

Secrets, Lies and Free Sugar: Information and Misinformation in Kenyan Politics

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Kenya can sometimes seem like a country obsessed with politics. Focussing on the goings-on of individual politicians, politics forms the subject matter of heated discussions, jokes and speculation in offices, bars and on street corners around the country. This is recognised by Kenyans and, as one informant exclaimed in exasperation, ‘in Kenya everything is politics. Politics! It’s a way of life!’ Another told me illustratively that ‘we want politics with our breakfast’.

But where do people get the information on which they base these opinions? I argue that despite improvements in media reporting, word of mouth—the so-called ‘radio trottoir’—remains the prime channel of political information. This has expanded rapidly in terms of volume and reach through the use of ‘small media’ and new communication technologies such as sms and mobile internet. Gossip and rumour form an important component of this communication, due to misunderstanding, to deliberate misinformation and diversion tactics on the part of politicians, to one-upmanship on the part of the narrator, but also, I believe, for the entertainment value. In fact, entertainment seems to be one of the motivating factors of individual involvement in the political process. Even the media focus on individual politicians, their fallings-out and the formation of alliances, something I compare with western tabloids’ focus on stars of soaps and reality shows. The spread of rumours can, however, also have deadly serious consequences, as seen during the post-election violence of 2008 (See Osborn 2008).

The arguments of this paper are informed by interpretative fieldwork carried out in Kenya from 2009 to the present, including observation of electoral campaigns—local and national—interviews with politicians and voters, and media analysis. The paper will interrogate the spread of information about politics in Kenya. I focus on how political messages are presented to and received by the general public and how this impacts upon political understanding and behaviour. Questions that will be addressed include: what issues do the media choose to focus upon and how do these choices affect the public’s understanding of the political process in the country? How is political information filtered through various informal social and political networks? How (if at all) is ‘fact’ differentiated from rumour? Finally, how do the public evaluate and make use of the messages they receive via campaign events, the media and the rumour mill when forming their political opinions?

¹ I would like to thank the British Institute in Eastern Africa for a minor research grant for fieldwork that contributed towards this paper as well as to all their staff in Nairobi for facilitating logistical and practical issues in Kenya, to my supervisor Professor Shiela Meintjes constructive criticism, encouragement and friendship. And finally to Oscar Omondi Onyango for research assistance as well as inspiration and for putting me right when my ‘academic imagination’ has run away with me. Thank you!

In the run up to the 2007 elections in Kenya I was told by a friend who lived in one of the informal settlements of Nairobi that if Raila Odinga won the presidential elections, sugar would be provided for free to residents of the slums. This is partly related to controversies regarding the Odinga family's interests in the Kisumu molasses plant, but more interesting is that this information was assumed to be believable, and that it had gained such salience amongst Nairobi residents. Where did this information come from? Was it spread deliberately by Odinga's supporters or by the party leadership to attract voters, or was it a misinterpretation of other information? Perhaps sugar was being distributed during campaign rallies – a common practice during elections in Kenya? I cite this example partly because it was the first time I came across clear misinformation informing political awareness in Kenya but also because serves as an example of the focus area of this paper which is the way political information is disseminated and received in the country, how information can get distorted and what affects this may have on electoral democracy.

I will begin by highlighting the obsession with politics amongst much of the general public in Kenya, in particular the fixation with political personalities. This will be followed by a discussion of the continued importance of personal networks for both economic, social and political survival, networks based primarily on ethnicity and the extended family. I posit that these networks, alongside formal media, remain central to the spread of political information from centre to periphery and, though less frequently, the other way around; information that is spread in order to keep informed, but also for entertainment, to keep up to date with the comedy of errors that is Kenyan politics. I will end by examining the implications of this means of communication, especially the salience of political misinformation and rumour.

Reporting Politics in Kenya or 'What was Raila up to yesterday'?

Talk about politics in Kenya tends to revolve around the goings on of individual political figures; who is aligned with whom? Which leaders have fallen out? Who accompanied the President on his latest tour? In which order did they speak? As has been observed in many countries in Africa, political parties are weak and lack ideological foundations. More often than not they are formed around a strong individual and/or figurehead for an ethnic group or as ethnic coalitions aimed at securing the maximum number of votes and securing the lucrative presidential seat (Gyimah-Boadi 2007:322). Issues, although

they are discussed in parliament, are not the prime area of interest in political discussions either among the general public or in the media. So, as Makhoka (2010:298f) and others have recognised, the focus of the media, and also of talk on the streets, tends to be on individuals, events and processes (Kadhi and Rutten 2001:253ff). Obsession with these political personalities has become so salient that one informant spoke of it as the 'superstar syndrome'².

