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ARTICLE

The "Airlift" Generation, Economic Aspiration, and Secondary School Education in Kenya, 1940-1960

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Abstract

This article argues that the "airlift" language often used to describe the eight hundred Kenyan students who attended US and Canadian universities between 1959 and 1963 is misleading. It assumes that the students were being plucked out of substandard education, yet these youth had received some of the most rigorous education in the world—even though it was colonial education intended to inculcate in them British cultures and mores. The students took this education seriously because they knew it would help improve their economic status as well as that of their families. These elite students were not necessarily concerned with the politics of decolonization or the nation-state, as most studies of colonial elites at the end of empire have tended to claim. They were interested in uplifting their economic status. This uplifting was in and of itself a political act—even though it was *not* politically motivated.

Keywords: Airlift generation; Kenya; decolonization; secondary school; colonial elites; memoirs

Between 1959 and 1963, US and Canadian universities offered scholarships to approximately eight hundred Kenyan students to study in North America. The most well known of these students is surely Barack Obama Sr., the father of the US's first Black president, and—mostly to learn about President Obama's family background—academics, politicians, journalists, and others have become interested in this generation of students.[1] Almost all of their research has focused on the

[1]Matthew Carotenuto and Katherine Luongo, *Obama and Kenya: Contested Histories and the Politics of Belonging* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016); Tom Shachtman, *Airlift to America: How Barack Obama, Sr., John F. Kennedy, Tom Mboya, and 800 East African Students Changed Their World and Ours* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009); Robert F. Stephens, *Kenyan Student Airlifts to America 1959-1961: An Educational Odyssey* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2013); Gerald Horne, *Mau Mau in Harlem? The U.S. and the Liberation of Kenya* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Jim C. Harper, *Western-Educated Elites in Kenya, 1900-1963: The African American Factor* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Eric Burton, "Decolonization, the Cold War, and Africans' Routes to Higher Education Overseas, 1957-65," *Journal of Global History* 15, no. 1 (2020), 169-91; Samy H. Alim and Geneva

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accomplishments of the young men and women during and after their studies in North America, and the primary concern has been to examine their symbolic importance to the US and its politics, as well as the political repercussions of their return to Kenya. The studies have certainly been fruitful. Scholars have argued that the Kenyan students opened doors (some of them were the first Black students to study at the colleges and universities) for African American students, and thus they were an important part of the civil rights movement in the US in the 1960s.[2] Others have suggested that the scholarships for Africans were part of US Cold War politics to create more allies in Africa.[3] In a similar vein, some studies have claimed that the scholarships helped unite Pan-Africanism and Black nationalism in the struggle against the spread of Communism.[4] And still other scholars have discussed the political tensions that arose among the students when they returned to Kenya after the country's independence in 1963.[5]

Most of these arguments are convincing. Nevertheless, there is an assumption in these various approaches that this generation of students only are important because of their contact with the West. In fact, the use of the term "airlift generation" in reference to these students, a term favored by all the universities, institutions, and organizations that granted scholarships, is unfortunate. The term can seem, at the very least, patronizing and imperious. It assumes that the Kenyan students were somehow being rescued or plucked out of the "dark" continent to be educated and edified, that

Smitherman, *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the US* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Mary L. Dudziak, *American Dreams: Thurgood Marshall's African Journey*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); C. J. Odari, "A Blessing or Curse?: The Mboya-Kennedy Students' Airlift and Its Implications" (PhD diss., Miami University, 2011); Maria Mwikali Kioko, "Transnational Connections of First Generation Immigrants from Kenya in the United States" (PhD diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2010); Rose Adhiambo, "Kenya's Foreign Policy Relations: The Case of the 1960s' Tom Mboya and J. F. Kennedy African Students' Airlift" (PhD diss., United States International University, 2013); Abon'go Malik Obama and Frank Koyoo, *Barack Obama Sr.: The Rise and Life of a True African Scholar* (New York: Xlibris, 2012); Sally H. Jacobs, *The Other Barack: The Bold and Reckless Life of President Obama's Father* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011); David Remnick, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (New York: Knopf, 2010); Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Random House, 2007).

[2]Shachtman, *Airlift to America*; Stephens, *Kenyan Student Airlifts to America 1959-1961*; Horne, *Mau Mau in Harlem?*; Harper, *Western-Educated Elites in Kenya*; Dudziak, *American Dreams*.

[3]Kioko, "Transnational Connections of First-Generation Immigrants from Kenya in the United States"; Constantin Katsakioris, "Burden or Allies? Third World Students and Internationalist Duty through Soviet Eyes," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 18, no. 3 (Summer 2017), 539-67; Odari, "A Blessing or Curse?"; Stephens, *Kenyan Student Airlifts to America 1959-1961*; Liping Bu, "Educational Exchange and Cultural Diplomacy in the Cold War," *Journal of American Studies* 33, no. 3 (Dec. 1999), 393-415; Burton, "Decolonization, the Cold War, and Africans' Routes to Higher Education Overseas, 1957-65"; Daniel Branch, "Political Traffic: Kenyan Students in Eastern and Central Europe, 1958-69," *Journal of Contemporary History* 53, no. 4 (2018), 811-31.

[4]Horne, *Mau Mau in Harlem?*; Dudziak, *American Dreams*; Stephens, *Kenyan Student Airlifts to America 1959-1961*.

[5]Carotenuto and Luongo, *Obama and Kenya;* Odari, "A Blessing or Curse?"; Babafemi A. Badejo, *Raila Odinga: An Enigma in Kenyan Politics* (Nairobi: Yintab Books, 2006); David Leonard, *African Successes: Four Public Managers of Kenyan Rural Development* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Matthew Carotenuto and Katherine Luongo, "Dala or Diaspora? Obama and the Luo Community of Kenya," *African Affairs* 108, no. 431 (April 2009), 197-219; Obama, *Dreams from My Father*.

they were "airlifted" from the poor, obscure conditions of their prior schooling and flown to the US or Canada so they could become enlightened. The presumption seems to be that the Kenyan students merely had potential, and to turn into true scholars they needed to become the fortunate recipients of Americans' goodwill—the same goodwill that donates food aid and vaccines to a struggling Africa. This narrative is misleading. These students did not necessarily need saving. Although most of them benefited a great deal from their time in North America, they were hardly being airlifted out of a crisis of ignorance or irrelevance. Most of them had matriculated at highly selective Kenyan boys' secondary schools, such as Mangu, Alliance, and Maseno.[6] They were being "rescued" from an already quite privileged education.

Recently, students from this so-called airlift generation—the generation of young Kenyans that attended secondary school from 1940 through the 1960s—have published autobiographies or memoirs of their experiences in these preparatory schools.[7] Prominent scholars and writers—such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Bethwell Ogot, David Wasawo, Henry Chasia, and others—have told their stories, which, in combination with oral interviews, reveal that they were highly ambitious young men who worked hard and excelled in the rigorous Cambridge School Certificate (CSC) exams (the same exams that students in the Metropole and other British colonies also sat for).[8] Their primary goal was to advance themselves and their families socially and economically. According to David Sandgren's study of the students who matriculated at Kenyan secondary schools in the 1960s, for example, they felt that "to pass [the CSC exam] meant access to a good life; to fail was economic death."[9]

To escape this economic death, they endured callous and unforgiving conditions. The schools were essentially a microcosm of colonial rule. They studied what the colonizers had studied and suffered under an arbitrary and absolute power meted out by

[6]For detailed histories of these secondary schools, see Benjamin E. Kipkorir, "The Alliance High School and the Origins of the Kenya African Elite 1926-1962" (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1969); Stephen J. Smith, *The History of the Alliance High School* (Nairobi: Heinemann Education Books, 1973); Lionel Bruce Greaves, *Carey Francis of Kenya* (London: Rex Collings, 1969); John E. Anderson, *The Struggle for the School: The Interaction of Missionary, Colonial Government and Nationalist Enterprise in the Development of Formal Education in Kenya* (London: Longman, 1970); John Osogo, "The History of Kabaa-Mangu High School and the Contribution of the Holy Ghost Fathers upon Education in Kenya" (MA thesis, University of East Africa, 1970).

