



Origins, nature and the development of ethnic identity in Kenya since 1963

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ABSTRACT

This article set out to explore the origin, nature, and formation of ethnic identity in Kenya since the year 1963, when the country gained its independence. Ethnic identity has also been among the most persistent aspects of the political and social landscape in Kenya and has been a frequent factor in the distribution of resources, political contestation, and nation-building. Basing itself on pre-colonial kinship systems established during the colonial reign and exploited by the post-colonial elites, ethnicity has transformed itself into a form of belonging as well as a tool of exclusion. The proposed study uses a qualitative and historical methodology, with references to the academic literature, policy documents, and political history, to examine the development of ethnic identity in five different political regimes: Jomo Kenyatta (1963-1978), Daniel arap Moi (1978-2002), Mwai Kibaki (2002-2013), Uhuru Kenyatta (2013-2022), and William Ruto (2022-present). Results indicate that ethnicity has been used by peoples to offer cultural strength and identity, although it has been extensively politicized to consolidate power, allocate resources, and attract and maintain support at the cost of national unity. This article is significant because it contributes to the discussion on ethnicity, democracy, and development in Africa, and this information can help the policymakers and scholars that have an interest in identity politics and state-building. The paper concludes that ethnicity has been both a blessing and a curse to the socio-political development of Kenya—both as a unity element and a source of division. The paper recommends inclusive governance systems, civic education, and grassroots reconciliation programs as some of the most suitable measures in alleviating ethnic polarization and enhancing sustainable national cohesion in Kenya.

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, Ethnic Mobilization, Kenya, Nation-Building, Politics

I. INTRODUCTION

Ethnicity has greatly influenced the course of the history of Kenya since independence in 1963. The issue that is tackled in this paper is associated with the maintenance of ethnic identity as the cultural anchor, and the political weapon in the post-colonial state of Kenya. Ethnicity is not simply a descriptive term of cultural belonging, it has been politicized, manipulated and mobilized by the elites to define power, resource and opportunities. This duality, unifying and divisive, is what has made it one of the most complicated challenges in nation-building processes in Kenya. The pre-colonial origins of ethnic identity in Kenya were fluid and relational. The Kikuyu, Luo, Kalenjin, Luhya, Kamba, Somali, and Mijikenda communities used to engage in trade, intermarry and migrate. Identity was more founded on kinship, lineages and territorialism as opposed to strict tribal divisions (Ogot & Ochieng', 2000). The British colonial rule (1895-1963) turned these seen identities into fixed tribes, however, the policies of indirect rule, census categories and land alienation turned them to hard-bodied tribes. Categories of ethnics were institutionalized and this influenced access to education, employment and land (Lonsdale, 1992).

The new Kenyan state inherited at independence in 1963 not just a sovereign government but also a polity which was more than divided. The politics of mobilization in the nationalist struggle was also characterized by ethnic arithmetic whereby the Kenya African National Union (KANU) that was dominated by larger ethnic groups opposed Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) representing minority communities that favored federalism (*majimboism*). Despite Kenya becoming a unitary system, these ethnic divisions continued to exist during the post-colonial rule especially in land sharing and political favors. The importance of researching ethnic identity in Kenya is that it has forever affected the political stability, democracy and development.

Ethnic identity in Kenya is thus not fixed but has been redesigned in historical and political backgrounds. Ethnic consciousness was heightened by the emergence of multiparty politics of the 1990s, whereby political parties were mostly ethnic blocs that needed to gain control of the region and state resources (Muigai, 2004). The patron-client networks also strengthened this ethnic politicization as the leaders used the development resources to strengthen their power base along the ethnic line. As a result, ethnicity emerged as the hegemonic principle of political rivalry and social



existence in Kenya. This relationship has been perpetuating electoral formations and voting trends whereby national interests are usually at cross with ethnic elites (Branch & Cheeseman, 2008).

