

MAKING HISTORY IN KENYA, 1993-94

DEREK R PETERSON

ABSTRACT

My scholarly vocation was vitally shaped by the people I knew in 1993 and 1994, when I was a Fulbrighter in Kenya. In this short essay I focus on two dramas: first, Kenyans' efforts to build culturally coherent communities that could reliably act in politics; second, the growth of a confidently assertive Christianity. In both of these contexts, Kenyans' energy, commitment, trauma, faith and fervor vitally shaped my sense of intellectual and moral purpose.

Keywords: Kenya • ethnicity • Christianity

I was a Fulbright U.S. Student fellow in Kenya between 1993 and 1994. I was expert in nothing. I had been to Kenya once before: as a second-year undergraduate, I had spent two months living and working with a Maasai pastor in Narok, in the south-west. At the University of Rochester I had taken classes in African history and politics. But when I arrived in Nairobi late in September 1993 I spoke no African languages nor did I have a deep knowledge of Kenya's politics or history.

Over the course of the year, I was drawn into two great dramas of the day. Kenyans were making strenuous efforts to create culturally cohesive communities, platforms for political mobilization. Pulled along in the tide, I embarked on a long research project into the history of ethnicity in Kenya's public life. At the same time, I was folded into a storyline of world-historical importance: the definition and growth of Africa's Christianity. In both of these contexts Kenyans' energy, commitment, trauma, faith and fervor vitally shaped my sense of vocation.

THE POLITICS OF ETHNICITY

The early 1990s were a time of political ferment across Africa: old regimes were falling and new political possibilities were coming to light. Kenya's ruling party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), had been in power since independence in 1963, but its cultural and political power was waning. On 7 July 1990 courageous activists had convened a massive rally at the Kamukunji grounds outside Nairobi. In the violence that followed, policeman killed over twenty protestors. Facing an increasingly mobilized public, President Daniel arap Moi's government was obliged to dismantle the one-party system. In December 1992, Kenyans—for the first time since independence—voted in



a multi-party election. The opposition won a substantial majority of the electorate; but, because the opposition was divided into several parties, KANU returned to power as a minority government. It won a bare 36 percent of the vote.

For many activists Moi's return to the presidency was a failure of organization. In the wake of the election activists set out to define constituencies that were politically reliable and demographically coherent. That is how, in the early 1990s, ethnicity became the framework in which politics worked. President Moi's base of support lay largely in the Rift Valley, among members of the disparate people called 'Kalenjin'. In the run-up to the 1992 elections, Kalenjin militias organized against immigrants,—especially the Kikuyu-speaking people. Since colonial times, the Kikuyu had made their homes in the Rift Valley, on land that they considered to be their own. Over 300,000 people were displaced and 1,500 people were killed in the months preceding the election. In 1993, there was a new wave of attacks. In mid-October Maasai youths in a place called Enoosupukia attacked their Kikuyu neighbors, killing 17 people and forcing 30,000 from their homes. The leader of Maasai political opinion defended these assaults from the floor of Parliament. "Kikuyu have oppressed the Maasai, taken their land and degraded their environment", he told his colleagues. "We had to say enough is enough. I had to lead the Maasai in protecting our rights".

I knew very little about any of these things when, early in November 1993, I set off from Nairobi in the company of my friend, whom I shall call Petero, to visit his family in a Maasai settlement called Olokurto. Petero identified himself as a Maasai person. He had grown up in the Rift Valley, spoke Maa as his first language, and proudly wore the distinctive beaded bracelets of Maasai people about his wrists. His father, though, had been Kikuyu, an immigrant who had come from central Kenya to settle in Maasailand in the 1950s. Over time, Petero's family had invested in the key marker of Maasai prosperity—cattle—and acquired land around Olokurto.

I had been in Olokurto for about two weeks when, one morning, I awoke before dawn to hear the shrill trills of women sounding an alarm. The herd of cattle that Petero and his brothers had grown was stolen during the dark hours of the night. I hastily put on my clothes and, following Petero and a group of a dozen men, set off on the trail of the stolen herd. All of the men were dressed in the distinctive style of Maasai herdsman, with bright red cloaks wrapped about their shoulders. After fruitlessly tailing the herd for some time, we approached a nearby police station to ask for help. The police were disinterested in our predicament, saying that their vehicle lacked fuel. Petero conducted an impromptu fundraiser, and after considerable money had changed hands, the group was on its way, trailing the stolen cattle. I was left behind. My presence among the vigilante group was judged to be dangerous for myself and for my friends. I returned to Petero's home and a few days later I made my way back to Nairobi.

