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Review of the primordial approaches to ethnicity: Focus on Kenya

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Abstract

This study gives an overview of the primordial approaches to ethnicity. Generally, there are two main approaches to understanding ethnicity: primordial and constructivist. Even though it acknowledges the popularity of the latter approaches and the critique they bring forth, it argues that they are not enough to erase the usefulness of the former (primordial approaches). It strongly regards the primordial approaches as foundational with regard to explaining the essence of ethnicity or ethnic belongingness. This study however focuses on the following five main features of the primordial approaches: common ancestry; culture; language; landscape; and names. It lends credence to Atieno-Odhiambo (2002) and Kumaravadivelu's (2008) argument that ethnic belongingness has always been a perduring phenomenon, and that there has always been a desire among most people to identify ethnically. Lastly, in giving prominence to the present-day Kenya – an east African country – it also argues that while there should always be (as have always been) accommodating towards other ethnicities, including intermarrying with them, we should be proud of our specific ethnic belongingness, celebrate ethnic diversity and resist attempts to lose ourselves to some sort of 'imposed' global homogeneity which is fashioned to undercut our ethnic grounding.

Keywords: ancestry, culture, ethnicity, landscape, language, primordial and names

Public Interest Statement

I contend that the primordial approaches are more fundamental (than social constructivist approaches) with regard to the understanding of ethnicity. I have reviewed the five main features of the primordial approaches: common ancestry, culture, language, landscape and names. I also argue that ethnicity in itself is not harmful; thus, we should celebrate both our ethnic belongingness and diversity. I would also wish to state that this research article is both an extraction and modification of my PhD thesis, in which I have taken a two-pronged approach to ethnicity: primordial and social constructivist, and argued that the latter works on the ground given by the former.

Introduction

This study gives an overview of the primordial approaches to ethnicity. First, it is important to point out that the concept of ethnicity has largely been drawn from anthropology, which is concerned with the following: human societies and cultures and their development (social and cultural anthropology); and biological and physiological adaptation (physical anthropology). Ethnicity also brings into mind such other fields as psychology, sociology and politics which also intertwine with anthropology. The concept of ethnicity is a form of identifying groups of people, in an attempt to define and explain the nuances which characterise the human nature. Other notable concepts used for identification of people along with ethnicity include race, class, religion, sex and gender. However, these notions, though always in use, in a casual or considered sense, have always been characterized by contestation and even indeterminacy. At times, there is even an overlap or confusion between some of the notions. A case in point is the relationship between race and ethnicity. While some scholars have suggested that the studies of race and ethnicity cannot be distinguished, many argue that ethnicity is the wider of the two, and that race relations ought to be looked at as a special case of ethnicity. On the other hand, many more scholars, such as Banton (1967, in Eriksen 2010), posit that there should be a boundary between the two terms. This study, while recognizing that ethnicity subsumes race, also admits that the two terms relate, intersect and overlap. It is for this reason, therefore, that this study suggests that the two terms be treated separately, but also as having useful parallels. However, nothing more will be said about race as this study is confined to ethnicity in the narrower sense, whereby the focus is on ethnic groups belonging to the same race, in this case the African race. The context for this study is also on Kenya, an East African country. First, I give the definition of ethnicity, after which I will mention the two main approaches to the studies of ethnicity, before I embark on the specific approaches this study is about: the primordial approaches.

Definition of ethnicity

I start to define ethnicity by drawing on Eriksen (2010), who gives the term its historical and ideological etiology, right from the mid-14th century:

> It is derived from the Greek *ethnos* (which in turn derived from the word *ethnikos*), which originally meant heathen or pagan (R. Williams, 1976:119). It was used in this sense in English from the mid fourteenth century (14th C) until the mid nineteenth century (19th C), when it gradually began to refer to 'racial' characteristics. In the US, 'ethnics' came to be used around the Second World War as a polite term referring to Jews, Italians, Irish and other people considered inferior to the dominant 'WASP' group (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). None of the founding fathers of sociology and social anthropology with the partial exception of Weber granted ethnicity much attention… With its emphasis on intergroup dynamics, often in the context of a modern state, as well as its frequent insistence on historical depth, ethnicity studies represent a specialisation which was not considered particularly relevant by the early twentieth century founders of modern anthropology. (Eriksen, 2010:4-5)

Jenkins (1997) and Eriksen (2010) both agree that as from the early 20th century, the term 'ethnicity' has become a household one, and has come to mean or refer to a collectivity of humans who live and act together. The two above-mentioned scholars note that ethnicity started enjoying widespread anthropological use particularly in the 1960s, and in the Western world. Writing in the past century, Jenkins (1997:9) observes how the term has fallen into common use, while also hinting at its problematicality:

> Since the early decades of this century, the linked concepts of ethnicity and ethnic group have been taken in many directions, academically (Stone 1996) or otherwise. They have passed into everyday discourse, and become central to the politics of group differentiation and advantage, in the culturally diverse social democracies of Europe and North America.

Jenkins (1997) speaks to the Western World; however, this study proposes that the situation replicates itself the world over. Jenkins (1997) also explains that the term 'ethnicity' enjoyed preference in the field of anthropology as a basic analytical unit over race, culture and tribe. On this note, it is worth capturing the shift from 'tribe' to 'ethnicity'.

