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ETHNICITY, LANGUAGE, AND IDENTITY IN KENYA

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Abstract: This article unravels the manipulation of language and non-linguistic communication strategies in political and sports discourses to negotiate various identities in Kenya. Kenya is multilingual with over 42 stable and unstable languages¹ whose users are, historically, “forced” into one country. Through a historical sociolinguistic approach, the article analyses code choice, stereotypes, jokes and nicknames for ethnic and other identity negotiation. It shows that negative ethnicity based on “we” versus “they” dichotomies enhances ethnic cleavages but Sheng pervades ethnic boundaries and politicians use it to endear and identify themselves with the youth. The present article calls for responsible language use.

Key words: *ethnicity, identity, political discourse, tribalism, linguistic practice*

Introduction

The present article discusses the negotiation of identities in multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual Kenya. Like other African countries, Kenya, is a product of the 1884 Berlin Conference and the scramble for and partition of Africa among European colonial powers (Ogot 2012). The country has intermittently seen conflicts either between neighbouring ethnic groups (Mungai 2007) or almost a full-blown “civil war” after the 2007 general elections (Njogu 2008, 2010; Chege 2010) and the 2017 general elections (Biegon 2018). What baffles keen observers is that in many multi-ethnic and multi-cultural polities worldwide, which were created through colonialism, their different ethnic groups live side-by-side, e.g., Malaysia (Gill 2014), mainland Tanzania (Sigalla 2010) and South Africa (Webb 2006)

1 I consider a grammatically stable language as one whose grammar and lexicon are fairly stable while a grammatically unstable language is one whose lexicon and grammar are unstable/in a constant change.

among others. In spite of the foregoing, Kenya has, for a long time, been considered an “island of peace” especially in the Great Lakes region and thus attracted many international multi-national investors and is the only home in Africa to two United Nations agencies, namely, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UNHabitat). Be that as it may, the unprecedented Post Election Violence (PEV) of 2007–2008 and the post-election chaos of 2017, when negative reactions to people of “other” ethnic groups sparked off the violence, give rise to many questions: Do language choices play any role in identity construction? Who are the main agents/players through whom linguistic practices are manipulated to reflect identities? What strategies should multi-ethnic polities employ to engender peace? Is there a need for linguistic harmonisation in order to weave a national identity?

Against the foregoing questions, the present article discusses identity negotiation through the manipulation of linguistic practices for political mobilisation as ethnic groups, as political parties/coalitions, and as an age category. While doing so, the reality of multilingualism and the existence of codeswitching² involving both stable and unstable languages will be considered. It is argued that ethnic diversity should not be considered a bane but a boon. The article shows that although political elites employ certain linguistic and non-linguistic strategies for ethnic identity and political mobilisation that could evoke negative reactions to people of “other” ethnic groups, the political class could also use other strategies such as Sheng to create harmony and unity in ethnic diversity. The next section presents views from literature followed by the sociolinguistic and political profile of Kenya. A description of the theoretical frameworks on which this discussion is premised is presented before the analyses and a discussion of data are provided. Finally, concluding remarks are given.

Literature review

The broad subject of ethnicity, language and identity has attracted the attention of scholars from a variety of fields, theoretical approaches and disciplinary traditions, i.e., historians, anthropologists, sociologists,

2 Codeswitching is the use of two or more codes in the same discourse event either intra-sententially or inter-sententially.

educators and linguists among others. The etymological derivation of the word “ethnic” is the Greek word “ethnos” which originally referred to a “number of people living together, company, body of men, band of comrades” (Lytra 2018:3), the meaning of the word has evolved over the years. Several writers have argued that ethnic groups as known today are a result of not only colonial invention but also recognition of African agency in negotiating and constructing ethnic identities. Fearson (2003) discusses how the Somalis (Somalia), Berbers (North African countries), Dinkas (South Sudan) and Tswanas (Botswana) describe themselves as Somali clans, Arab Berbers, black or southerners and sub-tribes of the Tswana, respectively, depending on context. In Kenya, most so-called ethnic groups derive their names from the days of colonialism (Chege 2010; Ogot 2012; Biegon 2018) in what Karega-Munene (2010) has called “production of ethnic identity.” This explains how ethnic groups such as the Kalenjin Luhya, Mijikenda, etc. were created. The name Kalenjin was not invented by the colonialists but by the Kalenjin elites for political identity and mobilisation (Lynch 2016). In other Kenyan discourses, these groups are called nations following Anderson (1983). He has described such groups as imagined political communities whereby inasmuch as all members of the nation do not know each other, in their minds they are a nation.

