Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Witchcraft and Colonial Rule in Kenya, 1900-1950

Review Number:
1188
Publish date:
Sunday, 1 January, 2012
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ISBN:
9781107012189
Date of Publication:
2011
Price:
£60.00
Pages:
116pp.
Publisher:
Cambridge University Press
Place of Publication:
Cambridge
Reviewer:
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Katherine Luongo introduces her monograph *Witchcraft and Colonial Rule in Kenya* by discussing the ?Wabenda trials? in Elspeth Huxley?s novel *Murder at Government House.* Set in an imaginary East African colony, the story centered on a woman killed for alleged witchcraft practices. The novel mirrored the non-fictional events of the Wakamba trials, sparking a dialogue on what constituted law, order and justice in a colonial state. These serve as the central themes of Luongo?s text. Tensions between Kenyans and colonial authority vis-à-vis witchcraft created room for negotiating the precincts of colonial rule.

Luongo?s intentions are manifold. By using anthro-historical and ethnographic methods of examination, links are forged between crime, law, culture and the colonial enterprise. She contends that witchcraft posed a variety of challenges to British authority and ignited debates on effective governance. To establish her thesis, Luongo explores the development of anthro-administrative practices and anti-witchcraft legislation, the effects of the Wakamba trials on administration, the evolving legal response to witchcraft related crime, the shift in colonial policy as explored through the Mau Mau rebellion and the modern ?reach and resonance? of witchcraft and governance in contemporary Kenya (p. 5).

Witchcraft and Colonial Rule traces a series of ?critical events?, defined by Lynn Thomas as actions ?that rework ?tradition categories?, prompting ?new modes of action? to come to being? (p. 25). With Kamba people occupying the leading role, Luongo demonstrates how their conflict with colonialism changed the

ideas and institutions of the crown colony.

Elements of the supernatural are common features in Kamba culture. Certain clans are believed to produce inherent mystical capabilities. The practice of witchcraft is often divided between *uwe* and *uoi*, the former softly translated as witchcraft for healing and the latter as witchcraft for harm. *Uwe*, *uoi* and *kithitu* (oath-taking) possess nuanced meanings. Beyond violence, *uoi* may refer to a way-of-being, a substance or force and *uwe* is often used to remedy the ill-effects of *uoi*. Similarly, *kithitu* may also denote the employed objects during the oathing ceremony or empowerment of the oath itself; those who disobey forfeit their life by means of curse. By exploring the lexicography of witchcraft the reader is made aware of the important complexity of an otherwise essentialized subject.

We see the moment of rupture between Kamba people and British authority in the early stages of conquest when the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC) engaged in several acts of sacrilege regarding Kamba spiritual sites during expansion. Relations turned violent thus cementing the Kamba cosmology as an area of tension with colonial officials. Nevertheless, as the British fashioned their indirect form of governance, this once dislocated group would be enabled to penetrate the barriers of state authority.

Luongo defines cosmology as an understanding of ?the place of human beings within the universe? or generally as a ?totalizing worldview? (p. 45). Kamba cosmology, centered on *uwe*, *uoi* and *kithitu* conflicted with the British Empire, whose cosmology equated to bureaucracy. Moreover, the violent nature of *uoi* and *kithitu* caused further agitation related to the concepts of law and order.

Resistance to state authority was constant owing to the Kamba?s continued adherence to their institutions, beliefs, and practices. The system of indirect rule was intended to maintain the customs of the ?natives? while sustaining ubiquitous control. However, administrative approaches shifted from regarding Africans as a collective to possessing ?individualized subjectivities? (p. 84). Accordingly, the state restructured its policies by integrating anthropology into administrative practices. A microscope was positioned over the Kamba populated Ukambani region to monitor the practice of witchcraft. Despite these measures, colonial rule remained unstable and insecure since witchcraft continued to be defined by imperial imaginations.

