

1 Introduction: staging politics in Kenya¹

If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction.

William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*

A political spectacle

Exuberant showmanship is one enduring face of Kenyan political life. A nineteenth-century European traveler records the scene his own party provoked at a Gikuyu assembly: “the speeches were rather screamed out than spoken, the meaning being emphasized with a club till it was reduced to splinters. The whole bearing of the speakers was aggressive and insolent.”² A century later, on a more peaceful occasion, some two hundred people sit in a grassy clearing in Mt. Kenya’s foothills. On this sunny day in March 1979, just months after the inauguration of President Moi, I heard a politician tell them: “Not long ago, before we had our new president, there were many things that were spoiling citizens here. There used to be a lot of drunkenness, bribery, corruption.”³ People have “spoiled the footsteps,” fallen away from the path they should have followed, he went on to say. Now, however, Kenya is a nation “on the move,” “on the run” toward rapid “development,”⁴ asserts a fellow politician. He warns the crowd that those who cannot keep up with the new president’s rapid footsteps will be left behind in a ditch.⁵ The talk is emphatic, vigorous. Though clubs are absent, threats are not.

A great change had occurred, implied orators of the time. Gone were the days when a citizen must “cook tea” (pay a bribe) in return for routine government services. (“Tea,” *chai* is a common metaphor for bribery in East Africa.) No longer would officers at the land registry delay farmers by demanding “tea” again and again from those who sought their assistance to settle boundary disputes. (So said one member of parliament who addressed the same ruling party rally in March 1979.)⁶ No longer would home-brewed beer tempt men to spend cash their families badly needed.

Here was the public face of a fresh national political culture⁷ – new traditions in the making. If successful, they might help to legitimize a new regime, and to sustain the nation-state as an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991). New slogans and catchwords circulated in gatherings in

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town and countryside and re-echoed in national radio broadcasts and newspapers. But who was imagining what?⁸

The images were contradictory. A new head of state (Moi) pledged to end past evils, but simultaneously assured citizens he would follow the footsteps of his eminent predecessor (Jomo Kenyatta).⁹ The new ruling regime included many faces from the old one. Citizens who earned incomes from home-brewed beer and who enjoyed consuming it heartily cheered its proposed prohibition. What realities lay beneath these appearances? Which renounced practices were actually to change? Was home-brewed beer now a thing of the past? Should citizens assume that their dealings with the land office would be straightforward and timely? Would the old cast of characters really adopt different standards and practices in a new political era?

These questions take us beneath the surface showmanship of a beguiling new political rhetoric. Oratory in public forums affords at best a cloudy view of political processes offstage, and the nontransparency itself is significant.¹⁰ Indirect messages float between orators and hearers. Speakers maneuver within constraints on what is and is not publicly speakable. Listeners draw their own inferences, construct their own interpretations. Missteps on either side can be dangerous, even fatal. The possibilities for confusion, deception, ambiguity, and contradiction are endless. Epistemological difficulties for the analyst are as slippery as those of Geertz's (1973b: 6–7) and Gilbert Ryle's (1970) philosophical tale of winks and blinks. An ethnographer must pick his or her way through "piled-up structures of inference and implication," making sense of "twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies" (Geertz 1973b: 7). As a foreign observer I cannot hope to decipher more than a fraction of the subtleties involved in Kenyan political theatre. But I do wish to suggest something of the spirit of those assemblies (or *baraza* in the Swahili language), large or small, where politicians and bureaucrats present themselves to citizens on a public stage.

Before defining the place of *baraza* in this study it is helpful to sketch the institution's contours. In this work I use the term *baraza* to refer to public assemblies that usually are held outdoors, are individually licensed by the state,¹¹ and range in size from huge rallies of several thousand women and men to smaller gatherings of a hundred or so individuals seated on grass in the countryside. The largest include gatherings in Nairobi held on patriotic national holidays and addressed by the president and other senior officials. Smaller assemblies in the countryside are addressed by chiefs, district officers, and other public servants and prominent individuals. A single gathering often includes dozens of speeches of varying length. "Traditional" dancers and singers and school choirs sometimes perform.

