



Origin and Nature of Ethnic Fragmentation in Kenya Since 1960

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Abstract

This research article underscored ethnic fragmentation in Kenya by dwelling on its origin and nature since 1960. It reviewed various literatures and filled the gaps that emerged. Additionally, the research article utilized historical research design since the study was qualitative in nature. It was conducted in Bungoma, Busia, Kakamega, Kisumu, Kisii, Homabay and Siaya. It utilized purposive and snowballing sampling techniques to collect data. Moreover, the article employed pragmatism and the Instrumental Marxism Theory which shed light on the historical and structural factors underlying Kenya's ethnic fragmentation. The research article found that; ethnic politics was deliberately introduced and propagated in the Kenyan political system by the British colonial government through its divisive 'divide and rule' policy to actualize colonial and imperialist economic and political objectives. The article concludes that; while historical and structural factors have significantly influenced Kenya's ethnic fragmentation, emerging national identities alongside ethnic affiliations indicate a potential shift towards more inclusive national unity.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Ethnic fragmentation, Fragmentation, Nature and Origin

Introduction

Ethnic fragmentation can stem from cultural and identity differences (Tade, 2005). Distinct ethnic groups often have unique languages, customs, traditions, and historical narratives that shape their collective identity (Joseph, 2004). These differences, when amplified and politicized, can lead to intergroup tensions and conflicts. Unequal distribution of resources, such as land, water, minerals, or economic opportunities, can be a significant factor in ethnic fragmentation. When different ethnic groups compete for limited resources, perceived marginalization or exclusion from resource access can deepen intergroup divisions and conflicts (Smith, 1996).

Ethnic fragmentation is often intertwined with political power struggles. The quest for political dominance or control over the state apparatus can lead to the mobilization of ethnic identities for political gain (Ibid). Ethnic-based political parties or movements may emerge, leading to competition or conflict along ethnic lines. Social and economic inequalities can contribute to ethnic fragmentation. When certain ethnic groups face systemic discrimination, marginalization, or limited access to resources and opportunities, it can fuel grievances and foster divisions between groups (Eresso, 2021). The rise of nationalism and independence movements can both unite and fragment ethnic groups. While these movements often aim for



self-determination and national sovereignty, they can also reinforce ethnic identities and contribute to the exclusion of minority groups, potentially leading to fragmentation (Ibid).

Ethnic fragmentation can also be influenced by external factors, such as interference by external powers, geopolitical interests, or international interventions. External actors, through their policies or interventions, may exacerbate ethnic tensions or exploit existing divisions for their own interests (Morgan, 2001). Important to note from Alesina and La Ferrara, is that the origins of ethnic fragmentation are complex and interconnected. The combination of historical legacies, socio-economic factors, political dynamics, and cultural differences shapes the nature and development of ethnic fragmentation in different parts of the world. What has not been discussed by Alesina and La Ferrara is that understanding these origins can provide insights into addressing the challenges associated with ethnic fragmentation and promoting inclusive societies (Ibid). Therefore, this study discussed this gap in the context of Kenya since 1963 as far as interplay between ethnic fragmentation and economic development.

Methodology

The study employed historical research design since its qualitative in nature. In the historical research design, the writings are descriptive, and they begin with a chronological recounting of events. Their investigation focuses on the events' explanatory connection and effects (Pentland, 1999). The study targeted all ethnic groups in 47 Counties in Kenya. Despite targeting 47 counties, it was carried out in 7 Counties which included, Bungoma, Busia, Kakamega, Kisumu, Kisii, Homabay, and Siaya which formed the sample size to the study. The study used convenience, purposive and snow ball sampling techniques to identify various respondents to be involved in the study. Secondary and primary data were used in order to enrich the study. Content analysis was used to analyse the data gathered by the researcher.

Results and Discussion

Origin of ethnic fragmentation in Kenya

The political exclusion of many ethnic communities in Kenya is the legacy of colonial rule and a decade long centralized, ethicized, and personalized presidential system (Kwatemba, 2008). The presidency was used for the political and material benefit of the holder of the office and his close political associates, often belonging to the ethnic community from which the president hailed (KNA, DC/EN/1/1). The British, as part of their divide and rule colonial policy, chose individuals from specific ethnic communities, to the exclusion of others to allow access to the country's political and administrative institutions, as a reward for this collaboration (Stuckey, 2023).

