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*The Problems of Paradise: Kenyan Students as Outsiders in
1960s East Germany*

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Abstract:

During the 1960s, East German leaders worked to enhance existing connections between East Germany and East Africa and to promote East German interests abroad, thus providing East Africans, specifically Kenyans, an alternative to British imperial paradigms of authority and a post-imperial influence. Utilizing five oral histories of the students themselves as a means to counter the scarcity of documents and fragmentary records, this article highlights the experiences of five Kenyan students in school, work, and dating in order to demonstrate the racism they encountered. Despite promises of equality and solidarity the Kenyan students' experiences and encounters with varied forms of racism and a lack of socialist modernity served to compound the very real divisions between the Eastern Bloc countries and sub-Saharan Africa and demonstrate the weaknesses of any developing solidarity movement between the Second and Third world.

Key words:

Kenya, education, students, East Germany.

Introduction

During the 1960s, East German leaders worked to enhance existing connections between East Germany and East Africa and to promote East German interests abroad, thus providing East Africans, specifically Kenyans, an alternative to British imperial paradigms of authority and a post-

imperial influence. As part of this mandate for socialist unity, the East German government offered scholarships to East African students, even to those from capitalist Kenya, who possessed their own agendas for furthering their education. Through examining the detailed experiences of five students, this paper hopes to show how the cross-cultural imaginary—which included both the goals of the East German state to further international solidarity and the optimism of the students—contrasted with the lived reality once in East Germany. The host populace exacerbated this rift as they mimicked global anxieties about an African presence and remained fearful of African intimacy. Thus, further cross-cultural exchanges were limited and the expected solidarity between East Germany and Kenya failed to materialize; the life stories of individual Kenyan students provide insight into this failed relationship. Specifically, the experiences of students highlight the disconnect between the imaginary students possessed regarding East Germany and the reality they faced. Such experiences were shaped by the political worlds of Kenya and East Germany, as well as the dynamics of the global Cold War. The believed forms of racism continued to remind and reinforce the idea that the students were and would remain outsiders.

This article demonstrates how African students exploited local and global political and economic change to fulfill their own agendas and forge connections between East Africa and Asia. To accomplish this goal, it utilizes five oral histories of the students themselves as a means to counter the scarcity of documents and fragmentary records. The five students—Winifred Njagi Wairimu, Jerusha Mwangi Munene, Joyce Atieno Gunter, Jane Muthoni Mbugua and Harrison Kimani Njoroge—were all born in the early 1940s, took advantage of the expansion of Kenyan schools in the 1950s, and secured scholarships and attended university in East Germany in the 1960s. These students witnessed the dramatic increase in Cold War tensions, including the rise of the Berlin Wall, the development of a strong police state in East Germany and the increase of propaganda by both sides. To trace the intimate encounters and experiences of students while abroad, this chapter relies on oral histories of African students conducted over the past five years during multiple research trips to the region. Recognizing potential limitations, recent Africanist scholarship nonetheless has reassessed the benefits of these sources.¹ While the oral histories used in this article are certainly performances, as the memories of participants are influenced by their youth at the time and their future successes, their memories nevertheless yield insights into the immigrant experience and the controversies associated with it. Over the last forty years, many of those who studied abroad in the late 1950s and 1960s returned home and achieved success in their

¹ Corinne A. Kratz, “Conversations and Lives,” in *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History*, eds. Luise White, Stephan Miescher, and David William Cohen (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 142.

respective fields of study. Those who failed to graduate from secondary school typically remain in the more rural areas and were outside the social circles of my now-elite informants. The interviews are performances used by the subjects to project drama and their own personal views onto past events and completed decades after the events occurred. However, these larger life history narratives are still important in highlighting individual interactions and everyday life in a manner not captured by traditional archive sources.² In some cases the stories are exaggerated for dramatic effect to impress others, including myself, and to further highlight the vivid racist encounters. I contend that the interviews still yield insight into the perception of East German society in terms of intimate forms of racism, the impressions ingrained in the students' memories of their time abroad, and how this influenced events throughout their lives. These everyday experiences provide rich insight into the multifaceted nature of Afro-European connections in the wake of colonial rule and expanding Cold War tensions and add an often-overlooked African voice to the study of student encounters while abroad.

