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Politics and Social Media on the Streets of Mombasa  
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Excerpt  
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PART I

*Rethinking Publics from Kenya*

# 1 *Introduction*

Just around the corner from the noise and congestion of the central bus terminal in Mombasa, there is a maze of narrow streets where shoe polishers, cobblers and other small-scale tradesmen set up stands. Amidst these streets, there is a corner where three roads converge and create a clearing large enough to accommodate a bigger gathering. Anywhere from 10 to more than 100 people, mostly men, gather at this corner, a few sitting on makeshift wooden benches, but most standing. On weekdays, there are always at least a few men present, leaning against the wall of the derelict hotel building behind them. For most of the day they are quiet, as if waiting for something. What they seem to be waiting for is the early evening, when more men congregate as they finish their daily activities. With more people gathered, debate begins about whatever issues occupied the local and national news that day.

Periodically, discussion comes alive. One such day in early March 2014, approximately fifty to sixty men gather by mid-afternoon, eager to discuss events that had taken place the day before at Kasarani Stadium in Nairobi, where the national political party, the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), was holding its delegates' conference. There is a sense of common interest among the men who are here. All seem eager to discuss a violent disruption that had taken place at the party elections as men dressed in black overturned ballot boxes during the live-televised party elections. Discussion indicates the event is up for interpretation. People question who is responsible, and debate why someone might have instigated the violence. One regular participant, a man who identifies as coastal, Muslim and a civic educator, chairs the debate. Even with an acting chair, another man dominates the discussion, fielding questions and comments from others. This man is a self-described political analyst. Others address him in this way. He speaks with a confidence of possessing insider knowledge on the conference events. Other individuals attract attention from the group through charisma or

expertise. Some defend their perspectives by appealing to an assumed common knowledge. Who belongs – within the gathering and within ODM – is called into question. Arguments tend to fall along particular lines, which attribute the violence to individual leaders' and partisan interests. Most suggest powerful individuals in the governing Jubilee Coalition caused the chaotic events, who were seeking to disrupt and discredit ODM as the main opposition party. Others raise the possibility that violence was orchestrated by powerful individuals in ODM who feared the outcome of the elections would disfavour them. Gradually, men leave and discussion shifts focus. The debate remains unresolved.

This gathering parallels similar, often smaller, gatherings for political discussion dotted throughout Mombasa, which materialise on a daily basis in open clearings on the roadside, in informal settlements, in schoolyards and by bus stages. One such gathering forms every evening next to a *matatu* (mini-bus) stage near the Kongowea market. Around 5:00pm, the first individuals to arrive arrange some benches into a square on a piece of unoccupied privately owned land. A woman passes through selling cups of *uje* (porridge) to the men who are seated, and an adjacent small cafe sells groundnuts and spiced Swahili coffee. As participants converge, they begin to discuss issues in the news. One particular week in March 2014, discussion is dominated by conflicting views on government salaries. A government announcement that the president and other key figures will take a pay cut becomes the topic of a more formal debate, which is chaired by a *de facto* speaker. One older man, who identifies with the Luo ethnic group, argues that salaries are too high. Others write off his comment. One man calls him a heckler, and another describes him as 'old' and a 'fool'. These men claim that they have expertise in finance and should have the floor to speak. One asserts, 'Let us talk about this. Ask us and do not Google.'<sup>1</sup> We are here for civic education. This is how we have always done it.'

As discussion progresses, some continue to make soft jibes at others by highlighting their own education or training. The accumulation of discrediting remarks upsets the man who had earlier been written off as a heckler, old and a fool. He stands up and proclaims loudly, 'I am not stupid! [He is] saying I am stupid!' He makes one more attempt to

<sup>1</sup> Referring to the Google.com search platform.

explain his view on the issue of salaries before he walks out, visibly upset and remarking again, ‘They are saying I am stupid.’

