

Pass Me the Morsel: The Political Kamukunjis of Eldoret Town, Kenya

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Eldoret, the capital of the North Rift region of Kenya is evidently a politically robust Town. This is reflected in its resident's pleasure for 'political talk' in gatherings popularly known as Kamukunjis. Political Kamukunjis(also called people's parliament in Kenya) dot particular corners and streets of the town, with the working class neighbourhoods having such gatherings on a regular basis. During times of intense political activity (a run up to an election, a referendum, or party politics) the Kamukunjis swell. The most visible in Eldoret is one located on Elijah Cheruiyot Street, perhaps one of the busiest streets in Kenya's fastest growing city.*

This study employed an ethnographic approach to exposing the internal dynamics of one of these groups. This is a study undertaken between November 2007 just before the general elections, through January at the height of the electoral violence in the country, and ending March, shortly after a peace deal led by Koffi Annan was brokered that ushered in a coalition government. Using an up-close, personal experience and participation (both passive and later active), I established the extent to which the group is organized (many have dismissed these Kamukunjis as a bunch of idlers), thereafter, an attempt to profile the group in terms of social, ethnic, education and gender strata was done, a stratification which reveals covert processes of inclusion and exclusion. Also, by use of a communication worldview, the study analyzed communication (debate?) within the group and the attendant norms of at play. Finally, using the findings gained in the field, the study provides an appraisal of the extent to which the group shapes participants' political opinion.

**Kamukunji is a Kiswahili word which means gathering*

Introduction

This study focused on group dynamics and the communication patterns inherent in informal *political* groupings found in Eldoret town. In this study, the group was termed *kamukunji*, a Swahili word that loosely translates to ‘ a gathering’. Jarnis (1988) defines a group as number of people who share common interests with one another, accept the rights and obligations of membership-including rules of behaviour within the groups, and share a sense of identity and belonging with others. Members of a group define themselves as belonging to a group, at least to some extent. They do this by attending regular meetings; they come to know each other more as their sense of identity grows with continued attendance.

The focus of this study was on a secondary group along Eldoret’s Elijah Cheruiyot Street, a group organized around exclusive discussions on political issues of the day. The group neatly fits the characteristics of secondary groups. As Jarnis (1988) explains, such groups have loose affiliations with sizes ranging from 3-1000, and often vary in permanence. Secondary groups are relatively unaffected by membership change. Besides, the political *kamukunjis* are specialized and segmental, in that they concern only a special point/segment of the whole person, in this case politics. Politics is the only legitimate subject of discussion for members. Here, relationships are formal and instrumental, in other words relationships amongst members are not based on emotions or a liking for each other, but for political expression. The adherents of this deliberations have sometimes been dismissed as idlers whilst others have termed the group ‘*the peoples parliament*’ where the average Kenyan can air his or her political opinions freely, or so we presumed.

To the uninterested passer by the *Kamukunji(s)* which are located along *Elijah Cheruiyot Street* often seem like an annoying appendage to an already overcrowded street, or a gathering teeming with pick pockets and petty criminals, an eyesore, or plain idlers whiling away precious time in loud fashion. One question the study sought to find out was how amorphous or organized the group was. Further on, the study sought to do a profile of the group in terms of class, gender and ethnicity. Also, the researcher investigated the role the groups played to the individual and the group as a whole.

Naturally, an objective was formulated to find out to what extent the *Kamukunjis* shape political opinion and to prescribe to what extent such gatherings can be seen as a resource worth tapping for scholars and stakeholders in political communication, sociology and other social sciences.

Background to the Study

Kenyan politics is largely tribal and voter behaviour is predictable along tribal sentiments and affiliations. In Kenya the ethnic profile is as follows: The Kikuyu constitute Kenya's largest ethnic group, forming 23% of the populace. The Kalenjin follow them at 14%, the Luhya at 13%, and the Luo at 12%. The Kamba form 11% of Kenya's population. Additional groups include the Kisii (8 %), Meru (8 %), and other African (15 %).

