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## Staging democracy: Kenya's televised presidential debates

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Kenyan election campaigning took a novel turn in 2013 with the introduction of televised presidential debates. The two debates were widely celebrated as signalling a positive turn in Kenyan campaigning, from the politics of personality and ethnicity towards a more sober, issue-based form of electoral competition. Organised by the nation's main media houses, the debates offer a unique lens through which to consider the role the media defined for itself during the election period. This paper argues that the debates were staged as part of the media's broader project of 'peace promotion'. In this way, actual *debate* between the candidates was of secondary importance to the spectacle of having all eight candidates amicably share the debate floor. This paper's approach thus emphasises the theatrical nature of the performances and the deliberate way in which they were designed to present a portrait of Kenya's maturing democracy. The paper concludes by situating these media spectacles within what is perceived to be a broader trend in Kenya whereby seductive images of the nation's future are produced and projected, thereby distracting from present realities.

**Keywords:** Kenya; spectacle; elections; televised debates; democracy; media; politics

Under the glare of studio lights, the eight candidates seeking the Kenyan presidency stood uncertainly as the national anthem was performed during the opening minutes of the country's first televised presidential debate. Behind them hung banners of State House bathed in red, blue and white: the colours of foreign democracies. In front of them a small audience composed largely of campaign teams, family members, civil society representatives and media personalities stared back at them.<sup>1</sup> For the first time all those aspiring for the Kenyan presidency were sharing a stage and facing questions on issues ostensibly of concern to the average voter, ranging from their plans for the country's education and healthcare systems to their views on the role of ethnicity in politics and the ongoing International Criminal Court (ICC) process. Two weeks later they reconvened to tackle a second batch of subjects, which included corruption, poverty and the issue of land.

The two debates – held on 11 and 25 February 2013 – were hailed as a 'positive milestone' that had the potential to inaugurate a new kind of political competition in a nation that only five years previously had witnessed electoral violence on a devastating scale.<sup>2</sup> Wholly a media-driven affair, the events were highly publicised and widely distributed via eight television and 34 radio stations.<sup>3</sup> They attracted a substantial audience, with a small poll conducted by Ipsos Synovate after the first debate finding that 78% of

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those sampled had been exposed to the programme, of which 66% had watched it on television.<sup>4</sup>

Taking the debates as our objects of study, we seek to describe the programmes themselves; to detail the planning that went into them and to explore the underlying logic motivating the media's attempts to stage debates for the first time. Whilst fully acknowledging the power – and limits – of mass media to influence public opinion, we do not attempt here to evaluate if and how the debates impacted on the eventual electoral outcome. Instead, we focus on the production of these events, emphasising their theatrical nature. Connecting this performative approach with broader questions surrounding the role of the media in post-conflict elections, we suggest that the debates were staged with a number of objectives in mind; and that the organisers' stated desire to foster the emergence of issue-based politics sat uneasily alongside other, less clearly stated motivations. Specifically, we contend that the media sought to use the debates to promote peace by creating a spectacle of elite friendship and mutual respect. The debates were also designed as a medium through which Kenya's evolving democracy was signified and celebrated, and as a highly visible way of demonstrating – to multiple audiences – how far the country had come since the events of 2007/08. We thus see the debates as 'media spectacles', designed more to impress than to inform the nation's electorate. Indeed, throughout the article we aim to show that actual debate between candidates was of secondary importance to the broader image being portrayed on screen.

### **Elections and the media**

Across the world, election periods present distinct challenges to the journalists who cover them.<sup>5</sup> Yet as Marie-Soleil Frère's analysis of the media's role in recent elections in six central African countries shows, these challenges are particularly acute in countries recovering from traumatic periods of violence and instability. Reporters working in these fragile political contexts often have to manage sensitively a range of tensions and fears that can be invoked among citizens by electoral competition. With voters participating in an act of 'collective reflection which can turn into a confrontation',<sup>6</sup> journalists have to be especially alive to the potential impact of their reporting. Standard journalistic codes and norms can prove difficult to apply, and in the countries examined by Frère, media operatives were often confronted with a series of dilemmas concerning the role they should play. Should, for example, electoral malpractice be reported, even if doing so threatens the broader peace?

The media landscape in Kenya is starkly different from those of the central African countries examined by Frère. A number of formidable media houses exist in Kenya, which are privately owned and have print, television, radio and online outputs. The various outlets are thought by many in the public to be under the influence of competing political and business interests.<sup>7</sup> Yet still the media is frequently ranked as one of the most trusted public institutions in Kenya.<sup>8</sup> Whilst criticism of the media and the role it played in fuelling the violence after elections in 2007 has mainly been levelled against vernacular radio stations, mainstream media nonetheless 'failed to prevent the dissemination of party propaganda and the violent rhetoric of many political leaders'.<sup>9</sup> In light of this, the run up to the 2013 elections saw key players in the media community think carefully about their role in securing peaceful polls.<sup>10</sup> Whilst such reflexivity was not wholly absent in 2007/08, as Florence Brisset-Foucault has discussed,<sup>11</sup> the nature of 2013 as a 'post-conflict' election undoubtedly raised the stakes for all concerned.

