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A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF ISARIA KIMAMBO'S IDEAS THROUGH TIME

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I

In this paper I attempt to review critically the historical thought of Isaria Kimambo through time by examining a selected number of his publications and manuscripts. The paper also incorporates comments from his peers and colleagues, as well as his own assessment. In conclusion, the paper appeals to historical institutions and organizations in the developing world (including the Department of History, University of Dar es Salaam and the Historical Association of Tanzania) to cultivate a culture of awarding outstanding historians for the purpose of promoting creativity, commitment, and devotion to the discipline.

II

Isaria Ndelahiyosa Kimambo turned 72 years of age in 2003. For half his lifetime Kimambo has served the Department of History of University Dar es Salaam and the Historical Association of Tanzania (HAT). Established in 1964, the Department of History is one of the oldest departments in the University, which started in 1961 as a college of the University of London. In 1963 this became the college of the University of East Africa, based at Makerere, Uganda, and in 1970 it became a full-fledged University. HAT, which became a non-governmental organization in 2000, was born in 1966, with Kimambo as one of the founding members.

Kimambo joined the Department of History in 1965, when he was in his third year of doctoral studies at Northwestern University. In 1967 he successfully defended his dissertation entitled "The Political History of the Pare People to 1900," which was based on research he conducted in Upare in northeastern Tanzania. In 1969 he became the Head of History

Department, the first indigenous Head, taking over from Terence O. Ranger, who left the Department and joined the University of California at Los Angeles as Director of African Studies.

Following the establishment of the University of Dar es Salaam in 1970, Kimambo became the first Chief Academic Officer (CACO), a position he held for 12 years. This proved to be the most challenging and stressful time of his career. As CACO he was torn between the need to East-Africanize the University—when there were literally no qualified East African specialists in a number of subjects taught at the University—and the obligation to maintain the academic excellence at the level set by its predecessors, the University of East Africa and the University of London. This was particularly stressful because the non-East Africans, some of whom had totally opposed the idea of establishing an independent University, were eagerly waiting to see the University fail. Kimambo also recalls that the office was more demanding then than it is today because it was less decentralized. For example, the CACO directly handled all matters pertaining to postgraduate studies, staff research, and teaching proficiency, sectors which at present are decentralized, being administered by the Directorates of Postgraduate Studies, Research and Publications, and Continuing Education respectively, before they get to CACO.

Although pleased to serve the University administration, Kimambo also confesses that the time he spent in administration has left a regrettable impact professionally, as it seriously impaired his research and publication capabilities. The bibliography at the end of this paper reflects this observation, since he hardly published any work during the time he was in the top University administration. Despite the handicapping busy period in his career, Kimambo, in comparative terms, still ranks high in the number of publications, having produced five single-authored or edited books, four co-edited volumes, and over twenty articles published in journals and edited books, and many more unpublished seminar and conference papers. He has also served as a UNESCO member of International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa from 1971 to 2000.

Looking at his bibliography shows that Kimambo is vested with an encyclopedic knowledge of history. He has covered with full professional proficiency a wide range of themes, boldly attacking historical fallacies, tirelessly defending Africans' historical interests, and practically demonstrating the relevance of history to humanity. In the following section we examine the main ideas, perspectives, and themes evinced in some of his publications over time as well as from his own comments in an interview on 29 May 2001.

III

For the sake of convenience and succinctness, I examine Kimambo's professional contribution with a focus on themes, historiography, and mission. Although Kimambo's writings cover a wide range of topics, including population, economy, society, methodology, and teaching of history, most of his works fall into political history, environmental history, and religious history.

Political history formed the bulk of historical literature published in the 1950s through the 1970s in Tanzania, east Africa, and Africa in general—an inevitable response to the political situation of the time. It is therefore not surprising that Kimambo's first three books—*A Political History of the Pare of Tanzania*; *Mbiru: Popular Protest in Colonial Tanzania*; and *A History of Tanzania*—focused on this theme. In these publications Kimambo joined hands with a large cadre of nationalist historians in Tanzania and elsewhere in Africa to expose the evils of colonialism, thus justifying anti-colonial movements (Kimambo 2003:2). They also went further to support the different measures and policies employed by the newly emerging political leaders in Africa in transforming their people economically, culturally, politically, and socially during the post-colonial period.

While several scholars in political science, political economy, and sociology have been relatively critical of the post-independence government in Tanzania, historians, and Kimambo in particular, have been less so. I suspect that part of the explanation has to do with the following factors. First, Julius Nyerere was himself a historian. Perhaps because of this, historians have been relatively tolerant of Nyerere and his policies for collegial reasons. Second, Ujamaa, the socialist ideology propounded by Nyerere and officially adopted as the state policy in 1967, was historical in origin and essence. The ideology complied fully with the “merrie Africa” historiography which characterized historical writings of the day (1950s–1970s). Thus historians understood and could explain it better than scholars from other disciplines—hence, their apparent condoning. Third, Nyerere was elected the first patron of the Historical Association of Tanzania in 1966, being a clear indication that historians commended his policies.