This was a very minor incident in a long catalogue of displacements, murders, and terror in the Rift Valley in those years. Even so, there was much at stake. In Olokurto, on that Sunday morning, boundaries were being drawn and contested. Petero's cattle had been targeted because he and his family were judged, by some, to be outsiders, beyond the fold of Maasai community. Petero's response was to assert his right to recognition and security. The vigilante group that pursued the cattle rustlers that morning was not simply engaged in retribution, they were claiming an entitlement and defending their status as Maasai.

Back in Nairobi I began to conceive a research project about the historical architecture of Kikuyu identity. I was already taking classes in Swahili language and I added Kikuyu language classes to my schedule. I began working in several different archives, searching for materials that could help me trace the changing logics of Kikuyu civil argument. I spent most of my time in the archives of the Presbyterian church, which were located at the top of a very high tower in a Nairobi church. My research was soon focused on the 'Mau Mau' war, which was fought between Kikuyu insurgents, who were called Mau Mau, and the colonial government of Kenya between 1952 and 1960. It was a war of political liberation. It was also a Kikuyu civil war, pitting insurgents against 'loyalists' who refused to accept the moral or political authority of the insurgents. In the years since independence, the memory of the Mau Mau conflict had been suppressed by Kenya's government. Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, had regarded the insurgency as a discreditable and embarrassing episode. His successor, Moi, feared that the memory of Mau Mau would provide a foundation for anti-government solidarity.

As I began my research, opposition activists were bringing Mau Mau back to life. A new organization, the Gikuyu, Embu and Meru Association (GEMA), was on the front pages of the newspapers. There was a search for heroes, as Kikuyu politicians looked to claim the moral and historical high ground over other of Kenya's people. Some demanded that Dedan Kimathi, the leader of the Mau Mau rebels, should be given a state funeral and honored with a monument commemorating his sacrifice. Kimathi had been hung by British officials in 1954. His body laid in an unmarked grave on the grounds of a government prison. In June 1993, one of the organizers of a leading opposition party launched a soccer tournament called the Dedan Kimathi Memorial Cup. The competition was meant to raise funds for the erection of a monument to the late Kimathi. In October editorialists in Kenya's leading newspaper proposed to create a national holiday to honor the sacrifices of the nation's founding heroes. One writer complained that Kimathi "lies in an unmarked grave amongst murderers, rapists, and other criminals". He wanted government to "erect huge monuments in all towns" to honor Kimathi and other heroes of national liberation.

Cultural and political history were being reworked when, in the last months of 1993 and into 1994, I started interviewing elderly men and women who had been involved in the Mau Mau conflict. Some of the people I interviewed confidently emphasized their heroism and self-sacrifice on behalf of Mau Mau. They had come to see themselves as founders of the Kenyan nation. I was surprised to find, though, that many of my interviewees regarded Mau Mau with skepticism and scorn. For them, the violence and indignity of Kenya's civil war was not easily forgotten. I spent one memorable afternoon near Kijabe, interviewing a formidable man named Parmenas Kiritu. In June 1950, Kiritu, a shopowner, had been the leading witness in one of the first court trials concerning Mau Mau. In his testimony he had stressed the greed and indiscipline of Mau Mau, describing partisans as hungry and wanton young men. When war broke out in 1952, Kiritu had helped to found the Torchbearers Association, a loyalist group that fought against Mau Mau insurgents. Kikuyu people had been "led astray by bad men who had given filthy oaths to women and children", he told a Torchbearers meeting in 1956. In conversation Kiritu told me about a man he knew, a member of his church, who had been forced by Mau Mau partisans to take a blood oath supporting their cause. Kiritu was outraged. He thought the Mau Mau movement was barbarous. It was this conviction that made him a vociferous critic of Mau Mau.

I spent ten years pursuing the questions that Parmenas Kiritu and others inspired. In 2004 I published a book entitled *Creative Writing* about central Kenya's political and intellectual history. I made no mention of Kiritu, but the book was shaped by the lessons I had learned from the emphatic, passionate criticism that he gave of Mau Mau. *Creative Writing* showed that Kikuyu political identity was never settled. The book traced the century-long work by which Kikuyu grammar, orthography, and literature were defined, showing how and why the elements of cultural life were contested. Kikuyu language, I argued, was a forum of democratic argument, not a stable vernacular. It was

a venue where opinionated, diverse, purposeful people could make their voices heard.

The year I spent in Kenya was the starting place for my academic vocation. It was also the time when I formed some of the most enduring, most meaningful friendships in my life.

CHRISTIANITY AND PUBLIC LIFE

The year I spent in Kenya was the starting place for my academic vocation. It was also the time when I formed some of the most enduring, most meaningful friendships in my life. I came to Kenya as a modestly accomplished saxophone player, and within a few weeks of my arrival, I was playing every week in the house band at one of Nairobi's rapidly-growing churches, the Nairobi Chapel. All of the musicians were students at the University of Nairobi, whose campus encir-

pled the church building. We all played, practiced and performed with great conviction and enthusiasm, writing new songs in Swahili and English to suit the needs of a congregation that seemed to be at the very edge of something new.

