

Tom Mboya and the African Student Airlifts: Inclusion, Equity and Higher Education Among Kenyan Women and Men

by

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Abstract

This essay depicts how the Kenyan Student Airlifts and the efforts led by Tom Mboya sought to provide Kenyan women and men opportunities to obtain higher education in the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a factor that influenced gender equity in Kenya wherein the efforts Kenyan women and later women throughout the continent of Africa gained access to higher education which led to greater economic and social mobility in the civil and private sectors of the newly independent African nation. Secondly, it argues that Pan-Africanism, Black nationalism and liberation combined with the United States' hope to prevent the spread of communism and thus led to Kenyan nationalists and Civil Rights activists in America working together via the education of Kenyan men and women, which set the stage for the inclusion of women in higher education in Africa.

Introduction

Gender Equity is defined by the United Nations Population Fund as the process of being fair to women and men. The definition further states that “to ensure fairness, strategies and measures must often be available to compensate for women’s historical and social disadvantages that prevent women and men from otherwise operating on a level playing field” (United Nations Publication Fund” 2017). As the second largest continent in both size and population Africa has made great strides toward gender equity. Although 1960 was designated the year of Africa because seventeen African countries gained their independence, African countries have been gaining independence since February 22, 1922 when Egypt became independent of British colonial rule. Currently, Africa has 53 fully recognized independent nations (ChartsBin Statistics, 2011).

Since 1960 Africa has had seven women heads of state to be appointed or elected. In fifty-seven years women in Africa have been able to take advantage and fight for opportunities that have led them to become heads of states, win the Nobel Peace Prize, as well as leaders for human and civil rights. This is a tremendous record compared to countries with hundreds of years of independence that have never had a woman serve as the head of state. In Africa, the progressive nature of parents, nationalists, and others who press in various ways for gender equity through the acquisition of education has been difficult but progress has been made.

As the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968), a movement consisting of the strategies, groups, and social movements in the United States (particularly in the South) whose goals were to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans and to secure legal recognition and federal protection of the citizenship rights enumerated in the Constitution and federal law gained momentum in the United States during the late 1950s, the Kenyan nationalist movement for independence was also gaining momentum. Kenyans were pressing for autonomy and they knew that Kenyans would be needed to fill civil service, military, police force, and other high-level positions that required university degrees once the British transitioned control over the government to Kenyans. In order to accomplish this objective, Kenyan students would need to be educated abroad because East African colleges could not produce enough qualified personnel over a six-year period. In a 1964 survey, the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development under the direction of Tom Mboya, a Kenyan nationalist and trade unionist, estimated that nearly 6,000 highly educated Kenyans were needed by 1971 to fill occupations that required university education. The most urgent and important professional and managerial positions that needed to be filled were in town and physical planning, lawyers, physicians and surgeons, engineers, surveyors, chemists, university teachers, directors, managers, and working proprietors, secondary school teachers, and agricultural graduates (Kenya Ministry of Economic Planning “High-Level Manpower Requirements and Resources in Kenya”, iii). To meet these necessary high-level labor needs, the survey identified four goals. First, utilization of the high-level Kenyan personnel already at work; second, up grading presently employed lower skilled workers; third providing education and training in East African colleges as well as overseas colleges and universities; and finally, contracting foreign technicians when qualified Kenyan personnel were not available (Kenya Ministry of Economic Planning, “High-Level Manpower Requirements and Resources in Kenya”, iii).

The survey also noted that attention be given to the education of women, especially since there was a need for skilled office workers; stenographers, secretaries, bookkeepers, cashiers and speed typists, professions that during this period were generally regarded primarily the domain of women. However, women educated in Kenya, and the whole of Africa for that matter, had consistently lagged far behind that of men. Women were often the last members of their families to attend school. This was due in large part to the result of economic consideration deriving from bride price or bride token when a groom or his family pays the parents of the women he is about to marry or has just married.

In some instances, the parents were conservative and believed that men should be educated first (Shillington, 2012, 68). Men mainly believed that women must be confined to their traditional roles as wives and mothers, and work in the fields. The reality of the situation was men did not want to lose women to schools, for women constituted the backbone of the farming society (Ibid.) The labor of women and their children increased food production and the wealth of the community. In other instances, cattle was a primary source of bride wealth and men with large herds of cattle could pay the dowry to marry several women who would through farming increase the man's wealth (Shillington, 151). Therefore, educational opportunities for women at the secondary education level remained low. Forward thinking Kenyan parents and others like Mboya recognized the important role that educated women would play in enhancing the quality of life of their families and participate in the development of the country. Nevertheless, it must be noted that women educated in Kenya and in other parts of the African continent had consistently lagged far behind that of men. A large segment of the male population held the conviction that women must be confined to their traditional roles as wives and mothers, and work in the fields. In reality, these men did not want to lose women to schools for women constituted the backbone of the peasantry. This essay demonstrates how men like Tom Mboya and parents sought to include the women who received secondary education in the Student Airlifts so that they were prepared to make valuable contributions to the newly independent Kenya. Educated women played an integral role in enhancing the quality of life of their families while participating in the development of the country. Consequently, women's education advanced steadily especially after independence due to the progressive thinking of individuals like Tom Mboya.

Tom Mboya

Tom Mboya, born Thomas Joseph Odhiambo Mboya (1930-1969) was a native of Kenya. He was part of the Luo ethnic group and educated in a Catholic Mission School. In 1946 he attended Holy Ghost College where he passed his qualifying examinations and earned his Cambridge School Certificate. In 1948 he enrolled in the Royal Sanitary Institute's Medical Training School for Sanitary Inspectors in Nairobi. He was elected to the Nairobi City Council in 1951 and was elected as the President of the African Staff Association in 1952. In 1953 he was elected General Secretary of the Federation of Labor and attended the Efficiency Correspondence College of South Africa majoring in Economics. In 1955 he went to Ruskin College in Oxford England to study industrial management. He actively sought to fight for the rights of Kenyan workers and to seek opportunities for them to obtain education and training (Rake, 15). In 1957 Mboya won the legislative council elections as a workers' candidate, becoming one of only eight elected African members on the council.