The formation of the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) in the early 1960s exemplifies the complex interplay between ethnicity and politics in Kenya (Njagi, 2018). KANU, founded in 1960 and primarily supported by the Kikuyu and Luo ethnic groups, sought a centralized government structure, which reflected the interests of the larger and more dominant communities. The formation of KANU can be seen as an effort to consolidate power among these groups, leveraging their numerical and political strength to shape the new nation's governance (Ibid).



Conversely, KADU emerged in 1960 as a coalition of smaller ethnic groups, including the Kalenjin, Maasai, and coastal communities, who feared marginalization in a KANU-dominated government (Tuli, 2005). KADU advocated for a federal system, or *majimboism*, which aimed to protect the interests of minority groups by granting them more autonomy within their regions (Ibid). This illustrates how ethnic considerations significantly influenced the political landscape during Kenya's transition to independence.

The rivalry between KANU and KADU highlighted the challenges of forging a national identity amidst diverse ethnic loyalties. According to historian Bethwell Ogot, "the ethnic factor was at the core of political organization" in Kenya during this period (Ogot & Ochieng, 1995). This dynamic underscores the enduring impact of ethnicity on Kenyan politics, as seen in the persistent regional and ethnic alignments in subsequent electoral contests. The formation of these parties thus reflects the central role of ethnicity in shaping Kenya's political evolution. An FGD while the researcher was involved in a discussion over the preceding secondary source, posited that:

After independence, Jomo Kenyatta, the first Kenyan President, largely maintained the colonial political and economic structures, and chose to politically and economically empower himself and those, mainly, from his ethnic community - the Kikuyu - to the exclusion of others. To this effect he abolished the Independence Constitution that provided for a semi-federal political system and centralised all political powers in his office. He justified the centralisation of powers by the ideal of nation building, a project that was predicated on a denial of the ethnic diversity of the Kenyan people. Dubbed pejoratively "majimboism", the semi-federal system was viewed as a system that would exacerbate the ethnic cleavages of the Kenyan people and sabotage the nation-building project (FGD with WAA CBO Leaders at Farm View Hotel, Busia (K), on 10/1/2024).

Therefore, since Kenya's independence in 1963, Kenyan politics has been bedeviled by ethnic politics as a result of ethnic polarization and sentimental coloration of all national issues. This problem has been one of the major factors inhibiting national cohesion and integration and overall national development in Kenya. Kenyan politics is tainted with ethnic sentiments and politically induced disharmony. Ethnic politics has been one of the factors responsible for poor socio-economic development (Kheri, 2017). While ascertaining the above discovery made by the research, oral source, Peter Kemei informed the researcher that:

Ethnic politics was deliberately introduced and propagated in the Kenyan political system by the British colonial government through its divisive 'divide and rule' policy to actualize colonial and imperialist economic and political objectives. The origins of ethnic consciousness as manifested in Kenya's political processes lay partially in the arbitrary way in which the British colonialists' based administrative boundaries and local government on cultural and linguistic lines, a decision informed by an assumption that Africans lived in ethnic groups, so ethnic groups must constitute the basis of colonial administration (Peter Kemei, O.I, in Kakamega Town, On, 12/11/2023).



These vices were continued on an even larger scale by post-colonial political leaders who failed to inculcate national cohesion and unity due to their pursuit of sectarian and self-interests at the expense of the nation-building project. Further, the study noted that, efforts by the successive regimes to advance a national identity have proved futile as all of them have worked to calcify it through its exploitation and politicization. The crux of this study argument is that ethnicity has, over time, been used by the self-aggrandizing political elite for self-serving interests.

Another opinion to this study and point in question was put forward by a key informant, Taabu Mafimbo, who reiterated to the researcher that; before 2007-2008, Kenya was among the few African countries that for a long period of time had enjoyed significant amounts of quiescence since independence. It has been regarded as an oasis of peace in a turbulent region. This was extraordinary going by the quantity of political violence, protracted conflicts, and civil wars that had occurred in the continent. However, Kenya had also seen its share of turbulent times that began as soon as the country attained independence under the Kenyatta regime (1963-1978). This period was largely characterized by the suppression of plural democracy resulting in a one-party state, political assassinations, and monopolization of the media by the state (Taabu Mafimbo, O.I, in Busia Town, On, 15/11/2023).

