



By Rasna Warah



I know most people are not going to believe me when I say this but, *haki ya mungu*, I was recorded as a Taita in the 2019 census. On the night of 24 August, a young female enumerator who identified herself as a Taita arrived at my house in Kilifi County alongside an elder of the community/area and unilaterally decided that I belonged to a tribe called Taita.

You might wonder how this came about but I can only explain it as interviewer bias—when an interviewer injects his or her prejudices and preconceived ideas into an interview, thereby distorting the results.

This is how this bizarre situation unfolded. Upon establishing that my husband was a Taveta, the enumerator, who appeared friendly and nice, told me without flinching that a woman belongs to her husband's tribe and so I would be listed as Taita-Taveta. Now, I have spent a lot of my life campaigning for Kenya's Asian community to be recognised as bona fide citizens like the rest of Kenyans who are born in this country or who have roots here, but to be forcefully adopted into a Kenyan tribe in this manner was not what I expected. (Note: I was not asked if I wanted to be listed as a Kenyan, which apparently was one of the options alongside tribe.)

As the interview proceeded, at some point the word Taveta dropped out of the enumerator's vocabulary and she began referring to both of us as Taita. I told her I had no tribe and if there was a category called "Asian" or "Other", I would be happy to be listed under it. She said there was no such category, which made me wonder what the hullabaloo about Asians being officially declared the "44th tribe" of Kenya was all about. Was it just a gimmick or a political ploy to gain votes? If

indeed Asians are now recognised as a Kenyan tribe, then why did the designers of the census questionnaire not reflect this?

So, not only were Asians as an ethnic or racial group ignored by the census, but some ethnic groups got special treatment. A Kenyan Somali friend informed me that while the majority of indigenous tribes were treated as a homogenous group (for instance, there was no distinction made between a Maragoli and a Bukusu, both of which belong to the Luhya tribe), Kenyan Somalis were treated as a heterogeneous group of clans. My friend was asked by an enumerator to declare his Somali clan.

While I was still recovering from the fact that I had been categorised in a Kenyan tribe with which I had no biological or filial ties, the enumerator proceeded to inform me that my husband, by virtue of being male, was, according to the census criteria, the de facto head of the household and that all questions would be addressed to him. I told her that the head of the household could be anyone, male or female, who is the breadwinner of the family, but she insisted that in Christianity, the head of the household is always the husband, the only exception to this rule being if the husband has died or has abandoned his family. I told her I was not a Christian, but that did not deter her. (I shudder to think what she might have recorded if she had encountered a homosexual couple where both “husband” and “wife” belong to the same sex.)

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Anyway, I decided to let that pass as patriarchal biases probably determine most censuses, but there were more surprises to follow. I was completely taken aback when she asked me and my husband if we had purchased anything online in the last six months. With the threat of a Sh500,000 fine hanging over our heads for giving false information (which country threatens to fine people for giving the wrong answers during a census?) I admitted to her that I had bought a book on Amazon recently.

Now as far as I know, the primary purpose of a national census is to collect data on *the number of people* residing in a country, not their shopping preferences. (Data on the latter is usually collected by marketing companies.) These people should be counted regardless of their citizenship. The people being counted could be refugees, tourists or even illegal aliens from Mars. That is why the ID number or passport question was completely irrelevant, and in fact, as many Kenyans learnt rather belatedly, it was also contrary to the Official Statistics Act and international norms and standards pertaining to censuses, which guarantee anonymity.

My question is: if this question is contrary to the country’s own laws and to international norms and standards, why was it included in the census questionnaire? The census question about citizenship and ID number would have definitely put off undocumented people, like the many urban refugees who live in Nairobi and other urban areas outside refugee camps, who I am sure found a way to disappear from the radar of the enumerators on the night of the census.

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Imagine being a refugee or an undocumented person in Kenya, and then being asked to produce an ID. The fear of deportation or arrest probably saw a lot of people not sleep in their homes during the week of the census—and so they were not counted. So, the census results are already inaccurate because someone at the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics was misled into believing that this was not an enumeration exercise, but an opportunity to intimidate people and to collect data on their legal status and consumption habits.

Tyranny of numbers

As for the question on tribe, in a politically volatile country like ours, where the “tyranny of numbers” is used to oppress or marginalise people, this question, in my opinion, should have been left out altogether.

I did not always feel this way. When the 2009 census was conducted, many argued that ethnicity should be left out of the census questionnaire because it would lead to further polarisation in a country that was becoming increasingly tribalistic (and which had just been through a violent election in 2007) and because the data on ethnicity would be manipulated by politicians to promote their own interests. These arguments have been made in other countries as well, notably in India, where there has been an ongoing debate about whether or not to undertake a census on caste. Those opposing the census say that it would promote casteism in the country, while those supporting it argue that a caste census would be an invaluable planning tool to promote equity.

