

# SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

## Land and Living on Little in Kenya

**Ambreena Manji.** *The Struggle for Land & Justice in Kenya*. Suffolk: James Currey, 2020. 224 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$95.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1847012555.

**Barbara Thomas.** *Politics, Participation, and Poverty: Development Through Self-Help in Kenya*. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2019. 228 pp. List of Tables. List of Figures and Maps. Bibliography. Index. \$149.95. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0367283742.

**Julie Zollman,** *Living on Little: Navigating Financial Scarcity in Modern Kenya*. Rugby: Practical Action Publishers, 2020. 214 pp. £46.45. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1788531184.

In these three volumes, Ambreena Manji, Barbara Thomas, and Julie Zollman detail how poor people in Kenya navigate everyday struggles against restrictive social, economic, and political constraints to build livelihoods through their individual and collective efforts in order to access basic social services, land, markets, and employment, and to participate in the social, economic and political arenas. In the latest edition of her book, *Politics, Participation and Poverty: Development Through Self-Help in Kenya*, first published in 1985, Thomas chronicles innovative ways in which the rural poor in six locations in Eastern, Central, and Rift Valley Provinces have exploited the complex competitive web of Kenya's electoral patron-client linkages at local and national levels to access scarce resources for community development projects. The trend of unequal development based on region, class, gender, and ethnicity that informed development through self-help in the 1970s and 80s persist to date, as elaborated in Zollman's *Living on Little: Navigating Financial Scarcity in Modern Kenya*. While Manji, in *The Struggle for Land & Justice in Kenya*, focuses on struggles over land and justice from the colonial

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era to the present, Thomas and Zollman highlight continuing struggles by people living on little to access scarce essential services and land in their quest for personal and community development. While these titles fit into distinct disciplinary fields and use diverse methodological approaches, they meticulously weave profound narratives of the resilience of ordinary Kenyans building livelihoods, families, and communities with little resources.

While these scholars document different forms and levels of inequalities in Kenyan society since independence, the inequitable distribution of land, often based on regional, ethnic, gender, and class divisions, has momentous survival implications for Kenya's poor, both rural and urban. Thomas found that smallholder farmers in locations with high agricultural potential in Central and Rift Valley Provinces suitable for both subsistence and cash crop production reported higher incomes compared to those in dry, food-insecure locations (26–27). In the 2000s, Zollman found that agriculture was no longer a significant source of household income for smallholder farmers, due to declining farm sizes and the type of farming that households engaged in. The only constant was that the most profitable farming activity was cash-crop production for the few farmers with sufficient land in the right climatic zones and with the ability to invest in crops that take years to mature (186). From Zollman's analysis, it is evident that Kenyans living on little have invented alternative ways—"looking for money" (11–38), "managing money" (39–67), and "making money work" for them (59–69). Yet, land ownership remains fundamental for building family and community lives. Without radical land redistributive policies and expansion in formal-sector job creation, struggles for survival for low-income Kenyans will intensify.

Manji undertakes a comprehensive study of the intractable land question in Kenya using a multi-disciplinary approach, including constitutional and land law, history, political science, and literary theory, to uncover how colonial and post-colonial structures have continued to create inequality in land ownership in Kenya. Beginning with a foreword by Dr. Willy Mutunga, Chief Justice and President of the Supreme Court of Kenya (2011–2016), Manji ably demonstrates the limits of constitutionalism in achieving land justice by meticulously combing through an authoritative "archive of official reports" juxtaposed against what she calls "counter-archive" or the peoples' memorial function in addressing land mischiefs committed by the state, politicians, and the elites (xi–xii, 22–23). She traces Kenya's land transformation resulting from settler dispossession of Africans in the colonial era, and how the post-colonial elites embraced, perpetuated, and perfected the colonial social, political, and economic structures to consolidate their power and domination. Manji follows the long history of land lawmaking in Kenya and persuasively asserts the limits of land reform and constitutionalism in achieving transformative structural change in land matters in Kenya.

