



# The Dynamics of Kikuyu-Kalenjin Ethno-Political Relationships: The Run-up to 2013 Elections in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya

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## Abstract

Kenyan elections have been intermittently marked by some degree of violence reaching its apex in the 2007 Post Election Violence (PEV). Surprisingly, in the following immediate national elections held in 2013, the two major protagonist ethnics; the Kikuyu and Kalenjin, previously embroiled in the political violence of 2007, came together in a new political coalition in the fight for the position of president and vice president. The elections witnessed the political elite skilfully harness their cultural institutions to achieve political power. The main concern of this study therefore, was to establish the role played by certain cultural aspects of ethnicity in restructuring the political engagements between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin in Uasin Gishu in the run up to the 2013 elections. To this end, the study employed the lens of instrumentalist and primordial theories while employing the historical method with a duality of an interpretivism philosophical underpinning and a qualitative approach. Primary data was analysed thematically and corroborated with secondary data. The study posits that some cultural aspects of both the Kalenjin and Kikuyu were instrumentalised by the political elite in Uasin Gishu to coalesce their people for political expediency. By the use of the same reverse logic, the study advocates the use of traditional African cultural structures to inculcate peace and political tolerance among the residents of Uasin Gishu as this historical study has proved possible.

## Introduction

Ethnic conflicts in places such as Rwanda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Darfur, and Sierra-Leone in Africa; Iraq, Israel, West Bank and Gaza Strip in the Middle East; the Balkans, Chechnya, and Yugoslavia in Europe; Pakistan and Myanmar in Asia, continue to have serious repercussions (Reuter 2023, Tambiah 1989). The prevalence of these conflicts validates Wimmer's (2004) observation that conflicts between communities have been the most common form of political violence in the last decades. In Kenya, ethnic conflicts have intermittently occurred mainly due to political contestations often pitting the two most populous ethnic communities; the Kikuyu and Kalenjin. Therefore, the political relationship between Kenya's Kikuyu and Kalenjin communities has been characterised by a complex interplay of historical, social, and economic factors. While political alliances have often been formed between the two communities, underlying tensions and competition for resources continue to shape their



interactions in Kenya's political arena. As its primary concern, the study examined the dynamic relationship between the two ethnic communities through the lens of primordialism and instrumentalism to show how political leaders coalesced their ethnic communities together through certain ethnic and cultural aspects in restructuring the political engagements between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin in Uasin Gishu in the run-up to the 2013 elections.

Several studies have been done to understand the actors, causes, effects, and factors influencing ethnicity and political violence (Kagwanja 2006; Totolo 2009; Kanyinga 1998; Onyango 2011; Mwiandi 2011). Closely related to this study are works on the use of Ethnicity as a political tool in Africa by Etefa (2019), in Kenya by Leleruk (2010), and the politicisation of ethnicity (Weber, 2010; Oyugi, 2000; Ahlberg & Njoroge, 2013; Tarimo, 2010). All these do not, however, elucidate the impact of cultural aspects of ethnicity on political alliances in Uasin Gishu County. There remains a scarcity of comprehensive research and studies regarding how cultural aspects of ethnicity have been instrumentalised positively in the political contestations in Uasin Gishu, resulting in peace, as in the 2013 elections.

### ***Methodology***

This study adopted a qualitative methodological approach in line with the interpretivist philosophical research paradigm. This ensured close interaction with the respondents to get their feelings, opinions, and experiences concerning the nature and development of political alliances and establish the link between these alliances and cultural aspects of ethnicity. The researcher used a non-probabilistic sampling approach, which included snowballing, purposive, and convenient sampling techniques to select the administration officials, village and clan and church elders. These techniques were used because of their ability to offer accurate representation (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003), and they were also associated with qualitative research (Yin, 2003). This study used oral sources derived from interviews and FGDs to get qualitative data, including but not limited to the respondents' opinions, feelings, and experiences. Secondary sources, which included scholarly books and journal articles, were used in the triangulation of the oral sources, which, according to Arias Valencia (2022), enhanced the credibility and validity of the study.