From tribe to ethnicity

Unlike the term 'ethnicity', the origin of the term 'tribe' has not been fully accounted for. This study suggests that the notion of 'tribe' may have existed alongside that of 'ethnic group', and that its connotations were equivalent with those of the earlier meaning of ethnic group (as referring to others, especially 'inferior' people). However, drawing on Jenkins (1997), this study proposes that the term 'tribe' may have been predominately used by 'White' Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASP) social anthropologists to refer to the very distant and primitive people that they studied during the colonial and immediately post-colonial periods. Perhaps, to show 'forgiveness' or even sympathy to the other 'inferior' members of their 'white race', such as the Italians and the Irish, the Anglo-Saxon social anthropologists designated and preserved the term 'tribe' to the more 'primitive' conquered groups, such as Africans and Asians. Thus, as Ogot (2012) laments, 'tribe' has racist undertones. According to these Anglo-Saxon social anthropological researchers, the primitive people were organised into tribal groups. In showing the centrality of 'tribe' (as a real and perduring social entity) to the theoretical and methodological development of social anthropology, Jenkins (1997:16-7) quotes Malinowski, a founder of the ethnographic method:

> [The modern ethnographer] with his tables of kinship terms, genealogies, maps, plans and diagrams, proves the existence of an extensive and big organisation, shows the constitution of the tribe, of the clan, of the family… The Ethnographer has in the field, according to what has just been said, the duty before him of drawing up all the rules and regularities of tribal life; all that is permanent and fixed; of giving an anatomy of their culture, of depicting the constitution of their society. (Malinowski 1922: 10-11)

As most scholars agree, by the 1960s, the term 'tribe', which had increasingly become embarrassing for its colonial baggage, paved way for its rather euphemistic equivalent: 'ethnic group'. However, as Jenkins (1997) notes, the underlying presumptions had not necessarily changed. All this time, the Western social anthropologists still 'othered' ethnic groups. Then, there was a breakthrough: first, emphasis shifted from the conception of tribe (and, by even unintended extension, any collectivity of people) as constituting a social structure to the conception of ethnic group as explaining social organisation; second, when, eventually, the Western social anthropologists also conceived of themselves as ethnic groups constituting a heterogeneity of all societies and, by the same token, worthy of the same social anthropological investigations.

Since this study is based on Kenya, it is worth mentioning – though at the risk of sounding biased – that the focus will mainly be on the African 'racial' group, which constitutes more than 95% of the Kenyan population. However, this racial majority constitutes different ethnic groups:

at least 42. At the outset, this study would like to emphasize that though belonging to one race, Kenyan Africans are not necessarily united by it. (For this reference, read my unpublished thesis: *The Discursive Construction of Kenyan Ethnicities in Online Political Talk*, 2019) This thesis shows that individuals' political predilections and alliances are largely determined by their ethnic belongingness. As Kanyinga (2013) has significantly observed, ethnicity in itself is innocent and positive; however, this is only so until it is activated and concretized to sharpen differences and incite animosity among people of the same race, continent or modern state. Cases in point are the Rwandan genocide of 1994, and the Kenyan post-election violence of 2007-8. I have also touched on the latter in the aforementioned thesis.

It is also worth to note that the two terms, 'tribe' and its epiphenomenon: 'ethnic group', coexist, and that they can be used interchangeably, at least in Kenya. However, for purposes of clarity, Atieno-Odhiambo (2002) describes the term 'ethnic group' as being more 'esoteric'; it is commonly associated with academics (especially cultural and social anthropologists). On the other hand, 'tribe' is more 'exoteric'; it is commonly associated with the laypeople. Below, I give an overview of the approaches to ethnicity and how these can be seen as constituting and describing the features of ethnicity.

Approaches to Ethnicity

Ethnicity has been accounted for by two main approaches: the earlier primordial approach and the contemporary social constructivist approach. This study proposes that though the two approaches conflict more than they are similar, and the latter is more popular than the former (at least across the scholarly field), an integrated approach which provides for both is a better way of understanding ethnicity. In other words, each approach speaks to particular dimensions of ethnicity. To be sure, while I acknowledge the currency of the constructivist approaches, I propose that the primordial approaches have laid the foundation and paved the way for the constructivist approaches. Therefore, I contend, the primordial approaches can serve as good reference points, against which their constructivist counterparts are argued and validated. This is the reason why I focus on the primordial approaches in this study. To do this, I rely a great deal on such pioneers of the primordial approach as Barth (1969a), (1969b), Banton (1967), Handelman (1977), Weber (1980) and Wallman (1986).

In addition to looking at these two types of approaches to ethnicity, this study also draws from every-day-life observations, in the hope of a clearer conception of the phenomenon. Since this study is based on Kenya, this discussion of ethnicity will necessarily use examples from the country. Before, I embark on an overview of the primordial approaches of ethnicity, which is the focus of this study, I quote Nasong'o (2015:1-2), who distinguishes them from the later constructivist approaches:

> Scholars who take a primordial approach… contend that such ethnic identities are natural phenomena and that ethnogroups are natural networks into which people are born and find membership. Members of such groups, it is argued, share objective cultural attributes including language, religion, customs, traditions, cuisine, and music, among other things. In addition, ethnic group members are said to share subjective or psychological aspects of identity distinctiveness, including emotional satisfaction derived from group belonging, a shared belief in a myth of common ancestry, and a belief in the sacredness of social relations that include the dead. For constructivist scholars, ethnic identities are not natural phenomena but enduring social constructions. They are products of human actions and choices, not biological givens. According to this approach, ethnic identities are derived from a cultural

> construction of descent with characteristics constructed to determine who belongs and who doesn't. Benedict Anderson (2003), for instance, argues that such ethnic groups are essentially "imagined communities" because members of even the smallest ethnic group will never know all their fellow members, meet and interact with them face-to-face, or even hear from them – yet the image of their communion lives in the mind of each.

