Constructivist approaches to ethnicity: A question of organization, mobilization and appropriation of ethnic identities in Kenya

Research article

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Abstract

The key argument in this study is that ethnicity, as a form of human identity, has the potential to be organized, mobilized and appropriated by individuals vis-à-vis those of other ethnic identities. As much as constructivist approaches shed some more light on the understanding of ethnicity, including highlighting fluidity or hybridity, the primordiality of ethnicity cannot be understated. In this regard, this study opines that primordiality gives the material for the constructivist arguments. Additionally, it can safely be argued that ethnicity, in and by itself, is not harmful. Nevertheless, ethnic identity is also not dormant; it is not always an event. Thus, this study foregrounds the performativity aspect of ethnic identity. Ethnic identity can be very much operational. It is in this same vein that this study considers ethnic identity along the following four touchpoints: *situational*; *relational*; *instrumental*; and *processual*. Put simply, while ethnic identity is not inherently pathological, its capacity to be activated, and, hence, to do real things cannot be overlooked. It is for this reason this study underlines individuals' organization, mobilization and appropriation of ethnic belongingness in their relations with the outgroups in such a political ecology as that of the present-day Kenya.

Keywords: appropriation, constructivist, ethnicity, Kenya, mobilization, organization, performativity

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Public Interest Statement

Ethnic belongingness in itself is innocent, it is the way in which individuals organize and mobilize each other and use their ethnic belongingness to do things, from the innocuous to the harmful vis-à-vis members of other ethnic communities that is the most important. Additionally, when the latter is the case, we should know that ethnic elites are at the forefront of this negative politicisation of ethnicity. 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 both are crucial to the understanding of ethnicity, and that the latter works on the material given by the former.

Introduction

As can be seen, this study makes reference to the confusion which seems to exist in the studies on ethnicity with regard to distinguishing between the social construction of ethnicity and the organization, mobilization and appropriation of ethnic identities. This is explained by the fact that the title of this study has been packaged in the form of this question: 'Constructivist approaches to ethnicity or organization, mobilization and appropriation of ethnic identities?' To be sure, this study more persuaded by the organization, mobilization and appropriation of ethnic identities. In his doctoral dissertation, the author tends towards taking an impartial stance towards both the constructivist approaches and the primordial approaches to ethnicity. However, now, and in this study, the author sort of breaks the mould of his earlier train of thought and takes a more definitive standpoint. The main argument now is that primordial approaches are essential in the understanding of ethnicity, and they cannot simply be wished away; to seek to replace primordial approaches with constructivist approaches in the explanation of ethnicity will be defeatist. In actuality, the primordial approaches are an indispensable foundation without which the constructivist approaches cannot be discussed. Simply put, the constructivist discussions of ethnicity allude to the primordial existence of ethnicities. While the critique of primordial approaches are valid and persuasive, they do not, in any way, this study argues, clearly show us the other side of the coin, especially where there is, or was, a complete lack of distinct ethnic collectivities. It is because of this that this paper does the following: first, distinguish the primordial approaches from constructivist approaches; second, embark on the critique of the primordial approaches to ethnicity; third, give an overview of the constructivist approaches; and, fourth, focus on a rather more meaningful approach, that of considering ethnicities as organized, mobilized and appropriated entities.

Nasong'o (2015) describes the primordial approaches to ethnicity as treating ethnic identities as natural phenomena, and that individuals of the same ethnic community share ethnic belongingness by virtue of sharing the following: a common ancestry, a common culture, a common language and other common cultural stuff. Beidelman (1997) notes that these members also share the same landscape. Ondigi (2019) also adds names as another stuff which characterises members of the same ethnic community. All these commonalities are accompanied by shared stories or myths about the existence of an ethnic community. On the other hand, and in response to the primordial argument, the constructivist scholars argue that ethnic communities are only imagined communities; they are not natural phenomena; they are mere social constructions as opposed to biological givens.

Critique of primordial approaches to ethnicity

Generally speaking, the primordiality of ethnicity is centred around the following five touchpoints: *common ancestry (and gender)*; *culture*; *language*; *landscape/territory*; and *names*. It is, thus, around these five factors that the critique of the primordial argument has been fashioned. However, as this paper contends, while the critique of primordial approaches raises crucial points, it does not obliterate the primordiality of ethnicity. Briefly, this critique is recapitulated here. The absoluteness of common ancestry is not completely sustainable owing to, at least, exogamous practices, which have always existed across ethnic collectivities. Such things as adoption and instances where children divest their own (blood folk) of parental rights for the benefit of strangers (Dolgin, 1990a; 1990b) have also taken away the absoluteness of the common ethnic ancestry argument. As Kumaravadivelu (2008) also points out, individuals and groups of people keep borrowing each other's cultures; acculturation is also a common practice. Language, as soft cultural stuff, is also dynamic; languages have not ceased to borrow from each other; in addition, as humans, there is no end to our capacity to learn and function in others' languages. Ours is a world characterised by migrations, from time immemorial. This is as opposed to being always confined in the same ethnic geographical region. For instance, the origin of the (author's) Gusii community, which belongs to the Bantu language branch, can be traced back to "the grassland area of Cameroon and the adjacent Benue region of Nigeria in West Africa" (Akama, 2017, p. 5). This is despite the fact that the Gusii people are now concentrated in the western part of the present-day 'Kenya', to the east of the African continent. To escalate the argument, beyond the fact that the Gusii people are now dispersed all over Kenya, a few others have been distributed all over the globe. Lastly, as much as names can index

someone's ethnic belongingness, some African individuals now only use European or Arabic names. A few African names also transcend ethnic boundaries.