In the months since the election there has been some debate as to whether media outlets lived up to the task professional norms demanded of them. One of the most contentious issues has concerned the media's decision to self-censor in the interests of keeping the peace. By not, for example, reporting speeches made by members of the campaign teams during the vote-count, were the television networks failing to fulfil their primary purpose? Similarly, criticism has been levelled against the media for their apparent reluctance to ask probing questions of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) during the lengthy vote tallying and transmission process. Michela Wrong describes the somewhat farcical situation of the IEBC chairman congratulating the media for their 'exemplary behaviour' whilst a vote-tallying screen above his head continued to display 'figures that did not add up'.<sup>12</sup> In not probing these discrepancies, was the media abdicating its basic responsibilities?

Analyses of the role the media played during the elections have thus tended to focus mainly on the decision-making process in a relatively direct manner. Whilst questions have been raised about what one columnist has described as a culture of 'peace evangelism',<sup>13</sup> these have tended to manifest themselves in discussions of what exactly should have been reported, and when. The issue at stake has effectively been whether, in its efforts to promote peaceful polls, the media abdicated from its customary watchdog role by censoring its output, as indeed it did in 2007/08.<sup>14</sup> The presidential debates have not featured heavily in commentary around this issue. Instead, the media groups responsible for organising them have constructed a narrative which focuses largely on the debates' potential to usher in a new form of politics. The debates, it has widely been argued, represent a crucial stage in the movement away from the politics of ethnicity and personality, towards a form of issue-based politics.<sup>15</sup> John Githongo talked of them being 'beamed across the planet much to our pride',<sup>16</sup> whilst British print and online newspaper *The Guardian* acclaimed them for providing Kenyans with a rare 'chance to judge their prospective leaders on their words and policies rather than on who they are'.<sup>17</sup>

### **Media spectacles**

We do not wholly reject these positive presentations of the debates. At the very least, in providing journalists with the opportunity to extract – live on television – commitments from candidates on a range of issues, the debates might make it easier for politicians to be held to account for their campaign promises.<sup>18</sup> We do however argue that the debates demand further critical attention. Indeed it is our contention that they provide a unique window into key media organisations' mindsets, and to their conception of their role in the run-up to the elections. In this way, connections between cultural production and the nation's broader political-economy should not go unexplored. We find Douglas Kellner's concept of media spectacles useful in this regard, these he defines as:

Media constructs that are out of the ordinary and outside habitual daily routine. ... They involve an aesthetic dimension and are often dramatic, bound up with competition. ... They are highly public social events, often taking a ritualistic form to celebrate society's highest values.<sup>19</sup>

Drawing on Kellner's analytical framework, we see the debates as media-constructed performances which were meticulously staged and, to a lesser extent, scripted. The candidates' movements were carefully choreographed, from their arrivals at the venue, to their entrances on stage, their handshakes, and ultimately to the post-debate mingle between

candidates and their families.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the physical staging of the event itself was loaded with symbolism, most obviously with the aforementioned images of State House and the red, white and blue colour scheme. An introductory video contained dramatic images of Kenyan landscapes, interspersed with clips of citizens queuing to vote in past elections. Such devices underline the fact that the debates were, first and foremost, designed for television consumption. Much of their power would have been lost to radio listeners not experiencing this aesthetic assault, which we see as pivotal to the productions.

In treating the debates as media spectacles, we recognise that our work stands apart from much academic analysis of political debates. American presidential debates in particular have been intensively studied, particularly by scholars in the fields of communication and media studies. Yet the bulk of this scholarship is concerned with either the content of the debates themselves, particularly the language used by the presidential aspirants,<sup>21</sup> or with the relationship between candidates' performance and electoral outcomes.<sup>22</sup> Whilst there would clearly be value in applying these approaches to the Kenyan debates,<sup>23</sup> this article focuses more on the style than the substance of the debates. This in part reflects the media's own objectives in staging the debates. It was in many respects enough for the events simply to go ahead – for the candidates to share a stage, and just as importantly to be *seen* to share a stage – as it was for genuine debate to occur.

That the organisers intended to transmit a particular message about Kenyan politics and the impending polls to those watching is clear from the press coverage provided by the very same media houses that organised them. On the day of the first debate, an article in *The Standard* not only prepared audiences for the spectacle ahead but also deciphered its potential meaning as well:

It would be refreshing to see Mr Raila Odinga and Mr Uhuru Kenyatta give each other a bear hug. If the two can do that, what would stop a Kikuyu and a Luo embracing each other and treating the political rhetoric as just that, not a life-long enmity?<sup>24</sup>

Whilst Kenyatta and Odinga did not quite deliver a 'bear hug', the handshakes and repeated references to 'my honourable brother' went some way in providing the spectacle of friendship and respect intended by the organisers. By adopting the desired language and behaviour, the leading candidates displayed an awareness of the ritualised nature of the debate form, and of their participation in a media spectacle. This is not to present the candidates as merely passive participants; they naturally sought to capitalise on the opportunities provided by the debates. In speaking of his 'personal challenges' at the ICC, for instance, Kenyatta attempted to remake his world into one where he – like all politicians – had a private life that had no bearing on his capacity to lead the country.