As this man exits, the chairman tells those who remain, ‘We are not here to make noise.’ He reasons elected leaders – citing by name the area Governor and Member of Parliament (MP) – could shut the gathering down. A vote is taken about how to proceed. Most raise their hands to support continuing the discussion on more tempered terms. Discussion carries on. Some justify salaries based on the expectation that an MP must give out handouts. Another suggests the problem is the number and cost of government commissions. I am asked about MP salaries in the countries that I originate from.

At 6:50pm one man disrupts the proceedings by bringing out a television set, which had been given to the group so they could watch the evening news. The acting chairman motions for the television to be kept off until exactly 7:00pm. At 7:00pm he formally ends the session, thereby preserving an order to the discussion. As the news broadcast commences, the man who had left returns. He laughs a little as he quietly restates his perspective to me; his sense of affront appears to be abating.

These routine but relatively informal gatherings for political discussion also take place in the increasingly networked world of mobile phones and social media, which has rapidly expanded in Kenya since the early 2000s. One day in April 2014, while waiting for debate to commence at the gathering near Kongowea market, a young man sitting next to me looks up from his phone and makes a comment to me about a female political activist in Mombasa who had been arrested earlier that day.<sup>2</sup> The mobile Facebook interface sharing this news story is still visible on his phone. Earlier that day, Suleiman Shahbal, a businessman and local politician, had posted about this arrest;<sup>3</sup> Shahbal was quickly reposted by others.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Observation at the *bunge* at Karama, 27 April 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Suleiman Shahbal contested for the Mombasa governorship in 2013 and 2017, coming second in number of votes in both.

<sup>4</sup> The post read: ‘Mama Ambasa and her team of Municipal Council workers leaders were jailed for one year on Friday. Their crime? Illegal dumping! In reality it is because they led a strike demanding their rights. They had not been paid for months while leaders were gallivanting all over the world in expensive trips at our expense. I applaud their courage. We will help them fight all the way to the Supreme Court to preserve their right to demonstrate. We will not let them rot in Jail. Senator Emma Mbura has offered to pay their fines. I say to you Mama

For the man sitting next to me, Facebook is more than a personal networking tool. In January 2014 he was part of a small group of friends who created a public Facebook group to discuss politics. The Facebook group mimicked the structure of a parliament. Formed first with 200 of their Facebook acquaintances, the group grew to more than 1,000 members within six months. Discussion in this group becomes animated around current affairs and politics, including religious-linked violence, electoral competition and politicians' performances. This online public space seems to break free of the forms of recognition that dominate physical gatherings. A person's physical appearance, verbal eloquence, personal stature, gender, age or other physical and audible identifiers do not necessarily dictate whether or not they attract attention. Individuals can continually revise their online profiles and claim new titles such as princess, prince, *mzee* (elder) or honourable. Who speaks and who is heard become linked to written prose, the frequency of a user's contributions or the ability to provoke controversy. Discussion is still informed by hints of participants' wider positionality. Suspicions are raised in the discussion about participants' political, personal and partisan networks. These suspicions are partially informed by experiences on the ground. Some who speak online also inhabit the same residential areas of the city or participate in the same partisan networks, as friends, acquaintances and competitors.

### 1.1 Public Discussion and Shared Imaginaries in Mombasa

Reflected in these three spaces of debate, public discussion ebbs and flows as part of everyday routines in Mombasa. Each point where it convenes has particularities. There is the Facebook group, where virtual user profiles allow participants to easily alter how they appear. This contrasts with the gathering in the Central Business District (CBD), where insider knowledge and charisma attract attention. This differs again from the gathering near the market, where discussion is

Emma that we will share this with you 50/50! Let no man think that the people of Mombasa can ever be cowed !' (recorded 28 April 2014 at 8:54 EAT). This post appeared on the public Facebook page for Hon. Suleiman Shahbal on 27 April 2014. It was reposted identically on Mombasa County Government Watch's public Facebook page the same day, with the additional heading, 'MESSAGE FROM Hon. Suleiman Shahbal'.

moderated by a preselected speaker and operates through predictable proceedings. Still, these diverse moments suggest patterns in the topics and practices of public discussion. Across the gatherings, it seems of no consequence for someone to comment on a politician's speech or behaviour. Public discussion easily falls into refrains about protracted grievance and division in relation to the county or national government. This mirrors a wider sense of dissatisfaction in Kenya with the political status quo, as well as an interest in debating the reasons for the current situation (Diepeveen, 2010).

