



The Original Sin: Land, Politics and the History of Ethnic Tensions in the Rift Valley

By Dauti Kahura



"Chitap koret," this is my ancestral land, a Kalenjin from the Sabaot community, one of the nine ethnic dialects that make up the Kalenjin nation, said to me at the foothills of Mt Elgon, in Trans Nzoia County. Sabaots are a pastoralist community and just like the Maasai people, believe in keeping cattle - even the poorest Sabaot must have a cow or two. "Kalenjin believe North Rift especially belongs to them and nothing will change that," said Kip, my Sabaot acquaintance.

"These people (the Kikuyus) will always be tenants on our land," said Kip. "They are here temporarily. It doesn't matter whether the land they occupy has been bought legally or not, was dished out, bought from one of us or any other person, whether it has a title or not. One day they must vacate this land." Kip said mutual suspicion between the Kikuyus and Kalenjin in the Rift Valley will always abound. "Mark my words," said Kip emphatically, "just like the Kikuyu don't forget, we Kalenjin don't forgive - we will revisit the issue of land ownership in the Rift Valley. We will soon show them who the true owners of the Rift Valley are." It was an ominous threat.

Every time there is a shift in the political relations at the national level, between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin elites, every time these elites engage in a public spat, the Kalenjin people of the greater Rift Valley allude to foreigners among them who should be ejected. Every time the issue of foreigners arises in the Rift Valley region, the first targets are specifically the Kikuyu people, some of whom

have lived in the Rift Valley region for the last 70 years.

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The genesis of the land quagmire between the Kalenjin and Kikuyus in the Rift Valley region, traces back to the 1940s, which the British colonial government exacerbated by settling the Kikuyus in the area. An annual colonial write-up of 1957 reported, “In common with other Kalenjin people, however, there is everywhere else, dislike of the Kikuyu settlement being established in what is regarded as their district’s sphere of influence in Uasin Gishu”.

Yet, the colonial government had, by the turn of the 19th century, sowed the seeds of discord, when it pushed many of the ethnic communities into reserve lands and squatter camps, to create room for cash crop growing by the European settler farmers in the White Highlands. Central Kenya, Rift Valley and Coast Province were the major culprits in this settler land colonial project.

A pastoralist community, the Kalenjin, however struck an exceptional deal with the settler farmers: provide manual labour in the farms for exchange of grazing rights. But come the mid-1940s, this arrangement was destabilized, because the settler farmers needed more land for their cash crops. Why? World War (II) had ended in 1945 and Europe had decimated most of its agricultural lands for cash crop production. In addition, the Kalenjin people were expanding in population, even as their livestock grew in numbers. They too were demanding more land to graze their animals. This naturally created further tensions.

The first thing the colonial government did in reaction to this agitation by the Kalenjin was, to contain them in squatter camps and deny them grazing land. A warrior-like people, the Kalenjin refused to be squatters in the settler farms. So, in search of pastureland, they trekked off. This migration led them to central Rift Valley, Taita-Taveta and even in as far as Tanzania.

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To replace the departing Kalenjins, the colonial government brought in the Kikuyus from Central Kenya to work in the settler farms arguing that the agrarian, sedentary Kikuyus were hardworking and attuned to plant cultivation, unlike the “lazy” pastoralist Kalenjin.

By 1950s therefore, Kikuyu population in the Rift Valley had tremendously grown and this greatly upset the indigenous Kalenjin. This is around the time the Kalenjins started agitating for their land and viewing Kikuyus as strangers and intruders. Hence, the temporary halting of more “importation” of Kikuyus from Central Kenya to Rift Valley, according to colonial reports that quoted Mr P.H Brown, the Uasin Gishu District Commissioner (DC), who recommended the stop.

But, no sooner had Brown stopped further Kikuyu migration into the Rift, than his successor revoked the decree. Mr R.S Symes-Thompson pointed out that Kikuyus were central to agricultural success in the settler farms. It is an arrangement that Jomo Kenyatta inherited and perfected when he became

first, the Prime Minister in 1963 and, later President in 1964.