### **A media-driven initiative**

Supporting the media and promoting responsible journalism is one area in which non-governmental organizations (NGOs), donors and international organisations try to intervene constructively in post-conflict elections.<sup>25</sup> In her discussion of several political debate shows aired ahead of Kenya's 2007 elections, Brisset-Foucault details the involvement of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Media Development in Africa (MEDEVA),<sup>26</sup> who provided financial backing and guidance on editorial content and style.<sup>27</sup> In 2013, the presidential debates listed Uwaino, a UNDP-backed platform that seeks

to harness the media in pursuit of peaceful elections as one of its associates, along with the IEBC.

However, the networks tried to ensure that the debates were presented as wholly media driven. They thus minimised the involvement of donors and politicians in the planning process, as both of these stakeholders risked damaging the credibility of the debates. Instead, the country's three leading media houses – Royal Media Services (RMS), the Nation Media Group and the Standard Group – came together to form a united front from which to promote the debates agenda and to enlist the support of all presidential aspirants.<sup>28</sup> It needs emphasising that these media houses are direct competitors who are also popularly believed to favour certain political factions. The debates thus represent a significant collaboration undertaken in the name of the national interest.

Negotiations, both between the media houses and with the candidates, were lengthy and took place at the highest levels, with the chief executive officers (CEOs) of the three companies enlisted to the cause.<sup>29</sup> RMS's Managing Director, Wachira Waruru, chaired the debates' steering committee, whilst the CEO of the Nation Group, Linus Kaikai, made the original announcement that the debates would happen.<sup>30</sup> In a striking example of the media pushing the debates agenda forward, one campaign advisor claimed that newspaper adverts for the events were published before a firm agreement had been reached with all the candidates. Those who had previously been reluctant to commit were left with little choice but to participate.<sup>31</sup> These negotiations were not without conflict. Early plans to hold debates stalled after the candidates were officially announced.<sup>32</sup> The questions of how many and which candidates should be included divided organisers and campaign teams. The frontrunners preferred fewer candidates, selected on the basis of polling data, whilst organisers pushed for more candidates,<sup>33</sup> arguably to dilute the conflict on-stage. The last minute court-ordered inclusion of Paul Muite and Mohammed Dida further exemplifies how contested and coveted the debate platform was,<sup>34</sup> which offered – especially the minor candidates – free and unparalleled publicity.

The one significant exception to this narrative of media dominance came in the aftermath of the first debate, when rumours began to circulate that Kenyatta would no longer be participating in the second contest. With Kenyatta apparently angered by some of the lines of questioning pursued by moderator Linus Kaikai during the section on the ICC, a Jubilee Campaign press release described the debate as 'skewed, shambolic and farcical,' and claimed that the candidate had decided his time was better spent returning to 'the campaign trail'.<sup>35</sup> The CORD campaign quickly responded by accusing Kenyatta of seeking to dodge questions on land which would be tabled in the second debate.<sup>36</sup> Kenyatta ultimately chose to attend, but the exchanges around his potential no-show represent the only real moment when campaigns sought visibly to politicise the issue of attendance at the debates. The Jubilee campaign also seemed to secure their desired outcome, with each and every candidate having their personal integrity probed during the second debate.

The overriding stated objective of the media in pushing for the debates was to make a positive contribution to the electoral process, by helping to inaugurate a new era of issue-based politics. Journalists felt that 'the whole country was watching them', and talked of a 'responsibility to the public' to move the country's 'political environment to the next level'.<sup>37</sup> In place of the usual political platitudes produced during campaign seasons, candidates would be asked difficult questions on the issues journalists deemed to be of most importance to ordinary Kenyans, and would be held to account for their answers.<sup>38</sup> The extent to which the debates were successful in eliciting an issue-based discussion is,

in the final analysis, questionable. Whilst candidates were asked questions and often pushed for specific answers by the moderators, the discussion was often either repetitive – with candidates parroting one another – or was rooted in personal accusations and rebuttals. The section on corruption during the second debate saw the mud-slinging reach a crescendo, with all candidates facing accusations of past improprieties.