Flags and bunting in the national colors (red, green, and black) adorn speakers' platforms and roadsides at the larger assemblies in town and countryside. *Baraza* are held in soccer stadiums, chiefs' camps, or public spaces near markets or local council offices. The audience stands or sits on the ground, exposed to downpours or sunshine. Speakers are more comfortable, occupying chairs or a wood bench at the front, sometimes on a sheltered platform. This "VIP" section is shared by other local notables who do not address the assembly. In rural areas these might include school headmasters, chairs of school committees, coffee cooperative society officers, and church officials. Thus *baraza* are one of few occasions for the public display of elite group cohesion and exclusiveness.¹² Among the audience elder men often sit near the front (or on the "VIP" bench in small gatherings), and women near the back. Administrative police (*askari*) stand on the fringes of the crowd.

Nearby shops and markets must close during such meetings, which may last several hours. Attendance is "mandatory," but unevenly enforced and not openly sanctioned. Those who address these gatherings usually speak extemporaneously, rather than from written texts (with the exception of formal occasions such as presidential addresses on national holidays). Who shows up, who speaks, and who sits next to whom on the speakers' platform are all matters that attract keen interest among local observers. Such gatherings provide clues about factional shifts, about who is "in," who "out," and about what can and cannot be stated directly and publicly. From the organizers' perspective, a successful *baraza* keeps dissent offstage. Dissident voices, however, are not necessarily silent during these gatherings. Individuals in the audience sometimes shout out embarrassing questions or reminders of scandals associated with those on the speakers' platform (such as misuse of local funds collected for a development project). Rival leaders on the platform may enrage one another with direct and indirect attacks. In short, these assemblies are by no means utterly predictable rituals.

I take *baraza* as a point of entry into Kenyan politics and social life, and not as the exclusive focus of this study. *Baraza* are revealing because they are the principal meeting ground between ordinary citizens on the one hand, and state officials and bureaucrats on the other. A century ago these gatherings brought Gikuyu and other peoples face to face with European explorers, missionaries, and soldiers traversing or invading their territories. At *baraza* today, for a few hours farmers in patched clothing and bare feet encounter cabinet ministers in three-piece suits. Politicians park their Mercedes before people accustomed to miles of daily travel on foot. Leaders relax in chairs at the front of the assembly, sometimes under shelters, while the audience sits on the ground or stands

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in sun or rain. A status gulf on which a social order rests is here on very public display. Close inspection of the spectacle reveals schism and unity, danger and security. It is that volatile mix that demands attention.

Beyond images of reversal

An amalgam of danger and security, conflict and cohesion characterizes both *baraza* and the wider social order. These two faces of social life, however, are often counterposed rather than blended in social analysis.¹³ They enter debates about Hobbes versus Rousseau, Durkheim versus Marx, 1950s functionalism versus 1980s political economy, and so on. At issue are fundamental questions about how to analyze social asymmetries that breed conflict and change, without neglecting or misrepresenting forces of cohesion and stability.

These analytical polarities have counterparts in both popular images and scholarly views of Kenya. Until the early 1990s Kenya was often portrayed in the West as a “beacon of success” and an “economic miracle.” Western observers praised the country as a showpiece of economic prosperity and political stability. It was an appealing “success” to tourists in search of exotic animals and Indian Ocean beaches, to development economists impressed by high rates of post-independence economic growth and by sharp increases in marketed smallholder production, and to Western nations pursuing the “strategic” interests of superpower politics.

In the early 1990s, however, this burnished image suddenly was overturned. Prominent Western media voices asserted that political and other violence threatened Kenya’s vital tourism industry, “corruption” threatened its economy, and government repression threatened its nascent “democracy” movement.¹⁴ Post-cold-war geopolitics lessened the “strategic” imperative of Western support of rulers such as Moi. Once a favored recipient of foreign aid, part of Kenya’s aid was suspended late in 1991, pending improvements in the management of its economy and political system.¹⁵ By early 1992, many Western observers saw Kenya as a political holdout amidst apparent continental moves toward human rights improvements and democratic reforms.

Both burnished and tarnished images of Kenya are misleading. They recreate essentialist oppositions between “the West” (“us”) and Kenya (“them”), as well as between Kenya and the rest of Africa. Prevalent myths assume that for “them” (Africa), but not for “us” (“the West”), coups, corruption, and violent “tribal” conflict are inevitable. Kenya’s avoidance of these presumably endemic political and economic maladies until 1990 was thus construed as “miraculous.”