When it became apparent that the British would have to relinquish its power in Kenya, they bought between one and three million acres of land to resettle the landless. They also put a caveat to land ownership: any Kenyan would own land anywhere in Kenya, regardless of their ancestral origins and ethnicity. Secondly, there was no free land. If anybody wanted to buy land, it would, henceforth be, on a willing-seller, willing-buyer. It is an arrangement that greatly favoured the Kikuyus and that Kenyatta took to heart and implemented it even better than the departing British. To date, these two decrees appear in the new promulgated 2010 constitution.

To this end, the British colonial government gave Kenyatta's government 100 million sterling pounds under the Settlement Fund Trustees (SFT) to buy land for the squatters - many of who were Kikuyus. In 1969, fiery Nandi MP Jean Marie Seroney, convened a charged meeting to debate the land question in Rift Valley. The Nandi Hills Declaration was the aftermath of that meeting, which decreed all land in Nandi belonged to the local community, that would henceforth oppose any further acquisition and settlement of Kikuyus in the area.

Moi who was the Vice President and Minister for Home Affairs and was Seroney's political nemesis, threw him into detention. The Kalenjins have always argued that even when they had money to buy their own land, the Kenyatta government opposed the move. They cite the example of the Makonge (sisal) Farm in Ziwa. The attempt to buy this land was thwarted by the state in 1976, leading to the arrest of Eldoret North MP, the controversial Chelagat Mutai. The farm, instead, was handed to a land buying company belonging to Kikuyus.

In Property and Political Order in Africa: Land Rights and the Structure of Politics, published in 2014 by Cambridge University Press, Catherine Boone, ably tackles the intricate interconnectedness of supra local politics and land ownership in the volatile Rift Valley region.

"The statist land tenure regime (LTG) established in the Rift Valley farming districts by the colonial state was perpetuated and elaborated by the Kanu government after independence," writes Boone. She says, the government bought the land from the departing European settlers, and allocated the land through settlement schemes to smallholder farmers between 1960-1975. "The rest of the land so acquired was transferred in the form of large estates to high ranking members of the Kenyatta regime entrenching their status as an economic, as well as a political elite."

Burnt Forest area - which become infamous in December 2007, after some Kikuyu families were trapped in a Pentecostal church and that was set on fire, burning mostly women and their children below 10 years - "become a zone of mostly Kikuyu settlement schemes and was purchased by the state in 1965." During the highly contested presidential 2007 election, the Opposition coalition led by Raila Odinga, running on an ODM ticket cried foul and accused the Mwai Kibaki led Party of National Union (PNU) of stealing the elections, provoking ethnic cleansing in Rift Valley, especially in areas that were heavily populated by Kikuyu. Burnt Forest became one of the notorious flashpoints of that ethnic warfare.

"Many settlers on the Uasin Gishu and Trans Nzoia Districts schemes were Kikuyu who had previously been employed on European farms in these areas" points out Boone. "Under Kenyatta, the kanu government used its land powers to open the Rift to settlement by peoples and persons who were not recognized by the state as indigenous to these jurisdictions, and who did not claim ancestral or customary rights in these areas." Boone adds, "Under colonial rule, these people were categorized into state-recognized ethnic groups (the Nandi, Kipsigis, Maasai, Tugen, Elgeyo, Samburu, Marakwet, Sabaot, Pokot Terik, Turkana and so on)."

Catherine Boone who is a professor of Government, International Development and Political Science at the London School of Economics (LSE), makes the point that even after these communities were pushed to the margins of their lands (presumably to create room for the sedentary communities such as the Kikuyu to engage in agricultural farming), the loss (of land) did not decrease, or become less onerous, overtime.

Conflicts over access to land in Kenya's Rift Valley have marked all stages of Kenya's national history and shaped each critical juncture, says Boone. "The colonial state expropriated much of what is now Rift Valley Province from the Maasai and other people indigenous to the Rift. The British proclaimed direct jurisdiction over what it designated as Crown Land in the Rift Valley in 1904."

