CONTENTS

Editorial

THEMATIC SECTION: HISTORY TEXTBOOK RESEARCH AND REVISION
Stuart Foster Dominant Traditions in International Textbook Research and Revision
Romain Faure Connections in the History of Textbook Revision, 1947–1952
Thomas Nygren UNESCO and Council of Europe Guidelines, and History Education in Sweden, c. 1960–2002
Henrik Åström Elmersjö The Meaning and Use of “Europe” in Swedish History Textbooks, 1910–2008
Janne Holmén Nation-Building in Kenyan Secondary School Textbooks
Erik Sjöberg The Past in Peril – Greek History Textbook Controversy and the Macedonian Crisis

OPEN SECTION
Elisabet Malmström Beyond the word, within the sign: Inquiry into pre-school children’s handmade pictures about schooling
Ingrid Helleve & Marit Ulvik Is individual mentoring the only answer?
Majid N. Al-Amri Getting Beyond Conversation Analysis
Ulf Blossing & Sigrun K. Ertesväg An individual learning belief and its impact on schools’ improvement work
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Nation-Building in Kenyan Secondary School Textbooks

Janne Holmén*

Abstract
This article examines how issues of national, Pan-African and tribal identities are handled in Kenyan upper secondary school textbooks for History and Government. Kenya is a multi-ethnic country without a common pre-colonial history. As a result, the historical record does not easily provide a common narrative with which to unify the nation. To compensate for the absence of a national narrative textbooks propagate and advance particular themes and national ideologies such as “African socialism”, “Harambee” and “Nyayoism”. Although unable to present a national narrative as a unifying factor, at the Pan-African level Kenyan textbooks stress the common African experience of European colonialism. Significantly, African nationalism is seen as unifying and liberating, whereas European nationalism is described as aggressive and oppressive. However, while the Kenyan textbooks describe the nation as in need of being constructed the tribes are taken for granted, despite research indicating that tribal identities themselves are often recent constructions. As a consequence, although national unity is stated as the primary goal of Kenyan History and Government education, school textbooks ironically do more to strengthen tribal identity than national identity.

Keywords: nation building, Kenya, textbook research, history education, civil education

Introduction
Education and school textbooks have been one of the modern state’s most important vehicles for the spread of national ideology (Woolf, 1996:27f.). Accordingly, the role of nationalism in European and North American textbooks was thoroughly studied early on (e.g. Carlgren & Söderberg, 1928; Walworth, 1938). In the climate of internationalism and anti-war sentiments following the First World War, research was initiated in order to come to terms with the excessive nationalism in European textbooks (Vigander, 1961). Recent textbook research has indicated that traditional national narratives have been challenged by globalisation, decolonisation and, in the case of Europe, the emerging construction of a European identity (Schiessler & Nuhoglu Soysal, 2005).

By now, textbooks from most areas of the globe have been investigated. For example, China was the focus of textbook research as far back as 1933 (Tsang, 1933), and in recent decades an increased amount of research into Middle Eastern, Asian and Latin American nationalism in textbooks has been conducted (see, for example, Podeh, 2000; Mizobe, 1997; Nava, 2006). Despite this proliferation of research there
is, however, still a lack of research on the African continent. In addition, almost all existing research into African school textbooks has focused on South Africa (see, for example Auerbach, 1965; Siebörger, 2000). Woolman (2001) has, in a comparison of curriculum reforms in Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria and Kenya since independence, investigated the strategies of educationalists aiming at nation-building in a multicultural environment. However, he does not focus on the content of the textbooks but on the structure of the education system. According to Woolman, it was important to reform the educational structures from the colonial era since they functioned to maintain elitism and dependency upon the colonial powers.

The lack of research on nationalism in African textbooks is probably partly a result of the fact that African states are difficult to fit into the standard model of nation-states. It may be argued that it is difficult to find states anywhere in the world where the population shares a common history, language and culture, but African nations offer more extreme exceptions as they are often heavily ethnically fragmented constructions of recent European imperialism. Strengthened national identities are but one possible avenue of future development since tribal and Pan-African identities appear to offer equally viable and relevant alternatives. Certainly, if we want to more fully understand phenomena such as nationalism and the role of education in nation-building, it is richly informative to focus on the extreme circumstances of Africa, where nationalism is under pressure from other potent, collective identities. Indeed, the extent to which the relative weakness of national identity in Africa makes the educational system’s role in nation-building even more crucial than in other countries is an area worthy of close investigation. This article will therefore investigate how the Kenyan textbook series *The Evolving World* (2004-2005), intended for History and Government studies in secondary school, handles sub-national, tribal and Pan-African identity. It is intended as a pilot study for a larger comparative research project including Kenyan, Tanzanian and Ethiopian school textbooks. Nevertheless, this small-scale study offers new insights into how national identity is constructed in school textbooks in an important African country.