[7]Please note that women constituted 5 percent of this generation. I am not able to focus on the women, however, because they attended girls' secondary schools and thus require a separate article. For a detailed examination of women's secondary school education in Kenya in the 1940s–1960s, see Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed: A Memoir* (New York: Anchor, 2007). See also Jim C. Harper, "Tom Mboya and the African Student Airlifts: Inclusion, Equity, and Higher Education among Kenyan Women and Men," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 10, no. 9 (Oct. 2017), 82-120.

[8]Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter: A Memoir* (New York: Pantheon, 2015), *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* (New York: Anchor, 2016), and *Birth of a Dream Weaver: A Writer's Awakening* (New York: The New Press, 2011); David Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly: A Memoir* (unpublished manuscript in private family archive); Bethwell Allen Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time: An Autobiography* (New York: Trafford Publishing , 2003); Moody Awori, *Riding on a Tiger: An Autobiography* (Nairobi: Moran Publishers, 2017).

[9]David P. Sandgren, *Mau Mau's Children: The Making of Kenya's Postcolonial Elite* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 65. This acute fear of failing exams continues to be the case in Kenya now. See Elizabeth Cooper, *Burning Ambition: Education, Arson, and Learning Justice in Kenya* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022).

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student prefects, teachers, and administrators who enforced rigid rules with corporal punishment. What this meant, of course, was that the students were learning the cultural habits, assumptions, and values of the colonizers—or at least that they were expected to do so. If the students could brave the discipline long enough and pass their exams, they could become the preferred allies of the British Empire, or so the colonizers hoped. In the end, however, the model students were not necessarily interested in becoming allies of the colonialists. Nor were civil rights in the US, the Cold War, or Pan-Africanism the only thing on their minds.[10] Their main concerns tended to be much more modest and homegrown. Many of them entered the demanding colonial education system out of a desire to advance themselves and their families, and the CSC was the ultimate credential they needed.[11] They seemed to believe—quite genuinely—that they were securing the best education they could get, and so they worked hard to excel and get into good universities, get good jobs, and live a "good life."[12]

The acquisition of the CSC became a political act for these secondary school students.[13] It could not be otherwise.But their political thinking was not necessarily geared toward subverting colonial rule.[14] As Frederick Cooper, Adom Getachew, Daniel Branch, and others have correctly argued, not all colonized elites were thinking of the "nation-state" at the end of empire. They tended to have broader, more philosophical interests that transcended issues of decolonization and the nation-state, and they were thinking in terms of internationalism, Pan-Africanism, and Black diasporic connections.[15] But the international issues that may have interested colonial

[10]Maathai, *Unbowed*, 64-89.

[11]Sandgren, *Mau Mau's Children*.

[12]Sandgren, *Mau Mau's Children*, 63.

[13]Marjoleine Kars, *Blood on the River: A Chronicle of Mutiny and Freedom on the Wild Coast* (New York: The New Press, 2020).

[14]Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (Spring 1984), 125-33; Carol Summers, *Colonial Lessons: Africans' Education in Southern Rhodesia, 1918-1940* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002); Muey Ching Saeteurn, "'A Beacon of Hope for the Community': The Role of Chavakali Secondary School in Late Colonial and Early Independent Kenya," *Journal of African History* 58, no. 2 (July 2017), 311-29; Harry Gamble, *Contesting French West Africa: Battles over Schools and the Colonial Order, 1900-1950* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2021). For alternative views of colonial subversion, see Rachel A. Kantrowitz, "Catholic Schools as a Nation in Miniature: Catholic Civism in Senegal and Benin, 1960-1970s," *Journal of African History* 59, no. 2 (July 2018), 221-39.

[15]Frederick Cooper, "Possibility and Constraint: African Independence in Historical Perspective," *Journal of African History* 49, no. 2 (July 2008), 167-96; Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Pedro Monaville, *Students of the World: Global 1968 and Decolonization in the Congo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022). See also Ismay Milford et al., "Another World? East Africa, Decolonisation, and the Global History of the Mid-twentieth Century," *Journal of African History* (Dec. 2021), 1-17; Ismay Milford and Gerard McCann, "African Internationalisms and the Erstwhile Trajectories of Kenyan Community Development: Joseph Murumbi's 1950s," *Journal of Contemporary History* 57, no. 1 (2022), 111-35; C. J. Lee, ed., *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010); Anton Tarradellas, "Pan-African Networks, Cold War Politics, and Postcolonial Opportunities: The African Scholarship Program of American Universities, 1961-75," *Journal of African History* 63, no. 1 (2022), 75-90; George Roberts, *Revolutionary State-Making in Dar Es Salaam: African Liberation and the Global Cold War, 1961-1974* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); J. J. Byrne, *Mecca of*

elites in other parts of Africa were not necessarily the main concern of the elite Kenyan secondary school students of the "airlift" generation. The period from 1940 through the 1960s was indeed one of numerous "possibilities" and of multiple "worldmaking" perspectives, and these students took advantage of these opportunities to focus on the well-being of their families—much like, I suspect, students from other parts of Africa did.[16] Members of the "airlift" generation hoped to use their secondary school education to improve their socioeconomic status and that of their families. To the students, their "airlifting" was more of an "uplifting"—an act with political consequences, no doubt, but one with economics more than politics in mind.

Historical Background

When the British colonized Kenya in 1896, they claimed to be bringing civilization to the Africans, yet they provided only minimal education—education that was intended to make Kenyan students efficient servants of their white masters.[17] This began to change after World War II, when Kenyans started demanding schools that could educate their children to take up professional jobs as teachers, lawyers, journalists, and doctors.[18] The colonial government did heed this call, hoping that educating a few Kenyan elites would create a class of Kenyans who were amenable to colonial governance. These elites would essentially replace the old-fashioned African chiefs of the past.[19] The colonial government partnered with missionaries, and by 1950 they had set up three main boys' schools and two girls' schools that provided a university entrance certificate.[20]

Sadly, the only university available in eastern Africa was Makerere in Kampala, Uganda, and the students were expected to excel on their CSC exams before they could enter the university.[21] Makerere admitted only 2 percent of the qualified

Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Michele Louro et al., eds., *The League against Imperialism: Lives and Afterlives* (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Tom Lodge and Milan Oralek, "Fraternal Friends: South African Communists and Czechoslovakia, 1945-89," *Journal of African History* 61, no. 2 (2020), 219-39; and Constantin Katsakioris, "Nkrumah's Elite: Ghanaian Students in the Soviet Union in the Cold War," *Paedagogica Historica* 57, no. 3 (2021), 260-76. See also contributions to the special issue "Other Bandungs," *Journal of World History* 30, nos. 1-2 (June 2019); and contributions to the special issue "Trade Union Networks and the Politics of Expertise in an Age of Afro-Asian Solidarity," *Journal of Social History* 53, no. 2 (Winter 2019).

[16]Sara Pugach, *African Students in East Germany, 1949-1975* (East Lansing: University of Michigan Press, 2022); Kara Moskowitz, "Local Histories of International Development in Decolonizing Kenya: Using Oral Histories to Understand Global Connections," *World History Connected* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2022), 1-24.

