was not characterised only by the assumption that the international political order would and should be based on nation-states and not empires. It was also characterised by a set of assumptions about what kind of political society should be contained within the building blocks of nations, defined in terms of parliamentary democracy, representative government and individual rights.

These assumptions shaped the politics of the time. In post-colonial Ghana, for example, Nkrumah was forced to defend publicly his commitment to parliamentary democracy.¹³ Those leaders, such as Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia and Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, who sought to move away from two-party systems had to take great care to show why, in their view, multi-party systems were inappropriate for their societies.¹⁴ This anxiety was, of course, partly a product of the Cold War context. But also underlying it was, as the historian of political thought Duncan Bell has recently argued, an emerging hegemonic understanding of liberal democracy as the constitutive feature of western modernity. This was, Bell suggests, partly a consequence of a shift in thought which took place in the first half of the twentieth century and which saw a remaking of the definition of liberalism and a rewriting of the history of the liberal tradition.

For Bell, liberalism in this period ‘increasingly figured as the dominant ideology of the West – its origins retrojected back into the early modern era, it came to denote virtually all nontotalitarian forms of politics as well as a partisan political perspective within societies’.¹⁵ It was newly ‘yoked’ to democracy, a process which, Bell writes, ‘automatically (and vastly) expanded the scope of those purportedly encompassed by liberalism, as supporters of “liberal democracy” were conscripted, however reluctantly, to the liberal tradition’. The consequence was that liberalism was ‘transfigured from a term identifying a limited and contested position

¹³ Richard Rathbone, ‘Kwame Nkrumah and the Chiefs: The Fate of “Natural Rulers” under Nationalist Governments’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 10 (2000), 45–63, at 57.

¹⁴ *Independence and Beyond: The Speeches of Kenneth Kaunda*, ed. Colin Legum (1966), 208–9; Julius Nyerere, ‘Democracy and the Party System’, in *Freedom and Unity*, ed. Julius Nyerere (1966), 195–203.

¹⁵ Bell, *Reordering the World*, 87.

within political discourse to either the most authentic expression of the Western tradition or a constitutive feature of the West itself'.¹⁶

This mid-twentieth-century triumph of liberalism thereby gradually marginalised those modes of thinking which sat outwith liberal traditions. Yet it also marginalised ideas that had once sat more or less comfortably within a liberal tradition. As Michael Freeden has recently reminded us, rather than think in terms of liberalism in the singular, it might historically 'be more accurate to talk about *liberalisms* in the plural, all part of a broad family exhibiting both similarities and differences. Many members of the liberal family overlap in their characteristics, but some are hardly on speaking terms.'¹⁷ But the mid-twentieth-century moment privileged some aspects of this tradition above others. The focus on the individual that characterised newly hegemonic understandings of liberalism eclipsed alternative modes of thinking about individual and community, equally embedded in a more expansive liberal tradition or traditions. In particular, it obscured the intellectual inheritance of the liberal idealism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with its emphasis on the individual as a member of a community, whose ability to flourish depended on social relationships within that community.¹⁸ This was a vision of society which, through its adoption of familial metaphors, recognised hierarchies both within states and in the wider international order.¹⁹ It was a way of thinking about society which was enormously influential in shaping the political thinking of the colonial officials and missionaries who governed Africa in the first half of the twentieth century.²⁰

The mid-twentieth-century emergence of liberalism as the 'dominant ideology of the West', in Bell's terms, had, I would like to suggest, implications for the way that the decolonisation of Africa was viewed by observers, implications which have continued to influence more recent scholarship. Setting the scholarship of the time within its wider intellectual context, it is striking to see the echoes of a distinctively mid-twentieth-century set of assumptions about the naturalness of this definition of the liberal order. The belief that liberalism defined in these terms offered the best hope for individual flourishing under a just government proved a powerful one for those writing about African independence, as powerful perhaps as the assumption that Africa was destined to become a continent of nation-states.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Michael Freeden, *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2015), 1.

¹⁸ Sandra M. Den Otter, *British Idealism and Social Explanation: A Study in Late Victorian Thought* (Oxford, 1996), 152.

