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# NARRATIVES, ETHNICITY AND POLARISATION

## The Case of the Luo and Kikuyu Communities in Kenya

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In collaboration with the Kenyan Directorate  
of National Cohesion and Values

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## *Executive Summary*

This case study examines the narratives shaping the fraught relationship between the Luo and Kikuyu ethnic communities in Kenya – a rivalry that has long been a substantial barrier to national cohesion. Narratives are more than just words. They serve as frameworks through which individuals and groups interpret their experiences and decide on their social and political actions, often playing a direct role in either escalating or alleviating tensions in polarised societies.

Based on an in-depth narrative assessment, this case study presents key narratives that shape Luo–Kikuyu relations and their implications for broader dynamics in Kenya. The findings reveal that traditional peacebuilding strategies, which tend to promote a new unifying narrative, have not been effective in the face of entrenched ethnic identities. Instead, a novel narrative peacebuilding approach is required – one which emphasises understanding the historical events, myths, collective traumas and structural dynamics at the root of divisive narratives and engaging with communities to reshape those narratives in a way that enables peaceful engagement and shared responsibility for addressing underlying socio-political issues.

The analysis underscores how group identities and interpretations of the colonial and postcolonial past inform current perceptions in Kenya, leading to cycles of mistrust and conflict, particularly during election periods. Through a detailed mapping of the simple, self-perpetuating narratives that validate one group's grievances while casting others as villains – as well as the role of influential actors and the media in driving them – this research illuminates the necessity of dealing with narratives, rather than leaving them to fester, in any effort to promote national unity and mitigate ethnic polarisation. The study concludes with practical recommendations for narrative assessments and interventions aimed at promoting greater understanding and cooperation among Kenya's diverse ethnic groups and beyond.

## Introduction

This narrative case study explores narratives that have impacted on relations between the Luo and Kikuyu ethnic communities in Kenya – a rivalry that has been described as holding the country “hostage”.<sup>1</sup> As narratives are systems of stories that help people make sense of their experiences, create a coherent view of the world, and decide on their social and political actions, they are key drivers of polarisation and conflict in divided societies with complex political histories, including Kenya.

An in-depth narrative assessment that mapped the main stories informing Luo–Kikuyu relations enabled identification of the issues underlying the narratives and analysis of how they shape beliefs and actions between the two groups and other ethnicities in the country. In line with IFIT research, we found that the usual peacebuilding strategy of crafting or promoting a particular unifying story to resolve the conflicts in Kenya has been ineffective, as people in polarised contexts tend to ignore or attack narratives that do not fit their existing worldview.<sup>2</sup> We therefore used IFIT’s narrative peacebuilding approach,<sup>3</sup> which focuses instead on understanding the dynamics of narratives already in circulation, with the aim of reshaping divisive narratives by working with those who subscribe to them and amplifying unheard narratives and voices to encourage peaceful engagement.

Studies indicate that narratives accentuate intergroup conflict when they denigrate opposing viewpoints and entrench existing biases. Divisive narratives reduce complex social realities into simple, self-perpetuating tales that validate one social group’s grievances while casting others as villains.<sup>4</sup> When politicians and other influential actors disseminate divisive rhetoric to the public, it precipitates intergroup conflict.<sup>5</sup> The media, meanwhile, influence narratives by selectively highlighting certain events and issues, as well as amplifying emotionally compelling stories that draw clear lines between perceived heroes and villains to engage audiences.<sup>6</sup> Psychologists show that polarising narratives increase prejudice against the ‘other’ and decrease empathy, making it more difficult to understand and appreciate different perspectives and diversity.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of Kenya, the country is home to over 42 distinct ethnic groups, with the largest being the Kikuyu, Luhya, Kalenjin, Luo and Kamba. Kenya’s constitution celebrates ethnic diversity and asserts a desire for the population to live as one indivisible nation. In its preamble, the constitution recognises the aspiration of all Kenyans for a government based on essential values and principles including national unity, equality, inclusiveness, non-discrimination and protection of the marginalised. Additionally, Kenya Vision 2030 aims to establish a just and cohesive society characterised

by equitable social development within a clean and secure environment. Despite these aspirations, Kenya continues to grapple with the predominance of ethnic identity over national identity, which has significantly undermined social cohesion and peaceful coexistence among its communities.

Election-related conflicts, driven by ethnic rivalry, remain a primary factor contributing to fragmentation within the Kenyan social fabric. Morris Kiruga notes that this rivalry has consistently emerged during electoral cycles.<sup>8</sup> In 2007–08, Kenya reached the brink of civil war, sparked by a contested election that pitted ethnic communities against each other. Our research confirms that this crisis was a manifestation of long-term mistrust between the Luo and Kikuyu communities, going back to the colonial era, and fed by narratives which have driven tensions, cyclical violence and intergenerational collective trauma. Despite their largely leaderless and tribeless nature, even Kenya's 2024–25 Gen Z-led protests have not escaped the gravitational pull of ethnic rivalries, with some participants accused of profiling communities like the Luo as politically unreliable or divisive.<sup>9</sup> This example reveals that even cross-ethnic movements can inadvertently trigger historical fault lines, underscoring the enduring power of narratives in shaping perceptions and allegiances.

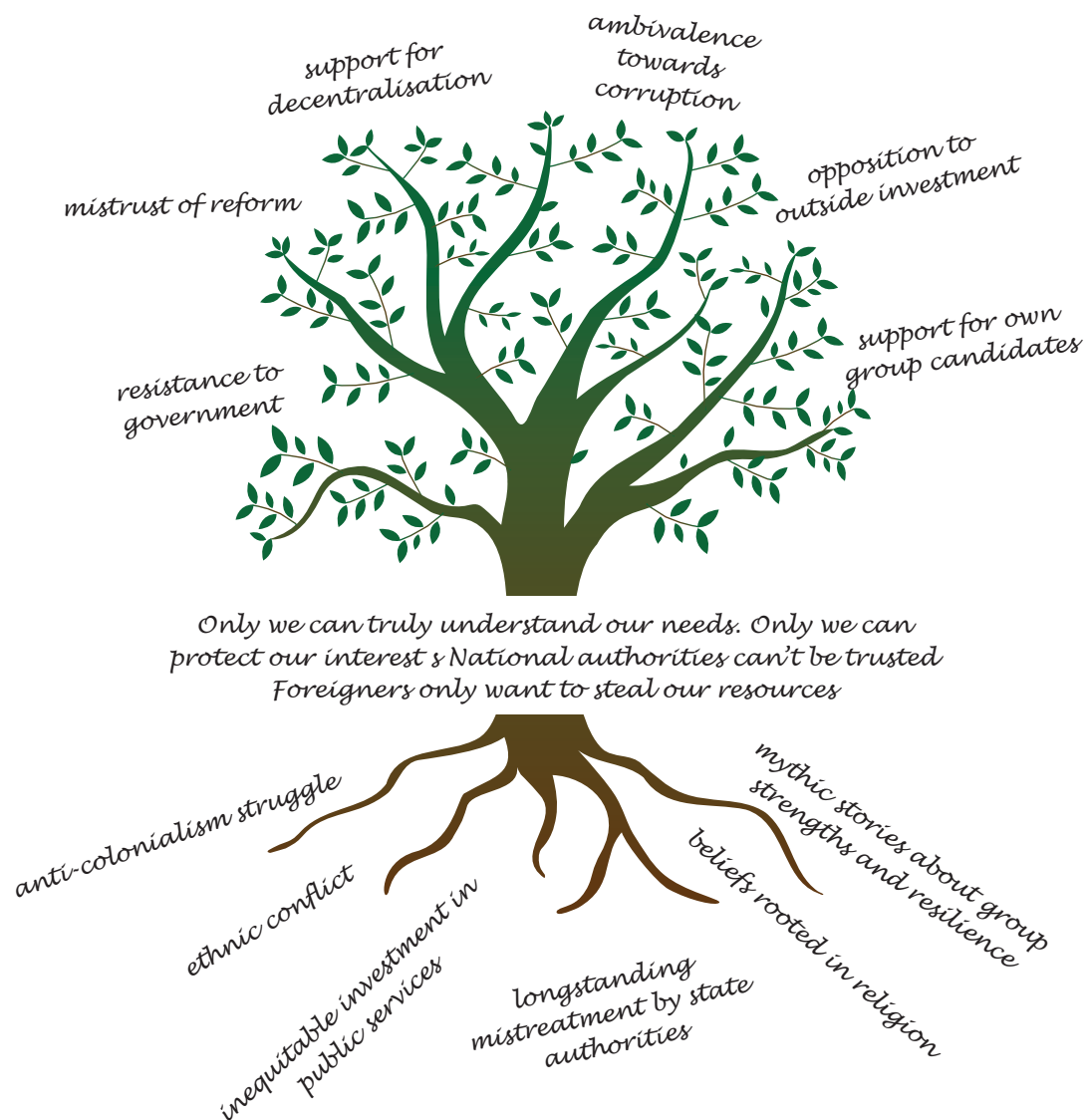
The Kikuyu–Luo relationship has had national repercussions. A historical and political rivalry entrenched through leadership struggles since independence, it continues to shape the country's political landscape. Daniel Howden reflects that “conflict in Kenya arises primarily when the Kikuyu and Luo are at odds”.<sup>10</sup> If Kikuyu–Luo grievances can be understood and addressed through a narrative peacebuilding approach, Kenya can be set on the pathway to depolarisation and greater national cohesion.