[17]Anderson, *The Struggle for the School*, 110-22.

[18]D. A. Low and J. M. Lonsdale, "Introduction: Towards the New Order, 1945-63," in *History of East Africa*, vol. 3, ed. Donald A. Low and Alison Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 12-16; Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), and *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Kenda Mutongi, *Worries of the Heart* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[19]Michael Mwenda Kithinji, "An Imperial Enterprise: The Making and Breaking of the University of East Africa, 1949-1969," *Canadian Journal of African Studies / La Revue Canadienne des études Africaines* 46, no. 2 (2012), 195-214.

[20]Kithinji, "An Imperial Enterprise," 195-214.

[21]Kithinji, "An Imperial Enterprise," 195-214.

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students, as it did not have the necessary resources to take on more, even though the students who did not make the Makerere cut were equally qualified for university.[22] In fact, some of these students ended up at Cambridge or Oxford on merit scholarships. Others attended prestigious universities in India. Jawaharlal Nehru offered them scholarships to boost his nonalignment movement across the so-called Third World, an alternative vision to both British imperial and Cold War paradigms.[23] Still other students earned scholarships from Eastern Bloc governments to attend equally good universities in these countries and to attract students into the socialist camp.[24] The 1940s-'60s period was, indeed, the "golden age of university scholarships."[25]

Tom Mboya, a twenty-eight-year-old trade union leader and fierce nationalist, did not let this moment pass him by. He quickly tapped into these scholarship resources by securing funding for Kenyan students to study in North America.[26] He argued that as Kenya was quickly approaching independence, the country desperately needed more university-trained professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, professors, and politicians, to help lead the new nation. In the mid-1950s, Mboya traveled throughout the United States, raising money to provide east African students with college and university educations in the US and Canada. President John F. Kennedy and many North American educational institutions, foundations, and individuals, such as the African American Students Foundation, as well as famous African Americans, including Harry Belafonte, Jackie Robinson, Sidney Poitier, and Martin Luther King Jr.,

[22]J. E. Goldthorpe, *An African Elite: Makerere College Students 1922-1960* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1965), 16-17.

[23]Ajuma Oginga Odinga, *Two Months in India*, 2nd ed. (Nairobi: New Kenya Publishers, 1965); Lee, *Making a World after Empire*, 2-20; N'Dri Therese Assie-Lumumba, "Behind and Beyond Bandung: Historical and Forward-Looking Reflections on South-South Cooperation," *Bandung: Journal of the Global South* 2, no. 11 (2015), 1-10; Timothy Nicholson, "Students, Sex, and Threatened Solidarity: East African Bodies and Indian Angst, 1955-1970," *Journal of World History* 28, no. 3/4 (2017), 615-47; Gerard McCann, "Where Was the Afro in Afro-Asian Solidarity? Africa's 'Bandung Moment' in 1950s Asia," *Journal of World History* 30, nos. 1-2 (June 2019), 89-123; Michele L. Louro, *Comrades against Imperialism: Nehru, India, and Interwar Internationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[24]Daniel Branch, "Political Traffic: Kenyan Students in Eastern and Central Europe, 1958-69," *Journal of Contemporary History* 53, no. 4 (July 2018), 811-31; Julie Hessler, "Death of an African Student in Moscow," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 47, nos. 1-2 (2006), 33-63; Constantin Katsakioris, "Burden or Allies? Third World Students and Internationalist Duty through Soviet Eyes," *Kritika* 18, no. 3 (Summer 2017), 539-67; Abigail Judge Kret, "'We Unite with Knowledge': The Peoples' Friendship University and Soviet Education for the Third World," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 2 (2013), 239-56; Maxim Matusevich, "An Exotic Subversive: Africa, Africans and the Soviet Everyday," *Race and Class* 49, no. 4 (April 2008), 57-81; Maxim Matusevich, "Probing the Limits of Internationalism: African Students Confront Soviet Ritual," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 27, no. 2 (2009), 19-39; Ogechi Anyanwu, "The Anglo-American-Nigerian Collaboration in Nigeria's Higher Education Reform: The Cold War and Decolonisation, 1948-1960," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 11, no. 3 (Winter 2010), 10.1353/cch.2010.0011; David Goldsworthy, *Tom Mboya: The Man Kenya Wanted to Forget* (Nairobi: Africana Publishers, 1982).

[25]Kithinji, "An Imperial Enterprise," 195-214.

[26]Tom Mboya, *Freedom and After* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986); Goldsworthy, *Tom Mboya*; Tom Mboya, "African Socialism," *Transition* 8 (March 1963), 17-19; Opoku Agyeman, "Kwame Nkrumah and Tom Mboya: Non-Alignment and Pan-African Trade Unionism," *Présence Africaine, Nouvelle série* 103 (1977), 59-85; Edwin Gimode, *Thomas Joseph Mboya: A Biography*, vol. 5, Makers of Kenya series, (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1996); Milford et al., "Another World?"

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supported this program.[27] This support resulted in eight hundred Kenyan students and a few other students from Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, and Zambia traveling to North America between 1959 and 1963 for university education. While these students did not have the financial resources necessary to study in the US and Canada, they did have strong academic foundations from their highly selective Kenyan secondary schools. They were not simply promising Black students who were in danger of a subpar African education and whose real education could only begin in North America.

Setting Up Elite Secondary Schools

Many of these students attended the Alliance, Mangu, or Maseno secondary schools, and as children, they had to overcome numerous academic hurdles to be admitted to these elite schools.[28] Once they began their schooling in first grade, the students were required to take an elimination exam every four years. If they didn't attain a high score, they were prevented from proceeding to the next grade, so when they did pass the final primary school exams and qualify for junior secondary school and then secondary school, they deservedly felt a sense of accomplishment; they were seen as the smart ones in their villages, the local geniuses.

Indeed, the young men were highly gifted, considering they were able to score A's on questions concerning alien situations they had never encountered in their own lives (most students taking the exams had not journeyed far from their villages).[29] Take this primary school exam question, for example: "A laborer drinks brandy worth 0.25 marks a day. (a) How much does he pay for the brandy in a year? (b) How many days must he work for the brandy, if he earns 2 marks a day? (c) How many kgs of pork could he have bought with this sum, if pork costs 65 pfennige a kg?" It is unlikely that any of the students had ever drunk brandy or eaten pork, and many of them had not even used money regularly.[30] In another question, students were asked to read a passage from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and then answer several questions, but the passage did not contain the title of the book, mention the author's name, or introduce the subject matter. It did, however, present the reader with baffling extracts that almost seemed chosen specifically to confuse the uninitiated: what was a village boy to make of the lyrics "Fifteen men on the dead man's chest / Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum / Drink and the devil had done for the rest / Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum"?[31] But if it was difficult to relate to the serenades of drunken pirates, the exam could still be counted on to offer up the predictable freebie: "What good things have the Europeans brought us?" We can only imagine the litany of endowments bequeathed to the students by the colonists, and how much this question counted toward the final grade. The students had to get at least a B+ on each subject to be admitted to one of the three schools—and there was no such thing as grade inflation.

[27]Shachtman, *Airlift to America*, 67.

[28]Anderson, *The Struggle for the School*, 60-89.

[29]Hilary Ng'weno, email correspondence with the author, Jan. 16, 2018.

[30]John A. Williams, *From the South African Past: Narratives, Documents, and Debates* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 23-26.

[31]wa Thiong'o, *Dreams in a Time of War*, 23-29.