¹⁹ Jeanne Morefield, *Covenants without Swords: Idealist liberalism and the Spirit of Empire* (Princeton, 2005), 45.

²⁰ Emma Hunter, 'Dutiful Subjects, Patriotic Citizens, and the Concept of "Good Citizenship" in Twentieth-Century Tanzania', *Historical Journal*, 56 (2013), 257–77, at 259.

What this meant was that while a concern with freedom was understood to be central to the movements which powered the end of empire in Africa, freedom was understood as inextricably bound up with claims of equality. As John Lonsdale wrote in 1981, what had united the first scholars of African decolonisation, writing in the 1950s and 1960s, was a concern, at once moral and political, with freedom. As Lonsdale wrote, this was a definition of freedom ‘based on Africans’ claims for political and racial equality’, in which ‘[i]ndividual self-realisation, political order, social freedom, and equity seemed destined to be joined together under the renewed sovereignties of independent Africa’.²¹ The scholars of the 1950s and 1960s were far less interested in those who rejected this focus on the individual, social freedom and equality. Much of that body of thinking took place in the idiom of ‘tribe’, and as such seemed to be a backward-looking response to the forces of modernity, distant from the liberal tradition.

After the first flurry of scholarly writing in the 1950s and 1960s, the political arguments of Africa in the 1950s slowly slipped into the background of historians’ attention. But this has changed dramatically in recent years, and there has been a new flourishing of research on that important decade. This growing body of scholarship has revealed two families of thinking present in this transitional moment. On the one hand, there were the nationalist movements who advocated a transformation in social relationships, breaking down old hierarchies and offering new opportunities to the young, women, trade unions and educated elites.²² The political reforms they advocated were very familiar in a mid-twentieth-century context. They supported elections and universal suffrage, the abolition of chiefship and individual rights. Many were part of transnational networks, linked by socialism, organised labour and other elements of an emerging global civil society.²³

Yet at the same time, others spoke a very different political language, less recognisable to onlookers today. In some contexts, this was a language of chiefship, but in other contexts, it was the chiefs who were the targets of criticism.²⁴ Particularly striking is the explicit recognition of and respect

²¹ John Lonsdale, ‘States and Social Processes in Africa: A Historiographical Survey’, *African Studies Review*, 24 (1981), 139–225, at 143.

²² Rathbone, ‘Kwame Nkrumah and the Chiefs’.

²³ Recent work is starting to uncover the dynamism of these transnational networks, for example Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the End of Empire* (Basingstoke, 2015), and research groups such as Afro-Asian Networks, <http://afroasiannetworks.com>.

²⁴ Justin Willis, ‘Chieftaincy’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern African History*, ed. John Parker and Richard Reid (Oxford, 2013), 208–23; Cherry Leonardi and Chris Vaughan, ‘“We Are Oppressed and our Only Way Is to Write to Higher Authority”: The Politics of Claim and Complaint in the Peripheries of Condominium Sudan’, in *Citizenship, Belonging and Political Community in Africa: Dialogues between Past and Present*, ed. Emma Hunter (Athens, OH, 2016), 74–100.

for hierarchy, defended sometimes in a language of culture, and at other times in a language of tradition.²⁵

The case of Ghana provides a particularly striking example of this contrast. Perhaps the most iconic figure of decolonising Africa is that of Kwame Nkrumah, who returned from studying in America to lead the Gold Coast to self-government in 1951 and then to independence as Ghana in 1957. Rejecting the gradualist approach of his predecessors, Nkrumah proclaimed that rather than wait for economic development, self-government must come first and development would follow afterwards. Yet while Nkrumah's success in binding together a nationalist movement and forcing the pace of decolonisation captured international imagination, politics at the local level in the 1950s were defined by a bruising battle between Nkrumah's Convention People's Party and local chiefs. These chiefs were presented at the time as forces of tradition, destined to be swept aside in modernising Africa. But as Richard Rathbone has shown, the battle was so bruising because of the power of chieftaincy, not its weakness. Indeed, what was really at stake was a battle between two contending visions: conservative nationalism on the one hand and Nkrumah's modernising socialism on the other.²⁶

Nkrumah sought to remake society, and his radical anti-chief language was part of that wider project. On one level, then, this was a political battle whereby those with power in the colonial order sought to preserve it in the independent Ghana which was being created. But it was also a struggle over two different visions of society, in which questions about political relationships were part of a wider set of questions about what kind of society could and should be built.