In 1964, Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, became Kenya's first president. At Kenyatta's death in 1978, Daniel arap Moi, a Kalenjin became President. Daniel arap Moi retained the Presidency, being unopposed in elections held in 1979, 1983 (snap elections) and 1988, all of which were held under the single party constitution. The 1983 elections were held a year early, and were a direct result of an abortive military coup attempt on August 1, 1982. In 2002, Moi was constitutionally barred from running, and Mwai Kibaki, a Kikuyu, running for the opposition coalition "National Rainbow Coalition" — NARC, was elected President in an election judged free and fair by international observers. The elections marked an important turning point in Kenya's democratic evolution in that power was transferred peacefully from the Kenya African Union (KANU), which had ruled the country since independence. Under president Kibaki, the democratic space expanded. The media grew freer than before. Kenyans associated and expressed themselves without fearing being harassed by security agents as it used to be the case during the Moi administration. It is worth noting that the Political *Kamukunjis* have been in existence since the introduction of multi party politics, but even more profound in the Post Moi era. In November 2005, the Kenyan electorate resoundingly defeated a new draft constitution supported by Parliament and President Kibaki. Kibaki responded by dismissing his entire cabinet. Kibaki eventually appointed a new slate of ministers.

The next general elections were held December 27, 2007. President Kibaki stood for re election on a Party of National Unity (P.N.U) ticket. He faced off with the Orange Democratic Movement Kenya ODM-K of Hon Mr Kalonzo Musyoka, a Kamba by tribe and the Orange Democratic Movement of Hon Mr. Raila Odinga, a Luo. The results were bitterly contested after Kibaki was unexpectedly declared winner and hurriedly sworn in. The country descended in a vicious bloodletting that made Kenya steal global headlines for all the wrong reasons. Later an African Union team led by Koffi Annan, a former United Nations boss negotiated a grand coalition that saw Hon. Mwai Kibaki remain president, Hon Mr. Raila Odinga became Prime Minister with executive authority while Hon. Kalonzo Musyoka became vice president. The deal was an attempt at managing an Ethnic conflict that would have grounded the East African region. The study was carried out three months before the elections and two months after the elections making a total of five months of continued observation. The study was concluded soon after a national accord binding Hon. Mwai Kibaki and Hon Mr. Raila Odinga was signed.

Research Site

Eldoret town is in western Kenya and the administrative centre of Uasin Gishu District of Rift Valley Province. It grabbed international infamy as the epicenter of vicious ethnic killings following the highly controversial general elections that saw Kibaki sworn in for a second term. Daniel arap Moi was born in the neighbouring Baringo District, and under his presidency, the town was developed further through infrastructure improvement. Roads were paved and an international airport established. Several factories were set up. In 1984, Moi University was established by the government in the outskirts of Eldoret. It continues to be a major player in the affairs of the town. The town is now home to a large market, Moi University campuses and Eldoret International Airport. It is also known for its cheese factory and industries associated with textiles, wheat, pyrethrum and corn. Eldoret is home to manufacturing industries, the most successful being Rupa Mills and Ken Knit Limited. Due to the presence of Moi Referral and Teaching Hospital, a Moi University teaching hospital and Eldoret Hospital, there is a host of experienced professionals in the town. This has made Eldoret attract skilled and unskilled labour to

service its major industries. It is a mostly cosmopolitan town that has all Kenyan ethnic groups well represented, with the ethnic *Nandis* forming the majority of the towns' population.

The political Kamukunjis used to be confined in the Towns estates at the time of the repressive Moi era. In 1991, the then president Moi shocked friend and foe by compelling KANU to support the repeal of section 2A of the constitution to allow for multiparty politics. After this historic democratic step, the Political *Kamukunjis* became a feature receiving near religious attendance. Soon, the groups began forming in the town's streets as recourse for enthusiastic residents to while away the lunch hour, between 1pm and 2 pm. Today, the political Kamukunjis of Eldoret have become a permanent feature of the town. The size of the group varies from five to around seventy people in a single sitting. Attendance is largely a factor of the country's political temperatures and events. Attendance is also dependent on the prevailing weather conditions. (They are held in the open air and this often necessitates earlier than anticipated adjournments when rain falls)

Research Method

This study was carried through by use of "ethnography". According to Hammersley, M. (1990). Ethnography literally means 'a portrait of a people'. Ethnography is a social science research method. It relies heavily on up-close, personal experience and possible participation, not just observation. In this study, the group under study is a fairly organized group that gathers for the sole purpose of political deliberations along Elijah Cheruiyot Street of Eldoret town, adjacent to the Telkom offices.

To achieve the stated objectives of the study, the research undertook to scrutinize People's behavior in everyday contexts, rather than under experimental conditions created by the researcher. The research was done from November of 2007 to early March 2008. This period was conveniently chosen because the country faced an election consequently there was a heightened political activity. The mayhem that followed the announcement of the elections results enriched the contents of the study as the group's activity became robust.

