



Demystifying Identities in Kenyan Post-Colony: A Clan by Clan Analyses

An informal multi-disciplinary discussion on clan-based identities (serving as a preliminary to Kenya-wide clan by clan analysis research) convened by Paul Kipchumba at the British Institute in Eastern Africa, Nairobi, on Thursday 27 June 2013 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Identity has dominated socio-cultural discourse in human history. Perhaps it is the most important element of humanity—people live in harmony or in tension, depending on how it is defined and conceived. Kenya has been grappling with the question of her identity through generally accepted values and ingrains of diversity and different ways of appreciating herself, as outlined in the preamble to the 2010 constitution: “Proud of our ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, and determined to live in peace and unity as one indivisible sovereign nation.”ⁱ However, the aspirations of building one Kenya by the New Constitution seem somewhat elusive because actual identity, especially through an understanding of latent identities, has not been established through an informed process. For instance, the colonial administration used tribal/ethnic identities to define, conquer and manage Kenyans. This approach still is manifest in everyday working of Kenyan nation. The internal boundaries, especially county systems, are largely modelled after the ethnic underpinnings. This approach has brought forth untold suffering to the people of Kenya in the past and present. The 2007/8 post-election violence and jitters in the sharing of political positions in the county system of governance in some counties such as Migori between the Kuria and the Luo or Elgeyo Marakwet between the Keiyo and the Marakwet are products of unresolved identities and emergent ethnic stereotypesⁱⁱ.

One may be deceived by the rampancy and normalcy of use of ethnic affiliations in the making of Kenya. The media, political elite and foreign interest groups have given them some prominence. However, if you take time to listen to the people in the countryside you will realize that a clan, with totemic symbolism, is nearly the most appreciated form of identity among Kenyans. For instance, among the Kalenjin a clan name like Talai cuts across most of the sub-ethnic communities but may present itself in different totems: a black crow for some and a pied crow for othersⁱⁱⁱ. In addition, the Somali nation transacts business through clan identities. But their concept of a clan is a cluster of shifting identities with many totemic classifications interfused or downplayed^{iv}. This presents a complexity in the definition of a clan. However, there is no evidence of a study on clan analyses in anthropological, historical, folkloric or religious accounts. There is only a mention and use of the term in various explanations and illustrations. The best way to understand clan-based identities is to reflect on kinship relations and descent.

Kinship relations and lineage arrangements are marked as the very basic foundations of human identity, mostly a biological order that respects consanguine relations and tries as much as possible to avoid incest^v. However, the availability of different marriage categories such as ghost marriages in tribal societies compromises with a concrete conception of kinship relations. They arise out of a family relational set-up, with foundational bearings from both patrilineal and matrilineal schema, but are largely matrifocal^{vi}. The best way to understand kinship relations is to reflect on characteristic shifts of personal alignment and the transferability of kin categories based on prevailing socio-economic and political circumstances. Descent in most societies is a patrifocal arrangement that is political, ritualistic or jural accretion to the members of that society^{vii}. It can be a territorial connection that has some historical attachment. Jural paternity confers membership as a kind of citizenship upon a child, and may even confer that citizenship to non-kin with

attachment to territorially labelled, ritually articulated and politically significant communities^{viii}. And this may be how a clan can be defined.

The proposed study aims at delineating clan based identities and connections among Kenyan ethnic, linguistic and religious communities. It will begin with a multi-disciplinary seminar that will bring together academics and researchers to define a clan and scope of the research project, make suggestions on plausible methodological approaches, and outline anticipated limitations and resolutions to the same.

Notes

ⁱ The Constitution of Kenya, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Mayer, Iona. (n.d.). *The nature of kinship relations: the significance of the use of kinship terms among the Gusii*. Manchester.

ⁱⁱⁱ Proceedings of a seminar *Pre-Colonial History of the Kalenjin: Methodological Approaches* convened by B E Kipkorir on Wednesday 30 May 2012 at the Eldoret Club, Eldoret, Kenya

^{iv} Gassim, Mariana Arif. (2002). *Somalia: clan vs nation*.
Schlee, Gunther. (1994). *Identities on the move: clanship and pastoralism in northern Kenya*. Nairobi.

^v Levi-Strauss, Claude. (1969). *The elementary structures of kinship*. Trans. James Harle Bell and Richard von Sturner. Ed. Rodney Needham. London.

^{vi} Goody, N. Esther. (1973). *Contexts of kinship: an essay in the family sociology of Gonja of Northern Ghana*. Cambridge University Press.

^{vii} Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred Reginald & Daryll Forde. (1950). *African systems of kinship and marriage*. London: Oxford University Press.

^{viii} Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1990). *Kinship and marriage among the Nuer*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.