Parasitic Politics: Violence, Deception, and Change in Kenya's Electoral Politics

Rasmussen, Jacob

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Jacob Rasmussen

Introduction

> We are not a violent organisation. But I can't say that some of our members weren't violent [during the 2008 post-electoral violence]. It is young men; of course they are angry. The government can't tell them not to be angry.[1]

Since the introduction of multiparty elections in Kenya in 1992, the electoral process has been characterised by violence in one way or another (Fjelde and Höglund, Chapter 1 in this volume). In 1992 and 1997, interethnic violence and militia-driven persecution of opposition supporters in the run-up to the elections killed several hundreds of people (Kagwanja 2001). The 2007 December elections erupted into interethnic and militant violence that killed 1,500 people and displaced more than half a million (Kagwanja and Southall 2010). Even the supposedly peaceful elections of 2002 and 2013, where a lot of resources were put into preventing and containing violence, saw hundreds of people killed in the months leading up to the elections (Merino 2014; Mutahi 2005). The dynamics and expressions of violence might have differed from one election to the next, and some of the violent actors have also changed over time, but the politicisation of ethnic identities, the instrumentalisation of youth militias, and the excessive use of force by the state security services have been central components of the violence that has surrounded and affected democratic elections in Kenya (Mueller 2008; Thibon 2014). As shown in the introduction to this volume, these elements are far from unique to Kenya; on the contrary, they are driving factors in much electoral violence across the world.

This chapter approaches electoral participation as anything from voting to violent action (Laakso 2007). The chapter investigates the Mungiki movement, one of the most dominant violent non-state actors in Kenyan electoral politics since the late 1990s. Looking at Mungiki's shifting roles as youth grassroots organisation, violent ethnic militia, political party and religious organisation across the last three elections (2002, 2007 and 2013), the chapter approaches electoral violence – in line with the ambitions of this volume – as violent acts or threats of violence affecting the electoral results or the electoral process prior to or after the actual vote. As such, the analysis of Mungiki's role in

electoral violence is not necessarily limited to periods of close proximity to the elections; rather, electoral violence in an emerging and transformative democracy such as Kenya can occur in temporal isolation from the elections yet have a huge impact or be informed by the electoral process (cf. Bekoe 2012; Burchard 2015). To add perspective to the analysis of Mungiki's peculiar practices, the chapter draws parallels with the wider characteristics of Kenyan politics. Hence, the analysis of Mungiki as a central actor in Kenya's recent history of electoral violence also provides a contextual analysis of the movement's relation to the Kenyan state and Kenyan politics, which has strong elements of ethnic politicisation and patronage politics (cf. Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Utas 2012).

Politics in Kenya is often described as a politics of deception or a politics of intrigue, known in the lingua franca Kiswahili as 'Siasa za kumalizana'. Politics in this perception is a game concerned with outsmarting the opponent by all means, often for personal gain or the gains of the ethnic community.[2] This aspect of Kenyan politics and political practice is often emphasised during national elections and it relates to another recurrent phrase characterising the ethnic dimension of electoral politics and the hopes of winning: 'It is our turn to eat.' This expression refers to the politicisation of ethnic identities and the expectation of politicians with a particular ethnic association to take care of their ethnic constituencies after electoral victory (Branch and Cheeseman 2010: 1). This effectively captures politics as a zero-sum game with a winner and a loser, where the gains of the winner equal the losses of the loser. As emphasised in the introduction to this volume and repeated in the literature on electoral conflicts, the higher the stakes in the elections, the more likely the risk of violence (Collier 2010).

Through the notion of 'parasitic politics', the chapter explores how the Mungiki movement buys into the noted characterisations of Kenyan politics as deceptive and driven by an appetite for power and the hope for ethnic redistribution. Parasitic politics is used to diagnose and explain a particular kind of political practice in which democratic participation and violent practices merge through the ability to transform, deceive and live of one's 'other' (in the case of Mungiki, the 'other' is either the Kenyan state, the Kikuyu political and economic elite, or the population as a whole). The merger of democratic politics and the potential for violence in the same concept does not mean that Kenyan politics is violent by default, but the concept can help us unpack the situated behaviour and rationale of some of the central actors.

The chapter is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Kenya on the Mungiki movement in the aftermath of the post-electoral violence in 2008, during the extra-judicial persecution by the police of Mungiki in 2009, during the constitutional referendum of 2010, and during the 2013 elections.[3] The ethnographic material on Mungiki's practices and political engagements is set

in relation to existing literature on the movement and to the bulk of literature on Kenyan elections and the country's continued struggle for democracy.

The chapter continues by setting out the analytical foundation before going into three empirically founded sections: the first focuses on Mungiki's mass actions and mobilisation, the second on the movement's ideological baggage from the Mau Mau and its ability to transform, and thirdly on the parasitic nature of politics and violent action. Each section is organised in subsections providing analyses of Mungiki's involvement across the three general elections from 2002 until 2013 and the role of violence or the struggle to contain it in these elections. In the conclusion, the chapter argues that electoral violence, as we can understand it through the notion of parasitic politics, reveals itself as relational, fuelled by competing claims and counter-claims, and groomed by the actualisation of historical misrecognitions and the instrumentalisation of collective identities, rather than being driven by a lack of civility and a lack of trust in the democratic aspect of elections.