The study made use of observation and relatively informal conversations as the main sources of gathering data. Naturally, the approach to data collection was unstructured in the sense that it did not involve following through a detailed plan set up at the beginning; the researcher went through the study with an open mind and let the research peel itself open, as does a blooming rose. The observations/participation were quite systematic, at least three times a day. That is in the morning (8-9am), midday (12-2pm) and in the evening (4-6pm). In the initial stages, the researcher engaged in a non-participant observational role so as to learn the norms and the rules of engagement. Over time, the researcher graduated into an active participant and was therefore able to accurately observe the inner workings of the group.

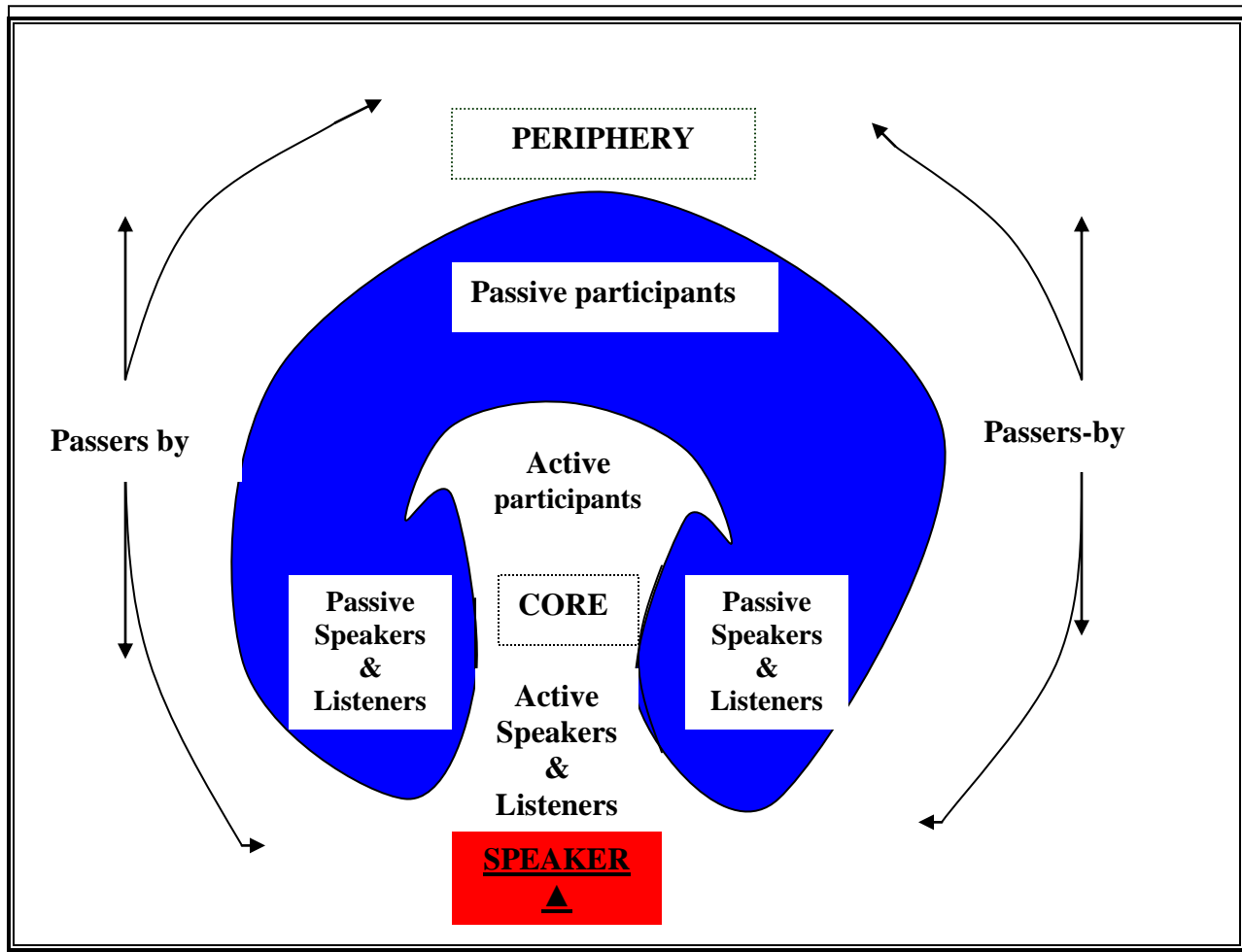
The focus was a single group, in this case the political Kamukunji's of Eldoret along Eijah Cheruiyot Street. As is common in such research methods, they group was relatively small in scale. The analysis of the data involved interpretation of the meanings and functions of human utterances and mainly took the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role.