**Nationalism and the Goals of Kenyan Education**

The most renowned theorists of nationalism, Anderson and Smith, have developed competing theories of how national identity arises. Anderson (1983) emphasises the nations’ constructed nature, regarding them as products of intentional political attempts at nation-building. According to Anderson, whose primary area of study is Southeast Asia, the decisive factor behind the rise of nationalism in former colonies is the existence of a local bureaucracy that can move freely within the colony, but is barred from a career outside it. Smith (1986) believes that nation-building requires the pre-existence of a core “ethnie” who share a common denomination, a myth of origin, a common history, a distinct common culture, a territory and a sense of solidarity. Some critics have argued that Smith’s model is not applicable to Africa, where a central ethnie does not
exist in most states (Palmberg, 2009). However, Smith frequently refers to the continent in his writings such as when he explains the distinction between “full” and “depleted” ethnies. The first category is represented by Ethiopia, rich in myths and history, while depleted ethnies like Kenya and Tanzania lack traditions of a common ancestry. Since, in the case of these countries, ethnicity could not form the basis of national unity, they have attempted nation-building through the creation of one-party states, which Smith describes as a form of political religion (Smith, 1986:11).

No political unit comparable to present-day Kenya existed before the advent of British colonial power. Kenya is a country inhabited by numerous tribes, with none of them constituting more than a minority of the population. The largest ethnic group, the Kikuyu, making up 22% of the country’s population, has been the most politically and economically dominant group after the country’s independence in 1963. In The Evolving World they are named “Agikuyu”, but here I will use the term “Kikuyu” which, although less linguistically correct, is more commonly used. Smith (1986:148) describes them as the core ethnie around which the Kenyan nation is formed – although earlier in the same book he states that Kenya was a depleted ethnie. Yet several scholars have claimed that, like many other tribes in Kenya, the Kikuyu did not have a strong group consciousness before the Europeans identified them as a group during the colonial period; until then they could best be described as a language group (Breuilly, 2005; Gicau, 1999).

As with most African states, Kenya can be described as a territorial nation where nationality is defined by the territory and not by ethnic origin. According to Smith, civic education is potentially the most significant feature of territorial nationalism. “If ethnic cleavages are to be eroded ... this can be done only by a pronounced emphasis on inculcating social mores in a spirit of civic equality and fraternity” (Smith 1991:118f.). Civic education might be seen as an updated equivalent to the “political religion of the one party state” that Smith referred to in 1986; in the early 1990s multi-party systems were introduced all over the world in former one-party states, including Kenya.

Smith’s words about the importance of civic education in unifying multiethnic states are almost echoed in the National Goals of Education described on page one of a Kenyan teachers’ guide (Maina, Oboka and Makong’o, 2004), where goal number one is “National unity”:

Education in Kenya must foster a sense of nationhood and promote national unity. Much as Kenyans belong to different ethnic groups, races and religions, their differences should not divide them. They must live and interact in peace and harmony. Education is an avenue through which conflicts can be removed.

The National Goals of Education leave no doubt that nation-building and citizenship are formulated as the primary goal of Kenyan History and Government education. Countries that have adopted what Smith would call “political religions” prefer to use the word “philosophy”; the term religion would probably be resisted by established religions. Authorities in the multi-ethnic states of Southeast Asia have made ambitious
Janne Holmén

attempts to create unity through the use of national philosophies. The Indonesian philosophy, “Pancasila”, formulated in 1945 by Sukarno, includes principles of belief in one God, humanity, unity, democracy (preferably through consensus) and social justice. As universal as the principles seem, “Pancasila” was said to be firmly rooted in traditional Indonesian philosophy, which was even more strongly emphasised during the presidency of Suharto (Darmaputera, 1988 & Purdy, 1984). Anderson (2006) notes that “Pancasila” was originally a set of Buddhist principles referred to in one of the oldest preserved Javanese texts, written in a language incomprehensible to most Indonesians today. After experiencing ethnic riots in 1969, Malaysia adopted the ideology “Rukun Negara” which was very similar in content to “Pancasila”. Both ideologies are compulsory at school; the “Rukun Negara” is even written in the back of school exercise books (Jenkins, 2008:69).