Deception and violence as political participation

Cheeseman (2015) and Collier (2010) have investigated the political economy of the dynamics of democracy and violence in Africa from a cross-country comparative perspective. They both depart from the positive potential for legitimacy and accountability inherent in democratisation, and the possibility for changing the course of events through the electoral process. Both authors point out that political participation – and maybe even the idea of democracy itself – is often boiled down to the electoral process of casting the vote, and the dynamics of contestation and violent conflict are often linked to the possibility for change.

The fact that all Kenyan elections since the introduction of multiparty democracy have been violent in one form or another testifies to the increased stakes for politicians in maintaining power; violence thus becomes a means to that end, even if the stakes and therefore the level of violence seem to drop at elections where the incumbent's term comes to an end, like the 2002 and 2013 elections in Kenya (Cheeseman 2015). Kenya's history of ethnic voter mobilisation, which has created identity-based loyalties between politicians and their support bases, has also limited voters' mobility to other political camps and has increased the risk of ethnic violence (cf. Collier 2010; Fjelde and Höglund, Chapter 1 in this volume).

In addition, sub-Saharan Africa is facing a demographic challenge due to the enormous increase in the youth population, which casts poor and young first-time voters as the central actors of electoral democracy. On the one hand, the youth have the numbers to gain influence through the vote; on the other, they often constitute a marginalised group due to their lack of jobs and education and their limited possibilities for political participation.

This is problematic in countries such as Kenya where voter registration and actual voting are time consuming and costly for the poor. Often, poor youths are considered a threat to democracy, and in many instances on the continent they constitute the main perpetrators of electoral violence (Anderson 2002; Christensen and Utas 2008; Strauss 2011). Paradoxically, the threat of violence or the violent act itself can be seen as a particular form of electoral participation in which the youths voice their dissatisfaction with the existing order and their chances for political participation and societal inclusion (Laakso 2007: 227). This is no different in Kenya, where the Mungiki movement claims to represent the masses of poor youth, and where its political mobilisation has come to evoke immediate public fears of violence.

The Mungiki movement embodies what I call 'parasitic politics' through its ability to transform and deceive, and to combine democratic participation and violent practices. Empirically, parasitic politics is derived from Mungiki's use of two metaphors from Kikuyu mythology: the chameleon and the Mugumo tree (a parasitic fig tree). Mythologically, the latter is considered the tree of life and the former as the harbinger of death. Both metaphors inhibit the ability to transform: the chameleon through its ability to continuously change colour and blend in with its immediate surroundings, and the parasitic Mugumo tree through its ability to consume the host tree and take on a new form. The two metaphors point to Mungiki's transformative and violent potential and also allude to ideas of a hidden core and a potentially deceptive surface. As such, Mungiki's metaphors embrace notions of secrecy, deception and violence in relation to societal transformations, as well as reintroducing mythology and ancestral traditions as integral parts of Kenyan politics.

In his work on the parasite as a grand metaphor for human relations, French philosopher Michel Serres (1982) merges notions of politics and mythology to describe how existing orders are challenged and re-worked (Brown 2002: 1). At the core of Serres' characteristic of the parasite is the asymmetrical relation. Even if the preying parasite and the host might depend on each other, their relationship is always asymmetrical: one is feeding on the other (Serres 1982: 55). Yet, together, the parasite and the host merge into a new and different whole. Through this parasitic process the normal flow of things – the existing order – is interrupted in order for something new to appear (ibid.). It is the characteristics of interruption, the inherently violent takeover, and the relational asymmetry and interdependence that make the parasite an intriguing metaphor for describing Mungiki's mythologically infused political practice and its role in electoral violence in Kenya. While unpacking the chameleon and Mugumo tree metaphors, the chapter investigates the productive potential of deception for understanding Mungiki's role in the dynamics of electoral violence in Kenya.

'The born-again Mau Mau': Mungiki's economic and cultural background

Mungiki is a movement dominated by youth from the Kikuyu tribe. Mungiki was founded in the rural parts of central Kenya in the late 1980s based on a revival of Kikuyu traditional religious beliefs (Wamue 2001). While formed in opposition to President Moi's oppressive regime, Mungiki also had grudges against the Kikuyu political elite (Gecaga 2007). The movement claimed to be the biological and ideological grandchild of the Mau Mau movement that had fought for land and freedom during the struggle for independence in the 1950s.

Ideologically, Mungiki is fighting against poverty, political and social exclusion, and for a correction of what their members perceive as historical injustices committed against the poor Kikuyu population. Mungiki adopted a range of secret rituals and operational structures from the Mau Mau. As such, Mungiki is founded on and guarded by a combination of revolutionary ideals and ritually sanctioned secrecy (Rasmussen forthcoming). In Kenya, any reference to Mau Mau oathing raises concern, as the oaths are widely associated with violent religiosity and obscenity (Blunt 2013: 168). Further-more, Jomo Kenyatta used mass oathing in a deliberate attempt at secretly mobilising the Kikuyu population behind his presidency in 1968 (Knighton 2010), which also associates oathing with the politicisation of ethnic identities and patronage politics.

Over the years, Mungiki has increased in numbers and gained strongholds in the Kikuyu-dominated areas of the poor neighbourhoods in Kenya's major cities, where it has become involved in economic activities in the flourishing informal economy (Rasmussen 2012; Servant 2007). Through the involvement in the security sector and the public transport industry, Mungiki became involved in criminal and violent activities. It also became increasingly politicised (Anderson 2002; Kagwanja 2005a). Due to the movement's involvement in crime and violence, as well as its problematic relationship to some Kikuyu politicians, Mungiki was subjected to systematic police persecution in 2002 and 2003 and most severely between 2007 and 2009 (Alston 2009; KNCHR 2008; Oscar Foundation 2007; 2008). These events cast Mungiki members as not only perpetrators of violence but also victims of political violence, thus entering into a larger cycle of Kenyan electoral violence which is about settling old scores.