At times the questions seemed out of touch with reality, particularly in the extended discussion surrounding prospects for the introduction of a minimum wage, which had all the candidates tying themselves in knots over the definitional difference between minimum and living wages. It is also worth noting at this point that simply discussing issues does not amount to issue-based politics. Whilst Odinga did at one point describe himself as a ‘social democrat’, it was difficult over five hours of debate to discern real policy differences – let alone ideological differences – between the candidates. Too often the go-to policy response was simply to implement the constitution, whilst the standard answer to financial questions was to cut government waste and clamp down on corruption. Taxation policy was conspicuous by its absence from the discussion, something which with hindsight, given the Jubilee government’s controversial changes to value added tax (VAT), might have been an instructive discussion for some voters. Ultimately, post-debate analysis emphasised the novelty of the events rather than the content; the fact that they ‘broke barriers’ was accepted much more readily than the possibility that they could have swayed voters.<sup>39</sup>

### **Images of peace**

Whilst the extent to which the debates elicited from candidates ‘a concrete agenda, complete with an implementation matrix’,<sup>40</sup> is questionable, the media were clearly operating with multiple objectives in mind when staging them. Journalists admitted with relative openness that, in holding the debates, they hoped to neutralise some of the latent potential for electoral violence and dispel ‘the idea that this was a win or die or election’.<sup>41</sup> In pursuing this objective – which was clearly underpinned by certain assumptions about who perpetrated the violence after the last election and why – as much significance was attached to the spectacle and imagery of the debates as it was to the questions posed to candidates. Key moments in the debates were scripted, staged and choreographed to encourage cordial interactions between the candidates. Simple dramatic devices were deployed to show the mutual respect shared by these members of the political elite. For example, candidates were instructed that they *had* to shake hands with one another upon entering the debate arena to give the universal sign of respect and fair play.<sup>42</sup> It was hoped that this staged show of mutual respect would work to dissuade supporters from reacting violently in the event of disappointing results.<sup>43</sup>

Televised debates also provided the opportunity for the media to extract public pledges from the candidates, which they could later be used to hold them to account. Moderator Julie Gichuru made the most of this opportunity during a discussion on how candidates intended to keep the upcoming polls peaceful. In a quick-fire round of questions, Gichuru ensured that every candidate made an unequivocal promise not to incite violence. She even went as far as to finish candidates’ answers for them, drumming home the mantra ‘we don’t go to the street, we go to the courts’. This section concluded with Gichuru thanking the candidates for their pledges. Whilst this exchange was aimed at eliciting pledges of peace from the candidates to which they could later be held, the spectacle was also constructed for audiences across the country, so as to alter their outlook and behaviour. As the chairman of the steering committee, Wachira Waruru, explains, the message to take from the debates is:



that there is no need, first and foremost, to each kill other over politics. Indeed, one of the most interesting things that happened in the first debate is actually not within the debate itself, but what happened after the debate. Because all the candidates were joined on the stage by their families. We had bitter rivals holding their grandchildren on the stage, showing off their children to each other. And it was such a pleasant spectacle. ... And the message was: it's never that serious. If these guys can stand in front of the whole country and show such friendship, why should the rest of us fight over them?<sup>44</sup>

This section of the programme was deliberately staged to show voters that, at the end of the day, politics is just a profession; that underneath public disputes lies genuine friendship.<sup>45</sup> To adopt Goffman's terminology, this is, in a way, an attempt to make visible the divisions between politicians' front stage persona and back stage.<sup>46</sup> Publicly, in the 'front stage' they are competitors and political adversaries. When the show ends we see the supposed 'back stage' scene: Kenyatta cooing over Karua's grandchild whilst all exchange pleasant greetings. Despite the first debate running over an hour beyond its allotted timeframe, there was no quick cutaway at the end, with the cameras instead lingering for a significant period on this staged show of elite friendship. It was a key moment in the programme. The irony of course is that, in Kenyan politics, this elite unity is in certain respects very real; the backstage is no more of a facade than the front stage. By exposing this space of solidarity, the debates perhaps reaffirmed for audiences the stability of the elite pact that had historically governed the country, but which broke down in 2007/08 with devastating consequences.<sup>47</sup>

### **Staging democratic 'maturity'**

Beyond the understandable desire to take direct action which would work to prevent a repeat of the events of 2007/08, memories of the violence pervaded media coverage of the 2013 elections in a much broader sense. The events of the preceding election 'left deep scars in the public psyche',<sup>48</sup> one of which was the laying bare of the 'cancer of tribalism', to use debate moderator Linus Kaikai's words. This was the first area of discussion in the first debate because, it was deemed 'the single most serious problem in the country'. By labelling tribalism in this way, the moderators conjured up a vision of the dark place Kenya was coming from, and offered up – through aesthetic means – the hope of a bright future, akin to other 'mature' democracies that hold presidential debates. Newspaper opinion pieces pitted the style, content and conduct demanded of candidates in a political debate against the unregulated mode that rallies precipitate. As one commentator observed 'in political rallies, they [politicians] are guided by populism, but in a controlled live debate, they must justify the promises they have made'.<sup>49</sup>

In her study of public meetings, Angelique Haugerud demonstrates how such forums have been used by the colonial and postcolonial state to control political debate. However, since the reintroduction of multi-partyism, the state's control over public debate has diminished. Due in large part to the events of 2007/08, rallies have seemingly been transformed in the public imagination into spaces of irresponsibility, where politicians, largely removed from the glare of the media, are free to make empty promises and promote divisive perspectives. The Waki Report, which investigated the post-election violence, laid emphasis on hate-speech disseminated at rallies as a significant contributing factor to the violence.<sup>50</sup> Political rallies have come to be perceived as a 'circus',<sup>51</sup> a 'carnival',<sup>52</sup> and a 'sideshow',<sup>53</sup> where 'issues are politicised and personalities become the main subject of discussion'.<sup>54</sup> By contrast, debates were praised in the media as somehow un-African; a 'rarity in this part of the world', unlike in 'old democracies' such as America, where they



are 'long-established traditions'.<sup>55</sup> By holding presidential debates Kenya was 'moving away from the easily excitable masses at a rally' to an alternative political space governed by markedly different standards and procedures.<sup>56</sup>