He helped form the Kenya independence movement in the council and the People's Convention Party in Nairobi. And in the critical pre-independence decade he also spent a year at the University of Oxford and twice visited the United States. In 1959 he helped found the African-American Students Foundation to raise money to send East African (originally only Kenyan) university students to the United States on charter flights, thus making it possible for many more students to study abroad. In 1960, he was a founder-member of the Kenya African National Union; he was minister of labour in the coalition government before independence and actively participated in the constitutional talks that led to independence in 1963, and in the same year, Jomo Kenyatta appointed him minister of justice and constitutional affairs. From 1964 to 1969 Mboya served as minister for economic planning and development, laying the foundation for a strong mixed economy and capitalist-oriented policies; this upset others in Kenyatta's administration, such as Oginga Odinga, who advocated policies of a more socialist nature. In 1969 Mboya was assassination, and action which shocked the nation and exacerbated tensions between the dominant Kikuyu and other ethnic groups, especially Mboya's own Luo (Goldsworth 1982, Kelley 2008, Mboya 1970, Shachtman 2009).

Tom Mboya sought to develop opportunities for Kenyans and later African women and men across the continent to access to resources and opportunities for higher education in the United States. Mboya's insight in understanding that independence in Kenya and the entire African continent would require and educated workforce of both women and men. He understood the fine lines of social status in the rearing of women and men. The social constructs which include divisions of labor along with political, religious and sometimes economic status forced women into subservient positions that often prevented their access to social status via politics, economics, religious leadership and education. During the late 1950's and early 1960's Mboya took steps to redress the inequity so that women would be prepared to take advantage of any opportunity that came before them. By including women in the African Student Airlifts he worked to develop a level playing field by empowering women through access to higher educational opportunities abroad. This was a strategic step towards equity with the hope that true equality could be achieved.

Review of Literature

The African Student Airlifts of 1959, 1960 and 1961 opened the doors for African students to receive scholarships to attend American colleges and universities. During this period in history several events including the Civil Rights Movement, expansion of communism in Africa, Pan-Africanism (the idea that people of African descent everywhere have common interests and should be unified), African nationalism and Black nationalism were on the rise and the African Independence were unfolding simultaneously. 1960 was considered the Year of Africa because sixteen African nations gained independence.

As nations in Africa gained their autonomy they needed an educated and trained group of men and women to fill positions in the government, public and private sectors, serve as professors and administrators at colleges and universities, open clinics, hospitals, medical schools and develop businesses. In essence, these western-educated elites were responsible for maintaining and/or developing an infrastructure that was led by Africans, in this case Kenyans. Tom Mboya, a Kenyan labor union strategist, was the originator of the student airlifts worked with Kenyans, African Americans, white activists, politicians, United States and Kenyan government officials, American Labor Union officials and activists as well as philanthropists to secure scholarships and transportation for Kenyan men and women to attend institutions of higher education in the United States.

While much has been written on the events that led to the African Student Airlifts, few monographs have been written about the impact gender, equity and inclusion in particular. The first books written on this topic were written between the 1960s through 1980's. However, this topic became increasingly popular in 2004 after the election of President Barack Obama. President Obama's father was one of the students that participated in the student airlifts.

Mansfield Irving Smith's dissertation (1966) *The East African Airlifts of 1959, 1960, and 1961* offers a simple overview of the African Student Airlifts which provides a description of the Kenyan student movement to the United States prior to 1959, a detailed account of the airlift programs, and the role of the Department of State. Relying mainly on primary documents and interviews, this account reveals the key facts of the airlifts but offers little interpretation of the situation, lacking the necessary historical hindsight because it is written from a political science perspective. Tom Mboya's work *Tom Mboya: The Challenge of Nationhood* is a collection of speeches and writings of Tom Mboya published in 1970 highlighted various issues relating to importance of trade unions, women and nation building, Kenyan political organizing and foreign policy during the development of the newly independent Kenya. These speeches reveal the vision Mboya had for a successful transition to self-rule. This collection of speeches represents an attempt to study, to analyze and to answer some of the challenges and problems, the prospects and opportunities of Kenya. Goldsworthy's *Tom Mboya: The Man Kenya Wanted to Forget*, is a powerful biography that outlines Mboya's life and is one of the first expensive scholarly depictions of Mboya's contributions to the Kenyan liberation movement. Works that preceded this work included Alan Rake's *Tom Mboya: Young Man of New Africa* (1962), Mboya's own *Freedom and After* (1963) and Mohamed Amin's *Tom Mboya: A Photographic Tribute* (1969). These texts, unlike Goldsworthy's work, were topical in their approach as they took a journalists perspective. Kenneth King's "African Students in Negro American Colleges: Notes on the Good Africa" (1970) discusses the earliest expansion of opportunities of East Africans to attend historically Black colleges and universities in the United States. This article emphasizes the relevance of World War I with opening up doors for the British to ensure that Africans received vocational and technical educational opportunities. King argues further that during World War I links developed between Black people in the United States and Africa on an unprecedented scale as Africans were seeking opportunities for higher education abroad prior to the 1959 airlifts.

