Introduction: Toward a History of Violence in Colonial Kenya*

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On December 27, 2007, Kenya seemed poised to cement its image as one of Africa's most "mature" democracies. What Kenyans anticipated would be the most free and fair elections in their history instead devolved into one of the nation's darkest hours. From Mombasa to Kisumu citizens cast their ballots in relative peace and security. As the election results trickled in, however, rumors of irregularities in the tally surfaced. Both of the leading parties—ODM and PNU—accused the other of corrupt practices and tampering.[1] As ballot counting continued and opposition candidate Raila Odinga appeared on his way to capturing the presidency, the Electoral Commission of Kenya suddenly declared incumbent Mwai Kibaki the winner. In a hastily arranged private ceremony, Chief Justice Evan Gicheru gave Kibaki the oath of office. In the weeks and months that followed, outraged political supporters of both candidates poured into the streets. Protests quickly turned violent. The police, military, and politically sponsored gangs used the tense climate not only to fight over the presidency, but also to square off over long-standing problems, from land ownership to the politics of identity. In the cosmopolitan capital of Nairobi, in the rich agricultural highlands of Kenya's former colonial settlers, in lakeside Kisumu, thousands were injured or killed with hundreds of thousands more left displaced.[2]

Much of the world had historically viewed Kenya as an island of peace and economic potential in a roiling sea of stateless chaos (Somalia), genocide (Rwanda), mad dictators and child soldiers (Uganda), and a decades-long civil war (Sudan). As the post-election violence mounted, however, much of the world media reverted to stock narratives about Africa. Tales of mindless "tribal" violence perpetrated by machete-wielding young men dominated the early western media coverage. Reporters found that they could easily make Kenya explicable by classifying it as a stereotypical African conflict.[3] This focus on

* The origins of this collection of essays began at a 2008 African Studies Association panel titled "Violence in Kenya." The authors would like to thank the panel's discussant Thomas Spear, Richard Waller, our fellow presenters, and the audience for their insightful comments.

[1] Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) and Party of National Unity (PNU).

[2] For a recent overview of the election violence, see the special issue, "Election Fever: Kenya's Crisis," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 2, 2 (2008); Ben Rawlence and Chris Albin-Lackey, "Ballots to Bullets: Organized Political Violence and Kenya's Crises of Governance," (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008), http://hrw.org/reports/2008/kenya0308/kenya0308webwcover.pdf; Jerome Lafargue, ed., *The General Election in Kenya, 2007* (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 2009), and Mbugua wa-Mundai and George Gona, eds., *(Re)Membering Kenya, Vol. I: Identity, Culture, and Freedom* (Nairobi: Twaweza, 2010).

[3] The most reliable non-Kenya media source was al-Jazeera.

the savagery of the violence and the proffering of simplistic explanations prevented serious discussion of the root causes of the post-election violence (or PEV as it was quickly dubbed). The western press informed readers that Kenyan communities had "awakened ancient ethnic rivalries" and were "settling the score the old fashion way."[4] Yet the violence was not ancient and primordial. Nor was it the result of nothing more than a deeply flawed election.

What the popular narrative often failed to capture was the continuity with Kenya's violent colonial past. The roots of the post-election violence were not so deep as to be entwined in Kenyans' DNA, nor so shallow as to have grown from a seed planted on December 27. We must instead trace the roots—tangled as they are—at least as far back as the colonial epoch, when public violence was employed to assert social and political authority. The following essays do not directly speak to the 2007/2008 post-election violence in Kenya. Instead, they offer a deeper look into how the meanings and uses of public violence were shaped by the colonial encounter. From the racially charged settler society and colonial courts to the suppression of gendered and youthful defiance in schools and cities, the following essays seek to move Kenyan historiography beyond the usual discussions of violence as anti-colonial resistance and to challenge the broader portrayal of violence in histories of colonial Africa.[5]

In the western mind, life in Africa is nasty, brutish and short, and violent. Images and tales of mass graves and savage violence often dominate coverage of the continent by a media that thrives on a pornography of suffering. In his widely-referenced and highly influential 1994 article "The Coming Anarchy," Robert Kaplan warned that western civilization was in its death throes, and the post-apocalyptic world would look much like contemporary Africa: genocides, state collapse, warlordism.[6] The causes of Africa's anomie, poverty, and crime included polygamy as well as a veneer of Christianity or Islam incapable of regulating Africans' darker impulses. One is tempted to speculate that Kaplan had sat down with *Heart of Darkness*, for Africa once again stood for the obscenities deep within civilization, the barbarism that without careful management would drive the West into chaos and death—to become Africa.[7] According to Kaplan, colonialism is implicated only for installing impotent "states" and drawing meaningless boundaries between them. Violence he chalks up to a simple failure of Africans to advance (or, perhaps, evolve?).