Primordial approaches

Barth (1969a) identifies four theoretical features of the conventional, taken-for-granted model of the corporate, culturally distinct ethnic group. Firstly, an ethnic group is biologically self-perpetuating. Secondly, the members of an ethnic group share basic cultural values, manifest in overt cultural forms. Thirdly, the group is a bounded social field of communication and interaction. Lastly, members of an ethnic group identify themselves and are identified by others, as belonging to that group. Beidelman (1997) adds 'landscape' (which Kanyinga [2013] refers to as 'territory'), food (which is essentially an overt cultural form) and gender (whereby, in interethnic marriages, children identify with the tribe of a specific parent).

For these reasons, ethnic groups are supposed to be fixed and corporate entities around which the features in question serve as boundary markers. Therefore, those keen on their ethnic communities would police along such boundaries as biology (or common ancestry), culture (beliefs, practices and commodities), communication (language), identification (emic and etic ascription), landscape (territory) and gender (male or patriarchal or even patrilocality versus female or matriarchal or even matrilocality). Ogot (2012), for instance, expounds on this rigid and potentially reductionist framework of ethnicity:

> The boundaries were supposed to be clear-cut and obvious; and the members of an ethnic group spoke one language, held a distinctive [sic] of social practices, and shared a common system of belief. In short, their view was that ethnic groups were fundamentally cultural groups that had virtually impermeable boundaries and that had developed their distinctive features by virtue of their original (and enduring) isolation from each other. (Ogot, 2012:19-20)

I will explore the above-mentioned features of ethnicity here, below. As has already been mentioned, this study takes a double or eclectic approach. It is important to note this, lest this study be taken to lend unconditional credence to the rather 'rigid' primordial approaches and, in the process, reify the already mentioned features that supposedly define ethnic boundaries. As I reiterate, however, the importance of the primordial features of ethnicity is that they can serve as good reference points, which this study will then critique accordingly. This will then set the stage for the discussion of constructivist approaches.

(i) Common descent (and gender)

Common descent is one of the most basic (and even important), if problematic, features of ethnicity. 'A leaf does not fall far away from the tree' is a common English proverb. 'Mtoto wa nyoka ni nyoka' is a cautionary Kiswahili proverb, which literally translates to 'The young one of a snake is a snake'. These proverbs point to the general assumptions, or even dictum, that biological workings are bound to be realized in the physical, social or other attributes of an individual. In other words, a group of people can, biologically, self-perpetuate. Eriksen (2010) simply refers to this biological self-perpetuation as (the workings of) 'blood' or 'bed'. As a corollary, an ethnic group has come to be regarded as having a common origin or ancestry. This notion is also normally backed by

narratives passed down by the old to their younger generations. As Eriksen (2010) explains, those who are very keen to sustain the distinctiveness of their ethnic group may insist on the ideology of endogamy, whereby each member of the group marries only an ethnic colleague. On this note, another feature of ethnicity: gender, follows below.

In situations of intermarriages, however, the ingredient of gender (Beidelman, 1997) renders the determination of one's ethnic group more problematic. Strathern (2003) points to the fact that biological processes (genetic and birthing) can be pitted against each other with regard to claiming an offspring. In this respect, most ethnic communities in present-day Kenya are patriarchal. This means that children identify more with the ethnic side of their fathers. These communities are also patrilocal or virilocal. In other words, a married woman moves into the home of the husband. In addition, both the children and wives take the names of the man. It is also worth mentioning, here, that African indigenous names can be important indicators of one's ethnic affiliation.

To critique, this study argues that common descent or biological self-perpetuation does not fully account for, or guarantee, a distinct or exclusive ethnic group. As has been shown (by Haviland *et al.,* 2008 and others), characteristics or traits considered peculiar on account of common descent are widely spread across the human population. Not all people who share physical attributes share a common ancestry.

Secondly, biological self-perpetuation for a specific ethnic group is itself not sustainable. Humans have always married across various borders or boundaries (such as ethnic and racial). The world over, humans have come to be characterized by fluidity and hybridity. In giving the pre-colonial history of the indigenous ethnic groups of present-day Kenya, Ogot (2012:20) observes how interethnic interactions have rendered ethnic groups fluid, multiple, fragmented, unstable and even contested; "(b)y the end of the Nineteenth Century, the African communities in the future Kenya were already all contaminated by each other in a complex, interdependent world. There were no watertight ethnicities. Clans, and lineages expanded and contracted, gaining and losing members across porous and cultural frontiers." Sticking to Kenya, this study quotes Ogot (2012), who gives an account of the Abaluhya or Luhya (a Western Bantu group) and Luo (a River-Lake Nilotic group) assimilation and hybridization:

