

## Rezension

**Milford, Ismay. 2023. African Activists in a Decolonising World. The Making of an Anticolonial Culture, 1952-1966. New York: Cambridge University Press. 298 pages. ISBN 978-1-009-27699-3**

Reviewd by

Lisa Hoppel\*

With “African Activists”, Ismay Milford offers a detailed analysis of anticolonial activism and thought, carried out and expressed by a generation of East and Central African student-activists during the 1950s and 1960s. Based on her PhD thesis, submitted at the European University Institute (EUI) in 2019, this book compiles insights from extensive transnational research, funded, enabled and supported by the EUI, the UK government and several European and African universities and institutions. As a result, Milford’s book contributes to a growing body of literature on decolonization processes, emphasising transnational connections, individual trajectories and anticolonial imaginaries beyond the metropole-colony focus, the Cold War binary and the glamorous ranks of high diplomacy (see for example James/Leake 2015, Burton 2019, Getachew 2019, Ghirmai 2019, Burbank/Cooper 2023). Networks created and maintained by non-state actors, such as anticolonial activists, students and writers, take centre stage in these new histories of decolonization (Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective 2018). Milford demonstrates how an actor-following approach meets the demands of this research agenda by understanding decolonization in terms of its constitutive social and intellectual processes (pp. 2-3).

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\* Lisa Hoppel, Department of Economic and Social History, University of Vienna. Contact: [lisa.hoppel@univie.ac.at](mailto:lisa.hoppel@univie.ac.at)

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The book follows the transnational routes of activists from present-day Malawi, Zambia, Uganda and mainland Tanzania to explore the discourses and the social practices, which informed their anticolonial work and created a specific regional-generational anticolonial culture. The expression of this culture in “paper objects” (p. 2), such as petitions, pamphlets, periodicals, travel documents, and correspondence, among others, marks the centre-piece of Milford’s extensive study. This allows her to portray an uneven landscape of anticolonialism, which manifests in scattered, low-key and short-lived initiatives across Africa, Asia and Europe rather than in diplomatic gatherings. Bringing this “cohort” of actors together in a transnational history of anticolonial activism provides an important corrective to national histories, which tend to imply a straightforward road towards territorial independence.

Moreover, the focus on “mundane”, less heroic, everyday practices reveals the multiple obstacles and frustrations of anticolonial work, with which Milford aims to demystify the self-styled, celebratory narratives of anticolonial solidarity projects (pp. 14-15). Thereby, the book contributes to a more critical, differentiated picture of African activism beyond both anticolonial romanticization and post-colonial pessimism. Milford is attentive to (regional) differences, tensions and power imbalances (also along gendered lines) and successfully attempts to present a more complicated story of anticolonial activism. She persistently challenges any assumption of linearity and teleology in the process of decolonization and reaffirms the prevalence of a broad variety of paths taken and not taken, of opportunities and limitations in an interconnected world.

This argument endures throughout the six chapters of the book, in which Milford vigorously describes how less prominent figures like Abu Mayanja, John Kale, Kanyama Chiume and Munu Sipalo navigated the “possibilities and constraints” (Cooper 2008) of anticolonial spaces in a period of colonial (counter-)insurgencies, Cold War anxieties, and Third World solidarity. Accordingly, this cohort’s anticolonial culture, which is defined as “a set of norms linking ideas and practices” (p. 1), was never static, but dynamic and constantly shifting, shaped by the endeavours of its protagonists to find political space to protest. The book is organized in three parts, each comprising two chapters, guiding us through the phases of emergence, solidifying and transformation of the anticolonial culture under examination. The first two chapters introduce the reader to the regional context, the repercussions of Mau Mau and the Anti-Federation Campaign and the early activities of the East and Central African student-activists responding to these developments. While chapter 3 and 4 describe the strategies and expressions of the group’s activism in the heydays of anticolonial internationalism in the post-Suez and post-Bandung 1950s, the last

two chapters examine the fate of the anticolonial culture during the early 1960s, when independence approaches in East and Central Africa and the cohort's convictions seem to fall.

In the early 1950s, this culture unfolded through small-scale publishing, in which anticolonial critique was articulated in a regional, comparative way, linking educational institution, schoolteachers and political parties across the region. To escape what was perceived as the "isolating force" of empire (p. 247) student-activists increasingly left the region, convinced that this would be a precondition for effective anticolonial work (Chapter 1 "Regional Learning"). Publishing, networking and coordinating abroad became a defining feature of the anticolonial culture in the following years, when mobile African activists gained recognition as valuable sources of information and skilfully manoeuvred contested spaces of solidarity. To illustrate this, Milford introduces a broad spectrum of anticolonial organizations, exchange fora and informal settings for activists to pursue anticolonial work. Small-scale initiatives such as setting up committees, organizing conferences and regional publications in London, Delhi, Bombay, Cairo and Kampala illustrate how this particular anticolonial culture became entrenched in practices of attracting publicity, creating conviviality, appealing to civil society and harvesting world opinion. However, impeding factors such as internal tensions, competition and inefficiency also reveal the limits of anticolonial pressure groups, sympathetic organisations and independent state patronage (Chapter 2 "Information Sources" and Chapter 3 "Before Accra").

