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Negotiating 'Kenyanness': Public discourses and Private realities

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Abstract

Most current debates on the Kenyan nation revolve around the unfortunate events that followed the disputed 2007 presidential elections. The resultant post-election violence claimed over 1,200 lives and left thousands injured, displaced and billions worth of property destroyed. The nation is still currently agonizing over the resettlement of thousands of people evicted from their homes after the violence. Food prices and other essential commodities have skyrocketed and social inequality is threatening the social fabric of the nation. More disturbing has been the rise of several militia gangs including Mungiki, Sungusungu, Saboat Land Defence Force, Taliban among many others. The key question that most analysts of the Kenyan scene have been grappling with is not just the impact of the post-election violence but more specifically the reasons that led to the violence and how a repeat of these unfortunate events in future could be avoided. In this paper, we examine the public and private discourses that have come to inform the debates around 'Kenyanness' as a concept. We argue that, if 'Kenyanness' is an ethical and philosophical doctrine, then it should relate to the broader context of Kenyan nationhood whose object is to aspire or inspire the Kenyan people into the love for their country, Kenya. Our basic argument is that the post-election violence in Kenya provided a key test to the more often projected Kenyan collective spirit. While questioning the public discourses around the Kenyan collective spirit, the paper raises pertinent issues on the concealed private realities that continue to inform the country's social, economic and political developments. 'Kenyanness', as we suggest, ought to recognize the two levels of similarity and difference as strong building blocs for the Kenyan nationhood that is peaceful and prosperous.

'Kenyanness' as a Political Construction: An Introduction

> Patriotism is an unstable sentiment, which thrives only at the level of the nation-state. Below that level it is easily supplanted by more intimate loyalties; above that level it gives way to empty slogans rarely backed by the will to sacrifice or kill. So, when thinking about the future of patriotism, it is necessary first to inquire into the health of the nation state (Appandurai, 1998: 160).

Two related events readily come to mind when mention is made of the concept 'Kenyanness' and more so in regard to the more recent history of the Kenyan nation state. These events, happening in the year 2004, form an important context for reflecting on the theme of this paper. The first event relates to the activities surrounding the 'Week of the National Focus' (4th-11th December 2004) whose purpose as envisaged by the Kenya Government spokesman, Mr Alfred Mutua, was to 'instil a spirit of patriotism and enhance a general pride in who we are as Kenyans'. The event, which was to be re-enacted annually was meant to re-socialize Kenyans from all walks of life into reflecting on their achievements since independence and cultivate the spirit of togetherness and dedication to their country, Kenya. It was noted that Kenyans in general, do not identify themselves as Kenyans first, but rather from the areas they originate from, therefore, a sense of national pride was seen as lacking. The overall theme of the event was dubbed, 'Najivunia kuwa Mkenya' (I am Proud to be Kenyan). Several government and non-governmental departments and agencies were marshalled into the great plan of making this idea a success. To a casual observer, the greatest impact of this event was easily discernible in the numerous advertisements in the press, stickers on the cars and banners in several social places among other public places.

The second event revolves around the search for the Kenyan national dress that begun around mid 2004. The idea behind this event, like the 'Najivunia kuwa Mkenya' one was to instil a sense of patriotism and cultivate the spirit of togetherness in Kenyans as well as showcase the country as an important tourist and investment destination. In this latter event several versions of attire that could turn out to be Kenya's national dress were displayed to the public. After months of deliberation and work by the nine member national dress design team, what was envisaged as the national Kenyan garment was finally unveiled. The basic attire for women was to be a two piece costume, comprising a wrap-top and wrap bottom. The blouse exhibited was short-sleeved, and was adorned in a red, vertical ribbon on its front. Going under this was a long, wrap-around skirt that descended loosely to the ankles. Like its top piece, the

displayed skirt was white with a full-length red strip on it. The men were only to have a top piece and hat. Made from *Kikoi*, like that of the ladies, the men's shirt or jacket featured a collar that was patterned to three symbolic front slits. According to the designers, the slits symbolised Kenya's three legged stool or the three stone fire place. The men's and women's attire, together with the accompanying accessories, were meant to bring out the 'Kenyanness' in the wearers.

