

**The History of Ethnicised Politics in Kenya and its
Impact on the Management of the Country's Public
Affairs**

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Abstract

This paper deploys historical analysis, conceptual analysis and critical reflection to examine the history of ethnicised politics in Kenya and its negative impact on the management of the country's public affairs. It sets out with a conceptualisation of 'ethnicised politics'. It then traces the growth of ethnicised politics in Kenya from the dawn of British colonialism to the present. Thereafter, it reflects on the five-pronged negative impact of ethnicised politics on the country, namely, the gross disparities in economic development along ethno-regional lines, the disproportionately limited economic opportunities for ethnic minorities, the stunting of the growth of issue-based politics, the stoking of violent inter-ethnic conflicts, and the vulnerability of highly urbanised persons and/or those born out of mixed marriages with no strong ethnic loyalties. It concludes that contrary to the widely-held view that Kenyans ought to abandon their ethnic identities in pursuit of 'nation-building', respect for the right to cultural identity and the promotion of inter-ethnic equity would make political mobilisation along ethnic lines less attractive.

Keywords

Ethnicised politics; politicised ethnicity; Inter-ethnic conflicts; Public affairs; Kenya

Introduction

At the dawn of its political independence in 1963, Kenya, like many other countries in Africa, adopted a Western-type liberal democratic constitution, which, on the basis of a culturally-blind vision, had a Bill of Rights which focused exclusively on the rights of the individual rather than on those of communities, thereby precluding the right to cultural identity (see Republic of Kenya 2008).¹ However, the politicization of ethnicity quickly became one of the most intractable problems in independent Kenya (Mute 1998, 443). Consequently, it is almost inconceivable for the very small ethnic groups such as the Ogiek, El Molo or Pokomo to win a presidential election in Kenya, as numerically-advantaged ethnic groups such as the Luhya, Kalenjin, Kikuyu and Luo are able to form winning coalitions without them. Thus, if a Kenyan from such an ethnic minority with a desire to see one of his or her own become President were to vote consistently in elections from the age of 18 to the age of 83, he/she would have voted fourteen times with an extremely slim chance of his or her preferred candidate winning the presidency, thereby aggravating his or her sense of exclusion from the polity (Oduor 2022a). Besides, political power is often tied up with access to resources such as land, public jobs and business opportunities, so that the lack of one often implies the lack of the other. The tragic case of the systematic dispossession of the Ogiek (“Dorobo”), a hunter-gatherer ethnic minority in Kenya’s Rift Valley, succinctly illustrates this point (Kamau 2000). Consequently, the various ethnic groups in Kenya often perceive the quest for political power as a desperate struggle for their own survival, hence the entrenchment of ethnicised politics.

Consequently, in this paper, I deploy historical analysis, conceptual analysis, and critical reflection to identify and explicate the deleterious impact of ethnicised politics on the management of Kenya’s public affairs. Towards this end, I set out with a brief conceptualisation of ethnicised politics. This is followed by an outline of the history of ethnicised politics in Kenya from the dawn of British colonialism to the present. Thereafter, I examine the five-pronged deleterious impact of

¹ The Independence Constitution of Kenya that came into force in 1963 was amended numerous times until its repeal in 2010, thus the 2008 reference rather than the 1963 one.

ethnicised politics on the management of Kenya's public affairs, namely, the gross disparities in economic development along ethno-regional lines, the political and economic exclusion of ethnic minorities, the stunting of the growth of issue-based politics, the stoking of violent inter-ethnic conflicts, and the vulnerability of highly urbanised persons and/or those born out of mixed marriages with no strong ethnic loyalties. I conclude that instead of the incessant hypocritical and fruitless preaching against 'negative ethnicity' or 'tribalism' in the name of 'nation-building', respect for the right to cultural identity and the promotion of inter-ethnic equity ought to be factored into the country's socio-political engineering. This would make political mobilisation along ethnic lines less attractive.

Conceptualising ethnicised politics

According to Schermerhorn (1996, 17), an ethnic group is a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood. Hence, ethnicised politics, often also referred to as politicised ethnicity, is the mobilization of sections of the population on the basis of cultural identity with a view to capturing or retaining state power. In Kenya, as in other parts of the world, this phenomenon has been inadvertently facilitated by the fact that strong kinship ties among members of ethnic groups reinforce the feelings of 'in-group' loyalty to the exclusion of members of 'out-groups'. In the Kenyan context, a three-tiered affiliation, namely, the family, the clan and the ethnic group are the foundation upon which forces of social organisation and socialisation revolve (Jonjo 2002, 105). It is these sentiments that post-independence Kenyan politicians continue to exploit in their endeavour to create political cleavages to their personal advantage, with mottos such as "It's our turn to eat" (Wrong 2009), thereby inhibiting healthy inter-ethnic relationships and the attendant social, political and economic stability.

Peter P. Ekeh (1975) argues that the experiences of colonialism in Africa have led to the emergence of a unique historical configuration on the continent - the existence of two publics instead of one public as in the West. The primordial public is characterised by a situation in which socio-cultural

groupings that predate Western colonialism retain their loyalties and activities that influence the individual's public behaviour, thereby impinging on the public interest. In other words, when people operate in the primordial public, they feel morally obliged to promote the welfare of their own socio-cultural groups, but not the good of the Western-style modern state. On the other hand, there is the civic public which is historically associated with the colonial administration, and which has become identified with popular politics. The civic public is based on civil structures - the military, the civil service, and the police, among others: "*The civic public in Africa is amoral and lacks the generalized moral imperatives operative in the private realm and in the primordial public*" (Ekeh 1975, 92). For Ekeh, this situation has spawned not only run-away corruption, but also intense competition among the middle class for political and economic opportunities in the state, so that "tribalism" is actually the preserve of the middle class. Claude Ake (1993) makes an important corrective to Ekeh's analysis by pointing out that contemporary societies in Africa do not have a single primordial public, but rather, in view of the plurality of ethnic groups, many primordial publics, along with a civic public.

However, Miguda (2003) contends that globalising forces such as student movements, Marxism, feminism, religious institutions and a vibrant civil society are diminishing the power of ethnicised politics to act as a central basis for cleavage formation in local politics. Nevertheless, I hold the view that due to rampant poverty, generally low levels of formal education, and the convenience of appealing to ethnic sentiments by politicians seeking an easy source of cleavage, the death of ethnicised politics in Kenya is not imminent. Indeed, as Miguda (2003) herself acknowledges, since the authoritarian single-party mode of governance in Kenya was set aside, many former Marxists, feminists and human rights activists have themselves appealed to ethnic loyalties in a bid to capture or retain political power.

Scholars have pointed out that ethnic identity, or any other socio-cultural identity for that matter, is an invention (Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo 1987; Davidson 1992, 206-207; Anderson 2006; MacArthur 2013). From this indisputable fact, some have inferred that ethnic identity is a fluid phenomenon unworthy of scholarly attention.

