From Violence to Peace: The *Daily Nation* and the change in how ethnicity is reported from the 2007 to the 2013 presidential elections

Just before New Years Eve 2007, following one of the most contentious elections in the country’s history, Kenya plunged into turmoil. A nation once considered one of the safest and most developed countries in Africa was gripped with unthinkable violence and came to the brink of tribal war. In just over 2 months, from when the election was held on December 27, 2007 to late February 2008, over 1,000 men, women, and children were killed, often in the most violent ways, and several hundreds of thousands more were displaced from their homes.

According to an article by Jeffery Gettleman that was published in the New York Times on December 31, 2007, “In several cities across Kenya, witnesses said, gangs went house to house, dragging out people of certain tribes and clubbing them to death.” The country, Gettleman wrote, “has plunged into intense uncertainty, losing its sheen as an exemplary democracy and quickly descending into tribal bloodletting.”

The root cause of the violence was the highly polarized 2007 presidential election between Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga, an election that split the country along ethnic lines. According to the 2013 CIA World Fact Sheet on Kenya, the country’s population is made up of seven distinct ethnic groups including the Kikuyu, Luhya, Luo, Kalenjin, Kamba, Kisii, and Meru peoples, which are further divided into 42 tribes. When tensions run high, whether because of natural disaster, the sharing of resources, or socio-political reasons, the country tends to fracture into tribal groups, as was exactly the case in this election. Dennis Galava, managing editor of the Sunday Nation, said in an interview in
October 2013 that the country is “divided on ethnic lines mainly on politics and sharing of resources.”

Mr. Kibaki, a Kikuyu, and Mr. Odinga, a Luo, had run campaigns laced with ethnic undertones, according to members of the Kenyan media. “During campaign rallies, we had noticed ethnic polarization in the messages being sent out by politicians,” Eric Shimoli, senior news editor at the Daily Nation, said in an interview in October 2013. This caused ethnic polarization, splitting the country between Kibaki supporters and Odinga supporters. “The country was actually divided almost equally into two,” Shimoli said.

After election day, as the votes began to be tallied, it looked as though Odinga was going to win the election and defeat the incumbent Kibaki. Odinga was known as “the peoples candidate” and had very strong support from several ethnic groups as well as the nations poor, while Kibaki was a life-long politician and had strong support from the Kikuyu people, Kenya’s largest ethnic group in terms of population, as well as many in the business community.

“At first it appeared to be a close contest, then it appeared that Raila was winning,” Shimoli said. Within the first days of vote counting, it appeared as though Odinga was leading the vote tally by over a million votes, according to media accounts from the time of the election. But seemingly overnight, the election swung in favor of Kibaki, drawing cries of foul play from Odinga and his supporters, who exposed irregularities in the vote and accused the Kibaki government of rigging the election, according to an article by Jeffery Gettleman of the New York Times. Kibaki was hastily
sworn into office in a secretive ceremony as the country began to deteriorate in the background.

Susan Linee, an editorial consultant for Nation who was previously the East Africa bureau chief of the Associated Press, said during an interview in October 2013 that the violence began in Kisumu, Kenya’s third largest city, which sits on the shores of Lake Victoria near Uganda. The Luo community there began to riot almost immediately after Kibaki’s reelection was announced. “They were rioting because they felt that their candidate had been cheated out of the victory,” Linee said. Violence soon spread across nearly all of Kenya, with some of the worst violence happening in the sprawling slums of Nairobi. Luos committed acts of violence against Kikuyus, Kikuyus committed acts of violence against Luos. Mobs formed going from house to house, burning property and beating and killing people. Other ethnic groups soon got into the mix, reopening old wounds and engaging in conflicts with people from neighboring tribes, according to media reports.

When the dust cleared, over 1,000 people had been killed and more than 500,000 others displaced, according to a report prepared by the United States Congressional Research Service. It was one of the darkest days in Kenya’s history.

After the election violence ended and the nation started to heal, many onlookers began to look at several factors that may have perpetuated and exacerbated the violence. Some pointed to the media and how they handled reporting on ethnic tensions before and during the crisis as one of those factors.