In addition to politics, ethnicity and the socio-economic and spatial disparities also interact in Kenya. The past land injustices, especially in the Rift Valley and Coast have made some people feel excluded and left behind (Boone, 2012). These grievances have been periodically taken out in ethnic clashes and most so during times of political transition. Meanwhile, ethnicity is another way of ordering society and preserving culture that determines the feelings of belonging and unity in people. Therefore, even though ethnicity has been used as a political manipulative instrument, it is also at the center of the Kenyan cultural life, which gives individuals and communities a sense, security, and identity (Ndegwa, 1997). The history of ethnic violence in Kenya and especially in 1992, 1997, and 2007-08, shows the mobilization of ethnicity in the process of competitive elections. Meanwhile, ethnic identity is a source of cultural pride and cultural belonging, in the language, traditions, and solidarity as a community. This article hence looks at the formation, the nature, and evolution of the ethnic identity in Kenya since 1963 and how successive political regimes have influenced its course.

1.2 Research Objectives

This research article was guided by three research objectives that were informed and addressed by the research findings. They are as follows:

- i. To examine the historical origins of ethnic identity in Kenya and assess the role of colonial policies in shaping rigid tribal classifications.
- ii. To analyze the nature and dual function of ethnicity in post-independence Kenya as both a mechanism of political exclusion and a source of social cohesion.
- iii. To investigate how successive political regimes in Kenya have influenced the development and transformation of ethnic identity from independence to the multiparty era.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethnic identity in Africa has a long history of being examined through the historical, political and anthropological perspectives. Geertz (1973), writing more generally about primordialism, claimed that ethnicity "is founded upon 'givens'--shared language, kinship, religion, and traditions--that offer people deep attachments." While this is an appropriate description of the affective appeal of ethnicity, it is mute to the diffusivity and instrumentalising of identities. The opening here is that primordialism is not thoroughly able to account for the changes in the ethnic custodianship found in Kenyan experience of colonialism and post-colonialism. A valuable Kenyan contribution was that of Ochieng (1975) who showed that there were no static "tribes" in pre-colonial times but that these groupings were fluid collectivities which came together through movement by trade, intermarriage, and migration. This result attacks static notions of ethnicity. However, Ochieng's work skips light on the contribution of external forces, particularly colonialism in hardening the categories, thereby leaving an opening to understand how colonial interventions established "tribes."

Lonsdale (1992) developed the proposition that through colonial rule, in Kenya, marked by socialist and nationalist labeling, tribalization, therefore the conversion of liquid patterns into viscous ethnic categories were carried out by the implementation of censuses, alienation of land, and indirect rule. He called this process "political tribalism." This framework is helpful in terms of understanding the roots of Kenyan ethnic identity, but it is mostly oriented toward structural impositions than it is on how ordinary Africans responded to or resisted, leaving a gap on how Africans in terms of agency molded identities. Boone (2012) further examined the colonial legacy, while relating ethnic politics to land distribution, specifically within the "White Highlands." Her work shows how land alienation politicized ethnicity among the Kikuyu, Maasai and Kalenjin. However, what is missing from Boone's study is that these measures are mostly relying on the notion of space (land) while neglecting other colonial institutions including education and labor that also shaped ethnic inequalities.

At independence, the infrastructure of the state was fragile and the new state was built on the politicization of ethnic cleavages. Oyugi (1997) argued that ethnicity became the agriculturally strong-seeded political mode which determines voting, state appointments and allocation of resources. His analysis identifies the primacy of ethnicity in governance but is missing the sociality of ethnicity, or in other words how ethnicity would have informed social contact beyond formal politics. Throup and Hornsby (1998) have noted that after independence the political parties in Kenya were ideologically non-aligned and mobilized on ethnic lines. The Kenya African National Union (KANU) of Khrushchev led to the Kenya African Democratic Union ensured the dominant and minority leaders represented contrasting ideas. However, although this sort of work examines high elite competition it lacks analyses of how various individual-producing grassroots cultures understood these alignments as part of their everyday life.

Mueller (2008) noted that patronage and state resources were channeled along ethnic lines and created the perceptions that "it is our turn to eat." While her analysis of the prominent political role played by ethnicity is accurate, it runs the danger of presenting communities as passive beneficiaries of patronage and opens up a vacuum on the ways in which citizens negotiated access to state resources, either through ethnic or otherwise. Ogot (1995) researched the multiparty period in the 1990s and noted how political elites used ethnicity as one way of mobilizing people to engage in violence, particularly in the Rift Valley. This is reflective of the destructive aspect of ethnic politics but leaves a breach regarding its constructive dimension -- solidarity, cultural identity and mediation of conflicts in Klopp's work.

