



Bridging Histories of East and Central Africa. Achim von Oppen (Universität Bayreuth), Katharina Zöller (Universität Bayreuth), Geert Castryck (Universität Leipzig), 07.06.2013-08.06.2013.

Reviewed by Clélia Coret

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (March, 2014)

Historiography has long treated the histories of East and Central Africa as separated. “Natural”, colonial or national borders divided these areas and made it hard to discern dynamics taking place across these spaces throughout history. Under the auspices of the Institut für Afrikastudien of the University of Bayreuth and the Centre for Areas Studies of the University of Leipzig, the conference “Bridging Histories of East and Central Africa” dealt with this idea of fragmentation and its impact. One of the goals of the conference was to question the divisions between East and Central Africa empirically. On the other hand the epistemological implications of the persistent divides were also addressed during the conference. This included specific attention to sources, categories and discourses on spaces and populations. The conveners did not take the alleged areas as a starting point, but rather focused on connections between histories and historiographies, as ACHIM VON OPPEN (Bayreuth) clarified in the introduction.

A keynote address by HELMUT BLEY (Hanover) was conceived as a quest for the contours of East and Central Africa, and in so doing showed the coherence of said spaces. Focusing primarily on the connections between Central Africa and the two maritime spaces – the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean – and also taking into account the south of the continent (Botswana, Namibia), Bley underlined the longstanding mobilities in these

spaces (slave trade, refugees...), driven by both economic and political logics. This transregional approach based on the study of movements of populations and ideas between the 17th and 20th centuries stressed the porosity of borders.

The first panel focused on practices in borderland societies, which question and thereby also shape the idea of borders. In this vein JONATHAN SHAW (Michigan) analysed the blood customs on the Uganda-Congo border between 1885 and 1928. He made sense of these ritual practices under colonial rule by insisting on the necessity for people on both sides of the border to create or recreate relations of solidarity that allowed them to uphold the trade networks then threatened by the insecurity caused by Belgian colonial forces. Through an analysis of Manyema migrations KATHARINA ZÖLLER (Bayreuth) illustrated the complexity to grasp this diverse group of people originating from Eastern Congo and variably perceived throughout their migratory space. Tracing these mobilities led her to question the construction of colonial and national identities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Tanzania and to bring out the internal differences in Manyema groups. KATHLEEN VONGSATHORN (Berlin) focused on the settlement of the Anglican Ruanda Mission in Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi between 1921 and 1958 and emphasized the continuities in the experiences of missionaries who worked in both Belgian and British colonies. She

also highlighted that the challenge of finding adequate historical material strengthens the perception of discontinuity in the history of this mission. ALOYS TEGERA (Goma) closed this panel with a presentation on the regional stakes around the oldest national park in Africa, the Virunga National Park. The preservation of the mountain gorilla, the exploitation of oil and respect for local livelihoods and communities all play into the first cross border cooperation between Rwanda, Uganda and the DRC. As discussant to this panel HENRI MEDARD (Paris) underlined that borders had never prevented the circulation of men, practices and knowledge. He also stressed that all the presentations had shown that the transformations of social identities were less due to borders than to mobility.

“Shifting delineations of East/Central Africa” was the topic of the second panel. MATTHEW UNANGST (Philadelphia) illustrated the perception of African space in the German colonial imaginary through the study of the expeditions of Wissmann and of Peters between 1888 and 1890. He showed how borders based on this imaginary were put in practice, mainly through the construction of a dividing line between Arab settler zones and ‘African’ zones, reaching quite far into the African interior. The paper of JULIA VERNE (Frankfurt-am-Main) took the Indian Ocean as vantage point basically asking how far the Indian Ocean world reaches. She considered the connections between “coast” and “hinterland” through the settlement of Arab traders in East Central Africa. Comparing the exhibitions of the Congo Museum and the later Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, MAARTEN COUTTENIER (Tervuren) tried to make sense of what these representations and collections said about the geographical and historical borders set by Belgian colonialism. Setting a (Belgian) Central Africa apart and denying an African history before the coming of the Europeans went hand in hand in the museum policies. In her role of discussant MARCIA WRIGHT (New York) underlined the cul-

tural borders and conflicts which put the supposed holders of a “superior civilization” or sophisticated culture (the Arabs from the coast, the Europeans) in contrast to those who were considered to have neither history nor prestige (the Africans).