In 1978, Moi's regime took over and furthered Kenyatta's machinations with some enhanced degree of brutality, a situation that triggered what came to be known as the clamor for multi-party democracy from the early 1980s. From the works of Throup and Hornsby, by the early 1990s, the clamor gained momentum and transmogrified into open rebellion, and an ethnicized brand of politics due to the marginalization of some ethnic groups (Throup and Hornsby, 1998). It is further opined that the political climate of the 1990s served to put the country on a dangerous political path that led to political and ethnic bigotry. It emerged those pockets of political violence and ethnic clashes in some parts of the country for example in Rift valley.

Following unprecedented internal and external pressure the then President Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi allowed for the repeal of section 2 A of the Constitution of Kenya and thus multi-party politics was ushered in the country (Rwigema, 2022). There was an election in 1997 that had significant violence, particularly in the coast and Rift Valley region. The 2002 General Election was the most peaceful election in Kenya. The transfer of power was also very smooth.

From the writings of Peter Mbogo works, the 2007/2008 the post-election violence that ensued in the wake of divisive presidential elections highlighted the extent of the ethnic divisions that had largely been ignored in the past as the country stood at the precipice of a civil war (Mbogo, 2022). The human cost was enormous with over 1000 people losing their lives in less than two months and hundreds of thousands being displaced. Yet, the violence also revealed the deeply entrenched structural decay that engulfed the country from the dysfunctional electoral institution, the insidious culture of impunity, ethnicization of politics, and power to imperious presidency and corruption (GoK, 2006). From this information, a respondent informed this researcher that:

In 2008, after the restoration of peace by the panel of eminent personalities led by the late Koffi Anan, Kenya was presented with an opportunity to begin a new chapter of robust constitutional and institutional reforms: packaged in a



four-item agenda. Although some significant achievements were registered - promulgation of the new constitution in 2010, reconstitution of the electoral body as well as other institutions like the judiciary and police -the country was still faced the almost similar challenges of 2007 during the 2013 general elections (Shadrack Oruko, O.I, in Koyonzo Kakamega, on 1/12/2023).

It is also worth noting that the 2017 election ushered the country into another political dilemma after the results of the elections were nullified by the Supreme Court judges led by Chief Justice David Maraga, citing deep irregularities and utter mendacity. The country was again at the precipice until 9th March 2018 when the historic symbolic 'handshake' between President Uhuru Kenyatta and former Prime Minister Raila Odinga took place. In their speeches, grand corruption, ethnicity, and ethnicized politics were among the issues that these two leaders identified as having adverse effects on the country's social, political, and economic development (Kisaka and Nyadera, 2019). The legacy of colonial rule, marked by the British divide and rule policy, entrenched ethnic divisions by favoring certain communities for political and administrative positions. Post-independence, leaders like Jomo Kenyatta maintained centralized power structures, perpetuating exclusionary politics that favored their own ethnic groups, notably the Kikuyu (Khadiagala, 2010).

Ethnic politics, fueled by colonial legacies and post-colonial leadership, hindered national cohesion and development. The instrumentalist perspective highlights how ethnicity was deliberately propagated by colonial powers to serve their political and economic interests. Moreover, post-independence leaders continued to exploit ethnicity for personal gain, calcifying ethnic identities and perpetuating divisions. The transition to multi-party democracy in the 1990s brought both hope and challenges. While it allowed for greater political participation, it also exacerbated ethnic tensions, leading to pockets of violence and instability, particularly during elections. The 2007 post-election violence exposed deep-seated ethnic divisions, pushing the country to the brink of civil war (Kamau, 2013).

However, moments of crisis also presented opportunities for reform. The 2008 peace agreement, facilitated by international mediators, paved the way for constitutional and institutional reforms aimed at addressing the root causes of political turmoil. The symbolic "handshake" between President Uhuru Kenyatta and former Prime Minister Raila Odinga in 2018 signaled a commitment to overcoming ethnicized politics and corruption, albeit with ongoing challenges.

