



Megan A. Styles. *Roses from Kenya: Labor, Environment, and the Global Trade in Cut Flowers.* Culture, Place, and Nature Series. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019. Illustrations, map, charts. 256 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-295-74651-7.

Reviewed by Thaddeus Sunseri (Colorado State University)

Published on H-Africa (June, 2020)

Commissioned by David D. Hurlbut (Boston University)

Each morning Europeans can get up and purchase bouquets of flowers from local shops or supermarkets, delivered overnight in plane cargoes from distant locations. As Megan A. Styles explains in *Roses from Kenya: Land, Environment, and the Global Trade in Cut Flowers*, some 35 percent of cut flowers sold in the European Union come from Kenya, and half of those are grown around Lake Naivasha, one of only two freshwater lakes in Kenya's Rift Valley. Like modern industrial food supply chains, floriculture provides Western consumers with familiar products whose origins are exotic and invisible. Who works in these industries and under what conditions? What are the environmental effects and ecological consequences of growing millions of flowers on thousands of acres in greenhouses that rely on irrigation and chemical fertilizers? How does the introduction of a new industry affect past perceptions of land ownership and ethnic competition in a developing nation with a colonial past fraught with competition over land and labor? How does that industry engage with modern ethnic politics in a nation with a recent history of political violence? These are some of the questions that Styles addresses in this book, which is at its heart an ethnography of actors at the point of origin of the cut flower commodity chain and a case study of Naivasha as a transna-

tional, neoliberal space that entangles myriad Kenyan and expatriate actors.

Styles organizes *Roses from Kenya* into five chapters that examine different stages of Naivasha's cut flower industry. Chapter 1 provides a fleeting history of Naivasha as a Maasai grazing and watering site, before moving into the lake's history of white settlement and Maasai removals under British colonial rule, a period that saw the first settler attempts to assert riparian rights to lake water for dairy cattle against competing access from mostly Kikuyu squatters and an emergent tourist and sport fishing industry. The period leading up to independence in 1963 effectively saw the indigenization around Naivasha of white settlers and Kikuyu demanding land access, who are key political players throughout the book. Into this environment in the 1970s intruded European capitalists, foremost among them Dutch, seeking alternatives to Europe-based flower production, supported by European Economic Community development grants and import preferences, with Kenyan government encouragement. Unclear is why it was cost effective to grow flowers for Europe around Naivasha, apart from cheap labor, access to fresh water, and sunshine. This is an industry whose demand for greenhouses, irrigation, fertilizer, and cold storage give advantages to scale of

production, so that huge farms employing thousands of mostly female workers dominate over smallholder production. Over time, roses have become the most profitable flower, each rose drinking as much as ten liters of Naivasha water.

Unsurprisingly, as chapter 2 details, most workers at the bottom of the flower commodity chain are single widowed or divorced women from other regions of Kenya, who are permanent outsiders with no intention or prospects of settling around Naivasha. This in part owes to the ethnically based political violence directed at non-Kikuyu in the wake of the 2007 presidential elections and ongoing tensions. Low-wage workers aspire to invest in education for their children, or small businesses or land plots “back home,” to where they expect to return someday. Despite the precarity of these jobs, low wages, sexual abuse, and deficient housing, most workers see Naivasha as offering a possible path to a better life. In the early 2000s, exposures in Europe of bad working and living conditions in the flower industry, including disease outbreaks, and detrimental ecological consequences, such as chemical pollution, led many supermarket chains and consumers to demand codes of labor and environmental practices to safeguard and improve conditions. These codes have made Naivasha into a “nerve center” for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) international researchers and black Kenyan professionals hired by the flower corporations to oversee regulatory codes.

The focus of chapter 3 is on black professionals working in the flower industry as technical experts and welfare officers and for NGOs, men and women who aspire to better lives, seeking to invest in property, businesses, and better houses. Many use their positions to advance political ambitions. Many of these professionals seek to reform the industry and shape Kenyan modes of governance in an age of neoliberal scrutiny and regulation. Styles, whose work is thoroughly grounded in participant observation, does not view workers or

managers in the flower industry as victims or exploiters in any sense but as actors using floriculture to better their lives and build the nation at its neoliberal moment. Many white Kenyans—British settler descendants and first-generation expatriate floriculture professionals, many of whom are Dutch—stake their role in the industry as stewards of the environment, promoters of good governance, and builders of a more sustainable Kenya. As chapter 5 explains, expatriate and local white professionals defend the industry against press depictions of it as exploitative, unsustainable, and racially privileged, while settler descendants, “riparians,” are more likely to see floriculture as posing an environmental threat to Lake Naivasha by launching massive unplanned population growth; depleting the lake of water; causing chemical spills or other pollution; and competing with long-established dairy, tourist, and wildlife industries.

The cut flower “commodity chain” comes out most clearly in chapter 4. In light of European concerns about climate change and the carbon footprint of products grown thousands of miles from consumers and air-freighted to Europe, the Kenyan government and the Kenya Flower Council, an industry trade group, launched a campaign in 2008 arguing that the carbon footprint of a Kenyan-grown rose was less than that of a Dutch rose owing to much higher energy demands of the latter. Moreover, the campaign emphasized that floriculture enabled hundreds of thousands of Kenyans to earn a living and improve their lives, a fair-trade dimension to the climate change argument. The partnership between the flower industry and the Kenyan state is seen in efforts to spearhead new forms of water governance around Lake Naivasha in order to rationalize its use. These and other examples detail how the Kenyan state and the flower industry are mutually dependent on projecting a positive image of the industry and the nation overseas, branding Kenya positively in an age of climate change, consumer sensitivity about the

source of their products, and neoliberal governance.

More than an analysis of the cut flower commodity chain, *Roses from Kenya* uses floriculture to examine Naivasha as a contested, politicized, and transnational space through the eyes of about twenty subjects profiled. This is not an environmental history of Lake Naivasha, but the struggles over water in the Naivasha basin in one way or the other are the backdrop to many of the tensions in the book and are given recent salience by the development of geothermal drilling that dots the Rift Valley with power plants to provide Kenya with thousands of megawatts of energy. Floriculture is embedded in the goals of the Kenyan state, as many members of the political class are investors, a large percentage of taxes and foreign exchange comes from flower exports, many layers of bureaucrats are dependent in one way or another on its success, and the image of the state is tied to the industry.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa>

Citation: Thaddeus Sunseri. Review of Styles, Megan A. *Roses from Kenya: Labor, Environment, and the Global Trade in Cut Flowers*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. June, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54962>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.