One might argue that in the case of multi-ethnic countries with “depleted ethnies” like Kenya, Smith’s interpretation of the nation-building process is very similar to Anderson’s, emphasising the constructed nature of the nation. It might be the inability of Smith’s general theory – the ethnie as the foundation of nation building – to explain African nationalism that has forced him to develop more particularistic explanations. Thus, this article can be said to rest upon Anderson’s basic theoretical supposition – that nations are recently constructed imagined communities – but it also draws heavily on Smith’s analytical tools.

Smith’s writings offer two complimentary, or even competing, suggestions of which route nation-building in Kenya might take: either through the formation of a national identity around the historical and cultural heritage of the Kikuyu ethnie, or by the way of civic education/political religion. Further, theories of identity distinguish between two processes of identity formation: an external one that emphasises the difference between the own group and “the others”, for example through the commemoration of wars against arch enemies, and one that focuses on the internal creation of myths and symbols (Barth, 1969; Smith, 1986). Of course, these processes do not only work on a national level, as more local (e.g. tribal) and regional (e.g. Pan-African) identities can be shaped through the same means.

The central focus of this article is to explore more fully which strategy Kenyan secondary school textbooks follow in their construction of national identity: is the emphasis placed more on a common heritage or on the creation of a political religion? The article also examines the extent and ways in which textbooks contribute to external and internal formations of tribal, national and Pan-African identities.

Sources and Method

The Evolving World is published by the East African branch of Oxford University Press. Kenyan textbooks for secondary school are designed to prepare students for the KCSE (Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education) examinations, taken after four years of secondary education at an age of 18-19 years. At the end of each textbook, test
papers are provided with questions and correct answers. The test questions encourage students to compile lists, for example: “State three reasons that led the Lozi to collaborate with the British” (TEW 3, 2004:224). Accordingly, to make the students excel with these kinds of questions large parts of the textbooks are lists of causes and effects. The importance of the KCSE exams, which are decisive in selecting students for universities, ensures that education is fairly uniform across the country, regardless of teachers’ sentiments and which textbooks are used. As a consequence of the uniformity, even a small study like this focusing on a single series of textbooks can provide a useful picture of education in Kenyan secondary schools. A survey of the competing textbook series published by East African Educational Publishers (EAEP) indicates that they are very similar in structure and content. The textbooks analysed in this article are from the series The Evolving Word, and are intended for forms three and four (ages 17-19). Textbooks intended for form one and two were surveyed, but none of the themes selected for closer analysis are treated there. Therefore, those books are not included in this study.

The availability of textbooks was a determining factor in selecting the sources of investigation for this study but, since The Evolving World and EAEP’s series together dominates the market for secondary school textbooks in the Kenyan education system, the study gives a robust picture of the textbook situation in most schools. There is, however, a small number of Kenyan private secondary schools that follow the traditional British education system and an even smaller number which follow the US system. The extent to which Kenyan nation-building is taught in schools with foreign education systems is worthy of investigation, but it is outside the scope of this article.

After reading the textbooks the central theories of national identity presented in the previous chapter were employed to decide which themes constitute the textbooks’ most important material for the formation of identities. As a result, the following six themes were selected for a closer qualitative analysis: (1) “nationalism”; (2) “responses to colonialism”; (3) “Pan-Africanism”; (4) “the Mau Mau movement”; (5) “nation-building in Kenya after independence” and (6) “national philosophies”. The names of the themes are descriptive titles constructed for the purpose of the study. Nevertheless, they are remarkably similar or identical to the terminology used by the authors of the textbooks.

**Analysis and Findings**

**1(N1) Nationalism**

African nationalism is described as a reaction to the exploitation and oppression of European colonialism. On African grounds, nationalism is seen as a purely positive, liberating phenomenon. It is defined as “… the desire for independence and self-determination among a group of people” (TEW 3, 2004:133). The authors frequently use the term “African nationalism”. Since it is described as a reaction to a common foreign oppressor, European colonialism, it functions as a unifying concept on a
continental level. In the account of European history nationalism is, however, listed as one of the causes of the two World Wars and of European colonialism in Africa (TEW 4, 2005:5, 23, 33). Thus, The Evolving World clearly distinguishes between good, liberating and unifying African nationalism and bad, aggressive and oppressive European nationalism.