The 2000s saw several new perspectives of the African Student Airlifts. Jim Harper's *Western-Educated Elites in Kenya: The African American Factor* (2006) outlines education in Africa from pre-colonial African education to missionary, colonial government schools and the establishment of colleges and universities in East Africa. This study builds upon the existing literature on the rise of western-educated elites and examines the student airlifts as part of the growth of this elite group. Harper argues that the airlifts provided the platform for western-educated Kenyan nationalists to replace colonial government official's positions at independence. Harper further depicts major influences of Black nationalism, African nationalism, Pan-Africanism, the Civil Rights movement, African nationalist movements, the Cold War and the expansion of communism played in securing scholarships and travel funds for Kenyan students. James H. Meriwether's article "Worth a Lot of Negro Votes": Black Voters, Africa and the 1960 Presidential Campaign" builds upon existing literature by examining John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon's campaign strategies to pursue the Black vote in the South by focusing their attention on awarding scholarships and/or travel funding to African students admitted to American colleges and universities. Meriwether argues that Kennedy's outreach to the African American leadership like Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King shifted the Black vote to Kennedy. Meriwether determines that the Kennedy and Nixon campaigns traversed the shifting social and political landscape of an America changing in response to the force of the Civil Rights Movement coupled with the global dimensions of the Cold War and the connections between Black Americans and Africans offered an opportunity to gain votes. Kennedy came out on top and was considered to be an ally in support of an independent Africa and made African issues a central focal point of his campaign by supporting the African Student Airlifts.

Tom Shachtman's Airlift to America (2009) deals directly with the influence that the Cold War, labor movement, Civil Rights Movement and the Kennedy/Nixon Presidential election had on the developments leading to the airlifts. This monograph provides a lens into Mboya's vision, the courage of hundreds of students that participated in the airlifts and the extensive collaboration between Black and White Americans who understood the critical need for an educated and skilled force of Africans to replace colonial government officials and their continued network with the United States. In that same vein, Robert F. Stephens reports that the Kenyan Student Airlifts to America focused on the developments in Kenya prior to independence. The book presents a view of the students that participated in the airlifts from the perspective of a Cultural Affairs Officer in Kenya. This also volume contains interviews with airlift participants and follows their professional careers. Philip Muehlenbeck's book *Betting on the Africans: John F. Kennedy's Courting of African Nationalist Leaders* (2012) unravels the compelling story of John F. Kennedy's interactions and approach to Africa during the Cold War and African Independence moment. Muehlenbeck states that Kennedy's charisma and intelligence were effective as he developed diplomatic relations with African nationalists while opposing European colonialism and how his administration focused on economic growth on the continent. Essentially, Muehlenbeck argues Kennedy reversed United States foreign policy towards Africa especially with providing more opportunities for African students to attend colleges and universities in the United States.

Traditional and Missionary Education in Kenya

Daniel Sifuna notes that the purpose for traditional education in Kenya was to train the individual to become a productive member of society by providing them with the knowledge, skills and behavior of their respective groups or societies (Sifuna, 1990, 10). Education, therefore, was an instrument of survival where society could pass from generation to generation the knowledge of creating productive members of society. Transmitting their culture from one generation to the next proved to be very significant especially since the people could not totally control the natural environment. A division of labor was evident in the roles of mothers and fathers. Mothers were responsible for educating children until boys reached adolescence. Traditionally, women trained young women and the men trained young men. Children engaged in participatory education activities through ceremonies, rituals, imitation, recitation, demonstration, farming, fishing, weaving, cooking, carving, knitting, dancing, drumming and storytelling. The youth were also provided with lessons in local geography, history, plant and animal behavior as well as family genealogy. Young men were trained as warriors and hunters to defend their territory and preserve their traditions. In addition, young men were responsible for clearing land, herding livestock, planting specific crops, and building houses. Young women were instructed on how to conduct themselves in an honorable manner and how to perform tasks specifically entrusted to women such as domestic chores (Sifuna, 1990, 5).

By 1844 the Church Missionary Society was present in Mombasa, Kenya where they set up the first missionary station to launch their evangelical mission (Pawlikova-Vilhanova, 2006, 80). Missionary schools taught reading and writing in English, Bible studies and various skills and crafts such as carpentry and gardening. Missionary's primary goal was teaching Christianity and conversion as well as to stop Africans from practicing in their traditional cultural customs which were deemed pagan by White missionaries. These practices included rites of passage, drumming and dancing, birth and death rituals, pouring libations, to name a few. The attitude of missionaries was tarnished by racial prejudice (Shillington, 2012, 297). Men were the primary focus of individuals to be trained as missionaries.

Once the British established rule in East Africa with the blessings and support of the missionaries and the Kenyan highlands were firmly colonized by White settlers, a new economy based on plantations emerged in Kenya. By 1920 coffee became the leading cash crop of Kenya (Wolff, 1970, 277). Other cash crops were tea, pyrethrum, and sisal. The developing new economy, the colonial administration, the efficient communication systems—railways, ports and mail and telegraph services along with the emergence of urban centers in Nairobi and Machakos required a large group of trained Africans to run them. A skilled and semiskilled African labor force became necessary and urgent as each British colony was mandated to become self-sufficient. The missionary schools were tapped to provide the workforce. However, since the missionary's primary focus was on religious subjects it could not provide an adequate labor force (Wolff, 1970, 276).

Colonial Government Education

To resolve this issue the British established the Frazer Commission which recommended a dual-educational system: academic for Europeans and vocational for Africans. Kenyan men were to be the primary recipients of this vocational education. Women were nearly shut out of this educational process. The first schools for European students were opened in 1902 to prepare both boy and girls for administrative and professional positions. Essentially, education for Africans was segregated by gender which had a negative impact on gender equity. Kenyan student's education was modeled after African American schools during this period when they received industrial and technical education. The students were to be prepared to work efficiently in settler farms and to fill clerical positions in the colonial administration. Nevertheless, vocational education was used to establish for the first Kenyan elites to gain employment in both the cash crop economy and the colonial civil and military services. Kenyans were employed as clerks, junior administrators, policemen, soldiers, hospital staffers, telephone and telegraph operators, school teachers, and evangelists. It was this cadre of Kenyan elites that eventually aspired to obtain higher education in an effort to gain the training that would enable them to fill the critical positions in the government and private sectors upon securing independence (Urch, 1971, 261). The colonial system of education fostered community development for the majority, technical training for the minority, and academic secondary education for a very small group of the Kenyan population. While women were not totally excluded from missionary and colonial government education their opportunities to access in positions in the British cash crop and industrial economies were extremely limited (Urch, 1971, 249).