Such scholars talk of identities such as Kenyan, Nigerian or Zambian as ‘national’, and those such as Zulu, Yoruba or Maasai as ‘sub-national’. However, such a categorisation panders to the ignominious arbitrary partition of Africa in the mid-1880s, and therefore serves Western imperialism. Besides, the fact that ethnicised politics has resulted in so much loss of life and property in many parts of the world, Kenya included, indicates that it is not only worth scholarly attention, but actually demands it. Indeed, Lentz (1995, 303) predicted that in the years to come, ethnicity, in whatever concrete forms and under whatever name, would be so important a political resource and an idiom for creating community, that social scientists and anthropologists would have no choice but to confront it: I opine that this imperative equally applies to political philosophers and to other scholars in the humanities.

Finally, over the past six years or so, it has dawned on me that while the pejorative term ‘tribe’ has now been largely replaced by the term ‘ethnic group’, even the latter term is habitually reserved for non-Western peoples, and is therefore an equally racist Western colonial trope. During the 59th Meeting of the African Studies Association (ASA) in Washington, DC in November 2016, I listened to Ngugi wa Thiong’o, in his joint presentation with Micere Githae Mugo, challenge the use of the demeaning racist term ‘ethnic group’, and emphasise that we ought to refer to people as they refer to themselves. Serumaga (2019) succinctly states this point thus:

Why are there only a handful of contemporary states in Africa whose names bear a relation to the identity of people actually living there. Everyplace else is a reference to a commodity, or an explorer’s navigational landmarks.

This frankly malevolent labelling offers the space for the linguistic demotion of entire peoples. To wit: 34 million Oromo, seven million Baganda, 43 million Igbo, 10 million Zulu will always remain ‘ethnicities’ and ‘tribes’ to be chaperoned by ‘whiteness’. 5.77 million Danes, 5.5 million Finns, and just 300,000 Icelanders can be called ‘nations’, complete with their own states with seats at the UN (Serumaga 2019).

It is crucially important that each socio-cultural group names itself rather than by people outside it. This is due to the fact that a name is a signifier of authority and ownership (Oduor, Nyarwath and Owakah 2018, 3). Consequently, wherever I can, I shall use the terms ‘people/s’, ‘people group/s’ or ‘communities’ rather than ‘ethnic group/s’. This is in line with the way in which these groups refer to

themselves in their languages. For example, those who belong to the Bantu linguistic group talk of themselves as Akamba, *Agikuyu*, *Abagusii*, *Abaluhya*, among others, with the 'A' or 'Aba' prefix signifying their peoplehood, and is the equivalent of the Kiswahili *Wa*. Similarly, the Nilotic Luo refer to themselves as *JoLuo*, the prefix *Jo* signifying their peoplehood. However, when the context demands it, I shall use 'socio-cultural groups' instead.

An Outline of the History of Ethnicised Politics in Kenya

In this section, I trace the growth of ethnicised politics in Kenya from its inception at the gloomy dawn of British colonialism to the present.

The Colonial Foundations of Ethnicised Politics in Kenya

During the pre-colonial period in what is now called Kenya, there was no central political authority which could be exploited by one people group to the perpetual disadvantage of the rest. Consequently, the inter-ethnic political competition characteristic of Kenya today was virtually unknown (Oloo 2007, 195). The beginning of ethnicised politics is therefore traceable to the British conquest of present-day Kenya which commenced with the formal inauguration of the Imperial British East Africa Company rule in 1888. That was followed by the declaration of British Protectorate over the Ten-Mile Coastal Strip in 1895, and the subsequent declaration of the land beyond the Ten Mile Coastal Strip as 'Kenya Colony' in 1920 (Kihoro 2005, 8; Omolo 2002, 213). This resulted in the forceful placing of various peoples with their diverse systems of government within one large and new area of central administration (Jonjo 2002, 90).

On the basis of the purported superiority of peoples of European descent, European colonial administrators and settlers enjoyed political and economic advantages over the majority indigenous population. This encouraged the subjugated peoples to associate political power with undeserved material gain, thereby laying the foundations of ethnicised politics. The peoples neighbouring the so-called White Highlands also became beneficiaries of economic spill-overs such as jobs, petty trade and formal education, thereby creating inequity between them and the rest of their compatriots (Omolo 2002, 213; Oloo 2007, 195). Besides, the colonial

administrative subdivisions of African-designated areas embraced culturally-specific territorial jurisdictions such as “Kikuyuland”, “Kambaland” and “Luoland”, thereby encouraging a greater sense of separate identities among the various colonised peoples (Kanyinga 2006, 355).

It is important to bear in mind that the official number of the peoples of Kenya as forty-two is quite arbitrary, having been arrived at by the British colonisers from the confluence of local elite interests and British administrative and economic expediency. This confluence resulted in the ‘merging’ of some people groups such as the sixteen communities now jointly referred to as Luhya (Osogo 1966; Itebete 1974, 97-101; MacArthur 2013), the approximately eight communities referred to as Kalenjin (Kipkorir and Welbourn 1973, 1, 70 ff.), and the nine peoples now corporately known as Miji Kenda (Atieno-Odhiambo 2002, 231-232). The British colonisers also outrightly ignored some people groups such as the Mukogodo whom they arbitrarily ‘merged’ with the Maasai (Cronk 2004). Consequently, the true number of the peoples of Kenya, from the perspective of the peoples themselves, is more than seventy. Kanyinga (2006) summarises the relatively indeterminate nature of ethnic identity in Kenya as follows:

The actual number of these [ethnic] groups is difficult to obtain given the fluid nature of ethnic identities and the tendency among sub-groups to claim distinct identities from parent groups. Some of these groups have distinct ethno-linguistic divisions that have created solid ethnic identities for sub-ethnic groups. Each of these groups inhabits a particular territory and ethnic members share a common ancestry, language and culture. Each and every part of the country is historically associated with a particular ethnic group. These are territorial claims, which have origins in the migration movements that took place during the pre-colonial period (Kanyinga 2006, 353).

An important germ of inter-ethnic tensions in Kenya is the fact that the colonial government made deliberate effort to foment animosity among various peoples in line with its strategy of divide-and-rule. The most well documented example of this strategy concerns the creation of suspicion between the Kikuyu and the Luo (Atieno-Odhiambo 2002, 232 ff.). Nevertheless, Kenya’s first indigenous political organisation, the East African Association (EAA), formed in 1919, was truly trans-cultural. Its leadership was comprised of the different peoples - Kikuyu, Luo,

Kamba, the various peoples later subsumed under the term Luhya, and some Ugandans, then the dominant socio-cultural groups in Nairobi's incipient labour market (Ajulu 1989). However, following the EAA-led Nairobi riots of 1922 and the subsequent arrest and deportation of three of EAA's Kikuyu leaders, Harry Thuku, Waiganjo Ndotono and George Mugekenyi, the colonial government encouraged cultural-specific associations rather than a country-wide organisation. The subsequent period therefore saw the proliferation of organisations such as the Kikuyu Central Association, Kikuyu Provincial Association, Kavirondo Tax-payers Association, North Kavirondo Tax-payers Association, Taita Hills Association, and Ukamba Members Association, whose activities were confined to issues specific to the particular peoples (Ajulu 2002, 255).