On the other side of the continent in East Africa, the 1940s and 1950s saw the emergence not only of new nationalist movements, but also of new associations, often based on ethnicity, which, in Derek Peterson's words, 'sought to stitch society together in a hierarchical relationship of trust and dependence'.²⁷ Where nationalists were concerned with national self-determination, these groups were instead 'driven by the urgent need to find institutions that could protect civic virtues and define honourable conduct'.²⁸ For John Lonsdale, this is the realm of the 'deep politics' of 'moral ethnicity'.²⁹ Crucially, this sphere of debate assumed, as Harri Englund writes of modern day Malawi, that 'claims addressing

²⁵Derek Peterson, 'Introduction', in *The Politics of Heritage in Africa: Economics, Histories, and Infrastructures*, ed. Derek Peterson (Cambridge, 2015), 1–36.

²⁶Rathbone, 'Kwame Nkrumah and the Chiefs'.

²⁷Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*, 127–8.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 16.

²⁹John Lonsdale, 'KAU's Cultures: Imaginations of Community and Constructions of Leadership in Kenya after the Second World War', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 13 (2000), 107–24.

the wealthy and the powerful could be effective precisely when they left difference and hierarchy intact'.³⁰

These groups, or those who wrote in these idioms, are often described as conservatives, but they were not simply trying to conserve. They often spoke explicitly about progress and how to manage it. They also had a lot to say about freedom – but did not necessarily link freedom with equality. What happens if, rather than attaching labels such as ‘conservative’ which fail to do full justice to their stated intellectual projects, we take these groups seriously when they say they were concerned with freedom, but freedom within society and existing social bonds rather than freedom as constituted through individual rights and the rejection of existing hierarchies? In the next section, I turn to show how evidence from 1950s Tanganyika might help us to reread local politics in terms of a contrast between two different modes of thinking about freedom.

II 1950s Kilimanjaro

In 1949, a new political movement which called itself the Kilimanjaro Chagga Citizens Union was created in the district of Moshi in north-eastern Tanganyika, on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. At a time of rapid political change across the African continent, defined by a language of democratisation and self-government, this political movement seemed curiously at odds with the acknowledged trends of the times. While its leaders, Petro Njau and Joseph Merinyo, defined their project as defending the rights of ‘free men’, it was the threat to freedom posed by local chiefs that was the primary focus of their attention. They campaigned against a new local government structure which had created three new divisional chiefs, and instead called for an elected paramount chief of the Chagga. They demanded that clans, not chiefs, be recognised as the true basis of political authority in the district. Concerned that society was under threat from social, political and economic change, they argued for a patriarchal vision of society in which older land-holding males recognised, and fulfilled, their duties to the young.

While these ideas seemed to colonial officials and to many contemporaries to be out of step with contemporary developments, they had deep roots in local thinking about hierarchy and the location of legitimate social and political power, ideas that had in turn developed in response to the social and political change of the 1920s and 1930s. Far from being merely an unthinking hewing to tradition, this was a movement born of reflection and of a distinctive understanding of the historical past.

³⁰Harri Englund, *Human Rights and the African Airwaves: Mediating Equality on the Chichewa Radio* (Bloomington, 2011), 224.

