

# BOOK REVIEW

**Kathleen Klaus. *Political Violence in Kenya: Land, Elections, and Claim-Making*.**

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xv + 357 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. \$120.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1108488501.

In *Political Violence in Kenya: Land, Elections, and Claim-Making*, Kathleen Klaus presents a deceptively simple question: why do some people take part in election violence while others do not? In answer, she examines the contexts for violence, which include: the land distribution and tenancy security differences, the relationship between elites (political or economic) and ordinary citizens, and finally, but most importantly, land narratives that configure historicity in a specific place. She thus “aims to provide a theory of electoral violence that can help explain the significant local variation in violence that so often characterizes episodes of electoral violence in Kenya and elsewhere” (5). Important to this study is the premise that violence is costly, and that people therefore need good reason to participate in it.

As such, Klaus analyzes why ordinary citizens might be compelled to perpetrate violent acts, the role of political mobilization, and the material and symbolic motives for participation in violence. Through a careful and vigorous comparison of the micro and meta land narratives and political dynamics in the Rift Valley and Coastal Kenya, Klaus argues that “violence emerges as a joint production between elites and ordinary citizens” (6). In fact, her study focuses on the micro-local level land narratives and political dynamics that enable or disable the elite’s ability to compel ordinary citizens into violent action.


In opposition to books that assume ethnic animosity and portray ethnic conflict as inevitable and intractable, Klaus investigates election violence as produced through institutional inequality, and importantly, through narrative. Klaus uses narrative as an explanatory tool to understand how elites organize violence in some cases and not in others. Land narratives frame the realm of possibility and become a “script” to justify and authorize the specific uses of violence or other courses of action (52). These narratives are a key component of violence, but they are not sufficient in and of themselves. Election violence, rather, feeds off these narratives when they are combined with local-level perceptions of land inequality among ethnic communities

that are political rivals, an insecurity of tenure, and a tradition of political elites as land patrons. This combination allows elections to be seen as “a rare window of opportunity to gain and secure land, and equality, a moment to lose” (7).

Throughout the book, Klaus examines in detail the local structuring dynamics of land inequality, land narratives, and land politics, providing clear examples of the process of violent escalation or deflation. These specifics matter, and this is one of the many strengths of the book. Through these specifics, we can see how land became tied to elections in some places but not in others. Klaus thus asks us to let go of preconceived notions of ethnicity, elections, land, and violence in Africa. To strengthen her argument, she compares different parts of the country that have had similar processes of government-backed resettlement and that have contentious land narratives but radically different outcomes.

To compare communities, Klaus defines land tenure security as “whether a household holds a title deed to their land,” as this provides “a relatively objective and consistent measure of formal land rights” (107). I would argue however, that in spite of a post-colonial pluri-legal system, title deeds are often used to invalidate customary claims and cannot be used to strengthen them. Therefore, title deeds are themselves contentious land narratives and need to be analyzed as such. This would allow us to interrogate title deeds as a specific kind of tool that indicates state backing, thus heightening the connection with elections and specific ethnic groups, borne out by the examples in this book.

I found this book incredibly compelling and refreshing. It is a must-read for anyone interested in Kenyan politics or land relations, as well as anyone interested in election violence anywhere, but in particular in multi-ethnic or post-colonial states. The author’s careful historical approach from the micro level allows a more nuanced view into electoral violence and its root mobilizations as well as its possible dynamics. Not only does this book ask new questions about election violence, it also asks new questions about ethnicity, elites, ordinary citizens, resettlement, and political institutions.

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