> In Samia and Bunyala (Abaluhya sub-groups), for example, many Luo clans such as the Abanyinek, Ababoro, Abanyakera, Abapunyi and Abamalunga were assimilated. Indeed, the present-day Banyala and Samia societies represent typical examples of hybrid populations, largely of Luo and Bantu groups. Among the Abamarachi, another Luhyia ethnic group, a royal clan, the Abafofoyo, had been identified with a royal lineage descended from Mareeba, a brother of Owiny and Adhola, eponymous ancestors of the Jokowiny and Jupadhola Luo clusters. (Ogot, 2012:26)

The Abaluhya also incorporated people from other ethnic groups. To give examples, Ogot (2012) mentions the following Abaluhya clans as constituting Maasais (a Plain Nilotic group): the Abashimuli of Idakho, the Abamuli of Bunyore, the Abashisa, Abamani and Abakhobe of Kisa, as well as the Banyala of Bunyala. Below, Ogot (2012) explains how the Luo (as found in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania) are essentially a case of absorptive ethnic pluralism:

> The evolution of the Luo of Western Kenya into an ethnic group reveals particularly complex processes of cultural and social integration. By about 1300 A.D., the earliest polities of the Luo in their cradleland in Southern Sudan were already plural societies comprising the Luo groups, Central Sudanic groups (the Moru-Madi) and Eastern Nilotic clans. This absorptive ethnic pluralism became a distinctive and

> pervasive feature of Luo societies as they moved south into Uganda, Western Kenya and Northeastern Tanzania. Groups merged, amalgamated, and developed into new collectivities with new and/or emergent identities. Hence, the first Luo clusters and groups to arrive in western Kenya (the Joka Jok) between 1490 and 1517 A.D. had already incorporated many non-Luo elements (Central Sudanic, East Nilotic and Bantu). (Ogot, 2012:25)

This fluidity or hybridization among the Kenyan indigenous tribes seems to have already been spread all over the region. Ogot (2012), however, suggests that this state of affairs was more pronounced along the Indian Ocean Coast. For instance, the Pokomo (Coastal Bantu) of the Tana River Delta, having moved and settled in the region towards the end of the 16th century, were to assimilate many Orma or Oromo groups (belonging to the Cushitic group). The Coastal region also has the Swahili people – a hybrid group of people resulting from the Arabs and the local Coastal Bantu – said to constitute twelve subgroups. To give the last example (from the northern part of Kenya), Ogot (2012) mentions the 'Nomads in Alliance' symbiotic relationship between the Samburu (a Plain Nilotic group) and the Rendile (a Cushitic group). As Ogot (2012) points out, some sections of the Rendile adopted Samburu clans, joined their age-sets and married 'their' women. On this note, it is important to consider the dynamics of gender, as determining one's ethnicity (Beidelman, 1997; Strathern, 2003). Nevertheless, as much as most Kenyan ethnic communities are patriarchal and patrilocal, not all children end up identifying with the tribes of their fathers (whether with or without their names). A child born to parents belonging to different tribes can choose to identify with a certain ethnic group depending on the parent they prefer or find more reliable. Some choose an ethnic group depending on their other experiences, including where they have been brought up or the group they simply have a liking for.

To conclude, as much as people may identify with certain ethnic groups on account of (the narratives of) common descent, they cannot empirically prove that their ethnic groups have always been sustained by endogamy. And, hypothetically speaking, even if that were the case, their physical (and many other) attributes would not absolutely distinguish them from other humans. As will be discussed under constructivism or performativity, despite being characterized by hybridization, and, thus, 'fragmentation', 'multiplicity' and even 'instability', people always tend to rely on the mere assumption or sense (often precipitated, enhanced and sustained by politicisation) of belonging to a particular and 'distinct' biologically perpetuated ethnic group. To add, in some cases, children may be taken away from their putative (biological) parents (and/or other relatives), to live and, hence, acculturate elsewhere. Dolgin (1990a and b), a feminist lawyer-cum-anthropologist, even presents an American case of the extreme whereby a boy wished to divest his mother of her parental rights for breaching her implicit 'contract': to nurture and bring him up. The boy, instead, wished to transfer the (traditional) parental status to a foster parent, who would meet their contractual requirements, and with whom he would henceforth wish to identify.

(ii) Culture

Geertz (1973, in Kumaravadivelu, 2008:10) describes culture as denoting "a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life". However, as Huntington (1998) observes, culture is a multilevel conception; it could also refer to the highest cultural grouping: civilization (as marking different generations, and as distinguishing human beings from other species). Therefore, for the sake of this study, Jenkins' (1997:14) narrow conception of culture will do:

> Here, instead of culture, we find a model of different cultures, of social differentiation based on language, religion, cosmology, symbolism, morality, and ideology. It is a model that leads occasionally to the problematic appearance that culture is different from, say, politics or economic activity (when, in fact, they are all cultural phenomena). In this, the model is revealed as the analytical analogue of everyday notions of ethnic differentiation.

