

**Elizabeth Cooper. 2022. *Burning Ambition: Education, Arson, and Learning Justice in Kenya*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 222 pp.**

Elizabeth Cooper's book contributes to a developing body of research on justice in contemporary Africa. Well-grounded in social and political theory, Cooper's anthropological engagements tap into the emotive quotidian experiences of secondary school students to reveal how arson is used as an instrument of collective moral indignation towards a pervasive moral economy in Kenyan secondary boarding schools. Using a long historical approach to Kenya's turbulent political history, Cooper silhouettes the students' struggles for justice within the broader political struggle against repressive modes of governance in colonial and post-colonial Kenya. Why arson? In all seven chapters, Cooper successfully convinces her audience how the ominous and subversive materialities of fire play an important role in the students' subaltern struggles to attain retributive justice.

The first chapter conceptualizes justice as a subjective context-based construct that often adopts peculiar modes, in this case, fire. Kenyan secondary boarding school students have repurposed schools as sites for challenging the normative, prescriptive, and contrived meanings of justice. The main theme emphasized in this chapter is the agency of the students and how their use of arson as a form of justice shapes wider political discourses in Kenya. Are such acts of arson a form of tyranny or heroism? In the second chapter, Cooper problematizes how the students' subjective and personalized forms of justice through arson play out in public political discourses. The author maintains that although such acts have attracted political disaffection, the students reaffirm their actions as legitimate and righteous (p. 33). The more than 750 cases of arson recorded between 2008 and 2018 are seen by Cooper as the product of self-conscious actions by the youth to redefine the contours of justice in post-colonial Kenya (p.26).

Chapter 3 analyzes the acts of arson from a moral axis which further exposes the complexities of how people interpret justice as a fluid concept. Students validate their acts of arson as legitimate actions to communicate discontent against a corrupt moral economy in the schools characterized by corruption and embezzlement. Through the use of the public media, which plays a complicit role with the state, their actions are in turn pathologized as a culture of indiscipline and a sign of moral decadence. Chapter 4, engages further with why fire is the weapon of choice in the pursuit of justice. Arson is part of a repertoire of political tools in Kenya's political struggles. It is an act of exercising subversive power and communicating "disaffection and impunity" (p. 95). Cooper does well to contextualize arson within student struggles against poor diets, authoritarian attitudes, and insufficient learning facilities. For the students, fire is consciously chosen for its retributive elements. Cooper draws on vivid biblical references to Hellfire and other literary works that depict the transformative attributes of fire as a retributive tool for punishment.

Cooper further invites her audience in Chapters 5 and 6 into a vicarious imagination of student experiences. In these chapters, she engages the emotive experiences of students within a colonially inherited regimented boarding school systems. It is in the boarding schools where fires are most prevalent, where children are deprived of the comforts of home through temporal and physical removal (p. 113). The boarding school system is thus presented as a microcosm of everyday life which is "consistent with pervasive modes of governing life in Kenya" (p. 124).

The students are conscripts of monotony and further associate the boarding school experience with violent modes of punishment, isolation, anxiety, fear, and hunger (p. 123). Such conditions have fashioned heroic narratives around acts of arson as a tool for political negotiation and retribution.

Cooper's final chapter further accentuates her argument that the concept of justice is fluid but highly contentious. The prevailing modes of governance often challenge and delegitimize these subjective forms of justice through physical punishment. Ultimately, this leaves a lingering question, should certain ideas about justice be relinquished? (p. 169). In the end, Cooper leaves her audience with a sense that retributive justice through acts of arson has served to perpetuate a culture of violence in Kenyan schools and the wider Kenyan society. Such conclusions provide ample ground for further research on the positionality of retributive justice in post-colonial Africa.

This book provides a useful anthropological approach that is beneficial to historians, sociolegal historians, and anthropologists working in the fields of education and justice in post-colonial Africa.

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