One commentator conveyed this sense of Kenya's modernising democracy, when he noted the contrast between Moi's 1997 chat with John Sibi-Okumo and the presidential debates. Mirroring the language of the Jubilee campaign, he claimed that: 'we have come from the analogue of monologue to the digital of debate and benched the old, tried and tested mode of hurling insults (and stones) at each other before cheering mobs'.<sup>57</sup> This language of transition – from 'tribalism' to 'maturity' – has permeated public discourse in Kenya over the past five years. Ghia Nodia explicates the relationship between ideas of democracy and maturity, when he writes that:

The creation of a liberal democratic polity becomes a measure of political maturity. Failure would signal a shameful 'national disgrace'. Only sovereign states with stable, liberal democratic governments are eligible to join the prestigious international club of 'advanced' or 'modern' nations.<sup>58</sup>

The emphasis on creation is important. The presidential debates were devised as an integral process that would both signify and enable the maturing of Kenyan election campaigning. They would force candidates to talk about issues and behave in a certain way. But furthermore, by placing candidates on the debate floor, they were brought alongside their international peers. This affinity between Kenya and other liberal democracies was underscored by the plastering of red, blue and white on the programme's visual effects, and the stage itself, as opposed to the flag colours of red, green and black. This aesthetic association built upon pre-debate coverage in the press that made frequent comparisons between Kenya's upcoming contests and American debates.<sup>59</sup> This aspect of the spectacle resonated strongly with regional audiences. One Ugandan commentator argued that 'such a debate would never take place in the Pearl of Africa'; that it symbolised a wider process of democratisation, absent in Uganda.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, a Tanzanian journalist voiced the hope that politicians in his own country would take inspiration from developments in Kenya; that it was 'time Tanzania emulated such mature political debates'.<sup>61</sup>

The reason that international audiences were even able to engage with the debates must not be overlooked. The decision to hold them in English rather than Kiswahili reveals a great deal about the organisers' priorities. Whilst both languages are spoken widely and have *official* language status, the 2010 constitution designates Kiswahili alone as the Republic's *national* language.<sup>62</sup> Yet the first debate took place entirely in English. In the days after the programme aired, leading Kiswahili scholars complained that the use of English was 'biased'; that it excluded large swathes of the country's population and in the process denied them their constitutional rights.<sup>63</sup> Noting that candidates tend to speak in Kiswahili when addressing rallies, they went on to question exactly whom the debates were targeting with their use of English.<sup>64</sup> It is particularly interesting to note in this regard that whilst the organisers provided no provision for simultaneous translation into Kiswahili, there was a sign-language interpreter at the bottom of the screen.<sup>65</sup>

The scholars' complaints received little coverage in the press, but journalists have since admitted that the use of English was, with hindsight, a contentious decision. Whilst recognising that many Kenyans would effectively be excluded from the debates, they felt that English was simply the 'obvious medium' through which to discuss complex political issues.<sup>66</sup> For them, the 'digital of debate' required an internationally understood language. The choice of English in part reflects deeply rooted linguistic power asymmetries in Kenya

and Africa more broadly. Haugerud explores the phenomenon of code-switching at Kenyan public meetings, noting that English has typically been accorded a higher status than Kiswahili. Its use by politicians has often worked 'to convey a message of superiority' to non-educated members of the audience.<sup>67</sup> The extent to which these linguistic power dynamics informed the decision-making of the debates' organisers is unclear, but by having candidates speak in English, the debates provided them with a means to stand alongside Obama and Romney and meet increasingly normative, Western expectations of how one must act on the campaign trail.

### Exposing the spectacle

The debates were thus staged in part to promote peace and to exhibit Kenya's maturing democracy. There is something of a contradiction between these two motives in that 'mature' democracies from whom the Kenyan media took inspiration tend not to be anxious about electoral violence. Similar tensions arose at times between the topics of discussion and the formal, official style of the debates. For example, the section discussing each candidates' alleged past offences of corruption and impunity sits uncomfortably within the normative tone of political debates where candidates are ostensibly meant to attack one another on matters of policy, not private accumulation. The extent to which this is ever truly the case is of course questionable, but it is important to stress once again that this focus on policy rather than personality was a key stated aim of the debates' organisers. By incorporating questions on issues such as corruption and the ICC process, which the candidates could answer, dodge and deflect, the debates – perhaps inadvertently – worked to normalise them, and to defuse their potency as divisive political issues. Following Gluckman, we thus see the debates as possessing some of the qualities of a 'ritual of rebellion'; events which function to lay bare social tensions and in doing so work to heal these rifts without altering the structure of society.<sup>68</sup> Examining Gluckman's work, Susan Schröter explains that 'the final goal of these rituals was a social blessing and the strengthening and renewing of the established order'.<sup>69</sup> The emphasis is on the *performance* of tension and the cathartic, stabilising effects of this. McLeod has applied this concept to the presidential campaign season in America. Here, the ritual socio-dramas of the campaign season allow potentially violent divisions within society to be given voice within a structured and temporally bound arena, thus rendering them surmountable. 'American society is disarticulated metaphorically...and then rearticulated every four years', and through this cathartic exercise the broader status quo is preserved, indeed strengthened.<sup>70</sup>