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[4] See "Kenyan Tribes Wage a War With Bows and Arrows," *Time Magazine*, 18 March 2008, http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1722198,00.html.

[5] The articles here examine the role of violence in a British colonial setting; for a recent French comparison, see Samuel Kalman, "Introduction: Colonial Violence," *Historical Reflections* 36, 2 (2010), 1–6.

[6] Robert D. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *The Atlantic* (February 1994), available at http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/199402/anarchy/. It is said that then-Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs, Timothy Wirth, faxed the article to every US embassy.

[7] On Cote d'Ivoire, Kaplan writes: "Success, however, was built on two artificial factors: the high price of cocoa, of which the Ivory Coast is the world's leading producer, and the talents of a French expatriate community, whose members have helped run the government and the private sector." When things began to slide toward anarchy, it was the French who were "working assiduously to preserve stability."

"Physical aggression is a part of being human," Kaplan avers. "Only when people attain a certain economic, educational, and cultural standard is this trait tranquilized."[8]

That Kaplan and other writers have consistently misunderstood the continent should not allow us to elide the fact that violence is distressingly common. Millions have been killed just since 1990 in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Darfur, and the Great Lakes region. Smaller rebellions and politically motivated violence have wreaked havoc in other states, with domestic and sexual violence exceedingly widespread in conflict zones. But scholars have challenged those in the public arena who offer facile explanations of violent conflict as "Christian versus Muslim," "Hutu versus Tutsi," "Arab versus African," or, *pace* Kaplan, as products of the natural and social environment. As Richards puts it, for many critics African violence is "driven by environmental and cultural imperatives which the West has had no hand in shaping, and now has no responsibility to try and contain."[9]

Yet many recent works that do attempt to explore the causes of contemporary violence rarely delve deeply into the colonial or pre-colonial past.[10] Moreover, most studies consider violence only in its exceptional forms—warfare, rebellions, counter-insurgency—rather than the mundane but more insidious violence of the fist, the cane, or the noose. Thus Stephen Ellis suggests that there are reasons "to reconsider the whole history of violence during colonial rule and even up to very recent times within a single perspective," but he refers primarily to violence as acts of anti-colonial resistance.[11]

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Richards, *Fighting for the Rainforest: War, Youth, & Resources in Sierra Leone* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), xiii. See also Klaas van Walraven and Jon Abbink, "Rethinking Resistance in African History: An introduction," in Jon Abbink, Mirjam de Bruijn, and Klaas van Walraven eds., *Rethinking Resistance: Revolt and Violence in African History* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), and David Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey, 2005).

[10] Preben Kaarsholm, ed., *Violence, Political Culture and Development in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2006); Patrick Chabal, Ulf Engel, and Anna-Maria Gentili, eds., *Is Violence Inevitable in Africa? Theories of Conflict and Approaches to Conflict Prevention* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Vigdis Broch-De, ed., *Violence and Belonging: The Quest for Identity in Post-Colonial Africa* (London: Routledge, 2005); Pal Ahluwalia, Louise Bethlehem, and Ruth Ginio, *Violence and Non-Violence in Africa* (London: Routledge, 2007), and Belachew Gebrewold, *Anatomy of Violence: Understanding the Systems of Conflict and Violence in Africa* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).

[11] Stephen Ellis, "Colonial Conquest in Central Madagascar: Who Resisted What?" in Abbink, de Bruijn, and Walraven, eds., *Rethinking Resistance*, 85; Toyin Falola. *Colonialism and Violence in Nigeria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). A handful of scholars have worked to historicize violence in Africa. Works on conflicts in the Great Lakes normally provide a chapter on the historical antecedents to recent ethnic conflicts. See Rene Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chap. 3; Gerard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), chap. 1; Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), chaps. 2–3; Jean-Pierre Chretien, *The Great Lakes of Africa: Two Thousand Years of History*, trans. Scott Straus (New York: Zone, 2006). Azevedo reaches back to the seventeenth century to argue that "violence became almost an intrinsic part of the fabric of the Central Sudanic societies," which outside intervention has only worsened. Mario Azevedo, *Roots of Violence: A History of War in Chad* (Amsterdam: Gordon and

Certainly Maji Maji, Mau Mau, and the Chimurenga deserve close study, and we must be alive to how those brutal conflicts continue to inform contemporary violence. At the same time, millions of Africans experienced acts of violence not nearly so breathtakingly brutal as the Herero genocide or the battle for Algiers.

