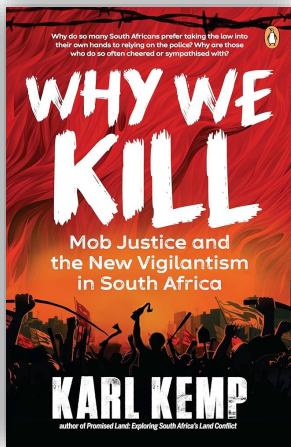


BOOK REVIEW

Why We Kill: Mob Justice and the New Vigilantism in South Africa

By Karl Kemp

Reviewed by Robert Guy McKee



New York: Penguin, Random House
2024

Karl Kemp's *Why We Kill: Mob Justice and the New Vigilantism in South Africa* (2024) is an "inquiry" (1, 297) by a white South African lawyer, journalist, and writer into why he and his compatriots have, in recent years, come to excel so in mob justice and vigilantism. It bears review in *OKHJ* for use of anthropological methods and its comparability to McKee (2021), reviewed in *OKHJ* 6(2).

The book opens with 300 pages of text, organized as prologue, forty chapters in five parts, and epilogue. The five parts, by their successive one-word titles, are 'Overture', 'Metro', 'Bush', 'Cops', and 'Justice'. After the epilogue come an author's note, acknowledgments and sources, acronyms, a glossary, and an index.

In the author's note, Kemp explains that he recounts his book's research-based stories not as an academic or a media-house journalist, but as a writer. He says he hopes thereby to provide the reader "some deeper insight" into his subject than does the

conventional wisdom (roughly, "It's all the police's fault!")—more importantly, to move, affect, entertain or otherwise inform the reader on a level beyond (301) what these other vocations can do. He credits whatever his book's success is to its grounding in fieldwork, including myriad recorded interviews and follow-up research, mostly qualitative. He identifies Alexandra township, just north of Johannesburg, as his fieldwork's primary site, and rural Limpopo, South Africa's northernmost province, as his second.

In the prologue, Kemp starts with a 2006 story from what he judges to have been an earlier South Africa, where mob justice was already "widespread, entrenched and arguably unremarkable" (11), the cops useless, but conditions not yet those of the book's new vigilantism.

In 'Overture', Kemp introduces his new vigilantism, as marked by:

- the South African Police Service (SAPS) having started, from 2017, "to consistently record 'mob justice' and 'vigilantism' as formal causative factors for murders and assaults" (11);
- near disappearance of informal trial by elders (6, 11, 297);
- increasing, staggeringly-high numbers of victims—from 849 in April 2017–March 2018 to 1,849 in 2022 (15);
- the country's nearing, where vital services are concerned, "the threshold of a failed state" (46);
- "a tsunami of crime" (62), including a greatly increased murder rate (12, 61), with "nauseatingly egregious" cases "a dime a dozen" (60);
- increased competition among metro-dwellers for scarce resources, with illegal immigration

and rural-to-urban migration exacerbating the problem (passim).

Kemp notes 2022 as the year of most of what he relates. He recounts the first segment of an Alexandra housing-conflict drama—a rich case study—that he weaves throughout the book, with core members of one vigilante party concerned providing their perspectives on the conflict via faithfully-transcribed interviews.

The titles of the book's four remaining parts identify their respective foci as Kemp sees them in differing, nuanced, inadequate (even taken together) explanatory relations to his subject. In part: 'Metro' furthers what 'Overture' began, concerning urban contributors to sociology's "anomie and social strain" explanation of mob justice; but it recognizes as unexplained here the country's rural mob justice, and it develops the book's Alexandra housing-conflict drama in view of additional contributors to vigilantism to be named later.

'Bush' reckons with what Kemp sees as especially rural contributors to mob murders: chiefs' traditional authority, Big Men, "witchcraft and muti killings" (111), and child kidnappings. It tells of the savage mob murder of suspected cable thief Trust Hlongwane, a young Zimbabwean immigrant, who was "stoned, brained, bashed for many hours" (160), then burned to death.

'Cops' only largely validates stereotypes of SAPS and its average cop—as corrupt, fat, poorly trained, failed in provision of basic services, useless to call given the choice of do-it-yourself policing and *real* (aka mob) justice. It tells of the murder by three SAPS officers of criminal suspect Mlungisi Khulekani Mpanze, with the magistrate later involved saying the officers had no right to act in Mpanze's shooting death "as the proverbial judge, jury, and executioner" (215). It challenges the idea that there is "any police force in the world that could cope with the [recent] madness of South Africa's streets" (224).

'Justice' treats the formal system's failure to deliver more than legal justice to the various parties either responsible for or aggrieved by alleged crimes of established dockets. It notes, for aggrieved parties of the finally concluded Alexandra housing-conflict drama, the multiplicity of the conceptions of justice due them, with most conceptions frustratingly beyond the system's power to deliver. It wonders about crimes "unreported [to SAPS] because the community

believed themselves far better served by taking matters into their own hands" (273).

In the epilogue, Kemp concludes that South Africa's "vigilantism persists partly because it works in ways the formal system cannot" (297), while he also asks "what the rise of mob justice in the last five years portends" (298).

I preface several comments and criticisms, now, by judging some related to Kemp consciously writing as a writer, primarily to fellow South Africans. While I do not fault him for this, it likely prevented his awareness of McKee (2021) having provided much data for comparison and contrast, including mob justice statistics for Kenya (many) and Tanzania (fewer, but of interest).

I do not see Kemp anywhere define either key term, 'mob justice' or 'vigilantism'. He uses them sometimes synonymously, sometimes with one as a cover for both—e.g., "vigilantism, and mob justice in particular" (104); he assumes readers know what they mean, especially in their book contexts. I nowhere see any form of 'lynch'.

The glossary is a single page with twenty-eight items. Likely adequate for Kemp's primary target readership, it could helpfully be longer for those unfamiliar with South African English, with the non-English interjections of interviews, or with such as the Zulu *vimba* 'block, bar [e.g., a thief from escaping]' (11).

The book has no maps, photos, figures, or tables, where even a few would help readers better follow, understand, and/or imagine various parts of the book. The book's ethnography of mob killings certainly merits the publisher's back-cover content warning.

Kemp nowhere spells out the personal philosophical anthropology by which he concludes his book so: "[G]iven this country and the state of it[,] why not kill for vengeance [by mob justice]? Why not kill those who take and break and rape and do not care for the law-abiding citizens?" (300). My sense is, Kemp condemns himself for flip-flopping much in answering this question honestly himself; it is also that South Africa, recently surveyed as 85 percent 'Christian', bears study for why its many 'Christianities' and 'Christians' appear to me so absent from *Why We Kill*, especially from the country's response to its mob justice.

On the whole, I think *Why We Kill* an admirable success at what Kemp intends it to be—a writer's compelling inquiry that does not presume to more than aim at tentative explanations (297); that involves readers throughout by such as, "The little whispering

voice that asks whether it is so bad to murder criminals in a country with a crime rate like that of South Africa” (6); “Do you still wish to murder those who take from you, having seen and smelled the corpse of Trust Hlongwane?” (297). I think Kemp’s book an invaluable contribution to the literature on mob justice/lynchings in sub-Saharan Africa.

References

Kemp, Karl. 2024. *Why We Kill: Mob Justice and the New Vigilantism in South Africa*. Penguin Random House.

McKee, Robert Guy. 2021. *Lynchings in Modern Kenya: A Continuing Human Rights Scandal*. Leanpub: https://leanpub.com/lynchingsinmodernkenya_acontinuinghumanrightsscandal.



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