With the emergence of new hubs of anticolonial activism in the late 1950s, Milford recognizes a shift in the anticolonial culture, when regional representation on a continental level appeared to become a more expedient strategy of the activists. The solidarity infrastructure in Cairo, Accra and Dar es Salaam offered possibilities to organize, publish and network, but also posed new challenges and limitations to the cohort's desire to be heard (Chapter 3 "Before Accra" and Chapter 4 "Publicity and Violence in the Shadow of Algeria"). Contrary to common assumptions, Milford pointedly illustrates that independent statehood did not necessarily smoothen the way to effective communication, coordination and cooperation. During the early 1960s, the stakes of decolonization grew higher and altered the anticolonial culture, increasingly curtailed by an atmosphere of uncertainty, distrust, conspiracy and disillusionment. Yet, a new form of critique unmasked the monopoly of colonial knowledge production, framing it as complicit in (neo-)colonial domination (Chapter 5 "Conspiracy in the Congo"). When the typical ingredients of the 1950s anticolonial work, such as networks, education, publicity and mobility, appeared to endanger political independence in the early 1960s, Milford identifies a turning point for the

cohort's anticolonial culture, which increasingly turned inward and challenged the initially characteristic regional framework (Chapter 6 "Radio Waves").

Throughout the chapters, Milford traces the materiality and mediality of knowledge production as a "responsive and situated intellectual process" (p. 250) to identify the socio-cultural rules constituting the anticolonial culture under examination. Approaching the making of this culture as a process urges us to understand it as inherently shaped by space and time. Against this conceptual backdrop, it is not surprising that the book does not fall into the trap of (re-)producing another "rise and fall" story. As Milford concludes, the anticolonial culture was subject to change, it was continuously transforming. In the course of the 1960s, it developed new social practices, new modes of expression (such as radio broadcasting), and new regional and global points of reference, while some of its defining features lost their relevance or impetus. However, the "space of letters, pamphlets, training courses, conferences and periodicals [...] did not simply evaporate, but formed part of a larger social history." (p. 244)

In order to analyse the everyday experiences of anticolonial work and the practical side of knowledge production the book draws on a remarkable corpus of sources. Multi-local and multi-archival research is not only a practical – though challenging – precondition for finding the traces of less visible, mobile activists in the fragmented material, it also responds to one of the main tenets of global history: to overcome Western-centred narrations. In addition to source material from institutional, state, private and party archives in eight countries, including Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, the book also features an impressive amount of personal writings, newspapers and periodicals from across Africa, Asia and Europe, as well as ten interviews with contemporary personalities – some of whom are the very protagonists of the book. The extent and use of the secondary literature proves that Milford is not only critically engaging with recent scientific debates on theoretical and methodological approaches to (global) histories of decolonization. She is also more than comfortable with contiguous fields, such as the colonial and post-colonial history of the analysed region, (New) Cold War History and International History – not to mention the immense corpus of additional reading recommendations. In fact, the density of information, impulses for further reflection and thought experiments compressed into this 250-page monograph also bears the danger of leaving the reader overwhelmed, in the best case inspired to explore, in the worst case confused and distracted. A certain expertise on the regional contexts as well as on key events, personalities and considerations from the history of decolonization would therefore definitely facilitate the reading.

Especially for global historians, the book presents an intriguing approach to the “globality” of anticolonialism. By adopting a micro-spatial perspective (p. 15), which is gaining growing popularity in the field, Milford is guided by the spatial imaginary of the African activists themselves – making it the subject and the method of her study (p. 251). She describes how they constructed an idea of the regional and the global as the basis of their anticolonial work. Not only were the regional experiences and infrastructure “decisive to the ways activists participated in the anticolonial landscape beyond the region” (p. 250), their sense of a collective regional responsibility abroad as well as their shared set of reference points, symbols and convictions find expression in the specific anticolonial culture that responds to the constraints of the external world. The relational perspective of her regional-global-approach would suggest an analytical emphasis on interaction between anticolonial activists, their different considerations and strategies.

Indeed, Milford stresses the simultaneous existence of various, even overlapping anticolonial cultures and cohorts, but little information is provided on how activists engaged with other views and practices they encountered in Asia, Europe and Africa. How did these interactions stimulate, inform and shape (not only constrain) their own particular anticolonial culture and, conversely, how did their own work affect others? Questions like these remain to be answered by further studies, which could benefit from Milford’s analytical toolkit and enrich our understanding of anticolonial activism by both contrasting and relating different anticolonial cultures.

Although Milford explicitly refrains from an analysis of cultural translation typical to global intellectual histories of concepts/ideas (pp. 16-17), processes of translation permeate the whole book. They feature in the way activists constructed a spatial imaginary in correspondence to their experiences, how they placed their agenda into broader ever-shifting anticolonial narratives and how they adapted their practices to different contexts and dynamics of anticolonial spaces. Consequently, Milford offers a different kind of intellectual history. She meets her aim of moving away from examining individual thinkers’ contribution to anticolonial thought and rather exposes the “collective labour” of transnational activism (p. 251). Therefore, this book – a creative interplay between theory, methodology and source criticism – encourages explorative research on the plurality of discourses, practices, and sites of anticolonial activism, and inspires us to pay attention to the overlooked groundwork of historical actors beyond the big names and central hubs of decolonization.

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