Kenyan Nationalists and African American Civil Rights Activists and the Pursuit for Higher Education for Kenyan Students

In an effort to shift or defer the costs of establishing a colony from the London Treasury to revenue collected from within the developing colony a cash crop economy was created. In order to ensure that the new economy was successful the British government created an economic structure around white immigrant settlers. The European settlers brought capital and some managerial skills and the British officials provided the land and labor. The land provided for the European settlers was taken from the native African inhabitants through military pressure. In many instances entire ethnic groups were moved to less fertile lands reserved for Africans. The cash crops that arose were cotton, rubber, coffee and tea. To develop a labor force the British officials developed laws which forced the vast majority of African males between the ages of fifteen and forty to seek work on European plantations. They were able to accomplish by through the tax system, the pass system, and the suppression of African peasant agriculture.

Males were required to pay taxes each year and the easiest way to earn cash was by working in wage labor jobs for Europeans. Payments to obtain passes which were used so that workers could travel to their jobs proved to bring in additional revenue until World War I when many African males were mobilized to fight as soldiers against Germans in East Africa. The final law that marginalized African labor and movement which restricted them from competing with Europeans in agriculture was the placement of Africans on reserves. Africans were restricted from the most fertile land and from growing the most lucrative cash crop, coffee (Wolff, 1970, 276).

By 1948 the Kikuyu labor tenants launched a movement against the white land owners and began to squat on land to cultivate crops and graze cattle. This was the beginning of the Mau Mau insurrection which was banned in 1950. By 1952 British officials restrained squatter cultivation and grazing rights and Governor Sir Evelyn Baring declared an emergency in October. Jomo Kenyatta, who the British believed was the leader, was arrested and eventually deported. However, the Mau Mau began to use guerrilla warfare tactics to fight back against the colonists. The British regained control in 1954. The Mau Mau gained international attention and Black people in the United States were watching as they embarked on their fight for civil rights in the United States. By 1955 the stage was set for African Americans who were galvanizing their efforts after the death of Emmitt Till and Kenyans, led by Tom Mboya to strengthen their Pan-African connections and work to provide opportunities for higher education for Kenyan students in the United States.

By 1960 Kenyan students began to receive numerous opportunities to travel abroad to gain college and university education in the United States (Meriwether, 2008, 737). Diasporic connections were being made between Kenyans and prominent African Americans such as Tom Mboya, Mbiyu Koinange, Julius Kiano, Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, Sidney Portier, and Congressman Charles Diggs, Jr. These men were leaders of Trade Unions, African American Civil Rights leaders, and politicians. While these leaders worked together they also had their own agendas. The African-American Labor and Civil Rights Leadership was inspired by the spirit of Pan-Africanism, the struggle against racial discrimination, the fight against European domination, rejection of communism, and Kenyan nationalism that expanded as result of the Mau Mau uprising (ibid.) The government of the United States had entered the beginning stages of the Cold War and was guided by Eisenhower's United States Foreign Policy which was adopted to combat the spread of communism protect American and western European access to oil in the Middle East and end British colonial rule. (Brinkley, 2012, 801). The continent of Africa was moving steadily and quickly towards independence and the American government sought to prevent the spread of communism throughout the continent. This political posturing set the stage for Tom Mboya to make the case and receive the support necessary to bring Kenyan students to the United States to attend colleges and universities. Although men were the decision makers at this time they had the foresight to include women students as an integral part of this scholarship support at this critical point during the Cold War (Staniland, 1991, 10).

The Kenyan men and women who received scholarships to attend institutions of higher education in America eventually became the founding brothers and sisters of their country. For the next twenty-five years they held half of Kenya's parliaments and account for the several of its cabinet ministers and more of its high-level civil servants, in addition to administrative appointments at Kenya's colleges and universities. They opened medical clinics and schools, developed multimillion dollar business corporations, and led international environmental programs (Shachtman, 2009, 7)

Labor Unions Develop Funding Strategies to Support Higher Education for Kenyans

Tom Mboya visited the United States in August 1956. He was invited by the American Committee on Africa (ACOA). The Committee was formed in 1953 by a group of African-American leaders and White activists to publicize and lobby for African Independence and Liberation Movements. The ACOA became known as the largest and most effective private organization devoted to African-American relations and American assistance to Africa. Not only did ACOA provide educational opportunities in America for future African leaders to have them prepared for the task of nation-building in the new independent countries on the African continent, it also desired to win them over to capitalism and to stray away from communism (Shachtman, 2009, 51). George Houser, a White activist and one of the founders of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), served as the Executive Director (1953-1981) along with other prominent members including William X. Scheinman, Charles Diggs, Jr., Hubert Humphrey, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rayford Logan, Adam Clayton Powell, Jackie Robinson, Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Ms. Cora Weiss, Bayard Rustin, Roger Baldwin, Sidney Poitier, and Roy Wilkins (Houser, 1989, 40).

Reverend Michael Scott, a White minister who was lobbying for Africans in South and West Africans in the 1920s recommended that Mboya travel to the United States. Rev. Scott was forced to leave South Africa due to his support of African liberation movements. He traveled to England to set up the Africa Bureau to support nationalist and liberation movements on the continent. It was during this time that the ACOA decided to support Mboya's visit to the United States. Subsequently the ACOA agreed and began to fundraise to cover the expenses by charging fees at the venues where Mboya spoke (Rake, 1962, 172). The two-month visit was an absolute success. He captivated the crowds and expressed the importance for their involvement in African nationalist, liberation movements through his depiction of the harsh treatment of African workers.

Mboya met with trade union leaders including, George Meany, of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO), Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers, Asa Phillip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, David Dubinsky of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, Philip Murray of the United Steelworkers, Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and Ralph Helstein of the United Packinghouse Workers. Mboya spoke in Detroit, Chicago, New York, Washington, Boston, Los Angeles, Atlanta and Pittsburgh (Rake, 1962, 178).

