

## Kenya: ethnicity, tribe, and state

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The extensive commentary on Kenya's [troubles](#) [1] has tended to blame ancient tribal rivalry, cynical political calculation, or a combination of the two; with the corrupted electoral process seen as providing the unintended catalyst - or worse, the deliberate instigator that awakens latent tribal hostility. British imperialism has also received its expected share of criticism, for inventing the now-indigenous Kenyan practice of divide and rule (see Caroline Elkins, "[What's Tearing Kenya Apart? History, for One Thing](#) [2]", *Washington Post*, 6 January 2008).

While all such explanations have some merit they may also mislead the unwary, since they underplay the always slippery relations between ethnicity as a universal human attribute, [politicised tribalism](#) [4] as a contingent process, and the state - any state, colonial or otherwise - as a cockpit of variously contested but always unequal power. How, then, can a focus on such factors illuminate Kenya's continuing turmoil?

### A colonial formation

In the 19th century the area that became "[Kenya](#) [5]" was stateless. Its peoples' civility, their ethnicity, was shaped by their subsistence: farming or herding, or some mixture of both. Such ethnic groups were not teams, not "tribes". Loyalties and rivalries were smaller than that - patriarchal lineages, marriage alliances, age-groups, trading partnerships, client-clusters, and the like. Ethnic groups were constituted more by internal debate over how to achieve honour in the unequal lives of patron or client, than by solidarity against strangers. Ethnic economies indeed were as often complementary as competitive, with different specialisms. But such inter-ethnicity - which was not without its frictions - was facilitated by the absence of any central power that might arrange groups in hierarchical relations. Sustained "tribal rivalry" could not exist under such decentralised, underpopulated, conditions.

It was European rivalry that imported that modern Leviathan, the state, in the late 19th century. It was, like all states, [assembled by force](#) [6] and driven by self-interest. Its British officials allied with African leaders too weak to be rivals; and occasionally did a little to rein in the otherwise self-destructive excesses of those potentially overmighty subjects, the white settlers. The colonial state, responsible to Westminster and at the same time nervous of India's viceroy and then (at independence) the country's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru - since British Indians far outnumbered white Britons in Kenya - stood to some extent athwart both Africans and settlers, trying to mediate the contradictions between them.

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Among his books are (as co-author) [Unhappy Valley: conflict in Kenya and Africa](#) [3] (James Currey, 1992) and (as co-editor) of [Mau Mau and Nationhood](#) [4]

Also by John Lonsdale in **openDemocracy**:

["How to study Africa: from victimhood to agency](#) [4]" (31 August 2005) (James Currey, 2003); he is also the author of seventy articles or book chapters on Kenyan and African history

Both settlers and Africans colonised the state and the facilities it provided [7]. What had previously been a multi-polar mosaic of scattered nodes of socially productive energy became, within Kenya's new borders, a layered pyramid of profit and power, unequally divided between two key centres - one "white", one black - and many marginalised peripheries.

White settlers got 20% of Kenya's high-potential farmland. As these settlers failed to provide enough state revenue and blocked African opportunity, the British increasingly encouraged African farming on the other 80%. So the second economic centre became Kikuyu-land: home of 20% of the population; close to the capital, Nairobi; cool and attractive to missionaries, with more schools than elsewhere. By geographical accident, then, Kikuyu had a head start in making money (essential to advance political ambitions) and in acquiring modern managerial skill.

Most nationalisms start among those subjects who do best out of, and are most useful to, an *ancien regime*; their frustrations are keenest, their opportunity greatest. Yet while that may explain Kikuyu leadership of Kenya's anti-colonial nationalism, it does not account for their involvement in Mau Mau [8], its secretive, violent, offshoot. To that point I will return, as it is a key to understanding the present.

## A social transformation

In the new circumstances, other and not-so-well-placed ethnic groups made the most of what they had. They were often driven by a local patriotism inspired by vernacular, mission-translated, Bibles that told of an enslaved people who became a tribal nation. They embarked, in combinations of hope and desperation, on chain-migrations out of pauper peripheries (not unlike the Scots or Irish in comparable circumstances) to colonise particular niches of employment: on the railway; on white farms and plantations; in domestic service; or in the police and army. Yet others came to dominate the livestock trade.

Officials and employers exploited these various tendencies and stereotyped the supposed ethnic qualities of the group concerned. The British helped to harden [9] ethnic divisions made greater by differing potentials for social mobility. Britain did not simply divide in order to rule.

The emergence of ethnic consciousness also arose from local debates about how the genders, generations, rich and poor should relate, as older inequalities were transformed [10] into new differentiations less sensitive to existing moral audits of honour.

Nowhere was such differentiation so sharp as among Kikuyu. Its effects became politically acute [11] after 1945 when settler employers in the Rift Valley's "white highlands" mechanised production, and the extensive Kikuyu diaspora of tenant-workers in the region refused the worsening conditions they were offered. These "ex-squatters", failing to recover a home in their increasingly populated, and property-protective, "reserves", had to make shift in Nairobi's slums. The insistent question, "how then can I live as an honourable Kikuyu?" was what separated the militants of Mau Mau from the politically conservative, propertied, patrons - led by Jomo Kenyatta - who first inspired them.