East African students, often criticized by the departing colonial state as inconvenient radicals, typically studied in East Germany for three years or more (both before and after decolonization), utilizing existing and newly developed transnational networks that suited their particular needs and represented an overlap of imperial and Cold War connections.³ However, historians have only recently highlighted the movement of colonized peoples, who exploited the networks of the colonizing empire while also creating their own, as part of the larger theme of 'African uses of the Cold War'.⁴ Works by Julie Hessler along with Eric Burton and Daniel Brach highlight the new phase of competition that started in the 1950s as countries such as the Soviet Union, the United States, Israel, France, the United Kingdom and both Germanys were competing for influence in the region, a fight that allowed African actors to exploit the situation to further their own agendas.⁵ Furthermore, these new connections fostered and helped spread anti-colonial, Marxist and pan-African ideas and new exchanges throughout the decolonizing world, which threatened British control and influence in East Africa. While general notions of progress remained shared by the students and the East Germany state, each side sought to capitalize on these new opportunities

² Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 9-10; Also Elizabeth Tonkin, "Investigating Oral Tradition," *Journal of African History* 27 (1986): 203-13.

³ For example see John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴ Jocelyn Alexander, JoAnn McGregor and Blessing-Miles Tendi, "The Transnational Histories of Southern African Liberation Movements: An introduction" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 43 (2017), 5.

⁵ Julie Hessler, "Death of an African Student in Moscow: Race, Politics, and the Cold War" *Cahiers du Monde russe* 47 (2006): 33-63.

created by the overlap of decolonization and the Cold War to further their particular agendas. Overall, African youths combined existing imperial and new Cold War connections in order to promote the circulation of people, ideas, information, literature, humanitarian concerns, capital, controversies, technology and goods around this web in varied ways, often ignoring the imperial metropolises in favour of new Cold War centers.⁶

East African students transmitted knowledge about educational opportunities, worked to help other students achieve educational goals, and all the while evaded colonial controls on the movement of people and information.⁷ In pushing to examine the “Cold War from below,” a new wave of scholarship over the last two years has highlighted the interaction of East Africans with both East and West Germany, emphasizing the mobility of students and their ability to engage with the Cold War and German rivalry for their own advantages. For example, rather than return simply as docile and indoctrinated students, Eric Burton argues that student activism, mobility and ability to fight the disciplinary efforts of the East German state worked to radicalize the students and further their political involvement and capital.⁸ Daniel Branch also explores the connections that Africans forged with Eastern Europe, the domestic factors important in securing access to Eastern Bloc scholarships, problems faced while abroad and the problems students experienced upon their return home.⁹ When students studied abroad they witnessed firsthand the politicization of education; upon their return, they saw how education functioned as an essential tool in the competition for state power in postcolonial Kenya.

Finally, recent developments in East German historiography demonstrate the multifaceted connections developed during the Cold War with the developing world. Works by Quinn Slobodian, Katherine Pence, Paul Betts, Young-sun Hong and others have demonstrated the ways in which East Germany attempted to use these connections to prove its modernity and development to a domestic, regional and global audience.¹⁰ Such analysis helps reconceptualize the Cold War from simply being dominated by a binary focus on the United States and USSR to tracing

⁶ For more on this concept see Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand's Colonial Past* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2012). Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁷ Daniel Branch, “Political Traffic: Kenyan Students in Eastern and Central Europe, 1958-69” *Journal of Contemporary History* 53 (2018): 811-831.

⁸ Eric Burton, “Navigating Global Socialism: Tanzanian Students In and Beyond East Germany,” *Cold War History* 19 (2019): 63-83.

⁹ Branch, “Political Traffic,” 812.

¹⁰ Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, eds., *East German Everyday Culture and Politics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

the multifaceted linkages between the Second World and Africa.¹¹ Pence and Betts add to this discussion, writing: “It behooves historians to pay closer attention to the manner in which East Germany, like its East Bloc neighbors, sought to engineer a superior alterity to the liberal West.”¹² Overall, the provision of aid to the developing world helped the country forge an independent foreign policy compared to its Eastern bloc brethren, while hosting students and workers demonstrated the development that East Germany achieved, helped prove its class and racial equality, and, as in West Germany and other Western European States, helped fill important labor needs. Africans studying abroad in the 1960s faced discrimination worldwide: in India, in the United States and United Kingdom, as well as in both East and West Germany. In the Eastern Bloc, racial hypocrisy contributed to a larger trend of anti-African marginalization.