This pattern, I claim, links in with the continued salience of the clientelistic or patrimonial logic in Kenyan politics. Rather than represent the populace, the MP is seen as the big-man, the head of the local, frequently ethnic or clan-based, clientelistic network. He (most often) is in parliament to fight for local issues, but especially to channel a piece of the 'national cake' to the local level and to distribute this among his clients. In return he will secure their continued support and maintain his stay in the limelight and close to the personal rewards offered by political office in an 'relation of unequal dependence' (Chabal and Daloz 1999:47). Seen from this perspective the obsession with individual politicians and their goings-on becomes more understandable.

As the Kenyan citizenry, the newspapers are also obsessed with politics and leading stories are invariably about political figures or events. Several newspaper editors told me that, although they had tried focussing on issue based reporting, it was exceedingly risky to carry for example, a human-interest story on the front page as sales invariably dropped³.

The reporting of the referendum on a new constitution held both in 2005 and 2010 is a good example of this fixation. The papers could contain around 10-20 articles a day on the constitution, primarily reporting campaign events and how individual politicians were positioning themselves—which MPs were seen together, who was for or against and who was accused of being a watermelon (i.e. red, the colour of No campaign, on the inside, green, the colour of the Yes side, on the outside)? This was all shrouded in a high degree of speculation. Information about the issues raised by changing the constitution,

² Interview with Micheal Soi, Nairobi 2010-07-22

³ Interview with Catherine Gicheru at The Star 2010-06-20, anonymous editors at the Nation 2010-06-22, Ben Agina, editor at the Standard 2010-06-26

on the other hand, was scant and reported in opinion pieces or towards the back of the paper⁴.

From a clientelistic perspective the papers are merely providing the information that their readers will need to judge the relative positioning of their big man or woman, how close to the centre of power and the resources this promises are they and how likely is it that this will benefit 'my group'? The political events and rallies that feature so centrally can be read as a kind of performance. The excitement, speculation, shows of support or jeering all combine to provide both pure entertainment as well as knowledge about levels of political support and positioning of individual politicians and political groupings; all useful information for clientelistic considerations (See for example Barber 2009, Haugerud 1995, Lynch 2006). When reporting these events, newspapers act both as a megaphone, informing the majority of the population who do not attend these rallies of what transpired, albeit selectively, but also reflect the general mood of the public focusing on the goings on of the political superstars. In this way they act much as the gossip magazines reporting about celebrities and the stars of reality shows that are so popular in Europe⁵. The editors and journalists of the main papers that I spoke with were not slow to admit that their prime consideration in deciding what to publish was sales figures.

It could be said that newspapers do not provide the most accurate indicator of what information is reaching the populace, and how this would influence their understandings of politics. Although it is estimated that one paper in Kenya is read by up to ten people⁶ their reach is limited by lack of access in rural areas⁷ and low levels of literacy. A survey carried out in 2010 showed that 37% of respondents had not read a newspaper in the past year. The majority of readers resided in urban centres and had

⁴ The Nairobi Star was an exception to this, including a number of informative articles although these became less frequent as the referendum approached.

⁵ This is not uniquely Kenyan, although the lack of stable political parties does heighten the importance of individual politicians. Based on an analysis of European and US politics, John Street suggests that it is useful to understand political communication as art and performance and to analyse it as show business rather than using the market model that has been prominent in recent research (Street 2006:369f).

⁶ Interview editor at the Nation 2010-06-22

⁷ Both geographical and linguistic

formal education (AudienceScapes 2010:10). It is therefore clear that political reporting in the papers is primarily aimed at the middle and upper classes in metropolitan areas⁸.

It should also be noted, however, that although the main audience is urban and educated, the contents of the papers can still influence the political behaviour of inhabitants of rural areas. One informant pointed out that many vernacular radio stations summarize the headlines in their news shows⁹. It is also clear that the political classes do deem what is written in the papers to be of import. A political lobbyist admitted that he actively sought to manipulate what was written through press conferences, diversion tactics and pure bribery, primarily with the aim of affecting the debate amongst the elite¹⁰. Further, as an MP I interviewed pointed out, politicians rely on those residing in the urban areas yet who are registered to vote in their rural homes¹¹. It was assumed that what was written in the newspapers both influenced their voting and that they, in turn, would be able to influence their friends and relatives in the rural areas. This also underlines the close linkages that remain between the rural and the urban, linkages that I discuss below. During the referendum campaigns many companies, organisations, churches and individuals bought space to advertise their stance on the constitution, something that also points to a perceived impact for what is published in the main newspapers.