Drawing on Kumaravadivelu (2008), this study recognizes two main forms of the cultural: 'hard stuff' and 'soft stuff'. The hard stuff are the concrete (or easily observable) things like food, architecture, art and clothing. The soft stuff entails such things as beliefs, morals, and even superstitions. Cultural practices tend to be in between the hard stuff and the soft stuff, though they are more of the hard stuff (observable). This study proposes that an element of correspondence is assumed to exist between biologically perpetuated groups and their cultural forms. Due to the same (or similar) socialization, people claiming a common ethnic heritage are given to conceive of certain cultural forms as typically theirs. In the same vein, LeVine and Campbell (1968), in their 1966 investigation of ethnic groups in the newly independent Kenya, have classified the studied ethnic groups into three degrees of (cultural) similarity: 'similar', 'intermediate' and 'dissimilar'. To give examples, all Bantu groups were either similar or intermediate to each other. These Bantu groups were dissimilar to both Nilotic and Cushitic groups. The Bantu groups that enjoyed similarity relationships were those that were also close geographically, for instance the Kikuyus vis-à-vis the Embus and the Merus. This similarity framework, as LeVine and Campbell (1968) conclude, thrives on linguistic grounds, beliefs in common origin and cultural factors.

In discussing relationships and the perceived differences between ethnic communities, Harris and Rampton (2003) point out that the diversity which defines these groups can be translated into 'deficit' versus 'adequacy'. Normally, the subordinate groups will be described as having 'inadequacies' that set them apart from the dominant groups. Within this differential arrangement, therefore, a group's characteristics or cultural practices can be perceived as being responsible for its 'high culture' or 'low culture'. The intervention strategy, usually tacit, then, becomes a socialization or assimilation into or towards the dominant group. This may explain why some individuals (whether associated with dominant or dominated communities) would over-communicate (emphasize) certain stuff which would be regarded as constituting 'high culture'. In the same way, some, especially from the dominated ethnic communities, would under-communicate (de-emphasize) stuff of the 'low culture' because it could be stigmatized (Blom, 1969; Eidhem, 1969).

In addition to the terms 'dominant' and 'subordinate' being subjective, problematic and contextual or even fluid (in some cases, for instance, an ethnic group may be elevated into a position of dominance simply because a president belongs to it), each ethnic group can be looked at as having certain 'inadequate' characteristics or 'low' cultural practices. Here, ethnocentrism may inform individuals' or groups' subjective judgement. For example, since the Luo males in Kenya have been known not to circumcise, individuals from other tribes may choose to exploit this as a deficit. This is despite the fact that other communities too, like the Turkanas and Tesos, do not circumcise their men. For this reason, this study argues that circumcision is used only strategically (or opportunistically) to disparage the Luos. Perhaps, this is because Luos have considerable political clout; thus, they may be a political threat to other dominant ethnic communities. It can, therefore, be suggested that certain cultural practices which are perceived to be peculiar to certain ethnic communities can be appropriated or exploited for various strategic (political) reasons, depending on which side one is.

Despite the fact that some ethnic communities have come to be associated with certain

cultural practices, which have also been tagged as belonging to either 'high culture' or 'low culture', what is on the ground, may, often times, be different. For instance, not all cultural practices or stereotypes associated with dominant groups may be conceived of as constituting 'high culture' by (other dominated) ethnic communities. Downing and Husband (2005), for example, point out that dominant groups may be tainted by (as) collective(ly) evil and, thus, even necessarily guilty and paranoid. On the other hand, members of the subordinate ethnic communities may be presented as inherently good and necessarily victims of the dominant ethnic communities. This framework is normally dependent on historical conjunctures which may have led to such asymmetrical relationships. In addition, it is important to note that members of an ethnic community are not necessarily cultural automatons of their stereotyped or perceived cultural practices. Not all members will subscribe to the cultural practices considered typical to their ethnic communities. If this study can draw on Van Dijk's (2006) analogy of ideologies, whose custodians are ideologues, and languages, whose custodians are linguists, not all members of an ethnic group will even be aware of their typical cultural ways, or partake in them or even be able to explain them explicitly.

Similarly, this study suggests that a certain 'cultural practice' can also be imposed onto a specific ethnic community. An example of this is when certain deeds of an individual or a few individuals may be used to describe the ethnic communities they are affiliated with. What one individual does is mapped onto a whole ethnic community. If, for instance, an individual from a certain community does such a 'strange' thing as slaughtering a dog, cooking it and then eating it, others may start associating the practice of eating dogs with all the people from the ethnic community that individual belongs to. Then, therefore, from an isolated 'strange' deed, a whole 'cultural practice' may have been created for an entire ethnic community.

To conclude the discussion of culture, this study suggests that it is not possible to establish that a particular ethnic group has its own unique or pure culture. If, for example, as Ogot (2012) puts it, African communities in the present-day Kenya were already biologically 'contaminated' long before they were colonized, then, they had also already been (and continue to be) 'culturally' contaminated. Kumaravadivelu (2008) explains:

> All cultures are the result of a mishmash, borrowings, mixtures that have occurred, though at different rates, ever since the beginning of time. Because of the way it is formed, each society is multicultural and over centuries has arrived at its own original synthesis. Each will hold more or less rigidly to this mixture that forms its culture at a given moment" (Levi-Strauss cited in Borofsky, ed., 1994:424). In other words, no culture can exist in its purest form, every culture is, willy-nilly, a hybrid culture. Cross-fertilization of culture is as natural as it is endemic. (Kumaravadivelu, 2008:12)

