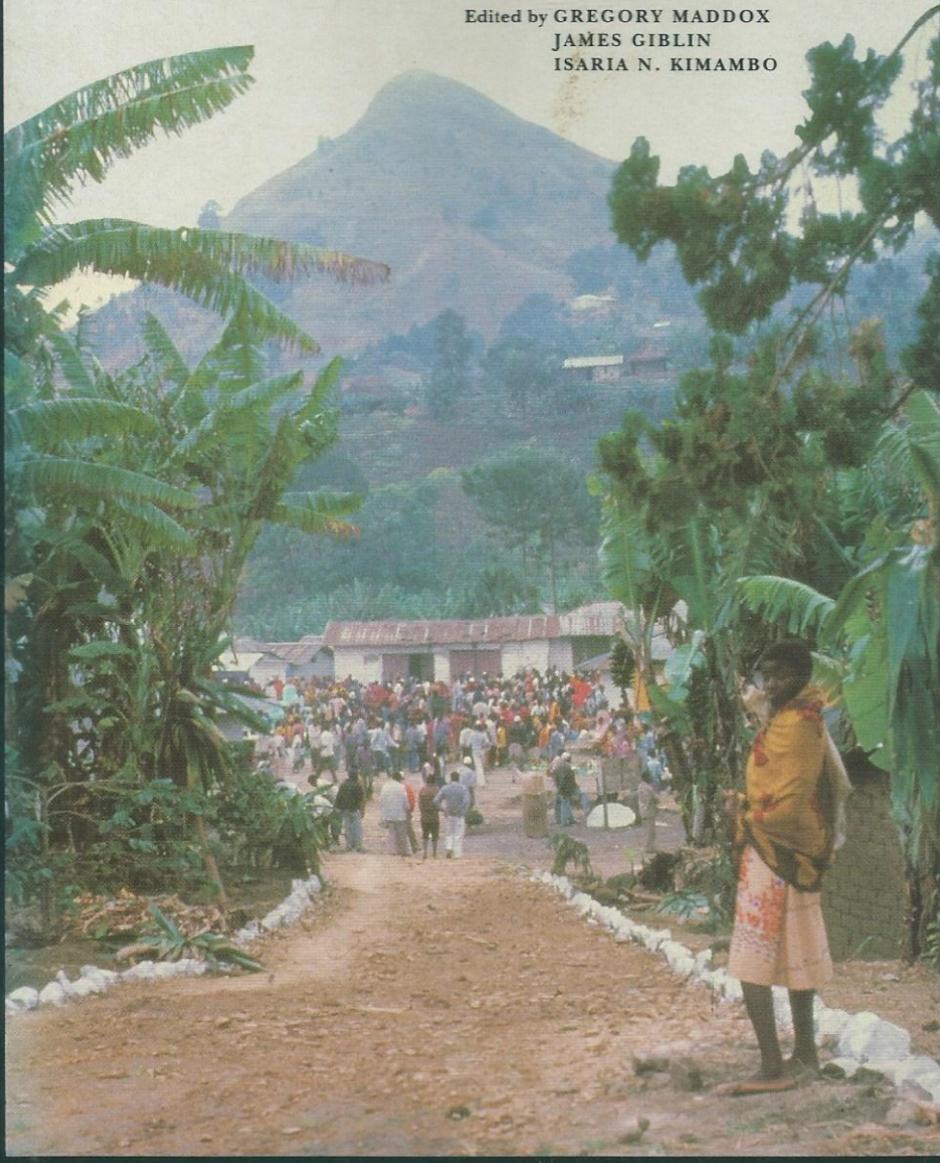


Custodians of the Land

ECOLOGY & CULTURE IN
THE HISTORY OF TANZANIA

Edited by GREGORY MADDOX
JAMES GIBLIN
ISARIA N. KIMAMBO



EASTERN AFRICAN STUDIES



Custodians of the Land

*Ecology & Culture
in the History of Tanzania*

Edited by
GREGORY MADDOX, JAMES L. GIBLIN
&
ISARIA N. KIMAMBO

James Currey
LONDON

Mkuki na Nyota
DAR ES SALAAM

E.A.E.P
NAIROBI

Ohio University Press
ATHENS

Introduction



Custodians of the Land

*Ecology & Culture
in the History of Tanzania*

JAMES GIBLIN & GREGORY MADDOX

Environmental history and the scholarly and popular understanding of the Tanzanian past