However, the contention this study makes is that this critique does not completely erase the primordiality of ethnicity. A case in point is that of the Gusii people: a great majority of whom are now concentrated in their traditional Gusii counties (of Kisii and Nyamira), and the elders of whom are not oblivious of the histories of (the origin of) the community; most of whose members are endogamous by virtue of routine and proximity; a great majority of whom also still speak Ekegusii and go by Gusii names. As Atieno-Odhiambo (2002) notes, the concept of ethnicity is a perduring phenomenon; many ethnic communities celebrate their long-shared history; for instance, the shared history of the Luos spans at least four thousand years. By this token, it cannot be overstated enough that the facts on the ground corroborate the primordiality of ethnicity. This is despite of the fact that there is no lack of a few outliers. This study is also cynical of some arguments put forth by such constructivist scholars as Kaufmann (2012), that, for instance, ethnic communities can be superseded by transnational cultural forms. This tends towards a colonial or neocolonial attitude and framework, whereby African identities and ways of life are to be extinguished and replaced by such modernist phenomena as a 'homogeneous global unit' with certain overarching narratives, especially those of the west. While the modernist-postmodernist and structuralist-poststructuralist dichotomies are beyond the scope of this paper, the author simply states that he subscribes to the post-modernist and poststructuralist schools of thought, which celebrate diversity in its entirety and call into question certain popular or unilateral readings of texts (Pennycook, 2001; Locke, 2004). As a corollary, there ought to be a celebration and guarding of African uniqueness and diversity, which includes fighting against the erosion of African ethnic identities. The damage caused by colonizing Africans, including the destruction of indigenous ethnic autonomies and forcible herding of ethnic collectivities into colonially crafted countries, such as Kenya, should be enough. On this note, an overview of the constructivist approaches to ethnicity is given below.

Constructivist approaches

According to the constructivist approaches, ethnic groups are not natural or inherent; they are just a human creation, which people use to make sense of their social worlds. Nasong'o (2015) explains this social construction of ethnic identities:

> 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. (p. 2)

While this study admits that constructivist approaches to ethnicity are (much) more popular in the academia than their primordial counterparts, it also asserts that the latter are more elaborate and robust in terms of explaining ethnic belongingness. In addition, the study argues that the primordial approaches serve as an important foundation on which the constructivist approaches are discussed. Without taking things for granted, it ought to be pointed out that some of the main concerns of the constructivist argument have been expressed under the critique of primordial approaches to ethnicity above. The next main argument of the constructivist approach is that which is instigated by the colonial project, and it will be highlighted below. Where necessary, responsive critique will be given accordingly.

Describing the collective identities in the 'pre-historic' times as not necessarily characterized by their intrinsic belongingness to distinct ethnic groups or such consciousness, Kertzer and Arel (2004) state that, then, people often only had the sense of being from 'here'. It is by this token, therefore, that social constructivists conceive of ethnic groups (as well as states or countries) as a modern phenomenon. As has also already been mentioned, above, there is an argument or wish among some social constructivist scholars of ethnicity for a future where ethnic identities are superseded by other social or cultural forms (Kaufmann, 2012). Kertzer and Arel (2004) and Ogot (2012) add that the 'pre-historic' collective identities were characterized by fluidity as opposed to exclusivity. As they further argue, "assimilation of others, comingling and miscegenation as a result of interethnic marriage" are already testament to the fact that there is no 'pure' ethnic group (Nasong'o, 2015, p. 2). However, this study posits that individuals in the 'pre-historic' or pre-colonial times already identified with their ethnic communities. Again, this study finds the term 'pre-historic' patronizing in itself; none ought to determine when others' histories started; no group, including that of social researchers, should also take away others' histories and, instead, create or impose theirs. However, the reality on the ground is that powerful groups have always erroneously imposed identities on others (including

ethnic identities), and, unfortunately, these imposed identities have come to be 'assumed' (or accepted) identities (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004). To counter the argument of a lack of earlier ethnic belonging (whether it was during the 'pre-historic' or pre-colonial times), Atieno-Odhiambo (2002), for instance, states that the Luo community have a shared history of at least four thousand years. While cases of ethnic fluidity and hybridity should not be dismissed, this paper argues that they (the cases of ethnic fluidity and hybridity) stand on the fact that, at some point, distinctness of some sort held and continues to hold. In other words, fluidity and hybridity are simply premised on what existed (or exists) before they are (or were) set in motion. This is the same way, for instance, the term 'mulatto', a hybrid, always brings to mind a mixing of an African and a European.

