

OLD AGE AND MONEY: THE GENERAL NUMISMATICS OF KENYA

ABSTRACT

This research report examines the relationship between promissory acts and promissory notes in Kenyan history and its popular imagination. In Jomo Kenyatta's classic ethnography of the Kikuyu, *Facing Mount Kenya*, he decries the corrosive power of money to corrupt the ritual techniques used to guarantee the honesty of elders in customary legal tribunals. However, at the advent of monetary independence from the East African shilling in 1966, Kenyatta seemed to have undergone something of a modification in his monetary thinking. Kenya's new currency was emblazoned with Kenyatta's own image as if to suggest that he himself backed its stability and capacity to ensure social reproduction. If we are to take seriously Keith Hart's observation that money always has two sides, heads and tails, representing both the authority of the state and a commodity with a price, what might the iconography of Kenya's new money tell us about Kenyan notions of trust and value that were grafted onto the nation-state form in 1966? This paper argues that Kenyatta's money attempted to suture gerontocratic authority to the quantitative value of the money form. In this respect, Kenyatta established a political tradition in which leaders attempted to embody the logic of the general equivalent itself.

Keywords: money, numismatics, gerontocracy, Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta

In 2005, 'Twenty, twenty, twenty, twenty, twenty' was the ubiquitous price for many urban routes vocally broadcasted by touts across *matatu* (taxi) stages in Nairobi's city center. One day in 2005, it was also exactly half of the value of the 40-shilling coin in my pocket that allowed me to avoid breaking a 500-shilling note to pay for the fare. Paying taxi fares with large notes is something associated with bad manners in Kenya; it violates the frenetic loose change spirit of the *matatu* world; big notes

are cumbersome to make change for, requiring *matatu* drivers to actually come to a complete stop while touts count out change. Big bills also inhibit the tout's ability to make change for other passengers crammed into the Nissan minivan, the typical *matatu* owner's vehicle of choice. This particular 40-shilling coin, new in 2003, was minted to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Kenyan nation. The heads side of the coin was emblazoned with the image of President Mwai Kibaki, who besides celebrating

the nation's birthday, was also clearly following in the footsteps of his presidential predecessors, Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Arap Moi (and for that matter Queen Elizabeth). While still living, both presidents had placed their own images on the nation's legal tender, not just on coins and small value notes, but on much higher denominations like 500 and 1,000 shilling notes. In other words, having just achieved an election victory in the December general elections of 2002, Kibaki's commemorative 40-shilling coin appeared quite modest in juxtaposition to his forbearers; in attempting to initially usher in a new dispensation in governance, the new coin's exchange value and circulation were kept relatively low, suggesting a proposed new ethos of restrained state largesse.

This minted modesty seemed partially to be a response to a pre-election, informal public debate about whether it was appropriate to have a living president on the nation's currency at all (and indeed the new constitution bars the use of images of individuals on the currency, but new currency has yet to be printed). The iconic signifier of gerontocratic authority, Moi had been sutured to every coin and bill by the time he left office in 2002 (eventually having replaced all notes and coins which had previously borne Jomo Kenyatta's image). However, Kibaki's big man modesty backfired. As stated earlier, worth relatively little and limited in circulation when compared to 5, 10, and 20 shilling coins, and 100, 500, and 1,000 shilling notes (which still bore the face of Moi), *matatu* touts, often the most adept articulators of public sentiment, christened the new coin with a rather humorous folk-moniker. Expressing resentment over the increased rationalization of the private transport sector signified by state mandated uniforms, standardized vehicle paint schemes, and speed governors, when I attempted to pay my fare with Kibaki's 40-shilling coin, the tout threw up

his hands, and with the greatest mock disgust he could muster flatly stated '*Sitaki Kirucy, uko na coin ngine?*' or 'I don't want Kirucy, do you have another coin?' Kirucy, or 'Little Lucy', referred to then Mwai Kibaki's senior wife Lucy Kibaki. This name for Kibaki's little coin took on a semi-official status amongst Kenyans as it limped into circulation.