As such, this case study presents an assessment of dominant narratives that inform relations between the Kikuyu and Luo using IFIT's ‘narrative tree’ analogy (see Figure 1). The trunk of the tree represents the publicly visible narrative. It is fed by often-invisible roots representing historical events, myths, collective traumas, structural dynamics and other factors that anchor people's identity and actions. The trunk leads into branches representing practices, policies and other consequences of the narrative. In polarised societies, a few narrative trees come to dominate the narrative landscape and overshadow or choke out other, smaller narrative trees, as has been the case in Kenya.<sup>11</sup>

After outlining the narrative assessment process, this case study details the role narratives play in exacerbating polarisation. It then presents three narrative trees that dominate Kenya's narrative landscape, analysing the deep roots and problematic branches of each. The study then examines the implications of these narratives for national cohesion and discusses the ineffec-

tiveness and even danger of seeking to replace them with a unifying story. The case study concludes with insights for assessing national narratives as the basis for strategic narrative peacebuilding and addressing core issues driving divisions in Kenya and beyond.

**Figure 1** Example of a Narrative Tree



## The Narrative Assessment Process

This case study represents a collaboration between IFIT and the Kenyan Directorate of National Cohesion and Values (DNCV).<sup>12</sup> IFIT contributed its narrative peacebuilding approach and input from narrative and peacebuilding experts to the study, particularly through the organisation's Inclusive Narratives Practice Group.<sup>13</sup> The DNCV, housed in the Executive Office of the President, led the project's implementation by providing a supportive environment, technical and structural assistance, and government linkages to enhance our narrative assessment within Kenya.

The goal of a narrative assessment is to map and analyse the dominant and alternative narratives circulating in a particular context, and the main actors and tactics that have shaped them. The assessment enables critical reflection on who is given or denied a voice and which stories are amplified or silenced in the public sphere.<sup>14</sup> In Kenya, we applied a qualitative approach through focus group discussions and key informant interviews. We conducted the assessment in three sub-counties of Nairobi chosen specifically for their different demographics, namely Ruaraka, which has predominantly Luo residents; Dagoretti South, which has predominantly Kikuyu residents; and Westlands, which has a diverse population that includes residents of Luhya, Kamba, Kalenjin and other ethnicities.

Using purposive sampling, we organised focus group discussions with 60 participants distributed across the three sub-counties, with an average of 16 participants per location, comprising six male adults, six female adults and four youths. We used IFIT's narrative tree analogy to help participants identify the dominant narratives driving polarisation in Kenya, as well as alternative narratives that are smaller but nonetheless important. The participants then identified the narratives' roots and branches, in addition to the role of politicians, the media and other influential actors in growing them.

We also conducted interviews with an assistant chief, an elder, a social worker and a religious leader residing in the sub-counties, as well as two academics with rich knowledge of the history and relational dynamics of the Luo and Kikuyu communities in Kenya. The study was limited to Nairobi and could not accommodate all minority communities. It nonetheless provided a wealth of data and serves as a firm foundation for a subsequent assessment at the national level.

To ensure effective data collection, we trained and worked with seven research assistants, three research coordinators, and two senior management staff of the DNCV, who provided administrative and logistical support for the research. The training focused on IFIT's narrative peacebuilding approach



and the narrative tree data collection methodology. Given that the process would include discussion of conflict and violence, the training emphasised the need for trauma-sensitive research, showing research assistants how to identify triggers among participants and respond to them.

Prior to data collection, the researchers sought the informed consent of the participants and acquainted them with the purpose of the study, its benefits and risks, and our commitment to confidentiality. A counsellor was on hand to provide mental health and psychosocial support if needed. The researchers ended up addressing six traumatic responses during the focus group discussions. They worked with the participants and the counsellor to address them, using culturally sensitive techniques such as deep breathing exercises and pausing for support from community members to help stabilise and improve the emotional well-being of those affected. Including a counsellor in the data collection process proved crucial to mitigating distress, ensuring ethical handling of research participants' trauma, and fostering a safe environment for meaningful and accurate data gathering. This demonstrates the importance of a trauma-sensitive approach not just to narrative assessments but to all narrative interventions.

We used thematic analysis to identify key narratives emerging from the focus group discussions and interviews. The narrative tree analogy allowed us to map out the complex relationships between historical influences, public perceptions and tangible societal outcomes. By mapping how narratives emerge and evolve, the assessment highlighted how deeply rooted influences continue to shape public discourse in Kenya, setting the stage for understanding their role in driving polarisation.

## The Links between Narratives and Polarisation

Narratives are structured stories that convey meaning and influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviours within cultural contexts. They serve as cognitive frameworks through which individuals interpret their experiences and the world around them. Narratives are representations of social, cultural, political and economic realities or experiences. They serve as structures for understanding complex social realities and can be used to communicate cultural heritage, personal experiences or collective histories.