The first day of the conference ended with a round table gathering Maarten Couttenier, Henri Médard, Marcia Wright and ABDUL SHERIFF (Zanzibar). An inspiring discussion actively engaged the whole audience. The separation between East and Central Africa in sources and research practices was addressed in an introspective way, talking about the own research experiences, career paths and methodological choices. The discussion also went into the conservation of archives and into the careful handling of categories used in the sources, oral as well as written and in many different languages.

SHERYL MCCURDY (Austin) opened the third panel titled “Swahili, Islam and Identity” with a paper on the Manyema and the religious association life in Ujiji. She explained the mechanisms of association building by people who compensate their lack of local roots with kinship relations and Islam. GEERT CASTRYCK (Leipzig) analysed the Islamization process of uprooted people confronted with political and economic challenges. Islam provided a path towards integration to newcomers in town, who eventually constructed a trans-local culture that was both East and Central African. In her presentation ASHLEY LEINWEBER (Missouri) explained how Islam, brought to Eastern Congo in the 19th century, was marginalized under Belgian colonial rule. Nevertheless the Muslim community developed through interactions with Muslims of other countries. She also underlined that Muslims made claims for the Congolese Muslim minority during Congo’s many postcolonial conflicts. As discussant to this panel Katharina Zöller stressed the role of Islam as a connecting factor between East and Central Africa especially in an urban context. A comparison can also be made

with similar processes in the Swahili city-states which had always integrated newcomers from the sea and the hinterland and where Islam played a role of integration.

In the fourth panel, “Migration and Host Societies”, STEPHEN ROCKEL (Toronto) discussed the mobility of societies in Western Tanzania in the 19th century in the context of a mobile economy from coast to coast. Among these migrants Tutsis built up patron-client relations with the Nyamwezi and Arabo-Swahili traders of Nyamwezi, which first led to transformations in the agro-pastoral economy and then to the emergence of new multi-ethnic communities in the region. JILL ROSENTHAL (Atlanta) investigated the migrations between Rwanda and Tanzania (Ndera district) in order to understand how migrants were eventually perceived as refugees by the end of the 1950s. Her focus was on the contingency of identities in a context of migration. JULIA SEIBERT (Cairo) discussed the relocation of thousands of workers from Ruanda-Urundi to Katanga in order to work for the Union Minière du Haut Katanga at the end of the 1920s. She showed that this group of workers, largely forgotten in historiography, gradually became a well organized labour group and a model for skilled workers. In the discussion Sheryl McCurdy underlined the creation of new economic processes as well as the role of mobility and interactions in the redefinition of identities.

The conclusions of the conference were introduced by MILES LARMER (Sheffield) and Helmut Bley. Larmer emphasized the idea that borders have always been crossed and that if the colonial demarcations transformed or reoriented existing exchanges, they did not make them disappear. The construction of borders led to the recasting of social identities, but these had never been fixed and always adapted to their specific historical context. Moreover Larmer stressed the normality of mobility, which for good reason appeared in all the contributions. Bley wondered what particular

societies would allow us to study in depth these connections and mobility for the whole East and Central African region. He further paid attention to the postcolonial period showing how national elites tried to manipulate the identity of transnational groups and to control territory and mobility.

