Book review:
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Building the African Nation: The African Association and Pan-Africanism in Twentieth Century East Africa, by Ethan R. Sanders. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025. Xv + 326pp.

The history of the African Association represents a foundational period in popular narratives of political struggle in Tanzania. In this reading, this welfarist association, which was founded in the late 1920s, serves as a forerunner of anticolonial parties and post-colonial governments in both Tanganyika and Zanzibar. On the mainland, it was catalysed into the more confrontational Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) by the intervention of Julius Nyerere, who then spearheaded the drive to independence. In Zanzibar, the African Association was transformed into the electoral vehicle of the Afro-Shirazi Party, which led the violent revolution of 1964. The fusion of mainland and island parties in 1977 created the Chama cha Mapinduzi, which governs to the present date and shows little sign of moving anywhere. At the bottom of these sedimentary partisan accumulations that constitute Tanzania's modern political history, then, lies the fossilised African Association.

In this carefully researched book, Ethan Sanders drills back down into these layers to reanimate the African Association. Rather than view it as simply the progenitor of the anticolonial parties, as a kind of protonationalist movement, Sanders examines the emergence of the African Association within its own context and on its own terms. He joins James Brennan, Jonathon Glassman, and Emma Hunter in producing new intellectual histories of Tanganyika and Zanzibar that demonstrate African engagement with global currents of political thought, while remaining attentive to their incorporation into local contexts. Sanders anchors his study in a fascinating tranche of materials produced by the

African Association located at the Tanzania National Archives. Whereas many histories of African political movements depend on reading colonial archives against the grain, Sanders offers direct insight into the Association's workings.

The book begins with a reflection on the intellectual origins of what Sanders dubs "redemptive pan-Africanism". He identifies the Gold Coast educator James Aggrey as a key figure in popularising notions of "African" identity in Eastern Africa. Although Aggrey's visit in 1924 was fleeting, his ideas made a deep impression in the region by offering ideological guidance for the cluster of men who later established the African Association (as well, as the book's final chapter shows, shaping the outlook of Julius Nyerere himself). Important political influences also came from the wider East Africa region, such as through the Kikuyu politician Harry Thuku. Throughout, Sanders is careful to evidence these connections, rather than speculate about the transmission of ideas.

For Sanders, the "African nation" was experienced less as an imagined community, but through physical interaction. A sense of shared African-ness was as much built through face-to-face engagement between members of the Association, when they travelled on political business, as through the circulation of newspapers and other texts. They did so through the communications infrastructure of colonial rule. Sanders takes us through the nuts and bolts of the Association's bureaucratic practices, emphasising the importance of letter-writing and bookkeeping. Through this "material circuit of ideas" (p.35), the Association built a network that spanned the Zanzibar Channel, into central Tanganyika, and to associated branches at Mombasa and Makerere University, though its ambitions spanned the whole

continent. They were guided by the idea of *umoja* (unity): only by working together could they advance the condition of the ordinary African.

Sanders also challenges a preconception, handed down through multiple texts, that the African Association was dominated by an educated male elite. Using membership lists and application forms from the Association's records, he shows how it attracted a diverse section of the population, which cut across class lines. They included groups like Somalis and Shirazi, who occupied ambiguous positions within colonial racial classifications, and turned to the Association for protection. Sanders also shows how the formalisation of "indirect rule" in interwar Tanganyika, which tied "tribal" groups to geographical regions, encouraged African "outsiders" living in provinces outside their ethnic designation to join the Association. Finally, the book demonstrates that, contrary to earlier verdicts, women played an important role in the Association's activities – not as a separate wing, as they would in TANU or the ASP, but within the same structures as male members.

In the African Association's formative years, its leaders and intellectuals engaged little with territorial issues concerning Tanganyika or Zanzibar: they spoke predominantly of "Africa" and "Africans" and advocated for their members at a local level. By the end of the Second World War, this was beginning to change. The threat posed by a proposed East African Federation, which African Association leaders regarded as a path to settler colonial rule, pushed them into greater engagement with territorial governments, while the establishment of the United Nations encouraged thinking along territorial lines. Power struggles between the branches created cleavages, too. Against this backdrop, the mainland branches turned towards working within the boundaries of Tanganyika, setting the stage for

TANU's modular nationalism. Yet the transition was not a smooth one. Sanders evidences the opposition of many Association members to TANU's explicit anticolonialism, which conflicted with the more convivial relationship to the British regime maintained by the "*umoja* men".

Sanders argues that concepts of pan-Africanism based on statehood and sovereignty, which link continental unity with anticolonial emancipation, fail to capture the diversity of continental thought in the early twentieth century. As he notes, "[f]or many pan-Africanists around the turn of the twentieth century, their project was to transform empire and not to escape it, and we need to examine what they actually wrote, and did, and not what postcolonial logics of the twenty-first century would have presumed they should have said" (p.25). If one criticism of the book might be offered, it is its temptation to tag the activities of Association members as being always inspired by a spirit of African-ness. When female beer brewers looked to the Association for support in their legal struggles with the colonial authorities, were they inspired by ideas of "African familyhood", or simply working through a convenient set of interlocutors for resolving local problems? On the whole, however, this is an important book. Much like the hopes of the African Association, the questions it poses should resonate beyond the borders of Tanzania itself.

George Roberts, University of Sheffield