



What Code is Your [TRIBE]?

By Dalle Abraham



"Take ye the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, after their families, by the house of their fathers, with the number of their names, every male by their polls." Numbers 1:2

The broken promise

The Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) shared pictures of Shona women dressed in immaculately white dresses, deliberately invoking a religious sensibility. This was necessary since the Shona had arrived in Kenya as African missionaries in the 1950s. These pictures were taken at a podium draped in the Kenyan national flag on the occasion of what KHRC referred to on Twitter as the #ShonaCitizenshipPrayer. At the back of the dais was a canvas poster with the words "Prayer for the government of Kenya to grant the Shona citizenship."

When they moved labourers from one part of their empire to another, the British didn't think of the kind of long-term damage they left behind among translocated communities like the [Warundi \(sisal farmers in Kwale\)](#), the Makonde (rescued slaves resettled in Kilifi), the Shona (African missionaries), the [Nubians](#) (King's African Rifles who helped the British expand their empire) and [the Pemba from Zanzibar](#). Or the Indians who were brought to work on the Uganda Railway. The post-colonial governments in Kenya, while instrumentalising ethnicity, had not evolved any mechanism to incorporate this translocated population who have over the past 57 years hovered in the margins of the Kenyan state.

Whether affected by the British Empire or rejected by the post- independence regimes, Kenya has been notorious for locking entire communities from accessing services and crucial papers through elaborate exclusionary mechanisms like censuses and ethnic coding.

Illusions and smoke screens

On 18th December, 2018, at an event in Marsabit, the then social services minister and former Marsabit governor, Amb. Ukur Yatani, presided over the issuance of legal status to “Wayyu”, the newly acknowledged name of the Waata community. The event, dubbed “rebirth of Wayyu”, was an official rejection of their old name, Waata, which had been considered pejorative and connotive of a low caste hunter gatherer group. With the name change also came their recognition as Kenya’s 46th tribe.

This recognition was a culmination of many factors. The idea was mooted by a Waata researcher in a [1993 paper](#) where he suggested that *“The Waata be registered as a distinct sub-group of the Boran-speaking peoples as are the Boran, Gabbra, Sakuye, etc;”* as a means of preserving the Waata culture and identity. Over the years this quest took on different forms: advocacy through petitions and threats, until at the end the quest for state recognition had become for Ali Bala Bashuna and for the Waata an existential question.

In a 2000 paper titled *“When will we be people as well? Social identity and the politics of cultural performance*, Aneesa Kassam gives a broader context for Ali’s quest, noting that:

“With no political support, his (Ali Bala’s) campaign has had little success. The state is, in fact, generally inimical to such manifestations of ethnicity. It considers them counter to its programmes of nation-building and will only support such movements when they are to its own political advantage.”

Wayyu was the third group to be given official ethnic codes and with it a form of a legal status. The government made it look like this granting of legal status through ethnic code was a necessary and desired development.

Before Wayyu, and through a presidential proclamation, Kenyan Asians were recognised as [Kenya’s 44th tribe](#) on 22 July, 2017. In a [TV interview](#), Farah Manzoor, a fifth-generation Kenyan human rights activist and the main architect behind the recognition of Kenyan Asians, led a choir thanking the president for recongising the Asian community.

Arabaini na nne
Twashukuru raisi
Arabaine na nne
Sisi ni wakenya
Wahindi wakenya
Kabila la kenya

When the Minister for Interior, Fred [Matiangi](#), announced the presidential proclamation, he told Kenyan Asians, *“Now, you are part and parcel of us formally. You are part and parcel of Kenya’s great family.”*

A few months earlier, the [Makonde](#) community received their own ethnic code on 1st February 2017 when the president himself conferred citizenship status to this erstwhile stateless community. They had been asked by the Minister for Interior, Joseph Nakaissery, *“to feel liberated”*.

Other groups came forward asking that they too be recognised. This is where the

#ShonaCitizenshipPrayer finds a meaning.

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A section of the Kirinyaga community came forward, asking that they be [recognised as the 45th tribe](#) of Kenya away from the Gikuyu tribe. One of the speakers said, *“We are not here to promote tribalism...we don’t want our children to suffer from inferiority complex when they are talking.* Another one added, *“We claim social benefits, recognition...”*

Just before the 2019 census, the Lembus community came forward with a [legal suit](#) for what they claimed to be an erroneous classification that had been *“done without their consent thereby denying them crucial rights”*.

Intentions and meaning

The issuance of tribal codes and their recognition in all the three cases of Makonde, Wayyu and Asians meant something different. For the Makonde, their recognition as Kenya’s tribe 043 changed their statelessness and made them Kenyan citizens. For the Kenyan Asians, to be Kenya’s tribe 044 meant someone was playing a political game with the community’s name. For the Wayyu, there was a social political validation; they were now a distinct, independent and legit “tribe” who would never live under the shadow of other tribes.