### ***Findings and discussions***

#### *Dynamics of the 2013 Elections*

Periodically, elections in Kenya have been accompanied by violent inter-ethnic clashes. During the general elections in 1992, 1997 and 2007, Kenyans witnessed politically motivated electoral violence, which resulted in loss of lives, property and trauma (Malik 2016). Unfortunately, the Rift Valley region, including Uasin Gishu, was the epicentre of this episodic political violence, majorly between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin. Interestingly, the violence between these two ethnic groups has always occurred when they supported opposing teams. Surprisingly, as supported by Linke (2022), the 2013 election was relatively peaceful compared to the preceding 2007 election, which had pitted the two ethnic communities in opposing political camps, leading to unprecedented ethnicised political violence. Malik points out in this regard that the political elite always analyse situations to assess whether to instigate ethnic violence for political gain or not. A respondent vindicated this role of the elite by stating that;

The alliance of the Kikuyu and Kalenjin does not exist. Kalenjin leaders support Kikuyu leaders when it is convenient and vice versa. When they feel it is inconvenient, there will be another arrangement altogether. So long as the leaders speak one language and their interests match, the alliances remain. (Osogo Ambani, OI, Kakamega19/06/22).



The above trajectory has played out since independence with different political alignments based on class or ethnicity to win or retain political power. However, Mwangi (2014) emphasises that ethnicity, though unfixed and often contested, has been and continues to be the greatest vehicle through which people and communities are mobilised. Unfortunately, ethnicity also becomes the preferred tool in interrogating identities during elections as the political elite battle it out during campaigns. Leading presidential candidates are usually from the populous ethnic groups. Three of Kenya's five presidents have been Kikuyu and two Kalenjin, from two of the country's most significant ethnic communities. Therefore, ethnicity is central to political power in Kenya, and the two have a symbiotic relationship. To win the 2013 elections, the elite mobilised several cultural and structural ethnic aspects. These included but were not limited to community elders, councils of elders, ethnic language and symbols, historical narratives and social networks.

#### *Community Elders and Mobilisation for the 2013 Elections*

Throughout Kenya, the immediate period before the 2013 election was characterised by a significant involvement of councils of elders in spreading messages of peace and promoting "good leadership,". Ironically, in 2007, these same councils played active roles in mobilising Kenyans in certain parts of the country to take part in the post-electoral violence through offence or defence. This duality of motive underscores the vital role of these elders in influencing politics at the grassroots levels in Kenya, as one respondent explained.

Before Ruto and Uhuru came together, the elders sat down in a meeting with the leaders from both sides. The elders told the people that the two communities had mistakenly fought in 2007/2008, yet the issue had been between Raila and Kibaki. They resolved that the people accused by ICC- (Ruto and Uhuru) were not involved in elections, yet they had been left in the middle as if it was them who were asking for the seat of presidency. There were comprehensive consultations between both sides. Finally, the elders discussed, and an agreement was made that we have to come together. (Julius Logot, OI, Turbo ,16/06/22,).

Many communities at the grassroots listen to their elders and will often go by the advice of these leaders. Were (2024) affirms that, throughout Kenya's history, village elders have played a crucial role in grassroots governance. These elders, be it the administrative headmen (*wazee wa mtaa*) or the community councils of elders, are picked based on their tenure in the community, knowledge and familiarity with the area, integrity, and experience. Consequently, many communities will generally take their advice because, as Onyango (2023) denotes, elders are made of respected and incorruptible members of the community, be they the shuka-draped Maasai elders, spear and shield-holding elderly Luo, the Kaya elders from the coastal region or the no-nonsense Njuri Ncheke from Meru. These elders play pivotal roles in decisions that affect all aspects of the lives of Kenyans, right from the rural areas and urban settings up to the national level.

It is these elders who were pivotal in the process of uniting Ruto and Uhuru, especially after the horrors of the PEV. The Kalenjin community decided to abandon Raila and the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) party after the relationship between Ruto and Raila began to deteriorate in 2010 due to political differences ( Yambo and Macharia 2024, in The Standard e-paper) The changing dynamics in the relationship between Ruto and Raila impacted on the Kalenjin and made its way to some elders of the community who in turn started to think seriously about how best they could secure the "future of the Kalenjin people" in the next election (Malik 2016). To this end, and especially given the recurring rounds of violence they had suffered since the 1990s, the idea of forming a union with a Kikuyu politician emerged as an attractive but intricate option.



For Ruto, acceptance and support by the Kalenjin elders were not to be taken as given, as initial conflicts and other controversies made it a challenge to accept his candidacy wholesomely for both the ordinary folk and some elders. One respondent narrated this challenge;

Some leaders in the community did not support Ruto. Seii, the chairman of the Kalenjin Council of Elders (*Myoot*), was initially against the support of Ruto because he had been accused in the PEV. However, Seii was inclined towards the Moi family, and the Moi family was against Ruto. So, Moi and their friends influenced Seii against Ruto. Therefore, a meeting was held, and the elders chose Joshua Sang as the new chairman of *Myoot* (Lelei Julius, OI, Magut 16/06/22).

