

Mungiki and the Re-traditionalisation of Society Argument: A Quest for Recognition?

This brief note critiques Peter Kagwanja's analysis of Mungiki which is anchored in the re-traditionalisation of society and the instrumentalisation of disorder frameworks. These are two related frameworks that have informed the works of Patrick Chabal, Jean-Pascal Daloz and Stephen Ellis.¹ The piece demonstrates the connection of the re-traditionalisation of society framework to Ellis's recent recommendation for a new trusteeship of so-called failed states in Africa.² It shows that trusteeship as a proposal for recolonisation is based on Ellis's low opinion of African nationalism. Finally, the piece argues that African scholars, like Kagwanja, risk much when they conceptualise movements like Mungiki from this deeply flawed perspective whose main emphasis is war, chaos, anarchy and violence; these being aspects that Ellis and associates link with the traditional. The article identifies the centring of western self-interest as the covert aim of such a pessimistic reading of African realities even when these interests are pretentiously cast as empathetic to Africans. This therefore is at once a personal note to Kagwanja as well as a rejoinder to Ellis.

Kagwanja has had a very prolific academic life. The quality and quantity of his publications have been steady and impressive. He has published several articles, some in 'reserved' journals like *African Affairs* (hereafter AA). AA is a rare journal indeed because of its long history of representing the natives and especially in the way the editors decide what to accept or reject. Recently, Stephen Ellis made me and Shadrack Nasong'o revise a paper we had submitted three times only for him to declare it too 'journalistic' to be published. He also mentioned that he had very many high quality submissions that made it impossible to publish ours. Of course we would have been surprised had AA accepted to publish our piece. But we designed it in such a way as to deny the editors a good intellectual basis of rejecting it. As we revised and recast the paper, we came to appreciate Nyamnjoh's words that African scholars have to 'face

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a critical choice between sacrificing relevance for recognition, or recognition for relevance'.³

I recount this story as a comment on the kinds of pressures many African scholars face as they endeavour to publish in western journals and the trade-off they quite often have to make between recognition and relevance. In 'Power to Uhuru', Kagwanja makes a particularly pernicious choice for recognition. His argument uncritically takes from Ellis the idea of a discernible drift from modernity toward retraditionalisation of society at face value. There is no attempt to theorise and explain the concept of retraditionalisation. Accordingly, his analyses of Mungiki activities fail to gel with the approach he purports to take. He seems to have latched onto the two perspectives of instrumentalisation of disorder and re-traditionalisation of society simply to catch the eye of the gatekeepers of publishing with AA. This is disheartening because, until then, Kagwanja was a leading analyst of the youth/generational question in Kenyan politics whose interpretative stance spoke to the realities in Kenya.⁴ In this, he was complemented by others like Mshai Mwangola whose work seeks to rescue youth discourses from the overly negative outlook in which youth activities are perceived through the pessimistic prism of crime, chaos, violence, or war. Other scholars like Abubakar Momoh and Musambayi Katumanga have made significant contributions to this discussion by locating youth violence in the context of the nature of the state when under pressure to reform. Of course, there is Mamadou Diouf's illuminating study of Senegalese youth which Kagwanja does not mention.⁵ To understand why, let us closely look at Kagwanja's conceptual tools.

Basically, Kagwanja's illuminating description of Mungiki is clothed in the flawed notions of re-traditionalisation of polity and instrumentalisation of disorder. His conclusion is particularly telling as it gestures to old-fashioned modernisation logic. 'Mungiki', he asserts, 'signified not only a logic of instrumentalization of disorder that has characterized Kenya's multi-party era, but also the effort to re-traditionalize governance in an essentially modern space'.⁶ By juxtaposing 'tradition' and 'modernity', Kagwanja raises important epistemological and methodological issues. This is especially worrisome in the context of recent historiography on the African state. Most of this historiography seeks to find the best epithet to describe the African state instead of comprehensively locating the root causes of these conflicts in the political economy of the twin processes of localisation and globalisation. 'Re-traditionalisation of society' and 'instrumentalisation of disorder' notions emerge from this discredited historiography; they are notions popularised in the 1990s by an Africanist network bringing together people like Bayart, Ellis, Chabal, Daloz and Béatrice Hibou.⁷ Sometime in the late 1990s, these Africanists began to 'concretise' their arguments through the 'Africa Issues' series; first as a way of bringing the 'best' of French Africanist works to the English world and also as a basis of claiming some newness for their perspective. Their arguments received some applause in the Africanist community in Europe and the US where the frenzy for epithets had run its course. But these studies were heavily shunned in Africa, except of course from a minority of scholars.