In the essay which concludes this volume, one of the 'founding fathers' of Tanzanian history, Isaria Kimambo, reflects on the efforts of successive generations of historians to strike a balance between external causes of change and local initiative in their interpretations of Tanzanian history. He shows that nationalist and Marxist historians of Tanzania, understandably preoccupied through the first quarter-century of its postcolonial history with the impact of imperialism and capitalism on East Africa, tended to overlook the initiatives taken by rural societies to transform themselves.¹ Yet there is good reason for historians to think about the causes of change and innovation in the rural communities of Tanzania, because farming and pastoral peoples have constantly changed as they adjusted to shifting environmental conditions. Short- and long-term climate change, calamitous droughts and excessive rains, exhaustion of soils and grazing, outbreaks of disease and infestations of crop pests have prompted East African communities to change their patterns of cropping, settlement and transhumance, their selection of seeds and cultigens, their management of vegetation and wildlife, their treatments of illness and their ways of thinking about good and evil. 'If we avoid assumptions about environmental equilibrium,' writes William Cronon, a historian of American environmental change, in a similar vein, 'the *instability* of human relations with the environment can be used to explain both cultural and

Introduction

ecological transformations.² In other words, once we begin to think about farming and pastoral societies inhabiting ever-changing environments, we are led to consider how economic institutions, political and gender relations, intellectual leadership and moral imperatives may have been involved in the process of environmental adaptation. This relationship between environment and rural culture, politics and economy is the subject of this volume.

Our interest in exploring the initiatives taken by rural communities in response to environmental change immediately brings us face to face with problems which surface not only in the narrowly academic domain of East African environmental and demographic history, but also in the modern political life of Tanzania. Debate among historians about environment and demography has swung between two extremes: the 'Merrie Africa' approach, which sees stable precolonial communities as having lived in harmony with nature before suffering depopulation, ecological disasters and economic exploitation under colonial rule, and the 'Primitive Africa' approach, which depicts precolonial Tanzanians as having inhabited a hostile environment in perilous proximity to famine, epidemic and demographic reversals before achieving somewhat greater security in the colonial period.³ Aside from other objections to these approaches, which are discussed below, both the 'Merrie Africa' and 'Primitive Africa' perspectives can be faulted for failing to consider sufficiently how rural societies change and develop. This tendency would seem to be more pronounced in the 'Primitive Africa' approach, but in fact the 'Merrie Africa' perspective also underestimates the capability for constructive transformation in rural communities. Its proponents tend to prefer images of stability over those of development, and place such heavy emphasis on the damage suffered by Tanzanians under colonial rule that their adaptability, innovativeness and occasionally successful struggles to achieve progress during the colonial period are obscured.

The historians' stress on precolonial harmony destroyed by colonialism and their tendency to neglect the detail of rural efforts to innovate and achieve development are reflected both in Tanzanian nationalist ideology and in the views of many social scientists who study Tanzania. Furthermore, these elements of historical interpretation have perhaps played a small part in encouraging a disturbing feature of modern Tanzanian political culture - the deep-seated scepticism held by many Tanzanians about the ability of their rural societies to endure change and achieve progress. In the political discussions which take place in rural homesteads, markets and schools, not to mention in the bars and offices of the cities, one often encounters an implicit distinction between national institutions, which are assumed to be able to effect change and improvement, and the villages, 'clans' or 'tribes' of the countryside, which are regarded as obstacles to development and

Introduction

progress. The widely held view of rural cultures as being incapable of transformation would seem to spring in part from a popular interpretation of the precolonial past. This interpretation holds that precolonial societies were held together not by institutions which were the products of political wisdom and ingenuity, but rather by natural bonds of affinity among members of extensive groups of kin. Political institutions, assume many Tanzanians, emerged only under colonial rule, and were bequeathed by colonialism to the independent Tanzanian nation. An interpretation such as this, which regards kinship rather than political institutions as the glue which held together precolonial communities and which attributes the creation of modern political institutions solely to the intervention of colonialism, leaves many Tanzanians doubtful that their own cultures can sustain material and political development.