We find these concepts useful for understanding how questions about corruption, economic inequality and the ICC worked to deactivate these controversial issues. It is not suggested that the media consciously aimed to endorse such uncomfortable realities. Rather, simply in exposing these rifts, the debates made them less divisive. Clearly, all these topics have been discussed extensively in the Kenyan press innumerable times, both before and since the debates. The key difference here is that the all the candidates were put on the spot, in real time, with the nation watching. Having survived the questioning, candidates were free to recommence their *modus operandi*.

The degree to which the organisers tried to control the tone and direction of debate is perhaps most apparent when we turn to Mohamed Dida's participation. Previously unknown on the Kenyan political scene, Dida provided a series erratic contributions, which were at times rambling and parabolic; at other moments direct and insightful. On several occasions he exposed the limitations of the debate between candidates and the

hollowness of the broader spectacle by interrupting stagnant discussions. During the section on corruption he cut in to ask the moderator: ‘did you expect a thief to tell you “I’ve stolen?”’. Similarly, when discussing economic inequality he stood alone by rejecting the scales set by the salary commission, given its ‘sycophancy and nearness to the palace’. Perhaps not especially eloquent, his repeated charge that ‘nobody is super Kenyan’, resounded uncomfortably in the plushy private school-cum-television studio in Lavington, a wealthy Nairobi suburb. In exposing the inadequacies of his fellow candidates and their inability to talk objectively and honestly about these difficult issues, Dida’s comments disordered the structured performance, and introduced an element of uncertainty to the whole show. It is notable that many of his less comprehensible contributions were met with visible embarrassment from the moderators. During the discussion on healthcare, for instance, his suggestion that Kenyans should eat only when they are hungry, and then should remember to leave room for water and ‘breathing space’, was met with spontaneous laughter from elements of the audience, but left Gichuru noticeably exasperated. Other bizarre answers were quickly sidestepped, with moderators looking to move onto other candidates rather than interrogate him further. These incidents exposed the spectacle at play, showing that the substantive content of candidates’ exchanges was often of secondary importance to the tone and style of their speech. The moderators expected and needed the candidates to comply with certain normative debate roles; Dida’s failure to do so at times left them uncertain as to how to proceed.

Analysis of an additional, much less widely publicised debate also exposes the spectacle at play during the two presidential debates. On 14 February 2013, at Nairobi’s All Saints Anglican Cathedral, the eight candidates’ running mates took part in a much more low-key debate, which attracted a fraction of the domestic press coverage afforded to their counterparts. Participants seemed noticeably more relaxed in this setting than those at the top of the ticket did during their debates. The debate was organised by the country’s churches in response to the planned presidential debates, which were seen as overly commercialised and with no room for a discussion of values.<sup>71</sup> A network of churches facilitated the debate and it was distributed for free on Christian radio stations, and broadcast live on KBC (the state-run network). Whilst the presidential debates dealt with issues that were of concern to the journalists organising them, such as the economy and security, the deputies debate dealt with issues which the churches claimed were important to their members, such as abortion, sexuality and the school syllabus.<sup>72</sup> According to one of the organisers, some of the questions were ‘very naughty from the mainstream perspective – the questions on marriage and the permissibility of certain types of relationship’.<sup>73</sup> Some answers were equally ‘naughty’, with William Ruto claiming that the Bible ‘equates homosexuals with a very derogated animal called dogs’. These sorts of questions – and the answers they would elicit – were deliberately avoided in the mainstream debates. Whilst aware of the strong links between religion and politics in Kenya,<sup>74</sup> the organisers of the presidential debates seemingly wished to avoid highlighting them. If the Kenyan debates were to stand alongside their international counterparts, they had to project an image of a *liberal* democracy, where a genuine separation of church and state tends to be expected.

### **Governance by spectacle**

The organisers’ stated objective for the debates was to force candidates to outline their proposed policies and defend their positions on various issues. The programmes probably

succeeded in this regard, but is there any evidence that this exercise had an impact on the election itself? A small poll conducted after the first debate, found that roughly only one-quarter of those sampled considered the show to have changed their choice.<sup>75</sup> Of these, all candidates except Kenyatta and Kiyapi lost support, with these two gaining by 2.9% and 0.1% respectively.<sup>76</sup> Some have suggested that the reason Kenyatta exceeded the 50% of the vote threshold can in part be attributed to the disappointing displays by Kenneth and Mudavadi during the debates, as many expected them to perform better.<sup>77</sup> Such assertions are impossible to quantify without further polling data or targeted research. But beyond the direct influence of the debates on voter choice, we do see the programmes working instrumentally to improve the image of Kenyan politics, but more specifically Uhuru Kenyatta. Coached by a British public relations firm, Kenyatta came across not as a tribal warlord but as a skilled and eloquent leader. Arguably, this transformation of Kenyatta into a legitimate statesman might have some bearing on how ongoing negotiations regarding the ICC play out.