Kenyans watched the “admission” of these “tribes” into an imaginary Kenyan National Register of tribal groups. No one noticed that from Makonde 043, Kenyan Asian 044 the government had skipped Tribe 045 and named Wayyu as Tribe 046. But that didn’t matter; this was vintage Kenyan ethos at play.

Census code

A few days prior to the 2019 Kenyan census, a video of an elderly man in a Kanzu and seated next to a wall with the words “Gurreh 509” scribbled on the wall went viral in Mandera. The man kept asking people to “wake up” and to “pass word around” that the people of Mandera were Gurreh-code 509 and not Garre-code 532. This, on his part, was short notice civic education to remedy the confusion of multiple codes provided as options for the Garre in the 2019 census. The man told the people to choose Gurreh 509 and to be vigilant enough to ensure that they were not recorded as Garre 532.

The 2019 census revived an old discussion on census and tribal codes.

Old game

In his book [Define and Rule](#), Mahmood Mamdani says that the census was an imperial tool that propped up indirect colonial rule. Censuses, he says, “...endeavoured to shape the present, past and future of the colonised by casting each in a nativist mould, the present through a set of identities in the census, the past through the driving force of a new historiography, and the future through an extensive legal and administrative apparatus.”

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An example of the quest of such a classification was visible during the colonial times in the curious case of the Isaaq and Harti Somalis who in 1937 petitioned the British colonial government demanding that they be charged a higher tax under the “non natives” category. [Keren Witzenberg](#), writing about this, says that “fearful of losing their privileged status within the colonial racial order, Isaaq elites claimed that they were not Africans, nor Somalis, but rather “Asiatics”.

This classification for the Isaaq/Harti Somalis came with benefits, including “pass exemptions, special rations in prison and the military, higher salaries, and access to separate wards in hospitals...and access to many of the civil rights denied to other African subjects”.

Census code as mother of ethnic code

The magical Kenyan number of 42 ethnic tribes was, according to Gabrielle Lynch, born out of the options provided during the 1962 census. Census reports, however, have not over those years been consistent in reporting on the number of ethnic groups in the country, as illustrated in the table below.

Kenyan tribes, as reported in the Kenyan census over the years

Census year	Ethnic groups included in census reports over the decades
1962	16
1969	21
1979	44
1989	56
1999	None
2009	64
2019	135

Source: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics

In the 2009 enumerators’ manual, at least 114 different tribes were coded, including subgroups under the big tribes like the Luhya, the Kalenjin, the Swahili and the Mijikenda. If this is compared with the census results and the ethnic data found on the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) website, it becomes easily apparent that even where one’s community had been coded and options provided, it did not automatically translate to their ethnic data being included in the final census report. The reverse is also true for some communities whose names were not coded or provided as options but their numbers and final figures were included in the final ethnic data report. By 2019 the number of coded ethnic/nationality options were 135.

It was obvious that the census was not serious about what and who they included in their ethnic lists. Numerous examples abound.

The 2009 census codes were different from the 2019 codes. Nubians who had been included in the 2009 census for the first time under code 220 were now coded 021 in the 2019 census. Even the Makonde with ethnic code 043 were listed under census code 320.

Other inconsistencies in the census include repetitions, double entries, misspelt community names, for example, Garre, Gurreh or Waat, Watta, Aweer/Watta, Wayyu.

While many minorities fought for inclusion, a community like the Orma are fighting to have the name Galla removed from the census since it is a pejorative reference invented in the colonial period. (*Mgalla muue na haki mpe?*)

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Kenyan demographers seem blind to the politics of identity and belonging. It was obvious that KNBS hasn't given serious thought to the socio-political implications of what the census means. In the enumerators manual we see a cautionary attitude from KNBS. To the question "What is <NAME>'s ethnicity or Nationality?" enumerators were asked to:

Accept the answer as given to you without question. Do not get involved in any argument on this issue. The census is not concerned with the legal position. Accept what the person tells you and record the ethnicity or nationality to which the person considers he/she belongs.

When did census coding become political?

While the census transitioned from its narrow orientation in 1962 where only 16 ethnic groups were tallied to 2019 where 135 options were provided, including minorities like Waat and Nubians, an examination of the census reports over the decades shows unexplained inclusion or exclusion of ethnic groups. This has created the perception that ethnic exclusion from the census tallying process means exclusion from opportunities and resources. The inclusion of any ethnic groups in the census one year and its removal in the next census has led to the general idea that one's existence and identity is being questioned. Here a protest begins.

