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Journalist Responses to Ethnic Tensions: A Study of the Press in Kenya

by D. T. Zaring*

Abstract

This two-pronged study is composed of a content analysis of the *Daily Nation* and the *Kenya Times* as well as a survey of 21 journalists who work for those two newspapers. The content analysis was conducted for the November 1, 1992 to January 31, 1993 editions of both papers, excluding Sunday editions. The sampling period included the final two months of the 1992 Kenyan general elections campaign, and the month that followed it. National news, opinion, and letter pages of both papers were analyzed. The survey featured some open-ended questions and some statements to which the respondents were asked to respond on a five-point scale ranging from "disagreeing strongly" through "neither agree nor disagree" to "agree strongly".

The content analysis of the papers suggests that journalists are willing to report ethnic conflicts, especially if they result in violence. They believe ethnic tensions are influential, dangerous, and often politically motivated. Neither *Daily Nation* nor the *Kenya Times* de-emphasizes articles or opinions referring to ethnicity to an extent that would suggest that ethnic concerns do not exist, or are unimportant in Kenya. Both dailies avoided treating ethnic phenomena with silence. The survey suggests that the issue of ethnicity is not ignored; however it is not treated by journalists as the essential key to understanding the country. Kenyan journalists appear to be optimistic about the resolution of ethnic conflicts, and their role in that resolution.

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Réactions de la Presse aux Tensions Ethniques: Une Etude de la Presse Kényane

par D. T. Zaring

Résumé

L'auteur aborde la question sur deux fronts. Il procède d'une part à l'analyse du contenu des quotidiens *Daily Nation* et *Kenya Times* et s'intéresse à 21 journalistes travaillant dans les deux journaux. L'analyse du contenu couvre la période s'étendant du 1^{er} novembre, 1992 au 31 janvier, 1993, mais elle ne tient pas en compte les éditions dominicales des deux journaux. La période d'échantillonnage comprend entre autres les deux derniers mois de la campagne électorale qui a précédé les élections générales de 1992 et le mois qui les a suivies. Les nouvelles nationales, les opinions ainsi que le courrier des lecteurs des deux journaux ont tous été analysés. Une technique adoptée a été celle du questionnaire et d'affirmations auxquelles on demandait de donner des réponses gradées sur une échelle de cinq degrés d'ampleur. On pouvait donner des réponses comme "tout à fait contre" ou "... ne suis ni d'accord ni contre..." ou "...tout à fait pour" etc.

L'analyse du contenu des deux journaux suggère que les journalistes sont disposés à écrire des reportages sur les conflits ethniques surtout dans les cas où ceux-ci mènent à la violence. Ils semblent convaincus que les tensions ethniques sont porteuses de conséquences dangereuses tout en étant souvent politiquement motivées. Aucun des deux journaux n'a tenté de minimiser les articles ou les opinions portant sur la question ethnique à tel point qu'on pourrait le soupçonner de suggérer qu'il n'y avait pas de soucis à se faire en ce qui concerne les tensions ethniques ou qu'ils étaient sans importance au Kenya. Les deux quotidiens ont évité de passer ce phénomène sous silence. L'étude suggère également que malgré le fait que les journalistes n'ignorent pas la question des tensions ethniques au Kenya, ils ne la considèrent pas comme un élément essentiel pour la compréhension du pays. Les journalistes Kényans font preuve d'optimisme quant à la résolution des conflits ethniques et au rôle qu'ils jouent dans la recherche des solutions à ce conflit.

Introduction

Kenya's multi-party elections on December 29, 1992 marked the culmination of what the country's newly legalized opposition called a "second liberation." The government and the ruling party, KANU, agreed not only to reopen the country to competitive, democratic politics, but also to reduce constraints on the press, free some political detainees, and pursue a "transparent and accountable" form of rule.