(iii) Language

According to Barth (1969a), language can be considered a distinct field of communication and interaction for members of a specific ethnic community, as passed down from generation to generation. As mentioned earlier, language can also be conceived of as a soft cultural form or a cultural practice of an ethnic community. Generally speaking, Kenyan indigenous languages also correspond to or can be indicative of the country's indigenous ethnic communities. Cases in point are the Kikamba language, as spoken by the Akamba people, and the Ekegusii language, as spoken by the Abagusii people. The same goes to the Kalenjin community, a conglomeration of sub-tribes, notably the Kipsigis, Nandi, Pokot, Tuge, Elgeyo and Marakwet. These sub-tribes also share names with the languages their members speak. For instance, the Kipsigis sub-tribe speak the Kipsigis language. However, all these Kalenjin languages are considered to be mutually

intelligible. In explaining the policing of ethnic boundaries, Downing and Husband (2005) point out that the in-group members can identify outsiders by dint of their language's modes of inflection, argots and transitory in-words. The argument is that even if an outsider learns their language, they may not master it so perfectly as to pass off as an insider. In the same vein, Blossom (2009) gives an example of how language, as a form of encrypted communications, was (and can be) used by members of an ethnic group to discriminate against or even fight outsiders:

> In looking at current research into how languages evolved in the development of human society, it appears language evolved first as a system that enabled tribes of people to communicate with one another in a form that was not easily understood by possible competitors for food and other resources. This encoding was something that people in a very local region could use to flesh out who was on their side and who wasn't… This use of language as a tool to identify sameness and otherness continued to be the case through history. (Blossom, 2009:13-14).

As much as language can be a marker of an ethnic community, it is also clear that neighbouring communities can borrow (and share certain) words from that ethnic community. As different ethnic communities come into contact with each other, so do the languages they speak. To give Ogot's (2012) examples, spanning from the precolonial Kenya, there is a Kalenjin ethnic group which became a linguistically and culturally Luhya group. The Kikuyus borrowed cattle-related vocabulary form the Maasai. "Today, the Korokoro or the northern Pokomo speak Orma language, and Pokomo dialects have many Orma loan-words" (Ogot, 2012:23). As an Omogusii by tribe, I can attest that, being neigboured by Luos on one side, some Abagusii people share certain words with the Luos by virtue of borrowing. An example is the word 'rirabwoni' for potato. Other Abagusii groups use the word 'ekiogokia'. 'Chibando' also seems to have been borrowed from the Luos' 'bando', for maize; however, other Abagusii people use 'ebituma'. Originally, the Abagusii people used 'Engoro' for God. Now, 'Nyasae', with Luo roots ('Nyasaye') is more prevalent among the Abagusii. Despite the above examples on the ground, these groups, being Bantu (Abagusii) and Nilotic (Luos), are presumed to be originally, linguistically and culturally 'dissimilar' (LeVine and Campbell, 1968).

In addition, individuals can learn and master languages from other ethnic communities, to the extent that the insiders may not decipher that they are ethnic outsiders. This is especially so if these 'outside' languages are learnt in natural environments, and by good language learners. Similarly, language 'proficiency' or its use cannot effectively separate insiders from outsiders. As Blommaert (2005) and Van Dijk (2006) argue, linguistic resources are not equally shared or accessed by speakers of the same language. There may not always be a correspondence between members identifying or affiliating with a particular ethnic community and their language proficiency.

Lastly, not all Kenyan languages are associated with specific ethnic groups. In this sense, Kiswahili (both a national and an official language) and English (an official language) can be conceived of as 'neutral' languages: as languages that bring Kenyans together, despite their diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds or affiliations. To distinguish the two languages, English is considered more elitist (as dictated by the curriculum, it is the main medium of instruction in schools and universities). While, generally, in urban schools, Kiswahili and English are taught as subjects, English is the medium of instruction. In the village schools, lower primary (from Standard One to Standard Three), both English and Kiswahili are taught as subjects, in tandem with an indigenous language. However, here, the indigenous language is used as a medium of instruction. From Upper Primary (Standard Four to Standard Eight), the indigenous language is dropped altogether and English becomes the medium of instruction, in addition to being taught

as a subject along with Kiswahili. This happens all the way through the secondary school to the university. At the university, even Kiswahili courses are taught in English. Thus, most formally-educated Kenyans write in English more easily.

(iv) Landscape

As Beidelman (1997) notes, landscape is a feature of ethnicity; ethnic communities can be delineated in terms of the land they occupy. Sometimes, geographical features, such as rivers and mountains, are referred to in association with some ethnic communities. These features can also be used as physical boundaries between ethnic groups. Kanyinga (2013) uses the term 'territory', especially to give a sense of the landscape which ethnic members can feel an entitlement towards. However, it is worth noting that markers of ethnic boundaries in Kenya's landscape can be largely attributed or traced to the colonial administration (Atieno-Odhiambo, 2002; Ajulu, 2002; Ogot, 2012; Kanyinga, 2013). Until the promulgation of the new constitution (in 2010), Kenya had been divided into eight provinces: Nairobi, Coast, Rift Valley, Central, Eastern, Nyanza, Western and North Eastern. These provinces – whose origins are the colonial administration – were further divided into districts. Due to population growth and political expediency, these districts kept growing in number. The current constitution uses the name 'counties' in the place of districts.