Twentieth century African history, and violence in postcolonial Africa, cannot be adequately understood until we better appreciate the history of violence. We do not lack in historians of Kenya's violent history. Too often, however, we have been drawn like scavengers to the bodies that piled up at the rise and decline of colonial Kenya. We allow our attention to be captured by conquest and Mau Mau.[12] King's African Rifle regiments and African irregulars, with Maxim guns and spears, spread colonial authority through violent means.[13] Subsequently, administrators employed force to turn peasants into wage laborers, and sent thousands to their deaths as porters during World War One. As the sun began to set on other parts of the empire, the guns again came alive. Historians have shown how the state used violence not just to defeat Mau Mau fighters in the forests of central Kenya, but also to physically and psychologically crush civilians and combatants in detention camps, "protected villages," jails, and on death row.[14] The papers in this volume try to redirect our scholarly attention away from the bloody bookends of British East Africa. We argue for greater research on violence against Africans on the local level, meted out by Africans and Europeans alike, throughout the colonial era.

There is, we insist, a need for a deeper, more nuanced history of violence in both colonial and postcolonial Kenya. We must study not just the PEV, but also the extra-judicial killings by police, the Rift Valley land wars of the 1990s, the torture chambers of Nyayo House, and the assassinations of Ouko, Kariuki, Mboya, and Pinto. Within colonial historiography much of the violence within the forests and detention camps in the 1950s has been uncovered, but little has been done to explore acts of violence within households, in the chiefs' lock-ups, settler farms, the courtrooms, and on the streets of Kenya's urban centers. In presenting the four articles in this issue we suggest a re-orientation toward acts of violence perhaps less spectacular than conquest and counter-insurgency, but perhaps just as key in shaping contemporary Kenyan debates over appropriate uses of violence. Authors here explore acts of physical violence in public settings and argue that these acts

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Breach, 1998), 3. The work of Alexander, McGregor, and Ranger demonstrates how memories of forced resettlement in Southern Rhodesia live on in Zimbabwe and help shape contemporary political debates. Jocelyn Alexander, JoAnn McGregor, and Terence Ranger, *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the 'Dark Forests' of Matabeleland* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000).

[12] These themes are also memorialized in literary accounts of the colonial period. See Tirop Simatei "Colonial Violence, Postcolonial Violations: Violence, Landscape, and Memory in Kenyan Fiction," *Research in African Literatures* 36, 2 (2005), 85–94.

[13] For an overview of this period, see John Lonsdale, "The conquest state, 1895–1904," in William Ochieng, ed., *A Modern History Of Kenya* (Nairobi: Evans Brothers, 1989), 6–35.

[14] For a recent overview of this vast topic in Kenyan historiography, see David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005); Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005); and Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

reflect moments where the boundaries of cultural hegemony were openly debated.[15] By examining how violence was used as a means of coercive discipline we argue that both African and European actors wielded violence in the public spaces of colonial Kenya as a means to socialize African men and women into proper social conduct as well as justify both the strength and benevolence of colonial rule.

The articles in this collection are not meant to contribute to a vision of "Merrie Africa," a peaceful, non-violent past rudely interrupted by colonialism. Despite a tendency to assume that pre-colonial Africans preferred compensation and mending tears in the social fabric to punishing scofflaws, public violence was used in Kenya's deeper past in ways that reflect both continuity and change with the colonial period. In some areas of nineteenth-century East Africa councils of elders held the power to order corporal punishment of criminals.[16] Suspected witches might be killed, along with sexual offenders caught *in flagrante delicto*.[17] Beyond direct punishment, infliction of pain in public ceremony also played a central role in customary acts such as circumcision. Thus by carrying out corporal punishment and painful rites of passage or even by wielding the death penalty, pre-colonial Kenyan communities were actively engaged in using public violence as a means to enforce social discipline and socialize youth into adulthood.[18]

The era of European colonialism in Africa did, however slowly and fitfully, bring an end to slave-raiding and intra-African warfare throughout much of the continent. At the same time, we should be wary of claims, such as Goody's for northern Ghana, that European conquest put an end to intra-African violence and that "the face of the country changed rapidly, giving increasing emphasis to non-violent means of dispute settlement."[19] We ought not to confuse the reduction of slave raiding and African wars of expansion with definitive peace; other forms of public violence endured and new ones emerged. Colonial expansion installed European authority through violence. With the beginning of colonial rule often coinciding with violent "pacification," Martin argues that "ordinary people merely exchanged the uncertainties of local politics for the certainty of colonial

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[15] See Edna Bay and Donald Donham, *States of Violence: Politics Youth and Memory in Contemporary Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 1–37.