The Findings

It is worth noting that at the time of consolidating the findings of this study; Kenya was on the verge of a precipice. The country was plunged in unprecedented orgy of violence. The bloodletting caused the destruction of property leading to the deaths of over 1000 people and the displacement of over 300,000 people. Former United Nations secretary General, Koffi Annan, was in the country trying to broker a political deal between opposition leader Raila Odinga (Orange Democratic Party-ODM) and Incumbent president Mwai Kibaki (Part of National Unity-PNU). As earlier mentioned, the deal resulted in a coalition government with the former as prime minister and the latter as president. It is on this background that the second half of the study was based. The first half of the study was done at the background of the heavily financed presidential campaigns from both sides of the political divide, highly competitive party nominations of civic and parliamentary candidates and several high profile defections.

The political Kamukunji along Elijah Cheruiyot Street is conveniently located. And the setting is quite telling. The participants congregate at a newspaper vendor's station under a tree. The facility serves the dual purpose of selling newspapers and providing a congenial atmosphere for political rhetoric. The newspaper reading is an important activity as it acts as a build up of debate. It is the contents of the newspaper that forms the issues to be debated. Also, those members who are illiterate or semi illiterate or cannot afford a newspaper have the ability to catch up with the latest news by listening in on the deliberations. The newspaper vendor stocks back issues of the dailies as reference material to clear issues in case of heated exchanges and to confirm doubtful arguments. On any particular day, the kamukunji has about a ten to a hundred participants. To properly comprehend the composition and ultimately role of participants, the researcher came up with a conceptual framework that illustrates the inner workings of the *Kamukunji* along Elijah Cheruiyot street.

See figure 1: Conceptual model of the Political Kamukunjis of Eldoret



As shown in the diagram above, all passers by are potential passive listeners or passive speakers. The study reveals that males are more likely than females to become either active or passive participants (see group profile). A passive listener is one who joins the kamukunji at the peripheral point. His behaviour is characterized by a fleeting participation, mostly listening briefly and then walking off and on rare occasions he may indulge in speaking a few words (either in support of a point or a feeble objection that does not affect the flow of the Kamukunjis discourse). Their opinion is often aimed at a fellow passive participant or no one in particular. Still, some active participants may pass off as passive participants. These are active members who will appear at the periphery of the group and study the groups' composition and subsequent level of debate. If they are not impressed they move on and later reappear when things change i.e. when there is an increase in active participants or a juicier debate. It is worth noting here that a passive participant can 'graduate' into an active participant based on his frequency of attendance, however, the span of time at which one joins active core membership is a factor of an individuals personality and knowledge of politics.

Active participants are former passive participants (listeners or speakers). They are to a large extent at the heart of the Kamukunji; they determine the direction and issue of debate. An active speakers utterance affects the whole group by either provoking debate or prompting responses. Active listeners are sometimes active speakers and depending on the political atmosphere in the country, are known to spend between one to seven hours of their time in political debate. Active participants happen to know fellow active participants by one or more of the following; name, facial familiarity, place of residence and place of work. At the very least, they are acquaintances. Passive participants outnumber active participants at the average rate of 3:1.

In carrying out the study, the researcher began as a passive participant for the first two weeks through observation and having learnt the groups unstated norms, gradually graduated and became a participant in the situation. This accorded the researcher the opportunity to experience the 'we' of the active participants, especially in trying to discover the needs that the participants derive from the Kamukunjis. In researching

groups, Hammersley, M. (1990) argues that in participant observation, the researcher attempts to share as intimately as possible in the activities of the people in the observed setting. The purpose of such participation is to develop an insider's view of what is happening which this study attempted to achieve. This means that the researcher not only saw what was happening but also "felt" what it was like to be part of the group, as an active participant. It emerged that the view from the inside is different from the view from the outside.

