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# To count or not to count? Insights from Kenya for global debates about enumerating ethnicity in national censuses

Samantha Balaton-Chrimes\* and Laurence Cooley

## Abstract:

There is an impasse on the question of whether or not to enumerate identity groups in censuses, given its potential to variously facilitate dominance *and* an emergence from marginalisation. In this paper, we theorise the impasse in Kenya as relating to a colonial history of the strategic use of ethnicity to divide and rule; a demographic makeup with *both* some large ethnic groups, and many small ones; and the local social construction of ethnicity, which allows significant latitude for collapse, disaggregation and change of group identities. This case corrects the dominance of Europe and the Americas in census studies, and offers insights for assessing the political stakes of counting, namely the need to bring past and present into conversation; to consider the varied political effects of demography; and to consider the particular significance and meaning of ethnicity and race in context.

**Keywords:** Census, ethnicity, Kenya, colonialism, demography, Africa

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of identity group enumeration in censuses is fraught, combining both normative dimensions for academics, concerned with whether we ought to count, and practical ones for policy makers, provoked by the challenge of categorising social constructs (Simon and Piché, 2012). Group identity enumeration can be divisive, leading to demographic posturing and legitimisation of domination by large groups. It can also be a powerful symbolic tool for recognition, conferring a sense of belonging and helping facilitate distributional affirmative action for marginalised groups. We argue there is no right answer to the question of whether or not to count, as the literature demonstrates, but we go further by analysing the reasons for this impasse in a case from the global south. Focusing on Kenya, we theorise the impasse as relating to a colonial and postcolonial history of the strategic use of ethnicity to divide and rule; a demographic makeup that has *both* some large ethnic groups and many small ones; and the social construction of ethnicity, which allows significant latitude for group categories to be collapsed or disaggregated to suit competing political interests, from above and below. These insights into the nature of the impasse on whether to enumerate ethnicity have broader relevance in postcolonial contexts. Specifically, they call for: a bringing together of historical and contemporary analyses to understand the endurance and transformation of colonial forms of power; a sensitivity to various demographic patterns; and a contextual specificity regarding situated meanings of ethnicity and race. These shape the stakes of counting in different ways. In Kenya as in many other places, the impasse remains unresolved as ethnic counting persists in ways that can be simultaneously problematic and beneficial.

Our argument is based on documentary research into the ethnic classifications used in all Kenyan censuses (1948, 1962, then decennially from 1969), as well as enumerators' instructions (where available), justifications of classifications in census reports, and for the colonial period, material in the Kenya National Archives. In the postcolonial period (1963

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onward), insights about the nature of decision-making are difficult to come by, with no archives publicly available, and interview access to staff from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) difficult. Our argument about the significance of ethnic enumeration in the postcolonial period is therefore based on historically contextual analysis, and for 2009 and 2019, media coverage and ethnographic observation of the census.<sup>1</sup> Given the precedence of colonial voices in official archives, and the dearth of public information on postcolonial censuses, there are important limitations to what we can say about the intentions and motivations of census-makers and those enumerated. Accordingly, our analysis is restrained, seeking to interpret the nature and effect of census categorisation and enumeration in historical context, and through engagement with scholarly debates. With the exception of (Balaton-Chrimes 2021), there has been no systematic, nation-wide historical analysis of the Kenyan census, making this general kind of argument a novel one.

## ENUMERATING ETHNICITY

There is no agreed approach to whether to enumerate aspects of social identity such as ethnicity in national censuses. Analysing UN data on the 2000 global census round, Morning (2008) found that 63% of states undertook some form of enumeration of group membership in their censuses, but noted significant variation in approach and terminology. Lieberman and Singh (2017) supplement Morning's analysis by locating census questionnaires missing from the UN data, and find that 75% of 1,333 questionnaires from 156 countries employed between 1800 and 2005 included at least one question about race, language, religion, caste, indigeneity, or tribe/ethnicity. Even so, this leaves a quarter of censuses over this period that did not enumerate any such identity, and according to Lieberman and Singh's analysis, the global prevalence of group enumeration fell between the 1930s and 1990s, before the trend reversed in the 2000s. They also find significant variation by region, with sub-Saharan Africa having the highest prevalence of group enumeration (16–17).

International recommendations about census design avoid prescribing *whether* questions about ethno-cultural characteristics should be included, and instead focus on *how* they should be asked, if they are. The UN's Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses state that ethnicity, language and religion are additional – rather than core – topics, enquiries about which depend on national circumstances, and recommend they should be based on self-declaration and should allow for multiple responses (UN Statistics Division, 2017: 203–5).

Scholars identify some of the causes of the impasse around this question. Rallu et al. (2006), for example, develop a typology of reasons why states do or don't enumerate identity groups, some nefarious and others democratic. Lieberman and Singh's analysis (2017: 47) finds that ethnic enumeration is associated with the onset of inter-ethnic conflict, but they caution against drawing policy conclusions from this finding, acknowledging the possibility that enumeration may help redress severe disparities in incomes and opportunities between groups. On the undemocratic side of the ledger, Loveman points to Apartheid-era South Africa, Nazi Germany and the pre-civil rights movement United States as cases where ethno-racial classification contributed to 'social stigmatization, legal subjugation, economic exploitation, political repression, or outright physical annihilation of subject populations'. On the other hand, in cases such as contemporary Brazil, South Africa and the US, enumeration has been pursued 'in order to combat entrenched inequality, counteract pervasive discrimination, or protect vulnerable minority communities' (Loveman, 2014: 4).