But I was not convinced. In 2009 I felt that the question was relevant. I argued that enumerating ethnicity was not a statistical problem, but a political one, and that the exercise of gathering data on the ethnic makeup of a country was desirable for planning purposes and also for the purpose of research. An anthropologist or historian studying migration patterns might want to know how many people of Indian origin have settled here, for example. I was particularly keen to know how many people of Indian/Pakistani origin resided in the country, as the only authoritative figure I had was one that was published over 50 years ago.

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Unfortunately, the figures on Asians released by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics in 2010 seemed a little suspect. According to an official text message that I received from the bureau, there were 35,009 people belonging to the “Asian tribe” in the country, who accounted for 0.09 per cent of the total population. This figure was questionable because, according to the bureau, there were also 53,393 Hindus in Kenya.

Now unless there had been a mass conversion of nearly 20,000 indigenous Africans to Hinduism in the years preceding the census, it was impossible to reconcile these two figures. How could there be more Hindus than Asians in the country? And what about the many Asians who were Muslims, Christians, Jains, Sikhs or atheists? Were they counted as Asians?

These anomalies may appear minor, but they severely impact the credibility of an entire census data set. If the data on Asians appeared to be questionable, then what other data was also suspect? This question became apparent when the 2009 census showed that there were 2.38 million ethnic Somalis residing in the country, a figure that was later refuted by the government because it

appeared to be too large.

The 2009 census did, however, put to rest the widespread belief that Kibera was the largest slum in Africa, with a population of one million. The 2009 Kenya census showed that Kibera was, in fact, home to slightly less than 200,000 people. So Kenya's most famous informal settlement lost its "celebrity" status as the biggest slum in Africa (though several articles I have read since the 2009 Kenya census results were published still claim that Kibera has one million residents, which goes to show that figures are like viruses—they can spread even after the medicine has been administered).

Devolution and urbanisation

Why is it important to have accurate census figures? Well, because when a country publishes inaccurate, misleading or unscientific statistics, national policies, priorities and programmes become skewed. Millions of people's lives can be affected by a single misleading or erroneous statistic. So, for instance, if a census shows that the majority of people living in a particular area are over the age of 35 when, in fact, the majority are under the age of 18, then this could impact the number of schools built in the area.

I understand that devolution has complicated matters, and so numbers are used to justify resource allocation, but surely we cannot in the 21st century's rapidly urbanising world be thinking that all counties are ethnically homogenous and will remain so in the next 30 years. When Kalonzo Musyoka asked "his people" to go to their villages to be counted, he was implying that resource allocation is dependent on the number of people in a county. This kind of convoluted thinking is what has made planning in this country a political exercise, a tyranny of numbers. This kind of thinking assumes that people don't move from their ancestral lands to settle in cities and towns. Yet many rural-to-urban migrants never return to their villages and eventually become permanent urban residents. Maybe our cities and towns are in such a pathetic state because county and national government officials assume that people who live there don't actually belong there, and will eventually go "back home".

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On the other hand, urban poverty has become an income-generating cause for many, which was why the one million population figure for Kibera was not challenged for many years. Many NGOs exaggerate numbers because that is how they remain relevant, how they push forward their agenda on the international stage, and how they attract donor funding. Many national and international NGOs working in Kibera probably used the one million population figure (which was, as I found out, completely made up) to solicit funds from donors. Meanwhile, the Kibera MP at the time of the 2009 census, Raila Odinga, didn't challenge the figure either, probably because he didn't want anyone to know that his constituency was actually much smaller than people believed.

But the use or manipulation of data to create certain outcomes is not confined to NGOs. Last year, a documentary on Al Jazeera showed how Big Pharma influences the way the World Health Organisation's (WHO) senior management makes decisions about global public health crises. The documentary suggested that the 2009 swine flu pandemic might have been fabricated or exaggerated to benefit pharmaceutical companies manufacturing the swine flu vaccine. One former delegate to the European Council stated: "The WHO officials have no idea about such things [pandemics]. They depend on scientists. And the scientists are allocated to them by the countries

and by the organisations that finance the WHO. And many of them gave advice and made decisions that benefited the pharmaceutical industry.”

Was the 2019 census conducted on behalf of certain commercial/political interests as a tool that could be used for marketing goods or to determine a household’s credit-worthiness? (One Kenyan on Twitter quipped, “For this government, Kenyans are not citizens, they are customers.”) Or was it a form of surveillance, much like the Huduma Namba?

It could be that I am reading too many sinister motives in the 2019 census. Maybe the enumerator sent to my house was not trained properly. It could also be that the statisticians and demographers at the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics who designed this census are not qualified for the job. Whatever the case, I would like the people who identify as Taita to know that one more individual has been added to their number, thanks to the 2019 census.

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