The *Speaker* plays a very crucial role. The position is not defined as *speaker* as we know it, but it is a term the researcher used to describe one who took it upon himself to manage the debate, 'adjourn meetings' and 'discipline' errant members. The speaker's authority is mostly tied to the fact that he 'owns' the 'place.' The Kamukunjis are hosted at his newspaper selling point. The speaker allows active participants to read newspapers without charge so as to enrich debate. Assertions, rumours and facts are verified by asking the speaker to look up various newspapers. The speaker manages turn taking, shouts down interrupters, and dismisses 'drunks' who would occasionally trespass and flout the group's norms and engagement procedures. His control role was evident once when at one point an active participant attempted to veer the talk from 'the Annan talks and the subsequent political settlement' to 'who particular parties will nominate' to parliament. *The speaker* was incensed at this and shouted down the member saying;

Sisis tunataka kusikia vile tutachukua serikali ,sio mambo ya nominations, hapana enda out of topic.(we are discussing how we will take over government, not parliamentary nominations, do not go out of topic)

Notice his talk of 'ownership' of the political party he supports. This will be discussed later in the paper. Once, when the talk degenerated into silly arguments, as it sometimes does in the absence of opinion formers, the speaker would compare his role with that of Koffi Annan (who was leading mediation talks to break the political impasse at the time) to assert his authority.

Mimi hapa ndiye Koffi Annan, mimi naamua nani anaseme,na nani anakimya, sivyoy?(I am Koffi Annan, I decide who will speak and who will hold his peace)

From the discussions above, it is clear that the group is fairly organized.

Opinion formers are an important 'elite' segment of the group. These are former passive speakers or passive listeners who have cultivated confidence among the group to the point of becoming active 'speakers'. Most importantly, their education level is mostly at college level, higher than the vast majority of the group's members who happen to be from four leavers or with limited education. As a result of their regular attendance, they are known by name, ethnicity and their profession. Their role is important because they command great respect and are rarely treated to interruptions or contentions. Their presence fortifies group discipline and makes it more formal. The researcher attributed this to their well-researched and perceptive analysis of political events, and a capacity to present information authoritatively and persuasively coupled with comparatively strong personalities. They were also well groomed. Some among this group did claim to have close contacts with the leading politicians in the country and therefore privy to what they termed as '*breaking news*', unfortunately, it was not uncommon for opinion formers to abuse their privileged positions in the group hierarchy to spread unsubstantiated rumours that are sometimes accepted by the audience members without debate.

On rare occasions when two opinion formers differ ideologically, the group would inevitably disintegrate. The speaker at this point watches helplessly and worse, if the two-opinion leaders came from different ethnic groups the group behaviour changes. They resort to their vernacular languages and the two splinter groups attract participants of their own ethnic groups only. Almost always when this happens, it is the Luo and kalenjin groups that break off to form their own. Other ethnic groups rarely have the numbers to form an enclave. At the height of political tensions and the near breakdown of civilian structure in the country around January through February, it was the opinion formers who whipped ethnic passions and invoked participants to engage in political mass action. Throughout the five months of doing the research, the opinion formers were never more than six.

The profile of the group is quite interesting. The members are 99% male. In the 5-month period of doing the research, the researcher never saw a single female in the group. However, a member revealed that on rare occasions a lady would pass by and listen (a passive listener) for a few minutes and go. As a result of the gender asymmetry, conversations among participants are characterized by a competitive streak and an urge to outdo another. Frequently, the researcher noticed what Tannen, D (1994) called report talk as opposed to rapport talk i.e. participants presented their opinion with a finality and authority even when the contents of their arguments were deeply questionable lacking veracity. Also, competitive turn taking among participants glared its ugly head through frequent interruptions. Speakers who were not considered as ‘opinion leaders’ are often rudely interrupted in their tracks.

The group comprises of mostly young men, with an age bracket of 18-40, but the greater majority falls within 22-35 yrs of age. Contrary to perceptions, the Kamukunjis are crime free and the researcher never heard or witnessed misconduct. At any sitting of about a hundred people, about 40% are job seekers, 30% are factory workers who do the night shift in Eldoret’s major industries, 10% are professionals taking a break. These professionals include lawyers, bankers, teachers, insurance brokers and journalists. The other 20% cannot be easily accounted for professionally, as they are a highly passive group. However they could be mostly farmers and other groups not represented in the previous categories. The three dominant ethnic groups represented in the Kamukunjis at the time of carrying out this study were the Luo, Kalenjin and the Luhya. This was not a surprise because the leading opposition group in the country (ODM) was at the time led by Raila Odinga, a Luo, whose running mate was Musalia Mudavadi, a Luhya and the youthful William Ruto, a Kalenjin. In their deliberations, the participants felt a sense of oneness based on this tribal alliance at the national level. Most of the participants, well over 70% were drawn from the low-end estates of Langas, Kamukunji and Huruma. The debates were virtually done in Kiswahili, with brief anecdotes of Luo, Kalenjin or Luhya. However, use of vernacular was frowned upon as it disintegrated the group.