Anthropology intended to service colonialism by producing knowledge of the ?other? to facilitate control. Moreover, it sought to engender ideas of Africans which warranted imperial occupation. Intrinsically problematic and rarely accurate, Luongo demonstrates that this administrative tool instead disempowered British jurisprudence and command over Kamba people

The 1931 killing of alleged witch Mwaiki forced a debate on British justice both in the colony and metropole. Luongo examines the history of the trial beyond the usual reading of Kamba life or the practice of law in the empire. In a joint analysis with ethnographic sources she finds the case illustrated the idea that the seemingly rigid categories of crime and victim were contestable. Rather than an attestation of colonial hegemony, the case points to a ?rupture in colonial control? (p. 102). In the eyes of many Kamba, the killing of witches was a means to *restore* law and order. Similar to the work of Bruce Berman, there existed a crisis of control as the state was bound by contradiction.(1) Several inquiries and reports were issued following the trial; however, the judicial discourse supported the narrative that witch-hunting was in opposition to colonial law. Following Ranajit Guha?s description of judicial discourse, Luongo argues that the British were ?trapping crime in its specificity ? by assimilating it to the existing order as one of its negative determinants? (p. 103).

Ultimately, colonial officials reviewed witchcraft policy in order to refurbish the ?fractured edifice? of colonial rule (p. 128). They admitted to the importance of local expertise by permitting locals to assess witchcraft cases and acknowledged the confliction of British law with the attitudes of Kenyans. Increasingly, judges revealed a sense of empathy toward accused parties by viewing witchcraft as ?real? and often appealed for clemency. The British attempted to repair the cleavages of their own imposed cosmology.

As the largest resistance campaign against British rule was set in motion, officials broke with their own laws

concerning witchcraft by using supernatural methods of containment during the Mau Mau rebellion. They sought to cleanse alleged Mau Mau fighters and sympathizers by engaging in ?de-oathing campaigns? ? often by means of internment. Harnessing its influence in Kamba culture, the British re-examined ?native? law and customs and placed ordinances on oathing. They continued the campaign post-Mau Mau as a means of rehabilitating witches back into society. Luongo reads these events as a confirmation that the shifting governing practices directly instigated by witchcraft affirmed the contested and contradictory position of the supernatural in administrative policy. Moreover, she presents an original reading of Mau Mau beyond the ordinary political framework but as a supernatural phenomenon from both British and Kamba perspectives.

Finally, the author traces ?postcolonial continuities? in modern Kenya, deeming the topic still relevant to contemporary affairs (p. 209). The colonial legacy of witchcraft ordinance persists as does the assumption that witchcraft is linked to underdevelopment. The spiritual practice remains a major concern in the 21st century as African governments and international bodies continue to negotiate and contain its place in the social, political, and material world.

Luongo contributions are plethoric. Her presentation of Kamba people is by no means static; rather, she provides a range of subjectivities of a marginalized group in the historiography. Kamba people are often limited to specific moments of African-state engagement in existing literature while scholars opt to focus on predominate Kenyan groups (e.g. Kikuyu or Masai people).

Furthermore, it offers to the vast work on law and negotiation by investigating how empire affected African law and vice versa. The literature on witchcraft in East Africa ranks dismally in relation to its western and southern counterparts, allowing Luongo to fill its empty space.

Richard Waller?s treatment of witchcraft as central to British justice serves as inspiration for Luongo to explore, and cogently demonstrate, how witchcraft has been essential to issues of contested power. It may now shift from a position of primarily anthropological investigation to a place in the scholarship of governance in colonial Africa.

In *Law and Colonial Cultures* Laura Benton contended that imperial domination did not erase local practices and institutions, instead they negotiated and existed in conjunction with colonial law resulting in ?overlapping legal jurisdictions? while imperial powers struggled with this elusive subversion to its authority.(2) Luongo goes further, charging that Kenyans, in a reversal of power, crafted and shifted the practices and governing institutions of the colonizer.

Making no leaps in judgment, Luongo?s arguments are well-buttressed by mounting evidence extracted from the colonial and Kenya national archives, university libraries, past and contemporary newspapers and a series of qualitative interviews. *Witchcraft and Colonial Rule* forces readers to re-imagine the construct of law and perceptions of order in relation to empire and will undoubtedly become essential reading for Africanist scholars of various specialities.

Notes

1. Bruce Berman, *Control and crisis in colonial Kenya: the dialectic of domination*, (Athens, OH, 1991). Back to (1)
2. Lauren Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History, 1400?1900* (Cambridge, 2002) p. 158.Back to (2)

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