Branch (2011) documented the experience of Jomo Kenyatta's presidency during which the inequality of land allocation and the inequitable redistribution of state patronage advantaged Kikuyu elites and institutionalized ethnicity in the state. This is useful to characterize ethnic discrimination, but it does create a void in terms of explaining how groups outside Kikuyu responded to these ethnic discriminatory practices. The recurrency of Daniel arap Moi's politics of division behind rhetorical words of unity was further illuminated by Throup and Hornsby (1998) who demonstrated the extent to which the Kalenjin elites remained central to his repressive politics. They dismiss the view that ethnic groups played a marginal role in History, claiming that Moi instead used it as a shield, as well as a sword. While the study captures the state-level elite-level politics, less is said about the often-remarkable implications daily life of Kalenjinization has for inter-ethnic relations at the community level. Cheeseman *et al.*, (2014) have explored the Uhuru Kenyatta-William Ruto alliance of 2013 to illustrate the way in which ethnic blocs can be reconciled by deals between elites. However, this alliance did not probe much further than elite settlements and therefore, significantly lacks an exploration of the viability of elites' alliance with ordinary Kikuyu and Kalenjin commoners.

Southall (2020), for example, examined the 2018 Kenyatta-Odinga "handshake" and showed the way in which elite consensus de-escalated tensions at the expense of broader democratic addressing of the situation. This highlights the importance of elite negotiations but there is a gap in understanding whether the citizens accepted the handshake as authentic conciliation or whether the handshake was just the interest of elites. Atieno (2023) linked the Ruto presidency to how the "hustler vs. dynasty" narrative is actually fractured by class politics rather than ethnicity. While impressive, her work suffers from a lack of analysis on whether this is a real change, or a reshaping of ethnic politics under a new label.

III. METHODOLOGY

This article makes use of a historical study design. Data were obtained from secondary sources such as books, journal articles, government reports and archival records relating to Kenya's political history and ethnicity. The sampling strategy was purposive as it focused on targeting literature that specifically addressed the question of ethnic identity in Kenya including development with shift of political regimes. The approach to the analysis was thematic categorization under three areas namely: on the origins of ethnic identity, its nature in the social and political life in Kenya and on a development since the independence. The findings were then synthesized to draw out continuities and transformations in ethnic identity in different times. This design was felt to be suitable because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of how ethnicity, as a social and political construct, has evolved over the period of time as a response to evolving historical and governance situations. Adopting a qualitative approach driven by historical analysis allowed the research to interpret events, policies and discourses that have shaped identity politics in Kenya, and provide an all-encompassing understanding opposed to the generalisations of statistical interpretation. The inclusion criteria were scholarly works, policy documents, and archival documents which directly discussed ethnicity and the creation of identities and political regimes in Kenya from 1963 to 2025. The sources that were excluded were those that were purely descriptive in nature without any analytical background, works that dealt with the theme of ethnicity outside the Kenyan context and those that were not credible and lacked academic content.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Origins of Ethnic Identity in Kenya

The origins of Kenya's ethnic identity are deep in the colonial period, during which British policy turned malleable pre-colonial identities into hard-edged "tribal" groupings, the study found. Pre-colonial communities were also not strictly defined because there was trade, intermarriage, and cultural overlap between communities. However colonial rulers used indirect rule, which needed clearly defined "tribes" to practically administer for ease and convenience (Lonsdale, 1994). Evidence gained from the colonial period censorship of the 1910s and 1920s indicates that the census classified people by "tribe," and ethnic groups were cut off by the establishment of Native Reserves, which allocated a particular area of the land for each group (Ogot, 1995). Institutionalized identity made ethnicity the key determiner of membership. Scholars agree that colonial statecraft created and solidified these cleavages: Lonsdale (1992) wrote of such a process as "the invention of tribes," while Anderson (2005) drew attention to the way in which



colonial land alienation in the Rift Valley exacerbated inter-ethnic tensions. In short, the results reveal that Kenyan ethnic identity was not primordial in its birth, but that colonial strategies of appropriating and mobilizing difference for its own process of governance created it.