Group Function

To the average participant, the group serves and accomplishes several needs. Since as psychologists have stated that the human minds protest against uncertainty, we continually seek to extract meaning from our environment. One way in which the participants sought meaning was through participating in the group's debates. It is worth noting that in times of great political events that prompted widespread anxiety, the group swelled in numbers. Worse, when the government of Kenya banned live broadcasts in the country's electronic media, the *kamukunji* groups had attendances from virtually all classes well represented, with numbers that were well over 150 at a particular moment. When aspects of a system are 'out of joint' with one another, i.e., when there is strain in an essential institutional structure, we become apprehensive and actively seek each other's support and perspective concerning what is happening. At the height of the conflict, the Kamukunji political deliberations become a way through which individuals kept referring to the group until a concrete, acceptable shared conception on which to coordinate actions and develop new collective patterns emerged. At one point, Kalonzo Musyoka, the third force in the electoral process surprised all, sundry and himself by pulling a mammoth crowd at the historic Uhuru Park. Early next morning, the Kamukunji was unusually full. The participants, majority of whom support Raila Odinga, had to seek support from the group to neutralize the anxiety created by the possibility of Musyoka upstaging Odinga.

Most of the participants portrayed a one sided political persuasion. The group functioned to affirm their dominant thoughts. Most active members or passive members who cared to air their opinions 'pledged allegiance' to the ODM party, directly or indirectly. Naturally, a binary connotation of the politics under debate kept emerging; with members speaking of us verses them. Particular ethnic groups were ostracized and found it difficult to be part of the group (it was felt that their political inclinations were obviously the 'other'). As a result there were negative stereotypes on those considered 'enemy groups'. A common tactic that the Kamukunji group members used to categorize 'the others' was to label them '*mungiki*' (a word describing a proscribed sect popular with Mwai Kibaki's Kikuyu tribe)

Accordingly, a pattern akin to groupthink emerged, there was concurrence thinking among active members whereby members expectations were unrealistic and highly overrated to the extent that they underestimated the incumbents determination to get reelected. This led to feelings of invulnerability and invincibility. Once, the researcher witnessed a passive participant being *tossed in the air* after indicating that there was a possibility of Raila Odinga losing the historic vote. There was thus a possibility that other passive participants who saw this opted for self-censorship to avoid similar treatment.

Still, there is a balance to this; an active participant could get away with such sentiments. After increased attendance, and therefore more ‘affirmation of loyalty’ to the group, the researcher became an active participant. It was now easier to display less overt conformity to the group’s ‘talk’. The *Kamukunji* adherents, more so the active participants, could at this point accept ‘hard and blunt analysis of political events from one whom they considered as one of their own. This did not invite reprisals. However, after internalizing the groups ‘thematic line of thought’, there was a need for the researcher to deliberately suppress utterances that may create disunity, controversy or heightened anxiety.

Although not measured, the researcher felt that the group’s influence on political opinion was not likely to be direct, in the sense that there was not a clear causal relationship between political opinion and attendance of the *Kamukunjis*. However, attendance of the group served a psychological feeling of meeting personal needs of finding meaning and affirmation and a social need of *security* (of one’s opinion) membership (however loose) and expression.

Conclusion and Recommendations

- As a resource, the *kamukunji* of Eldoret are important to leaders, politicians and students of political communication. Such forum can be one way in which leaders and politicians discover the pertinent issues that are affecting their members. For instance, the researcher learnt that it was virtually impossible to be elected councilor in poor neighbourhoods such as *Langas* estate without addressing the *kamukunji*. (The sitting councilor at the time of writing this paper was an active participant of this group).
- If the groups could be more organized and given proper recognition and structures that enhance formality, eliminate ethnicity and rumor mongering, and tailored to attract all irrespective of gender, tribe, status or class-then they could be useful tools for individual expression in a more legitimized way. Democratically, they will be a good way in which to express opinion, let off steam, and acquaint oneself with the latest news in town.
- Also, the concerned authorities can be able to hear directly from the citizenry so as to improve services and respond fast and appropriately. Besides, with support in terms of a few structures the council can get revenue from them in form of levies.
- Finally, should the *kamukunjis* become recognized and formalized, the local media houses that are replete with foreign content can, at a small fee, pick excerpts for a 30 minute programme once a week. This should prove popular now that there is all craze about reality television.

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