

## Politics: Broader Ethnicity Good for Kenya's Nationhood

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It is often said that the multiplicity of ethnic communities, pejoratively referred to as tribes, is the bane of nationhood in most African countries, including Kenya. Indeed, Kenya is reported as having 43 ethnic communities that purportedly undermine our nationhood.

A nation is loosely defined as a group of people, within a political entity called a State, who share a common language and culture. Politically, and this annoys Prof Ngugi wa Thiong'o, rich countries are nations, even when they have a very small population like Norway or Belgium, but poor countries are just a group of tribes. This is demeaning. Ethnic clashes are reported, even by our very own journalists, as tribal clashes. The damage is in the mind. We describe ourselves using the lens of the oppressors. *Language is everything*, as Confucius once wrote. Ethnicity, just like nepotism, is not necessarily a bad phenomenon.

Adam Bellow in his book *In Praise of Nepotism*, delineates the benefits of nepotism to a community. Friends and family members get priority treatment when it comes to all manner of opportunities: recruitment, jobs, promotions, trips, etc. Needless to say, monarchies across the world are clear manifestations of nepotism. You rule over people by dint of birth by a monarch. Period. No meritocracy. France was ruled for 200 years by the same family. England faces the same fate for even a longer period of time. In the new world, America has had its fair share of presidents who are from the same family. Nepotism is primal, it's in our DNA. Once we are conscious of the unwieldy power of nepotism, we can start to look for ways of creating ample room for meritocracy. Those who deserve should not be locked out by our relatives.

Ethnicity works more or less in the same fashion. We take care of our own, at times to the detriment of other communities. We "other" them and cherish our own. We follow stereotypes. This community is like this or like that. These mental representations are very powerful. In our evolutionary history, they helped us survive in our ecosystem. For instance, stereotyping pastoral communities as cattle rustlers may have helped agricultural communities arm themselves better for their survival. Today, these stereotypes persist thanks to the taxonomies by British colonialists. Westerners visiting Kenya are quickly inducted by their embassies on the stereotypes and advised to use them, especially while hiring workers. *These ones are loyal, these one are thieves, these ones are good watchmen, these ones are good cooks*, etc.

While this stereotyping is prevalent in rural Kenya, a great deal is mutating in urban centres thanks to education, interethnic marriages and international exposure. Globally, urbanization stands at 5% annually, which implies that in another 50 years most of humanity will be urbanized. Such a trend would over time weaken the ethnic networks and pave the way to coalescing into a nation. Even linguistically, the ethnic languages will be gobbled up by sheng and English. But before then, we will have to contend with the ethnicity as a unit of study.

Politically, Kenya is a democracy with a very progressive constitution since 2010. Its democracy is continuously tested during presidential elections and in the judiciary. Presidential elections accentuate the ethnic cleavages in Kenya where some politicians refuse to concede defeat citing voter rigging. The US seems to have borrowed a leaf from Kenya during the 2020 presidential when Donald Trump of the Republican Party refused to concede defeat claiming that Joe Biden of the Democratic Party stole his election. In America, it's a party affair but in Kenya it's mainly an ethnicity issue. Correct? Not quite.

In the 2017 and 2018 Presidential Elections, the Jubilee Party won. It was led by Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto, a kikuyu and a kalenjin respectively. The Orange Democratic Movement was led by Raila Odinga and Kalonzo Musyoka, a Luo and a Kamba respectively. Leave aside the gender insensitivity for a minute. This shows an attempt to bring the populous ethnic blocks together to win an election. The same happened during the 2022 General Elections. Instead of each community fielding its own candidate, it was more strategic to bring other communities in the loop to inflate the numbers, after all democracy is about numbers. Ditto in 2022, where William Ruto (kalenjin) joined hands with Rigathi Gachagua (kikuyu) via Kenya Kwanza coalition to beat the Azimio coalition. Both formations had mobilized many Kenyan communities, irrespective of ethnicity. Again, this points to a fortuitous possibility of creating two huge political blocks that will unite many ethnic communities.

With time, we predict that the big ethnic blocks will become political blocks for winning elections. Ultimately we may end up with two major blocks and hopefully the two will become one big block called the Kenyan nation. That way, we will have attained the much-elusive nationhood. But even with two blocks we can have a constitutional arrangement to provide for political inclusivity, for instance we can opt for rotational presidency between the blocks, in the manner of Switzerland. Five years for block A, then five for block B, then A again. This would stabilize our new nation and consolidate our democracy. Individual ethnic groups will morph and coalesce into larger conglomerates or political blocks. This would be a welcome thing for Kenya.

### **References**

Bellow, A.(2003), *In Praise of Nepotism: A Natural History*, USA: Doubleday.