However, credit ought to be given to the constructivist scholars for significantly highlighting the role of colonialism in constructing some ethnic groups. Be that as it may, the caveat is that these ethnic groups were not without an identity. It must have been a case of imposition of identities. Kertzer and Arel (2004) and Goldscheider (2004) attribute categorization of ethnic identities to such mechanisms as the census, as employed by the colonial governments. While the statistical information gathered through census has always been contestable, its motivation has also been social, economic and political. Drawing on Anderson [1991] and Scott [1998], Kertzer and Arel (2004) explain:

> Much of the most influential literature on the role of statistics gathering in extending state control has focused on the colonial state. Anderson, in his influential book *Imagined Communities*, pointed to the census as one of the primary devices employed by the colonial state to impose a "totalizing, classificatory grid" on its territory, and hence make all inside it its own. For Anderson, the key was the ability to make distinctions, to draw borders, to allow governments to distinguish among "peoples", regions, religions, languages." The very boundedness of the state meant that its component objects were countable, and hence able to be incorporated into the state organisation… The state's goal here, as Scott… put it, is to "create a legible people." (p. 5).

However, as much as census categorizations ensured easier control of the conquered peoples by the colonial governments, they were erroneous. As Kertzer and Arel (2004) observe, these census workings were mainly hung on the state's impressions and perceptions of the local people. Drawing on Cohn (1987), Kertzer and Arel (2004) give

India's example, in which the censuses simplified and reduced the hitherto complex society to 'distinct' cultural and ethnic groups, setting the stage for politicization of ethnicity:

> These census-takers were taught to think of the people around them as divisible into clear-cut cultural categories, and taught as well what the crucial distinguishing marks were to be. What previously had been part of the complex web of relationships, practices, and beliefs they shared now became something quite different. An identifiable, distinct culture was distinguished, allowing people to "stand back and look at themselves, their ideas, their symbols and culture and see it as an entity." Once they conceived of themselves as part of a culture in this objectified sense, they could then, as part of the political process, select aspects of that culture, and polish and reformulate them in pursuing their goals. (p. 31-32).

Thus, censuses were not only used by the colonialists to observe, describe and map the indigenous people, but they also contributed towards shaping the people and landscapes to fit biased, selective, simplistic and reductionist observations. In the same line of thought, scholars (notably Ogot, 2012; Ghai, 2013; Abubakar, 2013) have described such Kenyan ethnic groups as the Abaluhya, Kalenjin, Mijikenda, Taveta and Meru as nothing more than mere colonial constructions, coined and, therefore, imposed identities. The term 'Kalenjin' currently refers to a Nilotic ethnic community comprised of nine culturally and linguistically related sub-tribes. In actuality, while linguistic 'lumpers' would consider the Kalenjin a single ethnic and linguistic community with nine dialects, 'splitters' would consider Kalenjin as a cluster of nine ethnic and linguistic groups, each with its own distinct language. To explain the imposition of the label 'Kalenjin', the label 'Bantu', which is a branch of related ethnic groups and languages, can be used. The label 'Bantu' grew out of the word along the lines of 'Abantu' (or Abanto/Bantu/Batu) which its speakers use to denote 'people'. But this should not mean that the Bantu groups of communities preserved the name 'Bantu' for only themselves. To be sure, in Ekegusii, the word 'Abanto' is a common noun which is a reference to any people. Ogot (2012, p. 30) briefly details the emergence of the Taveta people thus: "Their history reveals that refuge groups comprising the Pare, Shambaa, Kamba, Taita, Chaga and Arusha fleeing from the famines and conflicts in their respective home areas settled in the Taveta forest in the Seventeenth Century." Similarly, as Ogot (2012) argues, the name 'Meru' is territorial

rather than 'tribal' or 'ethnic'. In addition to coining identities for certain collectivities, the colonial government also ascribed onto others uncomplimentary and inaccurate labels: "Colonial forces labelled the Elwana community "Malakote" to imply they were vagabonds" (Abubakar, 2013, p. 32).

In turn, post-colonial states inherited and perpetuated colonial ethos and discourses on ethnic categorizations in their countries. The subsequent censuses they carried out were, to a very large extent, modelled along those of colonial governments. Nasong'o (2015), for example, points to the case of Rwanda, where the Germans and Belgians had already constructed two ethnic communities, Tutsi and Hutus, out of one community; occupational categories came to take on stratifying, symbolic and ethnic roles. Those rearing animals became Tutsis while those tilling the land became Hutus. Probably still following in the footsteps of the colonialists, some ethnic elites in the post-colonial Kenya set up to create new ethnic identities, especially by joining those ethnic groups which are perceived to be closely related. These communities, sometimes referred to as super-tribes (Atieno-Odhiambo, 2002), are the GEMA (Gikuyu, Embu and Meru Association) and KAMATUSA (Kalenjin, Maasai, Turkana and Samburu). This study suggests that, in addition to belonging to the same cluster of ethnic groups, these communities coalesced because of their geographical proximity. Though Abubakar (2013) states that these new amalgamated ethnic identities did not completely metamorphose, this study suggests that the member ethnic groups continue to relate very intimately, for example the GEMA associates of Gikuyu (or Kikuyu), Embu and Meru.

