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Race and Empire: Eugenics in Colonial Kenya

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Before the 1980s, the powerful link between empire and race was marginalised in British imperial history. The postcolonial 'turn' opened up new ways of exploring racial constructions of colonised subjects and stimulated debate over the extent to which representations of the colonised in colonial discourse underpinned imperial power. In *Race and Empire*, based on an AHRB/C-funded research project, Chloe Campbell, who now works in publishing, reverts to a more conventional approach in her rigorous and detailed analysis of the Kenyan eugenics movement during the inter-war years. Her key aim is to redress the neglect of imperial eugenic movements through a case study of Kenya, tracing the 'transportation and mutation of British eugenic thought as it moved through the imperial conceptual network' (p. 3). The British eugenics movement, she argues, was the 'intellectual mother ship' for the Kenyan movement (p. 11). In the 1930s, however, the British Eugenics Society (founded in 1926) sought to distance itself from the Kenyan eugenicists. This was prompted by Nazi racism and by the growing momentum of attacks on what was now regarded as 'unfashionable' racial science, from the left and biologists such as Lancelot Hogben and Julian Huxley, that emphasised environment over genes and heredity. In the wider context, this reflected the deepening gulf between Kenyan settler society and the metropole over the question of African rights.

The Kenyan Society for the Study of Race Improvement (KSSRI) was founded in 1933. Its members were mostly urban professionals and government officers eager to form what was seen as an 'intellectual movement' (p. 6). The immediate context was the Depression that reached its peak in the early 1930s and affected the Kenyan economy, and the British government's rejection of settler demands for political control as a result of the Hilton Young Commission, 1929. Eugenics took root in the Kenyan medical profession, argues Campbell, partly because it promised 'rational, biological solutions to perceived problems ... of African development' (p. 69). There were, however, splits in the Kenya colonial service between those who were in favour of African development and emphasised environmental factors in African 'backwardness' and those who were opposed on the grounds of heredity and innate racial traits.

A recurrent theme of the book is the 'movement of ideas within the imperial system' (p. 178). Campbell's study reveals a complex network of relations between metropolis and colony centred on differing views of the 'African mind' and African capacities for development. Within the movement itself there were hardliners who emphasised biological differences framed in the language of scientific racism, and progressive liberals, mainly colonial officials as opposed to resident settlers, who emphasised the social hygiene aspects of eugenics in aiding development and addressing the problems of rapid change and urbanisation. Across the spectrum of views within the eugenics movement there was unity of purpose in addressing the problems of rapid change, particularly urbanisation and 'detrribalisation' resulting from the development of the colonial economy. Contemporary racial discourse romanticised the 'bush pagan', while the 'detrribalised' urban worker and what Graham Greene referred to as the 'trouserred, bespectacled [African] clerk', epitomised in Joyce Carey's novel *Mr Johnson* (1939), were ridiculed and despised (1). Urbanisation was associated with juvenile delinquency, family breakdown, prostitution and venereal diseases, criminality and mental instability.

The leading figures in the eugenics movement were doctors and psychiatrists and progressive settlers such as Eleanor 'Nellie' Grant, mother of Elspeth Huxley, the biographer of Lord Delamere, the British aristocrat who established the colony as a private fiefdom and remained central in Kenyan settler politics until his death in 1931. Much eugenics research in Kenya was directed to the question of mental deficiency, or '*amentia*', in Africans, pathologising the brain of the Kenyan native as inferior. The progressive faction supported this on the grounds that it would provide a better informed understanding of African life and facilitate the 'scientifically informed pursuit of native development' (p. 6). The fulcrum of the movement was the influential psychiatrist, Dr Henry Laing Gordon, a settler doctor in Kenya from 1925 who became president of the Kenyan branch of the British Medical Association in 1931. Gordon was supported by Sir Edward Grigg, Governor of Kenya from 1925 to 1930, and Leopold Amery, the Secretary of State for Colonies (1924-9) and a close friend of Grigg (p. 95). Gordon, argues Campbell, 'shaped a new and extreme interpretation of racial difference' (p. 40). Interestingly, she observes, Julian Huxley, who was associated with challenges to scientific racism and had Kenyan connections, supported Gordon as late as 1938, long after many in Britain regarded him as a 'charlatan' (p. 85).

Of the three main strands of British eugenics - heredity, meliorism or social improvement (which attracted reformist socialists), and Malthusianism (population control) - only heredity and meliorism survived in Kenyan eugenics. The key emphasis was on providing biological evidence of innate racial difference. This became central to the debate over race and intelligence as education was fundamental to new Colonial Office policies to promote African development. The welfare, development and meliorative aspect of the eugenics movement attracted the more liberal and progressive colonial officers and settlers, like Nellie Grant. These aspects are explored in the final chapter which contains some interesting insights into attitudes towards juvenile delinquency as a symptom of the problems of development. As in South Africa, where there were similar concerns over young male *Tsotsis*, juvenile delinquency was blamed on family dislocation but, as Campbell emphasises, the subtext was doubts about the suitability of Africans for urban life (p. 169).