Popular images and scholarly paradigms inform one another and are shaped by some of the same global forces. Much scholarly debate about processes of agrarian and economic change in Kenya also engages images of an economic and political “miracle” or “success story.”¹⁶ Some do so quite deliberately – for example, Michael Lofchie’s article, “Kenya: Still an Economic Miracle?” (Lofchie 1990). The World Bank (1981: 51) drew in part on glowing academic accounts of the “success” of smallholder agriculture in Kenya to argue more generally that a policy focus on small farmers was crucial to alleviating Africa’s economic “crisis.” So too Kenya’s political image was enhanced by the absence of a successful *coup d’état* during the country’s first quarter-century of independence. This record struck both journalists and scholars as a sign of success in a continent where coups had become routine means of transferring power.¹⁷

Both images of Kenya – before and after its 1990 descent – should be questioned for two sets of reasons. First, each image emphasizes just one side of those polarities noted earlier: cohesion/conflict, order/disorder, security/danger. That is, an analytical opposition is transposed to presumed historical sequence: from miracle to disaster. Instead of seeing Kenya’s history as a sequence of contrary images, this study draws attention to the ways in which both sides of the 1990 historical divide contain seeds of the opposite image.

A second sense in which Kenya’s contrary images are misleading is their emphasis on the nation-state as a discrete functional unit. Both burnished and tarnished images de-emphasize or overlook the intersecting streams of world history that constitute both “us” and “them.” In Africa, for example, two continental processes – enlargement of state bureaucracies and attenuation of political expression¹⁸ – emerged under colonial rule and re-emerged soon after independence, often with the support or acquiescence of the same Western powers that now advocate their reversal.¹⁹ Africa’s post-colonial states are successors to profoundly anti-democratic colonial forms of governing. Such historical continuities are lost in myths of individual nations’ exceptionalism.

These exceptionalist myths resonate with colonial maps in which “each colony appeared like a detachable piece of a jigsaw puzzle. As this ‘jigsaw’ effect became normal, each ‘piece’ could be wholly detached from its geographic context” (Anderson 1991: 175). Such conceptions now are a familiar target of intellectual criticism. Tilly (1984: 11), for example, discusses the misleading notion that “‘society’ is a thing apart; the world as a whole divides into distinct ‘societies,’ each having its more or less autonomous culture, government, economy, and solidarity.” Wolf’s (1982: 6) analogy of sorting nations into differently colored “billiard

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balls” in a “global pool hall” supports a similar argument. This type of sorting and labeling fails to acknowledge that “their” history is analytically inseparable from “our” history (Wolf 1982, Roseberry 1989, O’Brien and Roseberry 1991). Such approaches draw attention away from the very different structural positions individual nations occupy in wider regional and global economies and power structures. If these criticisms have become familiar the influence of contrary assumptions persists nonetheless.

Kenya, for example, is not unique as the object of myths of exceptionalism. The Ivory Coast was West Africa’s “economic miracle,” Costa Rica is Central America’s success story, and Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea are East Asia’s “economic miracles.” Indeed World Bank rhetoric advises Kenya to compare its economy to such East Asian nations, rather than to other African states. In addition, the official rhetoric of any African nation – including those which Western economists characterize as disasters – is likely to include myths of the nation’s exceptional triumphs in meeting economic and political challenges. Within these fields of image and myth, however, Kenya is one of a handful of African nations to acquire relative prominence in Western media and scholarly circles as a point of reference against which observers assess the successes and failures of other African states. As both a scholarly and media showpiece, the case of Kenya offers a particularly rich example of how popular images and scholarly paradigms influence one another.

How did Kenya’s image as an “island” of prosperity and stability in a troubled continent come to infuse the discourses of scholars, development practitioners, journalists, and Kenyan public figures? How might this case illuminate the more general question of how disciplinary concerns are locally transposed?²⁰ Appadurai (1986: 358) notes that “there is a tendency for places to become showcases for specific issues over time, and . . . the sources and implications of this tendency are poorly understood.” He refers here to the historical creation of “classic” theoretical issues that become associated with particular fieldwork locales – for example, lineages in Africa or reciprocity in Polynesia.²¹ To understand such historical processes, he notes, would require attention to a range of issues, such as the institutional prestige of the founding author, the theoretical power of the founding work, host government and elite responses to particular types of field research, the state of anthropology as a profession in the research locale, preferences of funding agencies, cross-disciplinary influences, and career pressures to stake claims to originality (see also Vincent 1990 and 1991).