Settler dispossession of Africans in the White Highlands exploded in the bloody Mau Mau war in the 1950s, and by 1954, the colonial government had commenced land consolidation, adjudication, and registration, which granted individual title to land, thereby codifying private property. Manji,

Thomas, and Zollman show how both President Jomo Kenyatta (1963–1978) and his successor, Daniel arap Moi (1979–2002) presided over corrupt regimes, irregularly amassing huge tracts of lands for themselves and dishing out public lands for political patronage. By the 1990s, general discontent over land mischiefs, human rights abuses, land-related election ethnic violence, massive corruption, and Moi’s autocratic rule had pushed civil society organizations to demand broad constitutional reforms. Under pressure, in 1999, Moi appointed the Njonjo Commission to study the land law system in Kenya, which recommended the creation of National and District-level Land Authorities to govern community lands (Manji, 54–58). The National Rainbow Coalition that unseated Moi in the 2002 multi-party election, appointed the Ndung’u Commission, which unearthed massive land grabbing and irregular allocations by both the Kenyatta and Moi regimes (Manji, 58–68).

Ultimately, Kenya adopted the 2010 Constitution, which limited presidential powers with respect to land, established land administration institutions, and actualized a devolved government structure, including pertaining to land matters. Other commissions, including the Waki Commission appointed to investigate the Post-Election Violence (PEV) of 2007–08, tied election-ethnic clashes to Moi’s ethnicization of land in the Rift Valley. Notably, The Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission charged with investigating land issues between 1963 and 2002 unearthed massive land grabbing by the Kenyatta family, which was controversially redacted from the report (Manji, 68–71). Manji effectively chronicles how successive regimes have perpetuated land grabbing while refusing to address contemporary and historical land injustices, such as the case of Maasai land claims and forced removals of marginalized indigenous communities such as the Ogiek, Endorois, and Sengwer from their ancestral lands with no compensation. Ultimately, the Mutunga-led Supreme Court jolted the peoples’ agenda by failing to support the National Land Commission in its Advisory Opinion Case in 2012, leading to rapid recentralization of land matters (Chapter 6). Continuing accumulation by the ruling class has ensured land hunger and landlessness for the majority of citizens living precarious lives on very little. As noted earlier, Kenya’s ruling class has no appetite for adopting redistributive land policies. Is “a revolt from below” a possible remedy? History will tell.

A student of politics and development studies, Thomas uses archival and contemporary government records, random sample questionnaires, oral interviews, and secondary sources to illuminate the impact of British colonial conquest on indigenous institutions, their adaptation to the colonial situation, and their continued relevance as organizing principles for the rural poor to participate in economic and social development through President Kenyatta’s motto, *Harambee* (“Let’s pull together”) or Self-Help (33–50). Using sophisticated statistical analyses, Thomas examines whether self-help as a development model has enhanced the equitable distribution of national resources or whether it has intensified existing regional, class, ethnic, and

gender disparities from its inception at independence through the mid-1980s (xvii, 15–17, 33–35).

While Manji focuses on the ruling elites and the politics of land accumulation and dispossession, Thomas uses class, ethnicity, and gender as prisms to interrogate the intricate web of patron-client linkages between local and national power brokers, as individuals and entire communities compete to access power and scarce resources. While Kenya pursued a centrally planned and centrally administered “modernization” development model at independence, by 1984 the government of Kenya had transitioned to a decentralized district-based development model to harness local resources through self-help and private sector investments in planning and implementing rural development. Sampling three high-potential-resource-based locations and three low-potential-resource-based locations in Eastern, Central, and Rift Valley Provinces, Thomas notes fierce competition between politicians at both local and national levels as well as within communities in mobilizing local and national resources for *Harambee* projects. Rural Kenyans contributed cash, labor (147–58), and materials (28–29) to construct critical community infrastructure, including schools (126–32), cattle dips (132–36), water supply (136–40), and health facilities (140–42). Thomas shows that high-potential-resource-based regions with powerful local and national patrons, for example, Central Province, home to Kenyatta’s Kikuyu ethnic group, recorded massive infrastructure development through the 1980s (207).