[16] See, for example, appendices to early volumes of the *East African Law Reports*.

[17] C.W. Hobley, *Ethnology of the A-Kamba and Other East African Tribes* (1910; reprint, London: Frank Cass, 1971); H.E. Lambert, *Kikuyu Social and Political Institutions* (London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1956), 59, 79; Gerhard Lindblum, *The Akamba in British East Africa: An Ethnographical Monograph* (1920; reprint, New York: Negro University Press, 1969), 160; Paul Mboya, *Luo Kitgi Gi Timbegi*, trans. Jane Achieng (Nairobi: Ati Joint, 2001), 180; A.B.C. Ocholla-Ayayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics among the Southern Luo* (Uppsala: Scandanavian Institute of African Studies, 1976), 102; G.S. Snell, *Nandi Customary Law* (1954; reprint, Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1986), 31.

[18] For more on this continuity and change, see Richard Waller, "Rebellious Youth in Colonial Africa," *Journal of African History* 47, 1 (2006), 77–92.

[19] Jack Goody, "Establishing Control: Violence along the Black Volta at the Beginning of Colonial Rule," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 38, 150–152 (1998), 227–44.

coercion."[20] The late nineteenth century might be viewed as a period when the control of public violence simply changed hands. The same might be said for the era of decolonization. At least outside the home, *Uhuru* (independence) may have marked a change in who employed violence, but the debates over who could legitimately use and be subjected to violence continued.

In early 2008, the present authors began to discuss the lack of historical context for Kenya's recent violence. This discussion merged with our standing conviction on the need to de-center Mau Mau as the central issue of Kenyan colonial history. It became clear that a start must be made toward writing the history of violence across the colonial landscape. The articles presented here extend attention to violence in colonial Kenya beyond conquest and resistance, and offer readers the chance to ponder how Kenyans were socialized into a culture of violence on a local level. By redirecting attention away from the dominant themes of colonial conquest and Mau Mau, we examine the ways violence was employed in daily life. Here we focus on the public arena, which (while beyond the scope of this volume) was intimately connected to culture of domestic violence in the private sphere of colonial life.[21]

Contributors in this volume show how violence in public life was widely debated through the legal and educational system, programs that targeted urban social morality and repatriation, and white supremacy advocated by settlers. For instance, Matthew Carotenuto and Paul Ocobock each demonstrate how repatriation and corporal punishment were used by both African and colonial authorities as a method of social and cultural instruction for wayward women and rebellious youth. This often resulted in African elders and more conservative elements of an emerging mission-educated elite entering into precarious partnerships with colonial authorities over the need to maintain gendered and generational discipline. Brett Shadle and Stacey Hynd expand on the connections between public violence and colonial authority and argue that corporal punishment and even the death penalty were central to establishing the racial hierarchy of settler society. However while most colonial officials and white settlers saw the need to use public violence to maintain "proper" interracial relations, Hynd shows how debates over employing mercy at the gallows also was a way to demonstrate the benevolence of colonial rule.

Placed within wider struggles over social and political authority, violence was used and debated by competing actors to assert control and establish legitimacy in a number of both complimentary and competing ways. These complex and conflicting notions of both legal and extra-judicial violence reveal an important medium of historical inquiry that sheds new light not only on colonial history but contemporary realities. While the violent

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[20] Phyllis Martin, "Violence of Empire," in David Birmingham and Phyllis Martin, eds., *History of Central Africa*, vol. 2 (London: Harlow, 1993), 16. At the same time, we do not wish to attempt to compare levels of violence, or measure the harm inflicted, in different periods, as does Chabal, who argues that "the continent now endures a greater degree of violence than at any time since independence." Patrick Chabal, "Introduction: Violence, Power, and Rationality: A Political Analysis of Conflict in Contemporary Africa," in Chabal, Engel, and Gentili, *Is Violence Inevitable*, 1.

[21] See Emily Burrill, Richard Roberts, and Elizabeth Thornberry, eds., *Domestic Violence and the Law in Africa: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010).

struggle for social and political power over the last century of Kenyan history culminated in the election crisis of 2007/2008, we argue that to understand (and overcome) the contemporary culture of violence one must begin in the colonial past.