

KENYATTA'S LEGACY IN KENYA

Power and the Presidency in Kenya: The Jomo Kenyatta Years.

By Anaïs Angelo.

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The ‘big men’ of African independence are falling. Some version of this sentiment has been floating around for at least a decade: from the death of Qaddafi and the sudden resignation of Mugabe to recent reevaluations of Mandela’s leadership and legacy. Others, like Nkrumah and Selassie, faced that reckoning early and are only now being resuscitated. Anaïs Angelo’s *Power and the Presidency in Kenya* reassesses Kenya’s founding father Jomo Kenyatta and argues that presidential culture must be understood as a historical process deeply entangled with the personality and particular style of its first president.

This political and institutional biography tracks Kenyatta’s political rise to the presidency through to his death in 1978 over eight chapters. Chapter One examines Kenyatta’s early political work through *Facing Mount Kenya* and as editor of *Mwigwithania* to his growing reputation as voice of authority in the Kenya African Union. Angelo argues this early work set the stage for Kenyatta’s privileging of individuals over institutions and the grounding of his political philosophy in an expansive yet particular notion of the ‘family’ arising from Kikuyu moral thought. The ‘disruption’ of colonial rule prompted Kenyatta’s ‘political realism’; Angelo stresses Kenyatta’s belief in the Kikuyu principle of ‘possessive individualism’, de-emphasizing the state in favour of a pragmatic and devolved (both provincially and individually) approach to communal organization, responsibility, and development (54–5). Chapter Two follows Kenyatta’s rise as a nationalist figure and the ‘stage-managed’ campaign for his release, which inadvertently solidified Kenyatta’s symbolic capital despite a divided political landscape.

Chapters Three and Four focus on the making of a president. Land distribution figured prominently, as Kenyatta maintained a ‘mutuality of interests’ with the British and a strategically ambiguous relationship with the former Mau Mau fighters, who often stand in as proxy for the ‘landless’ more broadly (102). In contrast to a growing body of literature, Angelo resists a reading of the postcolonial state as an extension of the colonial state and instead argues that the consolidation of presidential power was a product of the contest over land resources, the weakness of other political contenders, and Kenyatta’s reliance on personal relations and pragmatic political calculations. Chapter Five then delves into the murky waters of Kenyatta’s complex relationship to and treatment of the so-called ‘resilient’ Mau Mau. Angelo focuses on the collision of these interests in Meru, where Kenyatta worked through intermediaries and carefully balanced his repression of former Mau Mau leaders, epitomized in the police killing of Field Marshal Baimungi, with his use of Mau Mau ‘bodyguards’ and elevation of Meru politicians such as Jackson Angaine as minister of land and settlement.

In Chapters Six and Seven, Angelo returns to land and the formation of ‘disempowered regionalism’ — isolating decisions from the Office of the President and thus keeping him at arm’s length from controversial policies and popular discontent, while maintaining vertical ties that bound political power to the position of the president. An obsession with land productivity consumed government business, and land allocation and ‘Africanization’ became central tools in shoring up loyalty among the political elite and provincial administration. Chapter Seven looks more specifically at the repression of opposition, deep divisions in the political elite, and politicization of land resources through the shared ties of dependency and patronage. While Kenyatta continued to claim the position of ‘reconciler’, the period witnessed the tightening of his increasingly authoritarian grip on power through the amassing of personal wealth and strengthening of personal loyalties.

In Chapter Eight, focus shifts to Kenyatta’s seemingly imminent demise (though the period lasts almost a decade). The assassinations of popular leaders Tom Mboya in 1969 and J. M. Kariuki in 1975 amid growing opposition signalled a new and final phase in Kenyatta’s rule. As Kenyatta’s health deteriorated, succession took centre stage. The 1970s were marked by inertia, passivity, and the shrinking of Kenyatta’s trusted political ‘family’. Although seemingly late in the text, this chapter offers a fascinating sketch of Kenyatta’s inner circle and the political and economic resources of his familial network. Kenyatta’s death in 1978 came as somewhat of a surprise, and many resented his choice of Daniel Arap Moi, a Kalenjin, as his successor.

This text makes many important contributions to our understanding of the creation of the presidency and the seemingly detached personal politics of Kenyatta. Angelo productively extends the study of intermediaries and ‘disempowered regionalism’ into the post-colonial era. However, the book suffers from a number of limitations. Many of the early chapters rely heavily on the work of John Lonsdale and terrain well-covered in recent studies by W. O. Maloba. The provocative concept of the ‘family’ as central to Kenyatta’s political ethos remains fuzzy and imprecise, and it disappears as the driving analytical framework for the bulk of the analysis. Serious consideration of gender, patriarchy, and capitalism are conspicuously absent, as are the intersections of the presidency with other institutions — military, judicial, federal — beyond land. Perhaps most critically, how much of Kenyatta’s brand of presidentialism survived and continued to shape the political culture of Kenya — his ‘institutional legacy’ — is left frustratingly unclear (272). Critiquing an index may seem quibbling; however, the exclusive focus on personalities in the index reflects these deeper concerns with the clarity, wider implications, and originality of the argument. Sources are also heavily weighted towards British communications and intelligence sources, at the expense of Gikuyu-language sources, interviews, and sources outside official state channels.

Current President Uhuru Kenyatta announced in 2018 that, in line with the 2010 Constitution, his father’s portrait, along with those of his two successors, would be removed from Kenyan currency and replaced with images of wildlife — a reflection Kenya’s ‘diversity’. The Jomo Kenyatta sketched by Angelo in vivid detail would have likely applauded this pragmatic move by his son, perhaps pointing towards the deeper dynastic politics, frustrated promises, and enduring legacies of Kenya’s first president.

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