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(eds.). – *Kenya: The Struggle for Democracy*

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REFERENCES

MURUNGA, Godwin R. & NASONG'O, Shadrack W. (eds.). – *Kenya: The Struggle for Democracy*. Dakar, Codesria Books; London-New York, Zed Books, 2007, 344 p., index.

- 1 Though produced well before the hotly contested elections of 2007, the chapters in this volume speak most readily to the deep origins of the ongoing political unrest in Kenya. While the introduction and a number of the chapters sound an optimistic note for the country's political future, each of the authors foregrounds the narrowness of the precipice on which political stability has been balanced in Kenya. The chapters are linked by a consistent focus on the socially, economically, and politically fraught nature of transitioning from a single-party to a multi-party State system. The volume as a whole provides a primer on the intertwined relationship between violence and politics in contemporary Kenya.
- 2 The volume contains a lengthy introduction by the editors on the potentials for democracy in Kenya, and the nine subsequent chapters are organized under broad topical headings: "Civil Society and the Politics of Opposition", "Major Constituencies in the Democratisation Process", and "Donors and the Politics of Structural Adjustment."
- 3 Chapters on gender, youth, and civil society sound the optimistic note the most loudly, while essays on the police, intellectuals, and the contemporary opposition call attention to the dirty histories in which these groups have been variously imbricated and to tenuousness of their ability to contribute to democratization in Kenya. Each of the chapters points to the readiness with which Kenya administrations have ceded

their monopoly on the use of force and foreground the widespread disorder and systemic violence such moves have produced over time and through social sectors. Gimode's chapter, "The Role of the Police in Kenya's Democratisation Process", drives home this point most strongly, illustrating how state actors have impressed a variety of thugs into political service. The chapters also share an attention—some more overt than others—to the dangers of shifting from the "imperial" to "personal" presidential models; analyses which read as particularly prescient in the current political moment.

- 4 The majority of the chapters are clearly written and underpinned by strong narrative threads. Each chapter contains a lengthy introduction and definition of terms reminiscent of a textbook. For the most part, these introductions restate existing theories rather than refine them *vis-à-vis* the contemporary Kenyan context.
- 5 Mwangola's chapter, "Leader of Tomorrow ? The Youth and Democratisation in Kenya", offers a welcome departure from this trend, problematizing the various meanings and contingencies of the category "youth" in present-day Kenya. He offers the important insight that, "the multiparty era of transition was equally a struggle for generational transfer of power of political responsibility" (p. 155).
- 6 Oloo's chapter on the contemporary opposition provides the strongest contribution to the volume. Oloo skillfully renders the increasingly zero-sum approach and heavy personalization of power that continue to plague Kenyan politics. Such orientations have led to a situation in which "political parties remain very much the preserves of individual politicians who hold sway in their parties and who stand above their parties' institutional structures" (p. 95). The lack of easily discernible differences in the platforms of the incumbent and opposition parties, Oloo argues, has also produced Kenyan politics as a struggle over an "ethnic cake" in which political parties, and their high-profile leaders, have had to contract out their authority to their cement ethnically based constituencies (p. 103).
- 7 While the chapters do a good job in articulating political science theory and terminology, some of the chapters fall sorely short when dealing with constructs and terms derived from other social science disciplines. Gecaga's chapter, "Religious Movements and Democratisation in Kenya: Between the Sacred and the Profane", which dwells on Mungiki, displays an oversimplification of and an excessively eager acceptance of "tradition." A demonstrated understanding of the "invented" nature of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1992) would shift Gecaga's analysis significantly. For instance, such an understanding would enable her to trace how the increasingly politicization of Mungiki is *not* some sort of organic evolution, but rather a concerted strategy of remaking and mobilization "Kikuyu tradition" to serve sociopolitical and economic ends. It would also shed light on how the remaking and deployment of "Kikuyu tradition" is a political strategy dating back to the Kikuyu Central Association's clashes with protestant missions and the colonial state during the Female Circumcision Controversy of the 1930s.
- 8 Similar issues abound in Nasongo'o and Ayot's chapter, "Women in Kenya's Politics of Transition and Democratisation." The chapter does a solid job of highlighting the doors opened for women by the transition to multi-party politics and those doors that remain firmly shut. However, it commences with an outdated critique of "Western Feminism" that sets the analytic tone for the rest of the chapter (pp. 166-169).
- 9 Much of the chapter is regrettably mired in the ethnographic present and substantive portions demonstrate an alarming failure to interrogate the historical and political

context of “ethnographic” sources. For example, the authors make a rosy blanket statement about the socioeconomic status of Kenyan women *writ large* in the colonial, citing a 1932 colonial ethnography as the sole support (p. 173). Further, with no attention to the political agenda underlying the source or to the historical moment of its production, the authors continue in this vein citing a text by Nyerere and arguing that he showed “the traditional African family lived according to the basic principal of *Ujamaa* (communalism)” (p. 173). Such moves call into the question the credibility of subsequent analyses of contemporary sources.

- 10 The authors also make the error of plunking down European constructs on the Kenyan landscape. For instance, they write, “Where there was a blurred distinction between private and public life in Kenya, British structures and policies focused on delineating a clear distinction guided by an ideology that perceived men as public actors and women as private, domestic performers. Colonialists worked hand and hand with African patriarchs to develop inflexible customary laws, which evolved into new structures and forms of domination” (p. 175).
- 11 Not only does this analysis cast the highly contingent bourgeois European categories of “private-public” back into precolonial and colonial sociopolitical life in Kenya, it illustrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of “customary law.” Much recent literature, the reviewer’s own work included, has demonstrated how “customary law” is comprised of a flexible body of rules and norms which predated colonialism, changed according to circumstance, and continue to do so today¹.
- 12 The chapter redeems itself somewhat, employing an analysis of the gendered language of Kenyan jurisprudence to show the structural nature of gender inequality in Kenya (p. 177). A careful reading of the Moi’s construction of himself as “Baba wa Taifa” (Father of the Nation) reveals another problematic associated with the “personal” model of presidential power, and offers a lens into the gendered nature of state-associated political violence. However, the authors then flatten their analysis by abruptly concluding that gendered political violence emanates from the colonial era rather than interrogating how it is a highly effective and *modern* political technology (p. 182).
- 13 Despite the weaknesses of particular chapters, the volume as a whole makes a significant contribution to the depiction and analysis of multi-party politics in Kenya. The volume’s broad topical swath renders it a key text for anyone seeking an introduction to the most important the issues contributing to current political stalemate in the country. Its accessible prose would make it useful in both undergraduate and graduate classes on African politics and history.

NOTES

1. D. W. Cohen & E. S. Atieno Odhiambo, *Burying “SM”: The Politics of Knowledge and the Sociology of Power* (London: James Currey (“Social History of Africa”), 1992; B. L. Shadle, “Changing Traditions to Meet Current Altering Conditions: Customary Law, African Courts and the Rejection of

Codification in Kenya, 1930-1960", *The Journal of African History* 40: 411-431; J. A. Widner, *Building the Rule of Law: Francis Nyalai and the Road of Judicial Independence in Africa* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co.), 2001; K. Luongo, "If You Can't Beat Them, Join Them: Government Cleansings of Witches and Mau Mau in 1950s Kenya", *History in Africa* 33, 2006: 451-471.