

## **Ethnic Narratives, Local Realities: Towards an Understanding of Local Level Practices during Ethnic Violence in Kenya**

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On December 30<sup>th</sup> 2007, following a heated campaign period, a flawed election and a three-day delay of the results, Mwai Kibaki was announced as the winner of the Kenyan presidential elections. In the months that followed, Kenya witnessed some of the worst ethnic violence of her Independence history.

This paper explores the question of continuity in times of uncertainty, through an examination of the 2007-2008 post election violence in Kenya. It argues that variations in violence dynamics can be understood as a continuation of diverse everyday routines, narratives and experiences at the local level.

Analyses of ethnic violence in Africa remain dissatisfying and reductive. While scholars have rightly dismissed journalistic notions of irrational tribal bloodletting, the dominant academic consensus is equally as problematic. The overwhelming focus on elite machinations and politicking reduces ordinary people to mindless automatons; it creates the illusion of homogenous and neatly-bounded ethnic groups waging battle against each other, the individual components of which, blinded to all other relationships and daily experiences, act and react identically to ethnic orders from above.

Based on fieldwork conducted between October 2009 and August 2010, and using Mathare slum, Nairobi, as a focus of analysis, this paper explores the violence in all its complexities and ambiguities, suggesting that these can be understood as a continuation of everyday interactions, experiences and narratives. The paper begins by demonstrating the territorial divisions within Mathare, and suggests that these shape the everyday experience and interactional enactment of ethnicity within the communities. In areas which are, for the most part, ethnically homogenous, everyday interactions and practices are largely intra-ethnic, and, as such, reinforce, and are reinforced by, an ethnic narrative. In demographically mixed areas, however, the dominance of inter-ethnic interaction and experience, serves to disrupt ethnicized perceptions of the world. The paper first examines the different everyday experiences and practices within two diverse areas of Mathare, before illustrating how they were continued, in some form, during the violence. It argues that in ethnically mixed areas, inter-ethnic co-operation, assistance and opportunism characterised the violence; in ethnically homogenous zones, however, intra-ethnic policing and an over-arching ethnic narrative influenced the forms of violence. The paper concludes by suggesting that an analysis of variations in the dynamics of violence at the local level can illustrate how communities deal with uncertainty, and can situate this diversity of behaviour within the logic of everyday experience and practice.