A historical investigation of how Kenya came to be an academic and media showcase of the kind noted earlier might take into account a

number of external linkages: colonial Kenya was advertised in England as a “winter home for aristocrats” and attracted European settlers in significant numbers; Jomo Kenyatta was a forceful and charismatic personality who attracted international attention; Nairobi is a principal continental base for many journalists, multinational firms, and development agencies; tourism contributes heavily to Kenya’s foreign exchange earnings; Kenya often has offered a relatively hospitable climate for academic research; and Kenyan officials and scholars who screen applications for research permits have tended to favor studies oriented to economic and policy concerns and to discourage explicitly political research. A very heavy expatriate traffic to and from the country over many decades means that Kenya is better known in the West than are many other African nations.

What anthropologists find in Kenya, as elsewhere, is “a very complicated compound of local realities and the contingencies of metropolitan theory” (Appadurai 1986: 360). In Kenya scholarship one finds traces of a familiar parade of paradigms: from “lazy farmers” some decades ago to “poor but efficient farmers” more recently; from modernization to underdevelopment and dependency; from culture as unique life-ways to culture as obstacle to progress; and from “primordial” ethnic sentiments to invented ethnicities and nationalisms. Early 1990s political shifts in Africa and elsewhere accompany new academic searches for local political “spaces” where democracy might emerge. The quest now is for signs of new life in the associations or institutions of “civil society” that have been stifled by the state. One challenge for contemporary Kenyan ethnography is to explore how “local” cultures and histories provide the space for “global” ideologies of democracy. A continuing theme, however, and the starting point of the present study is the image of Kenya as a showpiece of political stability and of an economic prosperity that many assume rests in part on “progressive” small farmers.

To summarize thus far, I have drawn attention to two arenas of representation: (1) images of Kenya constructed in its own official rhetoric and conveyed through *baraza*; and (2) scholarly paradigms and media images that influence one another. I have suggested the need to move beyond images of reversal as historical narrative, and beyond analytical polarities that sustain such images. And I have introduced *baraza* as an institutional window on contending forces in Kenyan social and political life. These gatherings, like the wider social order, are an amalgam of security and danger, predictability and surprise, cohesion and conflict, conformity and creativity. To emphasize only the first element in each of these pairs is to paint a portrait as misleading as Kenya’s pre-1990 popular stereotype. Missing from such a portrait is explicit attention to

the social divisions and asymmetries that fuel change. It is to these that I turn next.

National political culture and local realities

National political culture, as conveyed through *baraza*, is a prism that refracts local realities. Official rhetoric does not necessarily “fool” citizens, though it sometimes symbolically neutralizes social divisions that might threaten the social order. Its capacity to do so, however, is historically contingent, as is its strategic balance between coercion and persuasion. *Baraza* do not convey an inevitably hegemonic ideology sustained through coercion and false consciousness, and reducible to material interests. *Baraza* do offer the state a grand opportunity to “naturalize” and rationalize the existing social order. But to portray *baraza* only in this way is to overplay both the state²² and national political culture as coherent and monolithic entities. Such political culture is less rigid and monolithic than the literature on nationalism often suggests. It is, as Fox (1990: 4) puts it “malleable and mobile,” a matter of “historical practice.” Indeed, upon close inspection it may appear to dissolve into a confusing mass of contradictions and ambiguities.

National political culture, moreover, is not a disembodied entity overhanging discrete “local” cultures. There is cultural continuity as well as discontinuity between the worlds of small scale and large scale organization: between kin group elders, appointed chiefs, district and provincial commissioners, president, and foreign dignitaries; all of whom may encounter one another in *baraza*. The language of the state and that of localities are not discrete domains. As Parkin (1990: 195) notes more generally, “through the spread and negotiated use of oral language, people come to share many ideas in common while at the same time honing them to their own local requirements and practices.”²³ That is, there is a “cross-fertilization of ideas transacted across constantly shifting cultural boundaries” (1990: 195).

Baraza, then, are a crossroads in two senses that are important to this analysis. First, they offer a window on processes occurring at multiple “levels” of social agency (from locality to nation-state, from assistant chief to cabinet minister or president). As political spectacle, these gatherings afford a view of an imposing vertical hierarchy of politicians and bureaucrats. They include baton-wielding district officers, district and provincial commissioners clad in starched khaki uniforms and pith helmets, as well as elected politicians, who range from local councillors likely to travel by *matatu* taxis, to members of parliament and cabinet ministers who own Mercedes Benzes. Second, as these last remarks

indicate, *baraza* capture exchanges among individuals of widely different wealth and social status. Rich and poor, literate and illiterate, women and men, old and young, stranger and native – these are some of the social divisions mediated in *baraza*.