In sum, pragmatism and the Instrumental Marxism Theory shed light on the historical and structural factors underlying Kenya's ethnic fragmentation. By understanding the instrumental use of ethnicity in politics and embracing pragmatic solutions aimed at fostering national unity and inclusivity, Kenya can navigate towards a more stable and prosperous future.

Nature of Ethnic Fragmentation in Kenya

Like most African countries, Kenya is multi-ethnic. In fragmentation studies, Kenya is considered to be one of the most ethnically fragmented society in Africa (Githieya, 2021). According to Kilikinji Wekhanya, the exact number of ethnic groups in Kenya is a contested issue. For quite a long time, it was thought or claimed that the number stood at 42 (Kilikinji Wekhanya, O.I, in Miluki Bungoma, On, 12/1/2024). This figure is said to have originated



from the questionnaire administered during the 1969 population census. A consensus seems to have emerged in recent years that there are more than 42 ethnic groups in the country (Muyonga *et al.*, 2021). As such, the questionnaire or data sheet for the 2009 population census listed no less than 111 ethnic groups. The expansion of the list of ethnic groups from 42 in 1969 to at least 111 in 2009 is partly the fruit of the struggles by historically marginalized communities, such as the Endorois, Ogiek, and Sengwer, to be officially recognized by the state (Wachira, 2009). Based on the secondary preceding secondary source, a respondent posited that:

It similarly reflects the ever-growing assertion by certain sub-groups that they are actually distinct or different from the larger groups into which they were subsumed during the colonial period. For instance, the 2009 population census included figures for the Marachi, Maragoli, Marama and other groups which were previously counted as part of the Luhya ethnic group. It also included Mijikenda and Kalenjin sub-groups, such as the Boni, Choli, and Dahalo, and the Kipsigis, Marakwet, and Nandi, respectively (Maurice Makhanu, O.I, in Bumula-Bungoma, on, 12/1/2024).

The compilation of an extended list for purposes of the 2009 population census begs the following question: what precisely defines one's ethnic identity and his or her membership in an ethnic group? It emerged that, a simple and primordialist answer to this question is that one is born with an ethnic identity. This means that ethnic identity is not only natural and immutable but it is also defined by one's culture, biological heritage, and territorial roots (Maurice Makhanu, O.I, in Bumula Bungoma, On, 12/1/2024). While affirming the above observation by the study, a key informant retorted that:

Various categories of social scientists do not easily buy this answer although it is a popular one especially amongst politicians. Instrumentalist scholars define the ethnic identity of an individual or group in terms of its relationship with the identity of other individuals or groups. Seen in this light, ethnicity is a subjective way of interpreting a group's identity, often in the hope of maximizing the members' interests. In other words, individuals choose to associate with a certain ethnic identity because of the incentives and advantages it offers (Maurice Makhanu, O.I, in Bumula Bungoma, On, 12/1/2024).

As Lynch correctly points out however, an ethnic group should not be confused with an ordinary interest group. Over and above shared interests, there must be ties that bind together an ethnic group such as language and culture (KNA, DC/NN/2/5). Other ties include an idea of blood ties and a shared past, of common descent and a history of union. A third and dominant approach to understanding ethnic identity is based on the argument that identities are socially constructed. The definitions of ethnic identity are insufficient particularly because they do not appreciate the fact that identities can and do often evolve. Ethnic identity evolves because the factors that, define it, such as social relationships, the everyday practices of perceiving and treating others, and the institutions in which we are embedded, change over time (Verkuyten, 2018).

According to Lynch, ethnic identities are complex and contested social constructions, perpetually in the process of creation (Lynch, 2006). Karega-Munene similarly notes that



ethnic identity is fluid and malleable and, therefore, negotiable, contestable, destructible and re-constructible (Munene, 2011). Based on Lynch and Karega-Munene, a respondent stated that: In essence, people play an important role in constructing ethnic identities, a role that may include giving names or labels to such identities, and is defined by social, cultural, economic, and political experiences. This author adopts, as many others do, a view of ethnic identity that blends the instrumentalist and constructivist approaches.