Some authors argue that narratives can serve as historical records preserving memories;<sup>15</sup> capture the values, beliefs and traditions of a particular culture;<sup>16</sup> and depict the economic conditions and struggles of different social groups, providing a nuanced understanding of economic realities.<sup>17</sup> Narratives can

be unreliable because they are inherently subjective, selective and shaped by biases.<sup>18</sup> They can sometimes idealise or romanticise certain aspects of reality, creating unrealistic expectations or distorting the truth,<sup>19</sup> and they often focus on individual experiences or specific events, limiting their ability to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues and grievances underpinning conflict and polarisation.<sup>20</sup>

Regarding polarisation, IFIT research has revealed that there is little consensus on the definition of the phenomenon. We use the definition put forward by Mark Freeman that polarisation is “a prominent division or conflict that forms between major groups in a society or political system and that is marked by the clustering and radicalisation of views and beliefs at two distant and antagonistic poles”.<sup>21</sup>

In the polarised Kenyan context, narratives often reflect historical events, such as the colonial experience and postcolonial conflicts. The ethnic conflict between Luos and Kikuyus is deeply rooted in historical experiences that have shaped social and political narratives. Donald Horowitz highlights the role of stereotypes in interethnic relations, specifically the dichotomy of ‘backward’ versus ‘forward’ groups, which continues to influence perceptions in Kenya.<sup>22</sup> Historical narratives frame the Kikuyu as industrious but privileged beneficiaries of colonial favouritism in land and resource allocation, while framing the Luo as marginalised yet intellectual and resistant. These stereotypes underpin grievances and competition for resources, exacerbating tensions during events such as the 2007–08 post-election violence.<sup>23</sup>

IFIT research shows that influential figures and institutions – which may include politicians, military officials, traditional leaders, youth, and the media, depending on the context – shape narratives in a way that can either foster peaceful dialogue or drive polarisation, potentially escalating conflict into violence.<sup>24</sup> In concurrence, Robert Entman’s framing theory demonstrates how selective emphasis in the media shapes public perceptions,<sup>25</sup> a process visible in Kenya where traditional and social media often reinforce monolithic depictions of ethnic groups.

Sara Cobb shows how narratives can reduce the complexity of social realities into simple stories that validate one social group’s grievances while delegitimising others, producing an ‘us versus them’ dynamic.<sup>26</sup> Solon Simmons notes how different plot structures in conflict narratives escalate tensions,<sup>27</sup> which occurs when political elites manipulate media narratives to deepen divisions, frequently framing Luos and Kikuyus as irreconcilable political adversaries. Despite the shift from analogue to digital and the growing focus on fact-checking and framing, important challenges remain, as highlighted by IFIT, including the widespread use of social media allowing anyone to act as a media outlet and the intentional interpretation of stories to align with specific narratives.<sup>28</sup>

This analysis aligns with the psychoanalytic insights of Vamik Volkan, who explores how historical traumas and the “chosen glories” and “chosen traumas” of individuals and groups who perceive themselves as both victims and heroes are mobilised to sustain group identities and justify conflict.<sup>29</sup> Volkan helps explain why dominant narrative trees with roots in collective memory, identity and trauma often overshadow narratives of shared interdependence or cultural hybridity.<sup>30</sup> In a similar vein, Frauke de Weijer and Alison Castel argue that collective trauma reshapes a group’s narratives, cultural expressions and collective mindset, often producing ‘frozen’ dominant narratives that are extremely difficult to resolve.<sup>31</sup>

Smaller, less visible narratives can help address divisions by demonstrating the complexity of political and social relations, broadening public discourse and promoting moral complexity. Postcolonial literature offers insights into identity and hybridity, challenging rigid ethnic categories and emphasising cultural blending.<sup>32</sup> Migration narratives similarly highlight the fluidity of identity in a globalised context, countering fixed perceptions of ethnic exclusivity.<sup>33</sup>

By visualising narratives as rigid trunks with facts, events and myths as roots and with actions and policies as branches, IFIT’s narrative peacebuilding approach creates space for inclusive and diverse storytelling.<sup>34</sup> This approach resonates with Chimamanda Adichie’s warning about “the danger of a single story” and aligns with the evidence that pluralistic narratives can reduce polarisation and foster greater understanding.<sup>35</sup> Together, these theoretical and practical approaches highlight the potential for re-framing the conflict between Luo and Kikuyu to prioritise shared humanity over division.

## Dominant Narratives in the Kenyan Context

Kenyan society, similar to many others, is intricate, with a multitude of narratives circulating at once – some in harmony and others in conflict. On the one hand, this aligns with Benedict Anderson’s view that narratives share common themes and values, offering a framework for morality, social order and collective identity.<sup>36</sup> On the other, it supports Pierre Bourdieu’s argument that narratives often represent varied perspectives, interests and experiences within a society, with different groups advocating for competing causes or solutions to societal issues.<sup>37</sup>

Participants identified various narratives that shape Luo–Kikuyu and thereby broader social relations, but focused on three dominant ones that are particularly impactful and spread in different ways by members of the Luo, Kikuyu and other ethnic groups. These narratives emerged from participants’ exposure to political caucuses, discussions within their social networks, and nar-

ratives actively shaped by media – especially social media – and influential figures such as politicians and musicians. While some participants embraced these narratives as reflections of reality, others viewed them as propaganda crafted by powerful actors to sway public opinion and influence behaviour.

Importantly, our narrative assessment process sought to move beyond simplistic stereotypes that frame one ethnic group as entirely villainous while portraying another as inherently virtuous. Instead, the assessment uncovered the layers underlying these narratives, revealing their social, historical and political foundations.

The first narrative we discuss here is that the Kikuyu community supports their kin in political office to safeguard and advance their economic interests. This narrative is significant because it fuels perceptions of ethnicity-based political favouritism, deepening divisions between the Kikuyu and Luo communities. This perception reinforces longstanding tensions, where the Luo community often views Kikuyu political dominance as an obstacle to their own economic and political aspirations. Over time, this has culminated in polarisation and, in extreme cases, escalated into violence by fostering resentment and exclusionary political dynamics.

The second narrative, anchored in collective traumatic incidents, is that the Luo community exhibits strong allegiance to their political leader, who leverages this loyalty to capitalise on political opportunities. This narrative is pivotal because it fosters the perception among the Kikuyu that the Luo leader uses his influence to pressure the government for personal advantage and manipulates his supporters to carry out economic boycotts, which negatively affect Kikuyu entrepreneurs. This perception shapes Kikuyu attitudes towards Luo political engagement, sometimes leading to concerns about bloc voting and exclusionary political dynamics, further deepening mistrust between the two communities.

The third narrative, that the Kikuyu strategically acquired land to maintain national control, deepens Luo–Kikuyu tensions by reinforcing perceptions of economic and political dominance. The belief fuels Luo grievances over resource distribution, framing Kikuyu land ownership as a tool for influence and marginalisation. As land is tied to economic power, the narrative heightens polarisation, intensifies ethnicity-based competition, and risks escalating conflicts, especially during politically charged moments. At the same time, it silences historical injustices and traumas, particularly relating to forced displacement, which the Kikuyu have endured over time.

Overall, the assessment revealed numerous narratives, but participants focused on these three, which indicates that they best reflect the dynamics of the Luo–Kikuyu relationship. Luo participants generally chose a narrative

emphasising their collective trauma under Kikuyu-led governments. Kikuyu participants generally selected one highlighting how Luo leaders leverage strong community backing to influence power. Meanwhile, the mixed group, comprising members of other ethnic communities, focused on Kikuyu migration patterns and the subtle injustices they have faced. Despite these preferences, all the participants engaged with each narrative, exposing their differing viewpoints.

