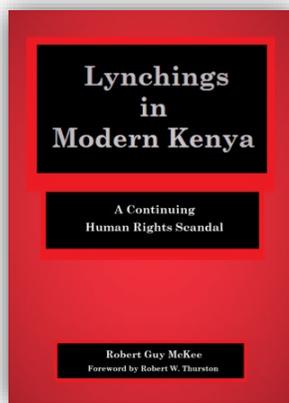


BOOK REVIEW

Lynchings in Modern Kenya: A Continuing Human Rights Scandal

By Robert Guy McKee

Reviewed by Patricia Manwaring



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A few years ago I came across a video on YouTube showing a woman being stoned to death in Iran. They had dug a pit and planted her in the ground and she was stuck. Unable to move as the rocks began sailing towards her. There was terror in her eyes and something more; disbelief that her entire village, people she had known and loved, could just stand there with rocks in their hands, ready to end her life. The stones began to fill the air. A rock hit her on the side of her head, and I didn't want to have this woman's death seared forever in my mind. I looked away.

This is exactly the opposite of what Robert Guy McKee does in his book *Lynchings in Modern Kenya: A Continuing Human Rights Crisis*. He does not look away. For over twenty years McKee has compiled meticulous notes in his Kenya Lynching Database (KLD) on the vicious reality of mob justice. Armed with spreadsheets, file directories, data and statistics, McKee sets out to “tell the world the facts” to the end that lynching in Kenya would be abolished.

Mob justice is so common in Kenya that a 2016 article in the *Standard* asks, “Has mob justice been absorbed into our culture [so that it] no longer seem[s] to be an evil act?” (65). In an “upscale Nairobi shopping center” a thief is caught trying to steal a cell phone; immediately a mob forms and stones to death both the man and two accomplices (12). The crowd then disperses and everyone continues on about their day. “A 35-year-old man is stoned and clubbed to death in ‘zero tolerance’ of the alleged theft of three dozen teaspoons” (29). People are lynched on a daily basis for theft: cars, clothes, milk, chickens. They are lynched for rape, suspected witchcraft, murder, land grabbing, stealing purses or goats. Lynching in Kenya happens daily for a myriad of offenses whether trivial or terrific.

McKee includes data for two hundred reported deaths from April-August 2013. A separate line for each person reported to be lynched.

5/4/13—‘Mob lynches iron sheets thief’/1/theft/stoned (31)

8/4/13—‘Sisters accused of witchcraft lynched’/2/gang-raped and then killed (31)

21/7/13—‘Suspected goat thief lynched’/1/theft/beat (37)

12/8/13—‘Residents burn theft suspect’/1/theft/beat, burned (38)

Nameless murder victims. Entire lives reduced to a line testifying to a violent death.

Are these the facts that will save Kenya?

Two goals listed when describing the KLD are: “quantifiable generalizations about Kenyan lynching” and “allowing other researchers and interested parties to consult and help further develop the KLD” (81). For years McKee has kept watch on the death toll in Kenyan newspapers. But is keeping an account of

violent death enough to save a life? Quoting a Star Article from Aug. 19, 2013 that puts the number of lynchings that year at 335, McKee states that were the lynchings to continue “at the same rate for the rest of the year, there will be about 577 lynchings in 2013, or about 1.58 persons lynched per day” (29). One and a half people is a hard number to comprehend as people’s stories vanish into statistics.

McKee makes a comparison between lynching in America, specifically from 1880-1930, and that of modern Kenya . . . comparison that complicates his argument. To try to understand the ontology of a modern witchcraft culture that seeks to take justice into its own hands, most often as a response to theft, by making a comparison to the dark pages of the American past is problematic for multiple reasons. McKee does not account for the fact that prior to the mid-1800’s black people in the American South were considered to be property. With virtually no legal rights, they lived in the daily fear of physical, emotional, and psychological violence. He chooses to focus on the Jim Crow era without acknowledging the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and the racial violence that underlines lynching in America. To say that “Americans concerned with lynching” should be “shockingly alarmed” by the death of 508 people in 1993 at the hands of mob justice in Kenya because “it is more than five times per capita the 230 lynched in America in 1892 which was the worst recorded year of US lynching history” (84), misleads the argument due to a difference in the definition of lynching.

McKee states that the Kenyan definition for “lynch” differs or “clearly departs from an American and British English dictionary definition” in which “lynch” is synonymous with “hanging” (10). Kenyans rarely employ the method of hanging in mob violence. Instead, the Kenyan press and media define the word “lynch” to mean: extrajudicial mob violence (3 or more people) that results in the death of the accused without regard to method. By that definition the numbers for America, past to present, would tell a different story. Could we then consider the death of George Floyd to be a lynching? Three policemen respond to theft at a convenience store after Floyd tries to pay with a counterfeit \$20 bill. The response to this theft was cruel mob violence, authorized by the state, that resulted in the murder of George Floyd.

Violence in America is devastatingly common today in our land of liberty and justice; perpetrated by machine guns that enable one deranged person to shoot a mass of people shopping for groceries in

Buffalo or children hiding under desks in Uvalde. McKee asks if Black Lives Matter?, taking American rhetoric to a Kenyan problem and convoluting both.

McKee notes that Ida B. Wells once said to “Tell the world the facts. When the Christian world knows the alarming growth and extent of outlawry in our land, some means will be found to stop it” (82). But we don’t live in such a hopeful world anymore. We live in a post-Christian world of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism combined with the post-internet disinformation age. We need more than headlines from a newspaper. We need more than the KLD which allows for “activists” to carefully comb the web to help make their “generalizations”, but does not require that they *be there*. We need a better story.

McKee briefly mentions that there are people stepping into the fight, even at the cost of their own lives, to end lynching; “journalists, clergy and other members of Kenyan civil society who speak to or write in the media decrying lynching” as well as “children who have somehow prevented a lynching” (26). Kenyan men, women and children fighting for reformed justice. These are “facts” that the world needs to be told about more.

As Christian anthropologists, the thing that sets us apart is that our research is not just about data and deadlines. It’s about being *with* people in a way that reflects God *with* us. God put on flesh and moved into the neighborhood and he was killed at the hands of an angry mob in a vicious and brutal way. We look and we see him bloodied and beaten and scorned, and we do not look away. But his death is not the only fact. While hanging on the cross he spoke forgiveness over the mob that had killed him. He gave his life so that others might live. He rose up out of the grave and changed the narrative of death itself, and it no longer has the final word. This story, of just one state sponsored lynching, sheds light on all the rest of humanity’s darkness.

Ee Mungu nguvu yetu (O God of all Creation)
Ilete baraka kwetu (Bless this our land and nation)
Haki iwe ngao na mlizi (Justice be our shield
and defender)
Natukae na undugu (May we dwell in unity)
Amani na uhuru (Peace and liberty)
Raha tupate na ustawi. (Plenty be found within our
borders)

National Anthem of Kenya



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