There were reasons why many scholars on the continent and abroad shunned this 'new' thinking. Notions of re-traditionalisation draw from a logic of the civilising mission which, until the 1940s, defined European incursions on the continent. Built around an anthropological reading of African institutions and its cultures, this mission questioned the humanity of Africans, justified their coloni-

sation and posed this domination as an engine of modernising the natives. Colonial modernisation became Africa's path from the heart of darkness to modernity. Its unilinear logic was the basis of developmentalism, the successor to the civilising mission after the 1940s, a developmentalism currently being authorised under US hegemony and re-authorised by IMF/World Bank neo-liberalism.⁸ In *Criminalization of the State*, Bayart, et al., speak of Africa's return to the heart of darkness, while in *Africa Works*, Chabal and Daloz write about the instrumentalisation of disorder as a plausible re-traditionalisation of society. It takes a bold Africanist to commit such notions to paper in this world of political correctness.

In his review of Bayart, Chabal and Daloz, Guy Martin aptly concluded that the two books were 'long on theory, but short on substance'.⁹ Kagwanja's piece seems designed to provide the substance. This is very disheartening. Matters would have been helped if the substance Kagwanja 'provides' accurately substantiated the concepts adopted. Unfortunately, the 'substance' can only work with his conceptual frame through misreading generational politics in Kenya. First, there is no line defining what passes as traditional or modern. The two realms interpenetrate in complex ways in Africa; they do so in such a way as to render the dichotomy a mockery of reality. The dichotomous tags are often deployed in Africanist discourses as trendy catch decoys designed to locate African problems exclusively in the local terrain. What better way to emphasise internal causes of African problems than to focus on the local which most of the time is understood as being cultural?¹⁰ What better way to exonerate the external connection than to emphasise tradition and warn of the dangers it poses against modernity? Bayart's arguments have been noted for eliding western colonialism as an explanation for the nature of the state in Africa. With respect to Ellis, Mkandawire writes that 'Ellis is attracted to the "local" and the "cultural" precisely because this allows him to detach it from the "global", on the one hand, and the "economic" and the "political", on the other hand'.¹¹ It should not therefore be surprising that Ellis now recommends a new trusteeship for Africa's so-called failed states.¹²

Second, Kagwanja's definition of re-traditionalisation is cheap and utterly

unconvincing. In fact, he hardly theorises the notion. The mere fact that a vigilante group draws on 'pre-colonial idioms of organization based on hierarchical age systems' does not in any way constitute re-traditionalisation of the polity.¹³ Otherwise, the numerous instances when pre-colonial idioms of organisation have been invoked in post-colonial Africa would make the whole gamut of this post-colonial history a process of re-traditionalisation. By the same logic, it means that we should see re-traditionalisation of society and instrumentalisation of disorder each time a group of people pick up spears, arrows, or swords and paint themselves with red ochre or clad in traditional shuka to assault others. The extent to which this description trivialises culture and invites us to ignore broader elements of political economy is remarkable. Yet these political economy approaches have inspired decades of illuminating scholarship on the continent that such notions like re-traditionalisation are bastardising.

It is curious that Kagwanja hardly refers to this inspirational literature. In fact, the adjectives he employs in reference to the Africanist scholars whose perspectives he has chosen to latch onto amply vindicate the claim that he intended to catch the eye of the gate keepers. While Grace Wamue, perhaps the main African scholar he cites other than himself, is said to have 'unveiled', John Lonsdale 'has powerfully argued', David Anderson 'has cogently argued', or 'has lucidly analysed'. One can understand why Lonsdale would be central to Kagwanja's argument given that he is the leading British scholar studying Kenya at the moment. But it is often conveniently 'forgotten' by those who employ Lonsdale's notions of 'political tribalism' and 'moral ethnicity' that Peter Ekeh made this illuminating distinction in his notion of 'two publics' three decades ago.¹⁴ Ekeh's was a pace setter. In a piece intended to canonise Ekeh's contribution, Osaghae shows how from his pioneering analysis, other scholars have borrowed, used and misused Ekeh's argument. Of the omissions these scholars foster about Ekeh's pioneering work, most refuse to acknowledge the centrality of colonialism to Ekeh's argument and its impact on the nature of the state and civil society in Africa. Ekeh observed that 'It is to the colonial experience that any valid conceptualization of unique nature of African politics must look'.¹⁵

