

Road Carnage: Risk and the Accident in Kenya

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Drawing on preliminary research, this paper considers where traffic accidents fit into a highly politicized discourse of insecurity and risk in Kenya. Even as contractors build East Africa's first "superhighway"—lauded as the first of many to come—Kenyan government and civil society organizations have begun to draw attention to accidents— "road carnage"—as a leading cause of death in the country. Reflecting the recent interest of the WHO and World Bank in traffic accidents in "developing" countries, this new attention on the part of official institutions is a much belated response. In Kenya, as in much of the formerly colonized world, roads have long appeared as sites of violence and death—whether this violence is that of the forced labor of road-building gangs, car crashes, or crime. And while in the independence era enormous affective investment was poured into miles of asphalt as a cipher of development, the poor condition of roads and their insecurity have since become rich sources of complaint and debate for *wananchi* (citizens). Blaming each other, drivers, society, the state, police, spirits, and modernity itself, *wananchi* invoke a range of ideas about injury, loss, and insecurity.

The paper is anchored in an ethnographic exploration of techniques for managing risk on Kenyan roads. "Managing risk" has a doubled sense—it refers, on the one hand, to a range of practices adopted by road-users in the absence of regulation and formal emergency response, and on the other, to official attempts to displace state liability for and make political use of accident statistics and general insecurity. Bringing together political and policy conversations, insurance practices, driving instruction techniques, and everyday ways of dealing with the road (distributing children in different vehicles when traveling, for instance), I will suggest that these practices offer insight into what Jean and John Comaroff describe as a "metaphysics of disorder" in the postcolonial state. Intriguingly, practices for dealing with road danger seem to displace the idea of the "accident"—random, unforeseen misfortune, or "cost" of technological progress—and to blur crashes together with crime, political violence, and state predation (in fact, in the Moi era, traffic accidents were an assassination technique).