(2) Responses to Colonialism

The Evolving World puts an emphasis on the strategies by which African and Kenyan tribes responded to European imperialism. These are divided into “resistance”, “collaboration” and “mixed reactions”, with examples given of tribes following one or the other. In Kenya, the Nandi, the Agiriama, the Bukusu and the Somali exemplify resistance, while the Masai and the Wanga exemplify collaboration. The Akamba, the Kikuyu and the Luo are used as examples of mixed reactions. The textbooks also mentioned that some of the collaborating Kikuyu amassed great wealth (TEW 3, 2004:37-51).

However, the subject of collaboration and the extent to which some ethnic groups have benefited from it is highly contentious. For example, following the Kenyan presidential elections in December 2007 ethnic violence led to the death of approximately 1,000 people, and many of the victims were wealthy Kikuyu who owned estates on land previously controlled by other tribes like the Nandi.

(3) Pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism is described as “… a movement that aims at the unity of all peoples of African descent all over the world”. According to the textbook, African co-operation was triggered by European exploitation. In some passages, Pan-Africanism is almost equated with nationalism, such as when Pan-Africanism is said to have been reactivated by the strengthening of nationalism on the continent during World War II. However, “national interests” are mentioned in the list of challenges encountered by the Organisation of African Unity. The disintegration in 1977 of the East African Community, comprising Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, is also partly seen as a result of different national interests and pride. The organisation was reborn in 2001 (TEW 4, 2005:86, 95, 113). Since the publication of the 2005 textbook Rwanda and Burundi has joined the EAC, and the organisation aims to establish a federation with a single currency. Significantly, further development of the East African Community might provide educationalists and textbook writers with the dilemma of promoting an East African identity in addition to national and Pan-African identities.

(4) The Mau Mau Movement

In the 1952-1959 period British colonial authorities in Kenya came under pressure from a popular uprising, the Mau Mau rebellion. Most of the fighters came from the Kikuyu population. According to Gicau (1999:24), Kenyan history writing has treated
the Mau Mau uprising as either inspired by Marxism or intended to uphold the Kikuyu hegemony. The official myth has described the popular Mau Mau movement as disruptive since only the modern and Westernised elite was believed to be able to lead in nation-building. In opposition to this view, the writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o wanted to put a focus on the people and on African traditions (Gicau, 1999:24).

In *The Evolving World* Ngugi’s views appear to have triumphed. The Mau Mau movement is described as a popular uprising against the injustices of the colonial government: “The Mau Mau fighters ... resorted to violence to eradicate colonialism, which subjected Africans to all manner of humiliation”. Although it was crushed, it is said to have accelerated the march to independence. One of the causes of the uprising is said to have been the European missionaries’ condemnation of African cultural practices, such as female circumcision: “The female circumcision controversy in central Kenya was one of the factors that aroused deep hostility. Africans were ready to uphold their cultural values at any cost”. The circumcision controversy is also mentioned as a cause of female participation in the independence struggle and as a cause of the formation of independent schools and churches (TEW 3, 2004:102f, 110-116, 123ff).

The textbook’s emphasis on female circumcision might be explained by the fact that Jomo Kenyatta and other politicians in opposition to the collaborators within the Kikuyu took advantage of the controversy. According to Breuilly (2005:186), Kenyatta subsequently fitted female circumcision into a highly developed theory of Kikuyu cultural nationalism.

(5) Nation-Building in Kenya after Independence

The growth of urban centres in Kenya affected people’s identities in a number of ways. The textbooks divide these impacts into the categories “negative” and “positive”. On the positive side, the textbooks emphasise the effects of contacts between people of different ethnic roots, which “... helped water down the differences and prejudices between Kenyan communities, and instilled in them a sense of ‘nationhood’”. Somewhat paradoxically, the adaptation of cultural ideas and practices from other ethnic groups is placed on the negative side. As one textbook declared, this urban culture “... prompted the erosion of African traditions and morals as the Africans imitated western cultural practices” (TEW 3, 2004:83f).

The chapters about Kenyan leaders (Jomo Kenyatta, Tom Mboya and Daniel Arap Moi) from the governing party KANU includes subchapters like “Kenyatta and nation-building”. Long-time opposition leader Oginga Odinga is described as a nationalist in the first paragraph in the chapter dedicated to him. The fifth politician mentioned, Ronald Ngala, is said to have favoured a system of autonomous provinces to avoid dominance by the largest tribes Kikuyu and Luo. In the summary of the section about Kenyan leaders, all five of them are described as nationalists who worked tirelessly for the development of Kenya. The leaders mentioned mirror the ethnic composition of Kenya; that they are all said to have been hardworking nationalists is probably
intended to enhance national cohesion. However, the result of their work does not escape criticism in the textbook. The reign of the first two presidents is said to have included challenges like “... corruption, poverty, the demand for pluralism, authoritarianism, political assassinations and human rights violations, making their regimes unpopular” (TEW 3, 2004:155-173). This openness in discussing the problems challenging present-day Kenya permeates the whole textbook series.

