

## The Man and the Office: How Kenyatta Shaped Presidential Power in Kenya

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### Abstract:

Anaïs Angelo's recent biography of Jomo Kenyatta, *Power and the Presidency in Kenya*, is as illustrative of Kenya's first president as it is of the executive office that outlives his presidency. Angelo argues that Kenyatta's "discreet and distant" political style paired with his ambiguous relationship to Mau Mau enabled Kenyatta to unite Kenya without a nationalist vision. While he remained distant from the technical aspects of rule, rather delegating them to others, Kenyatta's authority over national resources consolidated during his presidency.

### Der Mann und das Amt: Wie Kenyatta die Macht des Präsidenten in Kenia formte

#### German Abstract:

Anaïs Angelos kürzlich erschienene Biographie von Jomo Kenyatta, *Power and the Presidency in Kenya*, ist ebenso illustrativ für Kenias ersten Präsidenten wie für das Exekutivbüro, das seine Präsidentschaft überlebt. Angelo argumentiert, dass Kenyattas "discreet and distant" politischer Stil gepaart mit seiner zweideutigen Beziehung zu Mau Mau es Kenyatta ermöglichte, Kenia ohne eine nationalistische Vision zu vereinen. Während er sich von den technischen Aspekten der Herrschaft fernhielt, konsolidierte sich Kenyattas Autorität über nationale Ressourcen während seiner Präsidentschaft.

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“What kind of nation gets terrified of a great imagination? What kind of people annihilate holders of a persistent and transcending dream?” – Yvonne Adhiamo Owuor

Owuor’s words refer to *Dust*, her 2013 novel that deals with Kenya’s “blood-soaked history,” from the Mau Mau war of the 1950s to the 2007 postelection violence (Taiye Selasi, *The New York Times*, 28 February 2014). The Mau Mau war was fought to restore lands to dispossessed Africans. Though the conflict resulted, eventually, in independence, the demands for land and freedom persisted in the postcolonial period. It was on this stage that Jomo Kenyatta assumed the debut role of president. While not directing her work to Owuor, Anaïs Angelo picks up the question of political imagination in her recent biography of Kenyatta (1897-1978). Angelo chronicles his presidency (1963-1978) in a dual study of the man and the office he held. By looking at the historical origins of presidential power in postcolonial Kenya, Angelo addresses the political imagination at work in the early formation of the Kenyan state with particular interest in control over land distribution.

Angelo’s work provides a few ideas that relate to Owuor’s questions. According to Angelo’s biography of the man and the office, Kenyatta’s rise to power was enabled by his ambivalence regarding Mau Mau. Historians largely agree that Kenyatta was no revolutionary leader of Mau Mau. However, his eight-plus years in detention and his Kikuyu identity cultivated Kenyatta’s image as a folk hero. Thus, Angelo argues that Kenyatta was a ‘unifying figure’ despite the absence of a nationalist vision. Remaining “estranged from any of the grand ideologies of the 1960s,” Angelo describes Kenyatta’s political intelligence as a blend of Kikuyu moral values, an interest in a stable economy, and a tactical engagement with political opposition (p.16). These pillars are illustrated in the “triangular connection between the repression of Mau Mau

resilience, land decolonization and the increasing centralization of executive power” that form the core of the book (p. 24).

*Power and the Presidency* takes a chronological approach to Kenyatta’s life in office and traces the co-constitution of Kenyatta as president and Kenya’s presidential office. Angelo, a political scientist, shows how both the man and the office evolved over time under socio-political conditions of the post-independence period. The first two chapters examine Kenyatta’s pre-presidential career in order to emphasize his self-fashioning as a Kikuyu politician and the “hostile political machinery” remnant of colonial rule that would later be at his disposal. The middle four chapters deal with institutionalization of land distribution by focusing on key ministers and public offices. Angelo clearly shows how Kenyatta’s ‘discreet and distant’ style of rule allowed him to outsource the technical, bureaucratic aspects of political rule while consolidating authority as the primary gatekeeper to national resources. Kenyatta’s approach to dissent comes into clearer focus in the final two chapters. Angelo shows how the central control of land tenure led to the “consecration of presidentialism as an untouchable system of rule” (p. 249). This untouchability is further alluded to in reference to the political assassinations that took place under Kenyatta’s rule. Angelo concludes by sketching the Kenyatta family after Jomo’s death in 1978. She describes the accumulated wealth of the family, implying what Kenyatta’s discretion led to privately.

Angelo has said that part of the motivation for writing this book was to move beyond “Western stereotypical representations of African politics.” (Anaïs Angelo, *Democracy in Africa*, 8 August 2020.) Angelo exceeds her stated goal. She quotes John Lonsdale in order to show how “writing history” in Kenya “was a competition for civilization, and historical evidence was necessary to substantiate claims over land” (p. 224). As an historical text related to the office responsible for allotting land in the postcolonial Kenyan state, the book shows how Kenyatta’s “institutional legacy [...] not only preserved the colonial architecture of such a system of land buying and redistribution, but passed it on to the hands of his successors” (p. 273). The study is thus a tool that directly lends itself to Kenyans who resent a political leadership who “benefit from controlling the nation’s resources for their personal benefit.” (Quoting Kiama Kaara, political analyst; James Brownswell, “Kenya: What went wrong in 2007?” *Al Jazeera*, 3 March 2013.)

This brings us back to Owuor. Beginning this review with her voice brings Angelo into a conversation broader than the narrow confines of Kenya's ruling elite. These confines are conditioned by gender, ethnicity and, perhaps above all, class. Since its publication, Angelo has addressed the absence of women in her book. The book also naturally produces a top-down history, due to its focus on the presidential office. Daniel Branch advocates the study of elites in Kenya, "since it was their actions [...] that delegitimized the state in the eyes of its citizens" (Daniel Branch, *Between Hope and Despair*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011, p. 21.), whereas Kara Moskowitz's 2019 *Seeing Like a Citizen: Decolonization, Development and the Making of Kenya, 1945-1980*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019) focuses on the role of Kenyan citizens in making the postcolonial state. Further reflection on whom the author chose not to include in the book might have revealed how Kenyatta's consolidation of power was mediated by the new Kenyan citizenry. Overall, Angelo's work is succinct and focused. It offers insight into the modern formation of executive power that extends beyond Kenya and the African continent. Angelo's well-timed historical account arrives in a world where the future of presidential power is not obvious, leaving room for "great imagination."