Looked at from the context of the year 2004 and the pomp and clamour that accompanied the two events one would be vindicated, in spite of the numerous critiques, to imagine that Kenyans were indeed on course towards attaining the state of 'Kenyanness'. Today, only four years down the line, few Kenyans can remember that such events actually took place, leave alone the fact that one of the events was meant to be annual. The issue of who is Kenyan and what it means to be Kenyan seem to have faded away as soon as the events wound up in 2004. Indeed, the short-lived campaign to instil patriotism among Kenyans through 'Najivunia kuwa Mkenya' and also develop the Kenyan national dress poignantly illustrates the difficulty we have in defining the concept 'Kenyanness', and express it with relative unanimity. It also poses serious issues in terms of the debates surrounding the concept of nationhood in general and 'Kenyanness' in particular. To be sure, the general debates and critiques surrounding the two mentioned events opened a new space into reflecting on what it meant to be Kenyan.

Reading the various articles in the mainstream media[1] on the two events, it was obvious that the "Najivunia kuwa Mkenya' project, just like the final product of the Kenyan national attire were hotly disputed, generally ignored and thus promised bleak future prospects in terms of remembrance. While the organizers of the two events belaboured to explain the rationale behind them, it emerged, at least from the point of view of the critics that the campaigns made no sense and indeed left more to be desired. Reading through the articles by Barrack Muluka, Macharia Gaitho and Kwendo Opanga, one got the sense that the problem with the two events was two pronged. On the one hand, the problem was more about the messenger (in this regard Alfred Mutua and the Government that was sponsoring the events) than the message. The main point here was that, if the events were meant to instil a sense of patriotism in Kenyans, then there was nothing to celebrate and identify with, and the campaigns were therefore

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[1] Most of these debates were carried out in the two leading Kenyan newspapers, the *Daily Nation* (DNA) and *The East African Standard (*EAS*).* The key contributors included seasoned columnists Barrack Muluka and Kwendo Opanga from EAS and Macharia Gaitho from DNA.

premature at best. The argument was that given the many perceived wrongs that the government had committed to its citizenry, any association with the events would be interpreted as giving credit or showing support for the government.

On the other hand, the second issue regarded the publicity stunts associated with the events. The critics argued that if 'Kenyanness' meant the love for one's country, Kenya, then why would one stand at the rooftops and shout about it. Barrack Muluka particularly quoted the renowned African literary scholar, Chinua Achebe to state that "A patriot is a person who loves his country. He is not a person who says he loves his country. He is not even a person who shouts or swears or recites or sings that he loves his country. He is one who cares deeply about his country and all its peoples". If this is true, the critics opined, why then would the government go out of its way to mount such big publicity over the events. Is it a case of the '*Chema chajiuza na kibaya chajitembeza*' (the good thing (item) sells itself (in the market) and a bad one need to be advertised) as the Swahili adage goes? As Muluka put it bluntly, "Mutua (government spokesman) should know that patriotism is not about putting useless stickers on bumpers".

The two debates surrounding the criticism of the events are significant in trying to understand 'Kenyanness'. The concept in essence has more to do with 'being Kenyan'. The term's association with patriotism therefore makes sense in as much as it relates to one's association and love for Kenya. Being patriotic is not failing to see what is wrong in Kenya and speaking up about it; it is doing so and also giving credit where it is due and counting the blessings regardless. Although one may not therefore be happy with the many aspects of Kenya, there is an association with the country where one is born or whose citizenship one chooses to keep. There is, in this regard, a similarity between 'Kenyanness' and Kenyan nationhood. The concept nation in its broader context refers to a considerable group of people united by a common culture, values, standards and political aspirations and occupying a definite territory and having a sense of common identity (see Anderson 1983, Smith, 1986 and Hobsbawn 1992). Such a group sharing the foregoing characteristics is said to have a common nationhood.

'Kenyanness', like Kenyan nationhood, therefore, could be considered as an ethical and philosophical doctrine that aspires or inspires the Kenyan people into the love for the country. This doctrine, which could form a starting point for the ideology of nationalism, is informed

by the fact of a shared identity as well as other attributes including a common descent, language, culture, religion and a territorial boundary. From this broad analysis, it is easy to understand why one internet site with a theme under the title, 'Kenyanness' claims to be "dedicated to the Kenya nation's culture and identity as expressed in its peoples lifestyle, ethnic groups, languages, media, academia, politics, food with the objective of evaluating what it is to be Kenyan" (see www.mashada.com). It is also easy from the same hindsight to reflect, as Prof Indangasi does, on the "Kenyanness of Kenyan Literature' (Indangasi 2003) or the 'Kenyanness' of Kenyan song, clothing, cultures and so on.