Campbell's study is coherently organised, exploring the different facets of the eugenics movements in both colony and metropole. Chapter one effectively sets the context; chapter two focuses on British eugenics, empire and race. This is followed in chapter three by a detailed examination of Kenyan medical discourse

and eugenics, while the fourth chapter reverts to the metropolitan arena, focusing on the reception of Kenyan racial theories in Britain. Kenyan eugenicists lobbied for funding in Britain to establish a research programme in Nairobi to investigate the causes of 'African backwardness' and Gordon was elected to the consultative council of the Eugenics Society in 1939 (he died in 1947). Chapter five returns to Kenya, providing an analysis of the KSSRI and settler attitudes to race and eugenics to demonstrate how the Kenyan eugenics movement 'both chimed and at times subtly clashed with settler prejudices and preoccupations' (p. 114). The final chapter examines the link between biology, development and welfare, focusing on debates about juvenile delinquency, mental health, criminal insanity and African educatability.

Race and Empire is scrupulously researched, using a wide range of archival sources located in Britain and Kenya, and additional primary sources. The author provides a thorough, in-depth study of the Kenyan eugenics movement from different perspectives, highlighting networks elaborating race discourses and interconnecting Kenya to other white settler states, particularly South Africa, and to the metropolitan centre. The responses of different agents to the eugenics agenda are examined, including doctors and scientists, metropolitan eugenicists, settlers, colonial officials, the Colonial Office and philanthropic funding bodies such as the American Carnegie Foundation (which had a strong interest in an African education agenda that would counteract the destabilising impact of social and economic change). In developing her arguments Campbell engages with seminal studies on race and/or empire and settler societies by Dane Kennedy (1987), Saul Dubow (1995), Elazar Barkan (1992), Paul Rich (1990) and Jock McCulloch (1995).

All this is commendable; Campbell's monograph expands on existing works on the eugenics movements in Europe and the Americas and will certainly be of value to those with an interest in the history of race, empire and eugenics. In her key aims Campbell is successful. But the author's strengths are in her specialised study of Kenya and the book only partially reflects her claim to demonstrate how different eugenicist movements in different parts of the world 'were shaped by national cultures and associated with different political and social interests and ambitions' (p. 24). The language and preoccupations of the Kenyan eugenicists, discredited and offensive as they are now, were not unique to a defensive settler society but part of a much wider movement in Europe and the USA that nourished the extreme policies of Nazi Germany. It was these ominous developments in the 1930s that stimulated a rejection of scientific racism. Furthermore, the author might have addressed more incisively the contribution of eugenics to the shaping of racial attitudes to Kenyan Africans in comparison to other influences - racial psychology, American racial science, anthropology and liberal paternalism. After all, the KSSRI only had 60 members at a time when there were 16,812 European settlers. Linked to this is Campbell's handling of congruencies and divergences between different racial discourses, scientific, eugenicist and liberal, which is the weakest aspect of the book.

Additionally, the analysis is rather too dense in places, detracting from the clarity of themes and arguments. The text could have read more fluidly in parts and, additionally, in driving home some of the key points, the author tends to repetition. Some terms, such as 'colonial imperialism' (p. 19) needed fuller definition and, at times, the arguments are not very convincingly made or appear somewhat naive. For instance, initially, Campbell argues that race was not an issue in British eugenics (p. 1), yet later on the point is made that the 'language of race abounded in eugenic discourse' (p. 19). A more incisive study of the centrality of race in metropolitan discourse would have helped to reinforce her arguments about imperial knowledge/discourse networks. In the metropolitan context, anxieties over miscegenation, and the alleged resultant racial degeneration, intensified with the increase in 'coloured' residents in major ports and cities. M. E. Fletcher's *Report on the Investigation into the Colour Problem in Liverpool and Other Ports* (1930), which focused particularly on the social problems of 'halfcaste' children and adolescents, was sponsored by the Eugenics Society and reflected such preoccupations (2).