This conference cast a stimulating light on border issues in Africa and has relevance not only for historians working on the region under scrutiny. The dialogue between empirical case studies and epistemological thoughts enabled fruitful debates. The conference clearly managed to overstep the historiographical borders in East and Central Africa: firstly in underlining the multiplicity of borders and their superimposition; and secondly in transcending the disciplinary divisions, gathering historians, anthropologists, geographers – however all of them dealing with historical sources and their accompanying methodological problems.

To my liking, however, the debates could have been richer if other parts of Africa would have been integrated in the discussion. The focus was clearly on the zones where East and Central Africa – as variably understood – touch each other. Other parts of East Africa, Central Africa and beyond, like for instance the interior of Kenya or the Horn of Africa, would provide fertile ground to uncover similar dynamics. Furthermore, the gendered nature of population mobilities was only cursory addressed – despite the participation of a specialist like Marcia Wright – whereas a more profound treatment of this aspect would have made the complexities and entanglements that were highlighted throughout the conference even more tangible.

Programme

Friday, 7 June 2013

Achim von Oppen (Bayreuth) – Introduction

Helmut Bley (Hannover) – Keynote Address: Central Africa's changing regional orientations from 17th-20th Century

Panel 1: Bridging Borders

Chair: Abdul Sheriff / Discussant: Henri Médard

Jonathan Shaw (Michigan), *Blood Customs: Sanguinary Kinship, Secret Associations and Illicit Trade on the Uganda-Congo Border: 1885-1928*

Kathleen Vongsathorn (Berlin), 'In Spite of Opposition': *Crossing Borders with the Ruanda Mission, 1921-1958*

Katharina Zöller (Bayreuth), *Crossing Multiple Borders: the 'Manyema' in Colonial East Central Africa*

Aloys Tegera (Goma), *Nature protection and community survival: the case of Virunga National Park in the Albertine Graben*

Panel 2: Shifting Delineations of East / Central Africa

Chair: Ashley Leinweber / Discussant: Marcia Wright

Matthew Unangst (Philadelphia), *Writing the Divide between East and Central Africa: German Accounts of the Bushiri Rebellion and the Emin Pascha Expedition of 1888-1890*

Julia Verne (Frankfurt), *Where does the Indian Ocean end? Tracing coastlines in the Tanzanian hinterland*

Maarten Couttenier (Tervuren), *The Representation of East and Central Africa in the History Rooms of the (Belgian) Congo Museum (Royal Museum for Central Africa)*

Round Table: Research Traditions and Sources in East / Central Africa

Chair: Achim von Oppen

Maarten Couttenier (Tervuren), Henri Médard (Paris), Abdul Sheriff (Zanzibar), Marcia Wright (New York)

Saturday, 8 June 2013

Panel 3: Swahili, Islam & Identity

Chair: Stephen Rockel / Discussant: Katharina Zöller

Sheryl McCurdy (Houston), *Storm in a Teacup: Islam and Identity Politics in Western Tanganyika, 1908-1933*

Geert Castryck (Leipzig), *Submission of the Subjugated: Living Islam in Colonial Bujumbura*

Ashley Leinweber (Missouri), *A History of the Survival of Islam in the D. R. Congo: From Swahili-Arab Roots to Colonial Repression and Beyond*

Panel 4: Migration and Host Societies

Chair: Sheryl McCurdy / Discussant: Aloys Tegera

Stephen Rockel (Toronto), *The Tutsi and the Nyamwezi: The transformation of Agropastoralism in 19th Western Tanzania*

Jill Rosenthal (Atlanta), *From Migrants to Refugees: Identity Formation in Ngara District, Tanzania, 1959-1965*

Julia Seibert (Cairo), *Cultural Brokers, Revolutionaries or Outsiders? The impact of Rwandan migrant workers on Katanga's working cultures since the 1920s*

Final Discussion & Conclusions

Chair: Geert Castryck

Discussants: Miles Larmer (Sheffield), Helmut Bley (Hannover)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Clélia Coret. Review of *Bridging Histories of East and Central Africa*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. March, 2014.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41356>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.