Looked at from the definitional point of view, 'Kenyanness' or Kenyan nationhood as we will interchangeably use the terms in this paper, one already envisages an attempt at homogenising anything Kenya. From the debates that emerged from the two events that we have alluded to above, it becomes obvious that 'Kenyanness' as a concept is viewed differently by different people and could, perhaps, be a tenuous concept. From an analytical point of view, it is not possible to approach or present anything Kenyan in a homogenous way given the diverse nature and historical experiences of Kenyans. From a political point of view, there also seem to be a disconnect between what is presented as Kenyan and what is actually Kenyan. We will return to this point shortly as we examine the contradictions inherent in the concept 'Kenyanness'. What is perhaps clear, in our sense, is that 'Kenyanness' is a contested typology within the various class structures that inform the Kenyan reality today. In short, while one group (obviously the elites) exalts loudly its 'Kenyanness', the other group views this as part of the continuing strategy to consign them into poverty and deprivation. In a sentence, the latter category resents or even does not care about the whole public talk behind 'Kenyanness'. This in reality has been behind the whole debate on what 'Kenyanness' is and should be.

Post-election violence, Public discourses and the lie of Kenyanhood

On 30th December 2007 when President Mwai Kibaki was pronounced the winner of the hotly disputed general elections and inaugurated in a hastily arranged ceremony at state house Nairobi, few analysts anticipated the extent to which this would have on the post-election Kenyan state. Only an hour before the state house ceremony, presidential election results had been announced in a small private room with only the state broadcaster (Kenya Broadcasting Corporation) in attendance. Previous attempts by the Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK) to publicly announce the results had been abandoned amidst chaotic protests against alleged

electoral malpractice. Although electoral malpractice in 2007 has been cited by most analysts as the main spark that ignited the post-election violence it is significant as Cheeseman (2008) has observed to also consider the long term roots to Kenya's crisis. The latter include issues related to salient ethno-regional identities, historical grievances over land ownership, political exclusion, economic inequalities, religion, gender, generation among other social cleavages that were previously thought to be marginal to the Kenyan voting pattern[2].

What is significant to note is that immediately Kibaki was sworn in as president, a wave of violence erupted across the country whose outcome was disastrous to the social, economic and political fabric of Kenyan state. By the time a power sharing deal was signed between Kibaki and his main rival Raila Odinga in late February 2008 over 1,200 people had died, thousands injured, displaced and billions worth of property destroyed. The nation is still currently agonizing over the resettlement of thousands of people evicted from their homes after the violence that rocked the nation after the 2007 elections. Food prices and other essential commodities have skyrocketed and social inequality is threatening the social fabric of the nation. More disturbing has been the rise of several militia gangs including *Mungiki*, *Sungusungu*, *Saboat Land Defence Force*, *Taliban* among many others. The key question that comes to mind as one reflects on these events is what happened to the Kenyan collective spirit. More curious is whether that Kenyan collective spirit was there in the first place. Why would Kenyans turn against each other with such vengeance yet they claim to be patriotic and committed to the cause of their motherland. Our submission is that, perhaps, Kenyans have been living a lie.

The Kenyan lie can be conceptualized from not only the political constructions around Kenyanness as a concept but also around the contested terrain surrounding the whole issue of the Kenyan national Community. From the political point of view, ideas behind Kenyanness as illustrated in the two events above were just a pointer to the determined nature of the political elite to whip up a patriotic citizenry out of many diverse ethnic collections. Like in other African countries, the political elite in Kenya has, since independence in 1963, struggled to weave together the over 42 separate ethnic groups from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds into one collective entity. These political leaders have spent a great deal of their rhetorical energies urging their subjects to give up what they saw as primordial loyalties-to

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[2] For a more discussion on the disputed 2007 Kenyan election see the special issue of the *Journal of East African Studies vol. 2 Number2 July 2008*.

family, tribe, region etc- in the interests of the fragile abstractions they called nation. This indeed has been a rhetorical enterprise since as Appandurai (1998: 162) has pointed out 'in many ways these leaders knew what we have tended to forget, namely, that nations, especially in multiethnic settings, are tenuous collective projects, not eternally natural facts'. Yet even with these glaring realities the political leaders have and continue to create a false divide between the artificiality of the nation and those facts they falsely project as primordial-tribe, family, region.