Mboya, a brilliant strategist, requested assistance from the AFL-CIO to train Kenyan trade union personnel in the United States by funding the construction of a building in Nairobi to serve as headquarters for his Kenyan Federation of Labor. He also requested scholarships for Kenyan students. The AFL-CIO immediately contributed \$35,000 from its William Green Fund for the construction of the labor union building in Kenya (Sims, 1992, 57). More funding came from Asa Philip Randolph and the ICTFU to support this effort. Moreover, the AFL-CIO formed a committee of Asa Philip Randolph, George Meany, and Walter Ruther to set up and administer training programs for Kenyan trade unionists. A subcommittee of the Workers Education Committee, composed of George Brown, John Connors, and Theodore Brown was established to select schools and colleges that offered courses in workers' education. The AFL-CIO also chose Maida Springer to oversee and dispense the scholarships. Once the institutions were identified, Kenyan students were duly enrolled for three to four months and took courses in organization, administration, and public relations, rule of engagement, rules of negotiation, operation of grievances, development and conduct of strikes, and observation of democratic trade unionism (Papers of Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1957, Box 97, Folder 1). This training program derived from the collaboration of the AFL-CIO and Mboya, to prevent Africa from being a primary target of communist ideology, provided that African trade union leaders ought not only learn the general history of organized labor and the mechanism of trade union organizations in America, but also gain a broad perspective of the difference between the forces of democracy and those of communism (Papers of Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters 1957). Then Vice-President Richard Nixon supported this collaboration between American and Kenyan trade unions because he saw this as an effective method of preventing the penetration of communism into Africa (Ibid). The United States considered Kenya as a strategic location that was the gateway to unlock the East and Central African countries.

The funding for this program was inadequate which resulted in the program lasting only one year. An agreement was made between the AFL-CIO and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) to construct a school, the African Labor College, in Kampala, Uganda in 1959 (Richards, 2000, 98). This allowed the trade union officers to be trained in East Africa. Although the training program in the United States came to an end, it had sponsored several Kenyan trade union trainees who took courses at Harvard University. It was during his visit to America that Mboya began to contact individuals in the private and public sectors to support Kenyan students to receive scholarships to attend American colleges and universities. He communicated with Black and White individuals who provided him with scholarships.

Dr. Horace Mann Bond, President of Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, stepped forward and offered several scholarships and promised to admit any number of qualified students from Kenya. Dr. Bond was known to have never turned away a qualified African student. In fact, Lincoln University educated great African leaders, such as Dr. Nnamadi Azikiwe of Nigeria and Dr. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana (Bethel, 1975, 16). Mboya received offers from individuals to support Kenyan students who attended High Schools or Junior Colleges to live in their homes, as no boarding facilities were available in these institutions (Papers of Congressman Charles Diggs, Box 194, Folder 15). Mboya also met and corresponded with Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. requesting him to assist a Kenyan student, Nicholas Wandia Rabala, who later attended Tuskegee Institute. Rev. King and his church sponsored the student (General Records of the Department of State, National Archives, RG 59, Folder 15). Thus, Mboya was able to expand the educational opportunities from a specific focus on trade unions to Kenyan students being able to attend colleges and universities to study in a number of disciplines.

After his visit to America, Mboya succeeded in securing over eighty scholarships. However, he had one major issue that needed to be addressed. He needed to raise the funding necessary to transport the students from Kenya to the United States. William X. Scheinman, a wealthy White activist who was a member of the executive board of ACOA, an owner of Arnav Aircraft Associates, Inc., offered to assist Mboya. Scheinman was described as “a self-taught Wall Street analyst, an enthusiastic supporter of the independence movement in Africa” (General Records Department of State, National Archives RG 59, Box 2141). This resulted in fifty-three Kenyan students being airlifted to the United States in 1957. Thirty-six of them were airlifted at the expense of William X. Scheinman. The remaining seventeen students were provided with travel funds by their own families, their communities, or Mboya’s Scholarship Program, which he set up in Nairobi following his return to the country. The following year another group of thirty-six students were transported to America (Smith, *The East African Airlifts*, 1966, 39).

Kenyan Student Enrollment Increases in Colleges and Universities in the United States

In April 1959, Mboya returned to the United States at the behest of the ACOA. He was looking for funding to support at least seventy-five students who had already received scholarships to colleges and universities, as well as secure more scholarships and travel money for the hundreds of other eligible students on the waiting list. To organize this effort, Mboya, Scheinman, Frank Montero, and Dr. Julius Kiano, established the African American Students Foundation (AASF) Inc. in New York, with Montero as President and Scheinman as Vice-President (Goldsworthy, 1982, 167). The Foundation inaugurated its services by organizing a fund-raising event. The guest list included a host of powerful Black and White individuals with keen interest in Africa.

Among the speakers at the function were Senator John F. Kennedy and Congressman Charles Diggs (Papers of Charles Diggs, Box 194, Folder 1, 1963). In the following years, Kennedy and Diggs would play a significant role in what came to be known as the “Africa Students Airlift.” The AASF contacted many the 2500 colleges and universities across the United States appealing for scholarships. They contacted the Department of State, lobbied Congress and the White House for financial assistance, organized fund-raising events to which thousands of notable Americans were invited, asked for assistance and support from philanthropic and other organizations, and canvassed private companies and enterprises to request financial support (Smith, 1966, 96).

The AASF secured limited funding and informed the Mboya Scholarship Program in Nairobi to select the eligible students. Priority was given to students who through their own initiative had already applied and were accepted by American colleges and universities, as well as those who had collected travel expenses by working or raising funds in their communities (Atieno-Odhiambo 1981, 65). Prior to passports being issued, the Department of Education in Nairobi made sure that the colleges and universities that admitted the students were accredited. To accomplish this the Cultural Affairs Officer in Nairobi interviewed the students for clearance. The “cleared” students were issued visas. After a brief setback in locating air transportation for the students, Scheinman and the African-American Students Foundation raised most of the funds by appealing to eight thousand individuals to raise approximately \$50,000 to meet supplementary needs. Eighty-one students arrived in New York on September 9, 1959, by chartered plane (Smith, 1966, 120).