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Admission to the three schools was need-blind and, for the most part, based on merit.[32] You got the marks, you got in. Students who could not afford the school fees were usually given some kind of government grant, funded by taxes the colonial government collected from the Africans.[33] Since the colonial government needed a skilled and semiskilled African labor force—clerks, junior administrators, policemen, soldiers, hospital staffers, telephone and telegraph operators, and school teachers—the initial goal of the grant program was to ensure that enough capable young men had access to the education necessary for them to occupy these positions.[34] This is how this so-called merit process started: the colonial government wanted to pick out the best men in the villages to work the semiskilled jobs. It was not intended to create an African elite. Furthermore, the supposedly straightforward merit system allowed Mangu, Alliance, and Maseno to admit students from almost all Kenyan ethnic groups—although western and central Kenyan ethnicities, such as the Kikuyu, Luo, and Luyia, secured most of the student placements since these areas had the largest number of primary schools. Their proximity to the railway line, as well as the significant presence of missionaries and settlers, also meant that the successful students had greater access to formal primary school education.[35]

While Alliance was consistently ranked at the top in quality of instruction, Maseno was the oldest school and thus had the longest tradition of turning out excellent students. Located just a few kilometers west of Kisumu town in western Kenya, Maseno School was established by the Church Missionary Society in 1906 to teach young men gardening, carpentry, and hygiene.[36] But this changed in 1910 when students went on strike and demanded a literary education.[37] The teachers gave in, and soon the students were learning English grammar and literature, mathematics, and geography. But the school only went up to Form Two—that is, to junior secondary school—after which the students were trained to take up professional positions, such as teachers, clerks, and colonial administrators. The two-year junior secondary school diploma did not qualify graduates for entrance to university, and there was at the time no other school in Kenya that offered any such opportunity to Africans.[38]

Then, in 1926, Alliance was established a few kilometers west of Nairobi, by an alliance of Protestant churches.[39] Like Maseno, it was originally set up to teach

[32]Smith, *The History of the Alliance High School*, 42-48; Anderson, *The Struggle for the School*, 78-90.

[33]Mutongi, *Worries of the Heart*, 67.

[34]Anderson, *The Struggle for the School*, 70-77; Donald G. Schilling, "Local Native Councils and the Politics of Education in Kenya, 1925-1939," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 9, no. 2 (1976), 218-47.

[35]wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, and Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 69-70.

[36]Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time*, 39-40.

[37]Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time*, 60; Schilling, "Local Native Councils and the Politics of Education in Kenya, 1925-1939"; Sorobea Nyachieo Bogonko, "Africans and the Politics of Their Education in Kenya, 1910-1934," *Journal of Eastern African Research & Development* 14 (1984), 19-38.

[38]Sorobea Nyachieo Bogonko, "Education as a Tool of Colonialism in Kenya, 1911-1935: The Case of the First Government African Schools," *TransAfrican Journal of History* 12 (1983), 1-32.

[39]Kipkorir, "The Alliance High School and the Origins of the Kenya African Elite 1926-1962"; Anderson, *The Struggle for the School*, 89-90; Smith, *The History of the Alliance High School*, 19-27; and Greaves, *Carey Francis of Kenya*, 45-60.

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technical subjects and industrial education, but again, as had happened at Maseno, its mission changed quickly as the students demanded a more literary education. In 1928 the government turned Alliance into a full-fledged four-year secondary school, offering the Cambridge School Certificate (CSC) exams, the same exams high school students in the UK took to qualify for university. It was the only school in Kenya to offer the certificate until 1940, when Maseno was granted a similar full secondary school status (before then, the students who passed the junior secondary school exams at Maseno had tended to proceed to Alliance for two more years, after which they sat for their CSC exams).[40]

While the Protestant churches had founded their main schools with Alliance and Maseno, the Catholic Church in Kenya had not yet followed suit.[41] Loath to be left behind, the Catholics pushed the government in the mid-1920s to grant them permission to set up a secondary school—and so Mangu High School, a few miles north of Nairobi, joined the other two high schools serving Kenya's best and brightest. Like Maseno, Mangu offered only a junior secondary certificate until it became, in 1940, a full secondary school.[42]

Finally, nearly a half-century after the British began their rule in Kenya, the country had three schools that offered qualified boys—a total of about 250 of them every year—an opportunity to study for a university entrance exam. Few of the boys let the opportunity slip by; in fact, many of them passed the exam and proceeded to Makerere. The university, however, did not have the resources to admit all the qualified students, and those not able to attend were among the eight hundred Kenyan students who instead attended US and Canadian universities.[43] Their rigorous training in Kenyan secondary schools was an important formative part of their overall education.

Rigorous Secondary School Education

When the young men arrived at the elite secondary schools, they could not help but feel as though they were the anointed ones. And their teachers never ever failed to let them know this—nearly 80 percent of the teachers were white and had been trained at either Oxford or Cambridge. For example, Henry Chasia, who graduated from Alliance in 1958, told me that his teachers always reminded him and his classmates, "Success is not for the chosen few; it is for the few who have chosen to succeed." Chasia eagerly shared: "We believed them, and we were determined to succeed."[44] Serving as another example of this attitude is B. L. Bowers, the staunch principal of Maseno in the 1950s, who always began the daily school assembly by reminding

[40]Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time*, 44.

[41]Bethwell Ogot, *Modern History of Kenya, 1895-1980: In Honour of B. A. Ogot* (New York: Evans Brothers, 1989).

[42]For a history of Mangu, see Osogo, "The History of Kabaa-Mangu High School."

[43]Osogo, "The History of Kabaa-Mangu High School"; Odari, "A Blessing or Curse?"

[44]Henry Chasia, email correspondence, Jan. 17, 2018 (in the author's possession). Chasia went on to Makerere University College in Uganda and the Imperial College of Science and Technology, University of London. He received a BSc degree in mathematics and physics in 1964 and a PhD in electrical engineering in 1974 from the University of London.

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the students, "There is no platform in life where you go to give excuses why you didn't succeed," and, "It doesn't matter what happens to you, but rather how you handle what happens to you."[45]

Despite the tenor of these imperious platitudes, it seems that their regular airing had their intended effect on the students. They were inspired to achieve, or perhaps intimidated into achievement. As several students who went through these secondary schools in the 1940s and 1950s have noted, "You had to have the marks," and you had to maintain them, because "no faint-hearted person could have survived the four years."[46] The boys' compliance only confirmed the teachers' belief that they were serving the exceptionally gifted and hardworking. For example, in describing his cohort of boys at Maseno in the mid-1940s, Bethwell Ogot, now a prominent retired professor of African history, recalls, "The group that joined Maseno in 1946 was one of the most remarkable classes I have ever been associated with. It was as if all the best brains in western Kenya had been plucked from different localities and placed in one class."[47]

The competition among these high achievers was cutthroat. At the end of every term, the students were ranked according to their performance in their final exams, and the results were posted on the school notice board. No escape was possible, and no excuses accepted. The emotional impact of the rankings had a lasting effect; in recollections of their school days, the students of the "airlift" generation talk about these rankings, emphasizing how they were encouraged or discouraged, how they were made jealous of their peers at the top, and how, at least at the time, they were celebrated or branded by their scores.[48] In the cloistered world of the secondary schools, identities seemed to be fixed and futures laid out according to one's place on the list. "Our economic lives were in jeopardy if we did not pass the CSC exam . . . so the public rankings every term forced us to work harder," recalled Henry Chasia, who graduated from Alliance in 1958 and went on to get a PhD in electrical engineering at the University of London.[49]

The students at Maseno, Mangu, and Alliance attended classes in English literature, mathematics, and biology every day. They went to class mostly barefoot and clad in khaki shorts and shirts.[50] For many of them, this was the first time they had ever held a novel in their hands, and they talked a great deal about how voraciously they read—especially novels by Dickens, Eliot, Trollope, Hardy, Austen, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.[51] But by far the most important author was

[45]John Oywa, "Tracing Obama Snr's Steps as a Student at Maseno School," *The Standard*, Nov. 4, 2008, 10.