Background and Departure

During the early 1960s, as East African countries obtained their independence, African students embraced new opportunities for both work and education in the Eastern Bloc. As African nations transitioned from the colonial world into that of the Cold War, they began to build new relationships for the benefit of their fledgling states. Many students seeking to study abroad emphasized in their applications their desire to contribute to the development of their communities and country. Joyce Gunter, for example, described herself as motivated by “a passion to empower her community through sustainable food production.”¹³ Her stated goal complemented the technical specializations of East German universities and the state more generally, which worked to highlight a modernized social outlook and technology on a worldwide stage. Gunter identified modernization in Kenya as the path toward ending “primitive traditions such as female genital mutilation and cases of young girls being married off.”¹⁴ With this statement, she echoed the very image East Germany sought to promote of socialist modernity as the antidote to racial and gender inequality.

However, despite their interest in development and modernity, few students emphasized their desire to achieve a classless society. Rather, students assumed that their success would bring wealth and development to their communities and country. Examples of individual Kenyan students illustrate the growing ties between Kenya and East Germany, the importance of African agency and the challenges East Germany faced in their efforts toward “proving their modernity” and

¹¹ Quinn Slobodian, ed., *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

¹² Pence and Betts, *East German Everyday Culture*, 13.

¹³ Joyce Gunter, interview by author 29 July 2017.

¹⁴ Gunter.

building communities. Ironically, Daniel Branch highlights that students' dream of serving the state failed to be realized: in practice, the socialist education the students received while abroad served to disqualify them from important state positions upon their return, as their American-educated brethren received preferential treatment. Despite this disconnect, the rhetoric of state-led development matched the experience of the East German state and the stated goals of the students helped secure their positions at East German universities. Access to schooling was only one of many factors that inspired Africans to travel to East Germany—other economic, emotional and security considerations also motivated people to move—but educational aspirations encouraged many youths of the 1960s to look abroad.¹⁵

Additionally, African students often faced economic hardships and reminders of their economic underdevelopment that allowed the East German state to demonstrate its modernized outlook and domestic development to potential students. As both a European state and a socialist country, East Germany imagined itself as an exemplar of modernity, gender equality, and racial harmony, and the East German state proved successful in attracting African students with such promises. This developmentally focused rhetoric was reflected in the imaginary of many of the students; Wairumu, for example, recalls that she pictured East German universities as the antithesis of African schools, with their dusty rooms, rusted iron roofs, and barefoot children.¹⁶ Overall, a lack of knowledge regarding East Germany, except for its association with the European world in general, allowed students to imagine its overall development and economic power, a vision that was enhanced by comparisons with the students' own experiences of colonial underdevelopment.

In securing scholarships, connections to either the imperial or Cold War wider world were important, which often limited access to those families from the small middle class or political elites. School itself allowed students to develop the needed connections to missionaries, educators and rising politicians that were key in allowing students to learn about the scholarships and assistance available to them. As a means of fostering his domestic and international prestige and fueling political competition in Kenya, rising politician Oginga Odinga obtained scholarships for Kenyan students to study abroad, with the expectation that they would fill government positions upon their return home. However, students could only obtain the requisite initial meeting to be considered for these scholarships if they met certain educational qualifications—in particular, the

¹⁵ Marcia C. Schenck, "From Luanda and Maputo to Berlin: Uncovering Angolan and Mocambican Migrants' Motives to Move to the German Democratic Republic," *African Economic History* 44 (2016): 202-234.

¹⁶ Wairumu, interview by author, 10 August 2017.

completion of secondary school—and had the right connections.¹⁷ The British even alleged that in practice, only students who shared Odinga's own Luo ethnic affiliations received serious consideration. These restrictions worked to limit scholarship availability to either the extremely gifted students able to secure secondary school scholarships or to those from wealthy families who could afford the school fees associated with their children's education and envisioned their children among the postcolonial political elite. For example, Wairumu took advantage of the government connections her father, as a Senior Chief, afforded them as his acquaintances informed him of a new scholarship program in the social sciences, sponsored by the East German government.¹⁸ Thus, the students that secured scholarships to socialist countries often and ironically possessed the elite background that ensured their access to schools and used these connections to solidify their privileged position and, eventually, enter the economic and political elite of Kenya.