Lucy Kibaki is perhaps best known for her May 2005 late night raid of the *Nation* media offices with her security detail. Arriving in exercise clothes late at night (something that really seemed to bother Kenyans), while in the nation offices she angrily protested the *Daily Nation's* coverage of her publicized fight with then outgoing World Bank country representative Muhktar Diop. As was well known at the time, at Mr. Diop's farewell party, Kenya's First Lady, furious about the volume of the music emanating from his house adjacent to her residence, stormed the party and attempted to unceremoniously rip the power chord connected to the music system out of the wall. Lucy, surrounded by armed guards, then proceeded to call the local police demanding that Mr. Diop be arrested. On the night she arrived at the the *Nation's* offices, Lucy effectively held *Nation* staff hostage with the assistance of her sheepish security team while she heaped vitriolic accusations of biased reporting on those unfortunate enough to be working late, grabbing staff cell phones and notebooks, and even slapping a camera man for recording the event (which much to her presumed chagrin, was widely broadcast on *Nation TV* the next day). The notoriety that this incident earned Lucy was seconded only by her other well publicized assault of the Government Principal Administrative Secretary, Francis Musyimi, at a presidential awards ceremony for 'mistakenly' referring to Lucy as 'Mary Wambui', the so called 'NARC activist'.¹ This is the tacitly

agreed press title for Kibaki's junior 'wife' whose ambiguous marital status was rendered even more so by Lucy's intolerance of Wambui being mentioned anywhere in her vicinity. All of this culminated in an uncomfortable press event where President Kibaki, standing next to Lucy, explained to the press corps and the nation that, 'I have only one wife'.

The intense public dislike of Lucy and her allegedly explosive and unpredictable temper had earned her a rather sarcastic and extremely gendered folk moniker, 'Kirucy', or 'Little Lucy'. The use of the Kiswahili *diminutive* 'ki' now modifying Lucy's name, stood in sharp juxtaposition to the usual granting of *corpulence* to mostly male representatives of state, epitomized in the common greeting used to address social superiors, '*Habari ya mkubwa?*' or, 'How are you Big Man?' Kibaki's soft-spoken, sparsely scheduled, and often fumbling public speeches also stood in marked contrast to President Moi's public ubiquity, rhetorical acrobatics and patrimonial largesse. In 2005, while sitting in a bar in Kitale, one of Moi's supportive constituencies, watching one of Kibaki's underwhelming performances, an elderly gentleman stood up and yelled at the TV in English, 'This one is a fake!' Yells of support from the other patrons were laced with nostalgic comparative references to Moi's largesse and allegedly superior public speaking capacities.

Over the years, I have tried to think about the significance and connection between this diminutive gendering of Kibaki's little coin and occasionally harsh appraisals of Kibaki's lackluster oratorical abilities. This particular conflation of a *specific* public personality with the *general* equivalent of the money form, I would like to suggest, pointed to a profound skepticism about the Kibaki administration's capacity to weld a new idea of proposed rationalized governance to an equally aspirational vision of

Kenyan nationhood, despite the spirit of pan-ethnic cooperation that had brought Kibaki to power. *Matatu* workers experienced Kibaki's initial platform of combating the complex of patrimonial redistributive practices that often fall under the sign of 'corruption', as interfering with their capacity to make a better living. Before 2003, *matatu* crews disregarded speed limits and vehicle capacity standards, moving as quickly as possible through stops and police road blocks by transacting 'chai' (tea) with underpaid officers.

In the 1980s and 90s, as structures of governance ultimately succumbed to the persuasive power of the shilling—whether in the form of state largesse to buy constituencies before elections or the domestication of the law by motorists offering cash gifts to police at road blocks—under Moi, money was simply more available. The widespread privatization of public office under Moi facilitated a hemorrhaging of public funds into Kenya's transactional networks to such an extent that one of my taxi-owner informants stated in a somewhat celebratory tone, 'Under Moi, there was a lot more money in circulation because everyone was stealing.' It is hard to know whether the ubiquity of fee for service governance may have actually cost Kenyans more than something akin to Weber's rational bureaucracy. Certainly *matatu* crews thought that it did. Hence the rechristening of Kibaki's little coin was not really all that surprising. The coin was intended to communicate Kibaki's early attempts at downsizing 'customary' images of political authority and redistributive capacity (epitomized in the concept of 'bigness'), but Kibaki was not like his money in the way Moi was. Moi circulated everywhere at all levels of society and his speeches were well known as both objects of ridicule and celebration. Kibaki did not engage with the public much. He was 'a

fake!’ The public rechristening of the coin with the name of someone who was arguably the most despised person in Kenya, Lucy Kibaki, modified by the diminutive, indexed the public understanding of the primary state function—distribution of the ‘national cake’.

