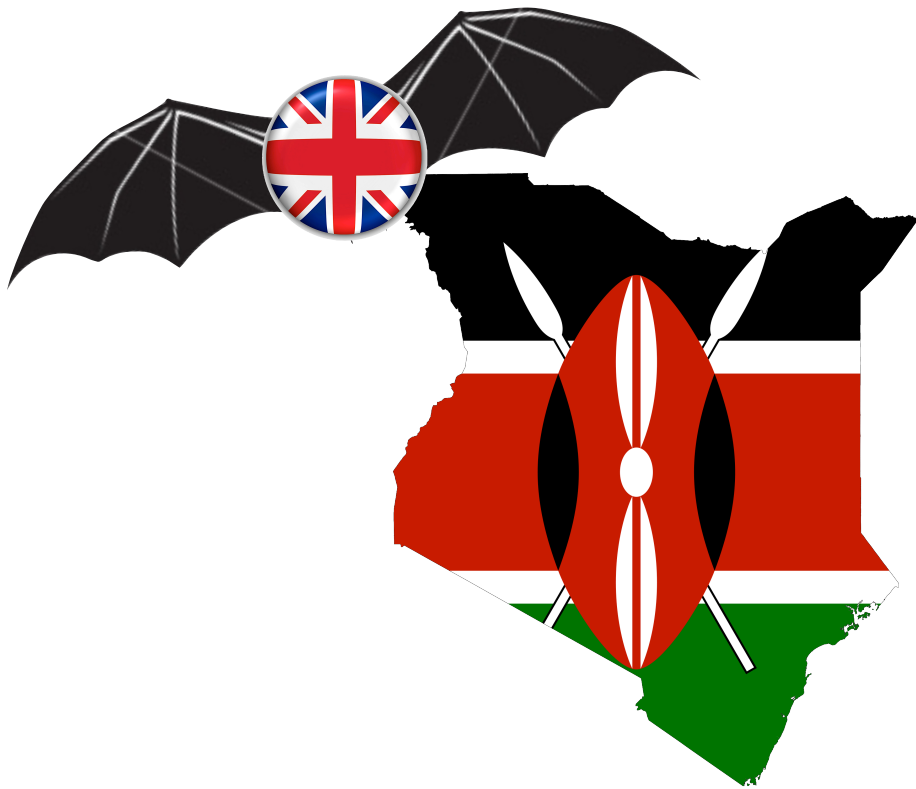


The Political Economy of Rumor in Colonial Kenya



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The term political economy has fallen in and out of fashion as a social discipline since the founding of the field in the 18th century. Since the 1980s, the term has seen its rise once again as social scientists try to explain the actions and choices by political actors as seen through a lens focused on the state's economy and its international relations. The field attempts to answer questions that political science deals with but uses more macro-economic and micro-economic data to back up the field's theory and hypothesis. What are the causes of state dissolution? How does culture evolve? Where do the origins of political institutions start? These are all important questions because they seek to understand the world as the interconnected society that it truly is. The benefits of this field are the capacities to pull from multiple disciplines and put together models and explanations that take into consideration more of the variables that society encounters in its existence. Other fields are beginning to include this interdisciplinary outlook in their specialty area such as history considering the work of anthropologists, communications considering the world of politics and international relations, as well as political science looking towards history to gain a wider understanding of cycles and waves. This is all critical in a world that is increasingly connected through technology. This fifth Kondratiev wave of expansion of information and communication technologies means that the interconnectedness of the world is brought into the home of every human that can connect to the internet. Thus, social sciences will need to continue their integration of different branches so that they may maintain their legitimacy with an ever more globalized population. Without consideration of other fields, a scholar's claims and legitimacy will weaken his or her arguments as the audience will see other connections that could explain the phenomena under review.

The field of history has much to offer other disciplines based on its breadth of knowledge of a massive selection of information that is often overlooked by scholars studying the present day. Today it is not controversial to claim that the growing connections that intertwine the citizens of the world has led to a lessening of the appreciation of our history by a larger portion of the population. Thus history will continue to need to be a field that offers timely and well explained interpretations of the past. This will need to be done by considering how other fields would explain the past as well because most fields are for obvious reasons not as backwards looking as history. Thus the intrinsic focus of research by historians, that is studying events and people that existed before the current generation, can be extremely beneficial for citizens, policy makers, and scientists today.

However, those historians that do not offer their analysis through terms and frames of reference that other fields could understand risk having their work tossed to the wayside by those exact people who might benefit the most from the research. Thus, incorporating various disciplines into historical research, or at least considering their academic viability in explaining past events, will be critical for successful scholarship in the 21st Century.