Boone argues in her book that "the farming districts of Kenya's Rift Valley Province are some of the most productive and highly commercialized rural zones of sub-Saharan Africa. These districts - Nakuru, Trans Nzoia, Uasin Gishu and Nandi - are territories with high in-migration and high ethnic homogeneity and with settlement patterns and land allocation authored directly by the central state. It is also one of Africa's worst conflict-ridden rural areas, with a long and bloody history of land-related struggles."

Once Daniel arap Moi was in control of the state organs, after succeeding Mzee Jomo Kenyatta in 1978, "he used the central state's land prerogative in Rift Valley to reward its own clients, who were encouraged by the regime to coalesce around ethnic identity, Kalenjin-ness that was centred on indigeneity (autochthony) in the Rift Valley," notes Boone. "From 1986 on, government forestlands became *caisse noire* of patronage resources that were used to cement elite alliances and build political support for Moi among Kalenjin constituencies he needed as a mass power base."

Hence, "evictions of Kenyatta-era forest squatters and the declassification of new forest land opened a land frontier that Moi used to settle thousands of Kalenjin families. Most Kikuyus were expelled from the Mau Forest in the 1980s, so that Kalenjins could move in. Many were allowed to settle south of Njoro."

In the South Rift, largely composed of the Kipsigis, Kalenjin's biggest dialect, a simmering anger of volcanic proportions is going on, brought about by the eviction of the Kipsigis people from the Mau Forest beginning 2018. Many were settled there, originally by President Moi in the early 1980s, soon after becoming the second president of Kenya, and for some as late as 15 years ago during the tenure of President Mwai Kibaki. The Kipsigis are now accusing the Deputy President William Ruto of ominous silence, as they are forcefully being kicked out and their property burned.

Daniel Burgei told me the Kipsigis helped marshal Kalenjin vote for Jubilee Party through Ruto, "now he is mum about the evictions. This is very troubling as we watch this whole spectacle in bewilderment. The Kipsigis have been practicing shamba system in the Mau Forest, where the soils are rich, do not need fertilizer and are good for cabbage, maize potatoes and tomato production. They also have been keeping livestock; cows, donkeys, goats and sheep." Yet, in the process, they have hived huge chunks of the forest by cutting trees, hence destroying the natural environment, all in the name of giving way to farming, said Burgei.

Ruto, like Moi in the 1970s when he was Jomo Kenyatta's VP is accused by a section of the Kalenjin people of keeping quiet in the face of the long-standing issue of land ownership in the Rift Valley region.

It is significant to note that "the name Kalenjin came into use as a group of designation in Kenya among World War (II) servicemen and ex-servicemen and students in the elite East Africa high schools in Nairobi and Kampala in the 1940s. "This ethnic consciousness of being Kalenjin was

rooted in the native-stranger distinction. In very part, it was produced by the land tenure regime. The form of ethnic consciousness and mobilization that developed in Kenya was not the consciousness of all the people.

“When (former President Daniel arap) Moi led the efforts to amalgamate the political organization of the state-recognized tribes of the western Rift Valley in early 1960, he called the umbrella group the Kalenjin Political Association (KPA).” Boone adds that when the colonial government lifted the ban on indigenous politics, Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) took over the interests of KPA.

“By the time of the February 1962 Lancaster House constitutional negotiations, “the rifts between Kanu and Kadu were...deep and deeply felt...During the talks, Moi would repeat that the people of Kalenjin were prepared to fight and die for their land.” Boone reminds us all, that “Kalenjin first appeared as an official ethnicity on the Kenyan census in 1979, Moi’s first year as a president. Moi promoted Kalenjin identity in the 1980s and 1990s as an ethnic designation to transcend the narrower, older colonial-era identities of Nandi, Kipsigis, Elgeyo, Tugen, and so on.” These ethnic consciousness of being a Kalenjin, says Boone was driven by the sensitive land politics of the Rift.

This consciousness has had the effect of creating a peculiar “tribalism,” in the Rift Valley land politics “namely that in it was almost wholly a consciousness of being, either a Kikuyu or not-Kikuyu.”