Everyday discussions of politics in Kenya are already phenomena of scholarly interest, particularly amidst the push for multiparty democracy and constitutional change through the 1990s and into the twenty-first century (Diepeveen, 2010, 2019; Gachihi, 2014a, 2014b; Haugerud, 1995; Ogola, 2011). Yet the sheer scope and diversity of spaces of public discussion appear unique to the contemporary moment, with its underpinnings in rising social media access and use. There was a notable shift in the speed and amount of broadband accessible in Kenya in 2009, with Kenya's first connection to international undersea fibre optic cables.<sup>5</sup> By 2013, mobile phone services and internet service providers (ISPs) were being supplied through four mobile operators.<sup>6</sup> As of 2017, Kenya's internet penetration was estimated to be 81.8 per cent (31 March), with 5.5 million Facebook subscribers in 2016 (30 June).<sup>7</sup>

There is a growing number of Kenyan citizen journalists, bloggers and commentators on Twitter, a social media platform that, at the time of fieldwork, allowed for information to be shared through 140-character posts. Often hashtags have been used to link comments to particular issues and have contributed to a wider political commentary (Ogola, 2015; Tully & Ekdale, 2014). In Mombasa, the frequency and diversity of groups, pages and commentary about Mombasa politics on Facebook, as well as the expanding use of Twitter and instant messaging services such as WhatsApp and Telegram, indicated an increasingly vibrant public sphere. Virtual channels expanded when

<sup>5</sup> In 2014, four cables were in operation: TEAMS 5, Seacom, EASSy and the Lower Indian Ocean Network (Lion2).

<sup>6</sup> The four mobile operators and also Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in Kenya were Safaricom Kenya, Airtel Networks Kenya, Telkom Kenya (Orange) and Essar Telkom Kenya (Yu).

<sup>7</sup> Retrieved from [www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm](http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm) on 25 August 2017.

and from where people could engage. Information was shared almost instantaneously with individuals connected through networks, as opposed to necessarily occupying the same place. The nature and scope of these diverse and dynamic public discussions seem to make them increasingly challenging to even attempt to grasp.

The diverse moments in Mombasa that give rise to a sense of a public sphere – in other words, something that ‘exists uniquely in, through, and for talk’ (Calhoun, 2002, p. 160) – indicate this to be a varied and dynamic phenomenon. Certain features of public discussion and the communication media through which they take place jar with past practices. What defines liminal spaces is changing. A place or a person that is ‘distant’ or ‘remote’ is now that which is excluded in both networked and physical terms. How the state comes to know the people it seeks to rule is also shifting, as they increasingly have access to data generated through digital footprints. Beyond Kenya, this has brought concerns about new forms of surveillance and control, particularly in states with existing authoritarian tendencies (Gagliardone, 2016; Lamoureaux & Sureau, 2019). Equally, there has been a sense that new forms of digital and networked media have opened up new and uncontrollable means of widespread communication that cannot be pulled back (Bosch, 2016; Castells, 2012; Rotberg & Aker, 2013; Tully & Ekdale, 2014). Citizens have at their disposal an increasingly diverse array of technologies through which to access, contend with and produce information.

The diversity and dynamism of spaces of public discussion contrast with the intractability of certain shared repertoires of difference and commonality in postcolonial Kenyan politics. Debates over citizen–state relations have continually fallen along lines that are based on ethno-regional identities, and clientelist relations, and are zero sum (Atieno-Odhiambo, 2002; Branch, Cheeseman & Gardner, 2010; Cheeseman et al., 2019; Mueller, 2008). Ethnicity has persisted as a defining line in political debates through changes in national leadership (in 2002 and 2013), the governing parties (in 2002) and even the Constitution (in 2010). In 2017, any indication that the 2010 Constitution of Kenya, which introduced a new level of devolved government, might have mitigated the ethnic dimension of political competition seemed to fade with a political impasse following the Supreme Court’s annulment of the presidential election. The two main presidential contenders were the sons of independence leaders;

this brought past divisions and personalised politics to the fore of public debate.<sup>8</sup> The rerun was marked by the sharpening of public debates along personal and ethnic lines. Divisions were eventually resolved through a personal agreement between the two party leaders (Cheeseman et al., 2019). Even media coverage of both sides of the presidential divide linked their positions to ethnicity, and a commitment to electing one of someone's 'own'.<sup>9</sup>

