

THE PERILS OF ETHNIC HISTORY

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I Say To You: Ethnic Politics and the Kalenjin in Kenya. By GABRIELLE LYNCH. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Pp. xvi + 291. \$80, hardback (ISBN 978-022-649804-1); \$27.50, paperback (ISBN 978-022-649805-1). KEY WORDS: Eastern Africa, ethnicity, identity, violence.

The staggering and largely unexpected violence following the 2007 Kenya Election has cast a large shadow over academic study in the region. A resigned and ahistorical inevitability has crept into the analytical links constructed between violence and the otherwise nuanced approaches to ethnic histories in Kenya. Gabrielle Lynch's study of the Kalenjin fills an important regional gap in the political history of Kenya. And yet, the spectre of inevitable violence and a reactive discourse of instrumental ethnic belonging obscure more than they reveal.

The Kalenjin, often at the epicentre of political violence in Kenya's recent history, provide a fascinating case study of the constructions, contractions, and contradictions of ethnic politics in Kenya. Despite their recent origins, the Kalenjin emerged quickly in the late colonial period as a powerful regional polity and the most consistently united voting bloc. In Chapter One, Lynch explores the creative process of ethnogenesis among the Kalenjin, dating to the 1940s. Young cultural entrepreneurs, like radio personality John J. K. arap Chemallan, used the Nandi term 'Kalenjin', translated as 'I say to you', to speak to diverse constituents across western and central Kenya. While divided by administrative boundaries and rich local histories, these Nandi speakers shared many social affinities: most practiced pastoralism, most practiced both male and female circumcision, and most organised their communities through systems of age-sets and local councils.

Lynch traces the origins of consolidation among Nandi speakers to a defensive need to differentiate themselves culturally, territorially, and numerically, from their more 'advanced' neighbours – the Kikuyu. Reflecting similar social work being done by partisans across eastern Africa, Kalenjin cultural entrepreneurs participated in the creation of a written Kalenjin language and embarked on cultural projects of history-writing, of defining 'Kalenjin' customs, and of policing the morality of their constituents.

Chapter Two examines the popularisation of this 'Kalenjin' idea during the politically and ethnically polarising time of the Mau Mau rebellion and into decolonisation. *Majimbo*, the devolution of political power to regional entities, became a rallying call for this territorially dispersed yet increasingly 'exclusive' political community. While Jomo Kenyatta's government dismantled the regional platform laid out in constitutional negotiations, Kalenjin leaders quickly threw their lot in with the ruling party and were rewarded with Daniel arap Moi's appointment to the vice presidency in 1966, and later his rather sudden selection as Kenyatta's successor in 1978. Lynch argues that Moi's rise to prominence as the leading voice of the Kalenjin, the subject of Chapter Three, drew on community perceptions of respectability and sobriety, though these ideas would have benefitted from further elaboration. Colonial legacies of land alienation, debates over *majimbo*, and the patterns of presidentialism and ethnic bias from the Kenyatta era led to a distinct narrative of Kalenjin marginalisation and persecution, and 'a politics of territory that links local citizenship to spatially distinct *ethnie*' (p. 80).

The remaining three chapters examine the politicisation of ethnicity and violence in postcolonial Kenya. Lynch examines the dark side of populism in Moi's era, focusing on the state-led patronage, political intrigue, and repression that, far from cohering Kalenjin support, rather revealed the tensions and contradictions of his rule. While instigating a process of 'Kalenjinization' of the civil service, security forces, and economic institutions, Moi's grip on power was fragile and the benefits of his patronage unevenly distributed. As movements for democratisation gained momentum in the early 1990s, Kalenjin voters remained loyal to Moi, due not to the usual arguments of political patronage but rather to local strategies of 'exclusionary ethnicity and speculative loyalty' (p. 166). Narratives of a threatened homeland and invading outsiders transformed Kalenjin voters, divided by local histories and interests, into warriors: 'virulent defenders of ethnic claims' (p. 179). Violent clashes marred the first multiparty elections in 1992 and 1997, reflecting both elite mobilizations and the 'privatization of violence' as well as popular fears and defensive practises of ethnic belonging.

While state-sanctioned violence attempted to stall or limit the democratisation movement, the victory of the opposition in 2002 marked a dramatic shift. Cracks in the Kalenjin vote and in their support of Moi and his chosen successor, Uhuru Kenyatta, began to widen. As the enthusiasm of Mwai Kibaki's first term gave way to disillusionment over stalled constitutional reforms, accusations of dynasticism, and the return of Kikuyu political dominance, a diverse grassroots oppositional movement coalesced in the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). As elsewhere, ODM's regional electoral strategy that emphasised political devolution, narratives of historical grievances, and promises of future power sharing proved appealing to Kalenjin voters, despite Moi's public backing of Kibaki. For Lynch, the widespread violence that followed Kibaki's contested inauguration in 2007 needs to be understood within the context not only of state and elite mobilisations of violence but also of these local narratives of historical dispossession and an exclusive politics of ethnic belonging.

While this study provides a detailed political accounting of the Kalenjin in recent Kenyan history, it suffers from a limited use of sources and a top-heavy, derivative instrumentalist approach to ethnicity in Africa. Lynch relies heavily on colonial sources, interviews that appear strongly politicised, and existing literature, reproducing rather than unpacking their biases and conclusions. Nandi-language sources are strangely absent, particularly considering their importance not only in the early articulation of 'Kalenjin' identity but also in later political mobilizations. For Lynch, the construction of the Kalenjin community is a tale of marginalised outsiders, motivated by fear, political calculations, and a defensive politics of self-protection. While the emphasis on emotive language provides a framework for examining popular perceptions and mobilizations, Lynch leaves the internal moral debates over community membership and obligations and the very construction, dissemination, and uses of narratives of the past unexamined.

Kenya's recent history of political instability and violence looms large over this study, prompting its author to read history backwards and see violence as the inevitable outcome of a narrowly defined instrumentalist ethnic project. The social history of this Kalenjin idea, of the imagination and dissent within this plural community, remains, unfortunately, untold.

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