[46]Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time*, 56; Kipkorir, "The Alliance High School and the Origins of the Kenya African Elite 1926-1962," 67.

[47]Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time*, 38.

[48]James Odari, phone conversation with the author, Jan. 10, 2018; Mark Akunava, phone conversation with the author, Jan. 4, 2018; Henry Chasia, phone conversation with the author, Jan. 3, 2018; Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 55-60; Awori, *Riding a Tiger*, 34; wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 16.

[49]Henry Chasia, phone conversation with the author, Jan. 3, 2018.

[50]wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 16; Donald Schilling, "The Dynamics of Educational Policy Formation: Kenya 1928-1934," *History of Education Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1980), 51-76.

[51]Henry Chasia, email correspondence with the author, Jan. 16, 2018; Hilary Ng'weno, email correspondence, Jan. 16, 2018; wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 19.

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Shakespeare.[52] Almost all the students' accounts mention the importance of Shakespeare at the school and in their daily lives.[53] Some of them simply learned Shakespeare by rote, but the Bard was woven into their daily lives—as in the case of, for example, the prefect in wa Thiong'o's Form One dormitory, who woke them up at five in the morning by reciting a line from act 2, scene 3, of *Macbeth*, right after King Duncan's murder is announced: "Had I but died an hour before this chance / I had lived a blessed time; for from this instant / There's nothing serious in mortality."[54] David Wasawo, who was primarily interested in biology, recounts that he studied Shakespeare for the purpose of polite conversation: "It was something you needed to know to feel part of the group."[55]

Students of history and literature, such as wa Thiong'o, who acted in year-end plays, deeply inhabited the texts; they read them seriously and made efforts to tease out deeper meanings. For instance, wa Thiong'o, whose brother was embroiled in the Mau Mau war that was going on at the time of his schooling, says that *King Lear* helped him to understand the exploitative colonial situation in Kenya. Still, the study of Shakespeare and other literature also provided a form of escape. Diversion was welcomed, writes wa Thiong'o: literature "contrasted sharply with the gloom of the near and present. An escape into wintry snow, flowers of spring, mountain chalets, and piracy on the high seas of those times and places carried my mind away from the anxieties of the moment."[56] There were many sources of anxiety for the students, personal as well as political: according to the recollections of several students, they were forced to take cold showers at five in the morning, clean the latrines, weed the gardens, and much more. Even a witty quotation of a line from Shakespeare might for a moment alleviate the misery of inescapable chores: "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly" (*Macbeth*, act 1, scene 7).[57] As wa Thiong'o writes in his memoir, "There was no way one could hide from Shakespeare at Alliance. His characters had become my daily companions, as were his insights into social conflicts. Inside and outside the classroom, over the last four years, Shakespeare was an integral part of my intellectual formation."[58] Shakespeare "really captured my soul," writes Professor Ogot in his autobiography. "How could one head create all such wonderful profound plays and poetry?"[59] Whether going through Shakespeare's lines to cram for class or for witty conversation, students took the Bard seriously—and unquestioningly—because they knew

[52]For an ethnography of an interesting interpretation of Shakespeare among rural groups in Africa, see Laura Bohannan, "Shakespeare in the Bush," *Natural History* (Aug.-Sept. 1966), https://www.naturalhistorymag.com/picks-from-the-past/12476/shakespeare-in-the-bush.

[53]James Odari, phone conversation with the author, Jan. 10, 2018; Mark Akunava, phone conversation, Jan. 4, 2018; Henry Chasia, phone conversation, Jan. 3, 2018. See also Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 55-60; Awori, *Riding a Tiger*, 34; wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 16; and Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time*, 51-60.

[54]wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 13.

[55]Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 36-40.

[56]wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 68.

[57]wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 110.

[58]wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 117.

[59]Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time*, 49.

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they would face questions in class and eventually have their erudition examined in the CSC exams.[60]

The students also wrote enthusiastically about their classes in biology, especially how they were obliged to dissect frogs and rats in the lab.[61] This was an assignment made difficult by the school's modest resources. Even at prestigious Alliance High School there was only one microscope for a class of fifty, operated and protected by the formidable Miss Rosie, a white teacher trained at Oxford.[62] Miss Rosie was very particular about the microscope's welfare, allowing only a few to peer down its eyepiece at the blood-smeared slides; the fact that the microscope occupied an altar that only a few were permitted to approach made it even more mysterious and tantalizing. To the likes of David Wasawo, who went on to become a zoologist, it "opened up for us a kind of living world we had not hitherto conceived of." Still, he adds, "our biology lessons were largely bookish," and the students were mostly left to pour over textbooks until their eyes blurred.[63] But even this did not manage to stifle their curiosity; for instance, the students found discussions of evolution particularly fascinating. In one case, Ogot remembers, students in his biology class at Maseno "asked the teacher so many questions about evolution, [that] by the end, the teacher had no answers. . . . All he could say was, 'God made it so.'"[64] Their intellectual skills were clearly expanding—and evolving.

And then there was the mathematics requirement, which was compulsory for the CSC. At Alliance, math was taught by Edward Carey Francis, the principal of the school, and all his students remember him as a strict and rigorous teacher. Francis earned a PhD in mathematics from Trinity College, Cambridge, at the age of twenty-four, and was a popular lecturer at the college for several years until 1928, when he decided to become a missionary with the Church Missionary Society in Kenya. He was first posted at Maseno, where he taught until he moved to Alliance in 1940; he continued to teach at Alliance until 1962, just a few years before his death in 1966.[65]

There is not a single conversation about Alliance, nor a single memoir, autobiography, or biographyof the school's alumni, in which the dedicated mathematician is not mentioned, usually regarding his disciplinary resolve and his high academic expectations. These standards were most likely a by-product of his ideology. According to several students, he believed that the British were justified in colonizing other races and that they had a moral authority to rule Kenya.[66] This supposed moral authority served to justify the high standards and the stern discipline; at the same

[60]Kilemi Mwiria, "Education for Subordination: African Education in Colonial Kenya," *History of Education* 20, no. 3 (June 1991), 261-73; Awori, *Riding A Tiger*, 51; Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time*, 57; Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 119; wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 119.

[61]Hilary Ng'weno, email correspondence with the author, Jan. 16, 2018; Shem Mweresa, email correspondence, Jan. 20, 2018. See also Awori, *Riding A Tiger*, 34; and Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time*, 51.

[62]Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 115.

[63]Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 115.

[64]Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time*, 50.