At least 17 tribes/Nationalities/options included in the 1989 census report had been left out of the 2009 results. But there was the addition of 18 new ethnicity/tribes/nationalities/options provided in the 2009 census.

Addition of new tribes in the Kenyan census over the decades

Year	Addition of ethnic groups.
1962 is our baseline	
1962	Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya, All Others, Kamba, Kisii, Meru, Mijikenda, Kipsigis, Turkana, Nandi, Masai, Ogaden, Tugen, Elgeyo, Non Africans
Additional ethnic groups included for the first time	
1969	Somali, Embu, Taita, Pokot, Marakwet, Sabaot
1979	Mbere, Tharaka, Kuria, Pokomo, Taveta, Swahili/Shirazi, Bajun, Boni/Sanye, Kalenjin, Samburu, Teso, <u>Nderobo</u> , Njemps, Rendille, Boran, Gabbra, Sakuye, Orma, Gosha, Hawiyah, Ogaden, Ajuran, Gur reh, Degodia, Basuba, El Molo, Asian, European, Arab, Other Kenyans Non Kenyans, Not stated
1989	Bulji, Dasnach-Shangil, Orma, Gurreh, Kenyan Asian, Kenyan European, Kenyan Arabs, Other Kenyan, Tanzanians, Ugandans, Other Africans, Indians, Pakistanis, Other Asians, British, Other Europeans Other Arabs, Rest-Nec, Tribe Unknown, NR
1999	None included
2009	Walwana, Nubi, Ilchamus, Galla, Konso, Waat, Galjeel, Kenyan Americans, Isaak, Leysan, Rwanda, Burundi, Other Africans, Americans, Caribbeans, Australians
2019	Bajuni, Dahalo, Dorobo, El-Molo, 18 Kalenjin subgroups, 9 Somali subgroups, 18 Luhya Subgroups, Makonde, 9 Mijikenda subgroups Pokomo, Wardei, 19 Swahili Subgroups, Wayyu

Source: KNBS

But even as new tribes were added, over the decades some were suddenly dropped from the reports.

Tribes left out of census reports over the years

Year	Communities previously tallied but left out
1969	Ogaden
1979	Kipsigis, Nandi, Tugen, Elgeyo, Marakwet, Sabaot, Pokot, All other Tribes, Non-African
1989	Indians, Not Stated
1999	None included
2009	Degodia, Gurreh, Pokomo, Bajun, Other Kenyans, Hawiyah, Ajuran, Dorobo, NR, British, Boni-Sanye, Other Arabs, Rest, El-Mollo, Tribe Unknown, Pakistanis

Source: KNBS

Source: KNBS

In the 2009 census, there were 114 options provided, including the subgroups for larger groups like Luhya (18), Mijikenda (12) Swahili (20) The census report only gave the figures for 55 different tribes.

In 2019, the options provided were 143, including subgroups for larger groups. The 2019 census reports has also shown the figures for all the subgroups, a departure from the past where the subgroups were amalgamated and their figures reported as one.

Efforts towards state recognition

The “rebirth of the Wayyu Nation ” began with the population census dating back to the 1990s. This bore fruit in 2009 because finally and for the very first time the Waata were counted as Waata and not as “others”.

Then their second quest begun in Ethiopia on 8th January 2013 at an event in which eight supreme traditional leaders (Aba Gadas) unanimously agreed to Waata changing their name to “Wayyu” because, as an activist put it, “*Kabila haliwezi kujiita na Matusi*”.

After this, the Wayyu set out on the quest for state recognition in Kenya. They began with the county commissioner’s office. “We got letters from the Marsabit, Isiolo, Tana River and Mandera county commissioners respectively confirming that our community lived in each of these counties.” County commissioners were instrumental in this quest since part of the ministry’s mission is “*maintain a credible national population register, enhance nationhood*”.

The Waata activists’ efforts included “taking the letters to the Gender and Equality Commission, who referred them to KNBS who referred them to Kenya National Census who referred them to the Attorney General’s office to whom they made a presentation justifying why we need to change our name from Watta to Wayyu and why we need an ethnic code”.

The Attorney General, Githu Muigai, then wrote a letter to the Office of the President through the Secretary to the Cabinet. They waited for the electioneering period to end, went back to the Secretary to the Cabinet, and also “asked for Ukur Yatani’s intervention, we even took the state recognition of Wayyu in Ethiopia, letters from the UN confirming the minority status of Wayyu”. Then a letter was written “to the registrar of persons...from the president himself”. These events eventually led to the community being recognised as Kenya’s tribe 046.

To be recognised as Kenya’s 43rd tribe, [the Makonde embarked](#) on a long journey. “We started the journey for recognition as Kenyan citizens early in 1995 “with the last major effort being “a walk for the stateless” where the Makonde community walked from Kwale County to State ouse in Nairobi, a distance of almost 500 kilometres.