In lending credence to Kertzer and Arel (2004) and Abubakar (2013), this study also argues that the colonial state did not only shape and coin new identities; rather, they also 'destroyed' and 'invisibilized' other communities. To give examples, small communities, such as the Munyoyaya, Elwana, Okiek, Elchumus, Segeju and Nubi, were lumped onto their dominant neighbours or even dismissively classified as 'the other'. These communities can be described as those which have since been marginalized or pushed to the periphery. In this same vein, the post-colonial Kenya can be described as being more nationalistic than consociational or multinational. As Ghai (2013) explains, a nationalistic state is based on the principle of the supremacist of one ethnic group over others. This study argues that, generally, the Kikuyu community has assumed supremacy in the post-colonial Kenya; more light will be shed on this below. Here, this study builds on Ghai's (2013) 'nationalistic' notion to explain how a few Kenyan communities of Asian stock, who, despite setting foot in the country way before the 18th Century, have been condemned to oblivion. These communities are the Badalas, Buluchis and Goans (Abubakar, 2013). This study suggests that, owing to the

fact that 'Africans' account for more than 95% of the Kenyan population, and Kenya is geographically in the African continent, these communities of Asian origin are not considered Kenyan. For instance, the Kenyan education syllabus as applied in schools in the 90s had only paid attention to the African Kenyans, which constitute Bantu, Nilotic and Cushitic language groups. Such cases of invisibilization bring to light the lingering contestation over the criteria or prerequisite for the Kenyan citizenship. This prompts Abubakar (2013) to ask what it takes for one to be considered a Kenyan (indigene).

As can be seen, ethnic identity or belongingness is not devoid of contestation, and it cannot be decoupled from politics and power struggles. On this note, the organization, mobilization and appropriation of ethnic identities is discussed below, and especially as understood within the framework of doing ethnic identity or performativity of ethnic identity.

Organization, mobilization and appropriation of ethnic identities.

Having argued that the constructivist approaches to ethnicity mainly use primordial approaches as their foundation to discuss ethnic identity, this paper restates its argument: that the constructivist framework does not erase or turn the argument of the primordiality of ethnicity on its head. That is why, as Atieno-Odhiambo (2002) and Kumaravadivelu (2008) point out, the desirability and awareness of ethnic belongingness are perduring. While it is unfortunate that some collectivities accepted hitherto imposed ethnic identities, and some individuals do not claim any ethnic belongingness, it ought to be acknowledged that many people define themselves, or are defined by others, as belonging to some ethnic community. Rather, it could be better posited thus, as a question: what do we do with and about our ethnicities? Drawing on, at least, Cameron (2001) and Blommaert (2005), this study foregrounds the performativity aspect of ethnic identity. In other words, ethnic identity (like any other aspect of identity) is not something that works a priori; it is not necessarily an automatic reflection of 'its members' (Ondigi, 2019). In other words, we do or construct particular ethnic identities. And, to put the record straight, here, construction of ethnic identities should not be mistaken to mean that the ethnicities in question never existed in and by themselves, in some form. Following Cameron (2001) and Blommaert (2005), we have certain meaningful resources in our identity repertoire, and we only identify ourselves as belonging to a certain ethnic group the moment we begin to use those meaningful resources. Therefore, ethnic identity is what we do or what we perform (Ondigi, 2019). The other pertinent question should be: How, and to what extent do we do our ethnic identities? To answer this question,

we had better look at ethnic identity – thus, ethnic performativity – as having the following dimensions: 'situational', 'relational', 'instrumental' ('strategic' or 'transactional') and 'processual'. It also ought to be pointed out that these performativity dimensions of ethnic identity are interrelated, interdependent and overlapping. Their discussion follows below.

(i) Situational ethnicity

With regard to (the performativity of) ethnic identities being situational, the recognition of the fact that our identities are multiple (as also including sex, gender, nationality, age, religion, profession and ability) reminds us that our lives cannot always be accounted for only in terms of ethnicity. Each situation invokes or activates a certain aspect of our identity. In Downing and Husband's (2005) words:

> We do not routinely proceed through our day perceiving everything through the self-conscious prism of our ethnicity. Similarly, we do not sustain a permanent self-conscious reflexivity in relation to our age, class, gender or the size of our ears. All of these may be made temporarily salient by the particular circumstances of the moment. (p. 18)

On this account, Downing and Husband (2005) offer us a caveat: knowing someone's ethnicity does not endow us with the prescience to see how they read a particular situation. "Their ethnic sensibilities may or may not be engaged. Or their ethnic sensibility may be salient but essentially subordinated by another contingent identity cluster" (Downing and Husband, 2005, p. 18). However, this study argues that since no one, not even a researcher, is free of subjectivity, we are given to suspect that many a reading are from a standpoint of one's particular aspect of identity, such as or including their ethnicity. To give a rather digressive example, it might be easy to accuse a woman of being overly feminist if she makes a statement concerning how the womenfolk ought to rise up against sexism meted out by men. At the risk of defending such suspicious readings of individuals' stances, this study suggests that partisan perceptions are very rampant. Downing and Husband (2005) add to this:

> It is the ego-involvement of individuals in social judgements that provides the basis for selective perception and selective exposure… When it comes to judgements of our in-groups against critical outgroups, we are psychologically disposed to be willing participants in perceptual bias and cognitive distortion. (p. 17-18)

This, therefore, makes us expectant and careful and even suspicious when listening to or reading someone's work. Biased individuals do not always make their bias obvious. Usually, the bias is tacit. In the same way, we might accuse an individual who has voted for their tribesperson of being sentimentally attached to their ethnic affiliation. However, the same individual will insist on making the voting decision based only on objective perception and for the national benefit. On knowing that a seller shares the same ethnic identity as them, for instance, a buyer may resort to negotiating a price in their ethnic language, so as to get the better of their competing buyers, who also happen to belong to different ethnic and linguistic groups. Particular circumstances (aspects of situationality) which invoke doings of individuals' ethnic identity will be covered under other (relational and instrumental) aspects of the performativity of ethnic identity below.

