In the concluding chapter of *Bewitching Development: Witchcraft and the Reinvention of Development in Neoliberal Kenya*, James Howard Smith recounts a conversation with a development-oriented Peace Corps volunteer who was not intrigued by the responses of Kenya’s Taita people to their economic straits. “They’re poor,” she said, “What’s so fascinating about that?” But as Smith explores Taita adaptations to their marginalization, a fascinating picture does indeed emerge of Taita’s imaginative refusal of norms, their creative aspirations toward utopia, and their articulation of (sometimes inchoate, often eloquent) truths about local and wider social orders. Situated in the 1990s era of deregulation, privatization, free-market structural adjustment programs, and NGO interventions, Smith’s ethnography explores the crosscutting cultural influences on Taita understandings of their marginalization with a particular focus on the now-hegemonic concept of “development.” While development initiatives from the outside have actually done little to improve Taita’s lot, and while many Taita are convinced that deviations from tradition have worsened their prognosis, Smith’s informants are nonetheless so preoccupied with the promise of development that people “would not shut up” about it (xii). Furthermore, the category is continually set against “witchcraft” in Taita discourse—a fluid and complex notion that focuses on the obstructions and threats posed by manipulative others. While by now there is a rich ethnographic literature on the relationships between witchcraft and development (or “modernity”) in sub-Saharan Africa, Smith’s work stands out for its illumination of the complexly imagined relationships between the past, the future, and the occult in Taita life.

In the vein of recent ethnographic work that explores folk understandings of economic change and modernity, one of Smith’s contributions in this book is to swivel the concept of development on its axis, focusing not on outsiders’ understanding of what development means (though Smith delivers a lucid history of this), but instead on competing visions among Taita themselves of what constitutes development. In a context where official development policies have marginalized the poor at the expense of the elite, employment has declined, and state patronage has dried up, development is no longer an expert idea but one that the masses have both viewed with cynicism and appropriated to speak to their own anxieties and desires. While the concept has been used at certain moments to make cynical barbs at the elite (as in the euphemism for personal wealth: “I have got a little development” [33]), for many Taita the notion of development is used to envision a creative and often supernaturally mediated escape from colonial and postcolonial state authority so as to construct a more viable social order.

Such efforts are shot through with what Smith calls “tempopolitics,” with anxiety about feeling behind and aspiring to move forward, often through recourse to the magical appropriation of powers associated with entities and places that are distant in space and/or time. In some cases such efforts involve poaching symbols, objects, and stances from the global community, the phantom outside world where things are ostensibly “more developed.” Yet folk notions of development do not always stand in an antithetical relationship to local tradition; in fact, one of the revelations of this book is that in many Taita understandings...
of development a better future can only be achieved with reference to a past marked as traditional and ethnically authentic. In some discourse, for instance, customary relationships of magnanimous exchange (coded in tropes of flowing water and blood) are seen as foundational to a kind of development that would let Taita protect their local resources in response to threats of neoliberal capitalism. Notice as well that Taita notions of development do not always map neatly onto what has been typically associated with “modernity.” In other cases, ritual forms that evoke Taita autochthony are used to propitiate the autochthonous forces in *fighi* protector shrines and, in so doing, to “heal the wounds” inflicted by Taita’s “un-Taita” moral failings and allow the Taita to progress.

Hence, although Taita (like many Kenyans) fear moving “backward,” there is a certain irony to the fact that “going backward (in the sense of a respect for tradition) may in fact be moving forward” (22). Still, Taita efforts to recuperate an idealized moment in the past are rarely uniform. Different individuals may revert to the value systems of different historical eras depending on their agendas, or may intermingle invocations of the past with foreign introductions such as Christianity or ostentatious markers of modernity. Still others look on any reappropriation of the local past as backward and threatening. Even among those who endorse the appropriation of the past, there is a great deal of anxiety about who in Taita society is adequate to do the job. Suspicions abound about inauthenticity and witchery that could interfere with felicitous invocations of tradition.

Following scholars such as Peter Geschiere and John and Jean Comaroff, Smith regards witchcraft as an idiom for making sense of and acting on social inequality, crisis, and change. Among Taita, witchcraft is often rhetorically framed as a threat to someone’s utopian vision of development—though given how many crosscutting agendas are at stake, apparently antithetical movements may be framed as witchery by one party or another. For instance, those who oppose new land tenure programs sometimes claim that autonomous residences isolate people from the moral pressures of the community and free them to pursue money through witchy malfeasance; however, mission-educated Christians in favor of the programs see those who remain in customary circular villages as isolated from modern education and more likely to bewitch (73). Like development, then, witchcraft can be set against either “modernity” or “tradition.” In one chapter Smith describes the mission of the witchfinder Maji Marefu, whose efforts were locally framed as a kind of occult NGO work designed to “[make] up for the state’s inadequacies” (217) by expunging the witchery that hampered the institutions representative of development. The subtlety of Taita dilemmas is apparent in the fact that Maji Marefu and his followers used symbolic markers of globalization (“gangsta” clothing, video cameras and the like), yet were brought in precisely to combat foreign forms of witchcraft while preserving aspects of Taita particularity: a “sustainable local development” (239, emphasis mine), grounded in local values.

Smith’s complex ethnography treats more wide-ranging themes than these, including the roles of Pentecostalism, shifting gender dynamics, Taita efforts to lure and assert control over NGOs, and Taita’s changing attitudes toward state governance—all in relation to his key concepts of development, witchcraft, and tempopolitics. While this book is not an easy read, I chalk it up to the complexity and contradictions that flow through Taita understandings of development, of tradition, and of the foreign. Doing justice to such complex-