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Rezensionen / Reviews

GITHUKU, Nicholas K. 2015. *Mau Mau Crucible of War: Statehood, National Identity, and Politics of Postcolonial Kenya*. Maryland: Lexington Books. 555 pp. ISBN. 978-1498506984

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As John Lonsdale's foreword to this book, *Mau Mau Crucible of War: Statehood, National Identity, and Politics of Postcolonial Kenya* states, "Kenya was a turbulent colony, a conquest state that barely sixty years after its creation ended more bloodily than it began." (p. vii) This statement opens a window for a multidisciplinary analysis of hundred years of Kenyan

history. Kenya, like other settler colonies such as South Africa and Zimbabwe for example, has a history that is intrinsically linked to the survival of the people whose *raison-d'être* is their ancestral lands. The regal Massai warriors and nomads were against the invasion of their lands and the subsequent subversion of their powers and reputations as formidable warriors. The pastoral Kikuyu, Luhya, Luo, Kalenjin, and Kamba communities among others initially welcomed the British settlers into their midst as was their custom of being hospitable to visitors. But with time, they woke up to the reality that the visitors whom they allowed to camp on parts of their lands had moved to take them over completely. As a result of this, they became squatters on their ancestral lands and were forced to work for the appropriators of their lands in order to survive. But this is precisely the history of the colonial project called Kenya, which led to the largest ethnic group, the Kikuyu taking up the crucible of the struggle to shake off the burdens of colonization and internal slavery on their ancestral lands. One of the key figures in this struggle, Jomo Kenyatta, went on to become the first president of the independent Kenyan country.

However, contrary to what its title may suggest, the focus in this book is not on the *Mau Mau* uprising. Instead, it is a cartography of the events that gave rise to the anti-colonial struggle, and made the uprising a necessity; the state of Kenya in post-independent times. Githuku makes a convincing case for a deeper, more complex understanding of the events that led to men and women taking up arms and going into the forest to fight against the oppressive white settlers. After the British colonial rulers handed over the reins to Jomo Kenyatta and his newly formed government, there was the need to build Kenya into a state. But this turned out to be a highly complex task because, according to Githuku, unlike European states that “emerged from the interactions and power relations between plenipotentiary actors that were either entities such as the church or its representatives, empires or its agents such as kings, towns and their denizens...the African state was forged out of a process of European imperial imagination.” (pp. 30-31) So, in the case of Kenya, disparate groups of people were forcibly brought together through colonization to form a state.

How can the hundred-year history of the Kenyan project be best illustrated in one book? Githuku's choice of a multidisciplinary approach ensures that all the areas that make up this remarkable history are brought into the narrative because each of them is part of the mosaic that form the historical

landscape. He depicts the history of Kenya as that of a settler colony which rose up against colonization and its far-reaching effects on the society, in a collective way. He conveys to the readers the fact that Kenyans (not just the Kikuyu) fought against colonialism and the postcolonial chaos that came in the wake of independence in their different ways. Politicians, academics, and churches took part in the struggle. Subsequently, some of the ideas that these aforementioned precursors espoused lived on in young Kenyans through popular culture.

Against this background, this book that is divided into eight chapters kicks off in chapter one with an interrogation into the dynamics of a post-colonial state, using the European model of nation building to juxtapose it with the African project. Githuku stresses that:

The state in Europe...emerged from the interactions and power relations between plenipotentiary actors that were either entities such as the church or its representatives, empires or its agents such as kings, towns and their denizens...in comparison...the African state was forged out of the process of European imagination. (p. 30)

Thus, Githuku points to the fact that the Kenyan state is a colonial project set up by the British colonizers to rule the inhabitants of the lands that they found there. Subsequently, Kikuyu, Luhya, Luo, Kalenjin, and Kamba communities among others were mainly united in opposition to the British intrusion into their lives, an intrusion that destroyed the fabrics of their societies and caused a societal disorder that has lingered beyond the hundred years that he has explored in this book.