Such doubts are perhaps more frequently expressed in the current period because, as the verities of Ujamaa and one-party rule have been swept away since the mid-1980s, Tanzanians in all walks of life have begun to face an unfamiliar future, a future that they expect to be dominated by the uncertainties of novel interparty debate and market-driven private enterprise. Thus they have entered a period of worry and vigorous debate about the future, a debate to which historians can contribute by bringing alive a sense of options and alternatives and by questioning interpretations about the past which might, however inadvertently, foreclose discussion about certain possibilities for the future. We believe that historical studies which situate farming and pastoral societies within their ecological contexts can be particularly effective in restoring confidence that rural cultures can develop, because, if they avoid the 'Merrie Africa' and 'Primitive Africa' extremes, they can demonstrate that communities have continually used their economic, political, cultural and moral resources to prosper in ever-changing ecological circumstances.

Historical research which emphasizes rural initiative and innovation inevitably challenges a rather simplified view of the Tanzanian past that has taken hold in scholarship which concerns itself more with questions of development than with history. In a number of studies of national development and current political issues, one finds precolonial societies portrayed as having been small in scale, relatively homogeneous and, to a great extent, self-enclosed. These studies tend to regard trade and other economic relations with the outside world, whether they be the nineteenth-century slave trade or cash crop production in the colonial period, as influences which corroded precolonial cultures.⁴ The tendencies to overlook the complexity of political relations and conflicts in precolonial societies and to see trade and economic change as destructive forces have led a good many observers of Tanzania to ignore the agency of Tanzanians in economic change. Rather than

Introduction

identifying individuals, groups and social classes that might have welcomed economic and social transformation,⁵ they have tended to regard Tanzanian communities as being on the defensive. Certainly the most influential example of this tendency is Goran Hyden's work on the 'economy of affection'. Along with a number of other studies, including some which modify or reject Hyden's theses outright, it sees Tanzanians as struggling to resist the influences of colonialism, commodity production, markets and modernity.⁶

The seductiveness of this kind of work (and, indeed, of the ideology of Ujamaa as well) lies in the fact that it counterposes certain indigenous cultural values and institutions against the influence of Western imperialism and capitalism. Like Ujamaa thought itself, however, it fails to examine the social, economic and political relationships within what it takes to be 'traditional' culture. As a result, studies which proceed from assumptions about the 'economy of affection' or about a Tanzanian predilection for avoiding market relations are less critical of state policies and ruling ideology than their authors probably intend. Like Ujamaa ideology, this approach precludes from the outset enquiry about a range of alternatives, including the historical role that capitalism and market relations might play in development. Rather than looking for the sources of agency and entrepreneurship which might shape economic transformation, a good deal of literature which is intended to be critical of the Tanzanian state finds only 'traditional' homogeneous societies united in defence of their values and way of life. Thus the fundamental weakness of the historical perspectives manifested both in much scholarship and in Ujamaa ideology is that Tanzanian societies are assumed to have been composed of small, egalitarian, non-political communities which, because they were organized primarily by kinship, developed a high degree of solidarity through constant interpersonal contacts. Both ideologues and scholars presume that Tanzanian societies were not divided by political conflicts in the past and did not produce groups and classes which were likely to seize opportunities for transformation.

While recent historical studies of Tanzania have often questioned these views, they nevertheless contain some implicit elements which may inadvertently contribute to such interpretations. An example of a study whose implicit assumptions are somewhat at odds with explicit intentions is the most comprehensive history of Tanzania, John Iliffe's *A Modern History of Tanganyika*,⁷ a work which is deeply concerned with political history and with African innovation and adaptation. Throughout *A Modern History*, one encounters Tanzanians of the colonial period struggling through what Iliffe had earlier termed 'the age of improvement'⁸ to come to terms with the new world of imperial politics, science and capitalism. Iliffe, like other nationalist historians of the 1960s who borrowed the concept of 'enlargement of scale' (see

Introduction

Kimambo, 'Concluding Essay,' in this volume), was strongly influenced by the social anthropologists Godfrey and Monica Wilson. The Wilsons believed that when African societies were integrated into colonial systems they underwent 'expansion of historical scale', a process which exposed them to the stimulus of outside influences. The arrival of outsider innovators such as missionaries and colonial administrators, argued the Wilsons, broke down 'the conservatism of the African' and encouraged rapid social change.⁹ Thus Iliffe was taking a viewpoint that was already well established in studies of Tanzania when he emphasized the innovating role of certain individuals, such as early Christian converts, who stand on the margins between two societies. For, like the Wilsons, Iliffe regarded contact between different societies, rather than the internal dynamics of Tanzanian societies themselves, as the sources of innovation and adaptation. Moreover, his interpretation was not intended merely to explain developments resulting from the clash of African and European cultures during the colonial period. Instead, it is integral to Iliffe's view of the entire sweep of Tanzanian history, for even in precolonial history, asserts *A Modern History*, the migrating ancestors of modern Tanzanians who converged on present-day Tanzania from various directions experienced 'dynamic autochthonous change which came from the mingling of diverse colonists'.¹⁰