Yet, the notion of re-traditionalisation of society firmly focuses on pre-colonial Africa. It seeks to identify only those aspects that validate a local/culturalist reading of African politics. Pride of place is given to religion, cultural symbols, witchcraft, local grammar, communal regalia, traffic in heads, et cetera, shorn of broader political economy concerns relating to colonialism, neo-colonialism and the neo-liberal context whose effects on Africa have complicated rather than helped its attempt to right previous wrongs.¹⁶ It is almost as if culture is a peculiarly pre-colonial lingering into the modern, a thing that marks out African deviance from the universal norm so that a society that is re-traditionalising is perceived as moving backwards from modernity. The amnesia about colonialism has come full circle in Ellis's writing. Ellis trashes nationalism and recommends trusteeship, what Richard Joseph baptises 'country-pairing'. In a recent study, Ellis recommends 'a new form of international engagement in Africa: namely, trusteeships for certain failed states'. Without delving into how this new form will differ from the old, Ellis calls for 'multilateral joint ventures in which certain countries and institutions share control over key operations'. Curiously, Ellis recommends that 'the UN should still play a fundamental role (although not an administrative one), since it alone can confer the kind of legitimacy critical to such projects'. He then pleads on behalf of Africans for a token African representative to an expanded UN Security Council since, as he argues, 'this would give Africans a sense that they were full partners in the body'.¹⁷ Did he say 'give a sense'?

My point is that Ellis's recommendation logically grows from the culturalist reading of Africa discussed above. The logic is plain: if the problem is internal to Africa, the solution must be external! It should therefore not be surprising that he recommends recolonisation which he baptises as trusteeship. But such a recommendation cannot work in a situation where people still believe in the glory of nationalism. This explains his tragic preoccupation with trashing nationalism. For him, 'the golden age of decolonization and nationalism in Africa did not lead, in most cases, to successful sovereign states'.¹⁸ But Ellis adduces wrong motives to decolonisation and nationalism. The idea of decolonisation and nationalism was self-determination for a colonised people, not the creation of successful

sovereign states. Such states were incidental to the main struggle for self-determination for a people. If Africa has failed to create successful sovereign states, is capitulating to trusteeship an alternative?

Above all, while there might be something refreshing for a Basil Davidson to lecture Africans on the failures of nationalism, the same cannot be said of a Stephen Ellis.¹⁹ After distinguishing Davidson, let us apply the same logic Ellis uses to dismiss nationalism. Ellis dismisses the 'narrow ideological prism of nationalism' used to interpret large-scale, organised violence because they are 'European creations'.²⁰ But what qualifies him, a European scholar, to lecture Africans about the vices of nationalism? Third, Ellis's notion of trusteeship is cavalierly conceptualised and his idea of locals as 'full partners' in the trusteeship is suspect. First, there is no historical break that will guarantee a new genuineness to western incursions into Africa. Second, why would the so-called local partners be part of the solution when, as Ellis points out, they 'have developed a vested interest in disorder and show little interest in seeing an efficient state emerge'?²¹ Ellis is of course correct in noting that 'intrusive outside meddling' is 'a bitter pill for African nationalists to swallow'. This is because we are used to the missionary zeal with which such recommendations come. And Ellis is not different. His missionary gene leads him to conclude by centring western self-interest. 'The West', he recommends, 'should adopt a new, enlightened form of self-interest and be open to engaging in new sorts of involvement in Africa'.²² Such self-interest is what we call imperialism in Africa. It explains why many nationalists still have to be wary of some of our angels of empathy.