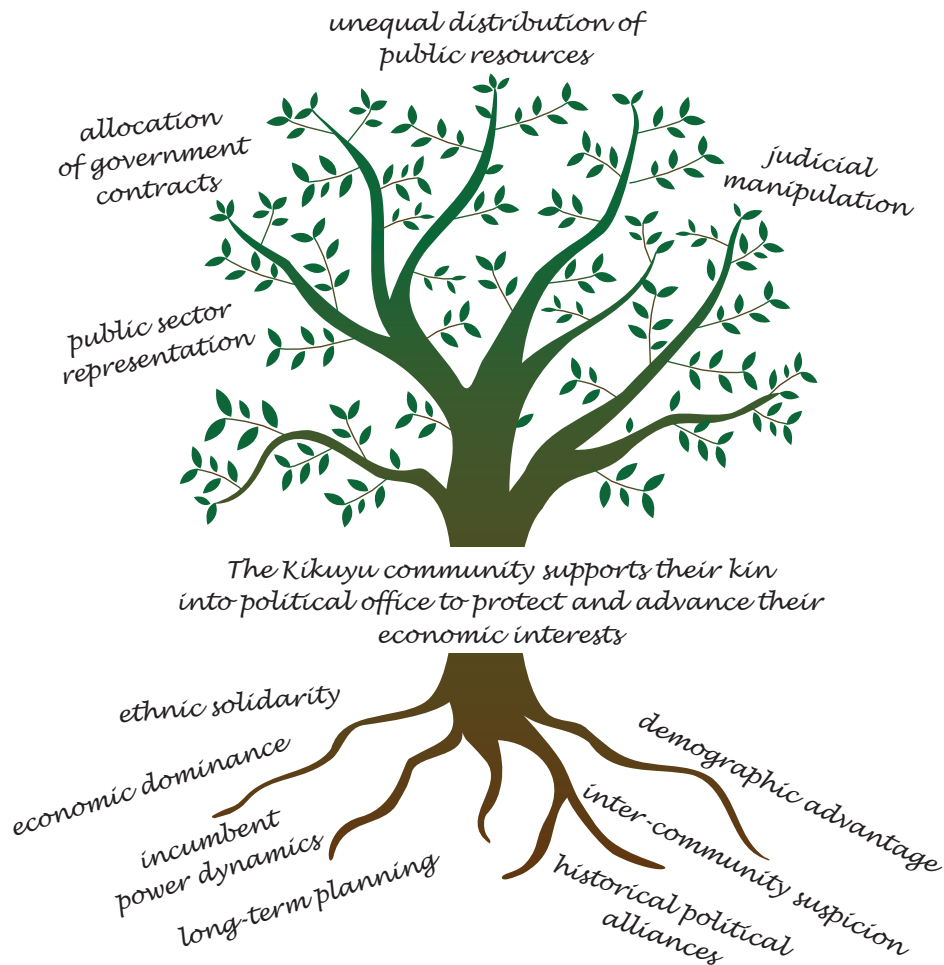
Having outlined these key narratives that shape perceptions and interactions among Kenyan communities, we will delve deeper into their drivers, examining in detail the roots anchoring these beliefs and the branches that manifest in societal practices and policies. It bears mention that we as the researchers do not subscribe to these narratives, which broadly categorise entire ethnic communities as uniform entities, when they are diverse and shaped by complex individual experiences.

#### **NARRATIVE ONE**

##### ***The Kikuyu community supports their kin into political office to protect and advance their economic interests***

During the assessment, a recurring narrative was that the Kikuyu community has historically implemented intentional strategies to secure proximity to, or influence over, the presidential office, thereby safeguarding and advancing their economic interests. This narrative was identified by participants who were not from the Kikuyu community. Most Luo participants expressed strong belief in it. About half of the other Kenyan community members who are not Kikuyu recognised it as a widely circulated perspective, but admitted they could not verify its accuracy. A notable ethnic dynamic surfaced when a Luhya participant contended that those who reject the validity of this narrative often belong to communities with close ties to the Kikuyu and benefit from them, such as the Meru and Embu, among others. Kikuyu participants admitted having heard this narrative, but they fully rejected it.

Exploring the structural dynamics and historical events at the roots of the narrative, participants suggested that a key belief among the Luo and other ethnic groups is that the Kikuyu community wields substantial economic power, without which they would have nothing to protect. This perspective has been reinforced by authors like Michela Wrong, who observes that the Kikuyu play a dominant role in Kenya's economy, notably in sectors such as public transportation (matatus and taxis), media (newspapers) and the civil service, with their entrepreneurial activities spanning from high-end establishments to remote roadside kiosks.<sup>38</sup>

**Figure 2** Tree of Dominant Narrative One

Luo participants further expressed the view that the economic strength of the Kikuyu community was derived, in part, from the goodwill extended by Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, a prominent Luo leader, at the time of Kenya's independence in 1963. Demonstrating trust in the Kikuyu despite perceptions of their treachery because they were favoured by the British colonial government, Jaramogi declined the presidency, instead advocating for the release from prison of Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu leader. This enabled Kenyatta to become Kenya's first president and cemented Kikuyu political influence. Although Jaramogi was subsequently appointed as Kenyatta's vice president, he was forced to resign from office in 1966 due to ideological differences with the Kikuyu leader.<sup>39</sup> This rupture contributed to enduring historical tensions and mistrust, particularly between the Kikuyu and Luo communities, shaping Kenya's political dynamics and alliances thereafter.

Since independence, the country has had three Kikuyu and two Kalenjin presidents. Non-Kikuyu participants discussed three key factors they see as contributing to this pattern: the Kikuyu community's strong ethnic solidarity, their demographic advantage, and the influence of having previous presidents from their community. Participants said that, as the largest ethnic group in Kenya, comprising approximately 17 percent of the population,<sup>40</sup> the Kikuyu leverage their demographic strength within a democratic framework to consolidate political power. They argued that this is reinforced by ethnic solidarity, with Kikuyus consistently supporting candidates from their own community, even when candidates from other communities may demonstrate stronger leadership capabilities.

Beyond demographic roots, participants frequently asserted that Kikuyu leaders utilise the power of the presidency to secure re-election and maintain their strategic positioning. Echoing Rasna Warah's perspective,<sup>41</sup> participants likened Kikuyu privilege to forms of systemic privilege, such as white or male privilege, noting that many within the Kikuyu community may be unaware of this advantage. Moreover, participants claimed that the Kikuyu community reportedly engages in strategic planning, designating future presidential candidates for successive elections, ensuring sustained influence over a 30-year horizon. One assessment participant said:

You can see how the Kikuyu prioritise voting for a Kikuyu president to protect their economic interests. Think about it: once a Kikuyu president is in office, they appoint cabinet secretaries from their community. Those secretaries then ensure that CEOs and employees are also Kikuyu. It's like a well-oiled conveyor belt, with each part playing its role. The president doesn't even need to micromanage; the system takes care of itself, with public servants awarding contracts to their own. It's a cycle that keeps everything in motion.