Thus, although historians have often rejected the idea that pre-colonial Tanzanian societies were self-enclosed and isolated, little concerned with trade, organized by kinship rather than politics and unchanging, some of the implicit aspects of historians' interpretations may nevertheless remain compatible with views of the past found both in development-orientated scholarship and in the ideology of Ujamaa. The challenge for historians now is to restore a sense of the possibilities of change by showing, first, that transformation does not occur solely as a consequence of culture contact; secondly, that in the past Tanzanian societies were dynamic and capable of transformation; and thirdly, that it is far from certain that historical experience, culture and harshness of climate have left Tanzanians ill-equipped or little inclined to enter markets, accumulate wealth and pursue other paths towards development. The emphasis on rural initiative which informs studies of Tanzanian ecological history can carry us far towards these goals, but we must beware of difficulties which have emerged in an earlier generation of historical work on the Tanzanian environment.

Introduction

The continuing tradition of environmental history in Tanzania

The studies presented in this volume build upon one of the strongest traditions of ecological studies for any African nation, a body of literature on history and environment in Tanzania that includes not only numerous impressive local studies conducted by ecologists during the colonial period, but also the work of Steven Feierman, John Ford, Helge Kjekshus and Meredith Turshen.¹¹ Indeed, these studies are a distinct extension of this tradition, because, while they share with these earlier works the view that human societies and nature cannot be regarded dualistically as separate systems,¹² they move beyond the debates which dominated some of the earlier work about whether precolonial Tanzanians exercised control over the environment. Instead, they examine the complex relations which link environmental concerns, political and economic structures and systems of belief. These studies take up some themes which have always been important elements of the environmental tradition – particularly demography – but at the same time they also treat other issues which have not often been studied in the context of ecological change, such as the morality of resource use and the interrelationship between environment and politics.

These essays also try to overcome problems in the environmental tradition created by time and space. Like most work on Tanzanian environmental history, they deal with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the period when Tanzania entered the capitalist world economy. During the nineteenth century, almost all of Tanzania became part of an international division of labour, initially by trading with caravans from the coast which sought ivory and slaves. The subsequent imposition of colonial rule gradually transformed some regions into producers of agricultural commodities and others into providers of migrant labour. New forms of political authority, new crops and agronomic practices and new patterns of mobility all affected the use of the Tanzanian environment.

The overwhelming importance of the passage from precolonial to colonial society has encouraged starkly dichotomous views of this era. Both the ‘Merrie Africa’ and ‘Primitive Africa’ approaches to Tanzanian history have found great differences and abrupt discontinuities between precolonial and colonial periods. In the Tanzanian environmental tradition, however, no one has seen greater contrast between these two periods than Helge Kjekshus, who, in *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History*, argued that the imposition of colonial rule destroyed the ability of Tanzanian societies to control their environments. He blamed the spread of tsetse fly and

Introduction

human and bovine trypanosomiases, as well as the breakdown of indigenous systems of production and redistribution, on the violence of colonialism and the colonial restructuring of local economies.¹³ Moreover, Kjekshus's book has been shown to exemplify not only the problem of chronology in Tanzanian environmental history, but also a problem of space. This difficulty has been discussed by James McCann, a latecomer to the legion of Kjekshus critics, who has asserted that his 'wooden, two-dimensional image of precolonial African agriculture' resulted from his failure to do careful empirical study of 'agronomy, crop repertoires, disease, and climate patterns'.¹⁴ The lack of careful 'empiricism' which McCann decries seems to arise in studies which, like Kjekshus's book, attempt to achieve nationwide coverage. In contrast with Kjekshus and some other studies of the environmental tradition, however, the research presented in this volume attempts to show that the transition from precolonial to colonial society involved continuity as well as change, and that histories of environmental change must be rooted in close examination of specific and often highly localized ecological circumstances.