On the other hand, the Kikuyu community had also weighed their options and tentatively realised there was a reasonable chance of working together with the Kalenjin. For this reason, as early as January 2011, Lynch (2014) notes that Uhuru had been advised to get together with Ruto and talk. Given the fact that neither Ruto nor Uhuru were the undisputed kingpins of their respective ethnic groups, ignoring the advice of Kalenjin and Kikuyu elders would have been tantamount to political suicide. In the same vein, Apollo (2022) reiterates in the UNDP report on the Pokomo that, apart from being custodians of culture, elders were also agents of the community's survival.

Furthermore, it is essential to note that even though the primordial roles of Kalenjin council elders have been retained, its structure has been modernised to cope with the changing times. They maintain their original functions of giving social, economic and political directions for the good of the community. Because of this, one focus group discussant described the new structure thus:

The hierarchy of elders is not the way it used to be before. It has been modernised according to the new administrative units. The elders begin from the villages, sub-county, and county to the region. The regional council of elders is called *Myoot*. The members come from all the Kalenjin subgroups; therefore, it is for all the Kalenjin subgroups. Then, each subgroup, like Elgeyo Marakwet, Kipsigis, and Tugen, has its own council. For example, the Nandi also have a council called *Kaburwo*, which deals with issues related to all the Nandi of Uasin Gishu and Trans Nzoia. When *Myoot* calls a meeting, the other council leaders attend to represent their communities because it is the overall council. When *Myoot* decides on something, nobody can go against it because it contains all elders. So, when *Myoot* decides it is peace, it is peace. When they decide it is war, it is war, we follow in its footsteps. (FGDI, Besiabor, 25/06/21, Turbo)

In the final analysis, the elder's role in bringing together Ruto and Uhuru and their communities was imperatively based on the primordial function elders played in traditional Kalenjin and Kikuyu societies, whereby they were the main guiding authority. The political organisation of the Kalenjin to help Ruto was suitable from the grassroots, with the elders leading at the forefront. An elder elaborated on this organisation;

Uhuru and Ruto could not just come together. A leadership and reconciliation committee was involved. For example, in Chepsaita, we had a chairman of peace; these chairmen were chosen by elders from every one of the Kalenjin communities right from the sub-location location up to the county (Kiprop Peter, OI, Chepsaita, 21/07/21).

Eventually, these persuasions resulted in the signing of several negotiated pacts in 2012 and 2013 (Mwangi, 2014). These agreements were signed and adopted between Kalenjin and Kikuyu elders in





public meetings to show commitment to unity between the two communities. Kalenjin elders' endorsement helped solidify Ruto's support within his community. Also, it fostered the coalition between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin communities, which historically had tensions dating back to previous elections. Therefore, both sets of elders played instrumental roles in consolidating political support within their respective communities and forging alliances central to the outcome of the 2013 elections. The following section turns to the cultural avenues and aspects used to mobilise support for the Jubilee coalition victory in the 2013 elections.

#### *Mobilisation of Cultural Support for the Uhuru Ruto Political Ticket*

Apart from using elders to mobilise support for their political cause, the jubilee alliance also used ethnic media outlets, ethnic language and symbols, historical narratives and grievances, social networks and community structures, promises of ethnic representation and empowerment, cultural events and ceremonies, and appeals to ethnic solidarity. All these strategies were ethnic-based, with the capability to easily attract and keep the attention of their members since ethnic symbols, speeches, and other such elements tend to dig deep and arouse and engage primordial tendencies. Once politicians achieve this attention from their members, the members will willingly and sometimes blindly follow these politicians' directives.

Rather than stemming from any desire to maintain peace, Uhuru and Ruto joined hands for strategic reasons, centring on winning the presidency (Eifert et al., 2010). The endorsement of Uhuru and Ruto was often accompanied by rituals and ceremonies, which further reinforced the connection between cultural identity, values, traditions and political allegiance. These endorsements reinforced the idea that voting for a particular candidate or party was in alignment with the community's cultural norms and aspirations. Both Kikuyu and Kalenjin councils of elders engaged in carrying out ceremonies to cement the relationship between the two communities and the new-found peace, ensure the two communities forgave each other of the atrocities each did to the other, and bless their two leaders and clear them for the highest office of the land. While some respondents in this study denied the performance of such rituals under the claim that Christianity does not allow them, others agreed that such rituals took place.