Census as an eating opportunity?

But why, if the Makonde’s wanted recognition as Kenyan citizens through ethnic coding, did the Wayyu and Asians also agitate for a code when they were already recognised as citizens, as they were already included in the census?

In post-devolution Kenya, a background is created. Employment and other resources were given along ethnic considerations. Thus, to add a “constitutional status” or a presidential pat to one’s ethnic existence redefines the framework in which local ethnic alliances are discussed and navigated, granting groups a new confidence and renewing their efforts to organise.

A Wayyu community activist captures the prevailing sentiment that an ethnic code might affect substantive changes in the community’s present and future access to resources and related opportunities. This speculative streak was putting a political question on the census/coding exercise. I ask how an ethnic code was different from a census code. “*Census is a research, they keep on changing the number ascribed to a community for purposes of analysis...census codes are not permanent. But an ethnic code is permanent, and that was our desire...If you cannot elect Wayyu by voting them as a minority then they can be given nomination seats, something like the old ‘bunge Maalum’ or even as an MCA in the county assembly.*”

For the Nubians, inclusion in the census was thought to lead to an express access to land. [Samantha Balaton-Chrimes](#), writing about the Nubians' reaction to being included in the 2009 census, observes that, "land was thought by many participants to be one of the reasons why the code in the census was so long in coming, and was of the primary benefits they hoped to gain from the 2009 code"

Samantha adds that "recognition in the form of a census code gave an institutional context for the multiple and complex modes of belonging that carry actual salience in their real lives".

A year after the Makonde had been coded, the [Daily Nation](#) visited the community to see what had changed for them and were told: "Two youths joined the Kenya Police Service and four joined National Prisons Service. About 200 youth have also been participating in community work under the National Youth Service."

In addition 1,875 members of the community had been issued with IDs and were registered as voters in Kwale County.

Post-independence anxiety

For many communities, an anxiety emerged at independence. In Kenya the post-independence governments inherited and wholly adopted the same simplified notion of ethnicity, which in most areas worked against the economic, social and political context of some groups, especially those that had been brought to Kenya in the service of the colony, such as the Indians, the Nubians or even the Burji. Kenya did not adopt an active denationalisation policy and did not undertake a mass expulsion of "non-nationals", as was seen in Uganda where Asians under Amin and Banyarwanda under Obote were expelled en masse. In Kenya this was instrumentalised at a certain level as a manipulation tool. Murmurs of "*rudi kwenu*" or being called "*wageni*" never ceased.

Inclusion in the census, for some, has over the past decades brought back these anxieties because censuses in Kenya have evolved into exercises that give people political and social visibility.

It looks like the problem of exclusion from censuses is experienced elsewhere too. Even in the United States, the exclusion of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) identity category brought some controversy when it was ignored in the 2020 census. This erasure was challenged by congresswoman Rashida Tlaib who said, "[By ignoring us you are erasing us...we will be invisible for another decade in our country](#)" The MENA community, like others, relies on accurate census representation for health research, language assistance, civil rights laws, and reporting educational outcomes.

A convergence of confused expectations

It is obvious that another purpose can also be added to the census code. These communities between them capture a microcosm of the anxieties that emerge in the face of statehood, problems of citizenship, belonging and access to opportunities.

This is the wellspring of the overly optimistic notion that with an ethnic/census code minorities will also gain an expressway to all the things that they had been denied or had lacked; respect, political representation and full inclusion into national decision making. But this ambition had been adopted without proper assessment.

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Only four members of the Wayyu community have contested an electoral office. On all but one of these occasions, the performance were dismal. These candidates suffered not only electoral loss but social ridicule and references to a “lower caste”, which meant that they lost their social standing and reputation. This ridicule and mocking jeers seemed intended to discourage further electoral contestation. The issue of forming political alliances, or their quest for ethnic codes was thus a matter of political necessity and of nationalistic expediency.

BBI games

The Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), like the census, reflects a quest for ethnic codes. Kenyan ethnic groups submitted memoranda on what they desired for their communities. Regional tribal alliances were formed to show allegiance to the president. Public political declarations were issued in support of BBI but also factions emerged as tribal elites sought to be the true spokespersons in submitting their ethnic group’s grievances and needs.

Mahmood Mamdani says “tribalism is a reified ethnicity”. And in Kenya a narrow utilitarian value has been ascribed to ethnicity and tribalism as the parameters of resource distribution and political mobilisation. Many Kenyan politicians often decry that tribalism is the cause of many of the country’s woes. The paths of these problems pass through the narrow bridges of ethnic and census codes.

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