Thomas concludes that *Harambee* projects have provided benefits across social and economic strata and played a positive role in resource distribution at the local level (Chapter VI; 159–65). Notably, when Thomas returned to Kenya in 1985, data showed that peasant struggles against the state had in many cases led to the transfer of more national resources for local *Harambee* projects. At the same time, mounting fiscal crises accentuated by massive corruption, a huge external debt, high inflation, and declining agricultural output saw international financial institutions call for revised fiscal policies, which compelled the government to shift *Harambee* from a focus on providing basic needs and social services to pursuing production-oriented and employment-generating projects (209). Stringent fiscal measures, such as the adoption of cost-sharing in health care and education, among other belt-tightening measures, had enormous adverse ramifications for low-income families. Ultimately, Thomas argues that although *Harambee* accelerated unequal development due to differential access to resources through self-help, it nurtured organizational and managerial capacities in local communities (210). She confirms that *Harambee* remained the focal point of administrative, political, and economic activity at all levels of the Kenya polity in 1985 (204).

While Thomas illuminates the resilience of rural communities in leveraging resources from the state and other donors for rural community projects, Zollman witnessed similar resilience in low-income Kenyans leveraging resources through social networks, community groups, and personal

initiatives as they pursued their own ambitions in spite of monumental societal gender constraints (92). Zollmann uses financial diaries recording household cash flows to investigate how low-income households navigate financial scarcity in modern Kenya. She uses a sample of three hundred mostly female-headed households from diverse locations to capture livelihoods and demographic patterns in Kenya (7–8): Nairobi’s low-income informal settlements; the drought-prone and food-insecure Makueni; Mombasa’s urban migrant and urban local households; agriculture-rich Eldoret with a sample from the city, peri-urban households, and a sample from rural areas; and Vihiga, the most densely populated portion of Western Kenya, where households eke out a living from cultivating both subsistence and cash crops, besides numerous other farming activities, along with illicit beer brewing (186).

Zollman meticulously weaves a profound narrative of how ordinary Kenyans build livelihoods and family lives with few resources. The narrative captures the lives of poor Kenyans tapping into multiple income sources such as casual labor, hawking diverse merchandise, self-employment, running small businesses, motorcycle transport, and numerous other money-making activities (Chapter 2). Many adopt innovative ways to manage their finances by “making money work for them” (investing) as they finance basic needs for their families and save for future family investments in land, business, cattle, permanent houses, vehicles, and motorcycles (Chapter 3). Zollman demonstrates that peoples’ lives are sometimes determined at birth, when they are born either into abject poverty or wealth. The analysis follows discernable patterns of how scarcity shapes people’s experiences from childhood to adulthood (Chapter 4).

Markedly, women’s financial dependency, unpaid agricultural labor and backbreaking housework, wage discrimination, inheritance norms, myriad forms of violence against women, and cultural socialization engender female domesticity, which renders women voiceless in family financial decision-making. Nevertheless, Zollman found that access to money gave women a voice in the family, allowing them to negotiate financial decisions regarding investments, besides making crucial personal welfare decisions. Zollman concludes that families, communities, and the government of Kenya must address violence against women, wage discrimination, and access to leadership opportunities and money to guarantee gender equality and women’s empowerment. Toward this end, Zollman calls for a radical shift in long-standing cultural norms (91–121).