(6) National Philosophies

In *The Evolving World*, a clear nation-building effort can be discerned in the presentation of the national philosophies: “African socialism”, “Harambee” and “Nyayoism”. African socialism was, according to the textbook, coined by KANU in 1963 and was defined as “an African political, economic system that is positively African, not being imported from any country or being a blueprint of any foreign ideology but capable of incorporating useful and compatible techniques from whatever source”. The objectives of “African socialism” are economic progress and equal distribution as well as the enhancement of human and political rights. “African socialism” is communal in nature and, according to the textbook, not based on class struggle. It is described as being “... flexible to ideas that enhance its features without necessarily being purely Marxist or capitalist”. What makes it different from Marxism is the emphasis on mutual social responsibility, drawn from the African practice of the extended family and communal responsibility. The textbook states that it has “... encouraged unity and peaceful coexistence among Kenyan communities” as well as promoted “... a sense of service and patriotism to the nation” (TEW 4, 2005:128ff).

In the textbook “Harambee” is said to be a Swahili slogan meaning “pulling together”. It is, however, not stated that some scholars argue that the word is derived from Hindu railway workers who were praising the goddess Ambee while pulling heavy loads. According to Kenyan media, this “pagan” etymology has recently caused conservative Christians to question the appropriateness of the slogan (Warah 2008). “Harambee” is described in the textbook as voluntary contributions to development projects by way of money, labour or material; in Kenyatta’s words, this meant “... ‘African’ socialism in practice”. The authors list a large number of positive effects of “Harambee”, including the promotion of unity among Kenyans since peoples from different communities have met to contribute towards a worthy cause. However, the textbook does mention that the “Harambee spirit” has been undermined and abused and that greedy individuals have used it for personal gain (TEW 4, 2005:132ff).

“Nyayoism” was adopted at the beginning of Daniel Arap Moi’s presidency in 1978. It is derived from the Swahili word ‘Nyayo’ (‘footsteps’). Moi declared that he intended to follow in the footsteps of his predecessors. The textbook cites Moi’s description of the philosophy: “It is a pragmatic philosophy which crystallises and articulates what has always been African, indigenous and formative in our societies ... not foreign but it is rooted in African past, but new in its trans-tribal application...” (TEW 4, 2005:136).
Also cited is the president’s claim that the pillars of “Nyayoism”: peace, love and unity, are not vague philosophies but practical foundations of countrywide development.

According to the textbook, “Nyayoism” evolved from three sources, with first being “African socialism”. The Christian religion was the second source and, according to the textbook, “Moi, a Christian, believed that through the virtue of love, the people of Kenya would build the nation and work against all forms of disunity”. The third source was Moi’s long political career which had made him realise that nation-building required love: “...Nyayoism is a philosophy of active nationalism for nation-building. It is the spirit which makes people answer to the harambee call…” (TEW 4, 2005:136-137).

The textbook notes that, despite Moi’s appeals for peace, love and unity, his era was rocked by corruption and ethnic clashes. It also states that “Nyayoism” guided Moi in the first 10 years of his 24-year rule, but that his government gradually adopted measures that appeared to antagonise the philosophy. Some of the philosophy’s shortcomings are also attributed to the difficulties in applying peace, love and unity; since people attach different things to these concepts they are difficult to monitor and evaluate (TEW 4, 2005:136-141).

In the textbook’s summary of the philosophies’ impact they are credited with a number of social and economic improvements, but also with the promotion of nation-building, nationalism and patriotism. The ambivalent view on European cultural influence is also seen here. As The Evolving World explicitly states, “The philosophies have promoted African cultures, since they are drawn from African traditions. They encourage the borrowing of relevant cultural values. However, Kenya is in a cultural crisis, as the youth continues to adopt Western cultures” (TEW 4, 2005 p.139-141). Apparently, the youth and the authors of the textbook have different views of which cultural borrowings should be considered relevant.