However, nostalgia for increased levels of monetary circulation expressed by *matatus*, must be understood in light of the fact that they are specially placed to access the flows of value under what Jane Guyer calls a ‘cash and carry system’ (2004), which means that once money is minted, it would rarely enter financial institutions. Before the advent of digital moneys stored and transferred via cell phones in Kenya, Kenya’s roads, and the *matatus* who traversed them, were the main arteries and capillaries of all monetary circulation through Kenya’s body politic; money moved in buses not banks. But perhaps more important for my purposes here is the fact that such memorializing of better days when money was easier to come by also entailed a certain degree of amnesia; the hypercirculation of money under Moi was a symptom of the gradual lifting of the state’s imprimatur (cf. Apter 2005), epitomized in the person of Moi himself, from its key symbol, its money (Blunt 2004). The Moi government had flooded the market with unregistered bank notes to out-gift his competition before the 2002 elections. Much of this money was generated by the infamous (but legal) Goldenberg scandal in which ‘investors’ were paid a 35% compensation of gold exports which allegedly helped generate foreign currency reserves, something the IMF and World Bank were recommending for Kenya. For the Goldenberg scheme to work as long as it did, Forex procedures were being counterfeited at the Central Bank and a secondary market developed for Forex certificates which could literally generate value from nothing. This overall situation, initiated the unfolding of a

peculiar and disturbing condition. The two sides of money, the top down organization of the state and the bottom up organization of the market, what Keith Hart calls ‘heads and tails’, completely collapsed into one another, so as to become indistinguishable (Hart 1986). What interests me about ‘Kirucy’ is the way that it points toward a particular conflation of the qualitative values of old age and gerontocratic authority (even as Kirucy indexed its failure), its meaning, with the quantitative values of currency. Additionally, in the public imagination anyway, they became indistinguishable alibis for each other. Or, put differently, in Kenya, big men of the state have big money, both in value and volume. Kirucy illustrates how the issue of backing is completely convoluted in the Kenyan popular imagination.

GENERAL NUMISMATICS

When thinking about the rise of the patrimonial state in Kenya under Kenyatta, I find myself returning again and again to the monetary as a decisive type of revolution not just in commerce, but in communication more generally (Goody 1977). In a more semiotic sense then, the rise of the general equivalent of the money form is a key feature of what Achille Mbembe has described as the main ‘tragedy of colonialism’: the historical development *away* from multiple marriage forms, many gods and various currencies—or multiplicity as the basis for social development—towards what he calls the ‘paradigm of “the one”, the monotheistic paradigm’ (as stated in Mbembe’s November 20, 2013 interview with Thomas M. Blazer from the Website *Africa Is a Country*). These multifaceted manifestations of Mbembe’s ‘paradigm of the one,’ in my reading anyway, shares a great deal with Jean-Jospeh Goux’s classic work, *Symbolic Economies: Beyond Marx and Freud*. Goux argues

that the key general signifiers of value in the work of Lacan, Freud and Marx—the father, phallus and money—are all manifestations of the same underlying monetary logic of the general equivalent, the proper critique of which begins in Marx’s *Capital*. Thus Goux’s attempt to create a theoretical numismatics is motivated by a desire to reveal, as Marx does with money, why certain hierarchies of value emerge and come to legislate norms. As he states:

In certain points of condensation, value seems to gather, capitalize, centralize itself, investing certain elements with a privileged representativeness within the diverse set of which they are members. The mysterious genesis of this privilege is effaced, leaving the monopoly of absolute, absolved, exempted in their transcendent role as standard and measure of values. (Goux 1990: 10)

In this way, as mentioned above, Goux sees a continuum across wide swaths of social theory and (and presumably, in much social phenomena): for example, how Derrida questions the supremacy of linguistic signs over all others in being assigned meaning; the way gold became a standard mediating diverse values in exchange; or in the way Lacan questions how a particular ‘pound of flesh’ comes to be the general signifier of erotic value (ibid.). Again, for Goux all ‘major symbols’ are ‘isomorphic’ in their historical connection to the rise of the monetary form and function as supplements to one another in their facilitation of exchangeability. They officiate in a homologous manner in all kinds of substitution or compensation, in short, by ‘replacing with something equivalent what is not itself’ (ibid.: 9). These various general equivalents are thus monarchs whose process of sovereign ascension, what we might simply

call ‘history’, is dissimulated by its ‘value effect’, (ibid.: 11) in their evaluation or appraisal of subordinate symbolic orders against which they exert their measure.