Political history continued to dominate Kimambo's thoughts far beyond the overtly nationalist period (1960s–1970s). In 1991 Kimambo published his fourth book, *Penetration and Protest in Tanzania*. Using Upare as a case study, the book illustrates the kind of impact capital penetration can make on rural communities. In a way, this volume is a continuation of *A Political History of the Pare*. The difference between the two is that the latter focuses on economy while the former delves into political organization.

Kimambo's political concern has not been confined to Tanzania. In an article entitled "The Mfecane in a New Perspective," published in 1989, Kimambo reviewed paradigms historians have used to account for the emergence of this important landmark in the political history of southern Africa. He noted that most scholars treat Mfecane as a momentary event, associated with the rise of the Zulu kingdom under Shaka. This to him is too simplistic, and he preferred to treat the Mfecane as a "process [that] was not accomplished overnight . . . [but rather was] a work of a number of generations." (Kimambo 1989:65). This plea was not confined to the Mfecane, but also to many activities recorded in human history. Sometimes what we consider to be single-moment events are actually links of a chain of events that represent a process, which when treated holistically produces an image completely different from the one perceived previously.

IV

Kimambo has been in the forefront campaigning against environmental destruction. In collaboration with two other historians, he has co-edited a volume entitled *Custodians of the Land: Ecology and Culture in the History of Tanzania*, which focuses entirely on environmental issues. Although environmental issues are highly valued today, Kimambo was one of the pioneer Tanzanian historians in this field. Not many Tanzanian historians have been interested in environmental studies. Kimambo himself remarks in his concluding chapter in *Custodians of the Land* that "[h]istorians of Tanzania have tended to avoid environmental concerns as part of their enquiry and analysis." He further notes that "environmental discussions have appeared as background information to many studies, without featuring much in the main analysis." (Kimambo 1996b:241).

Custodians of the Land was not the first manifestation of Kimambo's engagement with environmental issues. His advocacy of environmental protection and conservation began very early in his life. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact origin, one landmark is clear. As a middle school teacher in 1955, Kimambo won the first prize, worth Tsh 20, of the national *Mamboleo*—a popular newspaper of the time—English essay competition entitled "Why Kill Wild Animals?" While he considers this to have encouraged him immeasurably in his academic pursuits, it must also have planted the seeds of environmentalism in his mind, the fruits of which matured and ripened later on in his career.

As early as the 1960s Kimambo attributed the changes which took place in interior Tanzania during precolonial times to environmental factors. He argued as well that environmental factors had a significant influ-

ence on historical developments in Upare (Kimambo 1969a:13). Elsewhere (Kimambo 1969b:16, 22) he wrote:

All these examples seem to indicate that the evolution of political organization in this region did not take place overnight. It developed in response to the needs of these societies in their particular environments. It was this early development which was to open the way for further innovations and evolution in the period between 1500-1800 . . . It has been estimated that between 200 and 300 chiefdoms may have been formed in this [*ntemi*] region. Environmental factors may have encouraged this multiplication of political units in another way.

These statements are probably less impressive today, when almost everybody knows the importance of environment, but they exhibited a sense of boldness in the 1960s, when hyperdiffusion and migration were dominant paradigms in African history. He diverged from this norm and attributed the sociopolitical changes of the interior of Tanzania to local environmental factors. He was of the opinion that changes such as the *ntemi* political system could have developed locally. He strongly believed that the exclusion of environmental concerns from Tanzanian historiography had the effect of “blurring changes which resulted from continuous social adaptation to environmental conditions [creating] the static and unchanging picture of society found in colonial literature.” (Kimambo 1996b:242). We need to note, however, that in his earlier years Kimambo advocated environmental determinism, believing that history is determined by either positive or negative environmental factors such as drought, floods, and soil fertility. This approach was challenged in the 1980s and early 1990s for being too simplistic. While still accepting the role of environment in human development, scholars more recently have focused on environmental conservation.

Interestingly, Kimambo's recent writings also bear the new perspective. For example, he writes (Kimambo 1996b:241):

In many ways communities face the consequences of the way their past activities have degraded their environments, and they have begun to search for remedies. Tree planting, for example, has become a common community activity in many parts of the country as people search for ways to restore soil fertility and increase supplies of fuel. Certainly, an analysis of past human activities will indicate that, in their interaction with the environment, people have continuously affected it, while at the same time changing their own ways of life.