Ethnicity has also been studied through the lenses of language and identity. Identity is defined in various ways, depending on one’s professional background. Identity can be conceived as “something to do with the way people are categorized (identified) either by themselves and/or by others along a variety of dimensions, namely, race, nationality, ethnicity, culture, sex and gender” (Ogechi 2008: 76). Borrowing from Kroskrity (1999), Ndimande (2004: 62) considered identity “as the linguistic construct of membership in one or more social groups or categories.” He emphasised that although other non-linguistic criteria could be significant, language remains the most important and is sometimes crucial to the way members define themselves. Ndimande studied the stigma that native isiZulu and isiXhosa speakers faced while using their languages in higher education. He also enumerated a variety of identities including national, ethnic, cultural, social, linguistic, sexual and gender categories which they projected.

The language and identity approach blends well with the one adopted by Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1998: 1), who contend that “the language spoken by somebody and his/her identity as a speaker of this language are inseparable. Language acts are acts of identity.” Indeed Eckert (2012) alludes to identity through his study of sociolinguistic variation whereby certain features of language could be indexical signs that distinguish different groups including assigning others pejorative stereotypes. Some African scholars have also contended thus:

“In sub-Saharan Africa, there is a strong emotional attachment to language and ethnicity. Language is seen as the store-house of ethnicity; each ethnic group expresses and identifies itself by the language it speaks, and its cultural paraphernalia is shaped by its language. Sameness of language and ethnicity creates a bond of acceptance and provides a basis for togetherness, for identity, for separateness, for solidarity, and for brotherhood and kinship ... language and ethnic enclaves are commonly created in big towns in Africa because members of the same ethnic and language group tend to flock together” (Obeng and Adegbija 1999: 353).

During the Kenyan PEV chaos, members of warring communities survived the attacks if they spoke the language of the aggressors. Even then, if “language” alone were to identify an ethnic group, then speakers of unstable languages in Africa could be deemed distinct ethnic groups (Ogechi 2005, 2008; Hurst and Kanana-Erastus 2018). Instead, as Githinji (2006) shows, Sheng speakers in Nairobi have used Sheng to identify themselves not as an ethnic group but rather to distinguish themselves from non-Sheng speakers. However, Kioko (2015) contends that varieties of Sheng not only mark the Nairobi region, either east or west, but also mark the ethnic registers of Sheng depending on the ethnic region in which Sheng is spoken. “Shengnised” Kamba that is used in Kamba-speaking areas of Kenya is one such a variety. On balance, whereas the criterion of mastery of a language could be used to identify an ethnic group, it is not carved in stone. This is because there exists a fluidity whereby the mastery and choice of various languages in a given interaction can project different identities, either ethnic, national or international (Gill 2014:23) leave alone using it for age, solidarity and even political affiliation (Njogu, Ngeta and Wanjau 2010; Ogechi and Bosire-Ogechi

2012). Furthermore, identity marking may be done using either stable or unstable languages (Ogechi 2005, 2008).

Sociolinguistic and political profile of Kenya

With a population of about 48 million people (CIA 2018), Kenya is a typical example of a multilingual, multicultural and multi-ethnic country (Omondi and Kembo-Sure 1997). Depending on one’s source (Ogechi 2005) and whether or not the linguist is a “lumper” or “splitter” (Heine and Nurse 2000:3), the number of the country’s languages varies. For a long time, it has been claimed that Kenya had 42 languages (Okombo 2001) arising from the 1969 population census (Biegon 2018). However, the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission CKRC (RoK 2002) listed 70 while the 2009 population census lists no less than 111 languages (Biegon 2018). In all these cases, only grammatically stable languages have been considered and non-African languages such as Arabic, English, French, German and Italian (Bernd and Heine 2000: 1) were excluded.

Kenya’s indigenous languages³ fall into three typologies: Bantu, Nilotic and Cushitic. Bantu languages such as Kiswahili, Kikuyu, EkeGusii, Luhya and Kamba comprise 65%; followed by Nilotic ones such as Kalenjin, Luo and Maasai, who make up 30%; while Cushitic languages, namely, Borana and Somali, constitute 3% of the total population. The ethnic groups are distributed across the country as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Ethnic-cum-linguistic code distribution across regions⁴

Regions	Ethnic Composition	Comments
Nairobi	47% Kikuyu 16% Luhya 15% Luo 15% Kamba	Kenya’s most ethnically diverse region
Coast	Smaller coastal communities	96% of Kenya’s Coastal communities live in Coast