The Kenyan students who were cleared to attend American universities were graduates of African missionary schools, government schools, secondary schools, and institutions of higher education including Makerere, Kiambu, Kabete High School, C.M.S. Maseno Coast Secondary School, Alliance High School, to name a few. These students were placed in historically Black colleges and universities as well as majority institutions including Lincoln University, Clark Atlanta University, Hampton University, Tuskegee Institute, Howard University, Spelman College, Columbia University, Stanford University and UC Berkeley. They majored in diverse disciplines: political science, history, economics, education, communication, mathematics, agriculture, engineering, medicine and anthropology (Congressional Record, Committee on Foreign Relations, August 1960).

Mboya’s efforts led to an increase number of Kenyan students in the United States to over four hundred fifty-one compared to the total of forty-five in Britain, the colonial power in Kenya (Papers of Charles Diggs, Box 194, Folder 15, 1963). However, scholarships for Kenyans to study in the United States were mainly in the hands of Pan-Africanist leadership and organizations rather than in the hands of the agencies of the government of the United States. The Black and White leadership of the AFL-CIO welcomed and embraced Mboya and his Kenyan trade union and worked ceaselessly in collaboration with Black organizations and leadership to secure scholarship and travel funds for hundreds of Kenyans to attend colleges and universities in the United States.

Presidential Candidates Kennedy and Nixon Compete to Support Funding Kenyan Student Travel to the United States

Early in 1960, Mboya's Scholarship Program Office received 200 scholarships valued at \$1,000,000 from the African American Students Foundation. After a request to the Department of State for \$100,000 to transport the students, Joseph Satterthwaite, Assistant Secretary for African Affairs noted that the Department of State could not support the request (Mansfield, 1966, 112). The African-American Student Foundation leadership recommended Mboya come to the United States to conduct fundraising efforts for the cause. On July 26 Mboya, Senator John F. Kennedy, who was then Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, invited Mboya to visit with him at his residence in Hyannis Port. Mboya informed Senator Kennedy of the urgent need for funds to transport the students. Kennedy offered to transport the students with a grant from the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation (Muehlenbeck, 2012, 45). It was agreed that no public announcement be made so that the grant supporting the Kenyans student travel would be kept out of politics. Nonetheless, the news of the grant quickly spread and found its way directly in the forefront of the political arena in Washington, D.C. once the AASF accepted the Kennedy grant (Congressional Record, Committee on Foreign Relations, National Archives, August 1960). Upon notification that the Kennedy Foundation was providing support for the Kenyan students the Department of State reversed its decision and agreed to provide the required funds, of \$100,000 (Stephens, 2013, 71). Senator Scott, a member of Vice-President Nixon's campaign strategy, announced the news. Congressman Charles Diggs accused the Department of State of being hypocritical and was playing politics with the grant. The Democrats suspected the Republicans were using the funding as a political strategy to win votes for the upcoming Presidential campaign between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy. Consequently, the funding was allocated and African students from East and Central Africa were flown to the United States to attend college. Two hundred and twenty-two students arrived in New York in 1960 from East and Central African countries with most of them came from Kenya (Congressional Record, Committee on Foreign Relations, National Archives, August 1960).

In 1961 Phillip H. Coombs, the Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs, began to collaborate with several agencies with interest in African issues, particularly in educating African students. Among these agencies were the African American Institute, African-Americans Students Foundation, African Scholarship Program of American Universities, Institute of International Education, Phelps Stokes Fund and the United Negro College Fund. Delegates from these organizations formed a new organization, the Council for Educational Cooperation with Africa (CECA). The primary responsibility of the CECA was to help African students begin and complete their studies at American colleges and universities. These organizations pooled their resources to provide scholarship and transportation funding for a total of 148 students.

Education and Discrimination for Men and Women in the United States

Around the time Tom Mboya initiated steps toward ensuring inclusion and equity for female and male students, the educational landscape in the United States displayed similar efforts. These efforts were largely guided by two historic milestones that continue to shape the educational, economic and social climate of United States – the Women’s Movement and the Civil Rights Movement. The focus of the Women’s Movement during the 1960s was to address inequality in the workplace including denial of access to better jobs with equal salary and anti-discrimination laws. On the other hand, the Civil Rights Movement concerned itself with ending racial segregation and discrimination against African American men and women. The Women’s Movement led to women securing employment in once male dominated areas including teaching, nursing, and white-collar clerical work. At first these positions were held mainly by men. Employment opportunities led to an increase of women seeking college education. However, racism and discrimination remained a dominant issue for African Americans securing employment. Racism permeated the job market and Black men faced more discrimination. Nevertheless, educated Black women were better able to secure employment. Black women worked more than their White counterparts mainly because Black families had lower incomes resulting from high unemployment rates of Black men (Cross, 1999, 7).

In 1954 the majority of African American students were enrolled in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s) and women comprised of 58% of the students enrolled in HBCU’s. The 1974 Census Bureau data indicated that women earned 57% of all bachelor’s degrees awarded to Black people. This data indicated that African American women were very likely to complete college. Research by Karl Alexander, Claudia Buchmann and Cathy Cohen showed that during the first three decades of the twentieth century, when many people did not complete college, men and women graduated from college at generally the same rate. By 1950 gender gaps in college completion remained small as Black men trailed by Black women by one percentage point. And also, during the 1950s in Kenya most men and women worked as agricultural laborers. Women remained the primary caretakers of their homes while men generally worked on plantations cultivating coffee, tea or rubber. Like, education for Black people in the United States, education in Africa was focused on vocational and technical education so that African Americans and Africans would be able to work mainly as agricultural laborers under the guides of the Jim Crow and colonial systems. Africans desire for education, particularly between the first and second World Wars stimulated interest in Western education. In 1943, the British colonial government commissioned Justice Asquith to re-examine the needs for higher education in the colonies. The Asquith Commission was assembled to consider the principles which should guide the promotion of higher education, learning and research and the development of universities in the British colonies (Hussey, 1945, 166). This report stressed the “importance of the university in providing men trained for public service and professional careers” (Arnold, 1974, 88). As evidenced in the quote women were not provided with the same opportunities to pursue higher education. However, those who obtain a primary education were stirred towards domestic science courses and teacher training (Arnold, 1974, 88).