It is this latter potential of group-identity classification and enumeration that has seen the United Kingdom and states in the Americas embrace ethno-racial enumeration over recent decades (Loveman, 2014: 278; Lieberman and Singh, 2017: 17; Rallu et al., 2006: 536).

Pressure for enumeration to measure and combat discrimination is now present even in states that have historically been, in the name of national integration, the most wedded to not counting, such as France (Rallu et al., 2006: 536; Simon, 2008; Oltermann and Henley, 2020). Counting to address inequalities may account for why, having declined since the 1930s, the proportion of states enumerating at least one identity cleavage rose in censuses taken in the 2000s compared to the 1990s (Lieberman and Singh, 2017: 15–16).

A simple ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ assessment does not, however, account for wide variations, and contradictions, in reasons for ethnic enumeration and its effects. As Loveman (2014: 4) argues:

...contradictory reasons for official ethnoracial classification – to target segments of the population for exclusion or for inclusion, for discrimination, or for redress – are not mutually exclusive. In most cases, in fact, they are historically connected: Targeted constraints on the freedoms of one group may be coupled with targeted opportunities for others; targeted exclusion or repression in one period may generate resistance which culminated in organized demands for targeted benefits later on.

This points to the importance of specific histories and contexts in responding to questions about whether to count, and to the need for sensitivity to unanticipated effects of counting or not counting.

Furthermore, enumeration not only shapes access to rights, resources, power or advantage. Censuses render populations legible and governable, shaping rather than merely describing identities (Scott, 1998; Curtis, 2001). Scott argues that, when allied with state power, legibility can ‘enable much of the reality they [state actors] depicted to be remade’ (1998: 3). Identity categories in the census help establish who is who, and leave those not recognised – the illegible – to risk erasure and the legitimisation of the denial of rights (Thompson, 2016: 14). In response, illegible groups may lobby for official recognition or practice self-identification in open-ended questions, as for instance Sikh organisations have done in the US (Kurien, 2018: 94–95). They may actively resist incorporation into the state’s field of power by refusing or subverting enumeration (Hubner, 2007). Alternatively, they may simply carry on with what Scott (1998: 311) calls ‘*métis*’ – the resilience of complexity, diversity and informal (illegible) social practices that maintain social functioning but which the state struggles to comprehend. Insofar as census identity groups are concerned, *métis* might include the persistence of ‘mixed’ identities, people who ‘pass,’ whose identity shifts over time, those who don’t identify with the provided categories, or those who refuse the whole paradigm. Censuses, then, shape the identities and self-conceptions of the people they count, but not in an uncontested way.

## **MAKING SENSE OF THE IMPASSE**

Ultimately, then, the competing motivations for and effects of ethnic enumeration make the question of whether or not to count an unanswerable one. This dilemma has been made sense of in various ways, including through attention to colonial settlement, slavery and its legacies, and to drives for liberal multiculturalism and the challenges facing predominantly racialised migrant minorities. In what follows, we explore the example of Kenya to suggest other factors in the impasse.

Like all former British colonies, Kenya’s approach to ethnic enumeration was inherited from colonial authorities (Weitzberg, 2015). Kenya became a colony separate from the East Africa Protectorate in 1920, and was deliberately carved up into ethnic territories for most of the colonial period. At independence in 1963, President Jomo Kenyatta and his government

inherited a multi-ethnic state troubled by ethnic territorialisation and competition. The ‘big five’, and especially Kikuyu, Luo and Kalenjin ethnic groups, have sought to elect a President and dominate a highly centralised state, while a larger number of much smaller ethnic groups have sought to access the patrimonial state via alliances.<sup>2</sup> Since the 2010 constitution, devolution has reconfigured the patrimonial stakes to 47 counties, but ethnic competition still dominates political life (D’Arcy and Cornell, 2016). There is a constant and often constructive debate about the nature of ethnicity, or tribe – a term used commonly in Kenya, not always pejoratively; in Swahili, *kabila*. Kenyans are deeply aware and critical of the colonial roots of the terminology, and of the perils of tribalism (Wamwere, 2003; Thiong’o, 2009; Gathara, 2018), but at the same time, most are deeply attached to their ethnic identity – and not only or necessarily for straightforwardly competitive or chauvinistic reasons (Ajulu 2002; Balaton-Chrimes 2015; Lynch 2006).<sup>3</sup> These competing functions of ethnicity are at the heart of the question about whether or not to count.

Kenya’s census has always asked ‘What tribe are you?’ and provided enumerators with a prescribed list of options.<sup>4</sup> Ethnic population statistics were published at national and district levels until 1989; in 1999 no ethnic numbers were published at all; and for 2009 and 2019, only national-level ethnicity figures have been released. Prior to 2009, few challenged the relevance of this question, though its political sensitivity was abundantly evident in the official withholding of the 1999 figures. Even since 2009, when some civil society groups started to question the ‘tribe question’, many Kenyans take it for granted that it is necessary, especially for recognising minorities, while also acknowledging its political risks (on this tension, see Warah 2018).

## **(POST)-COLONIALISM AND CENSUS CATEGORIES**

Much of the literature on *group enumeration* focuses on settler colonies, Europe, or groups states by region, with little regard (except in settler contexts) of colonial history. Conversely, much of the literature on *colonial* census categorisation limits itself to historical accounts without necessarily drawing out contemporary implications. Here, we bring historical and contemporary classification together to argue they are connected via the postcolonial state’s reckoning with the edification of hierarchical identity categories; legacies of colonialism within state structures; and imperatives of postcolonial nation-building where diverse populations have been arbitrarily grouped within nations.