The second chapter, called "White Man's Country: The Colonial Foundations and Legal Architecture of the Kenyan State," examines critically the legal, institutional and policy basis of colonial, and afterwards, postcolonial Kenya. Githuku concludes that the colonists' "enactment of laws and policy making was the first step toward controlling natural resources such as land, minerals, forests, pasture, game or wildlife and rivers." (50) The 'sons and daughters of the soil' were taken by surprise by these actions, especially since they had never encountered such a widespread take-over of their lands to which their spirits were attached. Thus, "with their basic rights seriously infringed upon, and faced with glaring marginalization, a dissenting political consciousness, inspired by the

quest for justice, was kindled among the Africans. Finding themselves inhabiting the new but extremely hostile and urban colonial spaces, Africans experienced “illegality ‘from below’” in a manner that naturally occasioned psychosocial anxiety.” (51)

Chapters three and four focus on the perpetual hardships and psychological effects brought upon the lives of these colonized people. Githuku removes the veil of anonymity from these aggrieved people by making their voices heard through some of the letters sent to the Kikuyu newspaper, *Muigwithania* as early as in 1929. A contributor to the newspaper, Muorianyoni, rephrased Lamentations 5 verses 1-10 as he entreated God to:

Look and see the insults with which we are insulted.
 See our inheritance is given to strangers,
 And our houses made to belong to other races.
 We have become orphans as though our fathers were dead...
 ...We buy our water with money,
 and our firewood is sold to us.
 Those that pursue us are about our necks, *we are weary and find no rest*
 ... Servants are better than we ...
 We obtain our food with great difficulty and distress. (p. 110)

This plea by ordinary people, burdened by the heavy yoke of colonization shows how, faced with hardly any choices, they turned to the colonizer’s Christian religion to put their sufferings into perspective, and to make them known to the rest of the world.

Chapter five is the longest chapter and also the highlight of the book because of its rich illustration of the core issues that brought politicians, former freedom fighters, scholars, men and women both in the cities and the rural areas together on one page to fight against the excesses of the postcolonial Kenyan state ruled by its first prime minister and first president, Jomo Kenyatta from 1963 to his death in 1978. Indeed, it explores the post-independent Kenyan society as one that fought for the same cause for which Kenyatta himself had been imprisoned by the British colonizers. Kenyans were disappointed by the fact that the *Uhuru* (independence/freedom) they had fought for had eluded them, and all they got in return was *Uhuru na taabu* (freedom and problems). Kenyans suddenly realized that the long awaited restitution of the lands

appropriated from their families and clans was not going to come to pass because the new crop of African elites was more preoccupied with enriching themselves at their cost. As a result of this, ordinary men like Clement Kimata Mukui and T.K. Kairu, wrote letters to Kenyatta, admonishing him for betraying their cause and Kairu noted that he had been unemployed since 1956. He “did not understand why some had to sell their labor while others owned more extensive farms than they could put to use.” (p. 266) Indeed, for him, “the manner in which the country was steeped in capitalism was synonymous with lack of democracy.” (p. 266) In his eyes, “Kenyatta’s government [is] constituted of hungry hyenas that did not remember their children.” (p. 266)

Sustained criticisms also came from members of parliament, notably former radical members of the KANU party, such as Oginga Odinga and Bildad Kaggia who were among those ejected from the party during the 1966 conference in Limuru. This group was also joined by Joshua Mwangi Kariuki, known by his nickname JM. He was an outspoken critic of the government and was seen as a threat to those in power because they believed that he was capable of making the people turn against the government. He was eventually assassinated—Kenya lost a powerful voice against the social injustice perpetrated by the Kenyatta government.