At the centre of the Kenyan post-election violence has been the contested terrain of the national community. Put simply, Kenyans claim to be one yet, perhaps, they are not. As a human cultural and social community, Kenyans, it seems, have not espoused a shared bond and a common cultural identity. This cultural identity, as Stuart Hall (1994: 393) has argued, needs to be appreciated at two levels. On the one hand, it could be seen in terms of a shared culture, a sort of collective one true self, hiding in the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed selves, which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. In this regard our cultural identity ought to reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as Kenyans, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our cultural history. On the other hand, as the same author argues, our cultural identity ought to recognize that, as well as we have many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant differences which constitute what we really are or rather-since history has intervened-what we have become. In this second sense, therefore, cultural identity pays attention to the ruptures and discontinuities that characterize the various levels of interaction over place, time, history and culture. We cannot therefore, in this regard speak for long, with exactness about one experience or one identity without acknowledging its other side that is subject to the continuous transformative process of history, culture and power.

Perhaps, without belabouring Hall's succinct exposition on the levels of interpreting cultural identity, it is already easy to see, given the post-election violence that engulfed the country that Kenyans have hardly appreciated or lived within these two levels. Cultural identity cannot be appreciated or interpreted without paying attention to the specific historical milieu defining the emergence and transformation of a people. Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all lying unchanged outside history and culture. It has its histories- and histories have their

real, material and symbolic effects. Their past according to Hall continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple factual 'past', since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always already 'after the break'. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture (Hall, 1994: 395).

The point emerging from the foregoing analysis, then, is whether our knowledge about the dynamic and diverse nature of our cultural identities that inform our historical realities as a people is ever reconsidered. Cultural identities as Barth (1969: 9) has emphasized vindicate the reasoning that there are aggregates of people who essentially share a common culture, and have interconnected differences that distinguish each such discrete culture from all others. Since culture is nothing but a way to describe human behaviour, it would follow that there are discrete groups of people, i.e ethnic units that correspond to each culture. The differences between cultures and their historic boundaries and connections, the constitution of ethnic groups and the nature of boundaries between them thus represent a key element in the debates on nationhood generally and Kenyahood in particular.

Then, what has been the Kenyan lie? Is it that we choose to live in ignorance of our history or we have been made to live in that ignorance? The answers to these questions certainly bring us to address the concept of 'Kenyanness' and the various myths and symbols upon which the concept has been constructed. These myths and symbols, to a greater extent, have been central in defining the levels of negotiation through our nationhood. There is a sense in which one may argue that the ambivalent and contradictory nature in which discourses around 'Kenyanness' have been framed, especially within the 'nationalistic' perspective, is such that we choose to or are made to live in ignorance of our history. The key question that arises then is which history and who chooses that we remember or ignore certain histories. This can be captured within the whole debate around memory.

'Kenyanness'and the Private Realities: History and Memory Reconsidered
In their recent captivating book titled, *In search of a Nation*, Maddox and Giblin (2005) have made an argument, based on the experience in Tanzania, that a nation in most of Africa has remained alien to its people. As implied in the title of the book, most people in African countries have essentially been engaged in the futile search for a nation. These are not the

only authors to reflect on the contradictory nature of nationhood in Africa and specifically on the link between the state and the community. More recent scholarly writings on Africa implicitly posit a division between state and community. Scholars such as Mamdani (1996), Scott (1998) and Herbst (2000) among others portray African states, failed or otherwise, as alien and alienating for the communities over which they rule. In particular, Mamdani argues that, because the postcolonial state draws its legitimacy primarily from the urban society and modernity, its rural people remain more subordinated subjects rather than citizens endowed with democratic rights. The key question to reflect upon however is whether there is need for a coalescence of both the community and the state. While this question is often answered in the affirmative, the contradictory nature in which the state has managed to alienate the community has hardly been conceptualized. This, in our view, has to be understood within the context of history and memory.

The manner in which the discourses on 'Kenyanness' have been presented reflects the 'state centric' perspective whose general objective has been a struggle to appropriate historical memory to a nationalist project whose ultimate goal is the struggle over power. The ways in which people remember and articulate what they remember about their past and the choices informing such articulations has been a central component in the debates around and about 'Kenyanness'. As Thelen (quoted in Nyairo, 2005) has argued, since people's memories provide security, authority, legitimacy, and finally identity in the present, struggles over the possession and interpretation of memories are deep, frequent and bitter. The possession and interpretation of memories on 'Kenyanness', within the nationalist discourse, as we argue, masks the historical reality defining our dynamic and diverse experience.