After the PEV, rituals were held. They had to perform a ritual; they slaughtered an animal, spilt over the blood, and a declaration was made (we are now coming together, and we shall never fight again). The ritual for peace was done in Nakuru. The prominent representatives, the old men, and the council of elders are their roles. They did it with a few people who were there. The ritual was done in 2012. It is usually not meant for everybody and must be done at a specific place. The *Myoot* council participated, and they represented us (Lelei Julius, OI, Magut, 16/06/22)

It is thus clear that the primordial structures of the Kalenjin and the Kikuyu were still used for political purposes, such as blessing and endorsing political leaders for political offices for the 2013 elections. Ceremonies were performed to bring the two communities together, akin to the ceremonies performed in the precolonial period to end war between different communities and to ensure that each upheld peace.

#### *Use of Cultural Events and Ceremonies in the 2013 Elections*

Traditional cultural events and ceremonies were used for political campaigning and mobilisation. Candidates and political leaders participated in these events, addressing community members and seeking support by aligning their political agendas with cultural values and aspirations. As one respondent reiterated,



During ceremonies like funerals or weddings, if the *Mzee wa Amani* (Peace elder) were present, he would be given an opportunity to talk to people about the union between Ruto and Uhuru, the reasons why the two came together, the need to maintain peace between the two communities, and support the two leaders. They insisted on the need for peace and that no one should destroy other people's property again (Kiplagat Martin, OI, Soin, 20/12/23).

Kalenjin and Kikuyu elders sometimes organised cultural ceremonies and events where endorsements for specific candidates were made. These ceremonies, deeply rooted in tradition, legitimised the chosen candidates within the communities and fostered a sense of cultural pride and belonging among voters. Rituals were also performed specially to bring about forgiveness and create a bond of friendship between Uhuru and Ruto and the two communities after the PEV. The peace rituals embedded in the traditional African beliefs enhanced the solemnity of the pact between Uhuru and Ruto and the two communities. They emphasised the significance of maintaining peace, cooperation and good neighbourliness.

Orina (2022) opines that in traditional African religion, elders were part and parcel of the invisible world, and they belonged to the lowest category of religious specialists in the African understanding of the spiritual universe. Elders were closely linked to the ancestral dead by bonds of kinship and constant rituals and ceremonies intended to keep the relationship alive. Traditionally, it was in the process of executing their religious and sacred duties that the councils of elders among the Kikuyu and Kalenjin could influence the political, economic and social affairs. That was why, before the 2013 elections, Mwangi (2014) reported that Kenyan leaders nationwide were vying for the support of the Talai elders, traditional kingmakers renowned for their historical heritage and supposed mystical powers.

#### *Use of Ethnic Language and Symbols in the 2013 Elections*

Specific to the Kikuyu and Kalenjin cultures, language and symbols were employed in campaign materials, speeches, and slogans to resonate with community members. This linguistic and symbolic connection reinforced the idea of shared identity and everyday interests, fostering a sense of unity and solidarity among voters. This is due to the tendency of voters from ethnic groups to be more likely to vote for a candidate from their ethnic group (Philpot & Walton 2007). Campaign messages were often delivered in the languages spoken by the Kalenjin and Kikuyu communities, making them more relatable and resonant. Language plays a significant role in shaping identity, and campaign messages were crafted in Kikuyu and Kalenjin languages to establish rapport and convey authenticity. On the same note, one respondent reiterated the role of mother tongue during electioneering;

Mother tongue was not used in joint meetings with other communities. It was only used if the Kalenjin were on their own, and if they wanted to be cautious about traditional things, they had to say it in Kalenjin. If there is something they do not like, they say it in Kalenjin (Keter Julius, OI, Kamagut, 21/07/2021).

In the 2013 elections, the vernacular was used cautiously to mobilise and convince the electorate in Uasin Gishu to vote for these candidates. Using vernacular appealed more to their primordial senses, enabled the candidates to identify with the voters, bond with them and ensure that their message was communicated more effectively.

Additionally, symbols and imagery associated with Kikuyu and Kalenjin culture were used in campaign materials to evoke community members' pride and belonging. The URP election symbol was the horn. Among the Kalenjin, the horn was symbolic because it mobilised the community towards the new party. A respondent noted that among the Kalenjin, "...the horn was used for



communication. When someone blows the horn, you can tell where people are going. It was a sign of direction, danger, or good things..." (Julius Logot, OI, Turbo, 16/06/2022). Such symbolic elements from the respective cultures were incorporated into campaign materials and rhetoric to evoke emotional connections and foster a sense of identity-based loyalty.

#### *Cultural Narratives, Historical Grievances and the 2013 Elections*

The ensuing political narratives often invoked historical grievances or shared experiences of the Kikuyu and Kalenjin communities, emphasising the need to elect leaders to address these issues. Political leaders framed the elections as an opportunity to correct past wrongs and secure a better future for their respective ethnic groups. Thibon et al. (2014) narrate in this respect that the ethnic vote, which confirms the relevance of rival, strategic multi-ethnic alliances manipulating ethnic advantage, is not new. It is rooted in implicit mobilisation through two dimensions: the ethnic "unspoken", which profits from accumulated contentions and frustrations, and moral ethnicity, a sense of honour associated with territorial and cultural identity.