We can see traces of the historical writing which shaped this understanding in a 1950 document produced by the Kilimanjaro Chagga Citizens Union, entitled 'A History of the Customs of the Chagga'.³¹ In it, the Union thanked those scholars, both insiders and outsiders, whose research helped provide the basis for their understanding of Chagga history. The person they probably had in mind when they wrote of Chagga researchers was a man called Nathaniel Mtui, a Christian convert and clerk. Born in 1892, Mtui met an untimely – and violent – death in 1927, but in his relatively short life he played a key role in researching and writing the history of the region. Amongst his works was a text which has become known as the *Nine Notebooks of Chagga History*, an English-language typescript translation of material originally prepared in the vernacular Chagga language. These *Notebooks* deal most comprehensively with the history of the Chiefdom of Marangu, on the mountain of Kilimanjaro. They describe both the earliest chiefs and those in power at the time of writing, between 1913 and 1916. In particular, the *Notebooks* deal with how chiefs came to power, their conflicts and the ways in which they lost power.

Mtui's *Notebooks* were produced for the Lutheran missionary Bruno Gutmann, a German missionary committed to the principle of evangelising through the institutions of society as currently constituted. Gutmann combined the role of the missionary with that of the ethnographer, because he believed that working through existing social institutions required first understanding them. Gutmann came to East Africa in 1902 from Europe, and his reading of Africa's present and its recent past was shaped by his experiences in Europe. He saw European history as characterised by corruption and decline. Individualism posed a threat, as he perceived it, to the social bonds that held society together, and he feared that this process was now spreading to Africa. Gutmann was also working in the context of a society under colonial rule, first German and then, after the First World War, British government under the supervision of the League of Nations. At the time when he commissioned Mtui to carry out this research, Gutmann was preparing to write his long ethnographic study, *Das Recht der Dschagga*, which served in part as a critique of social and political changes which he believed were taking place under German rule and in particular the strengthening of the power of chiefs, which he believed to rest on a fundamental misunderstanding of Chagga society.³²

³¹ Kilimanjaro Chagga Citizens Union, 'A History of the Mila ya Wachagga', Tanzania National Archives (TNA) 5/584, fo. 154.

³² Emma Hunter, 'In Pursuit of the "Higher Medievalism": Local History and Politics in Kilimanjaro', in *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa*, ed. Derek Peterson and Giacomo Macola (Athens OH, 2009), 149–70.

Gutmann was particularly interested in the institution of the clan, as we can see from Mtui's text. At one point, Mtui breaks off his narrative to write:

I now learn that you [Gutmann] are not interested in this material which I have collected about the clans except the notes on the method of offering sacrifices by the Nyange clan. You say you want to know about the careers of different clans and I can see that this is a job which needs patience and I will have to go into this account gradually. I have decided to postpone collecting material about the clans to get to the truth of the whole thing about them and how they were affected by the cruelties and richness.³³

Influenced by the evidence he drew together with the help of informants such as Mtui, Gutmann's conclusion in *Das Recht der Dschagga* was that the core ties which knit Chagga society together were those of the clan. He argued that returning power to the clans would help restore social harmony and restore the social bonds which he felt were being destroyed by a too rapid transition into the modern world. He attempted to translate these prescriptions into practice, for example through the establishment of an advisory board of clan heads to promote Christian morality.³⁴ Gutmann's vision of society was profoundly hierarchical. In a 1935 article in the journal *Africa*, he wrote of the corrupting power of money, and the disasters caused by 'the confusion, the levelling down, and even complete abandonment of all difference in social position due to birth' which money inevitably caused.³⁵

Gutmann's analysis and conclusions were not always shared by other missionaries and colonial officials. Charles Dundas, the British colonial official who similarly drew on Mtui's research but reached very different conclusions, argued, in line with the thinking which characterised interwar approaches to colonial governance in Africa and the policy of indirect rule, that the clan had long since been superseded by the institution of chiefship. But Dundas did not think that matters could be left there: rather, his point was that it was this institution that should form the basis of political progress.³⁶

As Gutmann's and Dundas's writings suggest, the colonial officials and missionaries who worried about the impact of social change on society in the first half of the twentieth century were not simply seeking to repair and re-traditionalise social bonds that were being broken in order

³³Nathaniel Mtui, *Nine Notebooks of Chagga History*, paragraph 160. A microfilm copy of a 1958–9 English translation is available in Leipzig University Library.

³⁴Klaus Fiedler, *Christianity and African Culture: Conservative German Protestant Missionaries in Tanzania, 1900–1940* (Leiden, 1996), 42, 115.