(ii) Relational ethnicity

For belongingness to a particular ethnic community, an individual is normally informed by some consciousness; actively, these individuals socio-psychologically engage with their ontological self as members of their ethnic communities (Downing and Husband, 2005). Similarly, the other members of the in-group have got to accept these individuals as being part of the collective. However, as Barth (1969a) has pointed out, outsiders (members of other ethnic groups) too have to identify an individual as belonging to some ethnic group. Thus, ethnic belongingness thrives on mutual identification (Barth, 1969a). Eriksen (2010) has used the terms 'emic' and 'etic' to describe ethnic identity; while the former concerns self-ascription, the latter concerns others ascribing (or even imposing) an identity to someone else. Cameron (2001) and Blommaert (2005) describe this 'mutual' recognition by others as a co-construction of identity categories; in identifying ourselves as members of particular ethnic communities, we also rely on others' validation. Eriksen (2010), however, notes that both 'emic' and 'etic' ethnic ascriptions are entrenched in subjectivity, as opposed to objectivity. Eriksen's argument is that ethnic groups will consider others different from them despite a lack of exclusive ways of being or living. Here, this study suggests that Eriksen (2010) considers only the highest level of culture, which Huntington (1998) describes as 'civilization', as separating human beings from other species. To put it simply, all kinds of people have commonalities (like the natural language acquisition device and attendant use of speech as well as human genes) which other species do not have. Nevertheless, in the way of such things as (immediate) ancestry, language varieties, beliefs (or ideologies) and cultural products, ethnic groups will always be different from others.

Eriksen (2010) notes that different ethnic groups relate in two main ways: matching (or complementarization) and contrasting (or dichotomization). When in a matching relationship, different ethnic groups relate on an egalitarian basis, as equals. When in a contrasting relationship, a group has its will over the other, in the abstract. During the precolonial times, indigenous communities in Kenya generally had a horizontal relationship, having to, among other things, barter-trade with and intermarry amongst each other. Truces would also prevail in the aftermath of wars. As Keertzer and Arel (2004) and Goldscheider (2004) emphasize, there was no furore within or among collectivities over cultural practices or other ways of living. At the onset of colonialism, feelings of indignation and the quest for freedom began to grow in the indigenous people. This, as Birnir (2007) points out, necessitated a strong communal identity among the diverse indigenous collectivities; the colonizers were the external threat the indigenous collectivities were up against. This is despite the fact that the colonialists (had already) divided the indigenous collectivities along their 'ethnic' and freshly created 'district' boundaries.

However, at the onset of independence, 'national' identities or ethos generally retreated back into ethnic cleavages (already put in place by the colonialists' 'divide-and-rule' frameworks). Kenya, the newly colonially crafted polity within which the indigenous collectivities found themselves, was to be a totally new ecological system for the indigenes. In other words, as Ajulu (2002) observes, many ways of life were displaced by the colonialists. Cases in point are the tribal modes of governance which were replaced by such western values as 'national democracy'. Indigenous modes of production, for example 'barter trade', were also replaced by such Western modes as the 'legal tender' (money) and capitalism. This meant that the indigenous collectivities had to start engaging with each other anew and in a different context: on the 'Kenyan national plane'. This also meant that these ethnic collectivities now assumed a different outlook of themselves; the colonialists had already inculcated and sharpened their ethnic differences; they were now to be pitted against each other on the 'national' arena of Kenya. Expressing their sympathy for ethnocentrism, Stull and Von Still (1994, p. 7) warn "that individuals, for their own survival or in their own 'genetic self-interest', may cooperate and reciprocate within the group but not outside it". In the same manner, to enhance their 'genetic self-interest', individuals would regard outgroups as inferior, weird, potential rivals or threats, or even, in extreme cases, enemies. Consequently, by the course of nature, (some individuals from) ingroups would (potentially) relate with outgroups contemptuously, superficially and suspiciously, even necessitating a proliferation of ethnic stereotypes to justify this state of affairs. Wrong (2009) and Ogot (2012) narrate how people – including senior

politicians – have inherited colonialists' stereotypes and discourses about certain ethnic groupings in Kenya. To start off, Wrong (2009) quotes a British administrator, Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen (per his article in the *Kenya Diary*, 1902-1906), as waxing lyrical of the Kikuyu community:

> 'I am sorry to leave the Kikuyu, for I like them. They are the most intelligent of the African tribes that I have met; therefore they will be the most progressive under European guidance and will be the most susceptible to subversive activities. They will be one of the first tribes to demand freedom from European influence.' (p. 105)

In addition, for inhabiting fertile land and mainly practising agriculture, Kikuyus came to be regarded as 'industrious'. In comparison, since Luo Nyanza is relatively dry (and thus not as favourable for agriculture), Luos came to be labelled 'lazy'.