3 African languages excluding non-African languages presently used in Kenya.

4 Before the promulgation of the 2010 Constitution, Kenya was divided into eight regions called provinces.

Regions	Ethnic Composition	Comments
Eastern	55% Kamba 39% Meru/Embu	87% of all Kamba live in Eastern 97% of all Meru/Embu live in Eastern
North-Eastern	96% Somali	95% of all Somali live in North-Eastern
Rift Valley	51% Kalenjin 15% Kikuyu 7% Maasai	95% of all Kalenjin live in Rift Valley 97% of all Maasai live in Rift Valley
Western	88% Luhya	80% of all Luhya live in Western
Nyanza	63% Luo 31% Kisii	87% of all Luo live in Nyanza 95% of all Kisii live in Nyanza

Source: Elischer (2008)

Kiswahili is the national and the official language, next to English (RoK 2010). The latter is the medium of instruction in schools after Grade 3. However, when Kiswahili is taught as a subject after Grade 3, it is the medium of instruction in Kiswahili classes. Other indigenous languages are used for informal interactions in homes but also in religious and political gatherings as well as in settling disputes in linguistically homogeneous settlements especially in rural areas. Bilingual and trilingual codeswitching is prevalent in many informal interactions although Kiswahili-English codeswitching is now common even in official verbal interactions and on commercial billboards.

Though living in one geographical polity, it is doubtful if the Kenyan people have graduated from a conglomeration of ethnic groups into a nation⁵ and thus adopted nationalism.⁶ As indicated earlier, since independence in 1963, there have been instances of inter-ethnic clashes – the most pronounced ones having occurred after the re-introduction of plural⁷ democracy in 1991 (Chege 2010). This occurred

5 I take nation to be a political administrative unit in which, regardless of the diversity of their languages, inhabitants participate in a common political life and are loyal to that nation with one flag.

6 I follow Gill (2014: 19), who argues that nationalism is the nation-level socio-cultural dynamics integral for nation building. Identity formation based on culture is an integral part of nationalism

7 Kenya became independent with a multi-party constitution in 1963. However, the country was a *de facto* one-party state from 1964 until 1982 when it became a *de jure* one party state under KANU party. Multi-party democracy was re-introduced in 1991.

on the eve of the general elections in 1992, 1997 and 2002 with the most devastating conflict taking place in 2007–2008 after the 2007 general elections (Njogu 2010; Karega-Munene 2010). Over 1300 people lost their lives, several hundred thousands were displaced, and millions-worth of property was destroyed (Cheeseman 2008).

Political mobilisation culminating in clashes has been attributed to negative ethnicity (also known as tribalism) perpetuated by the political elites who want to acquire or retain political power. The formation of political parties in Kenya has historically been ethnic based. Before independence two major political parties were active, namely, Kenya African National Union (KANU) and Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) (Mungai 2007). KANU brought together the then so-called big ethnic groups comprising the Luo and Kikuyu, while KADU drew its following from those that identified themselves as minority ethnic groups largely composed of the Kalenjin, Luhya and Mijikenda. When multi-party democracy was abandoned in 1964 after KADU joined KANU, Kenya Peoples Union (KPU) was formed in 1966 and was largely identified with the Luo ethnic group whose political kingpin, the independence vice-president Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, had been “ejected” from the government. KPU was later proscribed and subsequently, Kenya remained a single party state until 1991 when multi-party democracy was re-introduced. Since then, with the exception of KANU, which was formed before independence, the other political parties seem to be “special vehicles” formed to participate in an election and thereafter are folded up. For instance, many of the political parties formed and participated in the 1992 multi-party elections no longer exist.⁸ This has been happening in every electoral cycle since then (Cheeseman 2008; Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis 2014; Horowitz 2016). The same can be said of political party coalitions such as the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) and the Coalition for Reform and Democracy (CORD).

At the moment, there is a great deal of bickering among politicians of the two major coalitions (NASA⁹ and Jubilee) that participated in

8 The parties that participated then included: KANU, Ford-Kenya, Ford-Asili, Kenya Social Congress, Democratic Party, Kenya National Congress, Party of Independent Candidates of Kenya and Kenya National Democratic Alliance. Of these, only KANU, Ford-Kenya and Democratic parties are still vibrant.

9 National Super Alliance.

the 2017 elections and it is feared they could implode and grind to a halt sooner rather than later (Njagih 2019, Githae 2019). In ongoing political activities, the construction of various identities takes place. It has been noted that identity in a linguistically heterogeneous Kenya is dynamic and almost constantly being negotiated (Ogechi and Bosire-Ogechi 2012). There is continual identity crossing, whereby interactants move across ethnic, political and age boundaries and negotiate whichever identity(ies) they wish to project by manipulating linguistic practices and other resources available to them.