³⁵Bruno Gutmann, 'The African Standpoint', *Africa*, 8 (1935), 1–19, at 9–10.

³⁶To see how the principles of indirect rule were explained by the government in Tanganyika, see for example: 'Namna nci inavyotawaliwa', *Mambo Leo*, Dec. 1925, 265. Charles Dundas and his political thinking is discussed at greater length in Hunter, 'In Pursuit of the "Higher Medievalism"'.

to conserve; they were seeking rather to manage what they themselves termed 'progress' in a way that did not break society apart.³⁷ They were concerned with how to reconcile freedom with society and were often, as I have suggested elsewhere, inspired by late nineteenth-century liberal thought.³⁸ Where they disagreed with each other was in their interpretations of the societies they encountered: on their past, their present and their potential futures, and on whether growing individualism was perceived as an essential part of social and political 'progress' or as a threat to society.

Gutmann's concerns about society and social relationships, and his fears about the consequences of individualism, were certainly far from unique and seem to have tapped into and perhaps helped shape wider concerns in the region. We can trace similar anxieties through a wide array of written Swahili-language texts circulating at the time in the region, particularly in the Lutheran missionary periodical *Ufalme wa Mungu* and the periodical of the Kilimanjaro Native Cooperative Union, *Uremi*. In editorials, reports of church meetings and letters, we find a rich seam of discussion about society and social relationships, focusing in particular on the ways in which children were failing to obey their parents and were leaving the region to go to the coast in pursuit of work. As Ruben Moshi, a member of the Lutheran Church, complained in the pages of *Ufalme wa Mungu* in 1930, the youth 'like to dress in the European fashion, they wander about from place to place even as far as the coast and if they are prevented by their parents or church elders they do not listen' and were even 'arrogant towards them'.³⁹ If the complaints voiced by people such as Moshi were often similar, the answers that were proposed to the problems they identified varied. For Joseph Maliti, president of the local coffee cooperative, the answer lay in developing agriculture so that 'we profit from our country and can thus bring back our children who are lost and poor, going to the coast with an emptiness in body and soul'. Progress required working together and cooperation.⁴⁰

At the same time, the pages of the Dar es Salaam newspaper *Kiwetu*, colonial Tanganyika's only independent African newspaper in the 1930s

³⁷ It is important to emphasise this point. Karuna Matena's recent book has argued that indirect rule, the colonial practice of government through the framework of the 'tribe' and chief, was a response to the perceived failure of the liberal projects of the mid-nineteenth century and that in Africa it 'took on preemptive, and therefore more systematic, character', aiming to prevent the dissolution of social bonds before it was too late. Yet indirect rule in Africa was never simply a project of conservation and, as Duncan Bell has argued, reading it as a rejection of liberalism rests on a narrow definition of liberalism. Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton, 2010), 173; Bell, *Reordering the World*, 57.

³⁸ Hunter, 'Dutiful Subjects', 259.

³⁹ Ruben Moshi, *Ufalme wa Mungu*, Jan. 1930, 8.

⁴⁰ Joseph Maliti, 'Letter from the President', *Uremi*, 3 June 1932, TNA 20984.

and 1940s, provided a forum for a vocal critique of Chagga chiefs who, it was said, were exceeding their powers and exacting too much from the population. The way forward was not however to strip chiefs of their authority, but to reinvigorate the traditions by which that authority had been controlled. By excluding wealthy elder men from a political role, it was argued, a key check on chiefly authority had been lost. In the past, wrote one correspondent in the pages of *Kiwetu*, the rich could protect the poor, but these days 'any person who tries to help a person or two people with their problems, for example by lending money or slaughtering cows will find that people who try to help in this way are called agitators'.⁴¹

This context helps us make sense of the ideas of the Kilimanjaro Chagga Citizens Union, particularly in the 1950s. The Kilimanjaro Chagga Citizens Union put forward a hierarchical model of society, in which full citizenship was limited to land-holding men, who were responsible for providing for their children and poorer kinsmen.⁴² They criticised chiefs as illegitimate, but when they called for a return of power to 'the people', their definition of 'the people' was a narrow one. Political rights were understood as being limited to land-holding males, and mediated through the Union itself.