If ethnic identities are socially constructed, then it should be possible to speak, as Karega Munene does, of production of ethnic identity, and to point to particular moments in history when certain ethnic groups claimed to be or emerged as distinct entities. For example, the term Kalenjin, which is now widely associated with the Nandi-speaking peoples, and partly created by the colonial administration, served as a form of ethnic identity in the 1940s and 1950s for a small group of academic and political elites such as Daniel arap Moi and Taita Towett. The term gained popularity from mid-1950s when these politicians promoted its use in order to establish a broader political base (Wanyonyi Wamamili, O.I, in Webuye Bungoma, on, 30/1/2024).

From the above assertions the 1979 and with Moi as the President, the national population census included a category called Kalenjin for purposes of disaggregating ethnic affiliation (Chrimes and Cooley, 2022). From the findings recorded by the study, an oral source informed the researcher that:

The terms Luhya and Sabaot, coined in the 1920s and 1940s respectively, evolved in more or less the same fashion. As mentioned earlier, certain sub-groups within the Kalenjin and Luhya ethnic groups have in the recent past insisted on being recognised as separate and distinct ethnic identities. Members of the Endorois, Sengwer, and Ogiek sub-groups, for instance, now largely regard themselves as ethnically separate from the Kalenjin. The Mbeere and Tharaka have also sought to differentiate themselves from the Embu and Meru, respectively (Nicholas Aswani, O.I, in Nambale Busia, On, 27/11/2024).

It is observed that, these detachments point to the fact that ethnic identity is at its core a matter of personal choice, individuals and groups have the autonomy to choose an ethnic identity of their preference and may adopt multiple identities. An individual may describe himself as a Kikuyu, Kenyan, farmer, and East African, all at once. However, the Kenyan High Court has frowned upon the idea that ethnic identity is a matter of personal choice (Lynch, 2006). Furthermore, based on the preceding discussion, it emerged to the study through Dismus Aluku that; in a case concerning the ethnic identities of certain individuals appointed to public office, a High Court judge observed that allowing people to choose their ethnic identities will run counter to the constitutional objective of ensuring regional or ethnic balance in the public service because persons may be able to choose their ethnicity or regional background depending on the benefit that may accrue to them. Despite what may be seen as the gradual fragmentation of the Kalenjin ethnic group, some people chose to be identified as Kalenjin for purposes of the 2009 population census. They did so notwithstanding the fact that they were at liberty to alternatively indicate that they belonged to one of the sub-groups that comprise the Kalenjin (Dismus Aluku, O.I, in Musokoto Busia, On, 6/1/2024).

Similarly, there are those who preferred to be identified as Luhya or as Mijikenda as the case may be. Interestingly, slightly more than 600,000 people or 1.6% of the total population stated that their ethnic affiliation is Kenya (Muiru, 2012). This choice is interesting because ethnic identity is often considered to be the primary alternative to national identity (KNA, DC/EN/1/1). However, a 2008 scientific survey by Bratton and Kimenyi find no evidence that ethnic identity and national identity are mutually exclusive in Kenya (Bratton and Kimenyi, 2008). It is curious, though, that the percentage of the population that described itself as Kenyans in the 2009 census (1.6%) is significantly lower than what Bratton and Kimenyi found in their survey, in particular, as high as 22% of the sampled people claimed that they feel only Kenyan and nothing else (Ibid). Even a higher percentage, 29% to be exact, said that they feel more Kenyan than anything else. Only a paltry 12% indicated that they preferred their ethnic identity over the national identity (Ibid).

The 2009 population census placed Kenya's total population at 38.6 million. Like the five national population surveys preceding it, the 2009 census revealed that five large ethnic groups account for more than 66% of the country's total population (See Table below). The Big Five, as they are sometimes called, are: Kikuyu (17.7%), Luhya (14.2%), Kalenjin (13.3%), Luo (10.8%), and Kamba (10.4%). Other relatively big ethnic groups are the Somali (6.4%), Kisii (5.9%), Mijikenda (5.2%) and Meru (4.4%). This ethnic configuration has direct implications on Kenyan politics, and especially, on the formation of political parties or coalitions and voting patterns.