Theoretical framework

The dynamics of identity negotiation discussed in this article are anchored on social-psychology and linguistic codes approaches. The social psychology theory, namely, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) has been developed by the British language psychologist Howard Giles and others since the 1970s (Giles 1973; Tajfel 1978; Giles and Ogay 2007). It has two principles, i.e., convergence and divergence that explain how interactants accommodate to or against each other in any conversational event. CAT explains the different ways through which interactants accommodate their communication, their motivation for doing so, and the consequences (Giles and Ogay 2007). Though designed to address interpersonal communication issues, CAT also links interpersonal communication to the larger context of the *intergroup* stakes of an encounter. In the present article, CAT is crucial in explaining identity negotiation between two or more interactants and larger inter-group communication such as communication between and among various representatives of ethnic groups either perceived to be so or otherwise. In the course of undergoing conceptual refinements, CAT is now an “interdisciplinary model of relational and identity processes in communicative interaction” (Coupland and Jaworski 1997: 241–242) and may, therefore, account for ethnic relations and identities.

Giles and Ogay (2007) claim that while language remains a central focus of the theory, people use other communicative symbols to signal their identities, e.g., dress and hairstyles, cosmetics and eating patterns. In this article, the use of stereotypes, jokes and Sheng could be accounted for on these premises. CAT has the following four basic principles (Giles and Ogay 2007):

- Communication is influenced not only by features of the immediate situation and participants' initial orientations to it, but also by the socio-historical context in which the interaction is embedded. For our case, any analysis of discourse text in Kenya should consider historical relations between the various ethnic groups, political parties/coalitions and individuals.
- Communication is not just a matter of exchanging information about facts, ideas and emotions (often called referential communication), but salient social category memberships are often negotiated during an interaction through the process of accommodation.
- Interactants have expectations regarding the optimal level of accommodation. These expectations are based on stereotypes about out-group members as well as on the prevailing social and situational norms.
- Interactants use specific communication strategies (in particular, convergence and divergence) to signal their attitudes towards each other and their respective social groups.

The convergence and divergence dichotomy is further explained through Tajfel and Turner's (1986) categorisation processes whereby individuals distinguish between in-group (in our case, same ethnic or political party/coalition members) and out-group (read as another ethnic group or political party/coalition).

Whereas CAT is useful in identity negotiation both linguistically and socio-historically, it seems to assume that categorisation is only possible between two identities, namely, in-group and out-group. The Kenyan case leads to more than two categories. To account for this, the present article borrows ideas of the sociolinguistics theory of "we" versus "they" codes (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 1982) that was expanded into "code-in-between" (Kamwangamalu 1998). Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982: 1) argued that "to understand issues of identity and how they affect and are affected by social, political and ethnic diversions we need to gain insights into communicative processes by which they arise." Using code-switching contexts in his Norwegian study, Gumperz (1982) distinguished between situational and metaphorical codeswitching and further distinguished between

“we code” and “they code” in metaphorical switching. In this case, the local native minority language is considered as the “we code” and signalled in-group identity membership, while the majority language served as the “they code” and for out-group members.

Applied to the Kenyan context, stable languages could signal “we” and “they” linguistic practices (identities). However, there could be instances of bilingual and trilingual codeswitching (Ogechi 2002). In addition, the prevalence of the unstable (urban youth) language, Sheng, could signal not only “we” and “they” distinctions but also a “code-in-between” that brings together its speakers regardless of their ethnicity based on the stable languages they use as their first language (L1) of wider communications. Therefore, the social-historical and political contexts besides other non-linguistic aspects are crucial in discussing identity in this article.

The data

The data used in this article comprise political discourse in Kenya since 2005. As indicated earlier, the re-introduction of plural democracy in 1991 opened space for freedom of speech in the country. Although KANU won the first multi-party elections of 1992, it lost the 2002 general elections when President Kibaki came to power under the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) that brought together the Democratic Party (DP), Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Ford-Kenya Party plus other minority opposition parties. Subsequently, freedom of speech increased and there was a referendum vote in 2005 on a proposed new constitution. The voting was preceded by a *Yes* versus *No* campaign at political rallies that provided a great deal of political discourse data which portrayed various identity negotiations.

Two sets of data are analysed here. First, secondary data on the 2005 referendum campaign rallies that were jointly recorded, transcribed and published by *The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights* (KNCHR) and *The Kenya Human Rights Commission* (KHRC). Other data were collected from Kenyan newspapers. Second, transcriptions of primary data comprising political speeches sourced from YouTube recordings. For all excerpts, English is presented in normal font, Kiswahili is in **bold**, any other stable code is in **bold italics** while Sheng lexemes are presented in *italics*.

Ethnic identity and political affiliation

Political elites mobilise along ethnic lines to solidify their political bases whenever there is competition to either retain the status quo or change that. This was reflected during the 2005 referendum campaign for a new constitution.

1. **Context:** A Member of Parliament from Machakos (Kikamba speaker) addressing a referendum campaign rally for a new constitution at Iten Stadium (largely Kalenjin speakers) (15 October 2005).