Since Mungiki's foundation, the members' public appearance has changed from dreadlocked young men flagging the movement's colours of green, white, black and red, through snuff-taking lumpen youth in the *matatu* industry (Kenya's informal means of public transportation), to Sunday church-goers wearing shirts and jackets. In terms of their public declaration of faith, members have moved from being Kikuyu traditionalists, through a brief flirtation with Islam in 2002 that saw them move back to the Kikuyu base, before converting

to Pentecostalism in 2009. Mungiki simultaneously presents itself as a religious movement, a political party with widespread economic activities and with a militant wing, and a movement engaged in social development activities and farming on a local level. All these aspects testify to Mungiki's potential to appear transformative and multiple at one and the same time. However, the leadership claims to remain true to the ideological core of fighting poverty, inequality and historical injustices.

While the ability to change while staying true to the core ideals of the movement is important, especially in relation to the chameleon and Mugumo tree metaphors, the changes have often coincided with the violent persecution of the Mungiki leadership. The brief conversion to Islam in 2002 has largely been considered a diversion when the movement was seeking shelter from police persecution under the banner of a minority religion. Years later, local Mungiki members in Kayole playfully showed off Islamic registration cards, claiming that they could appear in a range of different identities.[4] Similarly, when in October 2009 Maina Njenga and his followers publicly dissolved Mungiki and converted to Pentecostalism after Njenga's release from prison, it was widely perceived as yet another sham intended to free Mungiki of its reputation as the perpetrator of the 2008 electoral violence.

This doubt was only fuelled by the organisation's initial choice of joining the controversial and opportunistic Bishop Margaret Wanjiru's church, 'Jesus Is Alive Ministries' (JIAM). Wanjiru had pursued her political ambitions via the church and mobilised the support of her congregation to become a member of parliament (Kavulla 2008). She was hoping to benefit from the electoral support of the Mungiki members. However, these electoral ambitions never materialised for Wanjiru as Mungiki had its own agenda. For Mungiki's members, the explicit combination of religion and politics resonated well with their former traditionalist beliefs, where religion and politics were not considered separate domains. Thus, the conversion paved the way for Maina Njenga's 'rebirth' as a bishop and a politician and for the Mungiki members to present themselves as the 'born again Mau Mau'.[5] On the one hand, the dual meaning captured in this sentence describes a resurrection of the Mau Mau movement; on the other, it captures the former Mau Mau sympathisers who have converted to Pentecostalism through a ritual rebirth and conversion. The rebirth of the Mau Mau, even at the symbolic level, is associated with violence and political struggle for change.

Mobilising the masses *Mungiki* means multitude in the Kikuyu language, and there is an inherent claim and ambition of both being and representing the masses. Mungiki's core recruitment base has been among the poor urban youth and the landless and disenfranchised young Kikuyu population. The power of Mungiki's multitude ultimately has two potential expressions: that of a demo-

cratic threat to the established political elite through the vote; and as a threat to democracy through violent outbursts and rioting by the dissatisfied and unruly youth population.

The latest census on the demographic development in Kenya reveals that 50 per cent of the population is below twenty-five years of age (KNBS 2009). Mungiki's main recruitment base among the rapidly increasing youth population – many of them first-time voters – has only added to the uncertainty about the movement's potential impact, as this group is perceived to be easily influenced by their patrons. The potency of this indeterminable base of young Kikuyu voters is evident in the recurrent attempts by established politicians to mobilise Mungiki's youth support. Being the largest ethnic group in Kenya, the Kikuyu make up an attractive constituency and the Kikuyu heartlands are traditionally among the most contested electoral constituencies as politicians strategise on how to either unify or divide the Kikuyu votes (Cheeseman 2008: 168; Fjelde and Höglund, Chapter 1 in this volume; Mulli 1999).

Over the years, Mungiki spokespersons and commentators on the movement have differed over the size of the movement and the level of commitment of the members; the estimated numbers have ranged from several million supporters down to 30,000 core members (Rasmussen 2013; Ruteere 2008). The uncertainty about Mungiki's size has itself been part of the movement's political leverage, and the leadership has deliberately used this uncertainty to argue for their potential in influencing electoral results. By mobilising several thousand rowdy young men and creating visibility around their political gatherings, the movement has continuously managed to present the uncertainty of numbers as a potential voter base that should be taken seriously. The threat of violence through mass action prior to elections has been a central element of Mungiki's force. We can situate this practice somewhere between voting and actual violence, as it is an act that potentially influences the turnout of opposition voters at the polling stations, yet it may not involve casting a vote nor the shedding of blood.