In his reflections on memory and the postcolony, Werbner (1998) has distinguished between official or state discourses of remembrance and memorialisation, and the memory work that emanates unsolicited from the general public. This distinction exposes us to the realization of the duality of understanding memory and to a greater extent raises the issue of whose historical memory forms the central component in the construction of the past. Indeed, the key concern with this observation has to do with the control and ownership of social memory, of those structures and sites through which social memory is carried and maintained. Since a historian is mainly interested in the knowledge and perceptions of the past in order to chart the relevance of that past to the present, the need to understand the sites and structures through which memory is constructed and maintained is primary. Specifically in regard to the

question of 'Kenyanness' what is more problematic is the view that there exists a usable past which must form a component part in the recurrent quest for the many possible futures. This past certainly is one that is officially acclaimed.

The control of a society's memory-the regulation of what is remembered, how it is remembered as well as what is ignored or erased- is a valuable tool for maintaining and legitimating political power. According to Thelen (Quoted in Nyairo, 2005), there is need for us to question the similarities and differences between memories constructed by marginalized groups-and within marginalized forms- and those memories that belong to larger, officially recognised enterprises. The idea here is not the designation of certain versions as erroneous and the upholding of others as more factual and correct, but rather to appreciate that memory work can never be total or complete. According to Nyairo (2005) memory, like a broken mirror from which we glean only partial images, fragments or shards, must be read as only being capable of constructing in parts. Because memory is partial, it brings with it error which sometimes comes because memory is also necessarily about forgetting. Indeed as Nyairo (ibid.) further argues, the critical point to ponder in ignoring the 'erroneousness' nature of memories is the individual's, or the society's reasons for constructing their memories in a particular way. The key function of social memory, then we realize, is the establishment of shared memories, the insistence on shared experiences in the past, which works to bind communities in the present (Thelen quoted in Nyairo 2005).

Shared memories and experiences of the past between individuals define their collective unity within a given community. This in essence qualifies the argument that part of the function of memory is the building and shaping of individual identity in the present (Hall, 1994). To this end, gaps and ellipsis, erasures and suppressions of certain events in the past become imperative if the objective of remembering the individual in the present has to be achieved. What is particularly important is the fact that different communities are differentiated from one another through their modes of remembrance and inclinations towards differences in identities. As Odhiambo and Lonsdale (2003) argue, these differences may be articulated through customs, religions, cultures, traditions and lifestyles. However, as the authors emphasize, in whichever ways these differences are articulated, they reaffirm the centrality of state power as a key condition for civilized co-existence in multi-ethnic and multi-lingual contexts (Ibid. Pg.5). What is at stake according to these scholars is the question of a national

identity to control that state power, not least to combat the globalizing forces that would erode the ability of states to mediate between the world's losers and winners.

The point to be emphasized from the elaboration by the foregoing authors is the centrality of state power in reaffirming the invention of the nation and the coordination of the various components within its boundaries. Through state power, officially endorsed histories have tended to be the stories of the status quo that favour the unique entities of each nation as opposed to the manifest multiple realities that exist within those states. As is argued 'all states that claim to be nations have skeletons in their cupboards, stained with fratricidal blood' (Ibid, pg 1). In any analysis of the evolution of the state therefore, we need to make a distinction between the officially sanctioned histories and those that emanate from other multiple components within the state. There is need to recognize that nations are made by multiple, varied and even contradictory constituencies that have a multiplicity of dimensions created by the varied gender, generation, class and ethnic status of participants. Let's examine the pre-colonial, colonial and post-independent historical record in a sequel and see how, through state power, official endorsed histories that emphasize 'Kenyanness' have come to define the Kenyan collective experience.

Unity in Diversity: 'Kenyanness' as an appreciation of history

Strictly speaking, 'Kenyanness' as a concept makes little sense beyond the independent history of the country, Kenya. Yet, in an attempt to reconstruct the country's history, most analysts, mainly operating from a nationalistic orientation, erroneously locate the concept and particularly the people 'Kenyans' to the pre-colonial and colonial periods. It is true that the name of the country, Kenya, as a signifier of a specific geopolitical space begun to evolve with the British declaration of a Protectorate. This followed the processes of scramble and partition where the European powers drew boundaries to divide the various African territories among themselves and establish colonial rule.

The pre-colonial period however occupy a special place not only in the history of the Kenyan communities but specifically in the evolution of Kenya as a country and 'Kenyanness' as an ethical and philosophical ideology. Since the term relates to 'being Kenyan' the ways in which various Kenyan peoples evolve into this process becomes significant. Thus, the appropriate starting point in examining such an evolutionary process is the analysis of the people's pre-colonial history. This history precedes the European scramble and partition

politics and the colonial construction or invention of Kenya as some scholars have put it (see Mudimbe, 1988). It relates to the individuals and to the various ethnic communities as well as to the social, economic and political structures that have somewhat come to mould individual and collective experiences.