Consequently, it was not surprising that the period leading up to independence in 1963 saw a proliferation of regional, cultural and even clan based political organisations such as the Mombasa African Democratic Union, the Taita African Democratic Union, the Abagusii Association of South Nyanza District, the Baluhya Political Union, the Maasai United Front Alliance, the Kalenjin Peoples' Alliance, the Rift Valley Peoples' Congress, Tom Mboya's Nairobi People Convention, Argwings-Kodhek's Nairobi African District Council, Masinde Muliro's Kenya Peoples' Party, and Paul Ngei's Akamba People's Party, later on named African Peoples Party. It is against this background that the formation of the 'umbrella' parties, the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and the Kenya African Democratic union (KADU) can be understood as coalitions of 'ethnic' majorities and 'ethnic' minorities respectively (Ajulu 2002, 257; Muigai 2004, 209-210).

Kikuyu Elite Dominance under Jomo Kenyatta (1963-1978)

At the attainment of Kenya's internal self-rule on 1st June 1963, Jomo Kenyatta ascended to power first as Prime Minister, then as President in December 1964². As Prime Minister, Kenyatta was directly answerable to Parliament, and it is this

² Kenya was declared independent on 12th December 1963, but remained a British dominion, which meant that the British monarch retained the position of Head of State, with Prime Minister Kenyatta as Head of Government. With the transition to a republic on 12th December 1964, Kenyatta became President, which meant he was now both Head of State and Head of Government.

accountability that he sought to put aside through a series of constitutional amendments. *First*, Kenyatta's party, KANU, initiated amendments that produced a hybrid constitution, in which the inherited parliamentary system of governance was replaced by a strong executive presidency without the checks and balances characteristic of separation of powers (Badejo 2006, 254-255). *Second*, KANU initiated a series of constitutional amendments that concentrated power in the hands of the central government at the expense of the eight federal units, thereby producing a strong provincial administration which became an instrument of central control (Oduor 2011, 78-83). *Third*, in 1964, Kenyatta saw to the dissolution of the federalist opposition party, the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU), whose members joined Kenyatta's centralist KANU, thereby dispensing with the encumbrances implicit in the presence of a formidable opposition party (Odinga 1967, 219-231). *Fourth*, in due course, Kenyatta also significantly increased the number of Kikuyu parliamentary constituencies, thereby gaining greater control over the legislature (Kanyinga 2006, 370-371).

In his ethnographic work, *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kenyatta had defended the view that pride in one's cultural identity was a precondition of liberation (Kenyatta 1938, 120, 267, 317). His professed vision was one of a country in which the various peoples asserted their uniqueness, and co-operated on the basis of mutual respect (Lonsdale 2004, 89). However, in practice, Kenyatta built his power base almost exclusively on Kikuyu elite interests and Kikuyu grassroots loyalty. In no area was his partisanship as evident as that of the distribution of land and civil service jobs (Wasserman 1973). Inter-cultural tensions were further stoked by the fact that the average Kikuyu was favoured in the allocation of public largesse such as appointments to the public service and access to state loans for private business (Omolo 2002, 214). As a result, rewards and privileges characteristic of patron/client relations inspired a need among the Kikuyu to defend the presidency (Miguda 2003). Under those circumstances, cultural minorities were not even regarded as contenders to state resources, as the contest was almost exclusively between two large ethnic groups, namely, the Kikuyu and the Luo (Makoloo 2005, 5).

In 1966, Oginga Odinga, the Luo leader at the time, who had hitherto been the Vice-President of both the country and KANU, lost both posts due to a series of political manoeuvres aimed at marginalising him politically. In response, he formed a political party In April that year - the Kenya Peoples Union (KPU). Although a fifth of the Members of Parliament initially supported it, it was widely perceived as a Luo outfit mainly due to the fact that Kenyatta and his cohorts used the state media to wage an effective propaganda war against it. Kenyatta took every opportunity to promote the belief that his political opponents only came from Odinga's Luo community (Muigai 2004, 213; Kihoro 2005, 123). Kenyatta also sought to consolidate his grassroots Gikuyu support by highlighting the cultural differences between the Gikuyu and the Luo, with a view to stirring up Gikuyu supremacist sentiments (Atieno-Odhiambo 2002, 243-244).

Furthermore, in 1969, oaths were forcibly administered to the rank and file of the Kikuyu, in which they were made to commit themselves to protect the Kikuyu hold on the presidency. This was done with Kenyatta's full knowledge and consent, and therefore created even greater suspicion towards the Kikuyu among other communities (Muigai 2004, 213-214; Gatu 2016). At the height of the oaths, on 5th July 1969, Thomas Joseph Mboya (popularly known as "Tom Mboya"), the perceived Luo minister³, was assassinated, aggravating the inter-ethnic tensions. The fact that the assassination was carried out a few months after the mysterious death of Argwings Kodhek, another prominent Luo politician, intensified the animosity between the Luo and the Kikuyu (Muigai 2004, 213).

On 25th October 1969, during Kenyatta's one and only post-independence visit to Kisumu, and just over three months after the assassination of Tom Mboya and ten months after the mysterious death of Argwings Kodhek, a section of a large Luo crowd incessantly chanted pro-KPU slogans. Following a public altercation between Kenyatta and Oginga Odinga during that occasion, Kenyatta's security guards fired on the crowd, resulting in the deaths of scores of people in what later came to be known as the 'Kisumu massacre'. In an explanatory statement, the

³ It is widely believed that Tom Mboya was actually from the minority Suba community, but used the Luo identity out of political expediency.

government accused Oginga Odinga's KPU of being subversive, of intentionally stirring up inter-ethnic strife, and of accepting foreign money to promote 'anti-national activities'. Three days later, Oginga and his KPU Deputy Leader J.M. Nthula, were placed under house arrest, as were several other KPU officials and MPs, namely, the KPU publicity secretary Achieng' Oneko, MPs Luke Obok (Alego), Tom Okello-Odongo (Kisumu Rural), Okuto Bala (Nyando), Odero Sar (Ugenya), Wasonga Sijeyo (Gem), and Ondiek Chilo of Nyakach. Caroline Okello-Odongo, Odinga's secretary, who was the wife of the Kisumu Rural MP, was also detained (Nation Reporter 2013). The Attorney-General Charles Njonjo then banned the KPU under Legal Notice No.239 of 30th October 1969, and Kenya became a *de facto* one-party state (Kihoro 2005, 157). Indeed, from then on, detentions without trial and other forms of suppression of dissenting opinions were rampant for the rest of Kenyatta's rule and for most of Daniel arap Moi's after him.