Indeed, Githuku alludes to the fact that the ruling elites in Kenya, such as Kenyatta and his cohorts were betraying the martyrs of the struggle for decolonization and independence from Britain on the altar of insatiable greed. Those who shed their blood in the quest for an independent statehood were betrayed as their oppressors merely changed hands and their yoke was not lightened with independence. Instead, they had to watch from the sidelines as the new elites enriched themselves and left the crumbs for them to pick from the ground.

Githuku equally underlines the role played by literary authors, poets, and playwrights like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Meja Mwangi, and Micere Githae Mugo whom, he says, ought to be called a “Mau Mau intellectual,” in the struggle for independence and the post-independence dysfunction caused by the new Kenyan elites. He pays homage to Mugo’s contributions to this fight for *Uhuru*, and adds that:

The author of the political play *Kilo Cha Haki* (Cry for Justice), Alamin Mazrui, hailed Mugo as one of the most influential voices of dissent against dictatorship and kleptocracy in

Kenya, due to her courage to speak truth to power always with passion and eloquence. In a sense, Mugo was the central inspirational figure in Mazrui's characterization of his lead character, Lanina, a fearless trade union activist. (pp. 260-261)

All these authors were politically active because they, like most African authors whose countries were going through difficult post-independent times, could not stand on the sidelines; instead, they had to fight on behalf of the common man.

Chapters six and seven span the post-Kenyatta years between 1978 and 2002 which were occupied by his successor, Daniel Arap Moi. Alluding to the title of chapter six, "Matigari ma Njurungi," Githuku explains that the "Mungiki movement and Kikuyu spiritual sect, has its origins in the early 1980s. It emerged to protect the interests of farmers in the Central and Rift Valley Provinces. It was also an expression of discontent with the manner in which the parents of the sect's young members were treated by Jomo Kenyatta even after they had made enormous sacrifices in the struggle for *uhuru*. It is for this reason that the movement referred to themselves as *Matigari ma Njirungi*, (remnants who survived the bullets). That is, the heir-remnants of Kenya's freedom fighters." (394) But, Githuku also imparts upon the readers the fact that the *Mungiki* movement had a negative impact on the people. At the same time, he seeks to put the rise of this movement in the Kenyan society in perspective, concluding that it was a result of the socio-political negligence of both colonial and Kenyan governments. Since the Kenyan governments were unable to cater for the needs of the poor masses, they moved in to bridge the gap. But the role they played remains a controversial one.

Apart from the *Mungiki*, there were other voices of resistance, underground ones such as the *Mwakenya*, an "open intellectual dissent inside and outside universities" (p. 318) during the Moi years. There was also the London based *Umoja*, called the *United Movement for Democracy in Kenya*, an organization put together by Kenyan intellectual and political activists who joined them and showed their discontentment towards the Moi regime through songs. Churches also became centers of criticism towards the government where calls for democratic reforms were articulated.

Githuku's illuminating illustration of the important role played by popular youth culture in the seventh chapter also adds to this rich mapping of

Kenyan history. He asserts that the ghettos on the periphery of the cityscape where urban youths in marginalized neighborhoods that are hotbed of the *Mungiki* movement became the homes of hip hop groups. These youths were driven by what Githuku has called *Mau Mau mentalité* in the spoken word developments. For:

When young people gather informally to dance, sing, talk and gossip against this background of hardship, a new permutation of Mau Mau ideology through poetry that is hugely popular and fashionable has gradually emerged. (p. 410)

Githuku notes that these youths became part of the resistance against economic stagnation as they expressed their discontent with the status quo through music and oracy all of which have opened a new front in literary analysis.

All in all, Githuku has not just opened a window into colonial and post-colonial Kenyan experiences; he has painted a highly convincing and engaging tableau of a hundred years of Kenyan history in which every aspect of the struggle for *Uhuru* was brought together to show that the struggle has not just taken place in the 'forest,' and rural parts but also in urban Kenya. He brings together both ordinary Kenyans as well as radicals who were all fighting to make sure that *Uhuru* does not remain elusive to them forever.