Wakisimamisha pension ya Moi, then Wakalenjin na Wakamba watavamia State House.

“If they stop [retired President] Moi’s pension, then the Kalenjin and the Kamba communities will invade State House” (KNCHR and KHRC 2006: 30)

This is Kiswahili-English codeswitching and neither of the two languages is used to negotiate ethnic identity since they are languages of wider communication in Kenya. In the context of the campaign and at the local rural level (predominantly Kalenjin speaking), these could be considered “they-codes” (Gumperz 1982) but since this is codeswitching, Kiswahili-English codeswitching signals a “code-in-between” (Kamwangamalu 1998). Therefore, we can understand identity negotiation by considering linguistic manipulation and the socio-historical background of the context as follows. The speaker came from Machakos County where the local language is Kikamba but he was addressing a rally in a Kalenjin-speaking setting. He employed two strategies to accommodate and negotiate in-group identity with his listeners. One, linguistically, perhaps given his inability to use Kalenjin, he (unintentionally) chose Kiswahili and English. Further, since these languages could be deemed “they-codes” especially in the context of his listeners whose level of education and exposure to monolingual use of either English or Kiswahili he was not certain about, his language choice landed on Kiswahili-English codeswitching as a “code-in-between” (Kamwangamalu 1998) to engender convergence (Giles and Ogay 2007) between his listeners and himself.

Second, in order to negotiate and project group identity based on ethnicities, he invoked the socio-historical context of the relations between their ethnic groups, *Wakalenjin* (the Kalenjin) listeners and his native *Wakamba* (the Kamba). The utterance was made three years after the retirement of President Moi (a member of the Kalenjin ethnic group) who had not earned his pension, *pensionya Moi* (retired President Moi's pension), as a former President (he retired in 2002). Historically, during the fourth year of Moi's presidency, in August 1982, there was an abortive military *coup d'état* which was foiled by loyal soldiers led by his then Chief of General Staff of the country's defence forces (1978–1984), General Jackson Mulinge (a member of the Kamba ethnic group). In the speaker's mind, the 1982 incident enhanced the groups' ethnic identity as allies and the bond between the *Wakalenjin* and *Wakamba* which he was now invoking using a "code-in-between." In the same vein, the speaker used the codeswitching strategy to project political divergence with the government, *watavamia* State House (they shall invade State House). State house is the president of Kenya's official residence and symbolises the government, whose leader then was President Kibaki from the Kikuyu ethnic group.

The mobilisation along ethnic lines occurs not only at the level of national politics but also at that of higher learning institutions. According to the Universities Act No. 42, 2012 (amended 2016), universities must annually elect a Students' Governing Council (RoK 2012). In the elections, national political cultures are seen through the funding of student candidates by external politicians, who "have ulterior motives such as distributing drugs on campus or pushing some tribal agenda depending on the leadership of the institutions" (Oanda 2016). Cases of student leaders, who whip narrow ethnic emotions for convergence to solidify ethnic voting blocs as "we" versus "they," are rampant and blatant:

"A politician sent word that he wanted to sponsor a strong candidates' run for the presidency of the student union. I did not miss the chance and the only thing that qualified me for the sponsorship was my tribe. Someone organised a meeting with the *mheshimiwa*¹⁰ and I was slapped with a Sh. 500,000 cheque (USD 5800) to start my campaign. He told me that he was willing to do

10 *Mheshimiwa* is Kiswahili for honourable person.

everything so long as the college presidency did not go to the ‘other tribe’” (*The Star* 2014, cited in Oanda 2016: 78)

During election campaigns for students’ leadership, accommodation is done when students organise ethnic-based caucuses. Candidates for various positions form ethnic-based coalitions/teams and negotiation for ethnic identity could start with the “we” versus “they” linguistic divergence in the ethnic caucuses where the various ethnic languages are used. As the negotiation moves to the coalition level, Kiswahili, English or codeswitching and even Sheng are used as a code-in-between in order to negotiate the coalition’s identity.

Ethnic or racial identity revival

Politics and political mobilisation are so powerful in identity negotiations for ethnic divergence that this leads to the recognition of “new” ethnic groups. Here the political class is an external hand in the accommodation for convergence and divergence for political gain. An external force whips up the emotions of a group of people to clamour for their narrow ethnic nationalism. In this case, the external hand wants the group to break away from their larger bloc so that the ethnic voting bloc is divided.

Following the re-introduction of plural democracy in 1991, the KANU government sought to divide the solid opposition bloc of Luo ethnic group voters by encouraging the revival and revitalisation of the Luo-assimilated Suba into a distinct ethnic identity called AbaSuba. A district (an administrative unit) was created, an air time slot was set aside for OluSuba (the language of AbaSuba) at the Kisumu-based government broadcaster for local languages. Above all, the government provided funds to develop teaching and learning materials in OluSuba (Owino 2002; Kembo-Sure 2013). This was being done because many people who call themselves AbaSuba do not speak OluSuba but DhoLuo.