Despite its flaws, including the ahistorical and romanticized view of precolonial conditions which has drawn persistent criticism,¹⁵ Kjekshus's widely read book has been influential and has done an important service by inspiring debate and much additional research about environmental history in East Africa. His argument has been refined by Juhani Koponen, who in *People and Production in Late Precolonial Tanzania*¹⁶ sides with neither the 'Primitive Africa' nor the 'Merrie Africa' approaches. Although Koponen rejects Iliffe's characterization of nineteenth-century Tanzania as a hostile frontier zone where agriculturalists struggled for survival,¹⁷ he also opposes Kjekshus's claim for Tanzania-wide precolonial environmental control and instead argues that 'environmental and social control and, ultimately, survival in precolonial Tanzania was not a "national" achievement but essentially a local affair.... What the Tanzanian productive and reproductive systems were adapted to was their local micro-environments.'¹⁸ In this way, Koponen avoids the difficulties of time and space which have arisen in the environmental tradition.

Koponen's insistence on the need to understand how agronomic systems work within specific micro-environments is shared by McCann, the critic of Kjekshus who has called for increased attention to the detail of agricultural attention. Indeed, McCann has gone further in suggesting that agrarian studies in Africa have erred by concentrating on the political economy of agriculture at the expense of agricultural history. We would argue, however, in favour of a combination of agricultural history and political economy, because it provides a way of escaping the dilemma which confronts studies of Tanzanian environmental history. The dilemma is posed, of course, by the

Introduction

contradictory and equally unsatisfying 'Merrie Africa' and 'Primitive Africa' approaches. It can be overcome by recognizing that, in both precolonial and colonial societies, ecological relationships have been shaped by a complex set of constantly changing variables, which include agronomic technique and knowledge, political authority, relations of production, gender and morality. When we understand that rural Tanzanian societies have always witnessed conflict over control of labour and resources and that both political and ecological relationships were moulded by such conflict, we are then able to avoid both the 'Merrie Africa' and the 'Primitive Africa' tendencies. We need neither depict precolonial societies in overly romantic hues by making untenable assertions about political harmony and demographic and environmental stability, nor place so much stress upon the precariousness of precolonial life that we suggest inability to overcome environmental adversity. Of course, speaking of the difficulty caused by the 'Primitive Africa' tendency in a national historiography which has been dominated since the early 1960s by nationalist and Marxist interpretations might appear to be building a straw man, but, in fact, images of precolonial vulnerability in the face of environmental vagaries continue to influence thinking about Tanzanian history. For, aside from the insistence on precolonial insecurity found in the recent and brutally pessimistic book by Ronald Seavoy,¹⁹ the same tendency is also evident in the incomparably more subtle and sensitive writing of Iliffe, who, as he describes early nineteenth-century Tanzanian communities in the memorable opening passage of *A Modern History*, borrows his central image of a 'vast and empty land' directly from H.M. Stanley.²⁰ Thus Iliffe seeks less to challenge descriptions of precolonial insecurity than to explain them by arguing that early nineteenth-century Tanzania was still a thinly settled frontier.

Another way to describe the way out of the 'Merrie Africa'/'Primitive Africa' dilemma is to say simply that we need to develop a truly historical perspective on environment and ecology. One need accept neither the view that precolonial societies were unaffected by demographic and subsistence crises nor the idea of primitive scarcity if, as McCann urges, one adopts an approach that embraces both the possibilities of progress and stability and the likelihood of reversals and crises. The causes of setbacks and failures in agriculture and environment control are all the more comprehensible, moreover, when we realize that, as Jan Vansina has long argued,²¹ changes in agricultural productivity, division of labour, cropping patterns, selection of cultigens and vegetation management are all intimately related to political relations and structural transformation. Historians of Africa have come to realize not only that precolonial Africa developed an extraordinary diversity of political institutions, but also that those institutions were constantly changing.²² What historians of environmental and agricul-

Introduction

tural change have to bear in mind is that structural changes have always affected productivity, the likelihood of adopting or resisting agronomic innovations and the scale and effectiveness of control over vegetation, disease, wildlife and crop pests. Thus what we should do is not so much to emphasize agricultural history in place of political economy, but instead to achieve greater awareness of the interdependence between social and political structures and the course of agricultural change in African history. When we speak here of political economy, however, we have in mind a theory and method which do not limit themselves merely to economic and political relations. Instead, we envisage an approach which, in so far as it considers culture, ideology, language, religion and morality to be integral dimensions of an economic or political system, is somewhat akin to the more sophisticated conceptions of a mode of production. Hence we are advocating an approach which is somewhat similar to that of the Indian historians Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, for their concept of a 'mode of resource use' encompasses technology, economy, social organization and ideology, without neglecting 'the nature of the ecological impact itself'.²³