The British colonial government, by way of the Divide-and-Rule system of subjugation and governance, created each district based on a dominant ethnic community. In other words, each district was to be synonymous with a specific dominant ethnic community. Also of note, however, is the fact that some minority ethnic communities were often swallowed by or classified as constituting larger ethnic communities in the districts. The colonialists also ensured that provinces had at most two – or three – dominant communities (Abubakar, 2013). The colonial government, with the help of collaborative 'home guards', further prohibited indigenous Africans from moving out of their 'home' districts (Atieno-Odhiambo, 2002; Ajulu, 2002). The colonial government also confined political activities to the district level. This worked effectively to frustrate and eventually asphyxiate national political activities. By the time the ban on national political activities was lifted, indigenous Africans had been forced to use their home districts as inevitable reference points. These home districts and the ban on national political activities had an effect of alienating the indigenous Africans from each other. As many scholars have argued (notably Kanyinga, 2013), this has, to a very large extent, sharpened ethnic consciousness among indigenous Kenyans.

Due to this history, counties have always, at least traditionally, come to be associated with specific ethnic communities. In fact, the names of some counties even correspond to the names of the ethnic communities traditionally living there. An example is the Kisii County, synonymous with the Kisii (Abagusii) people. This explains why one can easily figure out another's ethnicity if they mention the counties they come from. This has also given members of ethnic communities a sense of entitlement to their traditional counties. To give an earlier example, Ogot (2012:63) spells a stipulation of the Nandi Hills Declaration, as passed by Nandi elders in July 1969: "The entire Nandi district was declared to belong 'under God to the Nandi people; and every non-Nandi, whether an individual, a firm or a corporation farming in the district or in the Tinderet area is a temporary tenant of will of the Nandi.'"

To turn the argument of ethnic groups owning landscapes on its head, nearly more than 95% of the 'indigenous' Kenyan Africans migrated into Kenya. For example, as Akama (2017:5) explains, the Bantu speakers – who are also the majority in the country – are shown to have originated from "the grassland area of Cameroon and the adjacent Benue region of Nigeria in West Africa." The Nilotic groups of people in the country originated from the Sudan region (Ogot, 2012). When the current African communities migrated into their new Kenyan home, some fought and (were) displaced (by) other ethnic communities. Ogot (2012), for instance, explains how the

present-day Bungoma County, currently associated with the Abaluhya people, got its name from 'Bongomek' (meaning a place of the Kalenjin people). Wrong (2009) also details how the Kikuyu people, whose 'original' home is Murang'a County, expanded into territories originally inhabited by the Maasai and Dorobo people.

In addition, some Kenyan communities have been so marginalized (especially because of their small numbers) that they have no territory linked to them. As Abubakar (2013) laments, these ethnic communities have come to be dismissively regarded as the 'other' Kenyans. These groups have also struggled to be accepted and recognized as Kenyans. Examples include the Munyoyaya, Elwana, Okiek, Elchumus, Segeju and Nubi. Such 'stateless' or marginalized ethnic groups normally live or exist in the shadow of dominant ethnic communities. Abubakar (2013:31) gives the example of the Nubi people, whose settlements are dispersed; some live "in Kibera in Nairobi, in the Rift Valley around the Eldama Ravine, on the coast around Mazeras, and in Kisumu." Lastly, it is also important to note that the Kenyan constitution provides for the citizens to move and settle wherever they are able or wish to.

(v) Names

This study points out that names are crucial markers of one's ethnicity, at least in Kenya. First, I point out that most Kenyans have at least two names. And, since Kenya was colonized by the British, and the majority of the population subscribes to Christianity, most of their first names are Christian, or European. Thus, it is the African names, usually the second (middle) and the third (last), which we can use to figure out one's ethnic belongingness. As a primordial feature of ethnicity, naming concerns all the other four (features) which have already been mentioned above. For instance, one's name normally points to one's common ancestry. To explain using my Gusii community, children are normally given two Ekegusii names: a personal name and a father's name (also known as a surname or family name). As has already been discussed, children normally assume the ethnic sides of their fathers. One's personal name can either be that of a close or distant relative, neighbour or even someone prominent in the community. Some Ekegusii names also point to certain beliefs and practices in the Gusii community. For example, some individuals are named after certain animals, and the common reason for this is that special ceremonies had to be performed in cases where a family's young ones were always dying at birth or not long after. This practice is referred to as 'ogotakerwa', which is roughly translated into 'being wished for'. Here, the elders broke the mould of naming children after people, and instead used the names of certain animals to wish long life and continuity for a new-born. This explains the complementary relationship between names and culture in the Gusii community. Names can also be associated with language and landscapes of an ethnic community. With regard to language, for example, names normally correspond to the words and sounds found in a group's ethnic language. Some names refer to the actual place where one was born or the time of day when one was born. Some names also make reference to the geographical features which have always been present and, thus, associated with one's ethnic community. A case in point is a place called 'Kabianga' in the Rift Valley (as presently inhabited by the Kipsigis of the larger Kalenjin ethnic community). The name 'Kabianga' is from an Ekegusii expression meaning 'if things have refused'. In other words, the place was inhabitable for the Abagusii people owing to a harsh climate (very cold), diseases (like malaria) and persistent attacks from their neighbouring Kipsigis neighbours. As much they eventually left this 'Kabianga' area, Abagusii still remember it as being one of their earlier homes.