According to non-Kikuyu participants, the narrative has resulted in the emergence of four main branches: judicial manipulation, unequal distribution of resources, public sector representation, and allocation of government contracts. Although the Kikuyu are reported by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission to hold approximately 22 percent of public commission positions<sup>42</sup> and 20 percent of parastatal appointments,<sup>43</sup> while making up a slightly lower proportion of the population, such figures alone do not capture the nuances underlying these distributions. Political transitions in Kenya do lead to shifts in patronage networks, as noted by Rei Gordon,<sup>44</sup> often influencing access to state resources like government contracts and social amenities. However, characterising these shifts solely as nepotistic or corrupt overlooks broader dynamics. For example, the Kikuyu community is diverse, with notable variations among the Kikuyu of Kiambu and Karatina, who speak different



dialects, and even more diverse when considering the broader Gikuyu, Embu, Meru and Akamba umbrella.

Non-Kikuyu participants perceived the distribution of resources as unequal, suggesting that it has contributed to the marginalisation of certain regions. They referenced a study by the Commission for Revenue Allocation, which found that the 10 least marginalised counties are primarily from Kikuyu-majority Central Kenya and Kalenjin-majority Rift Valley.<sup>45</sup> However, participants' interpretations of resource distribution appear selectively framed, as they did not reference the other least marginalised counties within the Kalenjin-dominated region, which has also participated in the presidency. They further asserted that judicial processes are sometimes compromised to maintain economic dominance, with cases against Kikuyu individuals reportedly dismissed through political interference or corruption. While empirical data highlight disparities in representation among ethnic groups, narratives that frame such patterns as inherently corrupt or exclusionary risk oversimplifying a complex reality.

Overall, the dominant narrative emphasises a divide between the Luo and Kikuyu communities, portraying the Luo as victims of political marginalisation and the Kikuyu as beneficiaries of systemic privilege built on colonial-era treachery. The perception that the Kikuyu community benefits disproportionately from economic and political systems amplifies feelings of injustice among other ethnic groups in Kenya, but particularly among the Luo. Similarly, the narrative fits Entman's thesis that dominant narratives perpetuate stereotypes,<sup>46</sup> with the purported manifestations including ethnically inequitable policies and actions of Kikuyu-led governments, as discussed above. These generalised views make it harder for the communities to see each other beyond these simplified identities.

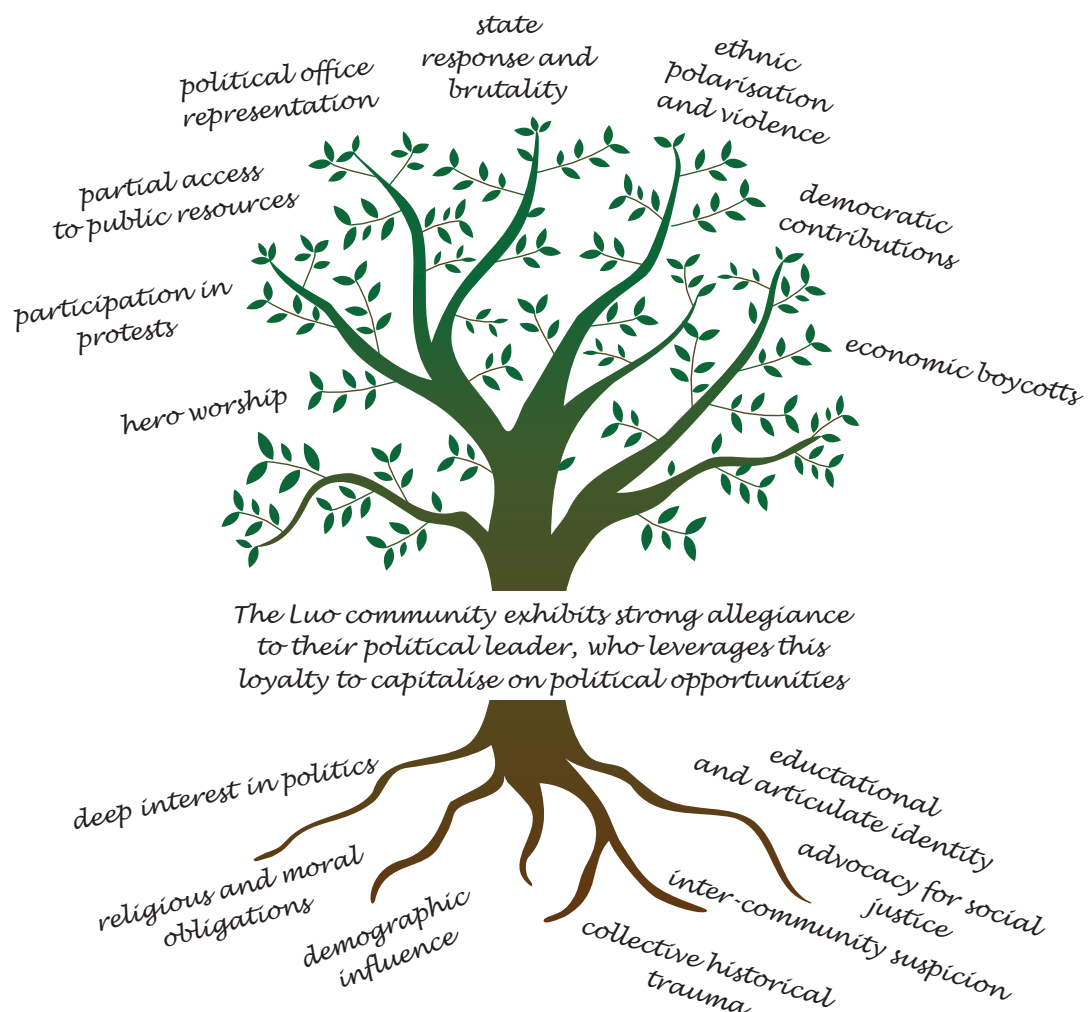
While narratives surrounding Kikuyu political influence shape perceptions of resource allocation and governance, similar discussions emerged regarding Luo leadership, particularly regarding how political exclusion and opposition dynamics have framed their role within Kenya's political landscape.

#### **NARRATIVE TWO**

*The Luo community exhibits strong allegiance to their political leader, who leverages this loyalty to capitalise on political opportunities*

Non-Luo participants observed that the Luo community exhibits a strong sense of political loyalty, telling stories about how their leadership uses this to seize opportunities within Kenya's political landscape. Specifically, Kikuyu participants said that the Luo leader has historically used his influence to pressure the government for personal advantage and push his supporters to hold economic boycotts, which have had a negative impact on Kikuyu entre-



**Figure 3** Tree of Dominant Narrative Two

preneurs. Luo participants, by contrast, affirmed their loyalty to their political kingpins but argued that all their actions have been intended to achieve social justice for the community and not to harm any other community.

One of the main roots of this narrative is a belief supported by all participants that the Luo community has a substantial number of voters and enough confidence to make a political appearance. Even though the Luo community makes up approximately 10 percent of Kenya's population, participants maintained that it wields significant political influence, particularly when compared to other larger communities such as the Luhya (14%) and Kalenjin (13%).<sup>47</sup>

Non-Luo participants identified several factors that they see as contributing to the significant political influence of the Luo community. Notably, the Luo were actively engaged in politics from the inception of the nation, with Jaramogi Oginga Odinga being offered leadership of Kenya's first African govern-

ment by Sir Patrick Renison, the British governor of Kenya, in 1960 during the final days of colonial rule. This offer was extended in recognition of Jaramogi's pivotal role in the anti-colonial movement and his substantial grassroots support. These attributes – political prominence and grassroots influence – continue to characterise his son, the current opposition leader Raila Odinga, and remain central to the community's political legacy. Kikuyu participants asserted that Luo leaders betrayed the government in the post-independence period, necessitating their removal from positions of influence. This, according to participants, has contributed to the Luo community's longstanding alignment with the opposition.