The conclusions brought forth illustrate that the source of ethnic identity in Kenya was not based on ancient divisions of the culture but mostly forged by the colonial experience. But before colonialism, pre-colonial societies like the Kikuyu, Luo, Kamba and Maasai had fluid identities, defined more by foregoing alliances and intermarriages and economic exchange than by hard-bound ethnic walls. Trade systems, cattle exchange, and ritual exchange clearly led to breakdowns between communities and a blurred sense of belonging that could well be seen as situational. However, the introduction of colonial rule during the second half of the 19th century hardened these fluid associations into rigid 'tribal' types. British administrators, seeking good governance, took to indirect rule, which made it essential to build out clearly defined ethnic units over which control could be exercised through local chiefs. This led to what Lonsdale (1992, 1994) so memorably called the "invention of tribes," a planned administrative tactic that set formerly permeable social boundaries.

Further entrenching of these identities during the 1910s and 1920s is shown by the way in which colonial census and Native Reserve demarcation processes reinforced them. Ogot (1995) emphasizes the ways in which individuals were made to register under one "tribe" which ignored the history of multiple affiliations most had held previously. This process of ethnic spatial segregation with areas occupying ostensibly separate territorial reserves helped to shape a spatial aspect of ethnicity that continues to this day. These results confirm the continued salience of Anderson's (2005) argument that the histories of colonial alienation of land, especially fertile land in the Rift Valley, increased competition between "settler" and "native" populations and laid the foundations of the long-suffered conflict. Identity change was thus not just cultural but very material, based on the politics of land dispossession and economic injustice.

The argument presented here has much in common with other scholars' views that Kenyan ethnicity is the product of a relatively recent historical and political construction rather than primordial heritage as Kenyan state and political elites have tried to portray it. Whereas essentialist formulations tend to depict inter-ethnic hostility as both natural and primordial in nature, evidence instead shows that it was colonial rule that actively created the divisions that were to form the basis of post-independence politics. Interestingly, colonial remnants passed on not only consolidated boundaries but a political logic which put ethnicity as the key identifier of belonging and access to resources. By institutionalizing difference itself for the purpose of domination, the colonial state provided the scaffolding for the ethnic displacements and mobilizations, exclusions and conflicts that marked the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in Kenya's political history.

4.2 Nature of Ethnicity in Post-Independence Kenya

The research found that ethnic identity began to take on a dual nature after independence in 1963: both as a mechanism to create political exclusion and as a source of social cohesion. Politically, access to state resources (land, jobs, and development projects) became closely linked to one's ethnic affiliation. Kenyatta I's government was widely charged with favoring Kikuyu elites in the redistribution of land in the Rift Valley that created a legacy of resentment (Berman, 1998). Moi regime subsequently institutionalised Kalenjin patronage and multiparty politics in the 1990s inflamed inter-ethnic violence (Branch, 2011). These findings concur with the argument by Mueller (2008) who stated that ethnicity in Kenya is a political currency that is used to mobilize and have access to resources. At the same time, ethnicity was not totally destructive. Communities were using ethnic solidarity to develop welfare associations, savings groups (*chamas*) and cultural societies promoting resilience and mutual support (Ndege, 2019). This reveals a duality in the effects of the politics: if it provided a mechanism for exclusion decompression by instrumentalizing ethnicity tutgee languages, in social life it often acted as a mechanism of inclusion and survival.

