Introduction to Forum on Post-Colonial and Contemporary Kenya dedicated to Elliot Fratkin and Richard Waller

Bettina Ng'weno and Paul Ocobock

This forum on post-colonial and contemporary Kenya, dedicated to Emeritus Editor Elliot Fratkin and retiring Book Review Editor Richard Waller, addresses a wide range of topics, from tourism (Devin Smart and Graham Fox) and post-election violence and HIV/AIDS (Elizabeth Pfeiffer) to hip-hop in Nairobi (RaShelle Peck) and forms of money in manhood rituals in discrete ethnic communities (Sibel Kusimba). Each article explores the agency exercised by Africans in "tight corners," to borrow a phrase from John Lonsdale, Richard Waller's dissertation advisor. These five studies—of money and ritual life, violence and disease, race and conservation, music, and tourism—have much in common. Amid poverty, disenfranchisement, illness, and uncertainty, the communities in each of these stories strive for survival and security. The forum also embraces difference, covering different parts of Kenya and revealing how different groups of Kenyans are often divided by very distinct, local concerns. Combined, they provide a window on the diversity of Kenyan lives and livelihoods, from rural to urban areas and from the coast to the north and the west. The authors have situated their analyses in complex but specific disparities in access to resources and power. These inequalities shape the analysis of the articles as well as the narratives articulated by people in the articles. The articles present peoples' efforts to construct narratives that articulate a space for self (albeit primarily a male self) in questions about history and world-making.

Specific issues of access to resources (money, land, cattle, grazing, marketing, medicine, employment, stability) and power (familial, age-based, wealth, ritual, gendered, voice, state, international, electoral, race, ethnic, violent) frame the questions of history and world-making presented here,

African Studies Review, Volume 61, Number 2 (July 2018), pp. 106–110
Bettina Ng'weno and Paul Ocobock

doi:10.1017/asr.2018.47

and we discern a number of provocative interconnections. Essential to the problems in each article are change and adjusting to change, which is read as uncertainty against which understandings of the world are created or taken up. This change is enhanced by growing local and global disparities in access to resources and power. Inequality then comes to be a way of understanding history and world-making. In Western Kenya, Kusimba shows us how impoverished Bukusu families access different kinds of money to afford powerful yet costly life cycle rituals. Pfeiffer locates debates about violence, morality, and HIV/AIDs among the residents of Mahali, a western Kenyan trading center, in the wake of post-election violence. Farther north, in Laikipia, Fox recounts how a class of white landowners rose to prominence despite decolonization and the ever-present threat of land appropriation, as well as how destitute, drought-stricken families stormed those farms. In the national capital, Peck listens to the voices of Nairobi's underground rappers demanding social change and struggling for political seriousness. And on a national level, Smart explores a post-colonial state desperate to build a tourist economy based in part on fantasy, while navigating the realities of the Cold War era.

The processes of world-making are revealed to be both local and global, and the two visions are in conversation with each other. Smart shows how the postcolonial government tried to brand Kenya as a tourist destination, while its image was negotiated between competing tourism narratives circulating both locally and globally. While local narratives emphasized different things (especially the modernity of Nairobi), they could not completely escape the power of international narratives (of pristine Africa) or of those who imagined Kenya as a tourist destination in the colonial past. Similarly, in articulating a sense of place, Pfeiffer demonstrates competing narratives of emplacement and belonging to Mahali that circulate among national narratives of violence, ethnic tensions, and global articulations of disease. The local narratives contain a self-reflection within a global context of modernity and medical service distribution.

Peck demonstrates the retooling of the global phenomenon of hip-hop in Nairobi to fashion responses to national problems of violence and instability. Nairobi's underground musicians reach out, Peck argues, to American traditions and innovations in rap music to transform their talents and challenge young people's political disenfranchisement and economic inequality. In addition, while rappers read their identity in the context of modernity, they connect themselves to a particular Kenyan history—more specifically a Gikuyu history of Mau Mau—to ground their "modern" contributions. Fox investigates the global narratives that tie race to conservation in Kenya (and perhaps in Africa more broadly) by looking at conflicting local narratives that try to enhance or critique this global narrative with local consequences in the context of climate change. Here the local can become global if articulated as whiteness. On the massive farms of Laikipia, Fox contends that white landowners seek shelter behind the financial aid of Western NGOs and USAID as well as the moral cover of conservation to protect their tenuous and contested land "rights."

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.47 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Kusimba parses global and local ideas of money and its purpose to understand its use in the production of male selves through time. In Bukusu, families increasingly rely on mobile money to connect individuals and families across geographic spaces, reminding them of their collective memory, history, and responsibilities to boys about to come of age. Kusimba argues that mobile money does not supersede other local, tangible resources such as land, livestock, and labor—rather, it supplements them. Local ideas of money are not singular, and they can change depending on poverty, status, gender, age, and particular networks and circumstances.