Table 9: Population share of the five big ethnic groups in Kenya

Ethnic group	% share of national population						
	1962	1969	1979	1989	1999	2009	2019
Kikuyu	19.0	20.1	20.9	20.8	18.5	17.7	17.1
Luhya	12.6	13.3	13.8	14.4	14.2	14.2	14.3
Luo	13.3	13.9	12.8	12.4	10.8	10.8	10.7
Kamba	10.8	10.9	11.3	11.4	10.3	10.4	9.8
Kalenjin	10.5	10.9	10.8	11.5	12.1	13.3	13.4
Total	66.2	69.1	69.6	70.4	65.9	66.4	65.3

Source: Karuti Kanyinga (2006:354) and NCIC (2016:29)

It is also important to mention that, controversy has almost always accompanied the release of the official population figures of ethnic groups. The results of the 1989 census, for example, was bitterly disputed because it showed that the highest growth rates were amongst those ethnic groups aligned to the government at the time (Kalenjin, Maasai and Luhya) (ibid). A further bone of contention revolved around the fact that the Kalenjin had displaced the Kamba as the fourth largest ethnic group. According to Eric Wasike:

The census was conducted in August 1989 but the results were released four years later (1994), a fact that led many to believe that the government had adjusted the true results for partisan political reasons. For the 1999 census, the government chose not to publish data relating to ethnic groups. Like the 1989



census, the results of the 2009 elicited considerable controversy. The census report indicated that the results for eight districts located in what are now Garissa, Mandera, Wajir and Turkana counties presented implausibly high or low growth rates which deviated significantly from the patterns portrayed not only by the rest of the country but by their respective neighboring districts as well (Eric Wasike, O.I, in Chwele Bungoma, On, 19/1/2024).

On this basis, the government not only advised that the results should be treated with caution but also went ahead to cancel them altogether. A few residents of the eight districts successfully applied for a High Court order barring the government from circulating or using any other results apart from those contained in the report of the 2009 census. In the end, however, the Court of Appeal lifted the High Court order (Suzanne, 2018).

The expansion of ethnic groups listed in the 2009 census, underscores the contested nature of ethnic identity. While some argue for a primordialist view, suggesting ethnicity as inherent and immutable, instrumentalist scholars assert that ethnic identity is subjectively constructed to maximize individual or group interests (Noah and Cohen, 2019). The emergence of distinct ethnic identities, such as the Kalenjin and Luhya, illustrates how social relationships and historical contexts contribute to identity formation. However, the autonomy of individuals to choose their ethnic identity, as observed by the High Court, raises concerns about the potential manipulation of ethnicity for personal gain, undermining constitutional objectives of regional and ethnic balance (Ibid).

Despite the diverse ethnic affiliations recorded in the census, a significant portion of the population identifies primarily as Kenyan, indicating a growing sense of national identity alongside ethnic attachments. This challenges the notion of ethnic identity as the sole alternative to national identity, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of identity politics in Kenya. In navigating the complexities of ethnic fragmentation, a pragmatic approach informed by these theoretical perspectives can pave the way for inclusive policies and social cohesion (Ibid).

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, Kenya's persistent ethnic fragmentation is deeply rooted in its colonial and post-colonial political histories. The British employed divide-and-rule tactics that entrenched ethnic divisions by favoring certain communities for political and administrative roles, marginalizing others, and laying the foundation for ethnic-based social and political stratification. Post-independence, these divisions were exacerbated by the continuation of ethnic favoritism, particularly under Jomo Kenyatta's presidency, which centralized power within the Kikuyu community, deepening exclusionary politics under the guise of nation-building. This centralization of power, further entrenched by subsequent regimes like that of Daniel Moi, has perpetuated ethnic divisions and undermined national unity. The transition to multi-party politics in the 1990s, while a step towards democratization, also intensified ethnic tensions, as seen in the 2007-2008 post-election violence. Despite the reforms following the 2008 peace agreement, including the 2010 constitution and electoral changes, ethnic tensions persist, revealing the complexity of identity formation and the contested nature of ethnicity in Kenya. To foster inclusive national unity, Kenya must continue building on these reforms, prioritizing the strengthening of democratic institutions, promoting pluralism, and fostering



national identities that transcend ethnic lines. Equitable resource distribution and inclusive governance are essential to addressing the structural factors perpetuating ethnic divisions, ensuring long-term stability and sustainable development.

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