

# ETHNICITY AND DEMOCRACY: A CASE OF KENYA

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**Abstract:** When Plato observed that “only the dead have seen the end of war,” the Greek philosopher seemed to have seen modern Africa from a distance. Conflicts have become so regular in Africa that they almost constitute a pattern. The roots of African conflicts are many and diverse but very few are as strong as ethnicity. It is a very powerful force that has been harnessed negatively by lords of impunity to deform Africa. Max Weber defined an ethnic group as those human beings or groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of migration or colonization in such a way that this belief is important for the continuance of non-kinship communal relationship. The politics of identity and ethnicity will remain a fundamental characteristic of the Kenyan democracy.

In this paper, I intend to address why ethnicity represents a political problem in Kenya, how the problem manifests itself, and which institutional models offer ways of ameliorating the challenges that ethnicity poses to democratic nation-building. In Kenya there is a relationship between ethnic fractionalization, lower levels of democracy and bad governance. This study seeks to separate out the association between negative ethnicity and poor government performance by disentangling the relationship between ethnicity and democracy. I argue that, the quality of democracy and good governance has been affected by negative ethnicity. Specifically, higher levels of ethnic voting in Kenya reinforce the exclusive democratic practices which undermines democracy and quality leadership hence quality of life. This in turn has bred a cycle of violence after every election that saw the International Criminal Court (ICC) move in to try and end this menace.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, democracy, colonization, multicultural

Ethnicity is derived from Greek word ‘*ethnos*’, which means a nation or a people<sup>1</sup>. The term ethnicity may also mean a race or group of people with common racial features and common cultural uniqueness. Once consciousness of being part of an ethnic group is created, it takes on a self preservation dimension and is passed from one generation to another. Also, Max Weber<sup>2</sup> defined an ethnic group as those human beings or groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of migration or colonization in such a way that this belief is important for the continuance of non-kinship communal relationships.

Ethnic affiliation is deeply embedded inside people’s consciousness and is difficult for them to break away from it. Thus ethnicity is natural and innate in human beings as part of their nature, which is inevitable. Every human being has a natural inclination towards identifying with other persons whom he/she share common interests, history or origin. Man’s sense of belonging makes him associate with people he/she is closely related with, which results in the formation of an ethnic group with its unique and peculiar way of life.

A fundamental unity between the different persons in an African community, that is, a unity of human relationship, underlies Traditional African morality. African morality places considerable value on the conformity of the individual to the social group in order to preserve the unity of communal associations. It could be said that in a way, African thought is indeed more concerned with the relationship than with the different entities which constitute the relationship. All human behavior is thus expected to conform to this value to ensure social harmony. Kenya is a multicultural and multi ethnic country

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<sup>1</sup> Cashmore E (1996) Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations. London, Routledge P. 35

<sup>2</sup> Weber M, ‘*Ethnic Groups*’ in Talcot P, et al (1961) Theories of Society Vol 1 New York: Free Press. P.305

comprising of more than forty two ethnic identities each with its own unique way of life.

In the opinion of this study, good governance is the starting point for Africa's recovery, not only for the benefit of Africans themselves, but also to pacify western fears of failed states which may harbor volatile dissidents or terrorists. According to the West's experience, a fundamental element of improving governance is the transition to a democratic society. While it is accepted that dictatorships tend to offer more stability, democracy – if all of the conditions are met – is promotive of the best outcomes in terms of human liberty. Legitimate democratic governments are less violent towards their citizens, and because they permit opposition, are less likely to result in bloody revolutions<sup>3</sup>.

Negative ethnicity still remains a dominant political force and it has brought with it poverty and exploitation which have for a long time held Kenya hostage. Since Independence, Kenyan politicians have manipulated ethnic divisions for their own myopic political and economic agendas, maintaining ethnicity at the forefront of the collective psyche. Despite being a powerful tool for conflict, ethnicity has simultaneously evolved into a valuable resource for access to economic stability for corrupt politicians, and opportunities to plunder state resources. In Kenya, state fund allocation is distributed by ethnic region, creating disparities and animosities between different ethnic groups. In fact the major reason that caused the infamous 2007 post election violence and skirmishes in which over 100 people lost their lives and property worth millions of dollars destroyed, was due to the perceived marginalization of some Kenyan communities denying them access to state resources and employment opportunities. In terms of democratic elections, ethnic or tribal affiliation dictates loyalties. Regardless of electoral platform, the Kenyan citizenry will almost exclusively vote for "their" ethnic representative. In the 2007 presidential elections, ethnicity played a crucial role. Mr. Mwai Kibaki, a Kikuyu, got few votes in Nyanza province which is predominantly Luo, whereas his opponent Mr. Raila Odinga, a Luo, got minimal votes in Central province which is predominantly Kikuyu. Kenyan politics has always been practiced based on a high degree of ethnic exploitation and opportunism. Kenyan politicians frequently base their political campaigns by appealing to tribal fears, stereotypes and ethnic expectations thus relegating to the backseat broad-based genuine and ethnically inclusive and equitable democratic platforms.