East German state officials immediately began meeting with and working to impress arriving African students, starting with the plane ride itself. Although some students covertly traveled to staging grounds at Cairo or even London, Eastern Bloc countries worked to provide direct flights for students in the early 1960s as such actions allowed the host states to showcase their modernization, especially to African students who had not previously experienced air travel.¹⁹ Wairumu was the first woman from her village to ever board a plane. Munene recalls the experience of the flight as in many ways unpleasant—he was physically uncomfortable and felt ill—but also exhilarating.²⁰ He met a number of other East African students on the flight, and the overall mood was buoyant as the plane was filled with enthusiastic young minds, eager to obtain their degrees and return home to serve their country. Most sought degrees in fields like medicine and engineering, a preference which reflected the technical focus of most regional universities in the Eastern Bloc and the need for technical workers in Kenya. The five students highlighted in this article majored in medicine, engineering, horticultural science, psychology and environmental science. By the mid-1960s, over six thousand students from Africa, including over four hundred from Kenya, would travel to the Bloc to study, thereby solidifying the relationship between the

¹⁷ On the role of Odinga see Branch, "Political Traffic," 816-819.

¹⁸ Wairumu.

¹⁹ For more on the pathways and attempts to get abroad see Branch, "Political Traffic," 819-821 and Eric Burton, "Decolonisation, the Cold War and Africans' Routes to Higher Education," *Journal of Global History* 14 (2020): forthcoming.

²⁰ Munene, interview by author, 15 August 2017.

two regions.²¹ For the students, the whirlwind of activity from securing a scholarship, to raising spending money and obtaining a visa, along with meeting other students, only heightened their optimism and helped East Germany, along with other Eastern Bloc countries, secure the goodwill and better relationships that they were seeking.

Arrival and Racism

Although arriving students often felt nervous and overwhelmed, they recognized the importance of their education to their future careers and were eager to quickly begin schooling and start their new lives in East Germany. Upon arrival, East German universities attempted to create connections between arriving students through orientations and other organized events. They hoped that by building relationships, they would help African students transition more easily into the East German educational system and work to highlight the level of development and other achievements of the East German state; however, it was also expected that these students would return home after only a brief stay in the country.

Education remained the primary focus of the students while in East Germany. However, the relatively mundane classroom experiences were rarely highlighted in interviews several decades later. Most of the students recall doing well at school and received their degrees. Furthermore, the political classes that the students experienced were seen as attempts at indoctrination and a nuisance at best. In contrast to the actual learning taking place, the racism associated with their educational experiences remains a defining memory, in addition to, as Hong emphasizes, a poor understanding of German, a general lack of appropriate preparation, poor food and inadequate housing.²² Thus, the challenges that visitors faced immediately undermined the state's self-presentation as a paragon of modernity and equality and overshadowed the educational experience itself.

The disconnect between the expectations of students and the lived reality began soon after their arrival as they experienced an intimate racism that would profoundly impact the rest of their lives, which originated from both state and non-state actors. Although the East German state sought to portray itself as a bastion of tolerance and equality, the everyday experiences of African students told a very different story. While most African students recall making friends with their German classmates, they also faced racially charged insults and even violence in their daily lives, both within

²¹ In contrast the United Kingdom hosted over two thousand students from the region and the United States welcomed over 1000.

²² Hong, *Cold War*, 197.

and outside the university. University lecturers mocked African students who performed poorly, as one student remembered, “telling them they are as dark in their brains as their skin color.”²³ Their classmates not only laughed at these jokes, but even encouraged lecturers to submit reports against under-performing African students. They justified their racist dislike of African classmates on the grounds that they were, as Munene remembers, “taking their ladies.”²⁴ Moreover, he reports that “students of African descent were victims of hate crimes and racist violence and feared for their safety as well as avoided particular places since they were prone to being attacked.”²⁵ The students encountered immediate racism from the same state and university officials that worked to promote international solidarity and, while many incoming students were able to form friendships, racialized encounters remained a defining memory.