To show an inheritance and perpetuation of colonial discourses, Wrong (2009) has singled out Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, for his Kikuyu-chauvinistic tendencies, for instance, at the expense of the Maasais, a nomadic and pastoralist community. Wrong (2009, p. 104) quotes Jomo Kenyatta (in his book *Facing Mount Kenya*) thus: "The ability to force the land to yield its riches was what made a Kikuyu superior, in his own eyes, to the feckless Maasai pastoralists who roamed the Rift Valley." On his part, Ogot (2012, p. 67) reflects: "Political stereotypes are a form of control. Kenyatta often publicly dismissed the Luo as lazy, unable to lift a jembe or hoe to save their lives, while repeatedly playing up the rhetorical stereotype of the industrious Kikuyu until it became economic and political reality." Such terrible stereotypes, among others, have held their ground. For some, the stereotypes are a justification for maintaining the political and, thus, economic status quo. These, coupled with certain cultural practices, as associated with particular ethnic communities, have also consequently played a role in arranging or stratifying Kenyan tribes onto some sort of hierarchical ladder.

Drawing on Ghai and Ghai (2013), this study argues that a relationship characterized by reciprocity would surely guarantee a peaceful, meaningful and enriching coexistence in such a multi-ethnic and multicultural society as Kenya. As Ghai and Ghai (2013, p. 3) explicate, reciprocity encompasses the condemnation of "the hegemony of one ethnic group" and the "affirmative action for the disadvantaged groups". Thus, the spirit of multiculturalism and reciprocity is seriously undercut when one ethnic group dominates the executive and public service, in a zero-sum

'democracy', and when there is no equal or equitable distribution of other kinds of resources among all ethnic communities.

(iii) Instrumental ethnicity

Ethnic groups interact with each other in different ways, according to the circumstances they find themselves in. As has already been posited, in the new ecological system that is the post-colonial Kenya, indigenous collectivities, whose ethnic consciousness have already been sharpened by the colonial mechanisms, are wont to perceive other 'ethnic' groups as possible threats. This is especially so in a modern capitalistic setting, which is characterized by the scarce resources which have to be shared, scrambled or fought for. Because of this, the actions or moves of ethnic groups would be necessarily strategic. To hark back to Stull and Von Still (1994), survival instincts would ineluctably take centre-stage. As Posner (2005) notes, ethnic groups would transact with others in order to maximize payoffs, rewards or advantage. However, and as will be shown below, these 'group' moves would be informed and driven by largely opportunistic ethnic elites who are filled with selfish economic and political ambitions.

While Kanyinga *et al.* (2010, p. 6) admit that in certain situations, ethnicity "is conterminous or co-extensive with an ideological or policy position", they contend that, in most cases, the voters are only mobilized by self-seeking ethnic elites who are keen to outbid competitors from other ethnic groups for state power. This is especially so for the highest office in the land: the presidency. Normally, ordinary members of an ethnic community are under the impression that their aspirations repose in their individual ethnic elites or 'messiahs' (Kanyinga *et al*., 2010). Things are made worse by Kenya's zero-sum aggregative democracy, in which the winner takes it all. As many authors (for example Ajulu, 2002; Atieno-Odhiambo, 2002 and Kanyinga *et al.*, 2010) have shown, state power is also used to reward or punish. In other words, the winning ethnic community or communities will benefit from the 'pork barrel' at the expense of the losers, who will be alienated from the sharing of the 'national cake'. Because of this longing for rewards and fear of punishments, the voters will tie their destiny with that of their leaders; "(c)ommunities are made to believe that they would rise and fall with the leaders who appear to represent their interests" (Kanyinga *et al.*, 2010, p. 6).

Posner (2005, p. 12) strips ethnicity of some of its perceived affect: "ethnic groups are mobilized or joined not because of the depth of attachment that people feel toward them but because of the usefulness of the political coalitions that they define – a usefulness determined exclusively by their sizes relative to those of other coalitions." As a corollary, Kanyinga *et al.* (2010) and Kanyinga (2013) point to how

ethnic elites reduce their tribespeople into mere bargaining tools or voting automatons. On the other hand, the voters' intransigent loyalty to their ethnic elites is informed by prospective material and non-material rewards. To quote Eriksen (2010): What can your tribe give you? As much as the presidency cannot cater for all their tribespeople's employment or business needs, research has shown that, in Kenya, people from the president's ethnic community benefit the most (Ajulu, 2002; Atieno-Odhiambo, 2002; Ogot, 2012; Kanyinga, 2013). The non-material benefits – what Kanyinga *et al.* (2010) call 'esteem goods' – include the 'feel good factor' for the members of an ethnic group when one of their own resides in the highest office.