Mombasa County was strongly positioned on one side of the divide. Throughout the 2010s, the Mombasa electorate showed strong support for ODM candidates.<sup>10</sup> National political divisions took on local dimensions, with local identities, histories and narratives pushing or pulling individuals towards the national opposition, ODM. The city is diverse, with one-third of residents in Mombasa identifying with ethnic groups originating from outside of the coastal region, and 40 per cent identifying as Muslims and 60 per cent as Christians in 2013 (Wolf, Muthoka & Ireri, 2013). Ideas of ethnic division have surfaced in campaigns for coastal secession. They divided residents into those

<sup>8</sup> Kamau, J. (2017). Raila Odinga, Uhuru Kenyatta walking in their fathers' steps. *Daily Nation*, 1 November. Retrieved from [www.nation.co.ke/news/politics/Raila-Uhuru-walking-fathers-footsteps/1064-4165880-pi0jvs/index.html](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/politics/Raila-Uhuru-walking-fathers-footsteps/1064-4165880-pi0jvs/index.html) on 25 March 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Mohamed, H. (2017). Kenyan elections: The ethnicity factor. *Al Jazeera*, 6 August. Retrieved from [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/kenyan-elections-ethnicity-factor-170806081143385.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/kenyan-elections-ethnicity-factor-170806081143385.html) on 23 March 2018. Burke (2017). Kenya election: government accused of 'genocide' against ethnic minorities. *The Guardian*, 27 October. Retrieved from [www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/27/kenya-election-less-than-half-of-those-eligible-thought-to-have-voted](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/27/kenya-election-less-than-half-of-those-eligible-thought-to-have-voted) on 23 March 2018. Kimenyi (2013). Kenya's Elections: Implications of Ethnic Rivalries and International Intervention, Op-ed. *Brookings*, 12 February. Retrieved from [www.brookings.edu/opinions/kenyas-elections-implications-of-ethnic-rivalries-and-international-intervention/](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/kenyas-elections-implications-of-ethnic-rivalries-and-international-intervention/) on 23 March 2018. Maritim-Maina (2017). How Kenya could move away from the politics of ethnicity. *Daily Nation*, 28 June. Retrieved from [www.nation.co.ke/news/Kenya-and-politics-of-ethnicity-/1056-3990476-hm0ftoz/index.html](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Kenya-and-politics-of-ethnicity-/1056-3990476-hm0ftoz/index.html) on 23 March 2018. Ajuong (2017). Ugly beauty: Ethnicity and politics in Kenya. *Pambazuka News*, 3 August. Retrieved from [www.pambazuka.org/democracy-governance/ugly-beauty-ethnicity-and-politics-kenya](http://www.pambazuka.org/democracy-governance/ugly-beauty-ethnicity-and-politics-kenya) on 23 March 2018.

<sup>10</sup> In 2013, the ODM gubernatorial candidate, Ali Hassan Joho, was elected as Governor of Mombasa. All ward-level representatives were won by ODM, which also secured four out of six MP positions. Elected posts not secured by ODM candidates, specifically the Senator of Mombasa and MPs for Jomvu and Nyali constituencies, went to individuals contesting with its coalition partner, the Wiper Democratic Movement. ODM again dominated in 2017, with the incumbent Joho elected as governor.



