

African Studies Quarterly

Volume 8, Issue 4
Summer 2006

BOOK REVIEW

The Risks of Knowledge: Investigations into the Death of the Hon. Minister John Robert Ouko in Kenya, 1990. David William Cohen and E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004, 344 pp.

Since political independence in 1963, Kenya has witnessed five prominent and cold-blooded murders of its political leaders. These are: Pio Gama Pinto in 1965, Tom Mboya in 1969, Josiah Mwangi Kariuki in 1975, Robert Ouko in 1990, and Crispin Odhiambo Mbai in 2003. Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo's text focuses on the political killing of Ouko "wildly regarded from the 1970s through the 1980s as Kenya's leading international spokesman and one of Africa's most effective statespersons" (ix).

The text, in my view, is the only available one that presents a panoramic and comprehensive coverage of the circumstances surrounding Ouko's death and issues that stemmed from that event. Given the towering stature of Ouko as a cabinet minister coupled with his political dexterity during the regime of Daniel arap Moi, the text can also be viewed as an exposé of Kenya's political terrain during the reign of Moi up to the late 1990s. The text assists one to decipher the trajectory of political innuendos and nuances of Kenya under Moi.

It is noteworthy that the text is not merely expository. It is not just a narrative of circumstances and events leading to the brutal demise of Ouko. The text draws the reader's attention to "the risks of knowledge" in the heady worlds of contemporary Kenya and Africa (16). The text therefore has epistemological concerns in that it is an erudite study of the social history of knowledge production employing the political assassination of Ouko as its pedestal. In its profundity, the text is not simply an attempt to offer solutions to questions such as: Who killed Ouko? How did Ouko die? Such questions are secondary or banal given the text's epistemological anchorage. The text's primary interest are the processes involved in the constitution of knowledge, how individuals and bodies come to "know", and how certain knowledge has gained authority (18).

To illustrate the epistemological concerns, it is argued that in actuality the formation of commissions of inquiry are not necessarily for the sake of remediation and reform. So, for instance, when the Moi regime constituted the Gicheru commission of inquiry to look into Ouko's disappearance and murder, the real purpose was not fact-finding and determination of the just course of action, but to come up with "truths" conveniently geared in service of the state's interests—"truths" that would assist the state in reproducing and extending its own authority and legitimacy (44).

Ouko's disappearance from his Koru farm on February 12 or 13, 1990, was followed by the government's announcement on February 16 that his mutilated and smoldering body had been found at Got Alila, about three kilometers from his farm, with a firearm and other objects supposedly belonging to him nearby. The record of Ouko's last days became dramatically crucial and preoccupied the minds of many and was given formidable space in newspapers, journals, and reports. "In death, his corpse became a text or a library in which many parties could and would prospect for different meanings. These representations would provide richness and depth to the accountings of Ouko's disappearance and death" (117). The public became consumed with the desire not only to comprehend the behavior of Ouko in his last days, and the behavior of those around him or those he interacted with, but also the behavior of those who would attempt to regulate the interpretation of his disappearance and death.

Two theories emerged regarding how Ouko met his death. These were the suicide and murder theories. For reasons well explained, the text refers to them as the gum boots and white car theories, respectively (50-51). These two theories were the interpretive divide in the investigations and inquiries on Ouko's death. Moi's government pushed for the gum boots theory, while the public believed in the veracity of the white car theory. Without engaging in any value judgments with finality, the text exhaustively and refreshingly discusses the rationales of these two theories. The text also explicates some inconsistencies in the narratives on Ouko's death. These are Hempstone's account, George Wajackoyah's story, and Shikuku's testimony. It also explores the various interpretations of where Ouko actually died;

whether he was killed elsewhere and the body dumped at Got Alila, or if he was killed at Got Alila.

Regarding the political topography of Moi's Kenya, the text leaves no doubt that its main feature was corruption, and that it was Ouko's opposition to this feature that led to his death. The text reports in detail how Moi led an oversize Kenyan delegation to a morning prayer in the US on February 1, 1990, hoping to cajole President George H. W. Bush into an official meeting with him, which Bush refused. Instead the Secretary of State, James Baker, questioned Moi about the corruption in his government and commended Ouko for his opposition to corruption.

Given the subject matter of the text, it is bound to attract a diverse range of readership. These would include: historians, political scientists, sociologists, philosophers, and the general readers whose concern hinge on social-political matters within Africa in general and Kenya in particular. Without any doubt, the text lends itself to scholarship given its profundity and the rigorous analytical skills employed. Though some persons would hardly be surprised by the revelation of corruption and extortion, the reader would surely be surprised by the highly conventionalized and naturalized or systematized practices through which men and women in power in Kenya have sought to extend their power and amass their wealth (269).

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