

ECAS9 – 31 May - 3 June 2023

Paper by Yusra Abdullahi

I attended the ninth edition of the European Conference on African Studies that took place from May 31st to June 3rd in Cologne, Germany. The theme was ‘African Futures’ and it sought to examine the crucial global entanglements of the African continent in the past, present, and future, with a particular focus on Africa’s ever-rapid expansion. Multiplicity, circulation, and adaptability were concepts and practises that were explored to define living realities and to further understand the archetypical characterisation of the continent as a futuristic laboratory.

ECAS9 was easily the largest conference I have attended thus far, and it attracted over 1900 delegates from 80 countries who collectively presented 1400 papers. Out of the 245 panels, I attended nine, and my own panel, *Reinventing Uganda: Political Imagination and Social Change After the Fall of Idi Amin (1979-1980)*, took place on the last day of the conference. The panel focused on the numerous visions of a post-Amin future espoused by Ugandan communities. There was a keen focus on marginalised communities and the ways in which they both envisioned and embraced political change while also pursuing their own agendas. I was the last speaker of the day and presented the paper, ‘From Karamoja to Kampala: The Rebuilding of a Somali-Ugandan Community’, which was on how the Somali-Ugandan community recovered agency after the fall of Amin as they galvanised around the shared agenda of building businesses successful enough to accrue political leverage in the era of the country’s next regime. Drawing from oral history interviews conducted in Kampala and Jinja in the 2018-2020 period, I shared the narrations of Somali-Ugandan elders who, in the early 1980s, worked to establish their community as one to be reckoned with in Ugandan economic life, as well as their lobbying to be recognised as one of Uganda’s official tribes. Somali-Ugandans rose in both politics and business after Amin’s fall, rejected marginalisation, and carved a standing in Ugandan society whereby they were able to influence national affairs.

Overall, I had a fantastic and fruitful five days in Cologne as I attended fascinating talks and roundtables, was introduced to new topics, got to know many wonderful academics, and (re)connected with colleagues from Leiden University, all while learning more about the new scholarship being published on the African continent.

Eighth International APH PhD Conference – 7-9 June 2023

The Association for Political History (APH) organised its eight international PhD conference, ‘The Mobility of Politics, the Politics of Mobility,’ on June 7, 8, and 9 at the University of Padova, based in Padua, Italy. I participated at the request of my research school, the Research School of Political History, based in Amsterdam. The three-day gathering brought together History PhD candidates from all over Europe who were affiliated with political history research schools in their respective countries. Aimed at promoting Political History, the APH drew linkages between mobility studies and the humanities as the conference’s theme focused on the mobility of politics, i.e., how did the circulation of ideas contribute to the formation of political ideologies and movements, and the politics of mobility, i.e., in which ways did politics impact the mobility of ideas?

My presentation, ‘The Rwenzururu Movement and its Uphill Battle for Self-Determination,’ took place on the second day of the conference as part of the panel ‘Political Activism,’ with

Leiden University professor Henk te Velte as discussant. In light of the mobility of ideas, my paper focused on the various strategies instrumentalised by the Rwenzururu movement to disseminate ideologies, foster solidarity, and draw upon a shared heritage to mobilise a patriotic movement. Three main methods used by Rwenzururians were hereby explored. First, the exhortation of repositories of history to attract widespread support from followers. Second, the composition of activist songs to voice injustice, arouse sentiments of hope, and praise the virtues of Rwenzururian cultural revival. Third, the internationalisation of the movement through its international petitioning at the United Nations as well as the Organisation for African Unity. The paper thus emphasised the range of ideas and practices that spurred the formation and growth of the Rwenzururu movement, which, although it never achieved internationally recognised self-determination, left an imprint on Ugandan history.

The APH PhD conference provided ample opportunity to engage with fellow PhDs working in the field of Political History from different perspectives, and it also broadened my insights into the field itself. As a member of the Research School of Political History, most scholarship that I have come across during our monthly sessions has been heavily focused on Europe, so it was refreshing that some conference participants covered case studies based outside of the Global North. Generally, the conference offered us PhD candidates with the opportunity to not only present our projects and receive in-depth feedback from senior scholars, but it also strengthened international networks for Europe-based PhD candidates.

New International Histories of Decolonisation and the UN – 14 June 2023

On June 14th, the workshop ‘New International Histories of Decolonisation and the UN’ took place at the European University Institute (EUI), based in Florence, Italy. Organised by the Department of History, the workshop looked at new and interrelated histories of decolonisation at the United Nations and brought academics working on these topics into dialogue. The workshop consisted of two panels: ‘Decolonisation in Peripheral UN Spaces’ and ‘Colonial Continuities at the UN,’ of which I presented on the latter.

Presenting once again on the Rwenzururu movement, this time I focused specifically on its claims-making attempts at the UN in addition to the deafening silence the UN exhibited in regard to the movement’s incessant pleas for self-determination and protection from the brute force of the Ugandan government. At the heart of the Rwenzururu movement’s struggles was the indomitable belief that theirs was a struggle of decolonisation, as the Ugandan state was seen as an alien force subjecting Rwenzururians to their illegitimate rule. This belief shone through in their petitions to the UN, as Rwenzururu activists deliberately used liberatory language to appeal for the UN’s assistance. I also touched upon the movement’s fluid view of the UN, as it regarded the international organisation in the 1960s as a beacon of hope, whereas in the 1970s petitions took on a more incendiary tone and accused the organisation of maintaining Ugandan interests only. In the concluding remarks of the presentation, I theorised several reasons that could explain the UN’s silence on the secessionist matter, including the fact that the Rwenzururu movement’s activities were scarcely reported outside of Uganda’s traditional borders.

The workshop at EUI proved to be highly fruitful as it sparked discussions of the ‘dark’ side of the UN, what happens to unfilled self-determination claims, the problematic nature of the binary language of ‘success’ versus ‘failure,’ the gatekeeping function of the UN in terms of deciding whose voices are heard and whose voices are drowned out, as well as who is granted

self-determination and who is not. All in all, the Q&A certainly left me with lots to think about as I proceed to write the second chapter of my dissertation on the Rwenzururu movement at the UN.