If the 1960s and 1970s were decades of consolidation of the Kenyatta regime which sidelined those claiming ancestral land rights in the Rift Valley and “inserted” African settlers into Rift Valley farming districts, the 1980s and 1990s were a reversal of these settlements. Forced to accept plural politics in 1991, by the West, his erstwhile allies in the Cold War era, Moi mobilized the Rift Valley constituencies, “along an axis of competition that pitted indigenes of the Rift Valley against settlers who had been implanted by the Kenyatta regime.”

Boone observes that the Rift Valley politicians tapped into existing land-related tensions in which the central state was directly implicated as the author and enforcer of a contested distribution of land rights. “This conflict found direct expression in electoral politics at the national level. Political rhetoric that pervaded Nandi, Nakuru, Uasin Gishu and Trans Nzoia districts dwelled on how land was lost to the Europeans was never recovered and how under Kenyatta ‘black colonialists’ had been allowed to buy up land that rightfully should have belonged to indigenous communities.”

Prof Boone gives the example of Likia location, in Molo division, Nakuru District, “where most land belonged to Kikuyus in the early 1990s, local Kalenjin politicians reminded the people of the past ownership of the land and encouraged them to reclaim it.”

On January 10, 2019, a former Molo MP, Joseph Kiuna held a press conference in Likia area of Molo and reminded the Kalenjin that they had not forgotten what they had done to the Kikuyus in 2007/2008 post-election violence (PEV). “All this time the Kikuyus have been pretending that they had forgotten and moved on,” said Kip. “We Kalenjin are very much aware they have not forgotten anything.” Even though thousands of Kikuyus were internally displaced – up to 600,000 people were dislocated from their homesteads in the greater Rift Valley during PEV, by the marauding Kalenjin warriors – many a Kikuyu nevertheless returned to Rift Valley. The allure of fertile soils, the armistice arrived at between Ruto and Uhuru Kenyatta and a desire to go back to their lands, which they had occupied for many years, was greater than the ominous existential threat of a repeat “ethnic” attack on their farms.

And the Kikuyus have had big group farms ranging between 1000 and 3000 acres in Trans Nzoia and Uasin Gishu Counties. 35 kilometers from Kitale town are the better known Gitwamba and Munyaka

Farms located at the foothills of Mt Elgon, bordering Mt Elgon Forest. Most of the Kikuyus who settled here were from Nyeri and its environs. Endowed with black alluvial soils, the farms are very fertile. Since settling there, decades ago, the Kikuyus have grown beans, cabbages, carrots, potatoes, tomatoes amongst a host of other horticultural crops. Markets days in Iten, Kitale, Matunda, Moi's Bridge and Soy are filled with fresh produce from these farms. As fate would have it, in Trans Nzoia, it is Gitwamba - which in Kikuyu language means a flat, rich plateau with fertile soils and Munyaka which means to be lucky - that were the first flashpoints of ethnic upheavals in 1991. They have remained so to date.

The 1991 ethnic clashes were instigated, organized and executed by Moi's Kanu regime which suddenly felt under siege from the multi-party advocates. Hoping to tap into their age-old grievances of land ownership and aware he had kept mum as land in the Rift Valley was being parceled to Kikuyus and other communities, by the Kenyatta government in the 1970s, Moi allegedly encouraged the Kalenjins to "reclaim" their land from foreigners, in exchange for their support to further cement and consolidate his grip on state power. By foreigners, he meant the Kikuyu people.

The other Kikuyu farms in TransNzoia are: Wamuini Farm A, the 1,000 agricultural land near St Joseph High School on the Kitale-Ndalu Road. Wamuini Farm B, formerly Mabonde Farm that was called *mabonde* - Kiswahili for denes, because of its ridges and valleys. There is also Meru Farm bought in the early 1970s. It is near Kitale showground, adjacent to the posh Milimani Estate. The other big farms owned by Kikuyus are Kiirita, Makui and Weteithie Farms. Weteithie, which in Kikuyu means self-help. All these farms were bought through land-buying companies with loans from Agricultural Finance Corporation (AFC). They include Mwioko, which means hope in Kikuyu, Ngwataniro-Mutukanio, Nakuru District Ex-Freedom Fighters Organization (NDEFFO) and Nyakinyua, which was President Kenyatta's favourite cultural dancing troupe made up of women.