In 2002, departing president Daniel arap Moi (from the Kalenjin tribe) and his chosen successor Uhuru Kenyatta (Kikuyu) – posing as the youthful candidate to bring about the long-sought-for generational change of power – reached out to Mungiki. The relationship between the politicians and Mungiki was then described as a patron–client relation (Kagwanja 2005a: 64). A similar characterisation would suffice for Uhuru Kenyatta's alleged use of Mungiki as a youth militia in the 2008 post-election violence. In 2003, President Mwai Kibaki (Kikuyu) – after winning a landslide victory against Uhuru Kenyatta in the 2002 elections – tried to counter Mungiki's opposition and reach out to their members by commemorating and restoring their idol – the Mau Mau leader Dedan Kimathi (Kikuyu) – to national hero (Branch 2010: 316). And in 2013, Raila Odinga (from the Luo tribe) posed alongside Mungiki's leader

Maina Njenga at the family home of Dedan Kimathi in a similar attempt to tap into Njenga's support base of young Kikuyu voters in Central Province, an area where Raila Odinga and Luo politicians traditionally have little support (*Daily Nation* 2012b). These attempts by successive politicians to reach out to Mungiki for electoral support testify to the importance of the Kikuyu youth as an electoral force that is recognised, but it also reveals the somewhat instrumental approach politicians often have towards the youth constituency. While hardly any politicians want to be directly associated with violent youths, the potential of numbers seems to outweigh the fear of association with electoral violence or the threat of it.

Mobilising the youth for change Over the years, Mungiki has proven its ability to mobilise in large numbers, thus putting action behind its claims of being indeterminate and representing the masses. But underlying the ability for mass mobilisation is also a strong ambition of mobilising for social change. In the campaigns prior to the 2002 elections, Mungiki displayed its strength in mobilising its members for direct political action by gathering several thousand people in Nairobi in support of Uhuru Kenyatta (Kagwanja 2005a: 63). Mungiki's leadership argued that their support for Uhuru Kenyatta was an ideological support for generational change and for a youth revolution, not an issue of ethnic politics (Kagwanja 2005b). During the demonstrations, Mungiki members waved machetes and so-called '*rungus*' (the Swahili word for a blunt wooden club used for fighting), alarming the press with their potential for violence (ibid.; Maupeu 2003). The police apparently turned a blind eye to the Mungiki members' unruly behaviour and their display of weapons, which led to heavy criticism when the police shut down and dispersed a political rally by the opposition the following week (Kagwanja 2005a: 63). The police was criticised for using double standards, raising questions concerning the relation between the Moi–Uhuru alliance and the security forces. Moi was known for keeping close relations with the security forces and special units within the police (Katumanga 2013), a central element in maintaining political power, not only in Kenya (cf. Collier 2010). Mungiki's display of its violent potential in 2002 occurred mainly prior to the elections.

In April 2008, thousands of Mungiki members rioted in Nairobi, bringing traffic and businesses to a standstill; this followed months of violent ethnic and politically motivated clashes as a reaction to the disputed 2007 elections, which saw Mwai Kibaki claim the presidency from Raila Odinga. The rioters protested against the extra-judicial killing of two of their leading figures and the wife of their chairman, Maina Njenga, allegedly carried out by secret police death squads (KNCHR 2009). Despite Mungiki members' role as perpetrators in the preceding post-election violence, the movement's sudden mass appearance in the centre of the capital was a shock to many Kenyans. The

fact that Mungiki members were able to enter the city in large numbers and cause havoc despite police awareness of the movement and in spite of the re-emerging violent persecution of Mungiki members was a boost for the movement's recruitment.[6] In important ways, the riots also marked a shift in Mungiki's violent mass appearance, as they were driven by the movement's grievances against the current political regime (led by the Kikuyu Mwai Kibaki), whereas previous mass appearances had been mobilised by changing political patrons for voter support or violent intimidation, or had been centred around religious initiation rituals, or were turf wars with other youth groupings. The April 2008 Nairobi riots showed Mungiki members taking charge of their own agenda and directing their violent potential against the state that had allegedly mobilised them and called for their persecution.

In March 2010, hundreds of Mungiki members participated in a peace rally in Eldoret in the heartlands of the Kalenjin parts of Rift Valley. The rally saw Mungiki's leadership appear on stage alongside former President Moi, both preaching peace and unity between the Kalenjin and Kikuyu ethnic groups and bringing together the most violent sections of their respective communities in the post-electoral violence of 2008. Interestingly, while Maina Njenga appeared on stage, Mungiki members dressed in suits and sunglasses were lined up in front of the crowd to provide security, whereas armed officers from the Administration Police stepped up when Moi entered the stage.[7] Mungiki's appearance at the Eldoret peace rally reveals its ability to strike deals with politicians controlling local segments of the security forces. Suddenly, Mungiki appeared as an advocate of peace. Simultaneously, the police persecution of Mungiki members saw them rebrand themselves as nationalist, in support of the progressive and rights-based constitution. In the period between the 2008 post-electoral violence and the 2010 constitutional referendum, secret police units had systematically persecuted Mungiki and the International Criminal Court (ICC) had opened cases against Uhuru Kenyatta for mobilising Mungiki for retaliatory attacks during the 2008 elections. Central Mungiki members were among the proposed ICC witnesses and Mungiki saw the violent persecution as a politically led attempt at silencing witnesses. In these circumstances, Mungiki could pursue its ambitions for societal change and the correction of historical injustices through a change to a pro-constitutional rights-based agenda. Mungiki's violent post-electoral engagements now saw the movement drawn into a cycle of state persecution, where the police were killing its members in order to cover up previous violent deeds in the fear of legal persecution from the ICC. Söderberg Kovacs' example from Burundi in the introduction to this volume accounts for similar dynamics of cyclical electoral violence instated to secure impunity.