Thus, Kagwanja should disengage from this kind of pessimistic thinking to pose his question differently if he hopes to arrive at a broader and more accurate conceptualisation of Mungiki's role in Kenyan politics, this notwithstanding the seductions of recognition in western journals. Rather than fit Mungiki into a preconceived notion of re-traditionalisation of society, it may be beneficial to inquire what kind of forces are always constantly organising behind the scenes with respect to movements and vigilante groups like Mungiki. Such a way of posing the question recognises that the forces are not always the same, that their interests keep changing and, as such, they do not al-

ways converge. Posed this way, it becomes difficult to offer facile explanations like re-traditionalisation of society for the simple reason that re-traditionalisation or instrumentalisation, when prefaced by the word 'classic', de-historicises these movements and freezes them in time. There is no social movement in Africa, or elsewhere for that matter, whose goal is simply to re-traditionalise society. Many of these movements are engaged in a struggle for power and the forces and interests operating behind them borrow cultural symbols and local grammar to deploy them as part of the wider struggle for power. It is therefore useful, in dealing with this issue, to conceptually distinguish goals from means but to understand that the two are intertwined in reality. Most of the time, the culturalist perspective has sought to describe the means while ignoring the goals. Such studies then take a long detour tracking evidence of that 'historical tradition' and Kagwanja's is the latest attempt to fit the evidence in the 'classic' notion.

I am inclined towards Mkandawire's analysis.²³ The piece raises certain fundamental questions and engaging him may be a more fruitful thing to do than the ignominious enterprise of providing substance to notions of re-traditionalisation of society. Mkandawire's analysis may be useful in terms of understanding the rural-urban dynamics of movements like Mungiki. In fact, as far as this point goes, it is possible to inflect Mkandawire's central assumption that rebel movements are mostly on a march through the rural areas to the urban power bases. What if such movements are not the large-scale rebel ones involved in major conflicts? What if they are smaller vigilante groups like Mungiki? It will be noted that Mungiki has not just made its march to the city; it has done so while strategically retaining its roots in rural areas. This is because the nature of its interests is different and smaller in scale. Straddling the urban and rural domains remains Mungiki's central objective for two reasons. The first is for security concerns. Second, it is doubtful that Mungiki is seeking state power. Indeed, Mungiki's uniqueness rests in the fact that its march to the urban is for mundane goals of social provisioning, even if such provisioning is done in violent ways. As a group, its agenda does not make it a viable contender for state power. As a result, it is content to take advantage of the

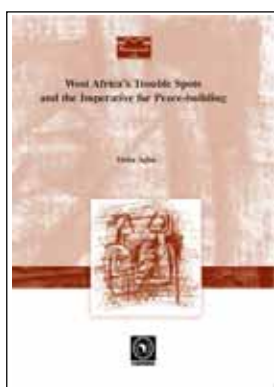
decay in urban areas to extract rents from those it holds to ransom. Given the nature of its objectives, Mungiki will remain a weak movement amenable to cooption, political manipulation and intermittent defection of its key members when political pressure is brought to bear on the movement or when the state or politicians dangle better carrots. It is debatable what makes possible such cooption and manipulation. Is it because of the weaknesses and lack of principle of its leaders or due to the influences and power of the elite within the Moi or Kibaki regime? For Katumanga, it's a bit of both.²⁴

In short, there are no good grounds for Kagwanja's adoption of the re-traditionalisation and instrumentalisation frameworks. These frameworks are problematic in the language they employ and in their attempt to sanitise old-fashioned and discredited theoretical postulates. But this brave new world order of imperial re-assertion has allowed a groundswell of theoretical experimentation with African realities. Many of these so-called new theories simply repack snippets of old theoretical positions in new language. Those responsible for the repackaging are emboldened by Africa's weak position in the world order. Yet many of the analysts responsible for this experimentation hold key gate-keeping positions in the academic publishing industry. The seductions of their patronage can be very great to young African scholars. This has often put African scholars in the unenviable position of sacrificing relevance for recognition or recognition for relevance in the choices we make about publishing. Clearly Kagwanja, in this case, has gone for the former. Therein rests the tragic danger of his scholarship becoming irrelevant, at least to the people about whom he writes.

Notes

1. See Peter Mwangi Kagwanja, "'Power to Uhuru': Youth and Generational Politics in Kenya's 2002 Elections', *African Affairs*, 105/418, 2006, pp. 51-75; Jean-François Bayart et al., *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*, Oxford: International African Institute in association with James Currey; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999; and Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*, Oxford: International African Institute in association with James Currey; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