This paper will attempt to add the dynamic of political economy to a study of rumor in Eastern Africa. The study, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* by Luise White, attempts to give historical legitimacy to rumor in the context of understanding history in Uganda, Tanzania, Northern Rhodesia, Belgium Congo, and Kenya. White documents evidence from the stories that dealt with the extraction of blood by vampires, conducted by or that the behest of colonial officials.

The stories detail kidnappings and murders performed by images of the colonial state: firemen, policemen, game rangers, and doctors.

White is very insistent that these stories are not to be evaluated by historians as causes of other political or economic factors. She intends not to dismiss them as fears of colonialism, technology, or health, as this “strips them of their intensity and their detail” (White 1). If historians explained these stories as African attempts to interpret their world, “it would be to argue that these stories simply deformed actual events and procedures. Such an analysis would turn the resulting history away from these stories and back to the events Africans somehow misunderstood” (White 2). White takes these stories at face-value and attempts to write a colonial history despite their contradictions with archival evidence of the history. She says that these stories “offer historians a glimpse of the world as seen by people who saw boundaries and bodies located and penetrated” (White 2). Despite her assertion that these stories are to be taken at face value only, she says that rumor and gossip reveals another world. The evidence in this world that she presents in her book will change the way historical reconstruction is done is her claim.

This type of research and scholarship flies in the face of the factors explained in the beginning of this paper. The desire to set historical evidence in its own vacuum of history does nothing to advance the understanding of events if other fields and factors that could have contributed to the evidence’s creation, dispersion, or content are not considered. Stories and rumors do not evolve without outside stimuli. This is a fact that White acknowledges when she says that the eyewitness accounts that form the basis of her work were explaining what was fearsome and why in the colonial context. Her

refusal to consider the Marxist explanation for these stories, that of the capitalist system of colonial extraction of minerals and labor, is confounding because it matches up very well with the evidence that is being presented. She says that the power of these rumors was not based on new and powerful technologies or procedures, but these outside stimuli were actually just ways that reproduced older practices. Despite being a very junior scholar in the field of African history, I have yet to encounter historical evidence that shows similar levels of extraction or the the repositioning of the African into extractive industries in a way that rivaled colonialism. The period between 1885 and the latter part of the 20th century undermined the African way of life and all of the social bonds that had existed before colonialism and remade the African continent in a way that suited its European masters. The redrawing of borders, the mass removal of African men to work in colonial plantations in the new world, the widespread use of African labor to engage in mining activities, and the displacement of rural farmers who were the backbone of many African economies all had debilitating effects on the continent that are still seen in present day. This rearrangement of society has no historical comparison on the same scale on the continent. While White can argue that Africans attempted to understand these new processes through previous understandings and through a lens of their own culture, their reactions are not necessarily unique to the cultures found on the continent. To say that the experiences of Africans under colonialism differed greatly than all others who suffered European domination is to discount humanity's universal reaction to repression and exploitation. All cultures sought to understand the effects of colonialism, and while the colonial experience had different variations around the world, the experience of subjugation, extraction, and exploitation were near universal. Their

unique reactions and explanations to the experience gives us insight into their cultures as well as the social character responded to specific political and economic events. Without understanding what these cultures were reacting to, we as academics only receive half of the story. These reactions in East Africa need to be studied together with the stimuli that precipitated their rise.

This paper will seek to add to White's evidence through the discipline of political economy. It will consider the timing of rumor and the forces at work during the time frame that may explain their causes and rampancy. This does not completely invalidate White's findings, as the undercurrent of her work is historically relevant, but it seeks to place a larger framework over her data that can help us understand why rumors surfaced when they did. Specifically this paper will look at economic cycles in Kenya and attempt to see how the proliferation of rumor and gossip syncs with the cyclical nature of the economy. The evidence White presents in her book has been coded and will be paired with economic depressions in Colonial Kenya in the 20th century. It will attempt to tease out a connection between the economy and the rise and propagation of rumor.

Colonial Kenya endured three major economic depressions before the change to majority rule in 1963, the first two of which are relevant to White's time frame. The first crisis, from 1919 to 1922 was a result of the economic depression that came from the fallout of the Great War in Europe. The second, from 1930 to 1933 saw earnings from exports drop significantly as the entire world entered a depression facilitated by the American stock exchange crash in 1929 (Ochieng and Maxon). As displayed by these crisis, economic events in Kenya were often connected to outside triggers. This is

obvious to anyone with knowledge of colonial Africa, as the colonies were financed by the Colonial Offices of their European powers, and were often interconnected in trade and finances. Often times, the interconnection was so strong that the economies of the Colonizer and the colonized were completely in sync. This is attributable to the bans on exports and imports from non-empire colonies and states. Thus in Kenya, as with Uganda, and in Tanzania (post-World War I) their traders could often only send and receive products to and from the United Kingdom and others colonies in the British Empire. When demand fell in the mother country, exporters, businesses, and colonial governments suffered from the loss of trade.