The 2013 elections took place in the dark and gloomy shadows of the post-electoral violence of 2008, and enormous resources were invested in preaching

peace and preventing a recurrence of electoral violence (Long et al. 2013). The ICC case against the Kikuyu Uhuru Kenyatta and the Kalenjin William Ruto brought the two candidates together in a political alliance where they respectively ran for president and vice president in the 2013 general election, an alliance that quickly became known as the 'alliance of the accused' (Lynch 2014). Kenyatta and Ruto succeeded in capitalising on this political climate and managed to turn the ICC case against them into a question of national sovereignty and of international attempts at scapegoating the entire Kikuyu and Kalenjin societies for the violent deeds of a few (Mueller 2014).

In the early stages of the 2013 electoral campaigns, Mungiki participated in a series of religious and political mass rallies using its usual tactics of displaying its ability to mobilise hordes of young men, only this time it made an effort to communicate its ability to contain their unruliness. However, its violent potential was constantly shimmering under the surface. In line with its stance in the constitutional referendum, Mungiki deliberately took up a position against ethnically infused politics. For instance, the Limuru rally in April 2012 was a peace meeting arranged as a direct critique of the ethno-cultural associations GEMA (Gikuyu, Embu, Meru Association) in Central Province and KAMATUSA (Kalenjin, Maasai, Turkana, Samburu) in Rift Valley for advocating tribalism and ethnic division.[8] When the police interrupted and cancelled the political meeting in Limuru, the Mungiki crowd behaved relatively peacefully compared with previous years, when meetings often ended in running battles with the police (*The Star* 2012). Similarly, at a political gathering at Kamukunji Grounds in Nairobi in June 2012, where Mungiki's leadership announced their effective takeover of the political party Mkenya Solidarity and launched their ambitions of running for seats at various electoral levels, Mungiki's security team seemed to cooperate with the police in controlling the masses.[9]

The 2013 elections were largely non-violent. A lot of resources had been put into advocating peace and preventing hate speech. The political leaders of the two warring factions of 2008 had teamed up in a political alliance. Mungiki's leadership ended up withdrawing their political candidatures and encouraged their members to support the Luo candidate Raila Odinga. Mungiki's role during the actual vote, however, seemed to have a limited impact on Raila Odinga's result in the constituencies covering Mungiki's strongholds, as Uhuru won landslide victories in the Kikuyu-dominated areas (IEBC 2013). Maina Njenga's public support for a non-Kikuyu candidate did not go uncontested in the ranks of Mungiki, and some members decided to go against the public recommendations of their chairman and voted for Uhuru Kenyatta.[10] In Nakuru, members posed as bodyguards for opposing political candidates, testifying both to the internal split in Mungiki and to the pragmatic logic of lending one's muscle to the best-paying patron.

The highest stake in the 2013 elections was legal persecution for instigating human rights abuses carried out by Mungiki. The dominant narrative of peace in the 2013 elections was a constant reminder of the violence of 2008, and the campaigns effectively turned the elections into a fight against foreign legal intervention (meaning the ICC). The elections might have been peaceful, but the violence was omnipresent. Mungiki's members again proved their ability to mobilise and contain huge crowds in the run-up to the elections, but they did not influence the vote. Their ability to initiate change seemed to be reduced to their violent capacity or the threat of violence.

Harbingers of death: religious appearances, mythological references and violent potential

When members of Mungiki refer to their transformations they often use metaphors, especially the chameleon and the Mugumo tree. As noted earlier, metaphorically the chameleon refers to the ability to adapt to changing situations, and to appear as something different from and other than what it seems to be. Analytically, it concerns the ability to transform, and opens up for discussion the question of whether the chameleon's true character is its ability to change colour and surface appearance or whether its true character is to be found in its shape or behaviour. The Mungiki members' use of the chameleon metaphor accentuates this problem, as the metaphor constantly teases out questions of whether their façade shrouds a concealed truth or whether it is solely a surface appearance or a diversion. In this sense, the chameleon metaphor diverts attention from the movement's religious and political project. This is also where the power of the chameleon lies, as it assumes that there is a depth or a truth that is hidden; that underneath the façade there is something politically important and potent yet hidden from public view and knowledge.

However, the chameleon can refer to more than unpredictability and the ability to transform itself and appear in multiple forms. In Kikuyu mythology, the chameleon is presented as the harbinger of death. To summarise briefly, the chameleon was sent by God to tell the Kikuyu people that they should never die, but he failed to deliver the message properly and ended up being humiliated by the Kikuyu people who chased him away. Soon afterwards, the Kikuyu started dying.

Mungiki was made illegal prior to the 2002 general elections following a turf war with a rival Luo gang in the Nairobi estate of Kariobangi, where the intergroup fighting resulted in running battles in the streets and targeted killings with machetes (Maupeu 2002). The fighting became known as the Kariobangi massacre. The rival gangs competed over the right to provide informal security in the neighbourhoods of Nairobi's Eastlands and over control of lucrative *matatu* routes. Politicians saw the potential in linking up with

the disaffected youth in charge of the provision of everyday services such as security, transport and rubbish collection, as they could serve the purposes of anything from voting fodder to violent intimidation. Mungiki proved especially skilled in capitalising on the political interest of violent youth militias, and, instead of facing persecution, Mungiki stuck a deal whereby the police turned a blind eye to Mungiki's forceful takeover of the most lucrative *matatu* routes in Eastlands in return for political support. Mungiki leaders even made public declarations about being protected by the government (Anderson 2002: 538–40; Kagwanja 2005a: 64). The Kariobangi massacre not only instilled a fear of Mungiki among the public, it also affected the 2002 elections in direct ways, as it helped Mungiki carve out an economic platform for political and violent engagements. However, due to the level of violence, Uhuru Kenyatta and Moi also had to publicly disassociate themselves from the unruly youth they had reached out to. The ban of Mungiki was a central element in this process, and so was the barring of Maina Njenga's parliamentary candidature later in the year.