In February 2017, the general election year, politics emancipated and created the Makonde ethnic identity whose forefathers came from Mozambique during the 1930s and settled in the Kenyan south coast. The present day Makonde have lost their language but they “trekked” to Nairobi to petition President Kenyatta for identity as Kenyans and

Makonde ethnic group (Ndubi 2017). President Kenyatta declared the Makonde the forty third ethnic group of Kenya. The Kenyan Makonde received birth certificates and identification cards as Kenyans and they can now seek employment, open bank accounts, register mobile phone sim cards, acquire business permits or even register for mobile banking. Hitherto that, they led a squalid life as menial workers and fishermen. The Makonde received two identities: ethnic identity as Makonde and national identity as Kenyans. Thus, politicians forced a divergence between members of the Makonde and their “hosts,” the Digo (part of the Mijikenda).

Similarly, in June 2017, the government recognised the minority Nubian ethnic community. Historically, the Nubian forefathers came to Kenya from Sudan in the early twentieth century and settled in Kibera, Nairobi, but others can be found in Ravine (Rift Valley), Kisumu (Kisumu County) and Kisii town (Kisii County). They practise Islam, retain their language and have always identified themselves as Nubians but they did not have national identity cards and land title deeds. However, in June 2017, the government gave them a community land title deed for 288 acres in Kibera, Nairobi (Open Society 2017). In exchange for this gesture, the Nubian Community leaders issued a statement promising to vote for President Kenyatta (*Daily Nation* 2017).

Racial identity was also negotiated in July 2017 when the government of Kenya officially issued a charter to Kenyans of Indian descent and recognised them as the forty fourth tribe in Kenya through a special gazette issued after the community petitioned President Kenyatta. Indians have lived in Kenya for over two centuries and many are descendants of the *Indian coolies* who build the Kenya-Uganda Railway line between 1895 and 1901.

Although the government argued that the above instances were meant to recognise the ethnic and racial groups’ constitutional and human rights, the acts resonate with the CAT principles of attempting to converge and endear the voters from these communities to the governing party while diverging them from the competitors in the general elections of August 2017.

Ethnic identity through stereotypes and jokes

Stereotypes have been used for identity negotiation to either project negative ethnicity (Ogechi and Bosire-Ogechi 2012) or create jokes marking ethnic relations that build friendships and thus inter-ethnic harmony among ethnic groups (Sigalla 2010). The Luo and the Luhya jokingly call each other *Mashemeji* (in-laws). Historically, two prominent Kenyan football clubs have a strong following from the two ethnic groups, namely, *GorMahia* Football Club (Luo) and *AFC Leopards* Club (Luhya). The clubs' fans and the media refer to the duel between the teams as a *Mashemeji Derby* (Official website of the SportPesa Premier League 2017). Geographically, the Luo and Luhya ethnic groups are neighbours in western Kenya, have heavily inter-married and are therefore in-laws.

Ethnic identity and accommodation are further enhanced through stereotypes and cultural symbols of the two groups. Supporters of each club troop to the stadia carrying items that are stereotypically and culturally associated with each ethnic group. On the one hand, *AFC Leopards* supporters carry chicken (either alive or symbols of chicken) since the Luhya are stereotypically deemed consumers of chicken. On the other, *GorMahia FC* supporters carry fish (real or symbols) since the Luo are stereotypically considered to be consumers of fish. It is not surprising to get non-Luo and non-Luhya supporters of the clubs also identifying with Luo and Luhya culture and, by extension, ethnic group identity not because they speak Luo or Luhya but because of the immediate situation and stereotype strategy (Giles and Ogay 2007) in order to project the identity they want.

Stereotypes and jokes as extra-linguistic markers are not only used in an inclusive way for ethnic identity and harmony but can also be (and have been) used to exclude others:

2. **Context:** At Ndumberi Stadium (largely inhabited by Gikuyu speakers) a Member of Parliament from Kisii County (largely inhabited by EkeGusii speakers) addresses a political rally during the referendum campaign (15 October 2005).

Wa-le ha-wa-ja-tahiri peleka jandoni

“those who are not circumcised should be taken for a circumcision ceremony’ (KNCHR and KHRC 2006:30).

3. **Context:** At Maua Stadium (largely inhabited by Meru speakers), a Member of Parliament from Embu County (largely inhabited by Embu speakers) addresses a referendum campaign rally (15 October 2005).

Kalonzo is lost, Kambas do not walk with uncircumcised men.