Like the writers of the 1920s and 1930s, the Union's leader Petro Njau was concerned with the state of the moral order and convinced that trust had broken down. He called for the authority of clan elders to be resurrected, identifying the impact of the declining authority of clan elders in the rising 'price of bridewealth, lack of manners and respect' and 'dishonesty' in relation to property.⁴³ The cure would lie in clan elders reasserting their authority, and in all accepting the authority of the Kilimanjaro Chagga Citizens Union as a disciplinary body.⁴⁴

Njau claimed to be concerned with freedom, and so he was: but this was freedom only for those who held membership cards for his organisation. Freedom came through membership of the Kilimanjaro Chagga Citizens Union, which for Njau was equated with belonging to a Chagga political community. To cite the historian Sean Stilwell, writing about a very different context, this was a definition of freedom not as 'the absence of obligations, dependence, or other ties that restrict or narrow an individual's right and ability to make decisions and act autonomously',

⁴¹ Letter from S. M. Ngooly, 'Uzembe katika mabaraza ya wenyeji wa utawala wa Moshi', *Kiwetu*, 8 Sept. 1939.

⁴² This section draws on arguments made in Emma Hunter, *Political Thought and the Public Sphere in Tanzania: Freedom, Democracy and Citizenship in the Era of Decolonization* (Cambridge, 2015), ch. 4.

⁴³ 'Mkutano maalumu wa wanachama', 2 Feb. 1956, TNA 5/25/7, fo. 266.

⁴⁴ Kilimanjaro Chagga Citizens Union Pamphlet No. 4 of 1954, 'Urithi wa Wenyeji wa Nchi ni Mila, Iliyotokana na Wakale Wao', 26 July 1954, 5, TNA 5/25/7, fo. 221; 'Kilimanjaro Chagga Union amezaliwa Moshi', TNA 5/584, fo. 31.

but rather 'as the ability or right to belong'.⁴⁵ Crucially, this was an understanding of freedom which was entirely compatible with inequality and social subordination.

It is significant that Njau's project was briefly successful. He and his party managed both to convince the colonial administration of the need for a paramount chief, despite the administration's initial opposition, and to ensure that their candidate, Thomas Marealle, was elected. But over the course of the 1950s, Njau's increasingly conservative vision of society was challenged by a powerful alternative based on radical principles of social and political equality for men and women, young and old, and a rejection of social hierarchies. The district commissioner's response to Njau's attempt to limit rights to those who held membership cards was to charge him with 'complete ignorance of what democracy and freedom really mean' and to insist that the Union 'should also understand clearly that *all* Chagga have rights whether members of your "Union" or not'.⁴⁶ At the same time, the Union's exclusion of women was challenged by opponents in the Chagga Congress who set themselves apart by welcoming women members.⁴⁷ The demand of the paramount chief, Thomas Marealle, in 1955 that Chagga students studying at Makerere College in Uganda apologise after they had been critical of him in an article in the Makerere College magazine, and that they do so in a mode deemed to be in accordance with Chagga customs and traditions, provoked opposition from a younger generation unwilling to accept a humiliating insistence on deference of the young towards the old.⁴⁸

Ultimately, Njau's opponents, first the Chagga Congress and then the Chagga Democratic Party, succeeded in arguing convincingly that there was no place in a democratising Tanganyika for a paramount chief and that he should be replaced by an elected president of the Chagga. A central theme in the opposition to the paramount chief was a concern that the position was out of step with democratic principles, particularly if it was now to be understood as for life and hereditary. As Joseph Merinyo wrote in 1958, articulating the case against hereditary chiefship and implicitly against the paramount chief whom he had previously helped to put into office, 'Many people would like there to be a vote every three years, especially these days. The people should be asked. The people are desperately waiting for the elections which will remove

⁴⁵Sean Stilwell, *Slavery and Slaving in African History* (Cambridge, 2014), 8.

