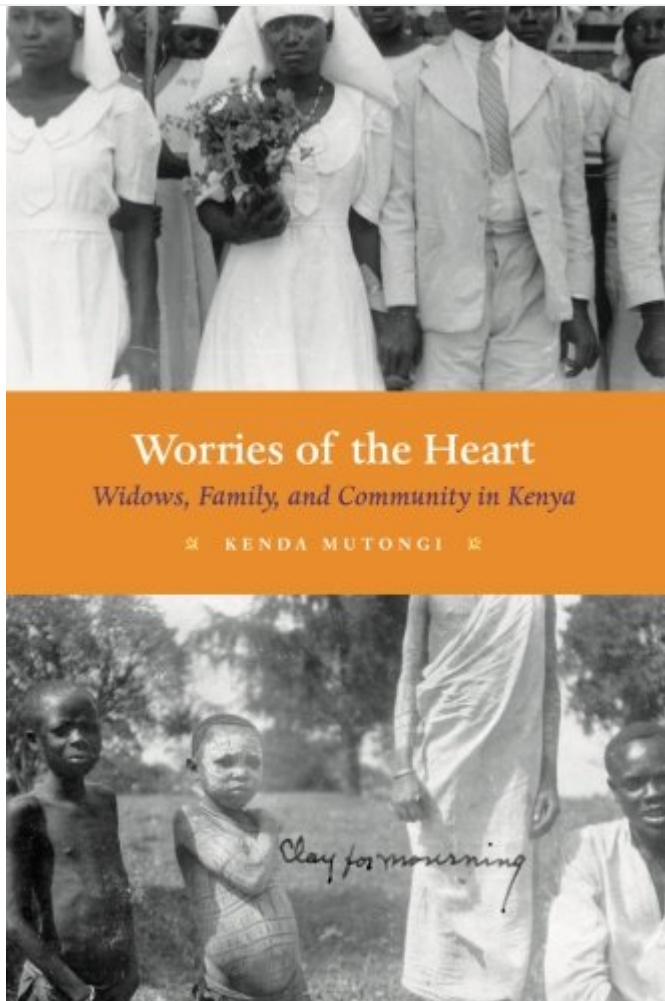


{essays in history}

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Worries of the Heart: Widows, Family, and Community in Kenya



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Reviewed Work(s)

Worries of the Heart: Widows, Family, and Community in Kenya. By Kenda Mutongi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Pp. 272. Cloth, \$50.00. Paper, \$20.00

Kenda Mutongi, associate professor of history at Williams College, is the author of *Worries of the Heart: Widows, Family, and Community in Kenya*. She specializes cultural, urban, and East African histories.

Kenda Mutongi grew up in Maragoli, a small community in Western Kenya near Lake Victoria. During her childhood, Mutongi's elders claimed that life had been better under British colonial rule than it was after African leaders gained independence in 1963. Yet, her primary school teachers, many of whom were highly educated Africans exiled from Uganda by Idi Amin, taught her about repression under colonialism and also instilled a sense of devotion to local traditions and history. During her ten years of living and studying in the United States, Mutongi decided to try and reconcile these conflicting views of Kenya's political and social history. Thus Mutongi, through a series of archival research expeditions and personal interviews on three continents, wrote *Worries of the Heart* to probe the lived experiences of rural western Kenyans during colonialism and independence.

Kenda Mutongi examined the lives of Maragoli people through widows and their families, whom she calls a "barometer of the impact of colonial and postcolonial rule," (4). Mutongi argues that widows were the first to suffer and benefit from the paradoxes of colonial and postcolonial rule where people found themselves being dominated and liberated at the same time. The title of her book refers to a strategy which the widows used under British rule to shame local men into fulfilling their masculine obligations of caring for the less-fortunate by publicly airing their "worries of the heart" about providing for their families. Mutongi demonstrates that widows carried this strategy into the independence-era Kenya by claiming their rights, often unsuccessfully, as citizens during a time when African leaders claimed the exclusive right, and also deep responsibility, to bestow rights and legal protection for citizens.

The widows seized on this language as much as they were constrained by it. For Mutongi, unlike many Africanist historians, independence did not present Maragoli widows with a radical break in their existence, but rather a new situation in which they slightly modified older strategies of survival. This de-emphasizing of independence as a moment of profound change for rural Kenyans alone is enough to make the book something of a landmark within African historiography.

However, Mutongi's work has far broader appeal for scholars and the general public. She calls her book a "historical ethnography" (5) and her method is instructive for historians and anthropologists. Her careful ethnography, drawn on interviews with 50 widows for a year, is carefully contextualized with archival research providing the reader with a more fully realized social world than most anthropologists describe at the same time describing people, even the deceased, more alive than most historians achieve. *Worries of the Heart* will appeal to the non-specialist because the widows' are Mutongi's primary concern and the historical contextualization is integrated into the text such that the casual reader is not hindered by academic jargon or historiographic arguments but can identify with the lives of the people of Maragoli.

The most serious issue not addressed by Mutongi is that "Maragoli" identity seems unquestioned through the duration of her study. Much recent work, particularly from east Africa, has demonstrated that identities such as "Maragoli" were often fashioned, defined, and refashioned during British rule and after. However, Mutongi is interested in "how and why the Maragoli came to think and act as they did." (p. 10). As such, the identity of her subjects is not as important as the subjects themselves. Her humane treatment of the western Kenyans she describes is laudable and complemented by fluid prose.

Perhaps because of her approach to understand people, Mutongi does not offer a singular answer to why Maragoli widows, indeed many Maragoli old enough to remember, believed that life was better under British rather than African rule. Instead she concludes by offering answers that are complex and contradictory – every bit as human as the answers most of us give for trouble in our own lives. Kenda Mutongi presents us a book that demonstrates the strategies of widows in rural Kenya to show how colonialism and independence in African cannot be fully understood as interactions between the powerful and the

oppressed. The interactions of Africans amongst themselves must be examined as well to understand how people lived their lives. Any scholar trying to understand the daily existence of their subjects will find this book instructive; any reader with an interest in understanding social interactions among people forced to grapple with a complex, often cruel, world will find a well-crafted, surprising, historical narrative.

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