Consequently, by the end of 1969, a mere six years after independence, the Kikuyu elite had effectively monopolised political power, with Kenyatta at the helm, and closely surrounded by Kikuyu relatives and friends such as Mbiyu Koinange, Njoroge Mungai, James Gichuru and Charles Njonjo. Even though Daniel arap Moi, a Turgen (part of the Kalenjin umbrella group), was the vice president, it was common knowledge that he held nothing more than a nominal position (Kanyinga 2006). The Kikuyu constituted the majority in the cabinet, with highly influential cabinet positions becoming their preserve, as were the headships of such key institutions as the Central Bank, the civil service, the police and strategic parastatal corporations.⁴ Thus Shadrack Ojudo Kwassa, a Luo former Chief of Protocol in Kenyatta's regime, reported how, during a reception at Kenyatta's Gatundu home, a senior member of the Kenyatta family was surprised at his inability to speak Gikuyu (which was tantamount to being surprised that he was not a Kikuyu). The following day his job was reassigned to Daniel Gachukia - a Kikuyu (cited in Atieno-Odhiambo 2002, 243-244).

⁴ In the Kenyan context, a 'parastatal corporation' is an institution set up and funded by the government to provide a service to the public while seeking to make profits to boost government revenue.

In 1973, the Gikuyu, Embu and Meru Association (GEMA) was formed with Kenyatta's consent. It had a two-pronged mission: to strengthen the immediate Kikuyu base of the Kenyatta state by incorporating the Embu and Meru into a union with the Kikuyu, and to circumvent KANU's party apparatus in the mobilisation of political support among these groups (Muigai 2004, 214). Consequently, many other groups formed 'cultural associations' of their own such as the Luo Union and the New Akamba Union (Muigai 2004, 214).

Githu Muigai summarises the popular misgivings with Kenyatta's perpetuation of ethnicised politics as follows:

First, by choosing to surround himself with an inner circle of Kikuyu advisers, he [Kenyatta] was seen as having created a Kikuyu government within the government, to the exclusion of other ethnic groups. Secondly, by choosing to champion the deep-seated land and power grievances of the Kikuyu, he was perceived as having consented to be the Kikuyu paramount chief. Thirdly, by co-opting the power elite of other ethnic nationalities into his ruling coalition, he set himself up as the ultimate patron in the neo-patrimonial state he presided over, without placating the poor and dispossessed (Muigai 2004, 201).

Kalenjin Elite Dominance under Daniel arap Moi (1978-2002)

When Daniel arap Moi, a Kalenjin, took over power from Jomo Kenyatta at the latter's death in August 1978, many Kenyans hoped that equity among the country's peoples would finally be pursued. Indeed, for a while it seemed that their hopes had a sound basis, as Moi shrewdly ran a government comprised of individuals from most of the peoples of Kenya, including minority communities (Makoloo 2005, 5-6). However, he gave high priority to building a strong political power base, recruiting a new loyal grouping from among his Kalenjin peoples⁵, and also establishing control over the Civil Service, especially the Provincial Administration, by replacing Kenyatta's appointees with his own. Moi's appointees were from peoples that made up the old KADU party of which he had been a key leader, but most were Kalenjin (Kanyinga 2006, 375). Essentially, the "ethnic" nature of the state changed little, but for the backgrounds of the favoured elite (Omolo 2002, 214-215). Furthermore, Moi constituted a new group of loyalists,

⁵ Plural because the Kalenjin are comprised of eight distinct people groups (see Kipkorir and Welbourn 1973, 1, 70 ff.).

including senior Kikuyu politicians who had not been influential during Kenyatta's reign, and who also lacked support from their own community. He also utilised the Luo and Luhya in his power game. An overall strategy whereby one people group was played against another evolved (Kanyinga 2006, 356-357).

Besides, whereas Kenyatta had by-passed the party KANU, Moi revitalised and mainstreamed it, building his networks through it, thereby freeing himself from the power of deep-rooted regional political leaders whose influence derived from their cultural identities. Moreover, following the 1988 General Elections, he engaged in gerrymandering to increase the number of parliamentary constituencies of Kalenjin and related groups (the Maasai, Samburu and Turkana), resulting in their jointly having the same number of seats as the Kikuyu (36 seats each), thereby ensuring the maintenance of this dominance in subsequent reviews of parliamentary constituencies (Kanyinga 2006, 372-373). He also engaged in similar disproportionate appointments to the cabinet (Kanyinga 2006, 375-376). Therefore, although he banned the cultural associations that had sprang up from 1973, his political strategy was solidly based on mobilisation along cultural lines.

In mid-1982, Moi engineered the amendment of the Constitution to make Kenya a *de jure* one-party state. A few months later, on 1st August 1982, there was an unsuccessful military take-over perceived to be led by Luo and Kikuyu servicemen, which provided Moi with a pretext to engage in unprecedented repression of dissenting voices. The assassination of Robert Ouko (a Luo Member of Parliament and Kenya's Minister for Foreign Affairs) in February 1990 further heightened the tensions between the Luo and the Kalenjin ruling elite. It also reinvigorated those from across the country who had been agitating for the restoration of multi-party politics from the early 1980s, including university lecturers and students, the Law Society of Kenya, religious organisations, and non-governmental organisations. In response, Moi convinced the Kalenjin, Maasai, Turkana and Samburu ("KAMATUSA") that it was in their interest to resist the return of multi-party politics.

Even after the return of multi-party politics in 1991, Moi continued to use the KAMATUSA for his political survival. For example, In 1996, William Ole

Ntimama, a Maasai minister, memorably told the Kikuyu living in the Rift Valley, the ancestral land of the KAMATUSA, to “lie low like envelopes” whenever a Maasai was passing by, meaning that they had to refrain from ‘meddling’ in the politics of that part of the country (Ndirangu 2016). In response to the public backlash against his statement, Ntimama insisted that he had talked of an “antelope” rather than an “envelope” (Gekara and Sigei 2013). However, the Kiswahili words for ‘envelope’ (*bahasha*) and ‘antelope’ (*paa* or *swara*) are distinctly different. In the run-up to the 1992 and 1997 general elections in which Moi was seeking to retain power in a multi-party environment, violence broke out in Rift Valley areas: Kikuyu inhabitants among the indigenous Kalenjin were targeted to intimidate them and/or displace them in order to keep them from voting for Moi’s competitors (Klopp 2001).