In consideration of Kenya's political realities, this study notes that ethnic mobilization is not limited to separate single tribes. Over the years, there have been ethno-political coalitions. These are arrangements in which certain tribes coalesce with the purpose of outbidding other equally multi-ethnic coalitions. This is testament to the fact that the compass of the 'we' category contracts and expands according to the situation at hand (Eriksen, 2010). To give an example, going into independence in 1963, the most popular (and winning) party, KANU (Kenya African National Union), was largely synonymous with the big tribes at the time: Kikuyus, Luos and Kambas. On the other hand, the second party in popularity, KADU (Kenya African Democratic Union), which portrayed itself as championing for the rights of minority groups, was largely synonymous with Kalenjins, Abaluhya and the people from the Coast Province. Soon after, in 1964, KADU was to be co-opted into the KANU government. President Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, would appoint KADU's leader, Moi, a Kalenjin, as Vice-President in 1967. As Atieno-Odhiambo (2002) argues, this was a ploy to appease the larger Kalenjin community. Jomo Kenyatta's government had earlier bequeathed Kalenjins' recovered land (from the colonialists) to his fellow Kikuyus in the Rift Valley Province (Kalenjins' traditional territory). Unsurprisingly, as Cottrell and Ghai (2013) lament, all these ethno-political arrangements are not ideologically meaningful; the overriding factor is to mobilize bigger numbers so as to outbid the rivals. The contending ethnic elites "are not looking for ideologically like-minded groups. Almost any party will do, any ethnic group will do" (Cottrell and Ghai, 2013, p. 112).

With regard to the 2007 elections, generally speaking, the Kambas and Kikuyus were each on their own, as the Luos, Kalenjins and many other tribes formed a potent coalition: ODM (Orange Democratic Movement). The elections were to be botched, leading to the post-election violence. In the equally disputed 2013 and 2017 elections, the Kikuyus and Kalenjins teamed up together. In both elections, especially the 2013 elections, Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto (the Kikuyu and Kalenjin ethnic elites, respectively) mobilized their constituents under the banner of 'being under attack

from the ICC (International Criminal Court)', for crimes against humanity in the 2007/2008 post-election violence. These ethnic elites also "launched a campaign in which they would tell their constituencies that they have allied for purposes of peace or so that the two communities would live in peace" (Kanyinga, 2013, p. 72). However, outside their ethnic communities, they "spelt different messages including messages of generational change, employment for the youth, and the importance of implementing the devolved structure of government" (Kanyinga, 2013, p. 72-73). Be that as it may, the general feeling among other Kenyans is that Kikuyus and Kalenjins have entrenched themselves in the system so firmly that they will retain their power even by unfair means. Since the onset of multiparty elections, Kikuyus are, generally speaking, also the only ones who are known for not supporting a presidential candidate from another ethnic community. For this, they have been accused of ethnic arrogance and chauvinism. Going by these accusations, it is worth considering the classic sociological cliché: "Ethnocentric groups seem to survive better than tolerant groups" (Horton and Hunt, 1968, p. 77).

(iv) Processual ethnicity

As has already been indicated, all the four aspects of ethnic performativity are interrelated. However, this study regards the processual aspect as that which encompasses all the other three aspects; it can also be said that all the other three aspects terminate into the processual aspect of ethnic performativity. Here, it can also be said that ethnic belongingness is more than a label which we give to collectivities. If ethnic belongingness were a mere label, we would not necessarily look at it as comprising of individuals who are active, thus organizing, mobilizing and using their voice and agency strategically, in certain situations and in relation to other ethnic groups. Therefore, ethnic identity or belongingness should be conceived of as a process as opposed to an event. Downing and Husband (2005, p. 14) explain: "Ethnicity is not a stable property of an individual, implanted, like some microchip at birth. It is a continuous process of identity construction in which individuals participate collectively in defining and valorizing a group identity."

At the risk of wading a bit into the primordial-social constructivist debate, this paper quotes Ogot (2005, p. 272): "ethnic identity is constantly being negotiated and defined, renegotiated and redefined, in everyday discourse." While Ogot (2005; 2012) may appear to subscribe to the social constructivist approaches to ethnicity at the expense of the primordial approaches, there is a caveat. This constant definition, redefinition, negotiation and renegotiation of ethnic identities is constrained by, originating in, or moving away from, some primordial framework. If there are any

adjustments to be made, they are normally made with regard to such primordial boundary markers as common ancestry, language and culture. Appearing to reinforce the enduring importance of the primordial approaches in this sense, Downing and Husband (2005) assert that 'admission to a valued group has to be earned'. More assertively, Posner (2005) and Birnir (2007) state that an individual can only negotiate an ethnic identity that is within their repertoire of ethnicity. For instance, if one is born to parents who belong to different ethnic communities, they cannot claim an ethnic belonging outside those two communities. Posner (2005, p. 15) elucidates: "When instrumentalists insist that ethnic identities are fluid, they almost always have examples of this sort of within-repertoire identity change in mind." It is a continuous process of identity construction in which individuals participate collectively in defining and valorizing a group identity. As has already been pointed out, defining and valorizing a group identity is more active than innocent, especially vis-à-vis other ethnic communities in a political ecology with scarce resources.