⁴⁶District commissioner to secretary, Chagga Citizens Union, Oct. 1951, TNA 5/23/20, vol. 1, fo. 104. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁷'Minutes of the Meeting of the Chagga Congress which Met in the Welfare Centre on Saturday 30th January 1954', TNA 12844/4, fo. 538.

⁴⁸'Wanafunzi Wachagga wa Makerere wamejita', *Komkya*, Feb. 1955, 1; Kathleen Stahl, 'The Chagga', in *Tradition and Transition: Studies of the Tribal Element in the Modern Era* (Berkeley, 1969), 209–22, at 218.

imperialism and bring democracy to Uchaggani.⁴⁹ Underlying this point was a conviction that political rights were the property of all. As one student, E. Alemyo, wrote in the pages of the Makerere College Chagga Students Magazine in 1959, God had not created some to rule and others to be ruled. All had a right and a duty to participate in government through regular elections.⁵⁰

In the mid-twentieth century, these arguments were increasingly resonant, both locally and at a global level, and benefited from the support of TANU, Tanganyika's increasingly prominent nationalist movement committed to the same goals. Indeed, the Chagga Democratic Party and TANU were so closely linked as to be hard to distinguish. Eventually, a local referendum was held on 4 February 1960.⁵¹ Of those eligible to vote, 44 per cent voted, and of those voters, 22,000 voted for a president, while only 5,000 voted for a continuation of the paramount chief, bringing the Kilimanjaro Union's project to an end.

Yet though the two intellectual projects we have discussed here were very different, with one based on the principle of social and political equality and the other on a hierarchical vision of society, they shared common roots in early and mid-twentieth-century thinking about progress, social change and society. Rather than casting one as 'modern' and the other as 'traditional', we might better see them as different wings of a broad spectrum of thought.

In post-colonial Tanzania, TANU's leader Julius Nyerere's conception of socialism, while radically opposed to Njau's thinking in that it was based on the principle of social equality, had its roots in a similar concern with how to reconcile progress with the maintaining and strengthening of social bonds.⁵² Locally, the concerns raised by the Kilimanjaro Union, particularly around landlessness and gender and generational relations, did not disappear with their loss of local political power, but continued to be discussed in the pages of the local newspaper *Kusare* through the

⁴⁹J. Merinyo to D. C., 'Tangazo Maalum kwa Wachagga la Tarehe 1st June 1958', TNA 5/23/20, fo. 149.

⁵⁰E. Alemyo, 'Serikali ni Sisi', *Makerere College Chagga Society Magazine*, The National Archives (UK) (TNA UK), FCO 141/17864, fo. 10A.

⁵¹A. R. Denny, 'A Note on Chagga Tribal Politics Prior to Referendum in Jan. 1960', TNA UK, FCO 141/17864, 4 Jan. 1960, 3, fo. 55A.

⁵²Emma Hunter, 'Economic Man in East Africa', in *The Moral Economies of Ethnic and Nationalist Claims*, ed. Bruce Berman, Andre Laliberté and Stephen Larin (Vancouver, 2016), 101–22. On the eclectic sources of Nyerere's thinking about society, see Tom Molony, *Nyerere: The Early Years* (Woodbridge, 2014). The term *ujamaa*, used by Nyerere to describe his policy of African socialism, was used in colonial didactic texts in the 1920s and 1930s to describe the choice of humans to live together rather than separately, and the responsibilities to each other which follow from that. This was, for the authors of the didactic primer *Uraia*, 'the basis of citizenship'. Emma Hunter, 'Languages of Politics in Twentieth-Century Kilimanjaro' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 2008), 231.

1960s.⁵³ Understanding their ideas, based as they were in a rich tradition of thinking about community and society, and interrogating them alongside ultimately more successful bodies of ideas in which freedom was bound up with equality, helps us better situate decolonising Africa in a longer framework of African history, and it is to these broader implications that I turn now.