Assessing what impacts, if any, the debates had is challenging when much of their power lay in the programmes' aesthetics rather than specific content. The widely circulated image of all the candidates standing at podiums with a picture of State House in the background was a tantalising representation of what politics in Kenya is, or more importantly could, be. Writing of the Malawian context, Oyvind Eggen explores how aesthetic imaginaries can be deployed by the state in substitution for concrete realities. He describes the way images can reflect 'ideas of a future form of stateness' which a country may crave to create.<sup>78</sup> In staging the debates the way they did, the media projected a particular vision of what form of political culture Kenya should aspire to. To truly see this, it is useful to speculate on the alternative ways in which the debates could have occurred. They could have taken place in a typical government school, with a studio audience representative of the population, not the political elite. The debates could have been held in Kiswahili, and only included front-runners Odinga, Kenyatta and Mudavadi. The moderators could have really pushed candidates for answers that went beyond just 'the constitution says ...'. If any of these alternatives had taken place though, the spectacle would have been undermined.

With the debates, the media assembled a constellation of images, actions and sound-bites that came together to form a highly seductive aesthetic of democracy in Kenya. Democracy was the debate floor, not the debate, and the discussion of issues was all that was required to claim that issue-based politics is taking root in Kenya. Almost a form of propaganda, an integral aim of the debates was to promote the nation itself, and – as embodied by the programmes themselves – its rapidly evolving civic and political culture. Indeed Gichuru wrapped up the first debate by concluding: 'What we do all agree on is this is a great nation', and furthermore, that 'Kenya is poised for incredible growth.'<sup>79</sup>

Such use of spectacle forms part of a broader trend in Kenya, which sees intoxicating images of the nation's bright future produced, projected and circulated. In this way, the country's blueprint policy document *Vision 2030*, is blanketed with digitally mastered photographs that claim to depict what the country will look like by the year 2030 if the policy's roadmap is followed. Pictures of magic-bullet solutions such as the Lamu Port-Southern Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor are used to substantiate promises of imminent and rapid growth.<sup>80</sup> Quick to recognise the power of these visual devices, Kenyatta and Ruto have capitalised on the opportunities offered by social media for sharing such images. On a number of occasions since taking office the duo have

tweeted photographs of them at the airport together, with Ruto either waving the president away as he departs on an overseas trip, or welcoming him back. The images essentially constitute a highly visible performance of the constitution; the symbolic temporary handover of executive power from president to deputy. With both men facing trials at the Hague, the images implicitly work to assuage any doubts over the nation's leadership and the solidity of the constitutional order whilst either is out of the country.

We see the debates as part of this trend towards governance by spectacle; a project performed by multiple parties who have a stake in the nation. They were to project a vision of the direction in which Kenyan democracy is moving whilst simultaneously bringing that goalpost closer in the very staging of the events. The decision of the Kenyan media to devote considerable resources to these spectacles raises interesting questions concerning the role they staked for themselves in the electoral process. It is clear from the presidential debates that the Kenyan media saw its role as extending well beyond just informing voters and acting as a watchdog. Instead, they felt a responsibility to contribute more directly to the democratic process; to take action to secure a peaceful outcome, and beyond this, to promote the nation itself.<sup>81</sup> In doing so, we suggest that they partially abdicated their normative responsibility to interrogate the visions of the country's future being offered by the campaigns, and instead became complicit in the construction of a governance spectacle. Such close cooperation perhaps compromised the media's ability to hold politicians and institutions to account. Questions around these issues extend well beyond the scope of this article. Yet in offering this analysis, we hope to have shown that Kenya's so called 'peaceocracy' played out as much in the constructed realm of spectacle as it did in the more tangible decisions about what to report and when.

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## Notes

1. Interview with an RMS journalist, RM Communication Centre, Nairobi, May 22, 2013.
2. [Ni Chonghaile](#), "Kenya Hosts First Televised Presidential Debate."
3. [Mundi](#), "All set for Kenya's Presidential Debate."
4. [Ipsos Public Affairs](#), *Political Barometer Survey*, pp. 6, 10.
5. [Howard](#), *Media & Elections*, p. 2.
6. [Frère](#), *Elections and the Media*, p. 13.
7. [Somerville](#), "Violence, Hate Speech and Inflammatory Broadcasting," p. 89.
8. [Orengo](#), "Police Most Corrupt."
9. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
10. Interview with an RMS journalist, RMS Communication Centre, Nairobi, May 22, 2013.
11. [Brisset-Foucault](#), "Electoral Campaign on Television."
12. [Wrong](#), "To Be Prudent."
13. [Allen](#), "Kenya's Journalists Start to Break."
14. [Kittony](#), "Role of the Media."
15. For example, [Daily Nation](#), "Presidential Debates Will be Good for Kenya."
16. [Githongo](#), "Rethinking the Kenya Project."
17. [Ni Chonghaile](#), "Kenya Hosts First Televised Presidential Debate."
18. Interview with Nation Media journalist 1, Nation Media Centre, May 15, 2013.