"Because I am from your tribe, you can trust me I will not eat alone" please "Vote for me", with the implied meaning that "you cannot trust those who do not belong to your tribe and they will not share with you the national cake". This is because voters think that having their tribesmen and women in power necessarily translates to better life for them. So when one's kinsperson loses a competitive election, violence usually breaks out. This can be explained by the fact that when an individual wins an election whether fairly or through fraud, he/she diverts all state resources to his/her region and the rest of the country has to wait for five years until elections are held for them to get a chance to have one of their own in power.

Kenyans vote as ethnic blocs partly because the economic inequalities in the country has brought with it widespread poverty and political illiteracy. People who are politically illiterate and poverty stricken need basic needs like food and not freedom of thought and conscience. They do not care about their right to vote and how it affects them. Thus potential voters always sell their electors cards for a loaf of bread or for a sum of less than one US dollar to their tribal kingpins. The less fortunate are the majority in Kenya and thus more vulnerable to ethnic manipulation by crooked politicians and lords of impunity. The Kenyan electorate has become sycophantic and in most cases rarely make autonomous choices when voting due to negative ethnicity. This violates an individual's ability to exercise his/her voluntariness. This is one's ability to make a choice without being unduly pressured to make a particular choice for any specific reason. Being free in making a decision means that we own the decision as ours and that one ought to have a better option. The principle of voluntariness removes coercion or any influence as possible so that the decision is the individual's and not someone else's. The purpose of coercion and undue influence is to do an end run around a choice or judgment so that an individual will do what he/she might not ordinarily have done in the absence of such irrationally persuasive techniques. An individual's decisions and choices at their very best ought to be as a result of his/her own self determination. The well being of a nation depends on the capacity of the electorate to choose leaders wisely and prudently. Ethnic voting patterns undermine the common good in terms of the quality of leadership since in most cases the ones whose ethnic group is more populous even if their leadership qualities are deficient, are the ones who get elected. Taken to its extreme, negative ethnicity results in coups and revolutions.

In Kenya ethnicity has been used as a partial criterion for apportioning benefits and burdens among the citizenry. This practice is rampant during

<sup>3</sup> Huntington J (1968) *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven, Yale university Press P. 28.

employment and discharge of public services in which special and undue consideration is given to a person on the basis of his/her ethnic identity. Here meritocracy is not the criterion. Negative ethnicity has undermined the common good by placing unqualified persons to positions of responsibility. It is also worth noting that the current president Mwai Kibaki has on many occasions been accused of favoring his community in making public appointments. Plum government jobs are held by people from his Mount Kenya region and Kikuyu community. It is not surprising to see key government ministries like that of Finance, Trade, energy, Provincial Administration among other plum ministries are being run by people from the president's community. Corruption is rife in these ministries as no one is willing to blow up the whistle since it is 'one of their own eating' (*muntu wa nyumba*, a slang word people from the president's community use to identify one another). This has not only denied the qualified and deserving persons the opportunity to actualize their potential but has also led to ineffectual performance of duty and services to the public. Negative ethnicity violates the principle of equity, which allows discrimination by reference to morally relevant differences and forbids discrimination in the absence of such differences. It is fair to discriminate in favor of the needy or the meritorious or the able; it is unfair to discriminate between people who are equally able by merely appealing to one's ethnicity.

Loyalty to one's ethnic group is 'highly celebrated' in Kenya and this has become more rampant than moral rules in shaping behavior. The culture of 'us versus them' is so ingrained in our country that politicians have coined all types of ethnic expressions and innuendos to whip up ethnic emotions among the citizenry. Phrases such as "Eshienyu ne Eshienyu" (ours is ours however rotten or bad it may appear to others), 'Kamwene' (it has its owner, it belongs to us not 'them') have taken centre stage in Kenya's political lingo. A public office is seen to belong to a whole community by virtue of 'one of their own' being the holder of that office. Consequently any positive criticism aimed at the holder of the office is taken to be an affront and assault on the entire community. Thus this way obligation to one's ethnic group often take precedence over those of public office, resulting in political leaders deviating from established rules and thus sowing seeds of corruption and impunity.