Furthermore, anti-African violence became increasingly prevalent and received more publicity over the course of the 1960s. African students in Bulgaria protested and were attacked by the police, faced attacks in Baku Azerbaijan and witnessed the death of a Ghanaian medical student in Moscow.²⁶ The Kenyan students in East Germany remember how occasional outbreaks of violence while at school furthered feelings of racism and marred many African students’ experiences of East Germany. Wairumu described an incident in 1964, in which East German men brutally attacked an African friend of hers. They tauntingly referred to Africans as “*Negger*”; afterwards, Wairumu recalls her friend “was beaten mercilessly and stabbed almost to death then abandoned in a nearby sewer drain where he was rescued by one of the security personnel manning their university gated campus.”²⁷

The disconnect between the experience of students and the officialdom they interacted with deepened as Wairumu stated the state report claimed that both sides were at fault for the violent incident; she presents this report as politically motivated, downplaying racially inspired violence in case “newspapers from West Germany got wind of the crime happening.”²⁸ Although African students confronted racism on campus, Munene recalls “discrimination that was more severe outside the campus territory,”²⁹ where even the imagined notions of racial tolerance disappeared, students were reminded of their outsider status and society policed itself to limit interaction between African students and others. Njoroge describes seeing banners and graffiti spread across

²³Wairumu.

²⁴ Munene.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See Branch, “Political Traffic,” 824-826 and Hessler, “Death,” 35.

²⁷ Wairumu.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Munene.

city streets and walls, calling for foreigners to go back to their home countries.³⁰ African students recount experiences ranging from strangers yelling insults on the streets, to restaurants refusing them service, to young men physically attacking them. Thus, students' experience of racism and violence were in direct contrast to the promises of racial equality, a myth that the East German state worked to portray to the West German state specifically and the world in general.

Modernity and the Role of Students

The disconnect between the modernity that the students expected and the East German state sought to highlight, including the social and economic progress the state had made since its foundation through the implementation of communist ideals and the racial harmony that it provided, increased with the amount of time the students spent in the country. The students became very much aware of the role they played for the state, as “puppets for their promotional material.”³¹ In one incident, during an international conference, African journalism students “were each asked to attend the meetings in their national costumes and fill several empty chairs to make them look like delegates” and were even placed in the front row to increase visibility.³² Wairumu described the state as objectifying successful African journalists by transforming them into convenient visual symbols of the global power of the German Democratic Republic. African students, far from being uncritical consumers of state propaganda, quickly recognized both the propaganda efforts of the East German State and their own intended role as instruments of state propaganda.³³

Despite the efforts of the bureaucrats within the East German state to highlight their modernity and progressive values, African students recall that they increasingly noticed the rather quotidian limitations on quality of life in East Germany—in particular, the restricted amount of consumer products and services available. Njoroge recalls that in East Germany, they usually had only a single type of product or service available, with no possibility of making choices or alternating between options, stating: “From dairy products like milk and butter, to butchery and bakery items, there was but one kind of everything.”³⁴ Even more telling, students quickly realized that the country experienced many problems similar to those found in their own homeland. Joyce Gunter explains, “All these problems were similar but not identical to those that I faced back home such

³⁰ Njoroge, interview by author, 10 August 2017.

³¹ Gunter.

³² Ibid.

³³ Wairumu.

³⁴ Njoroge.

as hunger, illiteracy, and poverty,” inspiring her to “take back enough knowledge during her stay to go help eradicate these issues.”³⁵ Thus, in a reversal of the expectations, lessons learned in East Germany provided an overview of what to avoid, as opposed to examples worthy of emulation; examples of poverty and corruption (highlighted below) reminded the students of their homeland rather than an imagined socialist paradise.

Moreover, African students frequently faced racism not only from East German citizens, but also from the very government that claimed to promote racial equality as part of its quest to embrace modernity. While being unaccommodating is not in itself racist, the encounters with the bureaucracy that Njoroge remembers were, in his assessment, unnecessarily harsh. He and other Africans often “had to wait for hours to see a government or factory official only to be rudely turned away because they did not have a particular form with them. Most shop attendants, post office officers, waiters, ticket clerks and doctors’ receptionists exuded a sense of racism and would seem to go out of their way to express their dislike and low opinion of black people and their resentment towards having to engage with or serve them.”³⁶ As these officials exercised great power over the students’ lives and constituted the majority of their interaction with the state, these minor functionaries furthered perceptions of racism.

