

Report on the Cambridge/Africa Collaborative Research Programme, 2007-2008

The theme of the 2007-2008 visiting fellows' programme was *Religion and Public Culture in Africa*. The Centre of African Studies at Cambridge invited researchers based in Africa to interrogate the thesis of secularization that predicts decline in the public importance of religion. The call for applications noted how the spread and diversity of religious forms, most conspicuously Christianity and Islam, exerts an obvious influence on public culture in many parts of Africa. Less obvious but equally important, the invitation went on to state, is the frequent blurring of boundaries between religious and secular spheres. Politicians can be held accountable through religious means, just as religious leaders are subject to worldly laws. Particularly in those countries where democratization has come to be associated with constitutional reform and liberal Human Rights discourses, the need is to investigate the actual interfaces between the religious and the secular. Such investigation eschews prescriptive models of civil society and uncovers important aspects of popular experiences with democracy. The overall objective of this fellowship cohort was to explore the limits and possibilities of secular liberalism under the historically diverse conditions of contemporary Africa.

On the basis of a competitive set of applications, the fellowship was initially offered to five scholars. Unfortunately the only application among these five to address the role and significance of Islam did not lead to a fellowship, because its author could not leave Kenya. As a consequence, the fellows that did take full advantage of the fellowship from early October 2007 until the end of March 2008 all worked on aspects of Christianity: Marja Hinfelaar (National Archives of Zambia) on the debates on secularism in Zambia; Nicholas Kamau (Egerton University, Kenya) on the impact of Christianity on the life and writings of Ngugi wa Thiong'o; Michael Okyerefo (University of Ghana) on the social and medical services of Pentecostalism in Ghana; and Damaris Parsitau (Egerton University, Kenya) on female leadership in Pentecostal ministries and churches in Kenya.

Because this cohort was the first in the Cambridge-Africa Collaborative Research Programme, it was necessary to identify a collaborating institution in Africa before the fellows had arrived in Cambridge. The mentor's research experience in Malawi and the country's eminence in the historical and social study of religion made Chancellor College of the University of Malawi an obvious choice. To this end, a fellowship application was solicited from Fulata Moyo with a view to having her as the local co-organiser of a conference in Malawi. However, although Moyo's application was received and accepted, she was unable to take up the fellowship because of a new position in Geneva.

Apart from these setbacks, the fellowship period was a success. Among the academic activities was a dedicated seminar series during Michaelmas Term at the Centre of African Studies. The well-attended seminars were given by UK-based scholars working on issues related the theme of the fellowship, involving both senior (Afe Adogame, Paul Gifford, David Maxwell and Isak Niehaus) and junior (Ilana van Wyk and Wendy Willems) speakers. Another highlight was the international conference *Christianity and Public Culture in Africa*, co-sponsored by the University's Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) in March 2008. The keynote lecture was given by Birgit Meyer, and the speakers and discussants coming from outside Cambridge included Barbara Cooper and James A. Pritchett from the United States, Rijk van Dijk from the Netherlands, Sverker Finnström from Sweden and Matthew Engelke, Thomas Kirsch and Anthony Simpson from the UK. Several Cambridge-based scholars and the visiting fellows

themselves also presented papers at this conference. The visiting fellows were also regular participants in other events organised at the Centre of African Studies, and they participated in a number of other seminars and workshops in Cambridge, including the African History Seminar and, on invitation from David Lehmann, public lectures on secularism.

In July 2008, the Centre of African Studies brought the fellows to Chancellor College in Zomba, Malawi, in line with the objectives of the Cambridge-Africa Collaborative Research Programme. After Moyo's move to Geneva, and several other developments following retirements and resignations, the college's Department of Theology and Religious Studies did not have enough academic staff to host a conference dedicated to the study of religion. Instead, Blessings Chinsinga from the Department of Administrative and Political Studies emerged as a highly efficient local co-organiser, and the conference assumed the theme *Exploring Malawi's Publics*, thereby giving the fellows an opportunity to share with their Malawian counterparts what they had learned about the notions of public culture and the public sphere during their stay in Cambridge. The opening session was graced by Leonard Kamwanja, Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of Malawi; Eston Sambo, Vice Principal of Chancellor College; and Derek R. Peterson. The visiting fellows presented their work in two dedicated sessions on the first day, while the rest of the conference was devoted to nine papers on Malawian topics, seven of which were given by Malawian scholars. A roundtable discussion at the end of the conference brought the visiting fellows into a dialogue with Wiseman Chirwa, one of Malawi's leading public intellectuals and a professor of history, under Derek R. Peterson's chairmanship. The conference clearly enabled the visiting fellows to appreciate the value of academic exchange within Africa.

The fellows' individual accomplishments gave rise to a considerable degree of satisfaction that they all expressed at the end of their stay in Cambridge. All of them had abstracts accepted for major international conferences that will take place after the fellowship period, and everyone also visited other universities in the UK to present papers or establish relevant academic contacts. Marja Hinfelaar, for example, presented papers not only in Cambridge but also in Oxford and Sheffield, whereas Damaris Parsitau presented in Edinburgh, Oxford and, very soon after her fellowship, Copenhagen. Nicholas Kamau listed as his most cherished experience his meeting with Wangui Goro and Simon Gikandi in London, Ngugi's translator and scholarly interlocutor, respectively. All four fellows have papers in preparation for the volume arising from the conference on *Christianity and Public Culture in Africa*, and all of them had also submitted papers to other publications by the end of their fellowship. Regular one-to-one sessions with the mentor explored problems with academic English and gave the fellows an opportunity to develop their ideas beyond formal seminar situations.

The 2007-2008 fellowship cohort was a remarkably conscientious, cohesive and good-humoured group of scholars. The only significant distraction was well beyond the control of the Centre of African Studies. The Kenyan elections of December 2007 affected the fellows' work morale for some weeks, and Damaris Parsitau, in particular, would probably have made more progress if the events had not unfolded during her stay in Cambridge. The Centre offered her a chance to visit her family in Kenya during the crisis, but she declined because her home was not reachable then. It bore testimony to the spirit of mutual support within the group that she, along with the others, had resumed an intense schedule of work well before the end of the fellowship.

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