Our knowledge on the various Kenyan communities in the pre-colonial period has been enriched by a multiplicity of sources, including oral traditions, archaeology, historical linguistics, cultural anthropology. Pioneer scholars, including Ogot (1967), Were (1967), Muriuki (1974), Ochieng (1974), Mwanzi (1977), Aseka (1989) among many others have enriched our historical knowledge on individual communities that occupy present Kenya. Their studies have emphasized the fact that present day Kenya was already an ethnically complex region characterized by varied communal interactions by 1500 AD. These interactions were constantly altering the social, economic and political entities of the communities in the region. Through the historical process of encounter and interaction, there were evolving ethnic communities that were neither definitive nor pure but hybridized in nature (Ochieng', 1974:44). This process of interaction was underway with the arrival of colonialism.

What perhaps needs to be emphasized from the contributions of the pioneer historical studies is that, first, the evolutionary process in Kenya pre-dates the histories of the present day inhabitants. Secondly, that the ethnic composition of the present country Kenya is as a result of a crystallization of many centuries of interaction between the various peoples. In this context therefore can be no definitive or pure community but a hybridization of sorts. Thirdly, is that in terms of the available data, especially that from historical linguistics, it may be concluded that Cushitic speakers preceded Bantu and Nilotic speakers in the peopling of Kenya.

Like in the pre-colonial period, historical discourses informing our understanding of 'Kenyanness' or Kenyan nationhood during the colonial period have often been couched within the state-centred approaches whose main project has been with nation building. Within this, nationalism as an ideology that holds that nations are the fundamental units for human social life has been portrayed as the main force behind the evolution and transformation of nations and communities. The claim that the nation is the only legitimate basis for the state and that each nation is entitled to each state has invoked many studies on nationalism with a

sole purpose of contributing to the national grid. In Kenya most studies on the colonial history have encapsulated various regional and ethnic issues and themes and their relationship to the national.

Theoretically, such studies have de-emphasized the positive aspects of the cross-cultural evolution of ethnic consciousness that had clear links to the identity forming processes whose history goes beyond the colonial period. Such cultural forces are usually conflated within the divisive forces of ethnicity and often projected as undermining the process of nation-state formation (Mustapha, 1992). The dominant intellectual paradigms have not helped much and indeed boost the nationalist agenda. The modernization theorists see cross-cultural linkages as an anachronistic form of ethnicity that was bound to disappear in the face of the modernity of the new nation, Kenya; dependency theories tend to concentrate on external constraints on the Kenyan state; and neo-Marxist theories concentrate on the class structure, and often consign ethnicity to the realm of 'false consciousness'. Even in contexts where ethnic nationalism is studied systematically, the point of departure is on the integrative needs of the nation-state, rather than the inter-ethnic integrative possibilities and constraints offered by the actual historical dynamics of ethnic groups.

Doornbos (1991: 64) has drawn our attention to the practical limitations of the state-centred approaches to the study of ethnic consciousness and ethnicity in Africa. The author observes that in the urge to political unity the tendency of many states has been to negate ethnic, regional and cultural diversities rather than recognize them as building blocks in the construction of a civil society. The result has been often a facade of seeming unity at the cost of many unsettled wounds and denied identities. Fatally in the long run, the state project had no meaningful or alternative sources of cultural inspiration to draw on, leaving it in the end without a vision and empty-handed in the face of impending crisis and disintegration. To view 'Kenyanness' from a narrow nation-building project therefore negates cross-cultural identities that go beyond the state and which could meaningfully be harmonised within the broader inter-ethnic dynamics.

That the colonial period was central to the social, economic and political transformation of the various African lives cannot be gainsaid. These transformations and the attendant African anti-colonial initiatives varied from one location and from one Kenyan ethnic community to another. As products of the colonial divisive policies, these initiatives from inception were

characterised by the badge of ethnicity for they, by and large, attended to interests that were perceived to be of immediate concern to their ethnic constituencies. In cases where such associations tended to widen their geographical scope and demands by threatening to constitute rallying bases of challenge to authority, the colonial authorities moved swiftly to domesticate those demands and to institutionalise forums for articulating their grievances within specific localities. This served the purpose of division and discord among the various communities that was in resonance with the colonial state's agenda of denying the local population any constituency of unity that would have constituted a formidable challenge to its dominance over society. Like all authoritarian institutions, the colonial state thrived on division, hate and oppression.