In addition to the bureaucracy, students forced to interact with the police remember these experiences as particularly challenging. According to Joyce Gunter, African students who fell under the suspicion of the *staatssicherheit* (the *Stasi* or secret police) met with a shocking degree of force and ruthlessness. Avoiding suspicion proved difficult; the inhabitants of the German Democratic Republic were one of the most heavily surveilled populations in the world.³⁷ The police subjected African students to curfews, which they claimed were for their own safety, but made no efforts to impose similar restrictions on perpetrators of anti-African violence. If foreigners failed to cooperate with abusive and discriminatory police officers, they were threatened with deportation.³⁸ Nor were these empty threats; some foreigners were indeed sent back to their home countries, an action that contrasted with official state policy and served to remind the students of their vulnerable position in East German society. Njoroge initially assumed that, because he was African, the *Stasi* would not take any interest in him, only to find his letters and telephone calls were being monitored.³⁹ While East Germany initially appeared to be a highly developed modern

³⁵ Gunter.

³⁶ Njoroge.

³⁷ Gunter.

³⁸ Hessler, “Death,” 34.

³⁹ Njoroge.

state, African students quickly unmasked this illusion through interactions with the state police along with the bureaucracy in general. These interactions instilled untaught political skills that the students could use for advancement upon their return to Kenya.

Still, African students commented on the positive aspects of their experience as well—especially the degree of gender equality they witnessed. Joyce Gunter became dedicated to securing gender equality, if not racial equality, upon witnessing the greater freedom and empowerment of East German women. Many had experienced gender discrimination both at home and at school in Kenya, and welcomed the progress made by women in East Germany.⁴⁰ As Gunter explains, “the most prominent factor was their accommodation of women’s empowerment and building their capacity as they encouraged women to remain in the workforce.”⁴¹ She saw East German institutional structures as providing much-needed support for women, by allowing them access to full-time employment and creating legal solutions to help working mothers (although few students knew exactly what these laws entailed). Ideas of gender equality resonated with African students, especially women who—like their male counterparts—hoped to save money and invest in businesses when they returned home. Njoroge recalls that many of the women he knew “had learned back at home in their schools about how modern East Germany was and that the chances of prosperity were so high in the German Democratic Republic hence their admiration of the country as the best among the rest of the socialist societies.”⁴² Overall the students critically appraised and questioned the claims of modernity that the East German state made, basing their experiences on their Kenyan upbringing, and both praised the gender equality that they found but condemned racial inequality as an important disconnect between their expectations and lived encounters.

Work and Dating

In addition to formal education, four of the five students interviewed recalled working while in East Germany, either to supplement their income or as part of their educational experience, where they came into close contact with people outside of the universities and often forged close bonds, even starting romantic relationships. Sponsorship programs typically required that students work part-time government jobs in order to both enhance their skill set and help offset the lack of

⁴⁰ Branch, “Political Traffic,” 822-823; For more on students in Kenya see Lynn Thomas, “Gendered Reproduction: Placing Schoolgirl Pregnancies in African History” in *Africa After Gender?*, eds. Catherine Cole, et al. (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2007), 48.

⁴¹ Gunter.

⁴² Njoroge.

qualified employees in East Germany. The work requirement also had something of an ideological component. As Njoroge put it, students had to work for their pocket money in order to instill in them a sense of responsibility, as well as to discourage them from abusing the privileges that they obtained from government sponsorship.⁴³ Integrating African students into the workforce allowed the East German state to highlight its modernized outlook —while also gaining a cheap source of labor. The East German government regularly recruited African students to work in part-time jobs in their field of study, with the expectation that many would become full-time employees after completing their degrees. Even though the process of recruiting and hiring African students for factory and government jobs in Germany was marred by discrimination, Africans still assumed it paid better than work at home.⁴⁴ Even more disturbing for the participants, in practice many job seekers obtained work not as a reward for academic excellence, but through bribery. Njoroge observed bribes being exchanged between recruiters and job seekers on many occasions.⁴⁵ Moreover, the most lucrative and politically significant government opportunities, including political offices and positions in the armed forces, were reserved exclusively for East German natives. Mbugua noted as well that local contract workers earned higher wages, while African contract workers remained economically marginalized.⁴⁶ According to African observers, preferential treatment for Germans was clearly discriminatory, rather than reflective of relative skill and the East German holders of high-paying positions often proved unqualified and performed poorly. While this favoritism was for the most part unsurprising, and would foreshadow future experiences of discrimination in the workplace, Africans were nevertheless angered by this stark reminder of their marginalized status.