Reckoning with these dilemmas has taken various forms. In some cases, colonial practices of categorisation outlasted colonialism but were later abandoned. In Rwanda, for instance, it was associated with the systematic privileging of Tutsi compared to the Hutu majority (Uvin, 2002: 165). Following the 1994 genocide, the government now pursues a policy of ‘ethnic amnesia’ and no longer enumerates ethnicity (Vandeginste, 2014). Elsewhere, ethno-racial categorisation and enumeration were abandoned more quickly, such as in Tanzania, where the census last enquired about ethnicity in 1967 (Green, 2011: 234). In Namibia, language replaced apartheid racial classification (Christopher, 2006: 347). Mauritius similarly abandoned its ‘communal identity’ question in the 1980s to help foster national unity (Christopher, 1992) but retained questions on language (including of ancestors), as ‘a way of avoiding an ethnic question, while still identifying the population of Indian origin’ (Christopher, 2006: 348). In other contexts, the state has oscillated. For example, following independence, Indian bureaucrats limited caste enumeration, seeing it as a divide-and-rule strategy inimical to nation-building. More recently, however, some have argued for a return to enumerating low-caste groups for affirmative action purposes (Vithayathil, 2018). Across Oceania, questions on variations on ethnicity have become more common since independence, but often with more context-sensitive meanings (Kukutai & Broman 2016).

In Kenya, by contrast, the state has steadfastly continued to enumerate both race and ethnicity, but not without significant changes.

### **Hierarchical and divisive identity categories**

As Kertzer and Arel note, colonialism, ‘based on a denial that the colonized had political rights, required a clear demarcation between the settlers and the indigenes’ (2002: 3). As a result, they argue, ‘European colonial powers..., who rejected cultural categorizations in their metropolitan censuses as incompatible with their imagined “nation-states”, had no such qualms when faced with the daunting task of counting their colonial subjects’ (10). For example, whereas Victorian census-takers saw Britain as lacking internal cultural divisions in need of enumeration, ‘understandings of colonial hierarchies varied greatly from place to place, and class, race, religion, and other categories of analysis were all considered important in certain contexts’ (Levitan, 2011: 148). Identity mattered in the colonies in ways it wasn’t imagined to matter at home. Categories enabled colonial authorities to confer differing rights and rates of taxation to different populations, depending on the authorities’ needs and resources. For example, Levitan cites an 1831 census that tabulated the population of Freetown, Sierra Leone, distinguishing between ‘Europeans, Mulattoes, colonial residents, disbanded soldiers, liberated Africans, and “native strangers”’. Here, ‘[w]hile some people were identified by their nationality or race, others were described by their occupation or economic status’ (156). This combination of ethno-racial and professional categories was broadly characteristic of British colonial censuses, which sought to establish who belonged, who was visiting, and who had superior rights, where Europeans were at the apex, with often multiple, complex and shifting categories below (Mamdani, 2001).

The first census in Kenya was the *Native and Non-Native East African Census* in 1948. This enumerated the ‘native’ population by tribe, for reasons statistics officers took as self-evident (Martin, 1949). 47 tribes were counted, with no justification or explanation of categories chosen, as the British thought of themselves as simply recognising pre-existing ethnic groups and territories (Morgan, 2000: 77). These categories arose from prior statistical devices, including tax and labour registers, and annual district-level population returns. This meant categories were at the discretion of District Officers holding varying degrees of understanding of the communities they governed (Balaton-Chrimes 2021: 46-7). The second colonial census, in 1962, counted 40 tribes, with a similarity of around three quarters of the groups. The differences related primarily to the inclusion of more ethnic groups from the North as administrative control increased there, and exclusion of East African groups outside Kenya. The explanation for the categories was simply that ‘[t]he grouping is of course somewhat arbitrary in many cases’; ‘geographic and linguistic considerations’ governed some choices, and ‘[i]n general the tribal classification was restricted to main tribes, and sub-tribes were not separately defined’ (Statistics Division, 1966: 34–35). As Ranger (1995) holds, such practices played a key role in constructing ethnic groups in colonial contexts, albeit not without reciprocating attachments to ethnicity – however much induced – on the part of African colonial subjects.

By 1962, the colonial government knew Kenya would become independent the following year, which may in part explain the lack of justification. Nonetheless, the same list was used in the first post-independence census in 1969, adding two Somali groups, and there were few changes for 1979 and 1989.<sup>5</sup> The popular notion that Kenya is made of 42(+) tribes comes from the 1969 census, though most Kenyans are not aware of this (Balaton-Chrimes 2021). In 2009, the list was significantly expanded, and a few further additions made in 2019, but there is no evidence that the inevitability of ethnic counting was ever reconsidered by the state. In this sense, the social imaginary of the nation as made up of discrete ethnic

groups has continued from the colonial period, as have many (though not all) of the specific categories used by colonial authorities.

### **State structures**

European colonial authorities understood ethno-racial categories *per se* to be a given in their colonies. That these categories were also ‘administratively pertinent’ (Rallu et al., 2006: 534) was not a coincidence. Such categories helped enable colonial authorities to conceive of subject populations not as a unified nation but as divided, and therefore easier to govern via separate administrative and territorial arrangements (Appadurai 1993). The French purported their colonial subjects were ‘Frenchmen abroad’, but their census practices reveal a different attitude, for example differentiating Algerians by ethnicity and later religion (Blum, 2002: 128–29), and West Africans by race (Gervais and Mandé, 2010: 94–96), while differentiating the French population only by national citizenship (Simon, 2008: 9). The British colonial strategy was to achieve cost-effective control via ‘indirect rule’, organising colonised populations into territorially confined ethnic groups and using local intermediaries to implement colonial policy.