The findings expose the extent to which ethnicity in post-independence Kenya developed a very specifically dual dimension; working simultaneously as a mechanism of political exclusion and of social cohesion. Politically, ethnicity came to be the dominant organising principle through which distribution of state resources and access to power was negotiated. The redistribution of land in the Rift Valley, under Kenyatta I, had a largely pro-Kikuyu bias in favor of the Kikuyu elite, a process that led to grievance accumulation by marginalized ethnic groups (e.g., the Kalenjin and Maasai). This fits in with the analysis by Berman (1998) of patrimonial politics, which illustrates how Kenya experienced a transformation of the state into specific means of ethnically based accumulation, by Kenya's first regime. Similarly, the deliberate bargaining advantage for the Kalenjin and coalition communities aligned with the ignoring of the state's role by Moi's reckless government through using KAMATUSA network was a reflection of the entrenchment of ethnic patronage as a sustenance strategy. Branch (2011) further notes that in the following of multiparty politics in the 1990s elite manipulation of ethnicity translated into the prevalence of ethnic clash, especially as in the Rift Valley, thus corroborating Mueller 2008's view of ethnicity as having been a powerful political currency in Kenya.

Yet, another less often emphasized dimension, and one that is particularly apparent in this study, is the integrative and cohesive function of ethnicity in everyday life. Communities marshalled ethnic solidarity to complement



state provision by forming welfare associations, burial societies, women's savings groups (*chamas*) and cultural organisations that provided mutual support in contexts where the provision of the state was often absent or inefficient. Ndege (2019) highlights this social aspect of ethnicity, where kinship relations and belonging for culture are protections against shocks that often benefit livelihood funds and safety nets; most prevalent in rural areas and peri-urban settings. Far from being just being divisive, ethnic identity in these spaces has served as the basis for trust and cooperation.

This duality makes it difficult to reduced, authoritarian understandings of ethnicity as destructive. Political science scholarship has tended to see ethnicity as the source of elite manipulation and violence, but anthropological perspectives emphasize the importance of ethnicity in the survival and cohesiveness of communities. The case of Kenya shows that ethnicity is not so easily sorted into a binary of "good" or "bad." Instead, it serves as both an instrument of exclusion in the political sphere, and of inclusion in the social sphere. This paradox is what makes ethnicity so potent an issue in Kenya, as it is both a source of conflict and hence a source of fight. The understanding of this dual role is therefore fundamental in contenting with Kenya's political trajectory, and viable interventions to deal with Kenya's divisive aspects without compromising its ability to maintain solidarity.

4.3 Development of Ethnic Identity across Political Regimes

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V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion



This study focused on the origins, nature and development of ethnic identity in Kenya since the time of independence. The results show that ethnic identity is not primordial but rather was the creation of politics in the colonial period, when the British carved the fluid precolonial affiliations into stern "tribal" categories through indirect rule and administrative practices. In the post-independence era, ethnicity came to have a paradoxical nature, in that it both served as a mechanism of elite exclusion, resource distribution, and political mobilization and as an element of solidarity, resilience, and cultural identity in the community. Across successive regimes, the results indicate, while strategies of mobilization and rhetoric have changed, ethnicity has been the dominant organizing principle of Kenyan politics. This persistence does highlight its dual value as a resource of power and a structure of belonging, which shaped political social and economic life.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the results obtained, the current study suggests the Kenyan government along with the relevant policy institutions should seriously implement better frameworks for inclusive governance, which could ensure equitable distribution of resources especially land allocation, employment, public services, because ethnic favoritism has in many cases led to resentment; such could be done through transparent national auditing systems and equitable representation in state appointments. The Ministry of Education, cultural institutions, and the media should encourage civic nationalism by including histories and similarities enshrined in the school curriculum, encourage patriotism through cultural programs, and run media campaigns to highlight unity in diversity in order to reduce dominance of ethnic-based belonging over citizenship. At the same time, local leaders, civil society organizations and religious groups should advocate for reconciliation at the grassroots level by organizing community dialogues, peace committees and truth-telling forums to address prevailing historical grievances such as the issues over disputed land and ethnic violence to make peace sustainable and not just between elites. To reduce ethnicized political mobilization, political parties, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), and parliament should encourage issue-based politics by enforcing regulations that discourage ethnic hate speech, institutionalization of inclusive candidate nomination and incentivization of policy-driven politics that focus on issues such as youth unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Lastly, comparative research on ethnicity in Africa should be further promoted by universities, research institutes, and international partners, DE Kenya learning lessons from a country such as Tanzania or Nigeria on effective best practice with regard to the management of diversity and evidence-based policymaking.

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