

# BOOK REVIEW

**Anais Angelo. *Power and the Presidency in Kenya: The Jomo Kenyatta Years*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. ix + 306 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$99.99. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-108-49404-5.

*Power and the Presidency in Kenya: The Jomo Kenyatta Years* by Anais Angelo represents an innovative look at the rule of Kenya's first president (1964–1978). For readers interested in the foundational period of independent Kenya, the book provides significant insights as well as challenges. Through extensive archival research, Dr. Angelo presents a revealing examination of the origins and emergence of this presidency. The result is a book that, while traversing familiar ground, sets aside the more traditional themes of “father of the nation,” that the British favored KADU and did not want Kenyatta to rule, or that of a neo-colonial state, and asks readers to consider an alternate paradigm for Kenyatta's rise to power and his fifteen-year rule. Regarding the rise, the author maintains that rather than being a dominating and visionary figure, Kenyatta followed “a strategy of charismatic indecision” (87). Also on a new and refreshing note, the author stresses that “negotiations on the decolonization of land institutions” prepared the way for a centralized post-independence government, notwithstanding the deep divisions over federalism that marked the period from 1961 to 1964. These are welcome departures from what have long been the “standard” treatments of the period covered by the book, though the author was unable to divert from the misleading assertion that “the European settlers” (or “the settlers”) in Kenya fostered and favored federalism, or *majimbo*, prior to independence.

The second half of the book focuses on Kenyatta's presidency, with much attention given to the 1960s. Chapter Five, titled “Kenyatta, Meru Politics, and the last Mau Mau (1961/3–1965),” is in many ways the highlight. Dr. Angelo utilizes oral interviews and little-used archival sources, particularly files from Eastern Region/Province in the lands and settlement department. With land issues in the then-Meru district as a central concern, the chapter details how Kenyatta and the Meru leader Jackson Angaine repressed “resilient Mau Mau elements” and took control of local politics. This case study is fascinating and illuminating, though how this experience translated to other districts of independent Kenya is never made clear.

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This and the chapter itself highlight numerous challenges that face students of Kenyan political history in digesting the book. The far too numerous and shocking difficulties are highlighted by a failure to provide proper context, particularly economic, and chronology. In addition, a relatively narrow focus on central Kenya while ignoring significant primary and secondary sources characterizes the book. For example, one individual is identified as provincial commissioner of Eastern Province at a time when such a province did not exist. Looked at as a whole, the book is also difficult to digest for other reasons: many misspelled and misidentified individuals, factual inaccuracies including wrong dates, and mis-attributed quotes. One need not go deeply into the book to notice these errors, as in the case of the photo on the front cover.

Chapters Two through Four stand out in illustrating all these weaknesses, none more so than the inaccuracies surrounding the three constitutional conferences at Lancaster House which are incorrectly dated. For example, one reads that the first conference “was disturbed by news of Kenyatta’s release” (98), but that occurred 18 months after the end of the conference. The proliferation of factual errors recurs throughout the manuscript. The reader must continually confront mistaken identification of individuals and the positions they held. Politicians holding the position of parliamentary secretaries are termed permanent secretaries. One identification is particularly puzzling: J (James) Mburu. He is identified as “the chief agriculturalist J. Mburu, also president of the Central Region Assembly,” and the description concludes that, in addition, he served as a DC and PC. No single individual combined all these posts. The author confused James S. Mburu and James G. Mburu.

These examples also point to a lack of careful editing, as with the spelling of personal names (e.g., Ian/Iain Macleod). An extreme case involves one of Kenya’s first African permanent secretaries, Peter Shiyukah. Throughout the book his name is written as Shikuyah. In short, this book is characterized by multiple errors and slack editing that complicate understanding. This is challenging and reinforces the need for caution with regard to the conclusions. For example, the last chapter begins with an assertion that during the independence negotiations Kenyatta “refrained from committing himself personally to any of the debates” (266), but four pages later, the narrative claims that Kenyatta’s personality dominated those negotiations, leading the decolonization process to take an unexpected turn and “the question of presidential powers took center stage.” Not only is this contradictory, but the latter conclusion is contrary to archival evidence from the third or independence conference (September 25 to October 19, 1963).

There is no disputing the significance of the Kenyatta presidency, and this at times interesting and compelling narrative provides some new insights, but the book’s many challenges make for a less than convincing contribution to its study. The reviewer is left wondering if it is not too late for a thorough

re-editing of the book so as to improve readability and enhance the book's contribution.

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**For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

- Kanyinga, Karuti. 2016. "Devolution and the New Politics of Development in Kenya." *African Studies Review* 59 (3): 155–67. doi:[10.1017/asr.2016.85](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2016.85).
- Peck, RaShelle R. 2018. "Love, Struggle, and Compromises: The Political Seriousness of Nairobi Underground Hip Hop." *African Studies Review* 61 (2): 111–33. doi:[10.1017/asr.2017.143](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.143).