Consequently, past cultural heroes like Koitalel Arap Samoei and Dedan Kimathi were evoked and used to mobilise the two communities. The figure of Koitalel Samoei became more popular because of vernacular radio stations like Kass FM. Kalenjin politicians used his heroism and resistance to colonialism. They compared it to resistance against the ICC, which was also seen as a way of European domination and interference in political affairs (Maupeau, 2014). Ruto claimed this legacy during campaigns since he is also called William Samoei Ruto. Ruto was compared to Samoei, while Kenyatta was likened to Dedan Kimathi, who died for the Kikuyu during the struggle for independence. These victimisation accounts and the references to a mythical past helped to build Uhuru and Ruto as heroes. They were regarded as figures rising from the legend and, therefore, destined to guide their people (Maupeau 2014). Consequently, it became the duty of their communities to ensure that they did everything in their power to ensure the two became the President and deputy president of the country.

#### *The Nexus Between Religion and Politics in the 2013 Elections*

The 2013 elections witnessed politicians using religion as an avenue into the hearts of their constituents. Religion was used to cleanse them, mellow the hearts of their communities to forgive each other, unite the two communities, and make Ruto and Uhuru acceptable in the eyes of their potential voters. In this case, according to Thibon et al. (2014), religion was used not only as a belief but also as a political resource. Both the Kalenjin, like the Kikuyu, have cultures of prophetism (Anderson, 1995) whereby, in times of uncertainty and insecurity, spiritual and other prophet figures emerge to explain the new issues, rules and principles to observe to cope. By asking God to save the unjustly accused leaders, citizens were also saved, which answered their material, social and moral insecurity. Therefore, the Jubilee electoral campaign appeared prophetic or the redemption of leaders and their people. The idea of calling on God for help is anchored on the traditional African religion, and in essence, both Kikuyu and Kalenjin believe in a supreme being who is omnipotent. Therefore, just as they had called on God during dire times under the leadership of traditional elders, they called on God through the church, believing that his omnipotence could help them overcome the challenges posed by the ICC case and their bid for the presidency.

#### **Conclusion**

The strategic utilisation of cultural and ethnic identities played a significant role in mobilising the Kikuyu and Kalenjin communities during the 2013 elections in Uasin Gishu. By appealing to shared cultural values, traditions, and historical narratives, political leaders sought to strengthen their support base and secure victory at the polls. Through the use of cultural institutions, such as the council of elders, cultural and religious practices and traditions and ethnic languages, the two leaders



were able to restore communal integration and cooperation of not only the Kikuyu and Kalenjin but also other communities initially affected by the PEV of 2007/2008. Consequently, relative peace and calm prevailed in Uasin Gishu in the 2013 national elections, translating to more peaceful and less tense polls than the previous elections. The most significant outcome was that through instrumentalising ethnic, cultural and traditional aspects, the two politicians were able to merge their communities' support, ascend to the highest office in the land and, above all, deliver a peaceful election in an otherwise volatile electoral region. A fragile peace currently exists between the Kalenjin and Kikuyu based on the whims and interests of their political elite. Having seen the role of traditional institutions in midwifing this tentative peace, there is a need to use the same institutions to try and find ways of settling the historical injustices which have become an impediment to peaceful coexistence not only in Uasin Gishu but the Rift Valley and many other parts of Kenya.

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**Oral Sources**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Position</b>
Kiplagat Martin	68 yrs	21 <sup>st</sup> July 2021	Soin	Farmer
Julius Logot	77 yrs	16 <sup>th</sup> June 2022	Turbo	Farmer
Kiprop Peter	70 yrs	20 <sup>th</sup> July 2021	Chepsaita	Farmer
Osogo Ambani	49 yrs	19 <sup>th</sup> June 2022	Kakamega	Professor
Kibet Elphas	74 yrs	21 <sup>st</sup> October 2022	Huruma	Retired Teacher
Lelei Julius	45 yrs	16 <sup>th</sup> July 2022	Magut	Teacher
Keter Julius	72 yrs	21 <sup>st</sup> July 2021	Kamagut	Opinion Leader
Focus Group Discussion 1	N/A	25 <sup>th</sup> June 2021	Besiabor	Village elders
Focus Group Discussion 3	N/A	16 <sup>th</sup> June 2022	Turbo	N/A