In Kenya, by dividing colonised populations into ethnic groups and restricting them to living and working in Native Reserves, only allowing exit when labouring for settler farms, households or government offices, the British effectively prevented pan-African organising, and eased the burden of governing by leaning on tribal ‘custom’ and local intermediaries. Though they never achieved the levels of categorisation, order and control they aspired to, indirect rule still left its mark (Tignor, 1976; Weitzberg, 2015: 412–15). Its legacy is felt in the depth of ethnic division, the sense of ethnic territory that still dominates politics and party organisation, despite land privatisation, and the centralised structure of the state, which incentivises ethnic patrimonial networks as the primary route to access state power and resources (Ajulu, 2002; Berman, 1998). This divisive and centralised state structure has been a major incentivising factor in ethnic enumeration.

### **Arbitrary nations**

It is well acknowledged that borders in Africa were arbitrarily drawn in the early twentieth century, based on the interests and negotiations of colonial powers, leaving Africans with states of ‘grotesque shapes and various sizes’ (Griffiths, 1986: 204). The Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 laid down the rules for boundary-drawing based on the principle of effective occupation, and Britain continued to tweak its East African territorial boundaries throughout the period of the East Africa Protectorate (1895–1920) and Kenya Colony (1920–1963), for example through agreements with the Sultan of Zanzibar regarding the ten-mile coastal strip, the shifting of the northern border south to grant Italian Somaliland further territory, and various disputes with Uganda over Lake Victoria and its islands (Wekesa, 2010a). The arbitrary construction of national boundaries has at least two implications for ethnic enumeration.

First, as an imagined community, independent Kenya has been built in large part as a nation made of a community of ethnic groups, strengthened by ‘unity in diversity’, as reflected in the national shield, which carries the word ‘*Harambee*’, meaning ‘Let’s all pull together’. A more individualistic patriotic identity as Kenyan also exists – and is quite strong – but in a way that is deeply imbricated with ethnic identity. To be Kenyan, one must belong to an ethnic group of Kenya (Balaton-Chrimes 2015), and when the state attempts nation-building that seeks to homogenise ethnicity, it largely fails (Wekesa, 2010b). This intractable relationship between ethnicity and nationality is, in part, attributable to the colonial project in which, over a period roughly two generations, diverse territories and peoples were forced

into a shared political community they did not define, yet became committed to after independence. Ethnicity is, in other words, a foundational building block for nationality, making it difficult to discount its significance in a tool as administratively and politically significant as a census.

Second, the challenges associated with arbitrary delineation of boundaries are further reflected in the numerous changes in classification of border communities in colonial and postcolonial censuses. Groups brought from other parts of Africa by the British, including Nubian soldiers and Burji, Konso and Makonde farm labourers, were classified and enumerated in 1948, but not again until 1989 (Burji), 2009 (Nubian) or 2019 (Konso and Makonde). Populations at the northern borders with Ethiopia and Somalia have also experienced shifting approaches to classification, such as the addition of Galla in 2009 (previously counted only in 1948), Waata in 2009, and Wayyu in 2019. Various Somali groups, including Galjeel, Isaak and Leysan, were added only in 2009, and Murile and ‘Corner Tribes’ in 2019. The process of nation-building and defining the citizenry evidently remains ongoing.

## ETHNIC DEMOGRAPHY

Much of the literature addressing identity enumeration pertains to national demographics characterised by binary divisions (e.g. racial categories of Black and white, or ethnic categories of Hutu and Tutsi), three or four main groups (e.g. Black, white and Latino; or indigenous, Afro-descendant, European and *Mestizo*), or that are multicultural in the sense of comprising a dominant white (often settler) population and a large number of small identity groups (e.g. Australia or the UK) (see, for example, Rallu et al., 2006). By contrast, in Kenya the ‘big five’ ethnic groups fight for dominance, though none have close to a majority, and there are more than 40 other smaller ethnic groups. While the black African population is divided into ‘tribes’, significantly smaller populations (less than 1% in total) of Kenyan Asians (mostly descended from Indian forced migrants) and Kenyan Europeans (mostly descended from white settlers) are counted by race. This combination is one key component of the explanation of why there is an impasse on the question of whether or not to count: among the ‘big five’, the demographic posturing fuelled by ethnic counting is dangerous; but among what we call the ‘little many’, the recognition conferred by a census code has both symbolic and instrumental value.

### The ‘big five’

The competitive side of Kenyan politics is promulgated most visibly by what Kenyans refer to as the ‘big five’ (see Table 1) – those groups large enough to be able to bet on influential ethnic voting banks (Ajulu 2002). It is these, and particularly Kikuyu, Kalenjin and Luo, who tussle in the political arena to control the state and its resources.

**Table 1:** The ‘big five’, 2019 census (figures from Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2020: 423–24)

Group	Population	National population (%)
Kikuyu	8,148,668	17.13
Luhya (including ‘sub-tribes’)	6,823,842	14.35
Kalenjin (including ‘sub-tribes’)	6,358,113	13.37
Luo	5,066,966	10.65



Kamba	4,663,910	9.80
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Though citizens decry ‘the tyranny of numbers’ (Maina, 2013), there remains a mutually reinforcing relationship between knowing one’s group size and feeling secure in belonging, rights and access to power. Accordingly, many Kenyans hold an ambivalent relationship to ethnic enumeration, while political leaders depend on and reinforce it (Balaton-Chrimes 2021). This is one of the main reasons Kenya has not abandoned ethnic enumeration.

In 1969, the 40 categories from 1962 were used, with the addition of two Somali groups. In 1979, these same categories were replicated again, though all the ‘sub-tribes’ of the Kalenjin were collapsed into a single category. Having recently succeeded Kenyatta upon his death in 1978, the new President, Daniel arap Moi, therefore belonged to a large ethnic group (the Kalenjin), instead of a small one (the Kalenjin sub-tribe, Tugen). As Lynch (2011a: 50) explains, this is perhaps the most well-known case of actively constructing an ethnic identity – Kalenjin – with the explicit orientation to increasing the group’s size. It is also significant insofar as it was primarily language-based, rather than rooted in colonial categorisation. Nonetheless, once the identity was consolidated by political leaders and administrative tools, including the census, Kalenjin slotted into the pre-existing paradigm of ethnicity structuring Kenyan society. In 1989, more or less the same list was used again. By 1999, ethnic numbers had become so sensitive that official results were never published by KNBS. When ethnic results were leaked in the press (Daily Nation 2000a) they caused such outrage and tension that the whole census report was delayed for over a year, purportedly for ‘technical reasons’, and the final report made no mention of ‘tribe’ (Daily Nation 2000b). From 2009 the ethnic results were published again, but with the addition of many new ethnic groups and ‘sub-tribes’, discussed below.

Between 1969 and 1989, the use of a reasonably stable list, and the significant Kalenjin change in 1979 can be interpreted as responses to several factors. First, the state inherited from colonial authorities was highly centralised, with power and control vested in the Office of President, held from 1969–1978 by Kikuyu leader Jomo Kenyatta. He enjoyed considerable personal privilege and wealth accumulation, and established a vast patrimonial network to both strengthen his own power and stabilise the newly independent nation-state. This led to still-strong perceptions – and in some cases realities – that Kikuyu people have benefitted disproportionately from the state’s power and resources (Owiti, 2014). The existence of figures attesting to the size of the Kikuyu population is, logically, vital to the maintenance of this political dynamic. Second, however, Kikuyu privilege was contested in at least two ways. From one angle, the Luo population, led at independence by popular political figures such as Oginga Odinga and Tom Mboya, anticipated ‘their turn to eat’ and contested Kikuyu power. This dynamic also required a sense of the size of the various other populations. From another angle, ‘small’ ethnic groups such as President Moi’s Tugen, and groups from the Coast such as Swahili and Mijikenda, had unsuccessfully fought for a federalised state structure in the constitutional conferences prior to independence, and in various ways throughout Kenya’s history have advocated what is known as the ‘*majimboist*’ position – ‘*jimbo*’ being Swahili for state or region (Anderson 2010). The fear that small groups need to be protected or, in the case of Tugen and Kalenjin, amalgamated to become large groups, similarly depended on, among other things, the existence of numbers.

The political sensitivity of ethnic classification and demography increased dramatically during the 1990s. Under domestic and international pressure, Kenya formally returned to multi-party democracy, and elections were held in 1992 and 1997. These elections were marred by significant violence in areas such as the Coast and Rift Valley, where ethnic

demography is mixed (Anderson and Lochery, 2008). Debates about *majimboism* began circulating again, but marred by fear and chauvinism about access to land, resources and political power (Anderson, 2010). In this context, the ethnicity results of 1999's census took on particular significance, as illustrated in the language of the *Daily Nation's* reporting (2000a):

Another significant fact, if the figures are correct, is that the Luo have lost their place as Kenya's third largest community behind the Kikuyu and the Luhya. They have slipped into fourth place with 3.1 million members, overtaken by the Kalenjin who are now in third place with 3.5 million. Smallest of the Big Five tribes is the Kamba, with 2.9 million members. The Kikuyu remain easily Kenya's biggest community on 5.3 million...

The perception and constant reproduction of ethnic numbers as a race or competition reached its zenith in the decision not to officially publish the results from that year.

### **The 'little many'**

By 2009, the census itself became part of debates about the need to transform inter-ethnic relations. In the preceding decade the pro-democracy movement had made major gains. Moi's preferred successor Uhuru Kenyatta was defeated in the 2002 elections, when Kenyans voted in Mwai Kibaki – in part as a rejection of Moi's dangerous variant of *majimboism*. As Anderson (2010: 147) argued, 'political inclusion has triumphed over ethnic exclusivity'. But by the December 2007 election, the fragility of inclusion and the persistence of fear were again made clear in inter-ethnic violence that left more than 1000 dead and more than 660,000 displaced (Lynch, 2009). The period following that election, where Kibaki (Kikuyu) and long-standing opposition leader Raila Odinga (Luo) had formed a joint government and were moving again toward democratic reforms to avoid further violence, was a cautiously hopeful one. It was in this context that the August 2009 census took place.

Some Kenyan commentators criticised the inclusion of a question about ethnicity in the census as divisive. A movement called 'Tribe Kenya' succeeded in getting 'Kenyan' included as an ethnic code, and encouraged people to choose it out of anti-tribalist sentiment (Balaton-Chrimes 2011: 212). 610,000 people out of 38.6 million did just this (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2013).<sup>6</sup> In a letter to the *Daily Nation*, one such person wrote: 'We cross-ethnic Kenyans are tribeless and proud. We may be a minority, but we represent the future' (Jommo, 2009). Nonetheless, by 2019 the number of Kenyans identifying as such dropped to only 183,023 – anti-ethnicity sentiment proved to be short-lived.

In keeping with the inclusive mood, it was not only 'Kenyan' that was added in 2009, but also a large number of 'sub-tribes' (discussed below) and previously marginalised minority ethnic groups recognised for the first time. The number of ethnic categories jumped from around 40 to over 110. For minority groups, such as Nubians, ethnic enumeration can be a social and political gain (Balaton-Chrimes 2011). It has symbolic value in the conferral of a sense of belonging, and instrumental value insofar as it can – theoretically – be used as a basis for making other kinds of claims, such as for land, seats in government, or development resources (Balaton-Chrimes 2011, 2021). The vast majority of newly enumerated groups were extremely small in size (see Table 2), and therefore non-threatening to the ethnic demographics of the 'big five' or in terms of overall demands on state resources.

**Table 2:** Minority ethnic groups, 2019 census (figures from Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2020)<sup>7</sup>

<b>Group</b>	<b>Population</b>
Dahalo	575
Taveta	26,590
Swahili (and sub-tribes)	56,074
Bajuni	91,422
El Molo	1104
Rendile	96,313
Sakuye	27,006
Aweer / Waata	20,103
Wayyu	3761
Gosha	685
Dasenach	19,337
Walwana / Malakote	21,774
Ilcamus / Njemps	32,949
Makonde	3764
Burji	36,938
Konso	1299
Nubi	21,319
<b>Small ethnic groups total population</b>	<b>461,013</b>
<b>Population total</b>	<b>47,564,296</b>
<b>Small ethnic groups percentage of total</b>	<b>0.97</b>

That more groups were recognised in 2009 and 2019 reflects the increasing array of political benefits theoretically associated with identifying as a marginalised or minority group under the 2010 constitution, which was being publicly debated at the time of the 2009 census. The constitution has a number of provisions directed at these groups, including an Equalisation Fund to address historical disadvantage, and dictates that legislation ensure representation of ethnic and other minorities and marginalised groups in Parliament and County Assemblies. A raft of commissions has been established to advance this agenda, including the National Gender and Equality Commission, National Cohesion and Integration Commission, Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission and National Land Commission. In practice, the promised benefits of these provisions are yet to materialise, but given they are the most concrete promises made to minority and marginalised communities in the nation's history, anticipation of gains is very real. When combined with the symbolic value of recognition as a 'tribe of Kenya', these provisions – despite their failure to materialise thus far – incentivise claims for ethnic recognition in the census.

## **ETHNICITY AS CATEGORY**

There is little agreement on how we as scholars, or census-makers, should define race or ethnicity – or indeed, over whether race should be treated as an aspect of or as analytically distinct from ethnicity (Lee 1993; Wimmer, 2008: 973-4). Occasionally, the census literature bundles together different aspects of identity without much critical reflection (see, for

example, Rallu et al., 2006). More thoughtfully, Morning (2008: 242; 2014) and Glassman (2011: 11) argue there is no conceptually coherent, essential distinction between categories such as race and ethnicity. These scholars suggest the concepts share in common an attempt to account for ancestry or ‘community of descent’ as well as a faith in the significance of group-based human difference. Nonetheless, as they acknowledge, there remains a need to interrogate context-specific uses of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity.’

Coherent or otherwise, the terms do get put to use in ways that support different political projects. In these cases the distinctions between the terms can bear on the stakes of counting or not counting. Hirschman (1987), for example, shows how British imperial census categories in Malaysia moved from ‘nationality’, to ‘race’, to ‘community’ and then to ‘ethnic group’. The appearance of *racial* categories coincided with Darwinian notions of evolution and coincident European notions of racial superiority, helping shape Malaysian colonial subjects in a racialised way that justified, for Europeans, colonial control. Hirschman notes the issue is not what marker is the right category, but rather ‘whether such markers are aligned with other ideological, social and economic divisions in society’ (557). We wish to make two key observations about the differences between uses of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ in the Kenyan context.

First, there is a difference between what the terms ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ have come to mean, particularly in their use in the census. Census reports from 2019, 2009 and 1989 tabulate ethnic groups in list form, ending with the categories Kenyan-Asian, -European and -Arab, without any explanation. It is 1979 that has the last explanation of choice of terminology: ‘The Non-African Kenyans were grouped into 4 groups’ [Asians, Europeans, Arabs and Other] while ‘[t]he grouping of indigenous African tribes was done mainly on ethnic, linguistic and geographic considerations’ (Central Bureau of Statistics 1979, p.25). Though it is not unambiguous, this grouping broadly suggests that ethnic groups are considered distinct from racial ones. The gradual and possibly unintentional amalgamation of the racial and ethnic lists over recent decades leaves the ‘official’ status of any distinction between race and ethnicity unclear. Nonetheless, the equivalent to ‘Arab’ or ‘Asian’ is not ‘Kikuyu’, but ‘Black’, and so amalgamating the lists only goes so far. These categories indicate that, at least as far as the census is concerned, race retains an association with phenotypical appearance and ancestry. In the Kenyan context, race is available to everyone, whereas ethnicity only to Black Africans. Race functions, therefore, not as an *aspect* of ethnicity but an alternative to it, albeit an alternative that one can hold alongside ethnicity.

These categories made sense to Kenya’s colonial census-makers: by the time the British reached Kenya, the racial hierarchies they began to establish in places like Malaysia were deeply ingrained in colonial epistemologies and ontologies. Given the significant privileges afforded to Europeans, Asians and Arabs compared to Black Africans, it made – and makes – sense, on Hirschman’s terms, to recognise that race as a social construct closely linked to biology (for better or worse) is a meaningful one in Kenya. Racial difference, conceived in this way, signalled colonial privilege, but unlike in settler colonies, racialised control of the state is no longer a central political concern of the population.<sup>8</sup> The population identifying as racial minorities in 2019 was very small (Kenyan Asians 0.1%, Kenyan Arabs 0.13% and Kenyan Europeans 0.003%),<sup>9</sup> white settlers having largely returned home around independence in 1963. Ethnic control, however, remains salient.

Kenya is not alone here. Postcolonial census-taking in Commonwealth African nations has often moved ‘race’ to the background or replaced it with nationality, while bringing ethnicity, language or religion to the fore (Christopher, 2006). For example, Uganda’s last

pre-independence census, held in 1959, included questions about tribe and religion. The first post-independence census, held a decade later, asked about race and nationality, and the 1980 census only about nationality, representing a (temporary) abandonment of all categories that would divide Ugandans from each other. The religion question was brought back in 1991, and the nationality question changed into one asking citizenship for foreign nationals (a largely insignificant population demographically) and tribe for Ugandans. This approach was maintained in 2002 and 2014, representing a return to colonial categories of ethnicity. Uganda now also has a list of national ethnic groups in its constitution. Meanwhile, Ghana's first postcolonial census, in 1960, enquired about tribe and religion, its 1970 and 1984 censuses nationality, and its 2000 and 2010 censuses nationality, ethnicity and religion.<sup>10</sup>

Our second point about ethnicity as a category is that, in Kenya, one of its key characteristics, especially over recent decades, is that it is highly amenable to a sometimes dramatic proliferation of the number and kinds of groups with whom one can identify. 'Tribe' has contained, over time, 150 different ethnic groups. Around 24 groups have been included in all Kenyan censuses;<sup>11</sup> while the remaining groups named between 1948 and 2019 demonstrate both the tendency for identification to shift and change, and the vast multiplicity of ethnic identifications. This is not uncommon. In Nigeria, for example, the three largest groups – Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo – together constitute around half the population, but there are at least 389 groups in total (Edozie, 2018: 427).

Conventional scholarly wisdom on the nature of ethnicity in Africa suggests exactly this; ethnic groups are highly malleable, amenable both to a profound sense of 'naturalness' and great adaptability. Members may draw on a shared sense of history, mythical or actual origins, and perceive themselves to share a common fate, thus having intergenerational, past and future-oriented ontologies (Young, 2002). Ethnic groups often share a culture constituted by elements such as language, religion, rituals, rites of passage, beliefs and kinship systems, which unite people otherwise differentiated by status, age or class (Lynch, 2011a: 12). In other words, actual shared ancestry is negotiable. Ethnic groups do not exist independently of their active creation and recreation by members conscious of their membership (Berman, 1998) and by the social and political structures that incentivise them, colonial and postcolonial (Ranger, 1995: 81). The identities, names, boundaries and alliances of ethnic groups can be, and regularly are, moulded to fit into and exploit prevailing regimes of recognition and distribution (Balaton-Chrimes 2015; Lynch, 2011b). Through practices deploying *métis*, numerous identities and their nuances survive and shift with or without state recognition, and are thus available to float in and out of state schemas of legibility. Legibility can strengthen those identities, but it does not alone constitute them.

The splintering of ethnic identities is illustrated by increasing numbers of sub-tribes; and very small ethnic groups formed through recuperating old categories, instigating new ones, or moving from 'sub-tribe' to 'main-tribe'. For example, many of the groups inconsistently named and counted in the census are sub-tribes of four large umbrella ethnic groups: Kalenjin, Mijikenda, Swahili and Luhya.<sup>12</sup> To elaborate on just one of these, 'Kalenjin', as Lynch (2011a) explains in detail, is a term that emerged in the mid twentieth century. In 1948, there was no Kalenjin category, but Nandi, Kipsigis, Marakwet, Pokot, Tugen, Elgeyo (renamed Keiyo from 2009) and Sabaot were all counted. These were counted as 'Kalenjin speaking' groups in 1962 and 1969, but Kalenjin was still not an ethnic group. In 1979 and 1989 they were merged to become 'Kalenjin,' now a 'tribe'. In 2009, when sub-tribes were added, this included the earlier groups, plus Arror, Bung'omok, Cherangany, Endo, Ogiek, Samor, Senger, Sengwer, Terik and Endorois. Lembus and Kony were added as sub-tribes in 2019, the latter counted with 'Sabaot/Bong'ome/Kony'. A number of other groups have been

associated and disassociated from Kalenjin over the years. This includes El Molo, who appeared first in 1979 and were counted as a main tribe then and in 1989, then as a sub-tribe of Kalenjin in 2009, and as a main tribe again in 2019; and Sabaot, who were counted as an 'other tribe' in 1948, a main tribe in 1962 and 1969, were not counted in 1979 and 1989 (the same years Kalenjin was collapsed into a single category), and as a sub-tribe of Kalenjin in 2009 and 2019. Dorobo, Ilchamus and Njemps have all fluctuated more ambiguously between being considered Kalenjin or not.

In Kenya, race has not been characterised by an equivalent adaptability or proliferation of group identities. This is not to endorse a biological approach to 'race' separate from a cultural approach to 'ethnicity'; nor to suggest that in other parts of the world, race has not or could not take on this character. Rather, our point is to recognise that, in Kenya at least, these have been (again, for better or worse) the major differences between the two concepts.

It is our suggestion that an understanding of the specific, locally constructed nature of race and other aspects of ethnicity in non-settler postcolonial contexts – and especially those with highly diverse identity-group demographics – is an important consideration when responding to the question of whether or not to classify and count in a census. This matters because it alters the political stakes relating to state capture, domination and fear, as well as affirmative action, recognition and marginalisation.

## CONCLUSION

There is no consensus about whether group identities should be enumerated in censuses. Group enumeration can be both a possible source of social division – perhaps even contributing to violence – and a vital tool for measuring and addressing group-based inequalities. However, much of the existing literature focuses on case studies from the global north or Latin America, where dominant majority populations exist alongside smaller, often racialised, minorities. Our contention is that normative debates about whether or not to enumerate group identities have been shaped by this specific context – which does not necessarily obtain in postcolonial states of the global south.

Through examining the Kenyan case, which lies outside the traditional focus of comparative studies, we have demonstrated that the question of whether to enumerate ethnicity in the census has no satisfactory answer; that is to say, in the Kenyan context, group enumeration engenders a political logic conducive to both inter-ethnic competition for dominance amongst the country's five largest ethnic groups, and measures intended to address disadvantage amongst smaller, often highly marginalised groups. We are, therefore, unable and unwilling to make any hard and fast recommendations about whether or not to count, and find ourselves falling back on the unsatisfying but appropriate conclusion that it depends on how the figures are used. Nonetheless, this analysis does offer three important lessons for understanding – if not resolving – this impossible question.

First, as is well acknowledged in the literature, postcolonial states carry legacies of colonial census practices and therefore also the effects of those legacies, including divisiveness. This is especially so in colonies, like Kenya, that were subject to indirect rule in a period when racial hierarchies and ethnic divisions were deeply embedded in administrative apparatuses and daily practices. Our analysis of the legacies of ethnic enumeration suggests that contemporary census studies must look not at the past or the present in isolation, but more frequently bring the two into conversation to interrogate whether or not forms of colonial power are consciously or unconsciously being reproduced, as well as to understand how they

are being transformed (e.g. the proliferation of categories in Kenya since 2009) or eradicated (as in Tanzania).

Second, the nature of group domination and marginalisation is shaped, at least in part, by demography, which can be widely varied and does not always consist of a small number of groups. Where this is the case, the effects of classifying and counting can be different, and notably – ambivalent in a different way. Rather than counting simply being a question of counting for ‘good’ (affirmative action and redress) or ‘bad’ (domination), it can be a question of different groups – especially different-sized groups – experiencing those effects differently. The politics of demographics can also be different where a majority is an impossibility, again altering the effects of counting in ways that can encourage cooperative alliances, but also competitive ones. There is no straightforward conclusion here, but rather a call for careful consideration of the varied effects of counting in different demographic contexts.

Third, though we agree that as concepts, race and ethnicity are best understood through constructivist insights regarding group-based difference and that there are good arguments for treating race as one possible aspect of ethnicity, we do suggest that the particular character of these aspects can be markedly different and take on different significance according to place. It is, therefore, inappropriate to elide differences in comparative studies, to assume the significance of any one over others, or to assume or refute particular meanings. In Kenya’s census categories, ‘race’ retains an attachment to biology, whereas ethnicity understood as ‘tribe’ has been more maleable. Any consideration of whether or not to count one or the other must be informed by a deep historical and contextual understanding of what these terms mean in a given place and time, how they shape demographic statistics, and whose interests are served or thwarted by which. This includes giving thought to how one type of category or the other might change over time, and in particular, proliferate, and how that might change the political stakes of counting.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, we refer throughout to final reports rather than code lists provided to enumerators; different spellings of the same group are not treated as different classifications; spellings used are those from the most recent census; classifications and population figures come from East African Statistical Department (1950); Statistics Division (1966); Statistics Division (1970) Central Bureau of Statistics (1979); Central Bureau of Statistics (1994); Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2013; 2020). Balaton-Chrimes conducted nine months of participatory observation with a minority ethnic group in 2009, which included observation of census enumeration in Nairobi; and a research assistant conducted one month of participant observation around the conduct of the 2019 census. This work informs this article but is elaborated in more depth elsewhere (Balaton-Chrimes 2011, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> The term 'big five' is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the big five safari animals that are the target of hunters. It is colloquially used in Kenya as an implied criticism of the sometimes violent conflict between the five largest ethnic groups.

<sup>3</sup> Where we use the word 'tribe' in this paper, it refers to the explicit use of the word in census or other stated materials.

<sup>4</sup> There are, however, examples where the code list given to enumerators and that in the final report differ.

<sup>5</sup> Because ethnic population results were never released for 1999, and the Kenya National Archives has no records available, we cannot know which groups were counted that year.

<sup>6</sup> Multiple response is not permitted, so identifying as 'Kenyan' would preclude identification with any ethnic group.

<sup>7</sup> Criteria include a) not a sub-tribe of another ethnic group; b) population under 100,000. This table excludes the category 'Stateless (Galle, Shona, Wapemba, Pare, etc.)', numbering 6272, as this category indicates they are not Kenyan citizens (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> This is not to say it is not significant both as a source of inherited economic privilege and ongoing questioning of the right to belong, but rather that racial minorities are not demographically numerous.

<sup>9</sup> Calculated from Kenya National Bureau of Statistics figures (2020: 423-24).

<sup>10</sup> This information is collated from questionnaires collected by the 'Ethnicity Counts?' project, available at <https://www.waikato.ac.nz/nidea/research/ethnicitycounts/census-forms>.

<sup>11</sup> Even among these, around half have experienced significant changes, including classification as sub- or main tribe; changes in the existence and content of their list of sub-tribes; and for Kalenjin and Somali (two significantly sized groups), sometimes the inclusion *only* of some of their 'sub'-tribes and not of Kalenjin or Somali as 'main' tribes, hence the approximate number.

<sup>12</sup> These groups, by and large, tend not to agitate for recognition in the same way as marginalised minority groups because they are already included in useful ethnic alliances. Nonetheless, when there is utility in doing so, they can, such as when Sengwer peoples were included as a Kalenjin sub-group in 2009 (Lynch 2011).



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