From a state-centric point of view, territorial distinctiveness and national consciousness have been among the key defining features in the formulation of ideas on ethnicity and nationalism as the main components informing the debates around Kenyan nationhood. Informed by the reality of the increasing expressions of ethnicity in many post-colonial African societies and the need to offer a critique of ethnicity, this line of thinking has yielded many historical studies. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), Anderson (1983) and Smith (1986), have clearly shown that ethnic consciousness was a product of historical experience, and hence its creation and elaboration was a proper subject of inquiry for historians. The link between ethnicity, nationalism and national identity need to be methodologically revisited. The central theme to be emphasized is the idea that nationalism is a relatively recent creation, specifically in response to the upheavals of the industrial revolution and the evolution of modern bureaucratic states (Hobsbawn and Ranger, 1983). In demystifying nationalism it has to be demonstrated that the nationalist mythologies are historically contingent creations that ignored diversities within ethnic identities. Smith (1986) in trying to trace the link between ethnicity and nationalism specifically identifies two positions. On the one hand, are what he calls 'primordialists' or 'perennialists' who conceive of ethnic identity in static, primordial or essentialist terms. On the other hand, are the 'modernists' or 'instrumentalists' who conceive ethnicity in a situational, contextual and subjective sense. In his view, ethnicity is something more than situational, and that it is not merely a fleeting or illusory matter of time and context.

National or Ethnic Community: Inequality and the urban Gang Phenomenon

It is true that with the attainment of independence in Kenya in 1963 different ethnic groups were conceived within the nationalist project of the country. As Benedict Anderson (1983) has argued, such ethnic groups, or nations as he calls them, were 'imagined political communities', imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. Anxious at encouraging a national sovereignty, or dichotomy to use Barth's (1969) words, the new Kenyan leaders were compelled to look inward and to rank as their first priority the political, economic and social developments of the Kenyan polity. The process of creating a national community thus took a centre stage in the political programmes of the country and influenced the nature of nationhood.

As Nasongo (2005) has argued, a nation simply became a psychological bond that joined a national group and differentiated it, in the subconscious conviction of its members, from all other groups in a most vital way.

What need to be emphasized however is that the overwhelming concern with building viable national groups negated the positive elements within ethnicity and indeed solidified ethnic divisions among the various groups. Indeed as Appandurai (1998: 162) has observed in its pre-occupation with the control, classification and surveillance of its subjects, the nation state often created, revitalized, or fractured ethnic identities that were previously fluid, negotiable, or nascent. Thus, the extent to which national consolidation received high priority, the less the attention was paid to relations between communities that had strong cultural bonds.

Beneath the façade of the national community therefore were inherent historical dynamics that continued to undermine and indeed maintain the various ethnic groups within their respective geopolitical enclaves. The colonial legacy in which the various ethnic groups had been lumped together not on the basis of shared historical origins and cultural practices, but mainly on the expediencies of the British colonial administration began the rear its ugly head. The legacy of exclusion in which society was divided between those who had rights to citizenship and those who did not- the urban and rural respectively came to the fore. The former colonial divide and rule policy, compounded by the use of force and exploitation were perfected by the post-colonial ethnic political elites who saw access to state power as an end in itself rather than as a means towards promoting public good. In a wider sense, the post-colonial state in Kenya, like elsewhere in Africa did not reform the colonial state which was

'bifurcated'. It was according to Mamdani (1996:2) adopted without altering the colonial structures. Sometimes, these structures were re-defined to suit the purpose and to exact the particular form of control that the colonial elite adopted to consolidate political leadership.

The outright manifestation of the failure by the post-colonial state to reform was prevalent inequalities among the various Kenyan ethnic groups. The class question was perhaps the most significant in this inequality. As Kanyinga (2006:352) has observed a class question has been significant in shaping and defining the nature of relations in Kenya. The poor have come to get a better sense of ethnic citizenship than the rich. The poor depend on ethnic citizenship, for instance, to acquire land through customary right while the rich use their wealth. In land as in other political and economic inequalities, ethnicity and access to political power became an important component. As Kanyinga (Ibid) further regional disparities and imbalances in development, especially in favour of the Kikuyu of central Kenya who had enjoyed both economic and political opportunities during the colonial period persisted. Other regions outside these areas remained undeveloped and lacked infrastructure to support important economic activities.