Despite the ban, which was still in force, and the erratic persecution of Mungiki, the movement managed to make a new deal of non-persecution prior to the 2007 elections, as their numerical and violent potential was called on once again by the Kikuyu political elite (ICC 2015; TJRC 2013; Waki Commission 2008). The late December announcement of the electoral result granting the incumbent Mwai Kibaki victory over Raila Odinga was immediately disputed and sparked countrywide protests and riots. In Rift Valley in particular, many ordinary Kikuyus suffered politically and ethnically motivated attacks, once again bringing old grievances over land to the fore (see Fjelde and Höglund, Chapter 1 in this volume). According to the ICC prosecutor's pre-trial briefs, Uhuru Kenyatta and other politicians held meetings with Mungiki, paying its members to conduct retaliatory attacks, helping them get hold of weapons, and granting them passage through police roadblocks (ICC 2015: 18–21).[11] Mungiki's violence killed several hundred people and displaced thousands. All human rights briefs and commission reports looking into the post-election violence present Mungiki and the police as the main perpetrators. In addition to these gruesome effects of the post-electoral violence, a further consequence was the ICC charge of human rights violations against Uhuru Kenyatta. As already mentioned, the ICC case greatly affected the 2013 elections and resulted in the extra-judicial persecution of Mungiki members, and it continues to cast shadows on Kenyan politics despite the ICC dropping the charges against Uhuru Kenyatta in 2014, due to a lack of evidence and what the court claimed was witness intimidation (ibid.).

Mungiki's involvement in the post-electoral violence and the brutality of the Kariobangi massacre earned the movement an image of youth militants for hire and a threat to democracy. The media similarly presented them as a menace

to society, associated with crime, ritualised obscenity, and brutal violence. If we think of the mythological meaning of the chameleon, the members' use of the chameleon metaphor takes on an ironic (and perhaps unintended) twist, because Mungiki literally is perceived as the harbinger of death.

But the metaphor allows for additional interpretative twists. Recall Mungiki's experience as being marginalised and excluded, then think of it as analogous to the fate of the vanishing and humiliated chameleon being chased away by the (now deadly) Kikuyu people who hoped to grow fat from the land. In this rendition, the chameleon metaphor captures the continuous tension between Mungiki and the Kikuyu political elite, a tension that unfolds around perceptions of betrayal, failure and exclusion – which, as we have seen, is particularly prominent around elections. The persecution and the extra-judicial killings of Mungiki by the police and the trade-offs guaranteeing safety in exchange for violence and votes can be understood as outcomes of interrupted and failed communication, resulting in a troubled and conflictual relationship causing death and grievance.

And there is yet another twist to the mythological prophecy of the chameleon bringing death to the fat Kikuyu people. Uhuru Kenyatta, son of Kenya's first independent president, Jomo Kenyatta, and heir to the Kenyatta family's wealth, was accused by the ICC of planning and instigating part of the post-election violence of 2008. Key witnesses against Uhuru Kenyatta at the ICC were former Mungiki members. Prior to the 2013 elections, there was still a possibility of Mungiki witnesses exposing Uhuru Kenyatta and bringing political death to Kenya's most celebrated political family. At that time, and before the ICC dropped the charges, the chameleon was still shimmering in its skin.

The numerous possibilities of interpretation and for merging mythological meaning with politically and violently infused action provide the chameleon metaphor with its explanatory strength. One can choose to focus either on the chameleon's changing colour or on its interior character, but, either way, the metaphor will always reveal the possibility of the other – and thus it is strategically incomplete. This is an important element in understanding Mungiki's shifting political alliances and its constant potential.

Parasitic politics: forceful takeovers from the inside

In Kenyan politics there is a long tradition of using violent youth militias for support and to intimidate opponents (Kagwanja 2001; 2009; Mueller 2008: 189), and Mungiki members have acted in this capacity in the past. Even if the Mungiki members have reformed and abandoned their criminal and violent ways, their violent activities of the past still maintain political power. On several occasions, the movement has hinted at the possibility of using inside knowledge of past alliances to discredit former political patrons. In May 2012, Maina Njenga claimed that almost all politicians from the Kikuyu

heartlands in Central Kenya have used Mungiki for their political survival at some point (*Daily Nation* 2012a), indicating that no one has clean hands and that no one should feel safe from exposure.

The idea of gaining political leverage from secret knowledge of others recalls Mungiki's other metaphor, the Mugumo tree – the parasite that grows on other trees. The tree has aerial roots that stretch to the ground and entangle and subsume the host tree. Metaphorically it evokes images of strength and power inherent in its parasitic nature, but it also points to relational aspects between host and parasite, a violent and antagonistic yet symbiotic process through which a new tree emerges. The Mugumo tree and the parasitic process direct our attention to Mungiki's ever-changing relationship with its political patrons and to the police who violently persecute the movement.

For Mungiki members, the Mugumo tree is a powerful and ambiguous metaphor. It allows Mungiki members to think of themselves as part of a potent collective with the capacity to act as parasites on the *matatu* industry, on Margaret Wanjiru's JIAM church, on the Mkenya Solidarity party and on the Kikuyu political elite. As has been shown, Mungiki managed to gain economically and politically from the Kariobangi massacre, and its violent takeover of lucrative *matatu* routes and its continuous forceful control have allowed the movement to raise money and create jobs for its members. In that sense, they are living off – or acting as parasites on – the *matatu* industry (Katumanga 2005; Rasmussen 2012).