[65]Francis is buried on the grounds of Alliance High School. Greaves, *Carey Francis of Kenya.*

[66]wa Thiong'o, *Birth of a Dream Weaver*.

time, the imposition of these rigorous standards served—at least in the minds of the colonial authorities—to vindicate their own moral certainty. In other words, the strict standards were thought to reinforce the moral superiority of those who enforced them. This is made clearer by the fact that the overall objective was never to create new African leaders; rather, at both Maseno and Alliance, Francis sought to mold "obedient servants of the colonial system, not to create elites."[67] It is obvious, then, that the idea of an African elite was never considered a realistic—or desired—goal; it is doubtful that Francis could even imagine drawing an African elite out of the well of his paternalism. In fact, he deemed most of the pioneering students at Alliance High School worthy of his disdain: "In work, they do very well, but in other ways that I care most, they do so badly. They seem to me to become insufferably conceited, unctuously pious, and slack in everything except books and examinations."[68]

With good reason, then, the students at Maseno and Alliance feared their principal. At Maseno, he was nicknamed "Achuma," or "the man of steel," and at Alliance he is almost universally remembered as an all-pervading force.[69] For instance, when he first moved to Alliance from Maseno, Francis sparked a crisis when he imposed strict rules for teachers and students. The first casualty was the school uniform. Before he arrived at Alliance the uniform had consisted of knee-length khaki shorts and shirts, and a maroon fez; Carey Francis promptly did away with the hats, demanded that students only wear khaki shorts and shirts, and that they go barefoot except on Sundays.[70]

He was not any easier in the classroom. His students typically narrate the horrendous lengths they had to go to appease Francis and avoid his rage. They tell of how they surreptitiously studied math under the blankets with a torch way past midnight; and of how they would sneak off into the woods to steal a few extra minutes of study time.[71] "Passing the CSC math exam was everything in those days. . . . Our economic future depended on how well we did on the exam," James Odari, who was "airlifted" to study at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, told me.[72] As an example of just how onerous the pressure could become, David Wasawo tells a story of how, during his final year at Alliance, Francis returned from leave just a few months before the students sat for their final CSC examinations and suddenly insisted they prepare for honors math. "We had only two terms to go," Wasawo writes, and yet Francis introduced "Additional Mathematics for the first time in the school because our class, as

[67]Kipkorir, "The Alliance High School and the Origins of the Kenya African Elite 1926-1962," 34; Smith, *The History of the Alliance High School*, 110-14.

[68]Kipkorir, "The Alliance High School and the Origins of the Kenya African Elite 1926-1962."

[69]Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 70-80; wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 60-68; Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time*, 81; Kipkorir, "The Alliance High School and the Origins of the Kenya African Elite 1926-1962," 34; Smith, *The History of the Alliance High School*, 110-14.

[70]Henry Chasia, email correspondence, Jan. 16, 2018. See also Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 30-34; and wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 87.

[71]James Odari, phone conversation, Jan. 10, 2018; Mark Akunava, phone conversation, Jan. 4, 2018; Henry Chasia, phone conversation, Jan. 3, 2018. For a study of mathematics in Kenyan high schools, see Boniface Njoroge Ngaruiya, "A Study of Mathematics Homework Practices in Selected Secondary Schools in Kenya" (PhD diss., University of Nairobi, 2002).

[72]James Odari, email correspondence, Jan. 10, 2018.

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he assured us, could manage it. He would cover the two-year syllabus in those two terms. We had also to remain in school during the August holidays to study for math." It was at least a partial success. "Come December when we sat for the examinations," he recalls, "some of us did well enough to obtain a distinction in the subject. . . . Carey Francis was that kind of great teacher."[73]

And in many ways, it is true; he was a great teacher—yet not always in ways that he had anticipated. All the high expectations, the discipline, and the "moral authority" would end up inspiring the same in his students. Counter to his own intentions, Francis, by pushing students as hard as he did, managed to turn his students into striving adults who sought to raise their own socioeconomic status as well as that of their families. The results of his pedagogy did not conveniently turn out obedient servants of the colonial system.

The drive to excel was not only aspiration for its own sake. In the spirit of heated rivalry, it was also expressed in terms of besting other schools. Carey Francis wanted his students to do better than students at Maseno and Mangu. Mangu was the target of Francis's ire, perhaps because of the traditional Catholic-Protestant rivalry in Kenya, or perhaps because the students at Mangu, where there was a strong emphasis on the sciences, tended to do just as well as Alliance students.[74] In either case, competitive rivalry became one of the defining principles of student life. Alliance was a sworn rival of every student at Mangu. From the moment they were admitted to the school, Mangu leaders preached to them that the goal of every student was to defeat Alliance in sports and academics. Mangu's school motto was *Jishinde Ushinde*—"conquer yourself so that you may conquer others"—and Mangu's students worked just as hard as those at Alliance.[75] Again, the goal—just as it was at Alliance—was to excel in school.

But there was perhaps more than one way of doing well, in that—at least at Mangu—there was room for more creativity. For instance, Hilary Ng'weno and Louis Mwaniki, who attended Mangu High School between 1952 and 1956, took fine art as one of the major subjects for the CSC exams. Both enjoyed the freedom to explore less conventional topics that allowed for a bit more self-expression—and not the tunnel vision of students in Carey's Alliance. "Mangu was not stressful at all," Ng'weno told me.[76] He spoke about how he enjoyed art and especially his final exam project, which "involved presenting water colour paintings."[77] Both he and Mwaniki earned an A on their CSC exam despite—at that time—their relatively unorthodox choice of subject matter; eventually Mwaniki went off to the famous Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts at Makerere, and Ng'weno went on to study at Harvard and later became a prominent journalist in Kenya (he edited the *Weekly Review*, one of the most intellectually engaged magazines in Kenya in the 1980s

[73]Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 130-31.

[74]Hilary Ng'weno, email correspondence, Jan. 12, 2018.

[75]James Muse, email correspondence, Feb. 13, 2018.

[76]Hilary Ng'weno, email correspondence, Jan. 16, 2018.

[77]Louis Mwaniki was born in Nyeri, Kenya, where he was educated in Catholic schools before becoming only the third Kenyan to attend Makerere University's Fine Art Department. Jean Kennedy, *New Currents, Ancient Rivers: Contemporary African Artists in a Generation of Change* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 45.

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and 1990s). The members of the "airlift" generation were, certainly, a highly talented group.

Students idolized their African teachers at least as much as their white instructors. Sadly, the African teachers were still subordinates and subject to the whims of the principal—for example, Carey Francis insisted the African teachers wear shorts in the classroom, a regulation the African teachers considered belittling since it was primarily meant to set them apart from the white instructors and administrators.[78] Such policies were no doubt galling, and purposefully meant to be, but the teachers remained dedicated to their jobs. "It was a prestigious job, and you took it seriously," recalled Mbiyu Koinange, who taught at Alliance in the 1940s. "You devoted yourself to it."[79] That is to say, he "conquered" himself—and his pride—so he could help his students conquer their adversities and escape the confines of their own lives.

Daily Life and Student Resistance

The students at these three schools generally had the same daily routine. They woke up at 5:30 a.m., quickly made their beds, then knelt beside them for a quiet moment of meditation and prayer. They were then required to clean their dormitories and the surrounding compound, take a cold shower, and proceed to chapel. After morning chapel (usually a reading from the Book of Common Prayer), breakfast was served, usually a simple porridge made of maize meal, and then it was time for classes, which lasted until a lunch break at noon (when they ate *ugali* (cooked corn flower paste) and vegetables or *irio* (cooked beans, corn, and potatoes), and, if they were lucky, a helping of beef a couple of times a week). Classes resumed from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m., after which everybody was expected to participate in sports (football, hockey, and track), or some extracurricular activity (usually debate, chess, or drama). As is usually the case in secondary school, it was during the extracurricular activities that students made connections with one another; they were, in the words of Hilary Ng'weno, "able to let go a bit and bond with one another."[80] Dinner was served at 5:00, and then at 6:00 the students attended study hall, or "prep," until 9:00. Lights went out at 10:00, at which point everybody was expected to be sound asleep.[81]

Weekends were much less structured. On Saturday afternoons students were allowed to go off campus unsupervised, though they had to return by 6:00 p.m. or face severe punishments. Typically, for students at Mangu and Alliance, nearby Nairobi was the preferred destination, and few hesitated at the prospect of hiking the twelve or so miles to get to the city and eat *mandazi* (fried dough), see relatives, or window-shop in Indian *dukas*. Students at Maseno made a similar journey to Kisumu—Wasawo notes how much they enjoyed the time off in Kisumu, where

[78]Henry Chasia, email correspondence, Jan. 16, 2018. See also Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 23-30; and wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 90.