Inequalities in governance institutions have been an integral part of Kenya's political life since independence. The inequalities in the composition and staffing of key governance positions are a result of ethnicity and attempts by the governance elites to consolidate political power by locking out members from other ethnic communities (Ibid. Pg 393). Political competition in Kenya has thus revolved mainly round issues of inequality and ethnicity. The 2007 election and the resultant post-election violence can thus not be divorced from this reality. The case of the urban gangs and Mungiki can be understood from this background.

It is specifically during the 1980sand 1990s that urban crime and the emergence of criminal gangs among the urban poor became a significant problem (Muller, 2008: 192). Although the largest and most prominent of these gangs is *Mungiki* others included *Kamjeshi, Baghdad Boys, Taliban, Sabaot Land defence Force, Jeshi la Mzee, Jeshi la Embakasi Chinkororo, kaya Bombo Youth.* The origin, nature and activities of these gangs and especially Mungiki has been discussed in numerous articles[3]. Most of these gangs operate in the shadow of the state both in urban and rural Kenya in a violent and Mafioso style. They not only control

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[3] See Anderson (2002), Kagwanja (2003), Katumanga (2005), Wamue (2001).

certain businesses, such as *Matatus* by demanding 'protection' money but also collect rates for essential services such as electricity, garbage collection, security, rent collection etc. The gangs have their leaders and a hierarchical structure with an elaborate army-like outfit that exhorts and terrorises any one that goes against their objectives. The significant component of these groups as they relate to this paper is the way they have challenged the state's monopoly over the use legitimate force. More significant also has been the way they have come to be intertwined with politics. They have for instance been hired by politicians to advance their goals, including disrupting opponents' rallies.

Although the existence and operation of these gangs cut across the various urban and rural settings in Kenya, the manner in which they effectively challenged and undermined the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force had important implications on the nature of post-election violence. More critical is the implication of their existence to the larger question of Kenyan nationhood. The existence of these gangs is a strong indicator of the failure of the various institutions of governance to evolve a more genuinely inclusive Kenyan nationhood. A more inclusive Kenya is where each citizen participates fully in the affairs of the state and is not deprived of any privileges on account of ethnicity, class and other social, economic and political divisions. Indeed a nation state is deemed failed when its institutions no longer work as the case of the criminal gangs seem to indicate. 'Kenyanness' as a concept therefore ought to consider the various social, economic and political experiences of the Kenyan people.

Conclusion

I want to conclude this paper with some scepticism. This scepticism is on whether we have tried to raise any issues touching on the public and private discourses around 'Kenyanness' as a concept. As we have argued, if we consider 'Kenyanness' as an ethical and philosophical doctrine, then it relates to the broader context of Kenyan nationhood whose object is to aspire or inspire the Kenyan people into the love for their country, Kenya. This concept, then, is informed by the fact that Kenyans share a common identity as well as other attributes that include a common descent, language, culture, religion and so on. Yet, as we have observed, viewed in this light, 'Kenyanness' becomes a façade since it seeks to homogenize anything 'Kenyan'. Far from this, our historical experience has ably demonstrated that as well as we, as Kenyans, have many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant differences in what we really are or rather what we have become. These points of difference may be ethnic, gender, generational and so on. In this sense therefore, we cannot speak with

exactness about one experience or one identity without appreciating our points of difference that are subject to the continuous transformative process of history, culture and power. 'Kenyanness', as we argue, ought to recognize the two levels of similarity and difference as strong building blocs for our common nationhood.

Looking through the historical record from the different phases of Kenyan history however, the paper has demonstrated that part of the problem with 'Kenyanness' as concept relate to the misrepresentation, and perhaps more critically, the misreading of the Kenyan history. More often than not our historical record has been influenced by state power whose agenda has been the reaffirmation of the nationalist project. Through state power, officially endorsed histories have tended to be stories of the status quo that favour the unique entities of the Kenyan nation as opposed to the manifest multiple realities that exist in the country. In this regard, for instance, the positive aspects of inter-ethnic relations are glossed over, conflated within the divisive forces of ethnicity and often projected as undermining the process of state formation and nation building. Our argument therefore is that it is meaningless, even anachronistic, to view 'Kenyanness' within this narrow perspective. Should we then burn all our history books? No, not at least for now. These books have been critical repositories on whose pedestal our current analysis and criticism has been based. The need to rewrite our history then, becomes an urgent undertaking. This, as we hint in the paper, can only proceed once we answer critical questions regarding the centrality of state power in the process of knowledge production.

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