Non-Luo participants, including the Kikuyu, said that the Luo community draws upon the events of this period to construct a collective memory of perceived antagonism by Kikuyu-led governments. Indeed, Luo participants provided examples of such events, which they believe to be traumatic, with one notable example being the 1969 Kisumu incident, during which government forces opened fire on a crowd, resulting in the deaths of dozens and injuries to hundreds, allegedly in response to perceived threats to President Kenyatta's security.<sup>48</sup> Another significant event Luo participants frequently cited is the 2017 death of six-month-old Baby Pendo, who was fatally beaten by police.<sup>49</sup> These incidents are emblematic of the historical tensions that continue to shape the Luo community's political narrative.

As a narrative root, Luo participants' comments indicate that collective trauma plays a central role in magnifying grievances among the Luo community by reinforcing a shared sense of injustice and victimhood. This shared trauma not only deepens mistrust towards the Kikuyu leadership but also strengthens Luos' collective identity as advocates for social justice. As indicated by non-Luo participants' comments, this has contributed to the construction of a collective identity in which the Luo perceive themselves as victims of political marginalisation at the altar of Kikuyu political patronage. Consequently, many Luo have cultivated a pronounced commitment to social justice, frequently utilising methods such as protests – which tend to be violent – to advocate for equitable treatment.

All participants, including the Luo, perceive that their effectiveness in such advocacy efforts is bolstered by their confidence, which is rooted in high levels of education and eloquence. Moreover, they emphasised, the Luo community demonstrates a deep-rooted interest in politics, frequently organising forums such as *Kamukunjis* (caucuses) and *Bunge la Mwananchi* (People's Parliament) to discuss political matters.

Our narrative assessment identified several branches shooting off this narrative. One important branch, which Kikuyu participants especially pointed out, is the Luo community's profound reverence for their political leader,

which they described as a “personality cult” or “hero worship”, despite their acknowledgement of the community’s high levels of educational attainment. Indeed, the Luo frequently refer to Raila Odinga using honorific titles such as *Baba* (Father), *Agwambo* (Mystery), *Jakom* (Chairman) and *Tinga* (Tractor). Cultural expressions, such as the song “Who Can Bwogo Me” by Gidigidi and Majimaji, further celebrate his leadership.

Non-Luo participants acknowledged this narrative branch and noted that even prominent Luo politicians, such as Rafael Tuju and James Orengo, have faced repercussions for failing to align with this perceived cultic loyalty. Additionally, non-Luo participants felt that the Luo actively participate in demonstrations at the directive of their leader, fully aware of the potential consequences, including loss of life and property damage. Many participants argued that the veneration of Raila Odinga constitutes a political performance, positioning him as a living embodiment of struggle, resistance and a perceived entitlement to power. Luo participants generally maintained that loyalty should not be mistaken for worship. However, they argued that the Kikuyu community might perceive it that way due to a purported decline in moral values among the Kikuyu, where respect for elders is no longer assured unless it is linked to economic benefit.

**Figure 4** Political Cartoon Representing Dominant Narrative Two



Source: GADO Cartoons<sup>50</sup>

All participants agreed that ethnic tensions between the Luo and Kikuyu have been fuelled by political leaders, elders and biased media outlets from both communities, who manipulate events to create simplistic narratives. They portray their own community as victims while casting the other as perpetrators, ultimately deepening divisions and reinforcing stereotypes. This perpetuates a cycle of ethnic polarisation that often escalates into physical violence, especially during election periods.

This polarisation has, at times, also had economic consequences. For instance, in 2017, Raila Odinga urged his predominantly Luo supporters to boycott companies such as Safaricom (a telecommunications firm), Bidco (a cooking oil manufacturer) and Brookside (a dairy producer), accusing them of supporting Uhuru Kenyatta's presidential bid against what he described as "the will of the people". Reports indicate that this boycott had adverse effects on Kenya's economy.<sup>51</sup>

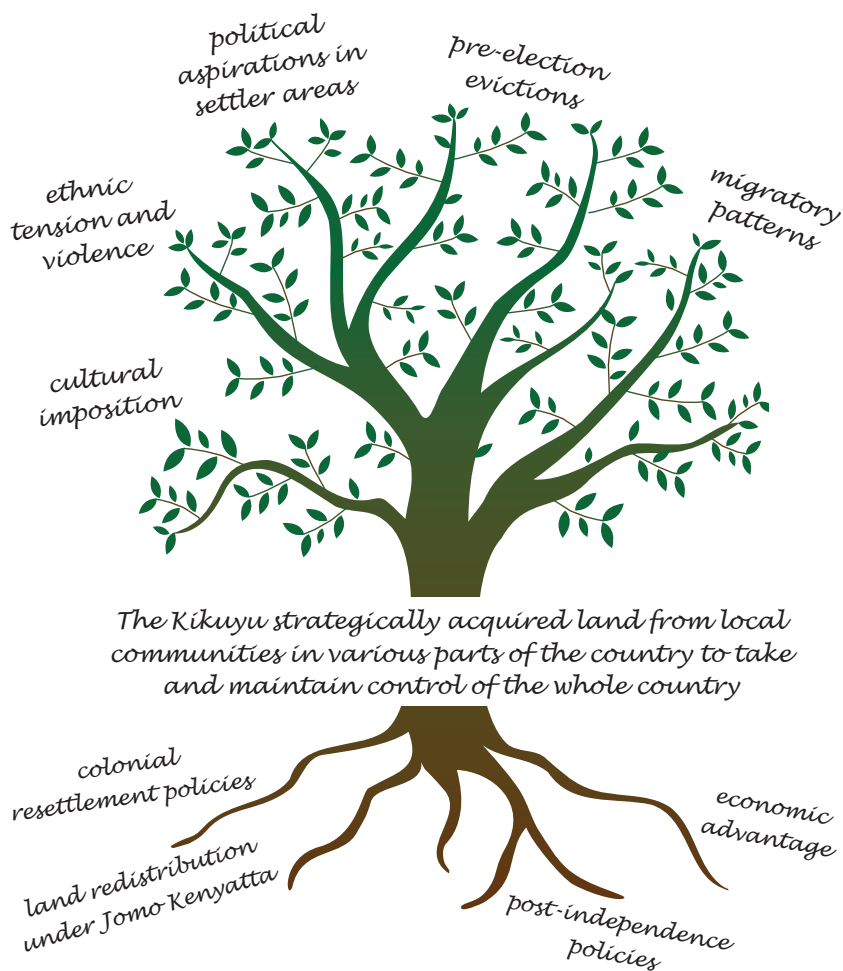
Kikuyu participants said that the government consistently implements heightened state enforcement measures in Luo-dominated regions during election periods due to the community's high capacity for mobilisation and propensity for engaging in violent protest. These deployments have frequently been associated with reports of police brutality and extrajudicial killings. Raila has alleged that such actions by law enforcement deliberately target the Luo community.<sup>52</sup> Luo participants argued that despite this challenge, this form of advocacy has, at times, yielded significant democratic achievements, including the rejection of the 2005 referendum on a new constitution and the adoption of a more inclusive constitution in 2010.