However, while names normally give off one's ethnicity, it is not always easy to place every name in its 'right ethnic space'. This is because some names are shared by different ethnic communities, as a result of cultural similarities, interethnic marriages, borrowing or even sheer coincidence. That is why, for instance, a name like 'Maina' is found in different ethnic communities.

This name exists in both the Bantu (for example, Gusii) and Nilotic (for example, Kalenjin) groups of ethnicities. The name 'Omondi' also finds itself in both the Gusii and Luo ethnic communities. Most Muslims' names also point only to the bearers' subscription to the Islamic faith as opposed to their ethnicity. Some people also use only Christian, European, Muslim or Kiswahili names, making it difficult for others to determine their ethnicity.

Nevertheless, these kinds of ethnic indeterminacy with regard to names is only on a small scale in Kenya. This is because most names are typically or traditionally associated with certain ethnic communities. To be sure, I have also relied on the 2013 general Election Data, as published by The Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission of Kenya (IEBC) in 2013. I made sure to refer to this general Election Data carefully, frequently and constantly. This source has also been given as a reference for this study. To give details, I would type and look up a name to establish its location in terms of counties (formerly districts). As has been mentioned already, Kenyan counties traditionally and typically correspond to the ethnicities of the people inhabiting them. Very few names straddle 'dissimilar' ethnic communities.

Conclusion

To conclude this paper, I contend that ethnicity, as a form of identification of social groups, is a perduring phenomenon. I also argue that most people usually think of themselves in terms of their ethnic belongingness even if they do not always say it (openly). Thus, I regard ethnic belongingness as something which many of us take for granted, unless we find ourselves in a situation where we have to express this belongingness. Only specific circumstances may require us to make reference to our or others' ethnic belongingness. This is the same way we do not always obviously express other forms of our identities, such as nationality, age, profession and sexuality. Again, in Kenya – a country which can be described as a hotbed of ethnic fragmentation and polarization – some may not comfortably disclose or discuss their ethnic belongingness, especially with those (suspected to be) belonging to 'dissimilar' (or 'rival') ethnic communities (in terms of national politics). Therefore, not having to reference one's ethnicity should not be equated with a lack or obliviousness of ethnic belongingness. As Kumaravadivelu (2008) notes, ethnic affiliation is desirable to many; it gives many a profound sense of being and belonging. To show both the desirability and perduring nature of primordial ethnic belongingness, for example, Atieno-Odhiambo (2002:231) points to Luos' shared history, which "is at least four thousand years old", and Kikuyus', which is at least "five hundred years." The historian Akama (2017) also traces the history of the Abagusii people to at least a thousand years ago.

All the five primordial features of ethnicity (common descent and gender, culture, language, landscape and names) still continue to play a big role in determining one's ethnic belongingness in the present-day Kenya, and they are also normally used as ethnic boundary markers. These features also tend to complement each other in the negotiation of primordial ethnic belongingness. Common ethnic histories, told in our indigenous languages, for example, remind us of our common existence, cultural beliefs and practices as well as common experiences or/of events, which refer to real geographical spaces and even to the legends of the community, whose names are still being used to this day. This is despite the fact that individuals can still learn others' languages and, as the Kenyan constitution promulgates, settle on any part of Kenya. Even with this kind of ethnic fluidity, which has always existed, as far back as the pre-colonial times (Ogot, 2012), the sense of the existence of specific and distinct ethnic collectivities should not be wished away. While Kenyan Africans can also be said to lose themselves to the forces of globalization or westernization, not all has been lost. Some ethnic cultural practices still persist, and while some of them have been blended with exotic cultures, they have, reinvigoratingly, retained their ethnic peculiarities. As a critical theorist and proud African scholar and individual, I strongly caution against the simplistic

and reductionist argument that distinct African ethnicities have been more constructed than they are primordial and that, thus, we should wish away traditional ethnic belongingness and absolutely embrace the notion of nationhood. In actuality, it is the national belongingness (such as that of 'Kenya'), which is much more far-fetched and invented. For example, the history of the present-day 'Kenya' only started in the early twentieth century, and as crafted by European colonizers, whereby hitherto autonomous ethnic collectivities were forcibly herded together into 'Kenya'. It also needs to be stressed that ethnicity in itself is not pathological (Ajulu, 2002); rather it is the negative ethnic politicization which needs to be condemned as it triggers harmful interethnic relations. It is on this note, therefore, that I suggest that it would be interesting to reflect and research on the constructivist approaches to ethnicity.

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Glossary of terms

Mtoto wa nyoka ni nyoka: This is a cautionary Kiswahili saying, which literally translates to 'The young one of a snake is a snake'. It is a warning to the effect that individuals take after (or are nurtured by) their older relatives.

Ogotakerwa: This is a cultural practice among the Abagusii people of the present-day Kenya. It is roughly translated into 'being wished for'. A new born is normally named after specific animals, so as to ward off evil spirits which had been responsible for the death of previous new borns in the family. The sense is that the current new born would live a long life and also beget or give birth to prolong the family line.

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