2. Stephen Ellis, 'How to Rebuild Africa', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, Issue 5, September-October 2005, pp. 135-148.
3. Francis Nyamnjoh, 'From Publish or Perish to Publish and Perish: What "Africa's 100 Best Books" Tell Us about Publishing in Africa', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 5, 2004, p. 333.
4. See his 'Facing Mount Kenya or Facing Mecca? The Mungiki, Ethnic Violence and the Politics of the Moi Succession in Kenya, 1987-2002', *African Affairs*, Vol. 102, No. 406, 2003, pp. 25-49.
5. Abubakar Momoh, 'Youth Culture and Area Boys in Lagos', in Attahiru Jega, ed., *Identity Transformation and Identity Politics under Structural Adjustment in Nigeria*, Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2000; Musambayi Katumanga, 'A City Under Siege: Banditry & Modes of Accumulation in Nairobi, 1991-2004', *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 32, No. 106, December 2005, pp. 505-520, and Mamadou Diouf, 'Urban Youth and Senegalese Politics: Dakar 1988-1994', *Public Culture*, Vol. 8, 1996, pp. 225-249.
6. Kagwanja, "'Power to Uhuru'", p. 73.
7. Jean-François Bayart et al., *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*, Oxford: International African Institute in association with James Currey; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999, and Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*, Oxford: International African Institute in association with James Currey; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
8. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises*, Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997, pp. 218-240
9. *Africa Today*, Vol. 47, Nos. 3/4, 2000, p. 179.
10. This is a point Mkandawire emphatically makes in his debate with Ellis. See Stephen Ellis, 'Violence and History: A Response to Thandika Mkandawire', and Thandika Mkandawire, 'Rejoinder to Stephen Ellis', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2003, pp. 457-475 and pp. 477-483.
11. Mkandawire, 'Rejoinder to Stephen Ellis', p. 480.
12. Richard Joseph also makes such a recommendation, this time baptised 'country-pairing', whose aim would be 'to strengthen capacity in specific sectors'. One wonders if Joseph is aware that today Africa has far more foreign experts than there ever were colonial officials and none of these have made any significant difference in strengthening capacity. For the recommendation, see Richard Joseph, 'Strengthening Development Capacity in Africa', A Discussion Paper Presented at the Aid, Governance and Development in Africa Conference held in May 12-14, 2005 at Northwestern University, p. 3.
13. Kagwanja, "'Power to Uhuru'", p. 59.
14. Peter P. Ekeh, 'Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1975, pp. 91-112.
15. Eghosa E. Osaghae, 'Colonialism and Civil Society in Africa: The Perspective of Ekeh's Two Publics', Paper presented at the Symposium on Canonical Works and Continuing Innovation in African Arts and Humanities, Accra, Ghana, 17-19 September 2003, p. 3. For the quote see Ekeh, 'Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa', p. 93.
16. Luise White, 'The Traffic in Heads: Bodies, Borders and the Articulation of Regional Histories', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1997, pp. 325-338.
17. Ellis, 'How to Rebuild Africa', p. 145.
18. Ellis, 'How to Rebuild Africa', p. 148.
19. This is an obvious contrast given Basil Davidson's long history of engagement with African nationalism and his passionate struggles alongside many African nationalists. It is because of this that his book *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*, New York: Times Books, 1992 was generally well received.
20. Ellis, 'Violence and History', p. 472.
21. Ellis, 'How to Rebuild Africa', p. 143.
22. Ellis, 'How to Rebuild Africa', p. 148.
23. Thandika Mkandawire, 'The Terrible Toll of Post-colonial "Rebel Movements" in Africa: Towards an Explanation of the Violence against the Peasantry', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 40, Issue 2, June 2002, pp 181-215.
24. Katumanga, 'A City under Siege'.



West Africa's Trouble Spots and the Imperative for Peace-Building

Osita Agbu

This monograph highlights the necessity for taking preventive measures in the form of peace-building as a sustainable and long-term solution to conflicts in West Africa, with a special focus on the Mano River Union countries. Apart from the Mano River Union countries, efforts at resolving other conflicts in say, Guinea Bissau, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria, have suffered from a lack of attention on the post-conflict imperatives of building peace in order to ensure that sustainable peace is achieved. Given the often intractable and inter-related nature of conflicts in this region, it argues for the need to revisit the existing mechanisms of conflict resolution in the sub-region with a view to canvassing a stronger case for stakeholders towards adopting the peace-building strategy as a more practical and sustainable way of avoiding wars in the sub-region. Peace-building in consonance with its infrastructure is a more sustainable approach to ensuring regional peace and stability and, therefore, ensuring development for the peoples of West Africa.

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