All participants mentioned that through strategic political negotiations, Raila has secured prominent roles, including that of prime minister, and has exercised influence in nominating individuals to ambassadorial, ministerial and state corporation positions. These political gains, they said, have also contributed to the implementation of development initiatives in Luo-dominated regions, such as the construction of major highways. Notable agreements underpinning these developments include the Building Bridges Initiative with Uhuru Kenyatta, the Handshake with Mwai Kibaki, and the political arrangement, colloquially referred to as the "half loaf", with William Ruto.<sup>53</sup>

Luo participants, however, argued that the government should ensure equitable resource distribution without requiring political bargaining. They said that Raila's efforts are a last resort with the aim to improve conditions for his people. While Luo political negotiations have shaped development and resource distribution, discussions about economic influence also arise in narratives surrounding Kikuyu land acquisitions across different regions.

**NARRATIVE THREE*****The Kikuyu strategically acquired land from local communities in various parts of the country to take and maintain control of the whole country***

Another dominant narrative identified by participants is that the Kikuyu community's expansion of land ownership beyond the Central region into various parts of Kenya is a deliberate strategy aimed at consolidating and sustaining control over the country. Importantly, this perspective was primarily raised by participants from ethnic groups other than the Luo and the Kikuyu. However, Luo participants largely supported it, emphasising that land acquisition is accompanied by other vices, including crime, disrespect of local culture and attempts to take over political leadership.

**Figure 5 Tree of Dominant Narrative Three**

All participants agreed that this narrative is rooted in historical events, even though their interpretations of the events varied. Beginning in 1941, British colonial authorities instituted resettlement schemes that forcibly displaced communities such as the Kikuyu, Maasai and Kalenjin, relocating them between the Central Highlands and the Rift Valley. The 1954 Swynnerton Plan, aimed at consolidating landholdings to promote cash crop production, exacerbated these displacements by merging small Kikuyu farms to meet credit eligibility requirements.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, the White Highlands were designated for European settlers, further displacing numerous Kikuyu families.

Following independence, the administration of Jomo Kenyatta prioritised centralised land control rather than restoring land to its original owners. The Kenyatta government established the Settlement Fund Trustees to facilitate the purchase and redistribution of European settler farms. However, these initiatives were market-driven and favoured those with financial resources.<sup>55</sup> The Kikuyu's historical settlement in the fertile areas surrounding Mount Kenya, coupled with an entrepreneurial tradition, enabled some of them to generate surplus income. These advantages, combined with post-independence policies, solidified the region's economic position. Utilising their economic and political leverage, many Kikuyu established British-funded land-buying companies, which facilitated their relocation to agriculturally productive areas, such as the Rift Valley, during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>56</sup>

Original landowners often lacked the financial means to reclaim their land, even long after independence, perpetuating perceptions of Kikuyu dominance in regions such as the Rift Valley and the Coast. This explains why Luo participants did not particularly find this narrative as dominant as participants from the Rift Valley and the Coast did. In interpreting this history, some participants contended that the Kikuyu are victims of their own leadership, while others felt that this was all part of a grand scheme to enlarge Kikuyu power. Those subscribing to the first interpretation further asserted that the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission final report was edited to obscure such narratives by amending critical sections, including paragraphs 203, 227, 231, 257 and 261 of the chapter on historical land injustices. For example, paragraph 203, which was expunged, is alleged to have originally documented that the late President Jomo Kenyatta allocated a "large tract of government land" from which the Kikuyu were displaced as a wedding gift to his eldest son Muigai.<sup>57</sup>

One notable branch emerging from this narrative is the pronounced migratory patterns of the Kikuyu community, which demonstrate their widespread settlement across nearly all regions of Kenya. All participants agreed that these patterns were initially rooted in post-independence land settlement schemes in the Rift Valley and coastal areas, but contemporary Kikuyu migration is predominantly driven by availability of commercial opportunities. The



migration has extended to regions such as Nyanza, Western, Northern and Eastern Kenya. Data from the National Cohesion and Integration Commission substantiate this claim, revealing Kikuyu employment in all 47 counties of Kenya, with the lowest representation observed in Vihiga County, where Kikuyu account for only 0.11 percent of employees.<sup>58</sup>

Non-Kikuyu participants claimed that in areas where they settle, the Kikuyu are perceived as disregarding local cultures, often giving schools, churches and locations Kikuyu names. For instance, the Kiambaa area in the Rift Valley is named after the Kikuyu word *Mbaa*, meaning fog, due to its chilly weather.<sup>59</sup> Such practices have occasionally incited violence, as seen during the 2007 post-election violence at Kiambaa. One Kalenjin participant said:

You know, our Kikuyu neighbours often act like they're above us. So, when election violence flares up, even if they've already left the area, some folks feel the need to wipe out any trace of that sense of subjugation. That's why places with Kikuyu names tend to get hit harder.

This phenomenon highlights how the nature of place names can become a focal point for violence, while also underscoring a broader issue: the forced eviction or voluntary migration of Kikuyu individuals before election cycles. This migration is often driven by fears of being targeted for violence, as local communities perceive the Kikuyu as likely to vote against local candidates.

Another branch shooting off this narrative, observed by non-Kikuyu participants, is that in certain regions where the Kikuyu are perceived as a settler community, they have fielded political candidates, which has contributed to tensions with local populations. In some instances, groups such as the Mungiki militia, which was implicated in post-election violence, have been involved in acts of violence allegedly aimed at supporting Kikuyu candidates.<sup>60</sup> These dynamics have further entrenched suspicion and hostility between the Kikuyu and other communities, such as the Luo, who perceive the Kikuyu as individualistic and inclined to prioritise their own interests at the expense of others.

Such polarising narratives often distort the truth, using exaggerations or false claims to deepen divisions. Briana Trifiro et al. highlight this in their research on how narratives are crafted to push partisan ideologies in news media.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, narratives about the Kikuyu benefitting disproportionately from colonial and post-independence land policies are often oversimplified or shaped to fit specific agendas.

In reality, the Kikuyu community has endured their own share of historical injustices, including land policies imposed by Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, who did not return ancestral lands even when he had the authority to do so. Kenya's first government, though led by a Kikuyu, did not prioritise returning

ancestral land to ordinary Kikuyu families displaced during the colonial era. Instead, land redistribution, especially in the Rift Valley and former White Highlands, mostly favoured political elites and those with the right connections, some of whom were Kikuyu themselves. As a result, many Kikuyu remained landless or were relocated to unfamiliar areas. This has created a painful contradiction: the Kikuyu are seen as politically powerful, yet many within the community still face deep-rooted injustices, especially over land.

Despite this, the narrative frequently paints the Kikuyu as opportunistic power grabbers, ignoring the community's diversity and the complexity of their experiences. These misleading perceptions fuel mistrust and perpetuate divisions, making meaningful reconciliation and peaceful engagement even more difficult.

## The Danger of a Unifying Story

The participants in this study – members of the Luo, Kikuyu, Luhya, Kamba, Kalenjin and other ethnic groups – had similar widely-held views about the two influential communities: “Luo is not just a tribe, it’s a lifestyle” and “Kikuyu is not just a tribe, it’s an enterprise”. However, their interpretations of these views varied greatly. Luo participants described their lifestyle as one of opulence, eloquence and a strong emphasis on education, while Kikuyu participants viewed it as marked by violence, hero worship, extravagance and political manoeuvring. Similarly, Kikuyu participants portrayed their ‘enterprise’ as built on hard work, strategic thinking, mutual support and responsibility, while Luo participants described it as driven by scheming, a sense of superiority, hunger for power, and manipulation. These radically differing perspectives highlight the deep-rooted tensions and contrasting narratives between the two communities.

