

Prolegomenon

Robert Ouko, a Life and a Death

BORN MARCH 31, 1931, at Nyahera, in Kisumu District, western Kenya, John Robert Ouko was educated in local schools, served as a schoolmaster in the neighborhood, and pursued higher education in Ethiopia, where he took a degree in public administration. He went on to serve ably in Kenya's government and the East African Community as a high-level administrator and cabinet minister from the end of the colonial period through the governments of Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi, rising to the position of Kenyan foreign minister. Widely regarded from the late 1970s through the 1980s as Kenya's leading international spokesman and one of Africa's most effective statespersons, Robert Ouko sustained the critical infrastructure of the East African Community even as it was doomed to collapse in the early 1970s. In the economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s seated in the rise of international petroleum prices, in the structural adjustment pressures, and in the diminution of Cold War support for a Western-oriented Kenya, Ouko seemed a masterful presence, straddling national, continental, and global political terrains. In his personal life, he stood at the head of several households, private businesses, and a modernizing farm with some fifteen employees, moving easily and constantly among Nairobi, Kisumu (Kenya's second city), his farm at Koru outside Kisumu, and foreign destinations across the globe. In January and February 1990, he enjoyed access not only to his local political parliamentary constituency in Kisumu and to the leader and congregation of his local Koru church but also to President George H. W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker in Washington, D.C.

Ouko's expertise in planning and administration and his long experience at the highest levels of government were wedded to practical interests in local development, local investment, employment opportunity, improved housing, and more-productive farming. From the late 1980s, he became involved in a plan to revive a failed molasses-processing plant within his constituency that was designed to produce a range of essential agricultural, industrial, and

consumer products to offset imports. Early on, the plant consumed vast amounts of investment and governmental capital. It failed in its first iteration; indeed, it produced relatively little but debt. Evidence suggests that Ouko was, in the last weeks of his life, assembling a comprehensive report on the history of the molasses project and on the corruption touching on the plant—corruption at high levels in the Kenyan government and stretching through international networks into Europe. The report may have been unfinished, and, to this day, it is unclear just what its intended destination was. Moreover, its specific contents are unknown, for the documentation has been missing since February 13, 1990.

On February 12–13, 1990, John Robert Ouko, minister of foreign affairs and international cooperation in the government of Daniel arap Moi, disappeared from his Koru farm. On February 16, 1990, the Voice of Kenya broadcast a government announcement that Ouko's body had been found at 10:30 A.M. that Friday, discovered on a hill known as Got Alila but a few kilometers from his Koru home. Early reports in the press restated and amplified the first government statements, and, thereby, Kenya's publics and the world learned quickly that the body was found in a mutilated and smoldering state, with a firearm and other objects supposedly belonging to Ouko located near the body, suggesting contending possibilities as to the manner of his death.

The outcry that followed led President Moi to ask a team of detectives from Britain's New Scotland Yard to investigate the circumstances surrounding Ouko's death. In October 1990, with the Scotland Yard report in government hands but still not opened to public inspection as originally promised, Moi went further and appointed a judicial commission of inquiry to look into the minister's disappearance and death. The commission, chaired by Justice Johnston Evans Gicheru, met in public in Kisumu. Day by day, the commission's proceedings were reported in detail in the Kenyan papers. The publication of the proceedings in the press ultimately facilitated the publications of the findings of the New Scotland Yard team in the same dailies. The commission, which met for thirteen months and took evidence from 172 witnesses, was terminated by the president in November 1991. Gicheru's commission never produced a final report, but the testimony presented there as well as demands for further investigations became central elements in the multiparty democracy and civil society movements within Kenya that led, some twelve years later, to the election ending the Moi era. In the period that followed, Kenya's publics would expect greater accountability and transparency in governance, finance and economy, justice, and public life. In 1992, one individual was brought to trial for Ouko's murder and was acquitted. The case remains unsolved.

Since the first report that Minister Ouko was missing from his Koru farm, the question of his demise has been a focus of interest in the Kenyan press. In March 2003, one of the first actions of Kenya's Parliament in the new, post-Moi era was to constitute a parliamentary select committee to open a fresh inquiry into Robert Ouko's death.

The public transcripts of the Gicheru Commission of Inquiry (1990–1991), along with other records and publications in the public domain, provide exceptionally rich materials that encourage continued attention to the intricacies of the last months of Ouko's life, of the several investigations of the death, of the efforts that were evidently made to cover the tracks of those responsible for his death, and of the worlds of political and economic intrigue stretching from Kisumu to Lugano, Rome, Amsterdam, and Washington. The very situation of the knowledge of Ouko's demise—unsettled, contested, unfinished—presents an opportunity to interrogate the powers and poetics of knowledge production and the nature of knowledge in the setting of this terrible crime. Here was one of Africa's leading authorities on development, murdered as he was completing a report on the corrosion of development and bringing into one dossier the complexities of state, investment, international contracting, politics, economic planning, and leadership. In the present work, we document the official programs of knowledge, including excuses, alibis, explanations, and also silences, and thereby illuminate the moves of the state to control the emergent and occasionally momentous public interest in the narratives of Ouko's demise. We underline and document the interstitial, intermediate, indeterminate, and unfinished frames of knowledge emerging within and around the several investigations. And through examining in close detail the projects of comprehending Ouko's demise, we draw attention to the burdens of long-standing economies of knowledge respecting Africa and to the naturalized or pre-scripted understandings or renderings of Africa's past and present. The unsettled account of Robert Ouko demands that Africa must be understood in its specificities, not only in its generalities. His life and death require not only closure but also understanding.