News reporting on television is seen as being more accurate than in the papers providing a deeper analysis and more nuanced representation of what is going on. Despite this many people will switch between channels, try to compare with international news reports from BBC or Al Jazeera and frequently discuss the reports on the phone with friends and relatives during the broadcast¹². Television is, however, limited in reach due to broadcast range and access to electricity (AudienceScapes 2010:8f). More important still for the spread of political information is the radio, and especially the vernacular radio stations that broadcast in rural areas¹³. Their reach and influence became clear

⁸ Makokha (2010:282) asserts that the 'information gap that exists is a wilful perpetuation of the domination of one class over the rest'.

⁹ Interview journalist with the Nation 2010-09-28. Although this may transmit the main news stories of the day to a broader public, it will necessarily miss many of the key educative, opinion and more nuanced texts that appear within the pages of the papers.

¹⁰ Interview with a member of the Yes campaign, Nairobi 2010-06-18.

¹¹ Interview with member of parliament, Nairobi 2010-07-17

¹² Interview with Michael Soi, Nairobi, 2010-07-22 and observations of friends and relatives.

¹³ In a study about the spread of information about the constitution the Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation Monitoring Project shows that Radio was by far the most common means of learning about

during the post election violence in 2008 where vernacular stations stand accused of spreading ethnic hatred and inciting violence (See Government of Kenya 2008, Ismail Jamal and Deane 2008).

Despite this it is important to recognise that the media are not accessible in the same way to all sectors of the population and that some communities, often rural and marginalised in other ways, are less privileged than others when it comes to information flows. This unequal access could also be seen to reinforce divisions between rural and urban, between men and women, between poor and rich (Booth 2010). There is also a continued belief in authority, especially in rural areas, and in the importance of receiving 'news' from authoritative sources. In one village I visited during the referendum campaigns a young man told me that they 'did not know how to vote as they had not been told'. By this he meant that no outside authority, such as civic educators or politicians had been to talk to them. When discussing further it turned out that they had no more a confused view of the constitution than the majority of the population¹⁴. In this sort of rural setting, without electricity or regular newspaper deliveries, most information will come from individuals who visit town, respected individuals such as pastors or school teachers, a matatu conductor, or, as I will show, through the mobile enhanced pavement radio. But in general, the unemployed youth I spoke to had little independent access to reporting on current affairs. Thus, unequal access to information is still characteristic of Kenyan society (Nyamnjoh 2009:63).

While all of these formal media play an important and increasing role in conveying political information to Kenyans, I argue that the most important source of political information still remains face-to-face communication, including an enhanced version of this which has developed with the rapid expansion and increase accessibility of mobile telephone and internet technology in Kenya. Before discussing these channels of communication and what they may entail for political communication and decision-making it is necessary to discuss the networks within which this information is spread, networks that form a central aspect of Kenyan social, political and economic organising.

the constitution at 77%, followed by TV at 53%, friends and relatives at 47% and by reading the draft at 40% (KNDR Monitoring Project 2010).

¹⁴ Interviews in Nyamarambe, 2010-07-27

Networks and family ties

Personal ties and face-to-face interaction are central to social and political life in Kenya. In a country where the majority of the population lack formal employment and any form of state run social security, these informal, interpersonal networks provide an essential means of survival, harnessed as a safety net in times of economic hardship or during illness, to find an odd job, or other means of earning a few shillings as well as to navigate the state bureaucracy (Berman 2004:38ff). They are also essential to the individual's identity and positioning in society in a context in which, as Chabal has pointed out, people do not exist in isolation but rather where belonging is communal. As such, they form a fundamental element of political practice in the country, are channels for patronage flows, and form the foundation upon which the clientelistic system rests. They are, in Kenya as in many countries in Africa, based first and foremost on family ties, and that 'family writ large' (Anderson 1991), the ethnic group¹⁵. As such, they can be seen to cut across divisions of class, between rural-urban and between those in power and the powerless. These networks should, however, not be romanticised. Their reciprocal nature is seldom equal. Further, it has been noted that they are both founded on and reproducers of inequality (Bayart 1993:228). As I will argue below, they also serve to reinforce ethnic divisions, especially during times of heightened political competition such as in the run up to national elections.

Political action must also reflect this collective dimension—the individual politician must be seen to be acting on behalf of their wider network in order to enjoy continued legitimacy and support (Chabal 2009:47f). As Hydén has noted, this is especially important in governance contexts, what he calls 'the economy of affection', in which "who you know is more important than what you know" (Hydén 2006:72ff) and where 'wealth in men' is one of the more important preconditions for power (Bayart 1993:231). These are systems that function in parallel with, and overlap, formal governance institutions. Or, as Bratton has suggested, they have become so ingrained in African politics that they could be seen as formal political institutions in and of themselves (Bratton 2007:98).