[79]Jeff M. Koinange, *Koinange wa Mbiyu: Mau Mau's Misunderstood Leader* (Nairobi: Book Guild Ltd., 2000), 24.

[80]Hilary Ng'weno, email correspondence, Jan. 16, 2018.

[81]James Odari, phone conversation, Jan. 10, 2018; Mark Akunava, phone conversation, Jan. 4, 2018; Henry Chasia, phone conversation, Jan. 3, 2018.

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they could feast on mandazi, *ngege* (cichlid), *mbiru* (tilapias), *kamongo* (lungfish), and other fish hauled in fresh from Lake Victoria.[82] Saturday afternoons also provided the opportunity to see girls, and some of the students boasted of sneaking into girls' secondary schools (Limuru Girls for the Alliance and Mangu boys; Ngiya Girls for the boys at Maseno). Any sins that happened to be committed could be redeemed on Sunday, when everyone had to attend chapel—wearing shoes (the only time all week) and donning a freshly washed uniform—for a two-hour service officiated by a local priest or deacon. After the service, a good many of the students retired to read the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, or John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* to supplement their faith. The rest of the Sabbath was usually spent studying.[83]

But life was more complicated than the weekly rounds of study, worship, and trips to town. There was another, less pleasant, aspect of the schools, one that was perhaps imported from the cloakrooms and playing fields of the British public schools. Almost all the students from Alliance and Maseno mention how heartlessly they were bullied during their first year.[84] Some of the bullying of the first-year students—or, as they were called, "monos" and "jiggers"—was relatively minor, nothing more serious than playground hijinks or a bad joke. For instance, wa Thiong'o tells a familiar story of harassment by a senior boy who would walk up to him, stretch his hand out to greet him, and then pull his hand back while yelling, "Jigger, what makes you think I would want to shake your hand!"[85] The same boy would sometimes walk up to wa Thiong'o and start clapping his hands and force wa Thiong'o to open and close his mouth in sync with the boy's handclaps. Wa Thiong'o was at a loss—"who did one complain to that another student had asked one to open and close one's mouth as quickly as he opened and closed his palms?"—and he more or less shrugged his shoulders and ignored the taunts.[86] Many of the senior boys viewed bullying as a rite of passage, and the younger boys simply learned to deal with it because they "knew that their time to bully would come," and that they would someday be on the top of the heap and could enjoy dispensing some harassment themselves.[87] With a little patience they would get their chance to show the new boys just who they were.

But not all the boys were, as wa Thiong'o says, merely "playing the bully more than being a bully himself." There was another kind of bullying they called the "fag" system, a system whereby senior boys, especially prefects, would force the new students to do unwelcome chores—for instance, busing their tables and washing plates after meals, washing their clothes, or running small errands for them, or delivering love letters to their girlfriends in nearby schools. This was accepted for the same reasons. The new students would eventually benefit from the certain hierarchy of age. As

[82]Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 112; Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time*, 67-70.

[83]wa Thiong'o, *Dreams in a Time of War*; James Odari, phone conversation, Jan. 10, 2018; Mark Akunava, phone conversation, Jan. 4, 2018; Henry Chasia, phone conversation, Jan. 3, 2018.

[84]James Odari, phone conversation, Jan. 10, 2018; Mark Akunava, phone conversation, Jan. 4, 2018; Henry Chasia, phone conversation, Jan. 3, 2018.

[85]wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 67.

[86]wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 67.

[87]Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 117.

Wasawo writes, "We accepted this form of bullying in good faith as we knew it was just a matter of time before we too would be doing the same to those who would be following us." As is usually the case, what mattered was the attitude with which the harassment was conducted. "What was unacceptable to me and to others of like minds," he writes, "was the kind of bully who gloried in making an exhibition of it."[88] Most of the time it could be taken in stride, unless the harassment was dispensed with arrogance and condescension.[89] Former Maseno student Bethwell Ogot resented the bullies for just this reason: many of them were prefects, a position which should have required of them some dignity and responsibility, but in reality made them nothing more than "tin gods" who were determined to make the innocent suffer their unworthy wrath.[90] Most students persevered through this kind of bullying because their education was important to their economic future. "The secondary school education was important, and you could not let those kinds of things [bullying] stop you from learning," said John Ogola, who was "airlifted" to study at Franklin and Marshall in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.[91]

Many of the boys were as afflicted by culture shock as they were by bullying. It is fair to say that in the 1940s and 1950s very few of the boys had been far from their villages before they entered the classroom. Much of what they saw and heard was alien to them. For instance, during wa Thiong'o's first English literature class, his white teacher casually spoke of strange objects that he had never encountered—like "parlor," "carpet," and "faucet." To the unworldly schoolboy, "everything was in dramatic contrast to my village hut."[92] Until he arrived at Alliance he had lived in "an all-purpose living space, sometimes shared with goats. Our bathrooms were the riversides, where we washed clothes and bathed behind reeds."[93] Gradually, he acquired some sophistication, learning, for instance, that a three-course meal ended with dessert. When first confronted by the concept, he writes, "I thought he meant *desert*, and I wondered how one could eat a piece of sand. Another boy voiced similar doubts. No, it was a dish, not a piece of sand."[94] Of course, some boys had an easier time adapting to this kind of culture shock. Others became homesick and frustrated, and even angry at having to lead a completely different life. Whatever the individual response, it's safe to say that few, if any, of the boys overcame the profound sense of dislocation triggered by their first years away from home in the closed, rule-bound, and insular environment of the boarding schools.

Some of the supposedly Christian rules were often beyond comprehension for the boys, and inevitably produced further cultural shock. In his memoir, David Wasawo writes poignantly about something that became a common occurrence during his four years at Maseno in the early 1940s. "On a bright sunny afternoon," writes Wasawo, "the whole school was summoned by the headmaster to gather around

[88]Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 120.

[89]Florida Karani, "The History of Maseno School, Its Alumni, and Local Society, 1906 to 1962" (MA thesis, University of Nairobi, 1974).

[90]Ogot, *My Footprints on the Sands of Time*, 48.

[91]John Ogola, phone conversation, Jan. 29, 2018.

[92]wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 97.

[93]wa Thiong'o, *Dreams in a Time of War*, 30-34.

[94]wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 97.

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the flag post flying the British flag. We were told that one of our number had made a girl pregnant back home during the vacation and that this was a heinous crime against all morals and all Christian tenets. . . . The poor fellow," notes Wasawo, "was made to lie down under the flag, bottoms up, and was properly flogged by the headmaster himself before our very eyes, as a punishment and to send a clear message to us all that we should never do such a thing."[95]

Wasawo and his fellow schoolmates did not believe the boy deserved such humiliation. "We were nonplussed at the extreme punishment of flogging our colleague for what we inwardly did not believe to be morally wrong," he writes, "and if Christianity said so, then there was something questionable about Christianity." He notes that each tribe had its own way of dealing with these kinds of cases. In most cases if a boy made a girl pregnant, his extended family would take responsibility, and arrangements would be made for him to marry the girl. "Putting a girl in the family way," he concludes, "was not a sin."[96]

Indeed, sometimes the regulated, clannish life at the schools could provoke conflict between the students and the administration. The provocations could be relatively minor—indignation over neglected privileges or unpleasant chores was enough to ignite a conflict and potentially cause a student strike.[97] At times it seems the students were intent on validating the familiar adage meant to malign the academy: "The smaller the stakes, the bigger the fight." For instance, at Maseno in 1940, the senior boys felt it had not been sufficiently recognized that they were a cut above their primary school counterparts, and that they therefore deserved more freedom. So, they boycotted classes. Those suspected to be ringleaders were promptly expelled, while the rest of the students received a punishment of one week of hard labor removing sisal by the roots from the school garden.[98]

Alliance boys also rebelled in the early 1940s when that famous—or infamous—principal, Carey Francis, tacked up on the notice board a memo declaring that students must begin growing vegetables in the gardens assigned to them, and that the produce would be contributed to the war effort.[99] This was simply too much. The irate students responded by removing the notice from the board and ignoring its instructions, and no amount of interrogation would expose the culprit. The headmaster responded by caning and expelling all the students, and they were only readmitted after they agreed, in writing, that they had been wrong and thanked the principal for their punishment.[100] After this crisis, Francis reorganized the school discipline system to include prefects, who, since they lived among the students, could better monitor their schoolmates' social lives.

