H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Katherine Luongo. *Witchcraft and Colonial Rule in Kenya, 1900-1955.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 116 S. ISBN 978-1-107-01218-9.

Reviewed by Christine Whyte
Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (September, 2012)

Katherine Luongo: Witchcraft and Colonial Rule in Kenya, 1900-1955

European media tend to focus on the violence or coercion of local, unregulated anti-witchcraft practices in Kenya. BBC News, Kenya, Horror of Kenya's 'witch' lynchings, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8119201.stm Visitors to Kenya are often shocked, and sometimes amused, by legal and political discussions of witchcraft in seemingly incongruous circumstances. As Geschiereargued,it is impossible to dismiss witchcraft. Peter Geschiere, The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa, Charlottesville 1997. And it presented an equally thorny problem to the British colonial authorities. In 1938 Lord Hailey pronounced that witchcraft was "the outstanding problem of the lawgiver in Africa". Lord Hailey, An African Survey. London, 1938, pp. 295-6. Witchcraft has always seemed to elude the understanding of outsiders.

Luongo's well-organised and detailed anthropological study of the history of witchcraft in colonial Kenya offers an insight into the world of the Kamba people and the treacherous ground the colonial judiciary trod in trying to legislate witchcraft and witch-killings in Machakos and Kitui Districts. Rather than viewing witchcraft simply as a 'remnant' of a lost pre-colonial tradition or, conversely, as a straightforward reaction to modernity and globalisation, Luongo ably illustrates the changes and continuities in witchcraft law and practice as the colonial state became entangled in regulation. Launching her study from a question asked in the UK Parliament about the fate of sixty Wakamba men awaiting execution for the killing of a witch in 1932, Luongoseeks to "demonstrate the ways that witchcraft has constituted an important space in which larger questions of power have been contested." (p. 18)

The book is structured into eight main chapters and an epilogue. The introduction clearly places the work in the legacy of other anthro-historians, such as the Comaroffs and Nancy Rose Hunt, the 'new imperial history' agenda of Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, and the detailed colonial histories of Kenya of John Lonsdale, Bruce Berman and Joanna Lewis.

Launching herself from Richard Waller's challenge to find "the historical roots of modern dilemmas" in witchcraft law, Luongo devotes two chapters to understanding the history and spiritual world of the Kamba. Richard Waller, Witchcraft and Colonial Law in Kenya, in: Past and Present 180 (2003), p. 241-275. Chapter three on 'Understanding Uoi, Uwe and Kithitu in Ukambani'is a particularly useful synthesis of a complex understanding of the world gathered mainly through interviews and oral histories.

The next chapter delves, with similar anthropological zeal, into the British colonial apparatus and its ways of understanding the world. Luongo pays particular attention to the construction and simultaneous use of the colonial archive, a helpful reminder to all historians that the archive was once a living thing.

With this background laid out, the study moves on to probably the strongest chapter of the work, a detailed analysis of the Wakamba Witch Trials of 1932. As the introduction highlighted, these trials were a moment of intense interest and debate for Kamba communities, British press and public, colonial legislators and local political officers. Drawing on Ranajit Guha's study of colonial judicial discourse, Luongo ably analyses the extant documentary sources on the trial to pull together not only a narrative of events, but a forensic reconstruction of the production of testimony and competing legal settings, namely the Kamba'sking'oleand the colonial court.

Chapter six picks up the aftermath of Wakamba, specifically how the colonial courts chose to deal with witchcraft claims in criminal cases. Of particular note is the emphasis on the work of the courts to create "ordered, usable narratives of witch-murder." from the "messy, intimate stories of witch-craft-related killings" (p. 140). The privileging of stories that fit better into a template

of 'good testimony' created substantial bias towards a particular reading of witchcraft-related violence. However, it should not be read as an entirely top-down process whereby colonial structure inflicted pressures on Kamba testimony. Rather, in this reading, the role of local knowledge in the development of imperial justice, law and order is acknowledged and elaborated.

The next two chapters tackle the Mau Mau challenge to colonial power and the Machakos witch-cleansings of the 1950s. The chapter on Mau Mau will be of particular interest to a wider audience. Luongo not only sets oathing in its social, religious and historical context, she also reveals the deep historical roots of the colonial strategies. She places them as the end result of a long-running debate "over what role local supernatural beliefs and practices should play in colonial governmentality" (p. 182).The final full chapterdemonstrates the important role that oral histories can play in disrupting official, national narratives. Luongo collected accounts of witch-cleansings of the 1950s in Machakos which diverge fundamentally from the archival narrative. Rather than privilege one account over another, Luongoembraces this ambiguity, explaining how the divergent accounts "suggest practical, historical gaps between colonial discourse and practice, between nominal and practical authority, and between exercised and perceived responsibility." (p. 206)

The Epilogue highlights modern cases of witchcraft killing and the ongoing use of colonial law in Kenya, and how these cases are now incorporated into an international human rights legal framework. The continuing resonance of the 'Wakamba Witch Trials' and others like it is clear.

A key strength of the work lies in its focus on the Kamba people and their experiences. However,Luongo's argument could have been made more robust by placing these 'critical moments' more explicitly into the history of the British Empire. For example, the chapter on Witchcraft, Murder and Death Sentences,brings to mind RhadikaSingha'swork on Thuggee and legal innovation in the 1830s. Rhadika Singha, Providential' Circumstances. The Thuggee Campaign of the 1830s and Legal Innovation, in: Modern Asian Studies 27 (1993), p. 83-146. The discussion on memory and witchcraft could have been enriched by referencingRosalind Shaw's work on non-verbal processes of remembering in West Africa. Rosalind Shaw, Memories of the Slave Trade. Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone, Chicago 2002. By incorporating non-Kenyan examples, the book could have offered clearer insight into "the scope and scale of colonial 'circuits' of knowledge." (p. 13)

Luongo's work addresses several important lacunas in African history. Firstly, she focuses her study on the Kamba people, traditionally under-studied in favour of more powerful Kenyan groups. Secondly, she provides not only a deft anthropological analysis of Kamba witchcraft and colonial law-making, but also an entangled history of witchcraft and colonialism which focuses on how colonial statecraft was shaped by the Kamba people and spiritual belief. Finally, in the penultimate chapter, she makes an important addition to our understanding of colonial anti-Mau Mau tactics, by placing the deoathing in its historical context of a prolonged struggle with the role of local supernatural beliefs in the development of the colonial law lexicon.

To conclude, the study is an important addition to the history of witchcraft in Africa and the chapter on oathing would make a useful reading for any advanced university seminar on Mau Mau. Historians of the region will benefit from Luongo's clear understanding of the beliefs and 'way-of-being in the world' of the Kamba people. The study also opens up questions about the significance of witchcraft across the chronological and geographical reach of the British Empire.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Christine Whyte. Review of Luongo, Katherine, *Witchcraft and Colonial Rule in Kenya, 1900-1955.* H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. September, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37240

Copyright © 2012 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.