Kikuyu Elite Dominance Restored under Mwai Kibaki (2003-2013)

The 2002 elections resulted in the end of the forty-year reign of the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and the coming to power of a coalition of several people groups under the banner of the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), with Mwai Kibaki as President. NARC comprised of two main factions, namely, Mwai Kibaki’s National Alliance Party of Kenya (NAK) and Raila Odinga’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). At the outset, there was an apparently balanced representation of the major peoples of Kenya in Kibaki’s cabinet (Kanyinga 2006, 76). However, a group comprising many of the still living key figures of the Kenyatta regime was soon reconstituted as Kibaki’s main advisers, including Njenga Karume, George Muhoho, Matere Keriri, Joe Wanjui, Peter Kanyago, S.K. Macharia and Nat Kang’ethe (Murunga and Nasong’o 2006, 7). Consequently, members of Kibaki’s Kikuyu community and their Meru allies got most of the key positions not only in cabinet, but also in the civil service. For example, out of 25 permanent secretaries, 11 were from the Kikuyu and Meru, some of them having been appointed into these positions even though they had already retired from the civil service. Other large communities had about 2 positions each (Kanyinga 2006, 391-392). In response, the other coalition partners accused Kibaki of reneging on his promise to effect the equitable distribution of appointments to public positions

in line with the pre-election pact among parties in the coalition (Livingstone 2005, 17-18).

Following the defeat of Kibaki's faction of NARC at the constitutional referendum in November 2005, Kibaki did away altogether with equitable distribution of cabinet and other public positions. He dismissed all ministers affiliated to the LDP faction of NARC, and appointed members of the former ruling party, KANU, to the cabinet, thereby further raising tensions between his NAK faction and Raila Odinga's LDP faction (Murunga and Nasong'o 2006, 12).

The climax of ethnicised politics during the Kibaki regime came with the disputed 2007 general elections that culminated in two months of violent conflict. Although the 2005 Referendum on a new Constitution was peaceful and its results uncontested, through it the lines of the 2007-2008 conflict were drawn, heightened by the perceived urgency of the need to win or to retain the presidency (Commission of Inquiry into Post-Election Violence 2008, 30). In the run-up to the 2007 elections, Mwai Kibaki, heading the hastily-formed Party of National Unity (PNU), drew his support mainly from the Gikuyu, Embu and Meru (GEMA) communities of Central and central Eastern provinces, and campaigned on his socio-economic record. On the other hand, Raila Odinga, at the head of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM)⁶, with the support of vast proportions of the Luo, Luhya, Kalenjin and some smaller communities, vocalised the need for fundamental political and socio-economic reform and devolution of state power (Wrong 2009, 295 ff.).

Violence across the country broke out as soon as Kibaki was declared winner and hastily sworn in at Statehouse at twilight on 30th December, 2007. The worst unrest during the post-2007 elections conflict was around the Northern Rift Valley town of Eldoret, where the Kalenjin mobilised against the Kikuyu, driving them away and burning their property. There was also serious violence in the Southern Rift,

⁶ During the November 2005 Constitutional Referendum, the "Yes" side led by Mwai Kibaki had the Banana for its symbol, while the "no" side led by Raila Odinga had the orange for its symbol. Thus the victorious "Orange" side began to talk of the "Orange Democratic Movement (ODM)", and later registered a party under that name.

with the Kalenjin attacking the Kisii over land ownership issues. In the Rift Valley towns of Naivasha, Molo and Nakuru, the Mungiki, a Kikuyu outlawed militia, attacked ODM supporters. Besides, families of the minority Ogiek hunter-gatherer community close to Nakuru had their houses and other property destroyed by Kikuyu villagers. Key among grotesque displays of ethnically-based violence were the Kiambaa church burning in Eldoret where 35 members of the Kikuyu community lost their lives, the burning of a house in Naivasha where 19 members of the Luo community were killed, the forcible circumcision of Luo men in Naivasha and parts of Central, Nairobi and Rift Valley Provinces, Police shootings in several places including Kisumu and Kericho, and the rape of women and girls (Kenya National Commission on Human Rights 2008, 9). By the time the power-sharing deal was struck on 28th February 2008, bringing together the ODM and the PNU, approximately 1,500 Kenyans had been killed, over 400,000 displaced, and an unknown number of women had been raped (Matheson 2008).

Kikuyu-Kalenjin Elite Dominance under Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto (2013 to Date)

During the 2007 general elections, Uhuru Kenyatta, son of Kenya's first President Jomo Kenyatta, who had been the Leader of the Official Opposition during Kibaki's first term, chose not to run against Kibaki, but to support him instead. In retrospect, he most probably supported Kibaki in 2007 in return for Kibaki's support in 2013. Moreover, in the face of a formidable challenge to Kibaki from Raila Odinga, son of Kenya's first Vice-President Oginga Odinga (a Luo), the Kikuyu would probably have accused Uhuru Kenyatta of dividing the community's vote if he had run in 2007.

A few years later, as part of the manoeuvres around the Kibaki succession, there was the proposed Kikuyu, Kalenjin and Kamba (KKK) Alliance. In a meeting in 2009 at Burnt Forest, three MPs - Kareke Mbiuki, Simon Mbugua and Joshua Kuttuny - claimed that then Vice President Kalonzo Musyoka (Kamba), then deputy Prime Minister Uhuru Kenyatta (Kikuyu) and then Eldoret North MP William Ruto (Kalenjin) would unite their peoples to succeed Kibaki in the next general elections. At some point in 2010, Kalonzo Musyoka endorsed the idea in a meeting in the

North Rift, sparking off a tirade of protests that the proposed alliance was divisive. In response, Ruto, Kenyatta and Musyoka repeatedly disowned the alliance (Muriungi 2011). On 10th October 2010, John Michuki, the late influential Kikuyu minister in the Kibaki regime, declared that anyone who wished to have support from the Kikuyu had to go through Uhuru Kenyatta. He thereby declared Kenyatta the spokesman of the community (Ngige and Gikandi 2010).

Around March 2011, yet another coalition was hatched, this time involving politicians from seven communities or clusters of communities. The so-called ‘G7’ included William Ruto (Kalenjin), Uhuru Kenyatta (Kikuyu), Kalonzo Musyoka (Kamba), Eugene Wamalwa (Luhya), Aden Duale (Somali), Najib Balala (Arab), and Omingo Magara (Kisii). However, it quickly disintegrated, probably due to squabbles about how to share out political positions. Thereafter, Kenyatta’s The National Alliance (TNA) and Ruto’s United Republican Party (URP) formed a coalition under the Jubilee Alliance Party (JAP), with Kenyatta as its presidential candidate and Ruto his running mate. Their main challengers were the Coalition for Reform and Democracy (CORD) headed by Raila Odinga (a Luo) deputised by Kalonzo Musyoka (a Kamba), and supported by politicians from several other communities. In the General Elections of 4 March 2013, Uhuru Kenyatta was declared the winner in a tightly contested poll, and his victory subsequently upheld by the Supreme Court.