Here, two things are reiterated, the rationale of which will be given afterwards. One, Downing and Husband's (2005) argument above is drawn on: that ethnicity is an on-going collective process of identity construction, whereby a group identity is defined and valorized. Two, an earlier argument made above is recapitulated: that a specific ethnic group's identity construction does not happen in a vacuum; rather, it is situated, it is strategic and it all happens in relation to other ethnic identities in a given political ecology. The focus of this study is the political ecology of the present-day Kenya. To give the rationale of the two arguments above, it ought to be pointed out that ethnic performativity, which also necessarily entails the organization, mobilization and appropriation of ethnic identities, has tangible results. To put it very simply, ethnic identity – as a process rather than an event – does things. And, these things can either be beneficial or deleterious, with the beneficiaries or victims being the in-groups or outgroups or even a whole political ecology.

In conclusion, this study quotes a narration of an event which illustrates the working of all the aspects of performativity of ethnic identity (situational, relational, instrumental and processual). The quoted source (Ogot, 2012) details how, on Tom Mboya's (a charismatic and influential Luo) assassination, Kikuyu ethnic elites (led by President Jomo Kenyatta) responded to the rising anti-Kikuyu sentiments from other parts of the country. As Ogot (2012) shows, this dire political situation led to ordinary Kikuyus partaking in an oath so as to affirm group solidarity and vow to ensure that the national leadership (presidency) remains in Kikuyu land:

> Ethnic polarisation became total as the Kikuyu, led by Kenyatta, initiated a massive oathing campaign in which almost every adult Kikuyu male was forced to swear in mass ceremonies at Gatundu, the president's home, and on pain of death, to keep the presidency in the House of Mumbi, the Kikuyu Eve. Oath-takers pledged, ominously, to maintain Kenya "under Kikuyu leadership… no uncircumcised leaders will be allowed to compete with the Kikuyu leadership. You shall not vote for any party not led by the Kikuyu. If you reveal this oath, may this oath kill you", Njenga Karume, who was one of the people who took this oath at Gatundu, confirmed in his book (*Beyond Expectations*, 2005:206) the content of this pledge. One had to strip naked, chew some mucky stuff and pledge loyalty to Kenyatta, and his government and for ever to stand united with Kikuyu leadership. All this went by the euphemism *cai wa Gatundu* – Gatundu tea, but those who refused to drink it faced dire consequences. A Presbyterian clergyman, the Rev. Samuel Githinji Mwai and his wife were beaten senseless by *Jeshi la Mzee*, the Old Man's army. Githinji died two days later: his wife long nursed physical and psychological wounds. Since no cleansing oath has since been taken, one must assume that the oath still binds those who took it. (p. 65-66)

Conclusion

While this study acknowledges the importance of the constructivist approaches to the understanding of ethnicity, it asserts that the primordial approaches to ethnicity cannot be wished away as they are foundational. The study also reiterates the fact that though traditional and – somewhat – essentialist, primordial approaches have set the foundation for the working of their constructivist counterparts. Primordial approaches, therefore, become the reference point on which constructivist approaches are built. That is why, for instance, ethnic identities are understood to be constructed or performed around such boundary markers as common descent, culture, language and landscape, as given by the primordial approaches. To give an example, the argument put forth by most constructivists that there is no pure ethnic identity owing to hybridity and multiplicity is 'apophatic'. In other words, such notions as 'hybridity' and 'multiplicity' simply allude to certain ethnic identities that were once (or are still) 'pure' or 'uncontaminated'. To be sure, 'hybridity' depends on or brings to mind a 'mixing' or 'interbreeding' of certain distinct ethnic identities. Especially noting that some ethnic identities have been shared by over four thousand years, such as the Luo, this paper also restates its disapproval of and cynicism towards the argument put

forth by some social constructivists: 'that ethnic identities will eventually be superseded by other cultural forms.' This argument reeks of modernist, patronizing and westernizing tendencies. Already, this paper contends, some damages on the ground can be seen, whereby, for example, a few African individuals seek to 'undercommunicate' their indigenous ethnicities while 'overcommunicating' Kenyanness. To avoid any doubt, 'Kenya' is a modern-day colonially crafted phenomenon, which is barely more than a century, as also conterminous with colonization of Africans therein. This paper especially laments about the subtle but sinister efforts aimed at the erosion of our ways of life. The beauty of Africa includes its richness in terms of culture and a lot of other ethnic stuff, which should be celebrated and guarded with jealousy. Indeed, as they say, 'diversity is the spice of life'. In the same way, Africans should be wary of attempts to globalize their world to the extent of being carved into units of some homogeneous stuff.

In the same line of thought, this study cries for due respect to be given to ethnic belongingness, which necessarily constitutes primordial approaches to ethnicity. As has also been argued, the constructivist approaches to ethnicity have not erased the foundation that is the primordial approaches to ethnicity. Rather, this paper concludes, people should conceive of their ethnic plurality and multiculturality as sources of strength as opposed to weaknesses. There is no way ethnic affiliation can be harmful if all the citizens of a polity are self-and-other-respecting, empathetic and accommodating. Canada, for instance, is known to be one of the most peaceful and prosperous nations despite being very ethnically diverse. Thus, instead of working to undercut ethnic belongingness, the bigger question we should ask ourselves should be: how do we organize, mobilize and appropriate our ethnicity in our present-day political ecology without jeopardising broader societal harmony?

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