Yet as they create these local-global pathways, Africans find measures of success, but often at a cost. The local and the global flow both ways—and Africans often remain ensnared in profoundly unequal economic relationships or subjected to complicated, tone-deaf conversations with the West. The long-distance speed of mobile money and short-distance certainty of land and livestock can only assure so much mobility for young Bukusu men suffering from underemployment, low wages, and high costs of living—all of which result in a prolonged period of emasculated youth. The stigma of and global fight against HIV/AIDs, coupled with its association with the evils of promiscuous, weaponized sexuality, offer residents of "Mahali" a way to explain the destruction of the trading center and its reputation as a place where terrible things happen. Speaking the language of conservation, white farmers have perpetuated land alienation, indentured pastoralists to impoverished livelihoods in land management, and postponed the decolonization of Kenya's northern lands. Nairobi's underground artists constantly feel the pressure to go mainstream, to accept the monetary rewards of signing with a label and being co-opted by the music industry and Kenyan politicians. And lastly, Kenya's postcolonial government struggles to balance its desire to project itself as a modern tourist destination with Western desires to imagine Kenya as a pristine, primordial landscape, devoid of people.

The forum is also a rich conversation with history. In each case, narratives about the local and global are drawn out of the past to make sense of the present. This raises questions about how history is remembered and then reconfigured as it is narrated. As such, history is a contested space, as these articles indicate, but then the question becomes, how should it be addressed methodologically to analyze this particular historical moment? What can these authors present as history, and how ought they to do this? How are historic local and global narratives circulated in the present, how does their operation today affect the telling of history, and how can we be made aware of it? Furthermore, how are we to unpack the politics of local, national, and global narratives of worlds? While troubling the distinctions between local and global, the authors identify a number of globally circulating ideas about how the world should or does work, including ideas about capitalism, neoliberalism, race, and modernity, as well as demonstrate the challenges or rearticulations of these processes at local levels. This pushes us to ask how and why do these global narratives circulate globally and gain power,

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.47 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and then how do we understand them in relation to the local? It would be interesting to look beyond the state to locate sites for the creation of these ideas. In particular, the language of self-articulation as "productive" or "unable to provide" as a man reflects a rather recent idea of masculinity; one sees this as well in the concepts of productivity and individuality as promoted by churches, in particular prosperity gospel churches. We would be interested in the role of these circulations of narratives of world-making—past and present—and how they enhance or disrupt other ideas of self at the local level.

With the process of devolution of governance to the local level following the 2010 constitution, after the elections of 2013, local concerns were expected to surface in the kinds of policies put forward by counties. However, counties were greatly constrained by capacity, resources, and personnel, and a number of them turned to populist measures of supposedly easy implementation that were particularly gender- and age-related. In Kilifi, the county government attempted to outlaw miniskirts for women and baggy trousers for men. In Kisumu, women were restricted from operating *boda boda* (motorcycle taxis) or from riding on them. These measures seem surprisingly personal and petty to be mandated at the level of county government, and in the end they proved unable to be implemented or enforced.

The issues of gender and age, however, are revealed by these articles as anything but uncontested within local, national, and global narratives of world-making. Rather, like history, age and gender form major fault lines through which narratives of history and worlds are articulated. They challenge Kenya scholars to investigate more deeply how masculinity and adulthood are being constituted through processes of ethnic and racial violence in the context of scarce resources and the relationship between the two. And they provoke us to think about the narration of history, place, and power through female voices. Collectively, the authors call for closer attention to be paid to the local and global narratives of world-making, including narratives that justify or critique disparities based on age and gender in relation to resources, power, voice, and environment. Moreover, a combination of temporality and sexuality frame many of the presented narratives of history and identity in the five articles. These authors work with Kenyans' ideas about temporal and sexual power, locating them in anxieties about reproductions of self, gender, community, country, and historical privilege, as well as generational successions manifested in conflict over resources, inheritance, and elections.

These communities all draw power from the very global forces that marginalize them. They reengineer mobile technologies, moral debates about disease, funding for conservation, and American trends in rap in music, challenging Western media and well-to-do adventure-seekers. They try to escape the "tight corners" of local circumstances and the impediments of national politics and economic life, while drawing these global forces homeward. Individually, each of these robust and creative papers

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.47 Published online by Cambridge University Press

underscores bright futures for Kenya Studies and the rising generation of scholars who study Kenyans' pasts and presents. On behalf of the editors of the *African Studies Review*, past and present, we offer this mini forum as a tribute to Elliot and Richard. It is our hope that these papers will capture their imaginations and inspire them as they continue their important work as well as challenge a younger generation of scholars to embrace new and innovative methods and concepts.

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.47 Published online by Cambridge University Press