In August 2013, Munuhe and Koinange wrote an article in the *Sunday Standard* titled “How Uhuru Kenyatta’s strategists planned for election”. They referred to a document titled “State House 2012”,⁷ allegedly authored by Uhuru’s think-tank, which they claimed provided interesting insights into how the think-tank viewed other candidates in the race, how they strongly believed that cultural blocs would carry the day, and how they toyed with the idea of dangling carrots to the smaller communities to get them to back Kenyatta. Munuhe and Koinange (2013) further quote the document as stating: “Indeed, out of the three presidents and 10 vice-presidents, only one - (Joseph) Murumbi - was not from the big five [communities] and he only lasted six months (the assumption of course is that Saitoti was appointed

⁷ The General elections were originally scheduled for 2012.

as a Kikuyu).” Of these communities, the secret dossier states, Central (Kikuyu), Nyanza (Luo and Kisii) and Rift Valley (Kalenjin) have a track record of voting as a bloc almost to the man. The narrative from the alleged strategy document states that Kenyatta had the best chance going into the election with virtually 37% of the vote (from the Kikuyu-Embu-Meru bloc) under lock-and-key, and needing only the support of either Kalonzo (a Kamba leader) or Ruto (a Kalenjin leader) to get over the top. While it is difficult to ascertain the authenticity of the secret document, the subsequent paragraphs illustrate that ethnicised politics remained an intractable problem during the Uhuru Kenyatta regime.

When Uhuru Kenyatta was declared winner of the 2013 presidential election, he formed a government dominated by people from the Kikuyu and Kalenjin - the two communities that comprised the Jubilee coalition. Nevertheless, in mid-December 2013, about eight months after the coalition took office, Alfred Keter (a Kalenjin), in a public rally in Eldoret and in the presence of the President and Deputy President, castigated Kenyatta for allegedly renegeing on the pre-election Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between his (Kenyatta’s) TNA and Ruto’s URP to share public positions on an equal (50:50) basis (Kenya Today Correspondence 2013). Such an MoU would imply that there would be very little or nothing for the other forty officially recognised peoples in the country. Indeed, in mid January 2014, about nine months after Uhuru Kenyatta took power, Koross (2014) wrote:

The home regions of President Uhuru Kenyatta and his Deputy William Ruto have been rewarded with more than half of all senior appointments, a survey by *The Standard on Saturday* has revealed. Mt Kenya and Rift Valley regions [Kikuyu and Kalenjin regions respectively] hold a combined 57.5% of the 87 appointments made by the nine-month-old Jubilee administration (Koross 2014).

Uhuru Kenyatta was accused, in some instances more fairly than in others, of favouring the Kikuyu primarily, and the Kalenjin secondarily in, among others, appointments to key public offices generally (Khalwale 2015), the perpetuation of the tradition of Kikuyu dominance in the appointment of Central Bank of Kenya governors (Nyong’o 2015), and appointments to heads of parastatal corporations (Wekesa 2016).

During most of Uhuru Kenyatta's first presidential term (2013-2017), William Ruto, then Deputy President, repeatedly told his fellow Kalenjins to rally behind him in his support for Kenyatta in the 2017 elections in order to secure Kenyatta's support for Ruto's bid to succeed him in 2022 (Kemei 2015). His efforts were boosted by Kenyatta, who, presumably to reciprocate the Kalenjin community's support in 2013 with Ruto at its helm and to ensure its further support in 2017, appealed to the 'Mount Kenya Region' (read "Kikuyu, Embu and Meru") to support Ruto in 2022 (Kibet and Munyeki 2016). Besides, in a speech to a largely Kalenjin audience in the Rift Valley on 20th September 2013, Uhuru Kenyatta had assured them that he would rule for ten years and then hand over to Ruto who would in turn rule for another ten (KTN 2013). In March 2016, Kenyatta told another public rally in the Rift Valley that those eyeing the presidency would have to wait until 2032 (KTN 2016).

Furthermore, in September 2016, about eleven months to the August 2017 elections, Kenyatta and Ruto strengthened their formal co-operation by folding up their TNA and URP respectively to form the Jubilee Party (JP). Ten other friendly parties also dissolved themselves and joined the JP (Joshua 2016). Raila Odinga (a Luo), Musalia Mudavadi (a Luhya) and Moses Wetangula (also a Luhya), among others, came together to form the National Super-Alliance (NASA) to challenge the Kenyatta-Ruto bid for a second term, but did not fold up their individual parties. In mid-January to mid-February 2017, about six months to the August 2017 elections, Uhuru Kenyatta and his arch-rival, Raila Odinga, each traversed those regions of the country that he considered to be his 'strongholds' in an attempt to mobilise his perceived supporters to register as voters, seeking to convince them that their only hope lay in his victory in the presidential elections.

When Kenyatta was declared winner of the elections on 11th August 2017, there were sporadic riots in areas where the opposition enjoyed massive support, especially in Nairobi, western Kenya and Coast. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), at least 33 people were killed in Nairobi alone, most of them as a result of action by the police. HRW further noted:

Added to the 12 killings at the hands of police documented by Human Rights Watch in western Kenya, and five additional killings confirmed by the Kenyan National Human Rights Commission, the national death toll could be as high as 67. Hundreds of residents have suffered severe injuries including gunshot wounds, debilitating injuries such as broken bones and extensive bruising as a result of the police violence (Human Rights Watch 2017).

Among the fatalities was the six-month old Baby Samantha Pendo whom an inquest confirmed the police bludgeoned to death in her mother's arms in Nyalenda slum in Kisumu on the night of 10th August 2017 (Omolo and Mulindi 2017; Article 19 2019; The Star Reporter n.d.).

On 1st September 2017, the Supreme Court granted Raila Odinga's petition to nullify the Presidential Elections of 8th August 2017 in which Kenyatta had been declared winner, and ordered for fresh elections within ninety days. However, Raila Odinga boycotted the October 2017 repeat elections on the grounds that the Kenyatta regime was determined to rig them since it had done little to implement the recommendations of the Supreme Court on how to make the polls more transparent. Thus, following Kenyatta's easy victory in the repeat polls, the country was plunged into a crisis which threatened to be more drawn-out and intense than the 2007-2008 post-election crisis: there were sporadic riots that ended up in injuries and some lives lost from police violence, sustained boycotts of business outfits associated with the Kenyatta family, and calls for secession.

