

The Bulldozer and the Word: Culture at Work in Postcolonial Nairobi

By Raoul J. Granqvist

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This book presents a superb analysis of how culture and space have been forged and contested in post-colonial Nairobi. At a time when its 'relevance' is sometimes called into question, *The Bulldozer and the Word* also illustrates the potency of cultural geography in forming critical insights into urban politics and identity in the South. Raoul Granqvist mobilizes a nuanced post-colonial reading of the city, which challenges the urban imaginaries of Nairobi as they are represented and practiced in architecture, literature, theatre and the Matatu - the vibrant and often contentious bus that crisscross the city. Themes around mobility and hybridity link Granqvist's investigation of the co-production of the city's cultural and spatial condition. Nairobi he concludes is an "... aggressive composite: a meeting place where acculturation operates under a parameter of many antagonistic modes of thinking, many separating histories and tenses, many geographies both adjacent (countryside) as well as distant (Kenya, Africa, 'American-Europe')" (p.13). Following an insightful section on the planning and architecture of the city centre, the cultural geographies of the city are surveyed through his reading of the Spear Books of the East African Educational Publishers. Published over a 30 year period, these adventure stories, romances and crime thrillers present Granqvist with an opportunity to reveal transitions in the meanings of urban

space and selfhood, from the optimism of the post independence period to the conflict and confrontations of the Moi regime. Central to this analysis are questions of gender and in particular masculinity. By following the shifts in the outlook of the Kenyan flâneur, Granqvist traces the creation of the male 'city persona' – characterized by bitter self-reflection, and a sense of manhood undermined by political oppression and grinding poverty. Represented equally well in both the literature of the city and in the bulldozers that have at critical moments leveled neighbourhoods and market places, Nairobi he demonstrates is a intensely masculine city, in terms of it is politics, urban spaces and everyday life. The final chapter on the Matatu takes this theme up very effectively. These buses he argues are an icon to '...the inappropriate, the asocial and the digressive' (p.23). Through an analysis of their language, music and graffiti, Granqvist draws out the dramas of Nairobi street life, where questions of patriarchy, public culture and protest converge and disperse. Whilst at times slightly fragmented, overall, this is a highly accessible book that makes an excellent contribution to Nairobi's recent history, whilst illustrating the value of doing cultural geography in developing world contexts.

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