This paper will thus divide into three parts, the first two studying the effects of the two economic depressions in colonial Kenya and examining the historical accounts that White provides in those time frames. The third part will examine rumor and gossip in order to find their meaning for society and when they are used as a tool of socialization. The goal is to observe how the increased use of rumor and gossip link up with economic and political events.

Methodology

In order to place White's vampire stories in a comparison against economic and political events in Kenya, there was a need to code these stories by location and by date. Her first two sections proved extremely rich in data about Kenya, while the third part of her book dealt with issues and places less associated with Kenya and the wazimamoto's that took African's blood. Each story about vampires in Kenya (as well as those specifically about vampires in surrounding areas) were coded by the year the

interviewee mentioned as the event taking place. The difficult part was the references to wide swaths of time, such as the '1920s'. Instead of discounting these references because of their temporal anomaly, all years in the time frame mentioned were credited with an 'event'. Thus a historical timeline of events can be tracked. Both timelines, the 'Kenya-only' (Figure 1) and the "Kenya+" (Figure 2) graphs are found at the end of this paper. Additionally, data used from Paul Mosley's *The Settler Economies* was entered into a graph that could be compared with the data sets from White (Figure 3). The part of Mosley's data that was chosen as an economic indicator for Kenya was the 'African agricultural export per head by export price of bag of maize'. This is not the most ideal indicator, but of the sets that had the most complete data for this timeframe, this indicator can be seen as a quasi-gross domestic product of Africans. With the majority of Africans engaged in agricultural production, whether on their own or under the supervision of white settlers, a representation of the African output during this time would be agricultural produce. Additionally, with the data in relation to the export price, the measure includes the economic atmosphere that would have been present in each year studied. This means how the economy affected Africans' 'pocket-books' can be measured by proxy.

Post World War I

With the effects that World War I had on societal relationships between the Europeans and Africans well established in the literature, an analysis of the political and economic events following the war might add understanding to White's vampires. Of particular note is the spike in vampire stories after the war's conclusion. Why might this

have occurred at this time? Numerous sources for White's work point to the start of the 'time of vampires' at the start of the 1920s. This period is of much interest to her study because of the reconfigurations, both political and economic, that are happening in this time.

It is following the war that the British Empire is able to retrain its focus on its colonies in the early 1920s and this matches up to White's spike in vampire reports (Figure 1). It should be of no surprise that stories of vampires surfaced during this time as spacial and labor realignments were occurring between African and European. This realignment was compounded by the world depression of 1920-1922. Kenya's export earnings dropped sharply during this time (Ochieng 71). Like many colonies, the loss of funds was supported by increased taxes on Africans. The common method was establishing a tax (hut and poll taxes were used in Kenya) on Africans that forced them into the wage labor market and into the welcoming arms of farmers and industry who then had the upper hand when it came to setting wages (Zamani 266). This was disruptive to the export industry as the majority of Kenya's export revenue before 1920 had come from African produce (Swainson 33). The period of the 1920s thus left less Africans on the land, which was compounded by the fact that commodity prices for African goods remained stagnate between 1922 and 1938.

The decreased earnings for the colony meant contractions on living conditions for all people of the colony, but like most economic hardships, the poorest of society receives the brunt of the burden. This period of moving off the land and into European or urban areas saw an increase in the number of vampire stories, and it is notable that many of those Kenyans that White interviewed said the time of the vampires, or at least

the stories of them, began during this period of economy reshuffling and migration off the land.

On the political side, 1920 was the year Kenya transitioned from a protectorate to a Crown colony and thus officially sanctioned the period of settler control in Kenya (Swainson 22). This increase in settler population would have the obvious effects on Kenya: more demand for government resources and more competition for African labor. This expansion of government expenditure to support the settler had the predictable effect of leading to large budget deficits. As a result, the Colonial Office in London advised the colonial government to increase the production of Africans as a means of stimulating the economy. However, the political power of the settlers had increased with their population, and thus a balance had to be struck between the two economies. African peasant production was the method employed, and a strategy that was officially called the Dual Policy was implemented after 1922. While African production was aided, it could not compete with the cash crops (coffee and sisal) that were grown by the settlers (Ochieng 71-71).