who are identified as *wapwani*, people of the Coast, and those labelled as outsiders (Willis & Chome, 2014), sometimes further separating *wapwani* into Arab, Swahili and Mijikenda (Willis & Gona, 2013). Ethno-regional differences have been complicated by divisions along financial and business lines (Willis & Chome, 2014, p. 122). Key businessmen have been suspected to fund politicians and drive local competition. Religious differences have further shaped the terms of political discourse in Mombasa. There has been a shared sense of marginalisation among Kenyan Muslims by a national government premised upon Christian law and by national politicians professing to be practising Christians (Kresse, 2018; Mwakimako & Willis, 2014). Kenya's participation in a global 'war on terrorism' and its offensive in Somalia since 2011 have reinforced religious disadvantage (Lind et al., 2015; Prestholdt, 2011). Conversely, attacks by Al Shabaab within Kenya have fed murmurings of disadvantage locally among Christians.

In practice, public life in Kenya cannot be reduced to static ethno-regional, religious and financial divides. Taking ethnicity as an example, John Lonsdale's (1994) concept of moral ethnicity or Stephen Ndegwa's (1997) discussion of dual citizenship highlight how ethnicity functions in multiple ways in Kenya, as the basis for collective responsibility and inter-group competition. The politicisation of ethnicity is the result of efforts and structures to make it so. This can be dated to the British colonial state's attempts to order people and territory, the organisation of colonial resistance around district and cultural lines (Anderson, 2005), and post-independence efforts by President Jomo Kenyatta's government to establish legitimacy (Muigai, 2004). In independent Kenya, to be Luo, Luhya or Mijikenda, or Christian or Muslim, seems unavoidable in political debates. Whether scholarly or popular literature, it has become almost impossible not to mention identity-based divisions when writing about Kenyan politics. This has given rise to a situation where discussion of political differences in Kenya does not easily progress without mention of the politicisation of ethnicity (e.g., Bedasso, 2017; Cheeseman & Larmer, 2015; Cheeseman et al., 2019; Gadjanova, 2017; Lynch, 2006, 2011).<sup>11</sup> Amidst such constancy, we must ask, why do such political repertoires

<sup>11</sup> This narrative is repeated in the media sector; see, for example, Nyambura, Z. (2017). In Kenya, politics split on ethnic divide. *DW*, 26 October. Retrieved from <http://p.dw.com/p/2X6Ta> on 27 March 2018.

dominate? Are there any opportunities amidst the diverse and changing spaces of public debate in Kenya to shift how people make sense of political difference?

This book interrogates the potential for change in shared imaginaries through public talk in Mombasa. It goes to the places where politics is discussed in everyday life: ‘publics’ where discussion occurs among strangers in everyday life, where people articulate and contest forms of belonging and attempt to persuade others of their views. The people’s parliaments depicted at the beginning of this book are an opportunity to explore the significance of public discussion in varied spaces. Gatherings claiming the name of *bunge* (parliament) materialise daily in a variety of forms. This includes youth parliaments, which usually have defined membership, convened through SMS messages, and meet in social halls and conference venues. More ubiquitous and informal than the youth parliaments, people’s parliaments take the form of ‘street parliaments’. Here, men routinely gather at street corners, bus stages and shoe polishers to discuss issues of shared concern; often they discuss government and partisan politics, but sometimes religion, business and culture. Participants range in age from their late twenties to sixties, and include those who are unemployed, retired and employed. Even more amorphous are the groups on social media, whose founders also claim the name of a people’s or youth parliament and seek to create a space for open debate and dialogue about public concerns from Mombasa. This dynamism and diversity of public discussion in Mombasa add to the puzzle of collective imaginaries in Kenya. Why, if public debate is active, varied and open, do there not appear to be obvious changes in the terms of debate?

## 1.2 Conceptualising Publics from Africa

There are two broad approaches in Africanist political scholarship to making sense of everyday politics on the continent, which seek to avoid subjecting publics in Africa to normative expectations from elsewhere. Some scholars operate within the framework of African political thought to develop emic conceptualisations of politics. Others begin descriptively, aiming to appreciate forms of everyday politics in their own right, avoiding normative questions. Practically, scholars cut across these two agendas; theory unavoidably emerges from ‘plain empirical realities’ (Said, 1983, p. 5). Still, distinguishing between the