Further complicating their experiences while abroad, three of the students interviewed dated East Germans during their time abroad, and these relationships remained an important memory even much later in their lives. The transgression of racial boundaries in this way sparked concern in host societies throughout the world, and, as Hessler highlights with regard to the Soviet Union, dating often aggravated race relations between Russians and Africans more than any other single issue.⁴⁷ Black men and women who entered into romantic relationships with white Germans faced rebuke or even violent confrontations; yet, despite German anxieties about such personal connections, everyday life and personal encounters made such relationships impossible to prevent. Africans and

⁴³ Njoroge.

⁴⁴ Njoroge.

⁴⁵ Njoroge.

⁴⁶ Mbugua, interview by author, 3 August 2017.

⁴⁷ Hessler, "Death," 36.

East Germans regularly met at school or work, became friends, and sometimes started dating. Wairumu recalls that being seen as “exotic” gave her more opportunities to date, if not necessarily begin serious relationships. “Whenever I walked in the streets of Berlin boys used to shout at me the words *ich liebe dich*. I enjoyed and appreciated the attention I received from the German men while I was there.”⁴⁸ A few African students entered into more serious romantic relationships with East Germans, often people they had met at school or work. Joyce met Klopp Gunter in early 1965, when she started her first job at a local factory as an assistant horticultural scientist. They experienced an intense immediate connection; Joyce reminisces that she knew they were meant for each other from the moment their eyes met across his desk.⁴⁹ Again notions of gender equality became important as Kenyan women enjoyed the opportunity to choose their partners more freely than at home, in a striking reversal of colonial and post-colonial models of patriarchal authority.

In order to develop relationships, some mixed-race couples felt forced to date in secret so as to avoid social censure. Munene reports that he needed to date his girlfriend clandestinely, “since we could no longer be seen together in public due to the scold the ladies could get from their fellow native citizens.”⁵⁰ Their relationship developed during a particularly difficult moment following the erection of the Berlin Wall, in which foreign students (especially black students) were increasingly warned to restrict their movements to campus grounds in order to avoid racial violence. The couple spent most of their time in his girlfriend’s friend’s hostel room, and trusted few people with the secret of their relationship beyond her and Munene’s roommate Gamba.⁵¹ Others, however, do not remember initially feeling external pressure or limitations on their relationships. Wairumu developed a close friendship with Frank Jürgen Klaus, and fondly recalls spending time over weekends with him in the local park or a coffee shop.⁵² Joyce Gunter suggests that foreigners and locals experienced interracial relationships very differently. Despite initial efforts to keep her relationship with Klopp Gunter a secret, her colleagues soon began gossiping about them. However, as Klopp worked in a management position critical to the function of the plant, their co-workers remained hesitant to confront him directly.⁵³ In contrast, Joyce bore the brunt of workplace gossip and censure. However, her relatively privileged position in the

⁴⁸ Wairumu.

⁴⁹ Gunter.

⁵⁰ Munene.

⁵¹ Munene.

⁵² Wairumu.

⁵³ Gunter.

workplace meant that she received less societal and official pressure to end her relationship than that experienced by some other Africans.

Although the East German state had made these interracial relationships possible by encouraging Africans to come to the country to work and study, East Germans found it challenging to accept such relationships. As the relationships became more permanent, the students encountered new forms of discrimination as their hosts worked to police relationships. Engagements, marriages, and pregnancies highlighted the increasing threats to racial boundaries, and some segments of East German society therefore responded with escalated threats to the physical safety of both Africans and their white German partners. Wairumu explains that due to open discrimination against the black community, getting engaged to a German could be a dangerous proposition.⁵⁴ After she got engaged to Frank Jürgen Klaus, their friends expressed an awareness that they, too, were endangered by the couple's engagement. In a different example, although Joyce had initially assumed her relationship with Klopp would be of short duration, they stayed together. Still, Joyce saw this as a dangerous endeavor, by which he "exposed himself to the *inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (or informal collaborators/spies) and would become known to the *staatsicherheit*."⁵⁵ However, she attributes the success of her relationship and safety to the importance of their workplace: "They knew all the rumors would be dealt with and they would be safe since the factory was one of the biggest and most profitable in their sector and it was viewed as an essential part of the East German contributors of revenue."⁵⁶ Other couples, however, proved less fortunate. During her third year at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Wairumu recounts, a South African friend in her journalism class got his German girlfriend pregnant. Once organization officials heard the news, they ordered the couple to terminate the pregnancy, thus reaffirming existing racial boundaries. As Wairumu explains, the couple had to comply with this demand, or risk bringing an early end to her friend's studies; thus students were faced with a choice—avoid having children but being allowed to study and stay in the country, or be sent home.⁵⁷ Joyce Gunter hoped that after eight months of dating and working together, her husband would return to Kenya with her. However, soon after her return, she received a telegram from Klopp in which he apologized, but told her that he "regretted that their plans to settle in Kenya would not be possible because he might not fit in as well as she will since it is her native home."⁵⁸ Their relationship ended abruptly as Klopp

⁵⁴ Wairumu.

⁵⁵ Gunter.

⁵⁶ Gunter.

⁵⁷ Wairumu.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

may have loved Joyce, but not the idea of leaving East Germany and living in Kenya. Dating created greater intimacy between visiting Africans and their host society, but these relationships rarely proved stable enough to last beyond the students' stay in East Germany. The unacknowledged racism of people such as Klopp made even those who viewed dating Africans acceptable, uncomfortable with the idea of moving to Africa and continuing the relationship.

Conclusion

This analysis of individual students' experiences traces the varied and complex interactions between East Germans and visiting non-Westerners during the Cold War. Lacking opportunities at home to pursue university degrees, Kenyan students made use of the global Cold War to achieve their educational goals and enter into the Kenyan elite. Their diverse, intimate and life-changing experiences abroad shaped them as individuals. However, despite their desire to contribute to state development and the transition to independence, their time in East Germany would limit the opportunities available to them at home: engaging with the global Cold War had unexpected domestic ramifications. In highlighting this point, Daniel Branch writes: "Kenyan students who studied in Eastern and Central Europe in this period returned home to be greeted with suspicion as the course of domestic politics and the influence of the Cold War turned against them."⁵⁹ Denied the possibility of working in the new postcolonial state and fulfilling the goals that the students elaborated as their reason for studying abroad, the graduates found work in the private sector, where they did quite well, in part because of their education and experiences working while abroad. Ironically, their studies in the communist Eastern Bloc left students well-positioned to take advantage of Kenya's expanding capitalist economy. The need to work and raise money pushed Wairumu to further her capitalist values and skills during her university years in East Germany. Students such as Wairumu still managed to secure employment—in this case lecturing at the University of Nairobi—but also invested in the local economy. After some success in the real estate market, Wairumu opened a factory, which both employed and provided mentorship for the horticultural and laboratory specialist graduates from local universities. Munene used his skills to establish a hotel from which he became wealthy and the owner of several other businesses. With his strong background in science, Njoroge was appointed head of the environment and conservation subsection of the Department of Environment, where he served and rose through the ranks to become Kenya's senior environmental representative to the United Nations. He served in this position in different capacities until his retirement in 2010, after which he got into

⁵⁹ Branch, "Political Traffic," 828.

private businesses that include agriculture, animal husbandry, and real estate. If the long-term life trajectories of the students are considered, they managed to secure employment opportunities and worked for the state, but also for themselves. Overall, Kenyan students were able to use the Cold War to further their own agendas and maneuver their education to achieve monetary success and political gains upon their return to Kenya.

This examination demonstrates how the students of Kenya interpreted and remembered their lived experiences while both contesting and reproducing class relations and gender inequalities. Overall, the agenda developed by the East German state to foster lasting connections with these students and their homeland while highlighting its own socialist modernity was limited by the lived experience of the students as they experienced economic hardships, perceptions of racism and condemnation for establishing their own relationships. Thus, the Kenyan students' experiences and encounters with varied forms of racism and a lack of socialist modernity served to compound the very real divisions between the Eastern Bloc countries and sub-Saharan Africa and demonstrate the weaknesses of any developing solidarity movement between the Second and Third world.

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