It should be noted that as Kenya was able to recover from the economic straits of the early 1920s and enjoy the benefits of the 'roaring '20s' the number of vampire stories reported by White fell. The themes of the vampire stories, kidnapping and extraction fit well with the actions by the colonial state were taking in response to the economic crisis. With labor needed by settler farms, the ability to capture (in a figurative sense) African laborers was a critical component in maintaining economic viability of the settler farms. Additionally, the increased presence of white settlers through immigration and their power in society was increasing during this time. While I have yet to come

across the story of Africans being literally snatched by white settlers to work on their farms, the vampire stories do an excellent job of relating what Africans saw happening in the economy to traditional stories of abductions by vampires or other-worldly creatures. The concept of supply and demand is expressed through these stories even if Africans did not acknowledge the concept directly. This is a key part that White could have incorporated into her understandings of the stories. Not only did they relate to the economic extraction that was colonial policy across Africa, but these stories responded to conditions as they were happening!

The Great Depression and Kenya

The second economic crisis in Kenya followed closely the depression caused by the crash of the American stock exchange in 1929. The far reaching effects of this shock are historical lore, but its African effects are less widely known. On the continent, the external trade of African colonies fell by 42% during the depression (Ochieng 236). In Kenya specifically, imports fell nearly 60% from the peak to the bottoming out. In response, beginning in 1930 a policy of retrenchment was in full swing in the British Colonies (Swainson 23). The addition of price controls and quantity quotas did not allow the cheaper prices of Kenya's exports to benefit from the crash as most countries would have. Thus Kenya was part of the worldwide increase in economic protectionism that only worsened the depression.

As a result of the increased market protection around the world, in just three years export values dropped by £3.4 million in 1930 to £1.9 million in 1933. Additionally, overall imports and exports saw a notable decrease in 1929 that lasted until the mid

1930s (Swainson 46 and 47). It should be pointed out that the number of White's vampire stories also increase during the early 1930s (Figure 1 & 2). The connection between the worldwide economic decline in the 1930s, like that in the early 1920s, and the number of vampire stories should be noted as increasingly suspicious in how related they are to one another. The seriousness of this economic crisis resulted in the Dual Policy being implemented again as it was in the 1920s. This time, due to the brink of collapse of the export industry, Africans were allowed to grow coffee for the first time, in addition to better seeds being distributed (Ochieng 72).

The political scene of the crisis mirrored the 1920s in that settlers were able to use the events to strengthen their own power. During the 1930s it was noted by the British Colonial Office that the economy of Kenya was being meddled with by the government to suit the interests of the settlers. The Colonial Office was adopting more free enterprise policies (within the Empire) at this time and commented with dissatisfaction that the settlers had gained political power that was more than what their contribution to the economy would suggest (Swainson 24). Each time the colonial office would make a demand in policy change, the settlers were able to rebuff their advances, in one case by threatening a coup d'état and warning they would establish settler self-government. This strength of settler power would only increase until the coming of independence.

Discussed in the previous section was the link between literal and figurative abductions in the 1920s. It made the point that vampire stories were not necessarily based on actual kidnapping. However, in the early 1930s, a substantial increase (75-100%) in the number of Africans that were convicted under the Native Registration

Ordinance occurred. This law was first passed in 1915, but only came into effect in 1920 (Berman 147). It required every African male to register at a colonial administrative office and be finger printed and given a certificate, the kipande, essentially a 'pass' in the South African sense. Relevant to my study is the fact that enforcement of the law in urban areas was done by the Kenya Police and in the rural areas by the tribal police, who were under control of the district administrators enforced the law (Berman 148). This lines up with many of the descriptions in White's book about police and firemen 'kidnapping' people. This is likely an explanation of locals who saw other Africans being hauled away by white police or black employees for what would seem to be wandering into the wrong area (in fact it could have been the case that man lacked a kipande). White quoted one of her interviewees:

"There were some Europeans who would come and capture Africans... Any human being except whites could fall victim; it depended on luck. Whites never fell victim because they were the masters.... They captured everybody, they did not discriminate against any race...but I never heard that they took Europeans." (53)

Another example White gives that can be seen through the lens of policy is the co-opting of Africans into the colonial power structure as part of law enforcement. Another would be the way of describing those who left the rural areas to take jobs on settler farms or urban areas. This specific example below, that of the training for the police

force, when viewed through the perspective of the enforcement of the Native Registration Ordinance the story seems to be a retelling of the policy but through a vampire narrative:

“When one joined the police force... in those olden days, he would undergo the initial training of bloodsucking.... During the day, we were police recruits. Immediately after sunset, we started the job of manhunting...we would leave the station in a group of four and one white man, who was in charge...When we saw a person, we would lie down and ambush him. We would then take the captured person back to the waiting vehicle” (65).