Ethnic loyalties and other primordial ties have made political leaders develop a sense of 'obligation' that is inconsistent with ethics of public office. Failure to discharge these obligations even if inspired by a need to follow moral rules and values may result in a backlash from the person's respective ethnic

community. Ethnic chauvinism is an extreme form of collective self interests where one's ethnic group is the centre of everything and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it. Thus, ethnocentrism is responsible for many armed conflicts in Kenya and Africa at large.

When ethnic loyalty becomes the guiding principle in awarding burdens and benefits in society, there is no objectivity in carrying out public appointments, awarding contracts or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits. The choices are not based on merit but on ethnic identities. Political power allocation of resources, jobs and services cannot be left at the mercy of ethnic self interest, private ownership and personal possession because this can have adverse effects on the basic inherent rights of others whose interests have been excluded. Social exclusion damages the social self thus spoiling personal identity. Social inclusion and participation in terms of access to the material conditions of well being in society is an important pre-condition for human freedom. If people are excluded from such access, the development of their 'social self' becomes impaired.

In the language of Plato and Aristotle, equal shares ought to go to equals and unequal to unequal. In *Politics III, 12*, Aristotle puts it thus 'if flutes are to be distributed, they should go only to those who have the capacity for playing flutes', that is, benefits and responsibilities should be proportionate to the worth of those who receive them. Thus it is fair to discriminate in favor of the needy or meritorious but unfair to discriminate between people who are equally needy and equally meritorious. Justice which is one of the basic pillars of humanity deals with the distribution of burdens and benefits of goods and services according to a just standard to all human beings in any society.

Negative ethnicity in Kenya has hindered the growth of democracy. This is because the Kenyan electorate votes along ethnic lines. Thus the electorate will vote for a candidate who is from their ethnic community even if he/she does not have good leadership qualities. This in turn has affected the quality of leadership in our country since undeserving candidates (tribal jingoists) whip up ethnic emotions of their community to rally behind them. This has bred leaders who distribute national resources along ethnic lines. Thus one can only access national resources and privileges if he/she has a member of his/her community holding a public office. This has sowed seeds of corruption, ethnic strife and impunity. Thus it is not strange to see two communities forming an alliance to defeat a candidate from a community they consider to be their common political enemy. This cultural myopia is destructive and undermines

the quality of leadership and also quality of life of the entire Kenyan citizenry.

It is also worth noting that currently a group of politicians led by the current Vice President, Mr. Kalonzo Musyoka, are at the moment touting of forming a tribal alliance called triple K (KKK) comprising of three ethnic communities, the Kamba, Kikuyu and Kalenjin so as to front one candidate whose myopic agenda is to block the current Prime Minister Mr. Raila Odinga from winning the 2012 presidential elections. Such alliances undermine democracy and the rule of law in Kenya. This has bred impunity and entrenched corruption since one can get away with theft of public resources as long as his/her kinsperson is in power. Majority of Kenyans have great expectations in the International Criminal Court (ICC) stepping in, and helping entrench the rule of law in a country in which tribe matters than law. This is because without the rule of law being entrenched in society, there can never be any meaningful democracy in a country.

Socrates set the agenda of reflectively questioning common beliefs and explanations carefully distinguishing those beliefs that are reasonable and logical from those which however appealing they may be to our native ethnocentrism, even if they serve our vested interests, may lack adequate rational foundation to warrant our belief.

#### CONCLUSION

In the opinion of this study ethnic loyalties that discriminate against others on the basis or arbitrary criterion of one's tribe undermine human dignity. Jesus Christ affirmed that 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself'. This is the way in which dignity fulfills itself. It means transformation from being self centered. Human dignity is destroyed by self love. Self interests are good when united with others' interests to form common interests and bad when fulfilled at the expense of others. Ethnic common interests as represented in a democratically organized society are the best way of guaranteeing everyone some basic means of existence. Ethnicity per se however, is not divisive or alienating when not taken to the extreme as is the case with tribal jingoists.

This paper argues for the enhancement of criticality among Kenyans to curb negative ethnicity. Kenyans need to be thoroughly reflective in every area of their lives. Such criticality will enhance individuality in the Kenyan electorate. This will transform people

into persons who, motivated by high order value of truth, universal well being of all ethnic communities and the inter-relatedness of humanity would transcend personal and group egoism. This will inculcate tolerance among the various ethnic groups in Kenya. A critical thinker thinks for himself/herself as an individual and only accepts what has been proved or demonstrated to the satisfaction of reason. A critical thinker cannot be short circuited in his/her decision making process so as to choose one alternative rather than another. Autonomy empowers a person to have a strong sense of personal responsibility for his/her own choices and actions. Critical thinking will minimize incidences of blind unquestioning ethnic loyalties and conformity to established cultural norms that perpetuate ethnic chauvinism and impunity..

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