Also in **openDemocracy** on Kenya's crisis:

Peter Kimani, "A past of power more than tribe in Kenya's turmoil [6]" (2 January 2008)

Michael Holman, "Kenya: chaos and responsibility [6]" (3 January 2008)

Gérard Prunier, "Kenya: roots of crisis [6]" (7 January 2008)

Rober Southall, "South African lessons for Kenya [6]" (8 January 2008)

Wanyama Masinde, "Kenya's trauma, and how to end it [6]" (9 January 2008)

## **A political competition**

The horrors of the Mau Mau "emergency" war of the 1950s that ensued proved the repressive potential of a [12] colonial state too closely allied to the settlers, its strongest clients. But the relative calmness of decolonisation in 1963 similarly proved the advantages of an outgoing state power that was not *solely* dependent upon its local roots - a clear contrast with Rhodesia's [13] fiery end.

The post-colonial state - rooted in a competitive society, for good historical reasons - is once more different. For the state has been the sole agency by which Africans could aspire to climb the commanding heights of the economy against racially entrenched interests - in land, commerce and finance. In recent years it has continued this role by ever more devious means, to meet external demands for "liberalisation". Access to its power matters. It is concentrated in an executive presidency, now directly elected, capable of manipulating all public institutions, including a parliament elected from single-member constituencies that either singly or in contiguous groups coincide with what have become tribal territories.

In consequence, the competition for a share in this power became governed [14] by internal ethnic accountability and tribal rivalry. President Kenyatta and his Kikuyu elite soothed the frustrated honour of their Kikuyu poor with settlement schemes in the former "white highlands" (of which the bulk, historically, had belonged to less favoured Maasai and Kalenjin groups). His successor Daniel arap Moi [15], finding less room for the poor of own Kalenjin, did more to create for them an ethnic elite.

Politicians generally justify their privilege by carving ethnic benefits from state largesse. But (in Kenya as elsewhere) this extractive approach faced increasing pressures. The ferocity of competition for a share of state power rose over time - as population has grown, as the fertilising rains of the post-colonial Africanisation of opportunity long ago dried up, as the terms of trade for primary commodities turned sour. It was fairly easy for Kenyatta to ensure that all, more or less, enjoyed a turn "to eat" in the ethnic coalitions on which a parliamentary majority [16] relied. It was more difficult for Moi. As the political stakes rose, so it became more tempting to attract and reward one's ethnic followers with officially-deniable opportunities for thuggery at the expense of those who were now tribal rivals in land, urban property, or petty trade. With every "bought" election, popular anger grew among Kenyan citizens - to an extent that they created pressure for a constitutional change which would strengthen parliament at the expense of the presidency.

## **A national transition?**

A new president, Mwai Kibaki [17], was elected in 2002 to clean the Aegean stables. But in that effort he has disappointed all but his Kikuyu cronies. Now, in the presidential election of 27 December 2007 [18], he appears to many to have broken the tacit rules of national competition - the last straw. That the opposition was, it seems, merely less successful in rigging the ballot will not make reconciliation any easier. Some of the subsequent opposition violence is politically directed. But the worst, by Kalenjin "warriors" against Kikuyu "immigrants" into the Rift Valley, may have outrun such elite-engineered tribalism to become an eerie echo of Mau Mau - in being an internal, generational, ethnic revolt against the compromises by which its own recently-manufactured Kalenjin elite came to terms with the "old wealth" of Kenyatta's Kikuyu.

There are, then, two very different dynamics currently at work in Kenya: internal ethnic dissidence and external tribal rivalry. Neither can be disarmed without rewriting the rules of political competition [18] for the power of a rather different ("post-post-colonial") state. It would have to be less closely allied to its strongest clients, and offer its services more disinterestedly

to all Kenyans. These might in consequence come to think of themselves more as citizens, less as ethnically-defined clients. It is a very great deal to ask.

Kenya faces two possible futures. On the one hand, the normal inter-ethnicity of most daily lives may have been poisoned [19] by the recent violence, forecasting a broken state. On the other, the shock may have persuaded Kenyan elites of the old, Burkean, truth that a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation. There is perhaps a glimmer of hope in the opposition's success in getting its man elected as the speaker of the new parliament.

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[2] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/04/AR2008010404300.html?hpid=opinionsbox1>

[3] <http://www.jamescurrey.co.uk/jcurrey/>

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[4] <http://www.jamescurrey.co.uk/jcurrey/>

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[5] [http://go.hrw.com/atlas/norm\\_html/kenya.htm](http://go.hrw.com/atlas/norm_html/kenya.htm)

[6] <http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?PID=273999>

[7] <http://www.jamescurrey.co.uk/jcurrey/>

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[8] <http://www.jamescurrey.co.uk/jcurrey/>

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[9] <http://www.jamescurrey.co.uk/jcurrey/>

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[10] <http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521470599>

[11] <http://www.jamescurrey.co.uk/jcurrey/>

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[12] <http://www.orionbooks.co.uk/HB-29651/Histories-of-the-Hanged.htm>

[13] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/november/11/newsid\\_2658000/2658445.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/november/11/newsid_2658000/2658445.stm)

[14] <http://www.jamescurrey.co.uk/jcurrey/>

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[15] <http://kenya.rcbowen.com/government/moi.html>

[16] <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/HUL055224.htm>

[17] <http://statehousekenya.go.ke/presidents/kibaki/profile.htm>

[18] <http://www.angus-reid.com/tracker/view/14542/kenya>

[19] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/>

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