



Catastrophe or catalyst?

African and African Diasporas' visions arising from World War One

Conference Report

World War One was a watershed moment for Africans and African Diasporas in North America and Europe. From the suffering, hardship, and also the new opportunities created by the conflict, new visions of the future emerged. It has long been understood that in the wake of the so-called Great War, the elites of Europe and the US imagined a 'New World Order' of international co-operation, and new demands for political and economic rights jumped to centre-stage amongst the working classes of Europe and the Americas. But, despite the renewed interest surrounding the 100th anniversary of the "Great War", the global and especially the extra-European dimensions of what has been called Europe's "seminal catastrophe" of the 20th century (Kennan) are still widely understudied.

In order to shed light on World War One experiences in Africa and in African Diaspora communities, and to make an innovative contribution to the multitude of commemorative events on the "Great War" in 2014, the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies hosted an international conference "Catastrophe or catalyst? African and African Diasporas' visions arising from World War One" from 2 – 4 October 2014, where scholars from England, Nigeria, Jamaica, Finland, Cameroon, Italy, Poland and Germany presented lectures and papers on the nature and emergence of these visions. The conference was organized by Achim von Oppen, Susanne Lachenicht, Annalisa Urbano and Christine Whyte, with the assistance of Max Krogoll, Hanza Diman and Fabian Becker. Together, they are the Bayreuth Academy Sub-project "Narratives of the Future in Modern African and Atlantic History", which aims to examine narratives of the future developed by Africans and African Diasporas, "at home" and "abroad", narratives that emerged beyond but by no means separated from Europe. As part of this Sub-project, the team wanted to discuss if and how World War One was a catastrophe not only for Europe but also for Africa and for African Diaspora communities, or rather became a catalyst for new ideas about their future.

The participants quickly agreed that World War One was not solely a catastrophe or a catalyst for Africa and African Diasporas but rather both. It was a catastrophe with regard to the suffering and duress it inflicted on soldiers and civilians alike, as particularly emphasized by David Killingray (Goldsmiths, University of London) in his opening lecture. But the war was also a catalyst that ignited new struggles for rights and new visions of a "better" future in Africa after World War One. Natalia Stachura (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland), for instance, used the example of the sinking of the SS Mendi in 1917, which to this day remains a focal point in South-African memories of the war, to show how influential a catastrophic event could be for political and cultural struggles for recognition

in a divided society. James Olusegun Adeyeri (Lagos State University, Nigeria) used the example of homecoming Nigerians who had participated in the war as combatants or labourers, to show how the experiences of the war provided a platform for new demands for social, economic and political rights in the context of colonial society. Several papers illustrated how the war fostered African attempts to leverage their loyalty to one empire (or to another) in order to improve their position under colonial rule (e.g. Kam Kah, Inal, Frenz).

But the different presentations also demonstrated what different effects the experience of the conflict could have. Demands and visions resulting from these experiences often differed or even appear contradictory for different African regions and groups, from the Eastern and Southern African theatres of war through the Horn of Africa colonial recruiting grounds to politically engaged West African observers. Anne Samson (Great War in Africa Association, UK) showed that many different visions of the future could be present in one state (South Africa), while Uoldelul Chelati Dirar (University of Macerata, Italy), in his lecture, gave insights on how different perceptions and reactions to the war were in the Horn of Africa. Henry Kam Kah's (University of Buea, Cameroon) presentation illustrated how the perception of colonial rule was divided in Cameroon after the change from German to French colonial rule in 1919.

Drawing broader connections and comparisons, the conference was not limited to Sub-saharan Africa but also engaged with visions emerging in African diasporas such as the Caribbean, where the war sparked a campaign for the enfranchisement of women (Dalea Bean, UWI, Jamaica), or in Egypt where unfulfilled promises by the Entente ultimately led to the founding of the Society of the Muslim Brothers, the so-called Muslim Brotherhood (Sibel Inal, University of Bayreuth, Germany). The war's stimulation of struggles for equal rights in colonial Africa by a non-African diaspora, namely South Asians in British East Africa, was examined by Margret Frenz (University of Oxford, UK).

The conference showed how multifaceted the topic really is. It was therefore suggested by Jan-Georg Deutsch (University of Oxford, UK) that it may not be the war in Africa that should be studied but the societies which were affected by it. This would help to overcome the Eurocentric view of World War One as a strictly European conflict, which according to David Killingray (Goldsmiths College, University of London, UK) can never give an accurate depiction of the nature of the war.

In the concluding session, agreement was reached that this conference's approach to the history of World War One, emphasizing its hard implications as well as its manifold effects on new departures in African societies and the African Diasporas, is a fruitful one and can open up new fields of research not only in the study of World War One, but also in global history at large. The Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies will continue to pursue this innovative approach to produce insights into visions of the future in African history, beyond eurocentrist tendencies to look only at how futures were imposed from the outside. For the future of this research project itself, a publication of selected papers from this conference is planned. At a later stage, perhaps around the centenary of the end of World War One, a larger conference on this topic may be envisaged to be held in Africa itself, still as part of the Bayreuth Academy's overall project "Future Africa – Visions in Time", currently funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) in the frame of its funding priority "Strengthening and Advancing the Area Studies".