Of course, this more comprehensive understanding of the monetary was far from the official understanding of money put forward by the Kenyan state in 1966, at the advent of Kenya’s monetary independence from the colonial currency, the East African shilling. In his public address on the opening day of the Central Bank of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta articulated a vision of Kenya’s currency being backed by its strong relation to other currencies, and the productive capacities of the Kenyan people. It is worth quoting here at length:

The Central Bank of Kenya is constituted as a part of the national machinery, an institution created and commissioned by law for the taking care of all monetary and credit matters. (...) A Government has always been regarded as a good Government if it offers to the citizens law and justice, order and security, and good money: money that everyone is glad to keep without the apprehension that tomorrow it may be worth a little bit less than today. (...) However, one thing cannot be forgotten: currency issue and management is a real business and no magic. The bank cannot make something out of nothing and the Government cannot by order, or ‘Fiat’ grant to a printed piece of paper a value independent of the backing which it possesses. Such backing is provided by foreign exchange, into which the Kenya Currency will be convertible at its established value. I am glad to say that the ratio of the foreign exchange cover is high and will remain so. But ultimately the value of the currency

is determined by something still more real and durable. When we look upon the bank notes which in a short time will officially go into circulation, we see several pictures showing Kenya's natural riches and the people working on them. This is indeed an indication where the country's economy, and the country's money as well, takes its strength from. It is ultimately the productive work done by the people on which the growth and the balance of the national economy depends. (...) With everyone contributing to the rise of the real national product, the task of the Bank to provide the country with sound money will be possible and easy to achieve. (East African Currency Board 1966, 118)

This quote from the Mzee, the Kiswahili honorific for old 'man' (as Kenyatta was popularly known) could be construed as an articulation of classic liberal economic theories. It is important to note, however, that Kenyatta was a man long obsessed with the truth value of signs, which he understood to be deeply troubled by powerful but ambiguous numinous energies to be fixed and delimited by some authority. In his classic work of structural-functional political ethnography, *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), Kenyatta celebrates the lethal capacity of ritualized oathing, carefully controlled by old men, to produce honest testimony in customary legal proceedings. This affirmatively valued Kikuyu past is held up against an ethnographic present in which the capacity of old men to fix the truth value of words in customary legal proceedings has been disrupted by the corrosive and persuasive power of money. Older technologies of the numinous could no longer back the truth value of words of both elder judges and litigants. According to Kenyatta, the introduction of money had eroded the

capacity of oaths, creating a downward spiraling trajectory into what Kenyatta understood to be an endemic state of 'bribery and corruption'. And, Kenyatta had all too well learned the destructive power of ritual that had become detached from its established social location and sacred objects. The Mau Mau rebellion was a similar downward spiraling trajectory of excessive violence in which young men, socially unfit to harness such dangerous energies, oathed their classificatory fathers, mothers and children. This violent excess was by no means limited to the rebels. The colonial state also struggled to back its legitimacy through public rituals of state-sponsored execution, which, rather than creating a state of law achieved, rendered the law a violent performative force run amok, as David Anderson has shown in his book *Histories of the Hanged* (2005).

In Kenyatta's eyes then, money needed an authoritative guarantor to fix its value and prevent it, like uncontrolled oathing, from wreaking havoc on processes of social reproduction. The universalizing power of money properly corralled was understood to supersede the parochial powers of oathing which in recent history Kenyatta understood as extremely divisive. Let us not forget Kenyatta's exhortation to Kenyans to forgive and forget the social divisions that a largely Kikuyu conflict, Mau Mau, had brought to a head. Thus, while for Kenyatta money and oathing were characterized by related and ambiguous powers, but potentially productive promissory capacities, the independent constitution left in place the colonial statute against oathing since it was a force potentially destructive of Kenya's fragile new nationhood. What we find instead is an independent currency whose minting, Kenyatta reminded the public, was 'a real business and no magic'. But, how are we to interpret this claim that the bank could not

make something from nothing, when he in fact asserts the future stability of the Kenyan shilling by fiat, something he says he is not doing: ‘the Government cannot by order, or “Fiat” grant to a printed piece of paper a value independent of the backing which it possesses. Such backing is provided by foreign exchange, into which the Kenya Currency will be convertible at its established value. I am glad to say that the ratio of the foreign exchange cover is high and will remain so.’

