

Another World? East Africa and the Global 1960s

Visualising cultural, intellectual and political networks

The 1960s were a vibrant time in East African history, when Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania all gained independence. The hopes for decolonisation were tangible in politics, art and society, and the optimism was felt across the region.

East Africa's global connections were powerful and real at independence; however, by the early 1970s, these were broken down due to conflict and nationalism.

The visualisation highlights the vibrancy of the 1960s: while short-lived and fragile, this was a moment when East Africa enjoyed a global moment and a sense of freedom.

The circles of this East African cosmopolitan elite were small. Politicians, intellectuals, writers, artists and activists, all travelled and socialised in shared spaces, such as at universities, conferences, and bars.

The visualisation highlights the scale of activity, centred around institutions these figures attended or worked at, events they participated in, and publications written for.

It showcases the strength of regionalism in this period,

buttressed by the East African Community, which enabled travel and the development of connections.

Some names are repeated frequently, highlighting the overlapping areas of activity, and the small nature of these circles.

Visualizations & Stories

● 56 Persons

■ 14 Publications

◆ 14 Institutions

Exploration Stories

Overview

Officially titled "Conference of African Writers of English Expression", the African Writers Conference took place from 11-17 June 1962 at Makerere College in Kampala. It was the first major gathering of writers in Africa. Renowned participants included: Chinua Achebe, Langston Hughes, Jonathan Kariara, Bloke Modisane, Es'kia Mphahlele, John Ndagenda, Rajat Neogy, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Rebecca Njau, Grace Ogot, Christopher Okigbo, Okot p'Bitek, and Wole Soyinka. In total, there were 45 participants. The conference was sponsored by the Congress for Cultural Freedom (which was funded by the CIA).

Debates

Debates centred around the direction of African literature in an era when most African countries were gaining their independence.

Questions included: What is African literature?

Is it African literature by Black Africans, or

literature by people living in Africa? What language should African literature be in? Who

is the African writer writing for?

Nightlife

Enjoying Kampala's nightlife was as much as part of the conference as the debates during the day were. The conference participants enjoyed getting to know the city's bars and discotheques, in particular Top Life Nightclub,

the most popular club in Kampala at the time.

This was where Ngugi wa Thiong'o later

recalled seeing Wole Soyinka dancing the cha-cha-cha to a very impressed audience of fellow

dancers.

Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (then James Ngugi) was an undergraduate student of English at Makerere College at the time, and was one of the few student participants in the conference. When he heard Chinua Achebe would be present, one evening he knocked on Achebe's door, holding the manuscript for his debut novel, *Weep Not, Child*, in his hands. Achebe agreed to read it, and was so impressed, he showed it to the publishing company Heinemann, and it was later published in the African Writers Series. This was the beginning of Ngugi's career as East Africa's most celebrated writer.