Gutie mwikamba uthisaga na ivisi

There is no Kamba who walks with uncircumcised men (KNCHR and KHRC 2006: 46).

The above three excerpts exemplify the projection of ethnic identity negotiated through ethnic cultural practices revolving around stereotyping of circumcision. Three ethnic communities, namely, Luo, Teso and Turkana usually do not circumcise. The other ethnic communities that circumcise jokingly stereotype circumcision and associate it with one’s ability to provide political leadership while the uncircumcised person is deemed otherwise. So, one could expect the three communities mentioned above to be treated similarly. However, this is not the case. The Luo are the group most politically active and visible. Leaders from the Luo ethnic group are usually bashed along the circumcision stereotype. For instance, in example 2 **wale hawajatahiri** (those who are not circumcised) is a covert out-group ethnic identity reference to the Luo. Example 3 is a further stereotypical out-group ethnic identity emphasis whereby another code, Kikamba *ivisi* (uncircumcised men), is used. According to Kamba culture, uncircumcised people (read: Luo ethnic group) are culturally supposed to be excluded from being identified with men and thus are not considered worthy of being associated with and given direction on the referendum vote. In both cases, the message is a marker of ethnic demarcation that enhances ethnic fragmentation because the speakers do not want their listeners to accept their opponents’ persuasion. This is because ethnic identities define why and how politicians seek, retain or win power (Biegon 2018: 8).

Identity through nicknames

Nicknames have been used by politicians to project either their persona and the ethnic group to which they belong or to unpleasantly portray their opponents and their ethnic groups. Nicknames constitute one of the CAT strategies for accommodation. Some of the nicknames that have been used in Kenyan politics for identity include: **mla mamba** (crocodile eater), **jamaa wa vitendawili** (person of riddles), **tangatanga** (loitering) and **kieleweke** (let it be known).

4. **Mla mamba** “crocodile eater”

Mla mamba (crocodile eater) was used by Danson Mungatana (one-time Member of Parliament) from Tana River County that is inhabited by the Pokomo ethnic group where crocodiles are a delicacy. Crocodiles are vicious reptiles that kill other animals including human beings for food. One must be courageous to hunt a crocodile. The “crocodile eater” was a member of the then ruling party (NARC) and was trying to portray his supposed bravado in politics against the leader of the opposition (Hon. Raila) whose ethnic group’s staple food is fish. To the politician, “hunting” fish is so simple and incomparable to hunting a crocodile. Thus, the nickname **mla mamba** (crocodile eater) has been associated not just with the politician but with the Pokomo ethnic group. In contrast, **mla samaki** (fish eater) could be associated to the Luo. Indeed, during the referendum campaign the leader of the *NO* group was identified as such:

5. **Context:** At Ol Kalau Stadium (largely Gikuyu speakers) a speaker bad mouths the leader of the *No* team.

Raila is a **mla samaki** (fish eater) who sneaked the Prime Minister who is more powerful than the president into the Bomas Draft (KNCHR and KHRC 2006: 51).

Mla samaki (fish eater) is used to identify the leader and his ethnic group (Luo).

6. **Tangatanga** (loitering).

This nickname is also used to name and identify the opponents of **mila samaki** (fish eater). It arose out of President Kenyatta's speech castigating his deputy:

Context: President Kenyatta addressing a crowd at Jacaranda grounds, in Nairobi on 29 May 2018.

Huyu kijana anaitwa Ruto unajua kila wikendi anatangatanga kila pahali atakuwa anapitia hizi machorochoro. Ukiona kuna kitu inaenda kona mwambie. Ni wangapi wanasema tuache siasa twende kazi? (Kenyatta 2018 in Kumekucha Chris 2018)

“This young man called Ruto, you know he is fond of loitering all over every weekend and he will be passing here in these streets. When you see something amiss tell him. How many of you support that we should shun politics and concentrate on work?”

Tangatanga (loiter) has been picked out of this speech and Ruto's political friends are identified as the **tangatanga** group (loitering group). They comprise politicians (largely from the Kalenjin and a few from the Kikuyu, Embu, Meru, Luhya and Kisii ethnic groups) who are allied to Ruto. Through the nickname, **tangatanga** (loiter), there is negotiation of an identity of ambitious politicians who are mobilising members of their ethnic groups to win or retain power in 2022 when President Kenyatta's second and final term ends.¹¹

Identity negotiation through Sheng and Engsh

Sheng and Engsh are the unstable youth languages spoken in Kenya. Of the two, Sheng has been widely studied (Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997; Mazrui 1995; Kiessling and Mous 2004; Ogechi 2008) unlike Engsh, a variety that only includes a few studies (e.g., Barasa and Mous 2017). However, Githinji (2006: 10) thinks that there should be no distinction between Sheng and Engsh; rather we should talk of two varieties of Sheng; namely, one based on Kiswahili grammar and another based on English grammar:

11 The Kieleweke group opposes the Tangatanga group and calls for no political campaigns until 2022.

7. Kiswahili-based Sheng

Si-naganji, si-naganji, si-nanjaru za ma-ganji

I got no money, I got no money, I got no means of getting money

8. English-based English

There is this *chile* I used to *vibe*.