The boys at Mangu rebelled, too—though not until 1956, a bit later than at the other two schools—likely because of the perpetually harsh discipline meted out by

[95]Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 56.

[96]Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 56.

[97]Margaret Wangeci Gatimu, "Student Perceptions of Riots and Boycotts in Secondary Schools in Kenya's Kirinyaga District" (EdD Diss., Portland State University, 1996), 10.15760/etd.1150.

[98]Karani, "The History of Maseno School, Its Alumni, and Local Society, 1906 to 1962"; Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly*, 97-98.

[99]Kipkorir, "The Alliance High School and the Origins of the Kenya African Elite 1926-1962"; Smith, *The History of the Alliance High School*; Greaves, *Carey Francis of Kenya*.

[100]wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 110.

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the white Catholic fathers.[101] At one point, when they had had enough, they simply walked away. Once again, the ringleaders were expelled from school, and the rest of the boys, like those who had gone on strike at Maseno, were required to perform a week of hard labor. To make matters worse, a popular African teacher named Claudius Mwashumbe was summarily fired because he was suspected of having incited the insurrection. Teachers were not spared. Anyone who questioned authority, or was merely suspected of questioning authority, could be fired without recourse, especially if they happened to be African. Interviews by students who took part in the strikes reveal that they went on strike in order to achieve justice and reform, since they had no other means of being heard by their teachers or the administrators. "We went on strike because we wanted better learning conditions to enable us to do well on our exams," Mathew Mukiri, who studied at Oberlin College in Ohio, told me.[102] And Mark Akunava, who studied at Brandeis University in Massachusetts, insisted that he and his classmates went on strike to "save our education and pass our exams."[103]

Despite such clashes, however, at the end of the term all students received a report card that ranked them according to their academic performance, along with a commentary from the teachers and the principal on their social conduct and extracurricular activity. Reading through the files of these students is a revealing glimpse into a workshop of academic achievement. Students are described as "brilliant," "clever," "erudite," "outstanding," "magnificent," and "hardworking."[104] Surely, these weren't just superlatives, especially given the high expectations teachers such as Carey Francis had of their students. These secondary school students of the "airlift" generation were right to consider themselves intellectually superior.

Conclusion

Perhaps one of the most succinct descriptions of the rigorous education the "airlift" generation received in Kenyan secondary schools from 1940 through the 1960s can be gleaned in *In the House of the Interpreter*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's memoir about his schooling at Alliance High School.[105] During the celebrated author's first assembly at the school in 1955, wa Thiong'o tells us, Principal Francis read a pivotal passage from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*.[106] The passage describes the moment when the pilgrim meets his spiritual interpreter:

[101]Osogo, "The History of Kabaa-Mangu High School," 80.

[102]Mathew Mukiri, email correspondence, Feb. 3, 2018.

[103]Mark Akunava, phone conversation, Jan. 4, 2018.

[104]"About Mangu School," The Mangu Writers Forum, June 27, 2014.

[105]Jennifer Muchiri, "The Intersection of the Self and History in Kenyan Autobiographies," *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 1, nos. 1-2 (2014), 83-93; Oliver Lovesey, *The Postcolonial Intellectual: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in Context* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Gĩchingiri Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ, "Bloodhounds at the Gate: Trauma, Narrative Memory, and Melancholia in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Memoirs of Wartime," *Research in African Literatures* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2016), 91-111.

[106]For interpretations of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in the African context, see Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of "The Pilgrim's Progress"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Derek R. Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c. 1935-1972* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2012).

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> Then said Christian: What means this? The interpreter answered: This Parlor is the heart of a man that was never sanctified by the sweet grace of the gospel. The dust is his original sin and inward corruptions that have defiled the man. He that began to sweep at first is the Law; but she that brought water and did sprinkle it is the gospel.[107]

"The Alliance High School," Francis told the two hundred or so students gathered at the assembly, is like "the Interpreter's House," where the dust they had brought in from the outside world could be swept away; in other words, the students' tribal ways would be "interpreted" into English mores and sophistication. Their "uncivilized" morals and political notions would be rectified by Christian faith and British customs. "By insisting on high performance on the playing field and in the classroom," wa Thiong'o writes, "Carey Francis produced self-confident, college-prepared, intellectual minds." He writes authoritatively, "By the time I left Alliance, I felt that academically I could go toe to toe with the best that any European or Asian schools could produce."[108] This assured attitude was shared by the majority of the sixty or so young men who graduated every year from Alliance in the 1940s and 1950s.[109] These students, as well as those from Maseno and Mangu High Schools, sought education with the zeal of new converts and were similarly passionate about the results.[110]

The early graduates of these three schools—students of the "airlift" generation—were expected to learn what any boy at an elite public school like Eton, or Harrow, or Charterhouse learned—but they had to do so without the traditions, the cultural background, or the resources. The demands were extraordinary and the resources paltry, but the system often worked because the context was always larger than the students themselves: the students studied hard because they understood that success—which meant passing their Cambridge School Certificate exams—would generate tremendous economic and social advantages for them and their families. Ironically, these students excelled at a colonial education intended to indoctrinate them into supporting colonial rule, but what preoccupied many of them was not colonial politics or decolonization.[111] What these students wanted was to take advantage of the numerous opportunities available during decolonization to uplift themselves and their families socially and economically. The years 1940s-'60s were indeed, the "golden age of university scholarships," and the secondary school students who did

[107]wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 42.

[108]wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*, 13.

[109]For Alliance students, see Jack R. Roelker, *Mathu of Kenya: A Political Study* (Palo Alto, CA: Hoover Institute Press, 1976); Duncan Ndegwa, *Walking in Kenyatta's Struggles: My Story* (Nairobi: Kenya Leadership Institute, 2006); Kenneth Matiba, *Aiming High: The Story of My Life* (Nairobi: Kenya Leadership Institute, 2000); Joseph M. Mũngai, *From Simple to Complex: An Autobiography* (Nairobi: East African Publishers, 2002); Wasawo, *We Understand But Darkly;* and wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter*. James Odari, email correspondence, Jan. 10, 2018.

[110]Kipkorir, "The Alliance High School and the Origins of the Kenya African Elite 1926-1962"; Smith, *The History of the Alliance High School*; Greaves, *Carey Francis of Kenya*; Anderson, *The Struggle for the School*; Osogo, "The History of Kabaa-Mangu High School."

[111]Cooper, "Possibility and Constraint"; Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*; Milford et al., "Another World?"

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not make it to the elite Makerere University took advantage of the scholarships available to them to study in the United States or Canada. The students of this "airlift" generation did not merely have "potential," as the term "airlift" suggests. They were highly qualified, ambitious, and confident high school graduates, well prepared for university education anywhere in the world. They were not being saved.

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