While Thomas and Zollman’s research are over four decades apart, both scholars illuminate the impact of patriarchy and socially ascribed gender roles on poor women in urban and rural settings. Rural women bear the brunt of heavy unpaid agricultural labor for household consumption and cash crop production. In addition, women care for children and sick family members, manage household chores, organize cultural events and, where possible, pursue other money-making opportunities such as illegal beer brewing, selling milk, or working as casual laborers (Zollman, 124). Thomas

ably demonstrates how the rural poor in Weithaga, Mbiri, Kyeni, Nthawa, and Kisiara organized to participate in economic and social development in the 1970s and 80s. She argues that in response to both national and international economic, social, political, and technological transformations stemming from the colonial experience and the policies and politics of independent Kenya, rural women were able to organize income-generating activities and revolving loan associations to attain some modicum of financial independence. They pooled funds to finance common basic infrastructure such as building a nursery school or a dispensary, while loans to individual group members financed home improvement projects, including iron sheets for roofing, water storage tanks, household utensils or furnishings, school fees, and the purchase of cows or goats. Some groups served as a form of social security for members (170–71). Similarly, in the twenty-first century, women's financial clubs (*Chamas*), social networks, and community groups enable poor women to save and invest. Some saved secretly without their husbands' knowledge and bought a house or livestock (Zollman, 95–96, 118). In addition to funding and resource allocation from national and local government authorities, rural women in the 1970s earned incomes from traditional roles, including casual work, employment in the agricultural labor force, cooperative farming, handicrafts, and group investments in shops, and new labor-reducing technologies such as maize mills, tractors, and public transport vehicles (Thomas, 174–76). In the 2000s, low-income Kenyans pursue similar money-making opportunities, including casual work, self-employment, running small businesses, agricultural labor, social networks, and most importantly, remittances (Zollman, 22–35).

Manji, Thomas, and Zollman address the impact of international forces in Kenya's post-colonial development trajectory. Thomas demonstrates how growing international interest in women's issues from the United Nations and non-governmental aid organizations in the mid-1970s boosted funding for women's programs in Kenya (173). Conversely, financial conditionalities imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the 1980s and 90s compelled the government of Kenya to introduce cost-sharing in public health services, which quickly made health care inaccessible to low-income families (Chapter 6). Similarly, the loss of international funding in the 1990s forced President Moi to turn to massive appropriation of public land for patronage.

The scholars also illuminate everyday struggles for justice that Kenya's poor endure within the context of endemic corruption. Manji has ably documented corrupt land dealings perpetuated by the political elites from independence to the present (55–159). Thomas cites how Kenya's patron-client electoral politics is characterized by cutthroat competition for power and resources. For example, two women's groups in Murang'a District, with the most vulnerable members, were tricked into making the largest financial commitment in a multi-million-dollar long-term investment project that offered no immediate returns for them (180–82). Zollman also highlights the impact of petty and mega corruption on the lives of low-income Kenyans.

As a rent-seeking state, Kenya is inundated with financial scandals, including kickbacks, theft of public land, and direct theft of public resources by government officials. As a result, poor Kenyans resort to bribery to secure crucial land and personal documents; to join security forces; and to access government-provided services, such as health care, education, water, and electricity. Notably, the poor hunger for judicial, economic, social, and political justice from a predatory state running a massive corruption enterprise at all levels of government. Nevertheless, Kenyans living on little are resilient, have achieved remarkable success, and are optimistically writing their own success manuals under conditions of scarcity and immense structural constraints (Chapters 6 and 7).

In conclusion, these works contribute to our understanding of how development models, state apparatuses of control, complex local and national patron-client linkages, and international forces have shaped Kenya's development trajectory since independence while exacerbating regional, class, gender, and ethnic inequality in land ownership, access to crucial social services, economic opportunities, and political participation. The analyses are interdisciplinary, and they reflect current trends in research in the humanities in general. While Thomas and Zollman present their findings in charts, figures, and maps, Manji sees no need for illustrations. As the three scholars document inequality, corruption, injustices, and the myriad struggles of Kenya's poor, Kenya is at crossroads, as the Kenya Kwanza government of Dr. William Samoei Ruto has signaled a bloated government bureaucracy dominated by politicians with integrity issues and continuing judicial impunity, as the Directorate of Public Prosecutions drops high profile graft cases against his cabinet nominees.

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