BOOK REVIEW

Paul Ocobock. *An Uncertain Age: The Politics of Manhood in Kenya*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017. xi + 356 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. $34.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-8214-2264-9.

In *An Uncertain Age: The Politics of Manhood in Kenya,* Paul Ocobock explores how the Kenyan colonial "elder state" used age and gender to rule. He meticulously details how officials viewed colonized Africans as their juniors, in need of guidance and discipline. Through close examinations, the author compellingly elucidates that Kenya as a colony was no seamless well-oiled machine, but rather a "crowded, cacophonous place" of religious leaders, judges, wardens, and other authorities who all had frequently competing visions about how to shape age and manhood (18).

The beginning of the text explores how the early colonial state manipulated male initiation and circumcision to create men and thus regulate labor needs. Officials enforced earlier circumcision rites in the hope of producing more obedient men at faster rates who could labor and pay taxes. In Chapter Three, Ocobock reminds us that contemporary discourses about men (and women) succumbing to urban temptations, idleness, and criminality in African cities have origins in colonial rule. Officials habitually deterred young people migrating to cities looking for work, where they "grew up ungovernable" in Nairobi because urbanity "uncoupled [them] from elder authority" (89). However, within this system of constraints and violence, we encounter many young African men in the city who found economic freedoms, camaraderie with other migrants, and the excitement of urban nightlife.

In the ensuing chapters, Ocobock investigates court-ordered corporeal punishment and child detentions. It is fascinating to read that on one side, the author writes of the governor importing two different sizes of Indian rattan canes for the old and the young, and on the other, he details an administrator's apprehension that the beatings are torture and violate the state's supposed mission of moral civility (119, 129). Beating youth was meant to steer them onto a more productive path, while the state purposed jails (Approved Schools) when all other alternatives were exhausted. Throughout the text, but especially here, Ocobock's observations could have been enriched by troubling the concept of criminality in the colony.

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The author then delves into the brutal crackdown of the Mau Mau war and its aftermath. While the state and some Gikuyu elders saw forest fighters as examples of unruly masculinity lacking adult authority, those who took the oath made themselves into warriors, and thus real men. Administrators sent captured young fighters deemed rehabilitatable to Wamumu Approved School. Here Ocobock reveals his conversations with former inmates who fought bravely with the Mau Mau but after their arrest grew to appreciate their education and job training. I, like the author, expected these men to decry their detention, and instead, they fondly recalled how their time at Wamumu enabled them to become respectable men.

The last chapter identifies how poor young men have posed threats to elder rule in the postcolony. Jomo Kenyatta formed the National Youth Service (NYS), in an attempt to appease the same landless poor who fought the British. Daniel Arap Moi leaned on his KANU party's youth wing to enact violence on those who opposed him. Additionally, Mwai Kibaki oversaw a brutal crackdown of the violent and menacing Mungiki. This chapter provides strong evidence about the divergent formations of the "elder state" after independence. As I read, I constantly vacillated on whether the author should have distinguished between the colonial elder state and the postcolonial elder state. For instance, and to start, the colonial state was a deeply racist project, while both relatedly and differentially, the postcolonial state has harnessed ethnicity in very particular and pernicious ways.

A few places needed more context and reference. First, Ocobock writes that in order for officials to determine if young males qualified to pay taxes, they examined the youths' bodies to see if they were, in fact, circumcised (63). Aside from being sexually intrusive or abusive, this detail opens up unanswered questions. Were chiefs and elders consulted on this practice? What were the implications, given that white officials were often uncircumcised (or were regarded as such) and therefore culturally disallowed from seeing initiated men naked, much less intentionally examining them?[1] Second, Ocobock's description of young activist Harry Thuku's 1922 imprisonment, subsequent protests, and resultant massacre ignored the contributions of Mary Muthoni wa Nyanjiru and other women collaborators (239). We needed to read that during the demonstration, Nyanjiru with her comrades grew incensed that negotiators failed to secure Thuku's release. They then charged to the front of the gathering, removing their clothes and affronting male authority by baring their naked bodies in front of younger men, both the negotiators and home guards. This practice, *guturamira ng'ania*, was the climacteric that fueled the massacre.

Last, Ocobock might have engaged with scholars Grace Musila and Tom Odhiambo, who have written on the Kenyan state as phallocratic and gerontocratic. Moreover, it would have been helpful if the author had incorporated Carolyn Martin Shaw's noteworthy contributions about how the British

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imported very distinctive racist ideas from the US that mapped onto cultural geographies and formations of gender in the Kenyan colony.

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For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Murphy, John F. 1986. "Legitimation and Paternalism: The Colonial State in Kenya." *African Studies Review* 29 (3): 55–66. doi: 10.2307/524083.

Mushkat, Marion. 1971. "Some Characteristics of Colonialism and Its Product, African Nationalism." *African Studies Review* 14 (2): 219–41. doi: 10.2307/523824.

Ronen, Dov. 1974. "The Colonial Elite in Dahomey." *African Studies Review* 17 (1): 55–76. doi: 10.2307/523577.