In the African past, the ability of societies to achieve development and avoid crises depended largely upon the ability of social and political systems to promote production and ensure redistribution. If historical research on the African environment succeeds in combining an understanding of dynamic change in the spheres of both political economy and ecology, it may help to avoid the gravest danger in the current discussion of the African environment, the danger that such discussion may become a substitute for, or a way of evading, debate about the political and economic structures which shape the lives of modern Africans.

Assumptions underlying colonial views of conservation and demography

Because several of the essays in this volume discuss the impact of conservation policies and demographic change in the colonial period, it is useful to consider some of the assumptions which influenced colonial thinking about these matters from the time they began to attract considerable official attention in the 1930s. British colonial administrators of the period confronted environmental conditions that had worsened dramatically during the preceding thirty years of colonial rule as a result of population decline and diversion of labour to an export sector which provided little return to workers. Population reversals had many causes, including a series of devastating famines and epidemics and the violence of colonial conquest and rebellion. The consequence of demographic

Farming and pastoral societies inhabit ever-changing environments. This relationship between environment and rural culture, politics and economy in Tanzania is the subject of this volume which will be valuable in reopening debates on Tanzanian history.

In his conclusion, Isaria N. Kimambo, a founding father of Tanzanian history, reflects on the efforts of successive historians to strike a balance between external causes of change and local initiative in their interpretations of Tanzanian history.

He shows that nationalist and Marxist historians of Tanzanian history, understandably preoccupied through the first quarter-century of the country's post-colonial history with the impact of imperialism and capitalism on East Africa, tended to overlook the initiatives taken by rural societies to transform themselves.

Yet there is good reason for historians to think about the causes of change and innovation in the rural communities of Tanzania, because farming and pastoral people have constantly changed as they adjusted to shifting environmental conditions.

Gregory Maddox is Associate Professor of History, Texas Southern University.

James L. Giblin is an Associate Professor of History, University of Iowa.

Isaria N. Kimambo is Professor of History, University of Dar es Salaam.

The cover photograph is of a market scene at Mgeta among the Uluguru Mountains in Morogoro District

Contents: Custodians of the Land: Ecology & Culture in the History of Tanzania: An Introduction by James Giblin and Gregory Maddox ENVIRONMENTAL & DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE Population: A Dependent Variable by Juhani Koponen – Environment & Population Growth in Ugogo by Gregory Maddox ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE & ECONOMIC HISTORY IN TANZANIA'S NORTHERN HIGHLANDS Environmental Control & Hunger in the Mountains & Plains of Northeastern Tanzania by Isaria N. Kimambo – Nature Reorganised: Ecological History in the Plateau Forests of the West Usambara Mountains 1850-1935 by Christopher Conte POLITICS & ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE The Precolonial Politics of Disease Control in the Lowlands of Northeastern Tanzania by James L. Giblin – 'We Don't Want Terraces!': Protest & Identity Under the Uluguru Land Usage Scheme by Pamela A. Maack ENVIRONMENT & MORALITY Environment, Community & History: 'Nature in the Mind' in Nineteenth & Early Twentieth-Century Buha, Western Tanzania by Michele Wagner – Canoe-Building Under Colonialism: Forestry & Food Policies in the Inner Kilombero Valley by Jamie Monson – Struggles for the Land: the Political & Moral Economies on Mount Meru by Thomas Spear CONCLUSION Isaria N. Kimambo
Maps Photographs Bibliography Index



*Published in Association with
The Mickey Leland Center
at Texas Southern University*

James Currey • Mkuki na Nyota • Ohio University Press

54b Thornhill Square • Islington • London N1 1BE
Trade Orders Plymbridge Distributors Limited
Estover • Plymouth PL6 7PZ

ISBN 0-8214-1134-9

9 780821 411346

ISBN 0-85255-724-8

£35.00

Cloth 0-85255-725-6

£12.95

Paper 0-85255-724-8

9 780852 557242

EASTERN AFRICAN STUDIES