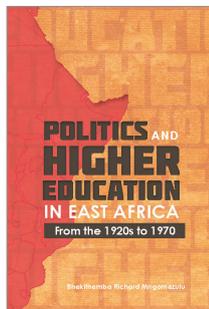


The University of East Africa: Anatomy of a failed experiment?

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Politics and higher education
in East Africa: From the
1920s to 1970

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AUTHOR:

Bhekithemba Richard
Mngomezulu

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REVIEWER:

Gerald Wangenge-Ouma

EMAIL:

gerald.ouma@up.ac.za

AFFILIATION:

Department of Institutional
Planning, University of Pretoria,
Pretoria, South Africa

POSTAL ADDRESS:

Department of Institutional
Planning, University of Pretoria,
Private Bag X20, Hatfield 0028,
South Africa

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In this book, Bhekithemba Mngomezulu offers a useful historiography of higher education in East Africa. He discusses the role played by politics in colonial Britain and in the East African colonies, and the involvement of missionary and American philanthropic organisations in the development of higher education in Africa, specifically in East Africa. The specific focus of the book is the rise and fall of the University of East Africa (UEA). It is this distinct focus on the UEA that distinguishes the book from earlier historical accounts of higher education in Africa such as Ashby's *African Universities and Western Traditions* (1964), Ajayi, Goma and Johnson's *The African Experience with Higher Education* (1996) and Lulat's *A History of African Higher Education from Antiquity to the Present: A Critical Synthesis* (2005).

The book consists of three parts, which are further subdivided into seven chapters. The first part (Chapter 1) provides a broad overview of the development of higher education in the British Empire. Further, it traces the development of higher education in Africa from the early 1920s to the 1960s. This chapter, through the reports of the various commissions, conferences, working parties, missionary and philanthropic organisations, demonstrates, inter alia, that the origin and development of higher education in Africa was a contested process; a process that was steeped in political wrangling, negotiations, suspicion, compromises and differing interests. The chapter illustrates that – while the demand for higher education by African constituencies was inseparable from the struggle for *uhuru* and the promotion of nationalism and pan-Africanism – for colonial authorities, missionaries and philanthropic organisations, the drivers for higher education in colonial Africa ranged from evangelism, colonial control, acculturation and, towards the end of colonial rule, the production of elites to whom the colonial authorities would 'handover the responsibility for administration, the technical services and for taking of political decisions' (p.9).

Part II (Chapters 2–4) explores the process of establishing the UEA from the early 1920s to 1963, located within the broader context of British imperial policy, and the roles played by the British government in London, British governors in East Africa and East African politicians and academics in the establishment of the UEA. The author traces the establishment of the UEA through the reports of various committees, commissions and working parties – such as the Permanent Advisory Committee on Native Education in the British Tropical African Dependencies (1923), the De La Warr Commission (1936) and the Asquith Commission (1943). He then explores the evolution of the UEA, beginning with the establishment of Makerere University College in 1949 as an inter-territorial university serving the entire East African region (Uganda, Kenya, Tanganyika and Zanzibar), and later the establishment of the Royal Technical College, Nairobi (1952) and University College, Dar-es-Salaam (1961), which in 1963 became the constituent colleges of the UEA. Towards the end of this part of the book (Chapter 5), the author presents important debates by East African politicians and academics around the role of the university, the relationship between the university, state and society, Africanisation of the curriculum and staff, academic freedom and university autonomy.

Part III (Chapters 5–7) examines the factors that led to the demise of the UEA in 1970. According to the author, 'the university started falling apart as it was being instituted, thus leading to the conclusion that it was like a stillborn child' (p.165); that is, there were indications already during the process of establishing the university that it was eventually going to collapse. While several factors conspired against the success of the UEA, the main reason for its collapse seems to be territorial and inter-territorial tensions among the three East African states, manifested mainly by agitations by these countries for the establishment of national universities and the pursuit of national interests.

Overall, the book offers an enlightening historical account of the development of higher education in East Africa. An important strength of the book is the detailed discussion of the various processes and roles played by different constituencies that led to the introduction of higher education in East Africa and the establishment of the UEA. The book is not just a historiography of higher education in East Africa, but, as is the case with good historical accounts, provides a useful context for understanding some of the issues confronting higher education in Africa today, such as the often problematic relationship between higher education, society and the state, the varied understanding of the roles of higher education, curriculum and the question of relevance, diversity and differentiation. Further, even though the author makes no attempt to link the historical development of higher education in East Africa to some of the practices that are characteristic of higher education in East Africa today, several path dependencies are discernible. A good example is the practice of aspiring universities entering into a 'special relationship' with an established university before attaining a fully fledged university status. In Kenya, with the exception of Moi University which was established from the outset as a fully fledged university, all public universities started as constituent colleges of an established university; a practice borrowed from the 'special relationship' of the UEA and the University of London.

A key limitation of the book is the largely descriptive nature of the discussion. While this is understandable given its historical focus, the author misses the opportunity, especially in the last chapter, to provide some critical analysis and tease out some key issues that still resonate in higher education debates today. For instance, despite the UEA being the first experiment with differentiation in African higher education, the issue is neither mentioned nor discussed. In this regard, the section on lessons from the experience of the UEA is the weakest in the book.

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