19. Kellner, "Media Spectacle and Media Events," p. 76.
20. Interview with an RMS journalist, RMS Communication Centre, Nairobi, May 22, 2013; Sugow, "How the Presidential Debate will be Conducted."
21. For example, Agha, "Tropic Aggression."
22. For example, Watson, "Theatre and the Presidential Debates."
23. For more information, see Ipsos Public Affairs, *Political Barometer Survey*.
24. Kipkemboi, "Presidential Debates Can be Game-Changer."
25. Howard, "International Media Assistance."
26. A Kenyan NGO focusing on media development.
27. Brisset-Foucault, "Electoral Campaign on Television," p. 115.
28. Interview with an RMS journalist, RMS Communication Centre, Nairobi, May 22, 2013.
29. Interview with Nation Media journalist 2, Nation Centre Nairobi, 15 May 2013.
30. *Daily Nation*, "Presidential Hopefuls to Slug it Out." The first debate was originally scheduled to take place on 26 November 2012, but was postponed until the final electoral alliances had been decided.
31. Telephone interview with Simon Waddington, May 20, 2013.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Matata, "Muite and Dida to Participate."
35. Leftie, "CORD and Jubilee in Blame Game."
36. Ibid.
37. Interview with an RMS journalist, RMS Communication Centre, Nairobi, May 22, 2013.
38. Interview with Nation Media journalist 1, Nation Media Centre, 15 May 2013.
39. Mwiti, "Winners and Losers."
40. *Daily Nation*, "Presidential Debates Will Be Good For Kenya."
41. Interview with Nation Media journalist 1, Nation Media Centre, 15 May 2013.
42. Interview with an RMS journalist, RMS Communication Centre, Nairobi, May 22, 2013.
43. Kipkemboi, "Presidential Debates Can be Game-Changer."
44. Clottey, "Kenya to Hold Final Presidential Debate."
45. Interview with an RMS journalist, RMS Communication Centre, Nairobi, May 22, 2013.
46. Goffman, *Presentation of Self*.
47. Branch and Cheeseman, "Conclusion: Failure of Nation-Building," p. 244.
48. Kagwanja and Southall, "Introduction: Kenya – A Democracy in Retreat?," p. 275.
49. *The Standard*, "Editorial: Today's Presidential Debate."
50. Waki Commission, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, pp. 216–17.
51. Makona, "Most Political Rallies."
52. Ibid.
53. Ndonga, "Kenyans Hail the Presidential Debate."
54. Lwabukuna, "Kenya's First Presidential Election Debate."
55. *Daily Nation*, "Presidential Debates Will be Good for Kenya."
56. Kipkemboi, "Presidential Debates Can be Game-Changer."
57. *The Standard*, "Crazy Questions for 2013 Presidential Debate."
58. Nodia, "Nationalism and Democracy," p. 16.
59. For example, Zilper, "Lessons Kenya Can Learn."
60. Onyango-Obbo, "Why Kenya Has Presidential Debates."
61. Machira, "Local Politicians Inspired."
62. Article 7 (1).
63. Rajab, "Scholars Call for Use of Kiswahili." The poll conducted by IPSOS Synovate also noted 'a large proportion of the audience' had been excluded by the decision to hold the debates in English.
64. Ibid.
65. In response to the complaints the second debate contained a brief section in Kiswahili, moderated by Joe Ageyo, but again there was no on-screen translation service provided for the rest of event.
66. Interview with *Daily Nation* journalist 2, Nation Centre, Nairobi, May 15, 2013.
67. Haugerud, *Culture of Politics in Modern Kenya*, p. 63.
68. Gluckman, *Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa*.
69. Schröter, "Rituals of Rebellion", p. 44.



70. McLeod, "Sociodrama of Presidential Politics," p. 360.
71. Interview with Professor Levi Obonyo, Daystar University Nairobi, May 14, 2013.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. The day before the second debate, for instance, the presidential candidates attended a 'national day of repentance and prayers' at Uhuru Park, which was presided over by the self-styled Prophet David Uwuor.
75. Ipsos Public Affairs, *Political Barometer Survey*, pp. 6, 33–4.
76. Ibid.
77. Telephone interview with Simon Waddington, May 20, 2013.
78. Eggen, "Performing Good Governance," p. 2.
79. Fortin, "Kenya Seeks Progress."
80. See the Vision 2030 website: <http://www.vision2030.go.ke/>.
81. Brisset-Foucault's analysis of the media's actions in 2007 is also instructive here; Brisset-Foucault, "Electoral Campaign on Television."

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