By 1950 Makerere, founded in 1922 in Uganda, had an enrollment of 450 African students. In 1955 there were 630 African students, only 62 of these students were from Kenya and the other students included African students from other countries in Africa, Asians, Arabs and no women (Kenya National Archives, 1955). At the time the colonial authorities believed that it was more economically efficient to send the few qualified African students to study abroad than to build more universities (Lewis, 1965, 207).

Historically, higher education in Africa has been dominated by men (Mbilinyi & Meena, 1991, 10). However, the 1959 and 1969 airlifts included large numbers of women. Kenyan Independence and African nationalism was the catalyst that gave the momentum for Kenyans to seek higher education abroad. Mboya was not only concerned with increasing educational opportunities for Africans but also with improving the conditions of African workers. Kenyan women and men sought out higher education opportunities abroad mainly because of the limited opportunities in Kenya. The local colleges maintained quotas and the abroad opportunities in most case were funded through scholarships. The 1959 airlifts had 61 men and 20 women who obtained their degrees and returned to Kenya to become entrepreneurs, politicians, government officials, and educators (The Nation, 2 April, 2008). This position allowed Mboya to extend higher education to Kenyan students in the United States. By 1959 it was evident that Kenya was on a direct path towards independence. Hence, the airlifts opened up opportunities for more Kenyan women to obtain higher education. After World War II, Black and African nationalism spread and they sought civil rights, human rights, self-determination and independence. After the *Brown vs. Board of Education Topeka*, Kansas decision in 1954 and the murder of Emmitt Till the policies of segregation were being challenged and defeated. During that same time the Mau Mau insurrection and the squatter riots in Kenya challenged colonial government authority. These events coupled with the expansion of colonialism created the perfect storm that led collapse of Jim Crow and colonialism and solidified collaborations between African American and white activists, politicians, and entrepreneurs to provide support and funding for African students, especially for women who had been virtually overlooked by the colonial system of education.

These international Black liberation movements inspired women and men of color throughout the diaspora to join forces to develop a strategy that would allow them to fight for equality and independence simultaneously. Under the banners of Pan-Africanism, Black nationalism and African nationalism one of their efforts was to focus on assisting as many Africans, in this case, Kenyan women and men securing higher education in the United States.

Higher Education Opportunities in Africa

By 1961 Kenyan Nationalists knew independence was near and the need for highly skilled and educated Kenyans was required to fill vital roles in a newly independent Kenya. A few positions were available to Kenyans by the late 1950's. This was the result of the assistance of scholarship programs mainly in the United States and to a lesser degree in Great Britain. England neglected to support higher education for its colonial subjects. Between 1945 and 1958 enrollment in secondary schools in Kenya rose from 134,185 to 651,758 students enrolled in primary schools. However, as many of those students sought admission into Makerere and Nairobi Universities, the only two colleges in East Africa, they were denied because the colleges could not accommodate the expanding number of eligible students (Sifuna, 1990, 56).

Mboya estimated that 341 Kenyan males and 22 females passed the Cambridge Overseas Exams in 1957. Of these 363 students, 73 men and 1 woman were admitted to Makerere, while 53 men and 4 women joined the Royal Technical College (now University of Nairobi) in Nairobi. Only 131 Kenyan students were accepted for the 1957 academic year. In 1958, 491 students passed the Cambridge Examination. Of this total 451 were men and 40 were women. Only 88 men were admitted to Makerere, while another 51 men were admitted to the Royal Technical College. The situation was even more severe for women. Out of the forty women one was admitted to Makerere and two were admitted to the Royal Technical College. (Papers of Charles Diggs, Howard University, 1959). Other colleges in East Africa were unable to provide educational opportunities to train personnel to fill the professional and managerial positions upon independence. Therefore, Mboya and his American contacts answered the call to offer opportunities for Kenyan men and women to obtain education.

After the election of President John F. Kennedy the Department of State along with the Agency for International Development (USAID), the Council for Educational Cooperation with Africa (CECAF) developed two agencies, the African Scholarship Program (ASPAU) for undergraduates, and the African Graduate Fellowship Program (AFGRAD) for graduate students. Approximately one-hundred forty-five colleges and universities participated in the programs. The newly developed programs were placed in the administration of the African American Institute. To be admitted into this program students had to: be accepted to an accredited American college or university; have at least a partial scholarship or private assistance; meet the required academic qualifications; and not be diverted from available spaces in African institutions of higher education (Jacqz, 1967, iv). This program opened scholarship opportunities for African students across the continent.

Between 1909 and 1961 Kenyan male students who studied in the United States far outnumbered their female counterparts. Nevertheless, those women who studied abroad were exceptional students who obtained their higher education and in general preferred to return home (Kenya) rather than remain in the United States so that they could lead the effort to make a difference and clear a path for more Kenyan women to follow (Maathai, 2006, 25).

In 1955 there were a total of nineteen Kenyan students studying in America, all male; 1956 a total of twenty-two students, twenty-one males and one female; 1957 sixteen males and one female; 1958 thirty-one males and one female; 1959 one hundred thirty-six males and twenty females; 1960 one hundred thirty-six males and twenty females; 1961 two hundred eighty-nine males and forty-three females, 1962 four hundred seventy-seven males and sixty-six females. The male to female ratio is staggering with the men clearly outnumbering the women. However, the contributions these women made have an intrinsic value that these numbers cannot explain. Tom Mboya's forward thinking provided an opportunity for gender equity with the hopes of leading to gender equality. While Mboya was working to provide opportunities in higher education for women, he did not neglect the contributions of working class women in nation building. In a speech entitled "Women's Role in National Development" in 1967 he stated:

"As mothers and housewives, women are in the vanguard of the new struggle for economic reconstruction and social progress. The future of all those ideals and objectives that we have defined for ourselves rests heavily on their shoulders. As mothers and farmers...they hold the key to the success of the programmes of development that we have designed for our rural areas. Because of their position in the family and clan and tribe and the homes across our land they have a continuing influence in the shaping of the society that we must establish in Kenya. It will, therefore, be seen from what I have said that there can be no concept of national development which does not seriously take into account the role of women. Any attempt to plan or even to implement our plans without seeking the full co-operation of women is doomed to failure and cannot be regarded as a serious attempt to move forward, and you are the people best placed to ensure this co-operation...."