President Daniel arap Moi supported this democratization of the Kenyan government reluctantly and under strong foreign and domestic pressure. He claimed throughout the election campaign that multiparty politics tended to result in tribal conflict, a view he has committed to his published political principles. "I have great reservations against multiparty systems in Africa for, rather than promoting patriotism, they refuel political ethnicism and factionalism."¹ Moi's concerns proved to be well-founded, if the vote tallies of the four main presidential candidates are any indication. Oginga Odinga, a Luo, received 90% of the Luo vote, Moi, a Kalenjin, received 90% of the Kalenjin vote, while 96% of the Kikuyus who voted chose one of two Kikuyu candidates, Mwai Kibaki or Kenneth Matiba. As veteran Kenyan journalist Hilary Ng'weno observed after the election, "the just ended general election has proved beyond all doubt that...when shove came to push [sic], Kenyans behaved blatantly in a tribal manner."²

The run-up to the elections was further marred by a series of violent clashes, particularly in the Rift Valley, which the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) dubbed "tribal wars."³ The clashes, according to a parliamentary select committee report, resulted in 799 deaths and the displacement of 54,000 people.⁴ They provoked national attention with the National Elections Monitoring Unit producing a report on the clashes, as did the NCCCK, which published a newsletter on the violence and its refugees called *The Clashes Update*.

At the end of 1992, Kenya, a country noted for its stability, was undergoing a period of ethnic politics, oratory, and even violence. How did the newspapers cover that phase? How did journalists approach the issues involved in it? While ethnic issues challenge the press in ways ranging from the problems of reporting destabilizing ethnic violence to suggestions of office discrimination, the subject is also new to academic research. This study will take two tentative steps into the field: one by examining the manner and number of ethnic issues covered by journalists from the KANU-owned *Kenya Times* and the privately held *Daily Nation*, and another by surveying the beliefs and strategies those journalists employ for that coverage.

The *Nation* is a profitable privately owned daily with a circulation of 180,000 and a tradition, according to John Abuoga and Absalom Mutere, of identification with the nationalist aspirations of Africans in a medium that used to be dominated by expatriates.⁷ It has captured nearly 70% of Kenya's daily newspaper market. The KANU-owned *Kenya Times* has a much smaller circulation: news editor Kenneth Mwema claims daily sales of 45,000, but other observers place the number closer to 20,000. Unlike the *Nation*, the *Kenya Times* is not a member of the Audit Bureau of Circulation, which makes an accurate gauge of its circulation figures difficult.

The *Kenya Times* takes "a positive approach on what the ruling party is doing to end the ethnic clashes," according to Mwema, while the *Nation's* news editor, Catherine Cicheru, claimed that "we go out of our way to write about ethnic tensions and ask for them to be stopped by those who are doing it. We scream about it until we are hoarse."⁸

The two papers have been embroiled in their own ethnic controversy. The *Kenya Times* has claimed that the *Nation* itself is an ethnically biased paper, editorializing at one point that "the truth is that the newspaper is top heavy with executives and senior editors from one tribe, a fact that the *Nation* is completely unable to explain to its critics and to the public."⁹ The *Nation* has angrily denied the allegations and suggested that the *Kenya Times* "come clean ... and expose to the public the tribal set-ups in its establishment."¹⁰ The *Times* claimed that the *Nation's* challenge and denials were "put together by a clique of Kikuyus at the Nation Centre."¹¹

The editorial content of both newspapers, however determined, suffers less from strong government constraints on the press such as those in place throughout the 1990s. Kenya's media could not be termed wholly free and independent, but as A. A. A. Ekirapa, chairman of Nation Publishers and Printers, the parent company of the *Nation*, told the International Press Institute's 1993 general assembly, since the legalization of multi-party politics the government has stopped interfering with the publication's editorial management of news.⁵ Furthermore, journalists have also been detained less often and treated more respectfully by the police, according to African press rights analyst Adewale Maja-Pearce.⁶ In sum, Kenyan journalists in the multi-party era have enjoyed somewhat greater opportunities in choice and method of coverage.

Methods

This two-pronged study is composed of a content analysis of the *Daily*

Nation and *Kenya Times* as well as a survey of 21 journalists who worked for those two newspapers. The content analysis was conducted for the November 1, 1992 to January 31, 1993 editions of both papers, excluding Sunday editions. The sampling period included the final two months of the 1992 Kenyan general elections campaign, and the month that followed it. National news, opinion, and letter pages of both newspapers were analyzed; international news, business, sports, and arts coverage fell outside the purview of the survey, as did any special supplements in either paper, such as the *Nation's* Wednesday Magazine, and the *Kenya Times'* KANU Briefs. The stories, columns, editorials, letters, cartoons, and briefs that remained were examined for references to any specific ethnic group in Kenya (for example, "Luoland" or "Kikuyu voters"), or to ethnic phenomena in a general sense (including "tribes", "ethnicity", "chiefs", etc.). Similarly, articles or columns that quoted or paraphrased their subjects by referring to ethnicity were also recorded. Columns, editorials, and editorial cartoons were all recorded as "opinion pieces." For reasons of clarity and simplicity, racial references to the whites and Asians that comprise less than one percent of Kenya's population were not recorded.