III Conclusion

By stepping outside nationalist frameworks of analysis, historians of decolonisation have increasingly come to stress the possibilities open to political actors in the period after 1945. Although the final result was a continent of nation-states, historians have argued that it did not have to be this way. Yet while the recent flourishing of new histories of decolonisation to which we owe this insight has been very welcome, in some ways it has simply moved the moment at which political futures became fixed to a slightly later date. The moment of possibility was shortlived, and by 1960 it was increasingly clear that the territorial nation-state would dominate the immediate political future in Africa as elsewhere. The barriers to political federalism, perhaps the most widely talked about alternative to the nation-state, were too high.⁵⁴ While a critique of nationalist frameworks of analysis has, therefore, greatly enriched the historiography of decolonisation, it may be that we now need to look elsewhere to take the historiography forward.

Just as ‘methodological nationalism’ once shaped the way that decolonisation was understood, so, I have argued, has a kind of ‘methodological liberalism’. Removing the prism of mid-twentieth-century liberalism reminds us that far from being always and necessarily constitutive of modernity, mid-twentieth-century liberalism was itself a distinctive ideology which responded to a distinctive moment. Provincialising this mode of thought opens up the possibility of exploring traditions of thinking which fit uncomfortably into that framework and rethinking what kinds of political possibilities were open in the era of decolonisation.

The political thinking of the period of decolonisation was, as those who first analysed it recognised, centrally concerned with the concept of

⁵³A debate in the pages of *Kusare* in Mar. 1962 about chiefship and whether women could hold positions of local political authority is telling in this regard. See for example a letter from Makunduwira Kiwari, ‘Umangi wa Ukoloni Hatutaki’, *Kusare*, 26 Mar. 1962, 3. Letters to *Kusare* over the course of the 1960s also suggest that although local political associations could no longer be formed, this did not mean that all had reconciled themselves to the nationalist party, TANU. Letter from Abdullah S. Kweka, ‘Wazee Waukaribisha Ujinga Mkoani Kilimanjaro’, *Kusare*, 11 Sept. 1965, 3.

⁵⁴Moyn, ‘Fantasies of Federalism’.

freedom. Yet while for some freedom was inseparable from equality, for others it was conceivable that freedom could coexist with inequality and the reconstitution or maintenance of social and political hierarchies. Some of these conceptions drew on liberal ideologies, particularly the liberal idealism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which sought human flourishing through community, and could sit within a broadly defined liberal tradition. But others were incompatible with or directly challenged liberal ideologies. Exploring the ways freedom was thought about in its contemporary context means that we can take seriously the political thinking of those for whom freedom did not mean individual autonomy and did not presume social equality, as was the case for Petro Njau and the Kilimanjaro Chagga Citizens Union, who criticised chiefs while nevertheless seeking to defend the power of wealthy men and the authority of clan leaders.

To acknowledge this has implications for the way we approach the history of decolonisation in Africa, and what happened next. Focusing attention so heavily on those who argued for a conjoined package of '[i]ndividual self-realisation, political order, social freedom, and equity' has meant that the apparent rapid abandonment of these ideas after independence was a puzzle to be accounted for. It has usually been explained simply in terms of political necessity, as weak post-colonial states cracked down on perceived opponents in order to secure their position, employing colonial-era strategies of governance to do so.

But looking beyond the familiar, and putting the projects of the 'ethnic patriots' and 'conservatives' of the 1950s in the same analytical frame as those of the nationalist parties, allows us to think more carefully about the intellectual context in which post-colonial governments and their citizens were operating and the intellectual resources upon which they were able to draw. It reminds us to pay attention to those traditions of thinking about society and social relationships which were as strong, in some times and places, as the alternative radical tradition of individual rights and social equality that enjoyed a brief hegemony in the late 1950s. By doing so, we might better understand the intellectual roots of the conservative projects of post-colonial leaders. At the same time, we may also be able better to identify the ways in which, even as political rights were rolled back and political space closed down in the years after independence, moral claims and political critiques continued to be made, as they had been in earlier periods, both in recognisable and in more unfamiliar and even uncomfortable idioms.⁵⁵

⁵⁵Englund, 'Zambia at 50'; James Ferguson, 'Debating "the Rediscovery of Liberalism" in Zambia: Responses to Harri Englund', *Africa*, 84 (2014), 658–68, at 666.