

Smith, James Howard.— *Bewitching Development*

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SMITH, James Howard.— *Bewitching Development: Witchcraft and the Reinvention of Development in Neoliberal Kenya*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008, 269 p., bibl., ill., index.

- 1 Reading Smith's book brought to mind two recurrent episodes in my own experiences researching and teaching African studies. As a graduate student in the mid-1990s I was familiar with the critiques of "development"—it was teleological, it established the West as the benchmark to which the rest of the world should strive, the development project tended to be top-down and funneled aid money back to donor nations. Yet when I arrived in Kenya to carry out historical research, the need for development was on everyone's lips—how could Kenya develop? What was standing in the way of development? Smith had a similar experience, around the same time: people in Taita "would not shut up about [development]" (p.xii). Kenyans well understood what development meant: education, employment, health care, good roads, electrification. I came to understand—and now understand better, with Smith's work—that "development" was not the problem, but rather what exactly development meant and who would direct it. In reading Smith, I also reflected on my American students' reactions to my lectures on African forms of Christianity. I relate stories of my deeply devout Christian friends in Kenya who insist that witches and witchcraft are very real and can ruin people's lives. My students had to learn that "Christianity" was not one coherent thing, with one set of beliefs, and that staunch Christians—likely stronger Christians than those American students—could legitimately believe in the existence of witchcraft. Smith's book brought together for me these two things—deep belief in

development and in witchcraft—and presents a new way of thinking of each, and how they are, in Taita, intertwined.

- 2 Smith argues that in Taita (a highland area in southwest Kenya, hemmed in by game reserves on the plains below) it is not tradition but witchcraft that is understood as the antithesis of development. Development is something that improves lives, that creates a common good, while witchcraft injures people and sows destruction. Smith locates development and witchcraft in a thick description of Taita society. The notion of tradition as the antithesis of development had its heyday in the rise of the first generation of western-educated Taita who, in the early years of independence, equated tradition with witchcraft. By the 1990s, however, many Taita argued that tradition was something good, a way of life that had kept harmful forms of witchcraft at bay and spread benefits widely in the community. With changes in land tenure and settlement patterns, individuals could now marshal witchcraft against neighbors without guilt, advancing their own interests or retarding others' improvements. Development was something individuals could do, or prevent, an idea that alternately draws on local notions of self-improvement and of witchcraft, as well as an advancing neo-liberal ideology that has shaped international aid (the emphasis on personal responsibility in creating development clashes, however, with Kenyans' detailed awareness of inequities in international economic structures, and how their personal and national futures can be shaped by decisions made in western capitals.)
- 3 There is much in Smith's work of interest, too much to detail in a short review: the (limited) promise of education, with schools as a primary site of witchcraft; the use of non-Taita, and non-Kenyan, witchcraft and anti-witchcraft; the multiple connections between witchcraft and feces, prosperity, pit latrines, and development; competing ideas of history; and much more. I found especially interesting the life of Rasta, a friend of Smith's, whose ideas of development and witchcraft, and attempts to succeed in life, are detailed in the book (one hopes, however, the Smith isn't airing too much dirty laundry).
- 4 I have a few minor quarrels, mostly on points that concern broader Kenyan society and history. For example, Smith argues that Mungiki attempts to control matatu (shared-ride taxi) routes "was widely read as an attempt to capture the public sphere and the currencies of national articulation" (p.40). I, personally, have not heard Kenyans suggest this: rather, the fight over matatu routes was simply an expansion of Mungiki's burgeoning criminal enterprise. His suggestion that the devil-worship scare of the mid-90s helped to push Kenyans to think of a democratic future and to hasten the decline of Moi and KANU is, I think, stretching things a bit (p.18). More attention to the work of historians of Kenya (such as Richard Waller's on witchcraft in the colonial period) would have been helpful.
- 5 Smith's book will be of interest to scholars of Kenya, witchcraft, and development (it might be fruitful to read *Bewitching Development* alongside Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow*, which also concerns witchcraft and development, albeit in a very different way). This, in fact, constitutes one of my disappointments with the book. This is the type of study development practitioners (World Bank, USAID, NGOs) should read before entering into any plan or setting off to collect data. If they could sense that their development projects had to interface with very different cultural assumptions about the way the world works and what development itself means, practitioners might—with any luck—reassess how they go about their business. Unfortunately—and, as he is a young scholar

seeking tenure, understandably—Smith pitches his book toward the scholarly community, and it is unlikely to land in others' hands (one or two sentences suggest moreover that his audience is specifically Western, rather than Kenyan: a senior man who intercedes with the spirits of the wild, and who the community constantly watches over and critiques, is “like the treasurer of a Florida condominium’s board of directors” [p.154]).