Here, White concentrates on the method of transportation and the use of the vehicle that is described in further detail, but, as is her method, accepts the story at face value and does not add any explanation to the story. This method of history writing certainly is unique, but what is history if not an understanding of the events that happened before? Understanding cannot be gained without an analysis of the microcosm that is under research. With the two major spikes in the occurrence of vampire stories coinciding with major economic crisis in the Kenya Colony there is a connection that is left unexplored in White’s work.

Gossip and socialization

With all these economic and political changes happening in Kenya and the rest of the continent, members of these political economies were bound to respond to the new policies and technologies through previously understood narratives. Despite the economic and political synchronization with the prevalence of vampire stories, this has not yet explained why rumor and gossip were the outcomes of this political and economic upheaval. However, when rumor and gossip are understood in the context of the society as a whole, we see a greater link between the uncertainty that these socio-economic factors caused and the spread of vampire stories.

The use of gossip in socialization studies is seen as a means of social control (Molvaer 226). It can show the divisions in classes, with the 'lower class' gossiping about the 'higher classes' and vice versa. With Kenyans moving to the urban areas, a social divide was emerging that had to be explained by those who had not encountered such phenomena before (Zamani 279). Moral views are strengthened by scandal and gossip, which can be passed on to the younger generation. It can be seen as a response to a way of life that was under attack by white settlers and the colonial government. In the telling of gossip, listeners are thus integrated into society and the overall community's identity is strengthened by the moral shock that is produced by hearing gossip. It can also be used to highlight indiscretions of a individual or group that is envied or seen as committing illicit acts in society. Thus the two pronged nature of gossip, that is to fortify accepted values and denigrate outsiders, can have a profound effect when it is paired with rumor. Rumors have been used by political leaders to disseminate information through 'approved' rumors but can also be used to disrupt

controlled regimes (Molvaer 227-229). Interestingly for this analysis of White, Molvaer writes that rumor can be used to “build up the common man’s view of his immediate surroundings and perhaps of his nation” (229). Molvaer groups rumor and gossip into his overall category of verbal means of socialization and social control. While his study focused on Ethiopia, the findings are relevant to Kenya. With the society rearranging between urban and rural, those transversing between the two worlds had to explain the new mechanisms that they were encountering.

Africans were the lower class in colonial Kenya, as they were across the continent. They were racially segregated from the Europeans and the Indians in Kenya. Their little knowledge of these ‘others’ was based on their encounters through the economy. In fact, one of White’s sources says that the vampire stories began “in Nairobi when racial segregation was also there.” (White 79).

Both Europeans and Indians were engaged in trade and extraction in the colony and both brought practices and technology that were previously unseen by locals. In the case of Europeans, the state bureaucracy and social services were in a form that differed from how society existed in pre-colonial Kenya. The extraction of minerals and people from the land were inextricable from the state functions. Thus it is not surprising that rumors and gossip in Eastern Africa focused on the extractive process of blood sucking. It clearly represents the new economy that was faced by East Africans. The lack of impetus on the part of the colonist to explain much of any part of the European economy to the locals meant that Africans were left to come up with their own interpretations. We see these rumors paired with an industry already well known to East Africans, that of slavery and the kidnappings that occurred by Arab, African, and European slavers in addition to the mythology of the supernatural that existed in society. This concept of capturing Africans to extract their blood and leave them in a daze or dead seems to be a perfect representation of the political economy that now threatened a traditional way of life.

Conclusion

Loise White's scholarship in the arena of rumor and gossip is a profound look at the way Africans may have interpreted European contact and technologies. However, rumor and gossip is only one part of the narrative in East Africa. Pairing the stories of vampires, blood sucking, and kidnappings with events occurring in the political economy adds a substantial level of understanding to White's work. During the interwar period in Kenya two major economic and political crisis took place. They were caused by many factors but the outcomes from these crisis left more power in the hands of white settlers and more displacement and subjugation of the Africans. Power structures were rewritten in this time and Africans needed a framework to explain the changes in ways that had cultural relevance. The explanations for the extraction of wealth from the land and the removal of Africans from their land by economic incentives found their voice in rumors and gossip about vampires and the process of blood sucking. The increase in the recordings of these stories and the localization of these events in time periods that closely correlate with these economic and political changes should encourage historians to take a deeper look at the political economy of the history in question. These correlations appear to be more than spurious, and thus future historians building on White's scholarship would do well to place these stories of vampires in a framework of political economy in order to give a well-rounded explanation of the history of East Africa.

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