In a blunt statement, Maina Njenga admitted a similar parasitic approach to the movement's Pentecostal conversion, as a newspaper quoted him telling Bishop Margaret Wanjiru in front of her congregation: 'This church is no longer yours. Now it is ours!' (*Daily Nation* 2009). By bringing in numerous Mungiki members to the congregation, he implied that they would take over her church. A similar process took place when Mungiki effectively took over the political party Mkenya Solidarity in 2012. As early as 2008, individual Mungiki members began registering as ordinary members of the Mkenya Solidarity party immediately after the government had turned down Mungiki's registration of its own political wing, the Kenya National Youth Alliance.[12] These registrations to Mkenya Solidarity continued until June 2012, when Maina Njenga publicly declared his leadership of the party at a rally on Kamukunji Grounds in Nairobi, much to the surprise of the original founder, G. G. Kariuki. Both examples reveal a swallowing of the host from within.

The symbiotic relationship between the parasite and the host as described by Serres (1982) reveals that the transformative aspect of parasitism does not free the parasite of the host when it has entangled it. Rather, the host is subsumed and becomes part of the new collective body. Understanding Mungiki through the Mugumo tree metaphor thus allows for an inside perspective that is still contextually open.

Through Mungiki's violent activities in relation to electoral and political events, we can see how the movement acted as a parasite on its political patrons by accepting money or negotiating a truce with the police. At the same time, it acted as a parasite on the local Kikuyu communities by extorting money from the *matatu* industry or by inserting its members as dreaded security providers. Through some of its actions, Mungiki effectively acted in a state-like manner or claimed a state-like authority; by doing so, Mungiki acted as a parasite on the state while embodying its character.

The Mugumo tree The explanatory qualities of the Mugumo tree metaphor go beyond its parasitic capacity revealed through the ambiguous and transformative aspects that characterise the relationship between host and parasite. Like the chameleon, the Mugumo tree also features in Kikuyu mythology. It is perceived as sacred and as the tree of life under which the Kikuyu tribe came into being. Furthermore, it serves a range of ritual purposes, and a legend reveals how the Mugumo tree is a medium through which the Kikuyu people communicate with their god through sacrifice and daily prayers (Beech 1913: 4; Karangi 2008: 122). Traditionally, some of the initiation rituals for the transition to adulthood were performed under the Mugumo tree, and the Kikuyu council of elders would hold its meetings there (Kenyatta 1938). In reference to these rituals and meetings, the Mau Mau took some of their oaths under the Mugumo tree.

Karangi (2008) has argued that the Mugumo tree has been neglected in attempts at understanding the cosmology of the Kikuyu. He sees the Mugumo tree as a reference point for the continuity of the social, religious and political world of the Kikuyu, with the tree symbolising fertility, survival, protection, belonging, religious access and political power (ibid. 117, 127–8). Therefore, when Mungiki members describe their movement as being like the Mugumo tree they not only refer to the immediate parasitic qualities of the tree; they also symbolically refer to themselves as having access to a vast register of past cultural, social, religious and political knowledge in the present and for the future. Mungiki's metaphorical references to the mythology invest the movement with the power of the Mugumo tree and fill it with parasitic agency, and its members become agents of change. Their parasitic behaviour is legitimised not only through notions of fairness and due to experiences of historical and structural injustice. More importantly, it is legitimised by reference to the mythology. As such, Mungiki advocates and practises a different form of politics, even if it sometimes mirrors the wider perception of Kenyan politics as deceptive.

However, former Mungiki members do not have exclusive ownership of the symbolic power of the Mugumo tree, nor of Kikuyu rituals such as oathing. In the spring of 2012, there were widespread rumours of secret oathing ceremonies

in support of Uhuru Kenyatta taking place at night, allegedly initiated by Kikuyu elders in order to unite the Kikuyu voters behind a Kikuyu presidential candidate and to oppose the ICC intervention. In February 2013, a Mugumo tree fell in Nyeri; this, according to legend, signals a generational change of guard within the Kikuyu community. In other words, the departing President Kibaki would be succeeded by a younger Kikuyu, which in this case could only mean Uhuru Kenyatta.[13] These examples show that other parts of the Kikuyu community are also influenced by secret ritualistic, prophetic and mythical knowledge in their political practices.

If we return to the idea of parasitic practices and the question of who is acting as a parasite on whom, it can also be argued that the Kenyan state and the Kikuyu political elite have been parasites on the Mungiki movement and its militant services. They have used the movement's violent and numerical services whenever they needed them, but Mungiki has been violently discarded through extra-judicial persecution whenever it posed a threat. Mungiki, for its part, has used its bad reputation as a weapon to disentangle itself from its previous patronage networks. Through its ability to continuously transform and appear politically relevant, Mungiki has managed to take a position in Kenyan politics where its patronage cannot be taken for granted. Mungiki members posing as key witnesses at the ICC is the best illustration of this. Mungiki uses its reputation as a dreaded militant sect to remain important, yet the ability of the movement to transform from anti-Christian ethnic traditionalists to a nationalist rights-based pro-constitution movement reveals that nothing is static. Parasitic politics is inherently violent, whether conducted by Mungiki or used as a characteristic of Kenyan politics in general.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how narratives (traditional and ritually infused) as a source for violent political mobilisation draw on a vast register of perceived injustices; this is similar to Fjelde and Höglund's (Chapter 1) convincing argument that a historical analysis of conflict patterns reveals how contemporary electoral violence is often informed by the past politics of differentiation and the politicisation of past identity conflicts. The chapter has shown how Mungiki, through its violent and parasitic practices, has played a central role in electoral violence over the last couple of decades. In the 2007 elections, Mungiki's violent potential – first displayed in 2002 – grabbed the headlines and defined the post-electoral chaos. Even in the supposedly peaceful 2013 elections, when the central concern was maintaining peace and containing violence, the process was tainted by past violence; this is best exemplified by the influence of the ICC case as a decisive theme. The chapter has shown how the potential for violence becomes a powerful resource for influencing the political agenda, even if the potential is not actualised. Through the skilful play of the threat of violence,

