

Crisis and the Regeneration of the Self: The Mungiki Movement's Power of Mobilisation

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Spaces of associational life in African countries have become widened in response to globalisation and democratisation processes. The widening has engendered the formation both of organisations and social movements that correspond to conventional notions of civil society agents and also a flourishing of those collective actors that could rather be termed 'uncivil society': vigilante groups, militias, gangs and mafias. The latter actors often have a 'Janus faced' nature and slide between roles as legitimate providers of social services and violent oppressors of communities in their social environments. They have become a potent channel for the articulation of political grievances of underprivileged youths in particular, while due to their radicalism, illegality or militancy, they are often disqualified from participation in formal political arenas. A case in point is the *Mungiki* movement in Kenya, which is the focus of this paper. We argue that there has been a tendency to focus mainly on the 'uncivil' face of Mungiki often in a context of 'high politics' reflecting elite alarm and anxiety that has served to hold back a fuller understanding of movements such as Mungiki. On occasions when analysis departs from a 'high politics' to addressing the 'low politics' of everyday survival of young Kenyans there is nonetheless a series of assumptions that the movement is a response to structural issues of poverty and political disenfranchisement. While these are important contextual factors there is nonetheless a distinct failure to identify how exactly Mungiki attains its *capacity* to mobilise thousands, if not millions of members. The paper corrects this tendency by seeking more dynamic explanations for why young men are attracted to the movement and what effect this has on their lives.

The paper uses social movement literature's 'framing-based' analysis. In-depth interviews with grass roots Mungiki members in three informal settlements in Nairobi are the basis to examine personal self-biographical accounts of attachment to the movement. 'Framing analysis' then is used to identify cross cutting themes emerging across the interviews in terms of: 'Diagnosis' (how members explain social reality and nature of problems); 'Prognosis' ('solutions') and, third, the 'Motivational framing' that clinches members to act. Findings shed light on how mobilisation is a response to personal as well as societal crisis but with an attendant programmatic response that empowers members to regenerate themselves. Whether the notion of 'power' identified in the article is compatible with a progressive politics remains much less clear.