According to a policy briefing centered on the media’s role in the conflict conducted by the BBC and released in April 2008, local media had some role in fanning
the flames of the conflict. However, the report was quick to point out that some media outlets, particularly regional radio stations, were far more culpable than other news outlets, mostly national media houses, that had tried to stop the bloodshed.

“On January 22, 2008, international reports began to appear, claiming that media, and particularly local language (commonly called vernacular) radio stations in Kenya, were responsible for fanning ethnic hatred and fuelling violence,” the BBC report read. It continued, “While the mainstream media has been praised for trying to calm the situation, people within and outside the media argue that it has failed to live up to professional and ethical standards and has contributed to the crisis.”

While some vernacular radio stations directly fueled ethnic hate, mainstream media outlets such as the *Daily Nation*, East Africa’s largest newspaper, were also blamed for subtly and unknowingly contributing to the violence through their reporting of the campaign, the election, and the conflict, according to the BBC report.

When asked about the *Daily Nation’s* coverage during that time, a number of Nation staffers acknowledged that they had not fully understood the possible consequences of their reporting. “What was the case at that time, when we were reporting we were not always thinking of what might be the consequences of that reporting. We had not expected the violence, we just thought it would be the usual political contests where people make a choice and use words against their rivals,” Glava said.

Shimoli said of the *Daily Nation’s* coverage, “As media we had never covered ethnic conflict to that level. We had seen it happen in Uganda, Somalia, Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda, Congo, but we never actually thought that it would happen in our own backyard
and that we would be confronted with it here. That is one of the problems we had, we
were supposed to report on this thing but we didn’t know how. We had reported on
everyone else, other countries, but never on ourselves. We didn’t know the boundaries,
we didn’t know what to do.”

The *Daily Nation* had always had a policy stating that ethnicity should only be
mentioned when it was essential to the story, but even with this policy in place, issues
still arose. “We had our media policy, and even one that was specifically prepared for the
Nation for the election, which we do for every election. Whenever we have an election
the editors, the staff, and the managers come together and draw up guidelines on how to
cover the election. But we did not factor in the elements of the ethnic warfare to come,”
Shimoli said.

The staff of the *Daily Nation* never directly advocated in one direction or another,
but simply covered politicians during their campaigns gave a voice to ethnic divisiveness.
“The media let everyone talk, but we had not expected that our talk could lead to a very
divisive situation or cause violence of that scale. So it would just be our pointing or
suggesting, one politician would chide a rival,” Galava said.

In the midst of the violence, many leaders of the community, led by Nation Media
and other major news outlets, organized a meeting and quickly put a plan of action into
place. According to Shimoli, media house banded together and all agreed to run an
editorial called “Save Our Beloved Kenya,” which preached togetherness and unity. This
show of solidarity helped begin the process of ending the violence and signaled to
politicians that the major media outlets were firmly against any ethnic divisions.
Fast forward to the 2013 presidential elections and a peaceful transition of power occurred. In these latest elections, which took place on March 4, 2013, Raila Odinga once again lost, this time to Uhuru Kenyatta, in an election that was much more civil and calm, according to Shimoli. Though there were some instances of remote violence, they were much more rare in occurrence and had mostly to do with regional elections, not the presidential race.

In the run up to the 2013 presidential elections, media outlets were better trained to deal with situations of ethnic polarization. “This time the media was a lot better trained. There was training by the media council, by USAID, by the British High Commission, by the media houses themselves. And this time we said if you incite people we are not going to suppress that news, we are going to reveal you,” Shimoli said.

Put differently, the country’s major media houses made it a specific policy to unite the country with their coverage. The *Daily Nation* even went so far as to publish an editorial saying what kind of discourse it expected from politicians.

The pendulum had swung so far in the other direction, in terms of media coverage, that Kenya’s major news organizations have even been criticized for pushing unity too much. “In this last election almost all media has been referred to derogatorily as ‘Peace Journalism,’ where people gave more emphasis to stories and campaigns of people that were promoting oneness among Kenyans and not dividing,” Galava said.

In the 2013 race, journalists took an active stance on ethnic inclusiveness, sending a signal that violence and division were not good for the country. “So this time I think that having suffered that, we were very cautious,” Shimoli said. “Although I have heard
it said that we have swung too far in the opposite direction and have been too cautious,”

he said, “I don’t think so, but I work for a media outlet so I am here to be judged.”