

Book Review: Unsettled: Denial and Belonging Among White Kenyans by Janet McIntosh

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McIntosh, Janet. *Unsettled: Denial and Belonging Among White Kenyans*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016. xii + 292 pages, Hardcover, \$85.00.

Anthropologist Janet McIntosh's *Unsettled: Denial and Belonging Among White Kenyans* presents a distinctive ethnographic report of the conflicted situation of British settler descendants in post-colonial Kenya. The focus of the book centers on the contested claims of the descendants to indigenous status and the right to land inherited from their colonist forebears *vis-à-vis* land grievances among indigenous Kenyans, particularly the pastoral Maasai, the perception of settlers as interlopers, and concerns over white privilege. The nagging questions of land distribution and national integration amidst racial inequalities—and sometimes ambivalent identity consciousness on the part of settler descendants—call attention to this situation. For example, the acquittal and reduced sentence following the killing of two black Kenyans in 2005 and 2006 by Tom Cholmondeley, a scion of one of the first British settlers Lord Delamere, created a media firestorm.

At the heart of the unsettled relations between white and black Kenyans is the land question. Many settlers seized communally-owned lands on the assumption that such lands were unused and lying waste, and that they needed to be developed profitably. The conflicting situation here is that land ownership in pre-colonial Kenya, and by extension Africa, was not based on the capitalist market model. In addition, McIntosh states that most white Kenyans live privileged, well-heeled lifestyles compared to the abject and relative poverty of most Kenyans. Further, the fact that some settler descendants refer to themselves as “British Kenyans” or simply “British” creates doubt in the minds of indigenous Kenyans about their commitment to the country. Although some settlers, like the famous Leakey family, cultivate affinity for the ‘natives,’ most harbored pejorative impressions of Africans as inferior, even polluting, and potentially dangerous. These negative perceptions enable settlers to guard their interactions with Africans, and oftentimes, the relationships are limited to the settlers employing Africans as cooks, maidservants, and farmhands in their ranches and businesses. While the settlers’ legal citizenship is not in dispute, what they lack is “full cultural citizenship” (p. 4).

For white Kenyans, denial and belonging is a balancing act. Like the African Americans in DuBois’ (1996/1903) *The Souls of Black Folk*, they experience, according to McIntosh, a double consciousness; that is, they live with two conflicting identities that cannot be entirely merged together. Given the realities of colonial injustices (that make less transparent the folkloric accounts of colonialism as a ‘civilizing mission’), the settler descendants eagerly try to distinguish themselves from the image of the disparaged colonialist. They claim that their families remained in Kenya after independence in 1963 because of the emotional impossibility of leaving. They profess their sincerity and devotion to the development of Kenya. With their valuable know-how and managerial expertise, they pledge to work with Kenyans of all backgrounds to move its economy forward through wild-life conservation, hotel and tourism management, and project fund-raising. For their psychological well-being, they want to erase their ‘conflicted intimacies,’ their negative image as colonial racists or as spoiled elites.

Adopting ‘structural oblivion,’ many become unconscious of white privilege and the relative disadvantage of the majority of Kenyans.

Many white Kenyans do make concerted efforts to integrate into indigenous Kenyan cultures, notably through what McIntosh described as ‘linguistic atonement.’ They learn and speak indigenous languages, such as Kiswahili, Kenya’s official lingua franca, as well as Kikuyu, Giriama, Kalenjin, and others. While they communicate with their employees using local languages, English is still considered a privileged medium and reserved for use among the elite. In addition, settlers pride themselves on their generosity towards their staffs, with respect to paying regular wages, as well as offering financial assistance for family expenses when asked. In one sense, settler employers secure affection through a structure of economic dependency.

Some settler descendants cross racial boundaries by initiating romantic relationships with Africans. Settlers seeking acknowledgment of their belongingness see their interracial relationships as symbolic cultural and racial reconciliation, designed to secure their citizenship and, hence, land entitlements. However, other settlers view the relationships with disdain. Young African women dating older *mzungu* men are seen as ‘gold diggers.’ Some settlers describe interracial relationships with derisive condescension, such as ‘going bush,’ and those opposed to interracial romance raise the prospect of ‘black peril,’ nursing the fear that African males may sexually assault their European female employers.

Lastly, McIntosh describes how some settler descendants engage in local occult practices either because they believe in the potency of ‘black magic’ or in order to psychologically exploit Africans. For instance, occult practitioners use charms to police employees, ward off thievery, and neutralize the effects of malicious witchcraft.

At the center of the unsettled relations between white and black Kenyans is landrights. In addition, for the settler descendants of Kenya, denial and belonging is a balancing act, and they lack full cultural citizenship. On the one hand, most passionately wish to be counted as Kenyan and to belong to Kenyan society. However, on the other hand, they bear the remains of the colonial belief of European superiority and the belief that they constitute the linchpin to Kenya’s development. For their part, some indigenous Kenyans express doubt, partly class-based and/or race-based, that settler descendants are full Kenyan citizens. McIntosh’s fieldwork and interviews paint a nuanced, vivid portrait of the constrained race relations in Kenya. *Unsettled: Denial and Belonging Among White Kenyans* is a worthwhile read for students and academics in the fields of anthropology and history who are interested in the development of Kenya and similar nations.

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