The sensitive nature of the topic made the administration of a survey quite difficult. After obtaining permission from the news editors of the *Nation* and the *Kenya Times*, a two-page questionnaire was given to reporters, editors and sub-editors from both papers. Fifteen *Nation* journalists received a questionnaire, which nine completed for a return rate of 60%. Twelve of 22, or 54.5% of the *Kenya Times* journalists given a survey responded to it. Thus a total of 21 journalists participated in the study, or 56.8% of those who received a questionnaire. Most of the journalists worked in Nairobi, though some were based in Nakuru, Kisumu, and Eldoret, and had covered the clashes in and around the Rift Valley. Their experience as journalists ranged from one to twenty years, and averaged over six years. Sixty-two percent of the participants were reporters; the rest were editors or sub-editors. They included Luhyas, Luos, Kikuyus, and Maasai, among others. All of the respondents but one were male.

The survey itself featured some open-ended questions and some statements to which the respondents were asked to measure their agreement on a five-point scale ranging from "disagree strongly" through "neither agree nor disagree" to "agree strongly." Some of the participants in the survey did not respond to some of the questions and statements in the questionnaire. Of the 396 short answer questions administered to the respondents, 387 were answered, or 97.7%. Of the 63 open-

ended questions administered, 60, or 95.2% were answered.

Analysis

"Ethnicity" is a notoriously difficult concept to define, and can be used with reference to race, religion, culture, or tribe, etc.¹² It is not within the scope of this study to attempt a complete analysis of the term; instead, after suggesting that it could refer to the self-perception of people that they or others belong to a distinct cultural group, or tribe, the journalists themselves were asked to supply a definition and reason for ethnic tensions. Most of their responses termed the tensions as either political, economic, or cultural phenomena, or as a mixture of the three.

A majority of the journalists felt that such tensions were politically motivated, at least in part, and could be attributed to the machinations of the powerful few. "They are essentially political," commented one, while another blamed "manipulation by leaders out to use a tribe as a base to further their self interests."

"Our leaders, keen to preserve their political power, play with the 'natural' element of ethnicity to stick into their positions," contended one *Nation* reporter. "Leaders use it for their selfish interests, i.e. divide and rule tactics," concurred another. A third concluded that "the tensions are politically motivated for the benefit of their perpetrators."

Others identified economic motivations as fundamental causes of the conflict. Land hunger proved particularly significant in this analysis. One reporter attributed the existence of tensions "either because they are politically stagemanaged or out of land disputes." Another felt they were caused by "land ownership ... [and] stopping dominance by others over commerce." One editor saw the tensions as a competition "over issues like land, government appointments in parastatals, educational opportunities, and even over cattle (rustling)." Many of the journalists who emphasized the importance of economic considerations in ethnic conflict placed them in a collective context; they affected the aspirations of a people, rather than of a few individuals. Others weren't so sure. "Opportunists use the tensions to exploit the situation and grab jobs or plots of land," wrote one *Nation* reporter.

A third explanation employed by many journalists to account for the tensions did invariably refer to the collective concerns of a people. It could be termed a cultural explanation, as opposed to a political or economic one. One *Kenya Times* sub-editor attributed ethnic tensions

to "the mutual fear of being dominated," while another editor claimed that "they exist because of suspicion amongst people and a lack of proper information on communities other than your own." One reporter blamed "age-old rivalries between ethnic groups ... [and] language and cultural differences leading to suspicion and animosity." A psychologically-minded sub-editor attributed tensions in part to "the ego that goes with ethnic feelings and aspirations." These explanations tended to emphasize the security and psychic benefits that came from belonging to a group over the opportunities for individual material gain at the expense of others as the root of ethnic conflicts.

Many of those surveyed chose more than one of these three most common explanations of ethnic tensions, though those that did choose only one tended toward a political explanation.

Politics helped to fuel the large number of articles that appeared in the *Nation* and the *Kenya Times* referring to ethnicity over the three month period surrounding the country's general elections (Table 1). By comparison, during the month preceding and the month following Ghana's November 3, 1992 presidential elections, the country's only private daily, *The Pioneer*, carried twelve articles and one letter referring to ethnicity.¹³ *The Pioneer*, to be sure, is a column-oriented broadsheet, a much smaller newspaper than either of its Kenyan counterparts, but the differences in emphasis are nonetheless substantial.