Amidst public anxiety that the new Kenyan shilling would be less valuable than the common East African currency, Kenyatta contradicts his own dismissal of the capacity of government to create value by fiat. Although Kenyatta begins his description of the new currency by rehearsing a traditional Kikuyu labor theory of value laced with bits of Adam Smith and John Locke, the worth of the new currency is ultimately backed by the guarantee of his speech act. As I have tried to conceive of the relationship between oaths and money through Kenyatta’s concern for durable symbols, I have come to view currency in Kenya as the replacement for oaths as Kenyatta became ‘the father of the nation’, and a key, but unstable, tool for the rehabilitation of the authorizing principle of old age after Mau Mau’s youth tried to usurp it. The promissory capacities of the Mzee as a guarantor of the nation’s new currency is also evident in then Minister of Finance James Gichuru’s pronouncement that, ‘We will be proud when our new currency notes are issued this year with the head of our new president...’ (*The Daily Nation*, March 2, 1966). Like Kenyatta’s speech act, the massive circulation of the iconic representation of the president in the everyday workings of economy and society cemented folk understandings of the way old men back money that somewhat contradicted Kenyatta’s earlier statement about

how the minting of money was ‘a real business, and no magic’, sowing the seeds for dangerous numinous energies to again run amok—something that in fact happened when powerful figures were again attempting to remake the nation.

As I stated earlier, before the 1992 elections the 500-shilling note, then the largest denomination available in Kenya and emblazoned with Daniel Arap Moi’s image, was renamed ‘the Jirongo’ for the Youth for KANU² ‘92 leader Cyrus Jirongo. Known for distributing truckloads of the bills to various constituencies before Kenya’s first multi-party election since 1963, Jirongo’s rise was meteoric as his briefcase of money accompanied him to everything from school fundraisers to football matches. Wherever Jirongo went, his ‘Jirongos’ were sure to be left behind. While the shilling remained relatively stable, delivering the election to Moi in first multi-party challenge, Jirongo’s status as a ‘KANU youth activist’ actually worked to secure the position of Moi as the iconic representation of gerontocratic authority by conflating a relatively high exchange value (500 shillings) with the sheer redistributive capacity of the Mzee’s party, indexed by the monetary clout of its ‘youth’ representative. Not only did such practices of KANU largess arrest (for a while anyway) any public doubt as to whether Moi’s image on the bill alone was sufficient to back value more generally, like Kenyatta before him, the increased flow of the 500-shilling note through the nation crystallized Moi’s vision of a prosperous nation-state: a patrimonial distribution network whose stability was to be guaranteed by the experience of old age, again, further backed and baptized by money.

Of course the spurious origins of the 500-shilling notes eventually took effect. Whether they were generated from the sale of property owned by Jirongo’s development

company to the National Social Security Fund at exorbitant rates, or were just bills that were never registered with the Central Bank before they entered circulation, the effects were the same. The state's counterfeiting of its own key symbols and productive processes led to a profound sense of ambiguity about what exactly backed what. When inflation reached 100% by August of 2003, the moniker 'Jirongo', the 'youth' who faithlessly toiled to prove the dependability of Mzee Moi as a basis for national cohesiveness, the sense of home that the concept of nationhood is supposed to illicit became acutely *unheimlich*, taking on a somewhat sinister cast. The public began to question whether old age was an alibi for money or money was an alibi for old age.

As this dissimulation of value continued, it is notable that the specific form that moral panics took for the rest of the 1990s were about the potentially deadly circulation of Satanic money released into the economy by unscrupulous older men, who only posed as morally upright sponsors of social reproduction (see Blunt 2004). And in conclusion, I would like to suggest that it is also not surprising that as the old men of state could no longer police the circulation of counterfeits within Kenya's moral and geopolitical boundaries, a new Kikuyu ethno-nationalist youth movement, *Mungiki*, armed with the ritual technologies of Kikuyu 'tradition', oathing, emerged to arrest the dangerous numinous energies unleashed by money's hyper-circulation, which had reaped disastrous effects on the Kenyan economy and society by literally 'producing something from nothing'. Explaining why he joined the movement, one of my Mungiki informants explained exactly the collapse of heads and tails into one another that I detailed earlier, 'We had to do something, old men, the government, the church, they all had become like money'.

NOTES

- 1 NARC stands for the National Alliance Rainbow Coalition, the name of the coalition party that ousted the former party KANU, Kenya African National Union, that had been in power since independence.
- 2 Kenya African National Union (KANU) was the ruling party in Kenya from 1963 until 2002. Kenya was effectively a single party state from 1964 until 1992. Kenya officially became a single party state in 1982 under President Daniel Arap Moi.

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