secret knowledge and mythological power, the Mungiki movement practises politics in a different way from that of the established political elite – though it is far from unfamiliar. By focusing on the role of deception and on parasitic feeding on one another, the chapter has revealed how we can understand the former Mungiki movement's quest for political inclusion, influence and power.

Furthermore, informal institutions such as youth militias that were established for political ends during authoritarian rule in Kenya have lived on after the turn to multiparty democracy; these informal political actors, like Mungiki, are used by the formal state as well as acting on their own. The chapter has shown how the continued existence and influence of informal political and violent organisations in the democratic era threatens the establishment of formal institutions and easily informs electoral conflicts (cf. Söderberg Kovacs, Introduction in this volume). The chapter has revealed that similar methods of secrecy and deception are at play at the centre of Kenyan politics. The aim here is not to argue that Kenyan politics is inherently immoral or by default corrupt. Rather, the aim has been to investigate the workings of violence and deception in relation to the electoral process. The tension between politicians and Mungiki in the ICC case presents itself as an extreme case for unfolding the deceptive work going on in the quest for power because it plays out across several electoral periods, drawing from the first engagements between Mungiki and the Kikuyu political elite, covering the 2007 post-electoral violence, and continuing until the abandoned ICC court case. Youth militias such as Mungiki and their influence on elections have historical roots, and they are intimately linked to politicians and remain influential in formal politics and on the ability of formal and legal institutions to function.

Mungiki's ability to change and constantly transform has been an essential part of the movement's power, as it is constantly transgressing the boundaries between the formal and the informal, the legal and the illegal. This is captured in the chameleon metaphor, where the true appearance of the movement – whether there is a true appearance at all – is constantly questioned. As such, Mungiki has not been stabilised and it presents a constant potential for violence to outsiders. This has provided the movement with influence on politics, and not only at election time.

Mungiki's role in Kenyan politics as an institutionalised political, religious and violent movement is best explored by looking at the relation between violence and elections, as elections have become critical encounters for Mungiki's parasitic practices. Through its metaphorical reference to Kikuyu mythology, Mungiki merges not only politics and violence but also politics and mythology, which allows for an analytical understanding of electoral violence in Kenya as more than merely anti-democratic and uncivil. Electoral violence must be understood as a form of participation that draws on other registers of knowledge that we usually associate with democratic practice and politics.

In doing so, the relational aspect of electoral violence as it has taken place in Kenya in recent years reveals itself, and it resonates with broader notions of deception and patronage that characterise Kenyan politics.

The existence of informal institutions with the potential for violence close to the core of formal political decision making and electoral politics has enormous implications for policy, as different logics are at play simultaneously. When such logics are present, yet hidden or denied, planning for peaceful electoral processes risks overlooking not only the vested interests at various levels, but also – and just as importantly – how these interests are interlinked and connected in intricate ways.

Notes

1 Author interview with Mungiki leader from Nakuru commenting on the movement's role in the 2008 post-electoral violence, March 2009.

2 The 1992 general elections in Kenya are a good example of how ethnic interests were strategically protected through the orchestration of violence (see Fjelde and Höglund, Chapter 1 in this volume).

3 I appreciate the financial support for fieldwork from the Danish Research Council for Culture and Communication between 2008 and 2010, and from the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office for funding fieldwork during the 2013 elections.

4 Author's fieldnotes, December 2008.

5 This was a recurrent phrase used by Mungiki members in the months after the Pentecostal conversion.

6 In interviews with Mungiki members carried out between August 2008 and May 2009, the Nairobi riots were mentioned more than twenty times by different members, referring to the movement's ability for mass mobilisation, but especially to its ability to disrupt and bring the capital city to a halt.

7 Author observations from the Eldoret peace rally, March 2010.

8 GEMA and KAMATUSA respectively supported the Kikuyu candidate Uhuru Kenyatta and the Kalenjin candidate William Ruto. Promoted as a peace meeting, the Limuru meeting presented the former Mungiki movement with the chance of distancing itself from the old ethnic organisations and instead allowed it to claim a pro-peace nationalist agenda.

9 Kamukunji observations conducted for the author by Armstrong Obissa, a Kenyan sociologist, 9 June 2012.

10 Interviews and observations with Mungiki members in Kayole and Nakuru, December 2012 and February 2013.

11 The former spokesperson of Mungiki, Nguguna Githau, accounted for the same process in a conversation with this author in February 2009. He was shot dead in April 2009.

12 Author's fieldnotes and interviews, November 2008.

13 According to an old prophecy by the Kikuyu prophet Mugo wa Kibero, a fallen Mugumo tree in Thika would symbolise the end of colonial rule, which actually happened in 1963, and the fallen Mugumo tree in Nyeri was interpreted along similar lines (*The Standard* 2013).

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