However, soon after the conclusion of the October 2017 repeat Presidential election, there were reports of a serious rift between Uhuru Kenyatta and his Deputy William Ruto on account of the former's apparent lack of commitment to support the latter's bid to succeed him. In early 2018, Uhuru Kenyatta presented a list of nominees to the cabinet in the absence of Ruto, and frequently used "I" rather than "we" in his address as had been the case since the duo won the 2013 polls (Wafula 2018). The rift culminated in the 9 March 2018 'handshake' between Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga, bringing to an abrupt end the tensions occasioned by the contested 2017 general elections. Hence while a few months earlier many Luo saw Uhuru Kenyatta as their arch-enemy, they now enthusiastically embraced him as Raila Odinga's formidable political partner who would facilitate his ascent to the presidency.

Subsequently, William Ruto formed an alliance with a number of influential politicians from the Gikuyu, Embu and Meru (GEMA) communities in a team that acquired the nickname “Tangatanga” (Kiswahili for “loitering”, derived from Uhuru Kenyatta’s charge that Ruto and his allies were loitering all over the country. Ruto eventually left the Jubilee Party, registered his United Democratic Alliance (UDA), and went on to form the Kenya Kwanza Alliance with a number of other political parties. As such, while the 2022 elections officially pitted Deputy President William Ruto against Raila Odinga, many saw them as a contest between Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto, because Kenyatta openly supported Odinga. Both Ruto and Odinga appointed Kikuyu running mates in a bid to secure Kikuyu support. In the end, Ruto was declared the winner on 15th August 2022, and his victory confirmed by the judgment of the Supreme Court on 5th September 2022.

In sum, William Ruto simply replaced Uhuru Kenyatta at the helm of the Kikuyu-Kalenjin alliance, with Rigathi Gachagua, a Kikuyu, as his deputy. Already complaints have come from several quarters that Ruto’s appointments favour the Kalenjin and Kikuyu elite who were at the core of his Kenya Kwanza Alliance. For example, according to Wanyoike (2022), Ruto’s cabinet does not adhere to the requirement in Article 130(2) of the Constitution of Kenya 2010 that the composition of the national executive reflect the regional and ethnic diversity of the people of Kenya.

The Five-Pronged Deleterious Impact of Ethnicised Politics on the Management of Public Affairs in Kenya: An Overview

From the foregoing outline of the history of ethnicised politics in Kenya, it is manifest that the phenomenon continues to have at least five deleterious effects on the management of the country’s public affairs.

First, ethnicised politics has resulted in gross disparities in economic development among the country’s regions. As Kiringai (2006) observes, while the government budget ought to play the dual roles of ensuring rapid economic growth and facilitating redistribution of the country’s resources, political patronage influences

the pattern of public spending, especially on large infrastructure projects and staffing of public enterprises. Since Kenya's eight former provinces were largely demarcated along "ethnic" lines, the disparities in economic development among them are directly related to how close to political power the elites of the eight provinces have been (Society for International Development 2004, 13). Indeed, the former Central Province, largely occupied by the Kikuyu from whom three of the five presidents have hailed, is relatively more economically developed than other parts of the country. The former North-Eastern and Coast provinces are worse off than others in terms of access to basic services. Besides, regions inhabited by numerically disadvantaged peoples are more marginalised than those inhabited by larger ones (Kanyinga 2006, 364-368). For example, in 2004, the doctor-patient ratio was about 1:20,700 in the former Central Province (home of the Kikuyu who had the presidency from 1963 to 1978, and again from 2003), but 1:120,000 in the former North Eastern Province (which has not had a president from the region). Even more striking, about 93% of women in the then North Eastern province had no school education at all, compared to only about 3% in the former Central province (Society for International Development 2004, p.vii).

Furthermore, as I earlier indicated, over the years, the elite from the president's community have tended to occupy key positions in strategic ministries, departments and state corporations. Consequently, they allocate middle and junior level positions to members of their own community. The hierarchy of patronage thus begins at the level of high politics and extends to the lower levels of public service (Kanyinga 2006, 383). In this regard, the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) released a report on 6th April 2011, based on an analysis of the government's Integrated Personnel and Payroll Data System for March 2010 against the population census report of 2009, as well as other official documents. According to the report, over 50% of Kenya's peoples ("ethnic groups") were only marginally represented in the Civil Service - the country's largest employer. Besides, only 20 out of over 40 listed peoples of Kenya were statistically visible in the Civil Service. Some 23 people groups had less than 1% presence in it (National Cohesion and Integration Commission 2011).

Moreover, the NCIC report revealed that the five most numerous peoples (Kikuyu, Kalenjin, Luhya, Kamba and Luo) occupied nearly 70 percent of all government jobs. The Kikuyu led the pack with 22.3% of all civil service jobs, followed by the Kalenjin (16.7%), Luhya (11.3%), Kamba (9.7%) and Luo (9.0%). The Kikuyu, Kalenjin, Luhya, Kamba, Luo, Kisii and Meru had a representation of above 5% in the civil service. All the other communities' representation was below 5%. Two communities alone, the Kikuyu and the Kalenjin, had a combined presence of almost 40% of civil service jobs, and the report inferred that this was due to the fact that each of them had held the presidency for more than twenty years (National Cohesion and Integration Commission 2011).

The then NCIC Chairman, Dr. Mzalendo Kibunjia, noted that jobs such as serving tea and cleaning did not need much formal education, and yet the “big communities” had dominated even such positions. Said Dr. Kibunjia: “Kenya must not allow itself to operate an informal apartheid system that could perpetuate an intergenerational transmission of inequality.” He went on to note that the composition of the civil service is important, not only because it is the face of the government and can speak volumes about inclusivity, but also because salaries from jobs are an important source of income for many people, forming the initial bases for wealth accumulation. He further observed that the skewed composition of the civil service not only distorts incomes, but also excludes large populations from driving policy about the things that matter to them (Kibunjia 2011). In sum, ethnicised politics quickly deteriorated into what Davidson (1992, 206-207) refers to as clientelism - the provision of state largesse in exchange for political support.

Second, due to ethnicised politics, Kenyans from minority communities are very frequently excluded from economic and political opportunities. They are grossly disadvantaged in the competition for business and job opportunities, even in the private sector. For example, Adam Hussein Adam, a Kenyan Nubian, worked for a multinational company in the Channel Sales Department. When the company decided to suspend the operations of that department and to re-deploy the staff to other departments, he found that he was not being re-deployed alongside his colleagues. In due course, his boss asked him: “Why don't you have a name that places you somewhere?” Names that “placed people somewhere” were of dominant

communities such as Njoroge (Kikuyu), Muliro (Luhya), or Onyango (Luo), among others (Adam Hussein Adam, 18 August 2007, personal communication). Besides, since political negotiations are based on numerical strength, communities that are grossly numerically disadvantaged such as the Ogiek, Endorois, Sengwer and Pokomo are easily excluded from such negotiations, thereby reinforcing their marginalization in the polity.