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In Trans Nzoia, other Kikuyus acquired land through SFTs, formerly white farms, given ostensibly to "landless people" by Jomo Kenyatta government. In Uasin Gishu County which borders Trans Nzoia, there is a replica of Munyaka Farm, today referred to as Kimumu-Munyaka Farm, located on the Eldoret-Iten Road. The more famous Ya-Mumbi Farm is on the Eldoret-Kapsabet-Kisumu Road. Rukuini and Kondoo Farms are near Burnt Forest. Kimuri and Kiambaa Farms are not far from Eldoret town. Rukuini and Kondoo, just like Gitwamba and Munyaka in Kitale, have remained focal points of "ethnic wars" since 1991.

After the violent uproar that took place in Eldoret North following the controversial 2007 general election, many Kikuyus living in Uasin Gishu County, abandoned their farms in Turbo 30 km from Eldoret town and went to live in town, at Langas estate, the sprawling Kangemi-type ghetto located on the Eldoret-Kisumu highway, just after the Eldoret Polytechnic. Kangemi is a slum on Waiyaki Way, seven kilometres from Nairobi city centre. Stephen Kiplagat, who was born and bred in and whose family still lives in Langas told me that it is today estimated to be 85 per cent populated by Kikuyus. "My family is one of the very few Nandi families that still reside at Langas, the rest are Kikuyus."

Five Nandi families originally owned Langas. Many of them started parcelling the land and selling it mostly to Kikuyus from the 1980s. Two factors drove this sale: the Kikuyu desire for a plot of land and the fact that they had ready cash to buy the land. With the money, the departing Kalenjin bought land in Kitale, Soy, Turbo and Ziwa so that they could engage in agricultural and livestock farming.

I went to school in Kitale in the 1980s, then it was a one-street settler town and that is where I first heard the phrase “revisiting the issue.” A prominent Kalenjin businessman, (he later become an influential politician in President Moi’s inner circle and today he is retired), said in my presence: “We’ve only leased the land to them (Kikuyus), they should be knowing that...we’ll soon revisit that issue.” When the push for multiparty elections in 1991, appeared inevitable, Moi’s monolithic Kanu one-party dictatorship relented to political pluralism, but not before igniting “ethnic” skirmishes in the Rift Valley.

Kip told me, “resources are becoming scarcer by the day in the Rift Valley region and our people would like the land issue in the Rift Valley region prioritized as a matter of national political discourse.”

The first wave of Kikuyu settlers in Trans Nzoia district first appeared as colonial civil service workers in the mid-1940s after the World War II. The next group showed up in the mid-1950s. These were Kikuyus running away from the Mau Mau insurgency and capture by the British colonial police. Many of them converted to Islam and assumed new identities. Indeed the first Kikuyus to settle in Kitale town were Hamisi Saidi and Hussein Ramadhan. They had taken up Islamic names and soon became petty traders in town.

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Kigotho Njuguna, Mbugua Gachani, Danson Kangonga Mbugwa, John Muchuri, Wanguhu Githiomi (who hailed from Kijabe) and Peter Kinyanjui – one time Democratic Party of Kenya (DP) point man in Trans Nzoia) formed part of the earliest pioneers of Kikuyu settlers in Kitale. DP was an opposition party once led by Mwai Kibaki, the third President of Kenya. The others were: Lawrence Waweru, Kirima Githaiga, David Kiberu, Waigi Mwangi (originally from Ngecha in Limuru) and Apollos Mwangi. All these men are dead and many of them hailed from Nyeri district.

As the theatre of the politics of succession leading to 2022, plays out in the expansive Rift Valley region, the spectre of the ever-simmering land question looms large. William Ruto, like his predecessor Moi, and not Seroney, finds himself in a dicey position of canvassing the entire Kalenjin vote, amid unsettled land ownership saga that remains an unresolved issue.

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