There is this girl I used to seduce. (Githinji 2006: 10–11)

Regardless of the argument, there is no gainsaying that Sheng exists as an unstable language. It is widely used among urban and a few rural youths (Githiora 2002; Ogechi 2008), is a code-in-between among its users, and its usage straddles ethnic identity. It is used to negotiate identity based on its users' uniqueness, such as wearing sagging pants, stud earrings, unique walking and hair styles, and *genge*¹² music (Ogechi 2008).

Kenyan politicians have been known to negotiate identity and seek solidarity with the youth through Sheng because the youth constitute the bulk of the voting population and could thus tilt the election in their way if the politicians identify with them. Besides trying to speak Sheng, some politicians have adopted Sheng names, e.g., *Sonko* and *Manzi wa Nai*. They have also used Sheng slogans in their campaigns, i.e., *tunawesmake*.

The nickname *Sonko* was first used by Mike Mbuvi when he campaigned to be a Member of Parliament of Makadara Constituency (2009), later to be the Nairobi Senator (2013) and, finally, for the position of Governor of Nairobi (2017). In Sheng, *Sonko* means a rich person. By calling himself *Sonko*, Mike Mbuvi was trying to accommodate to the urban youth through the convergence strategy of Sheng and to endear himself to the youthful voters. This is the same argument that could be attributed to *Manzi wa Nai* (young woman from Nairobi) that was used by Rachel Shebbesh as she campaigned for the position of Woman Member of Parliament for Nairobi County (in 2013 and 2017). Hon. Peter Kenneth ran for President in 2013 and his Sheng slogan was *tunawesmake*. He was trying to borrow the former US President

12 A genre of Hip Hop music recently beginning in Nairobi, Kenya, and commonly sung in Sheng.

Barrack Obama's slogan, "we can" and translate it into Sheng in order to converge to the bulky youthful voters using Sheng.

These and other politicians who wanted these youths' votes also used other non-linguistic attributes associated with Sheng speakers to endear themselves to the youth. For instance, Sonko is known for wearing jeans like a youth and also adorning himself with a lot of jewellery known as *blingbling* in Sheng, while Hon. Shebbesh's hairstyle is the typical dreadlocks won by youths. Hon. Peter Kenneth was previously known for wearing designer suits but during his campaign for President, he dressed down like a youth. To underscore the significance of Sheng and its attributes for identity negotiation and to woo youthful voters, the government of President Kenyatta suspended its strict *Matatu*¹³ rules whereby it was allowed to paint a vehicle with only one colour and a yellow strip at its waist. Instead, government allowed the owners to sharply and artistically paint them with Sheng slogans and play loud music that appeals to the youthful populace. The result of such art is what in Sheng is called *nganya*.¹⁴ This negotiation for identity through Sheng acts as a code-in-between and aims at convergence through all attributes associated with the youth.

Concluding remarks

The article has attempted to show and discuss a variety of identities that are being negotiated in multilingual and multi-ethnic Kenya largely through manipulation in language and politics. It has been demonstrated that identity in Kenya is dynamic and constantly being negotiated by various players. Furthermore, although language is a crucial tool for negotiating identity, it has been shown that language is not the only marker of ethnic identity. It has also come out that exclusive ethnic identity is not necessarily the result of ethnic and linguistic diversity; rather, it is a creation of intolerant politics that can be avoided by negotiating ethnic pluralism characterised by the tolerance of ethnic and racial diversities.

13 A minibus or similar vehicle used as a taxi.

14 Contraction of the Sheng word *Manganya*, which is a reversal of *Manyanga*. *Manyanga* is the sharply painted vehicle with loud music used for public transport in Nairobi.

Abbreviations used

CAT	Communication Accommodation Theory
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CKRC	Constitution of Kenya Review Commission
CORD	Coalition for Reforms and Democracy
DP	Democratic Party
KANU	Kenya African National Union
NARC	National Rainbow Coalition
PEV	Post-Election Violence
RoK	Republic of Kenya
UNHabitat	United Nations Human Settlement Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme

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Nathan Oyori Ogechi: ETHNICITY, LANGUAGE, AND IDENTITY IN KENYA

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Nathan Oyori Ogechi: ETHNICITY, LANGUAGE, AND IDENTITY IN KENYA

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