Third, personality cults based on cultural identity have taken centre stage, thereby stunting the growth of issue-based politics in the country. Politicians therefore frequently set themselves up as spokes-persons of their communities and repeatedly make political alliances with elites from other communities for their personal benefit, all the while convincing their followers that such decisions are for the good of their communities. Besides, in cases where politicians or their cronies are implicated in improprieties such as abuse of office or embezzlement of public funds, they often whip up “ethnic” sentiments among their followers, telling them that it is “their community” which is under attack. For example, in response to pressure to resign from the Finance portfolio due to allegations of corruption in the handling of the sale of the Grand Regency Hotel, Amos Kimunya convened a rally in his parliamentary constituency, in which he told those in attendance that they were the target of the calls for his resignation (Omanga and Gitonga 2008). Similarly, appointments to public offices are viewed as beneficial to the appointees’ communities rather than to the country. Hence during the controversy over Keriako Tobiko’s nomination to the post of Director of Public Prosecutions, Maasai elders told their followers that it was their community rather than Tobiko that was under siege (Rajab 2011).

Fourth, ethnicised politics has frequently led to violent conflicts among Kenya’s various peoples that have resulted in loss of life and property. The Kisumu Massacre in 1969, the inter-communal skirmishes in the Rift Valley in the early 1960s and 1990s, the menace of various culturally-based political militias during electioneering periods from the early 1990s, the 2007-2008 and 2017 post-elections crises are all cases in point. Indeed, the uncertainty in the run-up to elections slows down economic activity in the country, as people fear that their investments may be

razed to the ground because of inter-communal skirmishes or all-out civil war due to contested election results.

Fifth, Kenyans who are highly urbanised and/or who have mixed parentage often do not have deep loyalties to any people group. Nevertheless, in times of inter-communal tensions, they are treated as having loyalty to specific communities on the superficial basis of their names that are easily associated with specific peoples. For instance, at the height of the 2007-2008 post-elections crisis, Rozi was asked to state her “tribe” by a gang of young men with an assortment of crude weapons which had stopped an ambulance she was travelling in along the Eldoret-Kakamega Road. She said she was Luhya, whereupon they demanded that she speak some Luhya. However, she told them that although her father was Luhya, her mother was Taita. She only escaped being hacked to death by showing a copy of her mother’s identity card. The truth turned out to be that the only language she could speak apart from Kiswahili and English was Gikuyu, her family having lived for many years in central Kenya; and yet the marauders were busy looking for Kikuyus travelling along that road. Rozi’s brother, Simiyu Barasa, summarised his family’s predicament in an ethnically-politicised Kenya as follows:

My friend, I know no tribe. I only know languages. My mother is Taita, my Father is Luhya, and we were raised in Kiambu among the Gikuyu. It has never been important in our family to know which tribe we should belong to, my sisters and brothers have names from both sides of our parents’ communities. In this chaos, if the hunters of fellow humans were to find us in our house, would they really believe we are brothers and sisters from our names? (Barasa 2008).

Conclusion

The foregoing reflections confirm the veracity of the assertion of Ndegwa (1997, 611-613) that “ethnic” identity is a fundamental force in Kenyan politics, a fault line along which elites mobilised and competed for power within incipient democratic institutions at independence, in the authoritarian interim, and in the return to party pluralism. Consequently, Ogude (2002, 205) refers to post-colonial Kenya as an “ethnocratic state”. Furthermore, as I earlier indicated, ethnicised politics quickly deteriorated into clientelism - the provision of state largesse in exchange for political support, resulting in what Davidson (1992, 207) refers to as “a dogfight for the spoils of political power” - a situation which led him to memorably refer to the

imposition of the Western-type state on post-colonial polities in Africa as a burden and a curse.

Yet as Matheson (2008) observes, in calmer times, cultural differences are a source of humour among Kenyans. Nevertheless, by and large, the rhetoric of Kenyan politicians has been persistently nationalist, while their strategies and actions have been consistently grounded in cultural identity (Oduor 2018). Thus Ramogi Achieng' Oneko, one of the prominent leaders of Kenya's decolonisation struggle, wrote with deep melancholy in 2005:

An important driving force in general elections and politics today is tribalism and sectarianism, while pursuit of effective representation has been relegated to the background. The truth is that accelerated divisive tribal politics have marked the decline of our country as an effective political-economic force, not only in regional matters but also in African affairs (Oneko 2005, pp.xii-xiii).

Nevertheless, in many countries, Kenya included, cultural identity ("ethnicity") as such is not a source of friction. As Cohen (1996, 84) points out, if people actually have serious disputes with one another on the grounds of cultural differences, it is only because such differences are associated with serious political cleavages. On the other hand, continues Cohen, they stick together only because of mutual interests. Indeed, there are indications that Kenyans have the vast potential to transcend ethnicised politics. For example, in the February 1961 elections, Tom Mboya (perceived to be a Luo),⁸ beat Munyua Waiyaki (a Kikuyu) in a Kikuyu-dominated constituency (Muigai 2004, 210). Furthermore, the outpouring of grief and anger in many parts of the country, Luoland included, following the assassination of Josiah Mwangi ("JM") Kariuki, the Kikuyu Member of Parliament for Nyandarua North in 1975, suggests that even after twelve years of Jomo Kenyatta's highly ethnicised politics, Kenyans were still able and willing to embrace people from socio-cultural groups other than their own. A similar outpouring of emotion was evident, even in Kikuyuland, when Robert Ouko, the former Luo Minister for Foreign Affairs, was assassinated in 1990. Moreover, soon after the Kibaki-led National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) took power in 2003, Kikuyu crowds in Nyeri shouted that Raila Odinga (a Luo) was a *njamba* (Kikuyu

⁸ See Footnote 3 above.

for “hero”) for his pivotal role in Kibaki’s electoral victory. Similarly, in 2010, crowds in Murang’a, also part of Kikuyuland, again warmly welcomed Odinga, some waving his portrait titled “*Njamba ya Bururi* (the country’s hero)”, presumably for agreeing to a power sharing pact with Kibaki after the 2007 elections debacle.⁹ Most importantly, inter-communal marriages are common among Kenyans, indicating that the various peoples in the country generally live in harmony until the politicians incite them against one another.

However, many scholars and activists are of the view that cultural identity is an obstacle to Kenya’s democratization. Nevertheless, since the Kenyan state is the product of colonial violence bringing various indigenous socio-political formations into a single artificial colonial territory, forcing its citizens to drop their cultural identities in line with the liberal vision of a culturally-blind polity is further (neo)-colonial violence. What is needed are measures to mitigate the trauma of colonial consolidation. In particular, the right to cultural identity and the promotion of equity in the distribution of resources and opportunities among the various communities ought to be factored into the country’s socio-political engineering, thereby making political mobilisation along cultural lines less attractive (Oduor 2022b).

⁹ While these two incidents were widely reported in mainstream print and electronic media at the time, I was unable to find the reports online, probably due to deliberate action on the part of Raila’s powerful competitors in the 2017 and 2022 elections.

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