These two intersecting themes again draw attention to the challenge of understanding the interpenetration of “local,” “national,” and “global” domains. This is not a new problem in anthropology (cf. Wilson 1941, Wolf 1956, Mintz 1960, Mair 1965), but it is a focus of current experimentation in field research, analysis, and ethnographic writing. It has stimulated scholars to invent new language, as in the case of Appadurai’s (1991) neologism “ethnoscape.”²⁴ And it carries with it the challenge to avoid two extremes: (1) interpreting “all the minute observations of interaction seen in fieldwork . . . only as they manifest signs of the operation of a postulated macrosystem”; and (2) interpreting “small-scale interaction . . . primarily as a construct of the actors without systematic reference to some larger context” (S. F. Moore 1986: 328).²⁵ These challenges are carried forward in contemporary scholarship as analytic tensions among post-modernist “chaos,” historical contingency, and structural regularities.

An emphasis on the “chaos” or flux of daily life is one possible outcome of recognizing that a number of processes once assumed to be linear and irreversible now look more complicated. For example, agricultural intensification and commercialization are neither inevitable nor irreversible (McCann 1991; Berry 1993). State formation is a result of historically uneven and uncertain processes of ascendancy and decline (Schatzberg 1988). So too patterns of exchange via reciprocity, redistribution, and markets exhibit historical pulsations rather than strictly linear trends. Such visions of “chaos” in social life contribute to scholarly suspicion about “ethnography’s claim to provide a tidy picture of the Other,” and help to inspire instead representations of the world as “decentered, fragmented, compressed, flexible, refractive, post-modern” (Fox 1991: 6,1).

The approach taken in the present study is not necessarily to assume the absence of structural regularities, but rather to try, as Comaroff and Comaroff (1991: 313) put it, “to capture the interplay of structural constraint and situational contingency.” To explore the questions posed in this study requires a constantly shifting angle of vision: one that captures the interplay of local, national, and international forces,²⁶ and one that experiments theoretically with combined attention to strategy and constraint, conflict and cohesion, resistance and domination, and small scale and large scale processes.

I will note briefly two illustrations of this approach that are developed

further in later chapters. First, I suggest that any particular *baraza* can be taken as an event that is not a simple reflex of an already existing and presumably coherent social or cultural system. Rather, as Gal (1989: 442) puts it in a different context, “such events are the means by which some groups make contingent claims to shore up a social order, in response to attempts by others to dismantle it.” Indeed, rather than “an order” or “a structure,” it is helpful to think in terms of “part-structures being built and torn down,” “a complex mix of order, antiorder, and nonorder,” and “contingencies of form” (S. F. Moore 1987: 730). Thus individual orators at particular *baraza* can be seen to create as much as to enact, political structures or “part-structures.” National political culture is not a stable “text,” but something these historical actors create, transform, and enact in everyday struggles and practices, starting from positions of unequal power and authority.

A second illustration of a theoretical argument developed later is to show how a crisis such as famine or social protest brings into sharper analytical focus the cohesive forces it threatens. Famine, for example, is a “revelatory crisis” that, as Sahlins (1972: 127–130) and Firth (1959: 77–105) demonstrate, can shed a suddenly bright light on previously obscured lines of structural conflict and competing interest. Tensions may center, for example, on competition between domestic welfare (feeding the immediate family) on the one hand and, on the other, wider obligations (some ceremonial) toward kin and neighbors, or between patrons and clients, elders and juniors, or chiefs and subjects. In Tikopia, in 1952–3, for example, hurricanes and famine strained the “norms of domestic conduct and of hospitality,” and provoked competing explanations of spiritual agency and human moral failings (Firth 1959). In central Kenya, local famine names of past decades tell a story of moral crisis: “the famine of trickery,” “the famine of hatred without cause,” and “the famine that destroyed shame” (see chapter 4). Such crises draw attention both to lines of structural conflict, and to moral communities that bind farmers to one another and to better-off patrons. Again, the boundaries that define levels or scale of analysis are blurred. Moral communities with flexible boundaries tie localities into the political arena of the nation-state.

The “moral economy”²⁷ for which Kenyan citizens hold the state accountable is not that of an idealized unchanging village life. The rhetoric of governing elites – both colonial and post-colonial – implied protection of a rising subsistence standard, rather than a stable one. “Fire and light, lamps, oil, matches” were material improvements Africans should expect under colonial rule, in the words of a district official’s 1925 welcoming speech to the Embu Local Native Council.²⁸ As Berry (1985: