



# Unholy Trinity: Church, Tribe and Politics in Kenya

By Dauti Kahura



On 31 July 2017, the day that Chris Msando's body was found at the city mortuary, I was on the eighth floor of the Cardinal Otunga Plaza in the middle of Nairobi's central business district. The floor houses the office of Cardinal John Njue, the head of the Catholic Church in Kenya. I was there to discuss peace and justice issues that the church had been conveying to the country in the lead-up to the 8 August 2017 general election.

I had squeezed in a meeting with his personal secretary, Fr. Calistus Nyangilo, who informed me that the body of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC)'s acting ICT manager had been located. "Actually I was with his eminence when the report came through," Fr. Nyangilo told me. "This is bad for peaceful elections," Cardinal Njue had told him.

First, a word about Chris Msando. I had met Msando about two months ago at a workshop that had sought his audience to explain the IEBC's election preparedness to a group of journalists, election specialists and observers. He spoke last. For 45 minutes, Msando took us through what he considered to be a water-tight technological schedule to curb electoral malpractices.

Throughout his stay at the workshop, he took notes, but when he stood to speak, he spoke off the cuff, without a script. He was confident, eloquent and knew his subject matter very well. He had his

facts on his fingertips. Another 30 minutes was spent answering inquisitive and tough questions from the participants. At the end of our engagement, many of us gave the IEBC the benefit of the doubt. Initially, we were sceptical about the IEBC's prep work, but Msando reassured us.

"I want to debunk the myth that the Catholic Church has not been preaching about both peace and justice," said Fr. Nyangilo. "Maybe the messaging could be wrongly worded, but the church has been adamant that peace and justice are a prerequisite for a credible and just election." Shooting from the hip, I had begun by asking the Cardinal's personal secretary why the church seemed to be concerned more about peace, as opposed to justice, or even a credible election.

Sometime in June 2017, lawyer Charles Kanjama, addressed the Catholic church's top clergy and told them that the church had been sourly "divided in half" during the 2007 general election ethnic flare-up. The one-on-one discussion took place at the Queens of Apostle Seminary in Nairobi, situated off Langata Road. Because of this division, the church could not speak in one voice. It had been deflated and had lost its legitimacy, and could, therefore, not be trusted by its laity or even by the rest of Kenyans.

On 27 July 2017, the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB) had issued a pastoral letter titled "*Seeking Peace and Prosperity*" that quoted from the Book of Jeremiah 29:7. Said the letter in part: "The clarion call has been to have Just, Fair, Peaceful and Credible Elections."

But the pastoral letter was a far cry from the homily and punchy letters that the Catholic church had issued in the past. The letter, just a two-page affair and signed by Rt. Rev Philip Anyolo, the Bishop of Homa Bay and the chairman of KCCB, is nothing more than an exhortation by the Catholic church's top clergy to the Kenyan people: "We are calling upon all Kenyans to seize this opportunity to exercise our constitutional right and give us leaders of integrity." The letter ends by "beseeching God to take charge of the whole process of elections." Then the letter signs off by calling for peace...peace...peace.

That the Catholic church - the biggest and most influential and powerful of the Christian denominations in Kenya - has lost its legitimacy and trust among Kenyans has been a public secret since the botched general election of 2007. Indeed Fr. Nyangilo himself told me as much. "The church has been trying to reclaim its trust - and it takes a long time. That election divided the clergy and it was one of the lowest moments of the church and it has not been easy."

Since the post-election violence of 2007-2008 that almost tore the fabric that had held the country together since independence in 1963, the Catholic church has been hoping to exorcise the ghost of disunity and division that threw the church off balance. "I will be honest with you, it has been both an individual and collective struggle to reclaim the unity of the church," said Fr. Nyangilo. He told me that the Archdiocese Justice and Peace Committee had deployed some of its members to talk about justice and peace around the country among the Catholic laity, albeit away from the limelight of the mass media.

Why is the Catholic Church not broadcasting its powerful message loud and clear?

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The antagonism between some of the bishops has been palpable. So bad has been the ethnic and political division among the Catholic clergy that an Archdiocese of Nairobi priest, who asked me not to reveal his name for fear of retribution, told me point blank, "I do not recognise Cardinal Njue as my spiritual head."

The apex of the Catholic church's ethnic division peaked when a Catholic priest was killed during the 2007-2008 post-election flare up. Fr. Michael Kamau was a priest who hailed from Nakuru diocese but taught at Tindinyo Seminary in Bungoma. On 30 December 2007 or thereabouts, he drove from Tindinyo heading to Nairobi. He was coming to pick a fellow priest who had been seconded to teach at the same seminary. He was excited and happy since the priest he was going to pick was to teach the same subject he was teaching.

On reaching Nakuru, Fr. Kamau, aware that taking the Nairobi-Nakuru highway was risky, took the Kabarnet-Mogotio road leading to Mogotio town. Mogotio was an area that he was familiar with because he had worked there as a parish priest. He, therefore, knew the residents well. But little did he know what lay ahead of him. He was stopped by marauding youth, who, upon realising that he was a Kikuyu, killed him on the spot.

"Father Kamau was killed in the area he had worked as a priest," a priest from Mitume parish in Kitale, who knew him well, would later tell me. "The people who killed him knew him and they killed him because he was a Kikuyu," said the priest when we met in Nairobi. Consumed with anger and bitterness, my priest friend told me: "We must avenge the death of Father Kamau...the Kalenjins killed one of our own. We must get our justice."

Justice has been a difficult subject for the Catholic church's clergy since 2008. Itself wrought by ethnic division, the church could not purport to talk about justice, even among its laity, when in 2008 its clergy lost all pretense of being united by the Catholic creed.

Otieno Ombok, a staunch Catholic and a peace expert who sits on the board of the Archdiocese of Nairobi Justice and Peace Committee, admitted to me that the Catholic Church completely lost it in 2008. "For a long time after the 2007-2008 debacle, brother priests from warring ethnic communities could not talk to each other," said Ombok. "The conference of bishops was worse: it was a diametrically divided house." He added that the senior bishops - "and you know who I am talking about" - could not even sit and share a meal for the longest time.

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The truth of the matter is that ethnic division is not only a preserve of the Catholic church; all the mainstream churches in Kenya today are a reflection of political/ethnic division. During former President Moi's time, the African Inland Church (AIC) was openly identified as both a "Kanu and Kalenjin church", so much so that its then head, Bishop Silas Yego, openly associated with Moi, and occasionally even attended some

Kanu meetings.

The Cardinal's predecessor, Cardinal Maurice Otunga, said the priest, was pro-establishment, no doubt, but the one thing he never did was to openly and tacitly side with President Moi and his Kanu party. "Today, every Catholic, every Kenyan knows Cardinal Njue is pro-establishment, he is pro-Jubilee. His role in the lead-up to the 2007 elections was obvious for everybody to witness."

The renegade priest reminded me that the reason why the Catholic church is limping in this electioneering period is simply because it cannot pretend to moralise to anyone; its leadership is punctured and there is little trust among the college of bishops. "The feeble peace messages sugar-coated with weak justice expressions is simply because the church's head is interested in maintaining the current political status quo. When the conference of bishops comes together to issue a pastoral letter - like they did on 27 July 2017 - it was to give the impression that they are united and are speaking in one voice, but all that is a PR stunt."

Yet, while the church that has been struggling to reclaim its power and glory, it has also been readying itself for any post-8 August 2017 election eventuality. In the last month, the conference of bishops has been inviting "election experts" at its Waumini House offices in Nairobi to help it think through the probable scenarios in the lead-up to and after the elections.

In one of these sessions, a facilitator presented the following four possible scenarios:

**Scenario 1:** Good elections - that will be credible and peaceful. The victor and the loser will both accept the results. Therefore, the transition of power will be smooth.

**Scenario 2:** Good elections - that will be credible, but that will result in violence because the loser - even after losing fairly - will not concede defeat, hence will not agree to hand over power.

**Scenario 3:** Bad elections - but "peaceful" because the might of the security apparatus that will be deployed massively will force a false peace. The people will be coerced to accept bad results - leading to a "negative peace". (Otherwise called the Ugandan peace scenario.)

**Scenario 4:** Bad elections - that will result in an explosion of violence, even with the presence of the mighty security apparatus. Anarchy will reign supreme.

The in-house discourses that the KCCB has been holding with various experts are ostensibly to help it craft appropriate messages to Kenyans, as well as to prepare itself for the best of times and the worst times. "That notwithstanding, the Catholic church clergy can craft a theology of justice - if it wanted to," said Ombok. "It doesn't have to wait for experts to tell it what to do." Ombok said a larger part of the problem is that the church's leadership sits comfortably with the state, therefore implicitly, it is pro-establishment.

The truth of the matter is that ethnic division is not only a preserve of the Catholic church; all the mainstream churches in Kenya today are a reflection of political/ethnic division. During former President Moi's time, the African Inland Church (AIC) was openly identified as both a "Kanu and Kalenjin church", so much so that its then head, Bishop Silas Yego, openly associated with Moi, and occasionally even attended some Kanu meetings. Yego even helped Moi fend off criticism from the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), the umbrella body that brings all the Protestant churches together. After the introduction of political pluralism in 1991, Yego instigated a breakaway group of evangelical churches that accused NCCCK of being a political outfit. (NCCCK had been on the frontline of exposing Moi's excesses and in urging him to open up the political space for multiparty politics to thrive.)

Interestingly, NCKK today is a pale shadow of what it was in the 1980s and 1990s when it openly challenged the Moi regime. Today, under the leadership of Rev. Peter Karanja, it has all but gone quiet. Rev. Karanja, although an eloquent church minister, is apparently a victim of the 2007-2008 post-election violence that saw a large section of the non-Kikuyu Anglican laity view him as an apologist for a "Kikuyu state".

In 2007, the PCEA church leadership openly took sides in the politics of the day. It drummed up support for President Mwai Kibaki and the PNU party. Its adherents, many of them from the ethnic Kikuyu community, tended to conflate their church creed with Kikuyu political leadership.

The Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), from its inception in Kenya in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the missionaries first set foot in the central Kenya areas of Tumu Tumu in Nyeri and Thogoto in Kiambu, has always been associated with Kikuyu nationalist apologists. A Maasai evangelical pastor once told me that after the Scottish PCEA missionaries had gone, the Kikuyu church leadership that was left behind sought to Kikuyu-ise the church. "When the PCEA church came to evangelise in Maasailand, for example, many of the Maasai children's names would be turned into Kikuyu-sounding names; others would be given outright Kikuyu names - all in the name of receiving baptismal names."

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This is not to say individual PCEA ministers have not opposed the church's apparent contradictions and paradoxes. Timothy Njoya, now a retired PCEA reverend - though he still preaches at his favourite PCEA church in Kinoo in Kiambu County - fought epic battles within the church and with the state. These battles are acknowledged nationally and globally.

The recent death of Reverend John Gatu in May 2017, a one-time moderator of the PCEA church in Kenya and a good friend of Rev. Njoya, reminds us of the battles he also waged against the state during Jomo Kenyatta's time. In his biography *Fan the Flame*, he chronicles how he opposed the 1969 Gatundu oathings and the threats that were levied against him. Njoya remembers Gatu as a church minister, who like himself, fought for justice everywhere and for everyone.

"To the various church establishments, the preaching of peace, and not justice, means that they are only interested in maintaining their own status quo and that of the government of the day," says Ombok. "It is the way the church has been socialised, since the missionaries' activities coincided with those of the colonial masters."

"The peace narrative in the slums is a euphemism for veiled threats and subtle intimidation, coupled with scriptural menacing carefully selected by the quasi-messianic and self-styled pastors, who are just out to eke a living." Faced with the daily vicissitudes of slum life, the social worker told me, the peace message, when constantly drummed, can easily influence those who are constantly being reminded that "a demand for justice is tantamount to a demand for violence." The implicit message being passed on is: between peace and "violence" what would you rather have?

Six months to the 2007 general election, a motley group of evangelical/revivalist churches' leadership came together under the auspices of the House of Bishops. They agreed to speak publicly on the critical issues that would ensure a smooth election that year. The issues included accountability, credibility, fairness, justice, transparency and, well, of course, a peaceful election, among other things.

But unbeknownst to some of the bishops, a splinter group went to the State House and reportedly met President Kibaki. "After the 'clandestine' State House meeting, our friends' demeanour and all the issues we had said we would champion and vocalise changed overnight," a bishop who was part of the House of Bishops coming together confided in me.

Apparently, the group that had been left behind came to learn that there had been greasing of palms, but more fundamentally, the group that had gone to *eat ugali* (*eating ugali* in Kenyan political parlance has come to mean going to State House to be bribed) all belonged to one ethnic community. "There are no prizes for guessing from which community the group of bishops who had gone to see the president came from," the bishop, who sought anonymity, told me. That is the same group that insisted that the important thing was the country to remain peaceful.

"In the slums of Nairobi and its environs, it is these evangelical/Pentecostal/revivalist churches that are now being used to spread this false message of peace," said a social worker with a community-based organisation in Kibera, an informal settlement that was the site of much violence in 2007-2008. "My hunch is that they have been given money by the Jubilee Party to cause 'fear and despondency', even as they claim to advocate for peace," said the social worker, who because of the nature of his work, asked that his identity be concealed.

"Life in the slums is always tenuous, people live on the edge all the time - but in peace. When you begin talking about keeping the peace and being peaceful, you inadvertently create doubt in people and the 'peace' that is being preached acquires a different meaning," said the social worker. "The peace narrative in the slums is a euphemism for veiled threats and subtle intimidation, coupled with scriptural menacing carefully selected by the quasi-messianic and self-styled pastors, who are just out to eke a living."

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I found this to be true when I spoke to a middle-aged father of three in Lakisama estate, which neighbours Mathare North, another low-income area in Nairobi. "What we want is peaceful elections - not violence." Violence here is interpreted to mean disruption of the daily and natural order of life. "Elections will always be stolen. So long as they let us (voters) be, there's no problem. In any case, leaders are chosen by God not man - that is what the Bible says."

A more nuanced message that the peace narrative is not talking about - yet that is being hinted covertly - is the notion that a nation's leader is picked by God. It does not matter whether the leader in question coerces, kills, maims, rigs or steals to remain in power.

Thus, the peace narrative's other purpose is the normalisation of electoral malpractices, which people should just "accept and move on."

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covertly - is the notion that a nation's leader is picked by God. It does not matter whether the leader in question coerces, kills, maims, rigs or steals to remain in power. For the religionists and Christian Right, the end justifies the means. And that is why the peace narrative is largely being drummed by evangelicals - quasi "criminal" men and women - who themselves were "chosen" by God to preach to the people. These kind of pastors litter the slums, where they have converted semi-permanent iron sheets structures into Christ's tabernacles.

A self-respecting mother of two from Kiamunyi estate in Nakuru told me that a country's president is ordained by God. "The language of justice, which translates into violence and opposition politics, cannot be equated to the language of peace - which is all embracing and Godly. God is telling us to be peaceful and he is the one who will give us a president."

Nobody captured the contradictions of the Kenyan church better than my friend Fr. Carole Houle, an American Maryknoll priest and an anthropologist by training who is now resident in the United States. Before retiring, he was the Superior General of the Maryknoll Fathers in East and Central Africa. I got to know Fr. Houle after he came to Kenya from Tanzania, where his congregation had headed the Musoma diocese for close to 25 years, and where he had also forged close ties with the late Tanzanian president, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere.

"When I came to Kenya," recalled Fr. Houle, "I found a Catholic church that was highly ethnicised. The priests coalesced around their ethnic identities and so did the laity." Even in those early days of the 1990s, he could foresee that this was a recipe for disaster, especially for a fragile nation-state like Kenya. "Depending on the occasion, my Catholic friends and priests alike were Catholic first, Kenyan second, and their ethnic identities third."

This would be the order of their identity priority when in the church precincts, but immediately after the parishioners stepped out of the church, the order would be re-organised. "They would assume their ethnicity identity as their first priority, they would be Catholics second and Kenyans third." These identities, he observed, could shift effortlessly.

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"Peace is an important ingredient of the electioneering process," says Ombok, "but not at the expense of justice. Kenyans are a peaceful lot - it is an oxymoron to ask Kenyans to keep the peace. What Kenyans are demanding for is justice."

Ombok has been working with Ghetto Radio to spread the message of peace during this electioneering period. His programme is supported by the International Republican Institute (IRI), which also supported peace caravans around Nairobi County in 2013. "Our peace messages are an exhortation to the youth - many of whom listen to Ghetto Radio - not to allow themselves to be (mis)used by politicians from across the political divide to cause mayhem in the campaign period."

It is not only the church that has been struggling to peddle a peace message that Kenyans are interpreting as lullabies to lull them into "accept and move on" once more. A captain of the insurance industry who is also a member of the Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA) recently told me, "All what KEPSA is doing - pretending to preach peace - is to hope the status quo can remain and to pray for the best."

"But I will tell you this, the KEPSA leadership is living in a bubble," said the insurance guru, who asked me to conceal his name so as not to antagonise his company and the KEPSA fraternity. "It is disingenuous for the KEPSA leadership to purport to preach peace instead of calling for credible elections." The private sector, the captain confided, is undergoing its greatest test ever, "all because of the Jubilee coalition's ineptitude and grand looting."

"I think there is going to be violence,' he predicted. "Nobody is buying this false narrative of peace and remaining calm." He said his Asian colleagues were closing shop a week before the elections, travelling abroad, from where they will monitor the unfolding events. "If all turns out well, we will be back in business by 15 August," his colleagues had told him.

"As the country is being inundated with peace messages, drums of war are being beaten in certain sections of the country," said a lawyer friend who has been doing litigation work in Eldoret. "I have been in the North Rift for the better part of July and I can tell you the voters there are being militarised as if being prepped for battle."

The lawyer, whose clients include both Jubilee Party and NASA coalition candidates, said he had also been in Baringo County for two weeks and what he witnessed there left him with no doubt that the clarion calls for peace was a diversionary tactic of the Jubilee Party. "Songs of war, talk of defending our birthright, people being asked to protect their leaders - by all means, by any means necessary. This is what is happening in William Ruto's key fanatical support zones," said the lawyer.

Drinking copious mugs of tea in a Nairobi restaurant, the lawyer said he had an eerie feeling of the calm before a storm when he was up in Eldoret and Baringo County. "I was on my tenterhooks all the time I was in Kabartonjo and Kabarnet...the Kalenjins have sworn not to let power slip through their hands. I am not sure about anything anymore." He said that when he was in Bomet and Kericho he felt more relaxed.

In spite of the peace messages ostensibly being broadcast all over Nairobi and central Kenya, many of President Uhuru Kenyatta's fanatical supporters are speaking a different language: a combative language of not ceding ground. "If we are not going to have 'peaceful' (read going our way by hook or crook) elections, then let Uhuru unleash the military might on these people (these people being anybody opposed to the leadership of the Kikuyu hegemonists)," said an Uhuru supporter from Kiambu County.

In the opposition turfs, the peace messages are being interpreted to mean: this time around, we are not falling for your (President Uhuru's) ruse - of accept and move on. "If President Uhuru tampers with the election results, we are not going to court, we will burn the country," my ghetto friends from Huruma have vowed. "We are ready...for any possible eventuality."

A couple of day ago, a gangland youth leader from Kariobangi North was addressing his gang members of about a hundred young men. "*This time ni kufa kupona, Jakom anawahi uprezo na lazima tumwapishe.*" (This time round, it will be a matter of life and death, the chairman - Raila Odinga - will win the presidency and we are going to swear him in). "*Ounye anataka kumwaga amiero, lakini pia yeye ajua tuko chonjo.*" (Uhuru is planning to unleash the army on us, but he should know even us we are prepared).

The gangland youth was congregating a stone's throw away from the Holy Trinity Catholic Church. The peace narrative, it seems, may just turn out (this time around) to be just that: a once-upon-a-time narrative.



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