Another new development is his advocacy of a global rather than a parochial or even a national approach in tackling environmental problems. He argues that “[t]he fact is that adaptation and control of environment are concerns of all human communities” (Kimambo 1996b:242). This is true to the developing world as well as to the developed world. The struggle is a continuous one “as long as human societies continue to act in their environments.” (Kimambo 1996b:241).

To sum up, in writing about environment Kimambo has demonstrated a readiness to adapt to the ever-changing world of science and knowledge. Contrary to most aging intellectuals, who shy away from new techniques, methods, concepts, and theories on the excuse that you can’t teach an old dog new tricks, Kimambo has been changing with time. He has never hesitated to write about new themes for the fear of too much work involved in reading or researching on new subjects.

V

Kimambo has also shown a continuing interest in religious history. He has produced two major publications in this theme: *The Historical Study of African Religion*, which he co-edited with T.O. Ranger, and *East African Expressions of Christianity*, co-edited with Thomas Spear. Surprisingly, religious history is not a popular subject in African history, so one wonders why Kimambo is interested in this theme. The main reason has to do with his upbringing and education. Born in a devoted Christian family of Ndelahiyosa (father) and Aiwedasia (mother), Kimambo had all his schooling in a mission school or sponsored by a church organization. He had his primary education at Natiro Mission School. He then joined Marangu Teachers’ Training College, which by then was under the church. In 1959 he got a scholarship from a mission organization to pursue undergraduate courses at the Pacific Lutheran University, where his performance earned him another scholarship for graduate studies at Northwestern. His wife Mary also benefited from a missionary scholarship for a diploma and subsequently a degree in Minnesota.

VI

Since its inception the Department of History has been actively involved in paradigmatic discussions. Such concerns, Kimambo (Kimambo 1996b:243) notes, were stimulated not only by the birth in 1961 of a new nation—and in 1964 a union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar—but also by continuing struggles to define national independence, including the

Arusha Declaration. As an active member in the Department, Kimambo was fully involved in these discussions. Having identified the weaknesses of the colonial historiography (some of which have already been pointed out above), the first task faced by the post-colonial historians in the Department was to devise a new vehicle on which they could set sail. The inevitable solution was a nationalist historiography. Established in the 1960s, this attacked Eurocentric history in order to create an Afrocentric history. But the main weakness of this historiography, as Kimambo (Kimambo 1996b:242) points out, was its failure to accommodate the full range of economic and social transformations, particularly to perceive exploitation as a process in human relationships.

Consequently, a Marxist historiography took over in the 1970s. But with the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Marxism has been rendered impractical and has slowly but surely been losing popularity. The period since the early 1990s seems to have had no specific historiography. Kimambo remarks (Kimambo 2003:10) that this state of affairs should be expected because the “economic liberalization and political pluralism [we are undergoing] demand intellectual pluralism as well. The time of a single school of intellectual focus has probably passed. It may be unrealistic to think that only one paradigm can solve all the existing problems.”

However, scrutinizing Kimambo's works during the pluralistic period, we realize that he has inclined towards environmental history. In his view environmental historiography has incorporated positive elements of both nationalist and Marxist historiographies. “Environmental adaptation and control,” he argues, “are the bases upon which the structures debated by both nationalist and Marxist historians have been erected.” (Kimambo 1996b:242). Thus, rather than seeing rural communities as inert masses that were merely the objects of capitalist transformation, historians can now see them as dynamic, for they were always attempting to control environmental forces and adapt to changes as it suited them and as dictated by their level of technology.

VII

A review of his early writings reveals that Kimambo had a very focused mission, which was to rewrite the history otherwise distorted by colonial historians who came before him. He revealed and put into practice this mission in various ways. It will be recalled that one of the most common fallacies propagated by colonial historians was that of the ahistoricity of precolonial Africa. Kimambo was trained during the time when African

history was divided into the period of stagnation and the period of change. The former dominated the entire span to about 1800. Any trace of civilization spotted anywhere in Africa during this time was attributed to the superior races (Kimambo 1969b:19). The later period, characterized by intrusion of Europeans in Africa was, to them, the historical period because it constituted events that could be discerned or that were recorded in writing.

From the very beginning of his career Kimambo made it clear that he would correct this interpretation of the past. Perhaps as an indication that he was highly irritated by this type of historiography, Kimambo continues to reiterate this caution even today (Kimambo 1996b; 1999). As noted above, he is of the opinion that colonial historians could have avoided this error simply by paying due attention to the environmental factors he applies in his studies. He recently remarked in reference to the Pare that “[t]he story of environmental control and economic development in the three mountain areas has given us the opportunity to challenge the incorrect picture of precolonial African economies as being static and incapable of transformation to a market orientation.” (Kimambo 1996a:92).