Table 1: Number of Pieces with Ethnic Content (Nov. 1992-Jan. 1993)

	Nation			Kenya Times			Total		
	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.
Articles	48	77	39	81	133	133	129	210	172
Opinion	3	5	3	19	27	19	22	32	22
Briefs	8	16	8	0	15	1	8	31	9
Letters	10	12	9	11	33	30	21	45	39
TOTAL	69	110	59	111	208	183	180	318	242

Both newspapers printed increasing amounts of material on ethnic issues as the elections, which split the country along ethnic lines, drew closer. The *Kenya Times* ran either an editorial, a column, or a cartoon on its editorial page that touched on ethnic issues in most of its December editions. Often those opinion pieces would accuse the opposition of tribalism or warn the country of the dangers inherent in

tribal politics. The *Times* also consistently printed detailed articles on President Moi's campaign speeches during that month, and he almost invariably warned Kenyans against the evils of tribalism. In fact, most of the stories with ethnic content that the KANU-owned paper covered were paraphrases of speeches by politicians who branded the opposition as a collection of tribal parties, or, like Moi, warned the country against the dangers of tribal conflict.

The *Nation* was less likely to paraphrase or quote a public figure's complaints about ethnic factionalism, and indeed less likely to broach the subject in general, despite Gicheru's assertion that "we go out of our way to write about ethnic tensions." Both papers covered violent ethnic clashes in and around the Rift Valley when they occurred, the *Nation* generally in greater detail. Both papers also printed news analyses before the election speculating on how particular ethnic groups would vote, though the *Nation* ran more such stories than did the *Kenya Times*.

Ethnic issues faded from the limelight in the *Nation* after the elections as the political news moved away from the provinces and the ethnic campaign trail and back to Nairobi and the new government, cabinet, and parliament. The *Kenya Times* also de-emphasized its ethnic commentary and printed slightly fewer letters that touched on the topic, though it continued to cover political speeches that referred to ethnic issues.

Two thirds of the journalists surveyed believed that Kenyan politics and society are strongly affected by ethnicity, that ethnic politics play a destabilizing role in the country, and violence in Kenya can occur primarily because of ethnic reasons. The journalists were less sure about discrimination in the country due to ethnicity. While 47% thought that such discrimination did exist, almost 11% claimed that it did not, and 42% did not commit themselves either way. Table 2 records some of the beliefs journalists held about ethnic tensions in their work, given the above perceptions of the place of those tensions in Kenyan society.

Generally, the journalists from the *Kenya Times* and the *Nation* answered the survey similarly. While the *Nation* writers, however, were evenly divided as to whether newspapers should report the ethnic speeches of public figures, 75% of the *Times* staff felt that they should not. Two thirds of the *Times* writers surveyed disagreed with the statement that reporters should write on issues that they believe have ethnic aspects, while 56% of the *Nation* respondents agreed with it. Finally, 92% of the *Times* replies agreed that newspaper coverage

Table 2: Journalist Responses to Ethnic Tension in the News.

disagree strongly (%)	1	2	3	4	5 agree strongly
Newspapers should report ethnic violence that results in death, injury, or destruction of property	0	5	10	10	76
Newspapers should report speeches that refer specifically to ethnicity by politicians or other leaders	62	0	19	0	19
Speeches by politicians or other leaders tend to have a dangerous destabilizing effect on society	5	0	5	0	90
Reporters should write on issues that they believe have ethnic or tribal aspects or undertones.	43	10	10	10	27
Newspaper coverage of ethnic politics tends to exacerbate ethnic differences.	14	0	10	14	62
Newspapers can and should play a unifying role in Kenya that might mitigate ethnic differences	19	0	5	0	76
Such a unifying role would entail some self-censorship and a deemphasis of ethnic content within stories	19	0	14	0	67
My stories are edited/I edit stories because of the way they report ethnic issues	26	0	32	16	26
I exercise self-censorship when I report stories that have ethnic content	40	5	20	10	25

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

tended to exacerbate ethnic differences, only 56% of the *Nation* staff agreed. This distrust of newspapers and urge to downplay ethnic coverage on the part of the *Kenya Times* journalists is surprising in light of the paper's editorial policy during and after the 1992 election campaign, where it more than doubled the *Nation's* coverage of stories with ethnic content. Most of those stories featured coverage of ethnic comments by public figures.