The danger inherent in such dominant narratives is their ability to mask underlying divisions and perpetuate conflict, even when they appear to reflect agreement. In this case, while both the Luo and the Kikuyu community agree on the surface with shared narratives such as “Luo is a lifestyle” and “Kikuyu is an enterprise”, their interpretations reveal stark contrasts. These differences are rooted in stereotypes and opposing perceptions, with each community portraying itself in positive terms while attributing negative traits to the other. The portrayal creates ‘enemy’ images of the other that can be dangerous.<sup>62</sup>

As much as dominant narratives in polarised contexts simplify social realities and bind diverse groups in particular worldviews, externally constructed or imposed narratives that seek to unify a divided population are bound to be ignored or attacked. Rather, conducive internal conditions must be



established to enable the development of organic and authentic narratives that encourage peaceful engagement and allow underlying issues to be addressed.<sup>63</sup>

Tellingly, participants highlighted the limitations of the *Najivunia kuwa Mkenya* (I am proud to be Kenyan) campaign, initiated in 2004 by the Government Spokesperson's Office to promote patriotism and national unity. The campaign was perceived as ineffective because it was externally enforced, while existing socioeconomic inequalities undermined its impact. Mugambi Kiai illustrates these disparities by describing Kenya as divided into two stark realities: "a bountiful playground for the haves and a vast, arid wasteland for the have-nots".<sup>64</sup> In response, citizens subverted the campaign's message with a counter-narrative, adopting the slogan *Navumilia Kuwa Mkenya* (I tolerate being Kenyan) to reflect their lived experiences.

Rather than fostering cohesion, the *Najivunia kuwa Mkenya* campaign produced the opposite effect, for three key reasons: it ignored deep social and economic inequalities, felt imposed from above rather than rooted in people's realities, and tried to promote unity without addressing underlying divisions in society. Instead of bringing people together, it ended up feeling out of touch and even silencing.

To mitigate such outcomes, practitioners can benefit from using narrative mapping and analysis to identify prevailing narratives already in circulation, determine which ones dominate or suppress alternatives, and trace the underlying roots and emerging branches that reinforce rigid narrative trunks. At the same time, practitioners need to exercise caution in advancing unifying narratives, ensuring they do not oversimplify the intricate dynamics between groups or unintentionally exacerbate polarisation.

Genuine unity building demands an approach that embraces narrative diversity, actively addresses biases, and facilitates meaningful dialogue, rather than relying on superficial agreements or generalised perceptions. As this detailed analysis of narratives around Kikuyu–Luo dynamics demonstrates, a nuanced perspective is particularly vital in contexts characterised by histories of ethnic polarisation, such as Kenya.

## Conclusion

Narratives shape collective belief systems, beginning with individual perceptions and gradually evolving into broader societal influences. Among the Luo and Kikuyu communities of Kenya, narratives have played a dual role in fostering both cohesion and division. Stories of Kenya's shared athletic triumphs, for instance, bring these communities together under a national identity, cel-

celebrating moments like hearing the Kenyan anthem at global events. However, contrasting narratives rooted in interpretations of historical events, such as the relationship between Jaramogi Oginga Odinga and Jomo Kenyatta after independence, deepen tensions.

Narratives accentuate intergroup conflict and intensify polarisation when they emphasise distinctions between groups and foster an ‘us versus them’ mentality. For example, claims of Kikuyu dominance in land acquisition or economic systems are exaggerated, casting the Kikuyu as opportunistic and manipulative while the Luo are portrayed as marginalised victims. Such polarising narratives often magnify grievances by drawing on traumatic incidents like the Kisumu killings or police brutality during protests, creating collective memories of injustice. These stories evoke emotions like fear, anger and resentment, further driving communities apart.

Ultimately, the roots of most narratives are similar, drawing on shared socio-political conditions but interpreted differently by various communities. Unifying and even positive narratives, however, are not a panacea for cohesion; true unity building requires confronting biases, acknowledging differences, encouraging inclusive dialogue, and addressing underlying issues such as discriminatory policies and horizontal inequalities through concrete measures.

Furthermore, psychosocial support is crucial to narrative peacebuilding efforts because unaddressed traumatic responses – such as grief, fear, anger and mistrust – can perpetuate cycles of violence and hinder reconciliation by freezing harmful narratives and making them harder to address.<sup>65</sup> Integrating psychosocial care fosters empathy, restores dignity and rebuilds social cohesion, allowing people to co-create and engage meaningfully in reshaping divisive narratives into inclusive ones.

As divisive narratives obscure real issues and grievances, people benefit from understanding and looking beyond them, to work towards easing fears and economic vulnerabilities by taking shared responsibility for solving core problems. In this respect, conducting narrative assessments and identifying the plurality and complexity of narratives within society can help communities like the Luo and Kikuyu navigate their differences and foster understanding, strengthening the foundation for lasting peace and cohesion in Kenya.

Looking ahead, peace practitioners in Kenya who wish to apply narrative peacebuilding strategies should consider the following best practices:

- **Create safe spaces:** Host open dialogues within and across communities where people can unpack divisive narratives, self-reflect and explore new perspectives without fear.

- **Listen first:** Map the narratives people already subscribe to without the intention of replacing them. Narratives, especially around identity, injustice and belonging, can be gathered through *barazas* (gatherings), radio and everyday conversations.
- **Spot alternative stories:** Identify and enhance the visibility and legitimacy of less dominant real-life examples of shared struggles and cooperation, such as intermarriage, joint businesses or youth hustling together across tribes.
- **Foster shared meaning:** Use storytelling circles, radio and social media to help people hear each other's lived experiences and find common ground.
- **Act on real change:** While it is important to listen to a community's pain and pride expressed through narratives, effective narrative peacebuilding should go beyond symbolic gestures and public display to implementation of institutional reforms and equity-oriented interventions.

Alongside these narrative enrichment practices, peace practitioners in Kenya should also include efforts to:

- **Build narrative skills:** Prior training in how to analyse and diversify the narrative landscape, using local case studies as well as resources like IFIT's Narrative Peacebuilding Hub, is an important way to ensure quality results.<sup>66</sup>
- **Use local structures and civic and political leaders:** Working with Peace Committees, elders, women, youth, and political and civic leaders to ground narrative peacebuilding work in trusted community systems can help increase the chances of success.

Drawing on this Kenyan narrative case study, in addition to IFIT's global research and action in narrative peacebuilding, peace practitioners from other contexts may consider the following three rules of thumb:

- **Transform narratives from within:** Work with communities using narrative strategies and tools to reframe harmful narratives in ways that align with their lived experiences.
- **Amplify existing alternative narratives:** Highlight stories already in circulation – not newly created from the outside – that have the traction to enrich the narrative landscape while emphasising shared values and achievements.
- **Broaden the narrative landscape indirectly:** Avoid directly confronting divisive narratives in ways that might reinforce them. Instead, find indirect ways to bring alternative narratives to the forefront to promote inclusive and balanced engagement.

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