More could also have been made of the opponents of eugenics, and the significance of the development of anti-colonial nationalism and anti-racism in this period. Mention is made of the letters of the educated Ugandan, K. Kisonole, to the KSSRI (pp. 123-4). There is also reference to the nationalist leader, Jomo Kenyatta, and to Parmenas Githendu Mockerie, author of *An African Speaks for his People* (1934) and one of the founders of the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association. KISA was linked to the formation of independent churches and constituted a challenge to schools run by missionaries and the government and

intensified the debate around race and intelligence (pp. 133-8). Given the significance of these developments in the 1930s, they warranted fuller discussion as essential context to Kenyan eugenics and its link to validating settler supremacy. Omissions of oppositional viewpoints also apply to the upsurge of metropolitan anti-colonialism in the 1930s. The Kenyan settler state and its treatment of Africans was a focus of metropolitan liberal and left critics of colonialism, including Norman Leys, author of *A Last Chance in Kenya* (1931), and a doctor in the Kenyan medical service before retirement in 1918, who is briefly mentioned.

The author is so close to her subject, of which she is undoubtedly in command, that the wider context is sometimes forgotten. Kenya was not unique and similar debates relating to the innate characteristics of the 'native' or 'primitive' mind occurred in Australia, South Africa, Rhodesia, and indeed throughout sub-Saharan colonial Africa. As education became a development priority, African (and African American) men were deemed suitable to 'vocational' rather than to academic education. Such issues divided the more conservative paternalists from the progressive liberals and left, who supported African progress to independence. Debates about education were also gendered. Most discussions about race, intelligence and difference referred to male colonial subjects. Here, Campbell misses the opportunity to integrate a gender dimension to her study. Eugenics and the new scientific and biomedical discourse of hygiene, health and welfare also gave greater priority to colonised mothers and to the moral and sexual health of colonised and coloniser. The breakdown of patriarchal controls over women with migration to the cities was seen as a primary cause of social problems such as illegitimacy, juvenile delinquency and venereal diseases that also concerned eugenicists. Kenyan pro-eugenicists like Nellie Grant were involved in schemes to 'uplift' women, and thus their communities in general, through domestic science and 'home life' education emphasising health, cleanliness and hygiene (3).

Race and empire focuses primarily on the 1930s and the eugenics movement reflected the 'modernity of the colonial project in Africa' (p. 3). The aim was to create a society based on insights from eugenics research, envisaging Kenya as a laboratory for 'scientific colonialism' (p. 3). In metropolitan policy, however, a new discourse of racial equality was emerging that was incorporated into official Colonial Office policy during the Second World War. There was now more emphasis on social research as a basis for development. Rejection of scientific racism was reflected in an emphasis on economic modernisation, education and the metamorphosis, in colonial discourse, of the colonial subject into a potential commonwealth citizen. Influential agents of these changes, including the architect of the monumental *An African Survey* (1938), Sir Malcolm (later Lord) Hailey, distanced themselves from the eugenics-based research in Kenya (p. 108). Leading cultural anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski, who visited Kenya in the 1930s, were also openly critical and scornful of eugenicists (p. 24). With these developments the Kenyan eugenicists became more isolated, as did the wider settler society, which was increasingly at odds with official commitment to 'native paramountcy' as opposed to white settler supremacy.

These developments reflected important changes in the context and articulation of racial discourse. Where racial inequalities and divisions existed these were now attributed to cultural and environmental factors, not to innate racial characteristics, and it was assumed that progress towards equality was possible with education and social and economic development. A new language of cultural and ethnic difference thus emerged to replace the now discredited language of scientific racism. Eugenics, observes Campbell, was 'swiftly, though not entirely convincingly' displaced as the key to racial difference in post-war Kenya (p. 185). But, she adds, as the Kenyan settlers became more entrenched with the emergence of Mau Mau in the 1950s, biological arguments for racial difference were revived, albeit with a heavier emphasis on environmental factors (p. 184). As in apartheid South Africa, culture and ethnicity became euphemisms for race in official discourse (4). Belief in innate racial difference persisted, however. With the emergence of socio-biology and the new racism in the 1980s, questions of nature/nurture were revisited in explaining enduring racial/cultural differences. Thus the key value of this book for advanced students and scholars, who will be its main market, is that it expands on existing studies of eugenics in Europe and the Americas (amply referenced in the book) to include the imperial eugenics movement, providing valuable additional historical context to the evolution of a British imperial race discourse that echoes still into the present.

Notes

1. B. Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919-1945* (London, 1999), pp. 59, 69. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Bush, *Imperialism*, p. 229. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. B. Bush, 'Gender and empire: the twentieth century', in *Gender and Empire*, ed. P. Levine (Oxford, 2004), p. 105. See also A. L. Stoler and F. Cooper, 'Between metropole and colony: rethinking a research agenda', in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. A. L. Stoler and F. Cooper (Berkeley, Calif., 1997), pp. 26-31. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. S. Dubow, 'Ethnic euphemisms and racial echoes', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20 (1994), 355. [Back to \(4\)](#)

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