Nonetheless, the *Kenya Times* editorial writers have accused the *Nation* of being the country's ethnic (in this case Kikuyu) newspaper, and have claimed that reporters from other ethnic groups have quit the paper in protest against its tribal bias (the *Nation* has denied the charge). But if some *Times* writers believe that the *Nation* is discriminatory and overly ethnic, and vice versa, this study suggested a different conclusion. Only one writer of the 21 surveyed journalists believed he had faced discrimination at work, and he contended that it came in the form of favorable treatment because he was a Luo. Most of the other respondents categorically denied that ethnicity had any role at work. "My ethnicity plays no role at all in my daily work and ability," one *Nation* reporter responded typically. "When I'm in my office or on duty my ethnicity has nothing to do with my work," commented another. "Ethnicity does not play a role in my work," added a *Kenya Times* staffer.

Discussion

The content analysis shows that neither the *Nation* nor the *Kenya Times* de-emphasize articles or opinions referring to ethnicity to an extent that would suggest that ethnic concerns do not exist or are unimportant in Kenya. Despite the concerns of journalists that newspaper coverage tends to exacerbate ethnic differences, and their acceptance of the need for self-censorship when covering ethnic issues, both dailies avoided treating ethnic phenomena with silence. But the survey suggests that if the issue of ethnicity is not ignored, neither is it treated by journalists as the essential key to understanding the country. The journalists surveyed tended to believe that ethnic tension was due more to the greed or demagoguery of certain politicians than to the more intractable problems of collective suspicion and distrust, or economic scarcity. Their conclusion was an optimistic one. Political irregularities are presumably more soluble than cultural or economic tensions. The offending politicians need only be reeducated or removed to ameliorate the ethnic conflicts that they provoked.

Indeed, Kenyan journalists appear to be optimistic about the resolution of ethnic conflicts, and their role in that resolution. They believe that newspapers can and should unite a country, and overwhelmingly that the newspapers they work for do not suffer from ethnic conflict or discrimination. The journalists, in sum, had "gone beyond" ethnicity and could help to lead the country beyond it as well. While most of those surveyed agreed that journalists and politicians needed to carefully regulate their utterances on ethnicity, less than half agreed that Kenyans are often discriminated for or against because of their ethnic origins. In that sense, ethnicity seemed to be no great demon to the journalists.

However, a majority of the journalists distrusted newspaper coverage of ethnic events, and felt that because of the unifying duty that such papers owe the nation, writers should exercise self-censorship when reporting on ethnic issues. This need seemed to be more theoretical than practical; more writers said that they did not censor their own stories when reporting on ethnic issues than those that did.

While ethnic conflict has received a great deal of attention in Africa, the responses of journalists to such conflict has largely been ignored. This study can only be termed a preliminary survey of the concerns, agendas, and products of journalists forced to address ethnic issues in Kenya. Further and more detailed research will be required for more concrete and general conclusions.

The author would like to thank Magayu K. Magayu for his advice in preparing this study.

Notes

1. Moi, Daniel arap (1986). *Kenyan African Nationalism: Nyayo Philosophy and Principles*. London: Macmillan, p179.
2. *Weekly Review*, January 1, 1993, p. 1
3. *The Clashes Update*, Volume 1, The National Council of Churches of Kenya, April 1993, p. 1.
4. *Nation*, May 6, 1993, p. 1.
5. *Nation*, May 13, 1993, p32.
6. Maja-Pearce, Adewale (1992). "The Press in East Africa". Index on Censorship, 1992 volume 7, p. 58.
7. Abuoga, John B. and Absalom A. Mutere. (1988). *The History of the Press in Kenya*. Nairobi: African Council for Communication Education.
8. The circulation figures and editorial policies of both newspapers are based on interviews and information collected by the author in Nairobi,

April 27-May 30, 1993.

9. *Kenya Times*, November 26, 1992, p 6.
10. *Nation*, November 25, 1992, p 6.
11. *Kenya Times*, November 26, 1992, p 6.
12. See for example Rothchild, R. and V. Olorunsola. (1983). *State versus Ethnic Claims: African Policy Dilemmas*. Colorado: Westview Press, for a detailed discussion of the political aspects of the phenomenon in its African context.
13. Based on the author's research as a Research Affiliate at the University of Ghana's School of Communication Studies, December, 1992.