The textbook also lists some shortcomings of the national philosophies, but attributes them to a lack of commitment, negative reception from the citizens and corruption. “It can be argued that if properly applied, [the philosophies] would provide solutions to the problems that have hampered Kenya’s development since independence” (TEW 4, 2005:141). It is not primarily the philosophies that are criticised, but the decision-makers who have failed to live up to the principles and spirit of African socialism, Harambee and Nyayoism.

Conclusions
In The Evolving World, an historical narrative is presented which play an important role in building Pan-African identity by referring to the common African experience of European colonialism. History does not provide Kenya with a narrative that can unify the entire nation, as the textbook’s division of tribal responses to British colonialism into collaboration and resistance illustrates. Unlike in many other former colonies, the Kenyan “war of liberation”, the Mau Mau movement, has had a divisive rather than a unifying potential. However, this study indicates that a more positive
picture of the Mau Mau is gaining a foothold in present-day school textbooks. Smith’s theory that the Kikuyu tribe constitutes an ethnie around which the Kenyan nation is constructed is not supported by the analysis.

Europeans are definitely “the others” in the Kenyan textbooks’ attempt to create a national identity; but the colonial experience is shared with other African countries and it is primarily used for the formation of a Pan-African identity. Sometimes Pan-Africanism is equated with nationalism. Nationalism is described as a positive, liberating phenomenon in Africa, but is seen as a cause of wars and imperialism in Europe.

The textbooks’ attitudes to cultural borrowings are highly ambivalent. The loss of traditional values and adoption of Western culture is seen as a threat, but the content of traditional culture is seldom elaborated upon. The traditions mentioned in the books are those that European missionaries tried to abolish and which therefore became symbols in the fight against colonialism, the most important of which was the controversy over female circumcision. This means it is the traditions most disliked by the Europeans that are highlighted, rather than those most valued by the indigenous communities. However, the textbook writers do not propagate the continuation of, for example, female circumcision today; it is left unclear which particular African traditions they consider vital for the future and want to preserve from Western influence.

The national philosophies attempt to compensate for the lack of a common Kenyan history and culture by stating that the very act of working together is an old, indigenous African tradition. The supposed communality of the traditional African local society is, via the philosophies, expanded to a national level. It is interesting to note that other multi-ethnic states like Malaysia and Indonesia are propagating similar philosophies in their schools; civic education does indeed seem to be of great importance for territorial nationalism. One of its main functions is the spread of national philosophies, which constitute what Smith describes as political religion. This is in line with Anderson’s view that nations are recently constructed “imagined communities”.

Although increasing attempts have been made in Europe to remove nationalist material from school textbooks in order to promote peace between nations (Schüdekopf 1967:154), it is clear that in an African context, where the main ethnic divisions are found on a sub-national level, nationalism is promoted in textbooks as a means to achieve peace and unity between tribal groups. The textbooks reflect this by describing nationalism as a positive and desirable phenomenon in Africa, but highly negative in Europe. The only negative account of nationalism among African states concerns the East African Community, which is said to have been hampered by national interests.

While the Kenyan textbooks describe the nation as in need of being constructed the tribes are taken for granted, despite research indicating that tribal identities themselves are often recent constructions. As a consequence, although national unity is stated as the primary goal of Kenyan History and Government education, school textbooks ironically do more to strengthen tribal identity than national identity.
Textbooks with Abbreviations


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**Endnotes**

1. TEW 3, 2004:224 refers to the title of the book, *The Evolving World*, used in Form 3, and the date of publication and page number. Full references are listed at the end of the article.
CONTENT
Editorial

THEMATIC SECTION:
Stuart Foster Dominant Traditions in International Textbook Research and Revision
Romain Faure Connections in the History of Textbook Revision, 1947–1952
Thomas Nygren UNESCO and Council of Europe Guidelines, and History Education in Sweden, c. 1960–2002
Henrik Åström Elmersjö The Meaning and Use of “Europe” in Swedish History Textbooks, 1910–2008
Janne Holmén Nation-Building in Kenyan Secondary School Textbooks
Erik Sjöberg The Past in Peril – Greek History Textbook Controversy and the Macedonian Crisis

OPEN SECTION:
Elisabet Malmström Beyond the word, within the sign: Inquiry into pre-school children’s handmade pictures about schooling
Ingrid Helleve & Marit Ulvik Is individual mentoring the only answer?
Majid N. Al-Amri Getting Beyond Conversation Analysis
Ulf Blossing & Sigrun K. Ertesvåg An individual learning belief and its impact on schools’ improvement work