The National Council of Kenyan Women are doing a most praiseworthy job for our people. Women have also made great contributions in community development projects, in the medical service, the teaching profession. Increasingly they are taking their place in Government departments and in the monetary sector of the economy (Mboya, 1970, 116).

Mboya clearly articulated the importance of including women all sectors of nation building in Kenya.

A few of the names of the women who were a part of the “African Student Airlifts” included: Pamela A. Odede Mboya (wife of Tom Mboya) attended Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio and received a B.A. degree in Sociology in 1962; and Wangari Muta Maathai attended Mount Saint Scholastica College in Atchison, Kansas in 1960 and received a B.S. degree in Biology in 1964 and a M.S. form the University of Pittsburgh in 1965. Later she received her Ph.D. in Veterinary Medicine at the University College of Nairobi in 1971. These women were trailblazers. Wagemba became the first woman to hold a senior position in the Ministry of Agriculture as Supervisor and shortly thereafter she was appointed as the Director of Home Economics and Agricultural Extension Department. Pamela Mboya became an exceptionally popular and influential leader for women’s rights. She served on several boards and committees including the National Council of Women of Kenya, Y.M.C.A., Board of Governors for several schools, Board of Directors of HelpAge International, Vice-Chairperson of HABITAT, the United Nations Human Settlement Program and the National Security Intelligence Service, to name a few (Opiyo and Muiruri, Standard Digital, 2009). Dr. Maathai became the Chairperson of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy, Director of the Red Cross Society, and Director of the Council of Women in Kenya. She founded the Green Belt Movement (GBM) in 1977 to fight deforestation, desertification, and erosion in Kenya. The GBM became a continental movement and received the support of United Nations, European governments and individual donors. Her work with GBM led to the planting of over thirty million trees across the continent of Africa and she became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize (Maathai, 2006, 10).

Dr. Wangari Maathai, Nobel Prize winner and world-renowned environmentalist, was the first Kenyan woman to receive a Ph.D. Dr. Maathai recalled that her parents must take all the credit for allowing and encouraging her to pursue her advanced education locally and particularly abroad at the same time when very few women left the household to attend school. Her parents were indeed progress people, and they decided that she should have a chance to go to school. Without their support Dr. Maathai may not have had an opportunity to leave the farm (New York Times, accessed 20 March 2017). Progressive parents, together with a small number of women who had received higher education, continued to encourage and press for the advancement of women seeking higher education.

Kenyan students who studied abroad received both knowledge in various disciplines that equipped them to face the formidable challenge of developing their homeland, and experienced American life and culture. While gender equity did not lead to equal access to higher education opportunities abroad or at colleges in East Africa, a small number of women were given access to higher education and they contributed greatly to their local communities and nation despite being marginalized and often disadvantaged. Because of the progressive thinking of Tom Mboya, parents and others who helped cultivate an environment that supported gender equity, women in Kenya may not have played on a level field but they were on the field and played well. To date, because of access to higher education, Africa has had seven appointed or elected women to serve as Heads of State. The leveling of the playing field continues to expand.

Conclusion

This essay is just one example of the foresight and vision that individuals, like Tom Mboya, had in providing opportunities for women and men to have access to higher education opportunities at a time when education was not considered a priority for women and at a time when women were traditionally thought to be mothers and care takers. While more men traveled abroad to gain degrees, it must be noted that the impact that the few women who obtained higher education was astounding. The student airlifts set in motion a strategy that opened opportunities for students throughout the continent to be able to travel abroad to receive bachelor, master, and doctorate degrees. Many of these men and women were promoted to the highest levels of government. African women became Presidents of nations, ministers in government, heads of non-profit organizations, and Nobel Prize winners. Communism, Pan-Africanism, the Women's Movement and the Civil Rights Movement served as the catalysts that created the environment of inclusion for women and men from Kenya seeking educational experiences abroad. Higher education provided a platform for women and men to have a voice that expanded social and private benefits and indeed were essential for the attainment of social status, social justice and ensuring they are able to show their full potential as Kenya gained its independence from British rule. Kenyan Nationalists and Civil Rights Activists in the United States understood the importance of inclusion as it relates to Kenyan women. They fought strategically and collaboratively to secure funding for Kenyan students. The result was Kenyan women and men became a very sustainable part of filling government positions in the civil and private sectors left by British colonials at the onset of Kenyan Independence.

Providing increased opportunities for Kenyan women and men to access higher education was a factor that ensured that they would be prepared to secure high-level positions government and private industries. Higher education therefore became the medium for women and men to participate fully in the development of their society and to achieve self-fulfillment. In addition, the African Student Airlift became a global gender equity campaign that was an important vehicle for encouraging the increased recruitment and placement of women in the private and public sector for Kenya. The issue of access to and inclusion for Kenyan male and female students in higher education abroad was placed on the global political agenda in 1959 when a collective group of individuals and organizations led by Tom Mboya along with Kenyan Nationalists and American Civil Rights Activists worked together to secure scholarship and travel funding for Kenyan men and women to attend American colleges and universities. The African Student Airlifts made it possible for impartial treatment of Kenyan female students to ensure equal enjoyment of privileges and rights allotted to members of either gender seeking higher education opportunities in the United States. The role for these western-educated cadre from Kenya was exceptionally important beginning with the formation of a coalition government and internal self-rule in 1962 until independence.

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