In order to write or rewrite the precolonial history of Africa one has to revert to sources such as oral tradition and archeology, which do not depend on written documents alone. Kimambo has been a strong proponent of oral traditions, which for him are not only sources of history, but alternative histories. He demonstrated this clearly in *A Political History of the Pare*. He also joined hands with other historians working in Tanzania in the 1960s to demonstrate that oral traditions, when used correctly, can become as reliable history as written documents. A major contribution in this fight was a volume edited by Andrew Roberts entitled *Tanzania Before 1900*, in which Kimambo contributed a case study of the Pare (Kimambo 1968).

One of the reasons Kimambo advocated oral history was his conviction that oral traditions present the true version of history, as they come from the people concerned. Unlike other types of history, which may be based on secondary or non-human sources, oral tradition is “a history based mainly on the life of the Africans and their attempt to influence and, indeed, to control the course for their history over centuries.” (Kimambo 1969:xi). We note, however, that Kimambo (and most Tanzanian historians, for that matter) has scaled down his fight for oral traditions through time. He is not as enthusiastic as he was in the 1960s. This is despite his remark in 1969 that, “[u]nfortunately, very little work has been done in collecting oral traditions in Tanzania” (Kimambo 1969b:14). In my view this statement is as true today as it was in 1969. We still need to

treat oral traditions as a research problem that needs priority and urgency. Oral traditions continue to vanish as the elders continue to pass away. It is with this spirit that the Department of History at UDSM has established a new course called "Oral Histories in Tanzania." The course aims at developing practical skills in collecting oral testimonies and traditions and using them in creating histories. We hope this will make an impact after some time.

While fighting against the belief in a static precolonial Africa, Kimambo has, whether directly or indirectly, challenged hyperdiffusionism as the main explanation of culture change in Tanzania, and Africa in general. Although he accepts migration as an important stimulus for some of the changes that occurred in Tanzania, he is opposed to taking this in simplistic form as was done by colonial historians. He raises three grounds to oppose the application of diffusionist explanations to the precolonial history of Tanzania. There was no single group responsible for transmitting the ideas of change and 'improvement' to all parts of Tanzania. Secondly, even where ideas diffused from one area to another, local initiative transformed these ideas and adapted them to the needs of that particular society. Finally, changes were introduced in society not for fun, but as a means of solving problems of communities that were becoming more complex. As such, people could not patiently wait for other individuals or groups to initiate solutions (Kimambo 1969b: 18).

Kimambo appealed for the need to recognize the efforts, initiatives, and successes achieved by the peoples of Tanzania in the past. "The time for tracing influences from outside for everything achieved in Tanzania has passed," he wrote. This is because "it is becoming clear that the Tanzanians of that period were much more in control of their own affairs than has hitherto been allowed. They were able to create political ideologies which suited their own environments and needs." (Kimambo 1969: 33), a view strongly shared by many historians.

Another issue that concerned Kimambo in the early days was the uneven distribution of historical research in Tanzania, particularly between the coast and the interior. He noted that for a long time the history of east Africa before 1800 had been presented as the history of the coastal city states and their connection with the Indian Ocean trade. In Tanzania the main concentration was on Kilwa and Zanzibar. In his view this bias emerged not because the interior was uninhabited, but because historians were looking for written records and the coastal region happened to have a few of these, either in the form of chronicles or records of travelers who visited the coast during the early period (Kimambo 1969b:14). Consequently, the people of the interior had been treated as people without his-

tory. To rectify the situation, he joined hands with other historians to write the precolonial history of the interior communities based on oral sources (Roberts 1968).

The emphasis on such research balance is notably absent in his recent writing, probably because such a balance has been attained. But it seems like the balance has been obtained by establishing a reversal imbalance, concentrating on the interior at the expense of the coast, where research has been left totally to archeologists. This could be equally harmful. Archeology and history complement rather than substitute for one another. The coast has a high potential for contributing to the economic and sociocultural history of east Africa. Collaborative work between archeologists and historians (and other specialists, for that matter) along the coast would highly enrich our understanding of the sociocultural dynamics and economic history of precolonial Tanzania.

VIII

Kimambo's contribution to history as a discipline in the form of research, publication, consultancy, advice, and intellectual discourse with colleagues and students is impossible to quantify. He continues to be an active historian, and he continues to contribute to the building of history and the advancement of the discipline in Tanzania and Africa. He served as a member of UNESCO's General History of Africa project from 1971 to 2000. His devotion and commitment to history has earned him reputation as a historian who has many achievements in the Department of History, Historical Association of Tanzania, and the historical discipline in general.

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