

# BOOK REVIEW

**Robert W. Blunt.** *For Money and Elders: Ritual, Sovereignty, and the Sacred in Kenya*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019. 239 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$27.50. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-226-65575-8.

The history of modern Kenya has long attracted the attention of anthropologists. From Greet Kershaw to Carolyn Martin Shaw, cultural and social anthropologists have enriched the study of Kenya's past and present. Robert Blunt's recent book, *For Money and Elders: Ritual, Sovereignty, and the Sacred in Kenya*, is an attempt to carry on this tradition. Blunt describes his work as a "historical anthropology of political form rather than a history of Kenyan politics" (17). In spite of this caveat, and perhaps inevitably, the author ventures frequently into Kenya's political history, with mixed results.

The central argument in *For Money and Elders* is that British colonial administrators introduced the idea of ritual sovereignty to Kenya. At the start of colonialism, these administrators found an "acephalous ideology of ritual efficacy" in the colony, but they gradually transformed it into centralized sovereignty, owing to their Protestant backgrounds (29). Blunt focuses on central Kenya, where the gerontocratic use of judicial oaths among the Kikuyu has long been viewed by scholars as a practice that predated colonialism. However, similar to the introduction of colonial chieftaincy to previously acephalous societies, Blunt argues that Kikuyu elders only became the custodians of ritual authority under the auspices of British indirect rule. In other words, while certain forms of Kikuyu oathing practices predated colonialism, Blunt maintains that the gerontocratic control over oathing and the notion that oaths could be used to settle legal disputes with finality were both colonial impositions. The main evidence for this claim is a letter that Jomo Kenyatta wrote to the Kiambu District Commissioner in 1949, lamenting the perversion of justice by unscrupulous elders who were taking bribes and using fake oathing stones while adjudicating land cases that had been brought before the Local Native Tribunal.

Blunt's analysis of what he terms "Kenyatta's lament" is illuminating, and he provides compelling evidence for the evolution of pre-Mau Mau Kikuyu oathing, especially during the interwar and postwar years. His claim that precolonial Kikuyu had an acephalous ideology of ritual efficacy, however, is

less convincing. Even though he critiques two Kikuyu ethnographies from the early twentieth century that do not support his argument, he does not really prove his case. Furthermore, Blunt never explains how exactly the colonial imposition of ritual sovereignty happened. He suggests that the new arrangement was mutually beneficial to colonial administrators and Kikuyu elders, but he does not flesh out the process of imposition. For example, were Kikuyu elders simply duped into believing that they now wielded ritual authority that they had never exercised before the arrival of Europeans, or were they putting up a show? And how did Kikuyu women and youth react to this colonial imposition? Blunt never addresses these questions. Indeed, he fails to engage with important literature on the limits of invention, which has long warned against granting colonial administrators more power than they actually wielded, while simultaneously imputing to colonial subjects a shocking degree of gullibility.

Using Kenyatta's lament as a jumping-off point, Blunt then proceeds to examine what he deems a "recursive problem" in Kenya's colonial and postcolonial history: the unstable relationship between elder authority and the value of signs and symbols, which include words, currency, ritual objects, and land title deeds. The result is a wide-ranging book that chronologically analyzes Mau Mau rituals and violence, Kenyatta's and Moi's patrimonialism, devil worship, state corruption, policing, public transportation, and electoral violence in Kenya. For historians of modern Kenya, the most instructive chapter in *For Money and Elders* is the one on Kenyatta's lament (Chapter Two). This happens to be the only chapter where Blunt makes use of archival sources. But the rest of the book (Chapters Three through Seven) suffers from considerable evidentiary problems, which limit its contribution to the historiography of modern Kenya.

In Chapter Three, for example, Blunt argues that as the Mau Mau progressed, oath administrators continuously expanded the range of symbols and clauses that they used in oathing ceremonies, and this proliferation stemmed from nagging doubts about the efficacy of oaths. The entire chapter hangs on this argument, but instead of providing solid evidence for his claims, Blunt resorts to theoretical abstractions about Mau Mau oaths having been "ideological," that is, "knowingly doing activities directed towards following an illusion, but nonetheless still doing them" (87). What is more, a careful reading of government intelligence reports on the evolution of Mau Mau oathing—an important archival source that is never utilized in this chapter—disproves Blunt's claims. Save for liturgical differences between the first and second Mau Mau oaths, and the geographical variations between oaths that were administered in different districts across Central and Rift Valley Provinces, the symbols and clauses that were used in local oathing ceremonies remained fairly consistent throughout the war.

The chapter on devil worship suffers from similar evidentiary problems. While Blunt acknowledges that the then president, Daniel Moi, set up a commission of inquiry to investigate the subject in October 1994, which later published the report of its findings in June 1995, he curiously omits any direct

engagement with the report in his analysis. Instead, Blunt opts to quote from a newspaper account that announced the delayed release of the report to the public in August 1999. The bulk of his analysis, however, is based on two individual accounts of devil worship in Kenya, which blur the lines between tabloid journalism and the popular press. It is not clear why Blunt chose to analyze the individual accounts alone, without engaging the official report. But by missing the forest for the trees in this manner, he fails to provide a full sense of the scope and scale of devil worship in Kenya, and thus does not prove his assertion that it was linked to Kenyans' understandings of state corruption.

In conclusion, Blunt's analysis of colonial and early independent Kenya would have benefitted from a more thorough engagement with archival sources, while the chapters on the recent history of Kenya under Presidents Moi and Kibaki would have profited from a critical examination of official reports that address many of Blunt's thematic concerns. Additionally, an interrogation of popular sources such as music and literature, which offer commentary on some of the book's themes, would have enriched and further complicated Blunt's arguments. Ultimately, assembling a wider array of sources would have helped Blunt to paint a more nuanced picture of Kenyan society, where shared norms and sharp cleavages emerge in dialectical tension. But as it stands, *For Money and Elders* ignores or downplays Kenya's long history of popular protests against corrupt civil servants; trigger-happy police officers; misogynistic *matatu* (commuter taxi) operators; and greedy members of parliament, whom youthful protesters have recently nicknamed "MPigs." To be sure, this book is full of interesting ideas about ritual, violence, and state patronage, but many of them are *a priori* arguments that lack sufficient evidence. While the importance of theory to historical research cannot be overemphasized, good theory must be married with solid and robust evidence in the reconstruction of the past.

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