At the time, I only dimly understood how consequential all of this was. Nairobi's population was growing rapidly. In 1980 there were around 800,000 people living in the city. By 1993, there were over 1.5 million. Many of these newcomers were exceedingly poor, but there was a growing middle class, too, with well-paying jobs in Nairobi's booming economy. They were searching for a Christianity that reflected their confidence, their ambition, their drive. The Chapel had been founded in 1952 to serve British expatriates living in the city. By the mid-1980s, its congregation had virtually disappeared. A new pastor—Oscar Muriu, only 27 years old, was appointed in 1989 to serve the congregation. He had a Masters of Divinity from Nairobi's leading divinity school, and a confident ease as a preacher. By the time I began playing my saxophone at the Nairobi Chapel, there were three services every Sunday, and the halls were packed with upwardly-mobile Nairobians.

In the first part of 1994, I began working with my Chapel friends to record an album that captured some of the music we'd invented, practiced, and rehearsed. This, too, was part of my work as a Fulbrighter. There were rehearsals and recording sessions three or four times a week, usually in the evenings. It was hard work. The album we recorded was called *Ni Wewe Tu*. I can be heard on it playing the saxophone. I also sang bass and arranged some of the choral harmonies. It is one of several albums that the musicians at the Nairobi Chapel recorded in the 1990s. Today the Nairobi Chapel is one of eastern Africa's most successful, most forward-looking Christian churches. There are over a hundred congregations that look to the Chapel as their point of origin. They are located in Kampala, Dar es Salaam, Addis Ababa, Accra, Kigali, and elsewhere in Africa. The Chapel is presently making efforts to launch churches in Europe. It is one of a number of African churches that are shaping the future of Christianity worldwide.

Here again, my sense of scholarly direction was vitally informed by the passions of the Kenyans I came to know. Having been involved in the early life of a confident, growing congregation, I became interested in the longer-term roots of east Africa's Christian evangelicalism. My second book, published in 2012, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent*, told the history of the East African Revival, a Christian conversion movement that began in northern Rwanda and southern Uganda in the mid-1930s and spread through Burundi, Kenya, Tanzania, eastern Zaire, and southern Sudan over the course of the 1940s and 1950s. Converts were people of the world. Contemporary advances in eastern Africa's communications infrastructure along with the widespread sale of bicycles, the circulation of newspapers, and

the advancing road network, made it possible for converts to travel across cultural and political frontiers, learn new languages, and read other people's autobiographies. Through media, converts came to see themselves as sharing a trajectory, an exemplary life-course, with people from other places.

The people I knew in the Nairobi Chapel were not revivalists, but their grandparents were. Family histories connected the confident, upwardly mobile people I knew with the cosmopolitan, widely-travelled revivalists of fifty years before. In the 2000s, I did several interviews with the elderly relatives of people who I had come to know as a Fulbrighter. The student who had played drums in the Nairobi Chapel band became one of my closest friends and collaborators. I lived in his family's rural home for months at a time, interviewing elderly men and women in his company. Another friend, the piano player, became a pastor and a theologian, a colleague to whom I now turn for advice and insight. Relationships forged in an earlier time shape the social and intellectual contexts with which I now work.

That is how my scholarly vocation took shape, not as the result of a singular intellectual vision nor as the fruit of careful planning or strategic thinking. My scholarly work was directed by the passions and preoccupations of Kenyans who I came to know and admire. That is the wonderful thing about Fulbright. Americans dealing with the global South usually rest upon the self-inflating notion that we should teach or guide the people with whom we work. With the Fulbright U.S. Student Program, there is no such conceit. The program puts us in political and cultural situations that we cannot pretend to control, and obliges us to act within storylines that we can not pretend to author.

NOTES

1. Kenya's post-colonial history is discussed in Daniel Branch, *Kenya: Between Hope and Despair* (Yale University Press, 2011). Gabrielle Lynch's *I Say to You: Ethnic Politics and the Kalenjin of Kenya* (University of Chicago Press, 2011) is a fascinating study of Kalenjin identity. My book about Kikuyu cultural history is *Creative Writing: translation, bookkeeping, and the work of imagination in colonial Kenya* (Heinemann, 2004); my book about the East African Revival is *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: a history of dissent* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).



The author and hosts in Olokurto, November 1993

BIOGRAPHY

Derek Peterson, Ph.D. is Ali Mazrui Collegiate Professor of History and African Studies at the University of Michigan. He was a US Student Fulbrighter to Kenya in 1993-1994. He was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2017 and a Guggenheim Fellow in 2016. He can be reached at drpeters@umich.edu.
