Chapter 2

Eleanor Tiplady Higgs
SOAS University of London, UK

ABSTRACT
This chapter addresses issues of identity and racial exclusion by looking at Christianity and whiteness at the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in the context of late colonial Kenya. Between 1955 and 1965, Kenya YWCA rejected its identity as an organization for white/European women, and became inclusive of African women for the first time. The history of Kenya YWCA written by its last white leader, Vera Harley, is an important source of information about this period in Kenya YWCA’s history. The narrative Harley constructs is an important part of the identity of the organization in the present day. Studying this narrative of ‘race’ and inclusion yields two key insights; firstly, that in late colonial Kenya racial and religious identity were strongly connected, even mutually constitutive. Secondly, women in African contexts have historically been excluded from (some) Christian organisations.

INTRODUCTION
This chapter addresses a part of the history of East Africa by outlining a historical narrative of the Young Women’s Christian Association in colonial Kenya (henceforth, ‘YWCA’), tracing the effects of a gendered whiteness on this organization’s identity in its relation to British imperialism. As such, this research offers historical detail

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8772-1.ch002
Becoming ‘Multi-Racial’

about the YWCA, a worldwide Christian women’s organization that has received surprisingly little academic attention despite its membership base of approximately three million women. More broadly, it also contributes to the literature concerning relationships between white/European women and African women in colonial contexts. Specifically, one particular historical narrative is discussed in terms of its continuing influence on YWCA’s institutional biography up to the present day. This history tells of the period during which the YWCA became a ‘multi-racial’ organization, and both the events described and the narrative itself have had considerable significance for the organization’s identity. The narrative in question is found in Vera Harley’s semi-autobiographical *Rickshaws to Jets: A history and anecdotes of the Kenya YWCA 1912-1965* (1995). Harley was the leader of the YWCA from 1958 to 1964, becoming the last white/European woman to hold that position as a direct result of her own efforts to recruit African women into the YWCA’s leadership.

Kenya YWCA began its life as a racially exclusive organization during the colonial period, at a time when diversity—of ‘race’ or gender—was not a widely-recognized value. The ways that issues of ‘race’ and racism are addressed and avoided in *Rickshaws to Jets* reflects the attitudes of many white/European Christians in late colonial Kenya. This is evident in the very similar trajectories of other groups in colonial Kenya and their responses to Africans’ struggles for independence in the mid- to late-1950s. Before the achievement of independence in 1963, monoracial groups were viewed with suspicion. As Kenya YWCA today is led by and for African women, the organization’s history is also a story of success in the sense that the exclusion of Africans by white/Europeans has been convincingly overcome. In large part, this reflects the changing racial landscape in Kenya after it achieved independence in 1963, and that those white/Europeans who remained in the country withdrew from public leadership positions. Such dynamics underline the fact that histories of racism have produced different YWCAs in different countries. For example, the YWCA of the USA with its mission of ‘eliminating racism, empowering women’ has historically approached racial inequalities in ways that would not make sense in Kenya (Robertson, 2007). Moreover despite a number of similarities, including the impact of European colonization, the YWCAs of South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe have addressed ‘race’ and racism in very different ways due to the specific nature of their (post)colonial contexts (Seymour-Jones, 1994).

Before discussing the context for the journey Kenya YWCA took towards becoming ‘multi-racial’, it is necessary to begin with a brief historical outline of the history of the YWCA, including the wider social and political dynamics of Kenya as a British colony and a site of much Christian missionary activity. Concentrating subsequently on the 1950s and early 1960s, the main focus of this chapter is on the Africanization of the YWCA as represented in Harley’s *Rickshaws to Jets* (1995). Two key insights are drawn from the analysis of Harley’s narrative, both of which