¹⁵ Although Bayart points out that although the family or ethnicity seem to form the basis of these networks they are in fact flexible and the family connection could instead be seen as instrumental, as "idioms at the service of actors" (Bayart 1993:217). See also Ekeh (2004) for one explanation of the emergence and continued salience of these 'kinship networks' in Africa.

More important for this paper, however, are the way these networks function as channels for information. They do not only provide a link between those in power and their 'subjects', but also between individual citizens at various levels of society, between urban and rural areas and between Kenyans in the diaspora and their friends and relatives at home. Bayart describes them as rhizomes, spreading and merging underground and only on view at selected intervals (Bayart 1993:220f). An individual could be a member of several networks of survival or utilize different nodes for different purposes. Although these channels of communication have long been important and influential, and urban dwellers have consistently maintained strong bonds of loyalty, belonging and exchange with the ethnic 'motherland' (See e.g. Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo 1989:43ff), the speed and reach of the spread of information has increased dramatically due to a rapid spread of mobile technology in Kenya.

Mobile operators in the country, often in partnership with development agencies, have been at the forefront of innovative mobile solutions accessible to as great an audience as possible (Ondari 2010, Zuckerman 2010). According to the recent national census 63% of households own at least one mobile phone (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2010), although this figure also varies from town to countryside. Now few rural inhabitants are more than the press of a button and a few shillings away from their relatives and friends in political centres. Political news and gossip on the city streets or in the village bar are no longer separated to the same extent as previously by geographical distance.

In one sense the increased availability of 'small media' (Spitulnik 2002) such as the mobile phone, has led to an enhancement and expansion of these networks. On the other, it has also enabled new uses of the linkages between individuals. As Michelle Osborn has shown in her exceptional article about the role of rumour in the 2007 elections and the following violence, mobile technology and the short message service (SMS) facilitated the spread of anonymous messages, messages that nonetheless contributed to people's conceptualisations of the violence as well as their future actions (Osborn 2008). As has been shown "new users tame mobile telephony to correspond with existing social structures and employ its agentive capacities to circumvent social constraints" (Shrum et al. 2010:615).

In the following I will focus the role of the interpersonal, 'word-of-mouth', networks in the dissemination of political information, linking them to what Stephen Ellis has dubbed 'pavement radio' (Ellis 1989). In what way does their salience affect messages about politics spread around the country?

Pavement Radio, Rumour and Gossip

Pavement radio, or 'radio trottoir', is the name given to the word on the street, the news spread in daily discussions held during casual meetings on street corners, in bars, in busses, hairdressers, etc. It has been defined as "the social-channelled, oral discussion of current events in Africa, is more than rumour alone. It conveys information and news but is also used for entertainment and almost as a collective form of psychotherapy" (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004:29f). It has been suggested that pavement radio, and the importance of information conveyed via word-of-mouth, can be seen as a continuation of traditional oral communication, traditions that still have greater relevance in Africa than in areas where information flows have become more formalised (Barber 2009, Nassanga 2009).

As has been mentioned, talk about politics is ubiquitous in Kenya—the pavement radio is broadcast loud and clear across the country. In almost any small town you will find places where people, most often men, gather to discuss political highlights. In Nairobi city centre, several more or less formalised discussion groups, meet on a regular basis to lash out current political affairs. Talk is frequently inspired by the headlines in the papers, but I posit that this talk also feeds into what is published in the papers and reported in formal media which, in Africa, can often be read as extensions of the pavement radio (ibid:Ellis and Ter Haar 2004:31). Further, in these discussions the headlines will be embellished with information from personal sources; a snippet of privileged information gleaned from a friend of a friend with contacts in high places, or the conclusions of a discussion held with a neighbour or in the buss to town. Discussions will also include speculation about the reasoning and political strategies behind the actions of individual politicians as well as jokes, slander and conjecture; all 'favourite topics' of the pavement radio (Ellis 1989:322).

These face-to-face to face discussions are then spread further to a wider audience. On the one hand, individual members will take topics and conclusions of discussions with them throughout the day, continuing the exchange as they meet new groups of friends

and acquaintances. On the other, exciting or sensational news will often be spread to contacts around the country using phone calls or, more frequently, short text messages (SMS's). Thus, political information and gossip can spread at astounding speed from town to countryside and back to the town again in ever increasing webs¹⁶.

This manner of communication obviously opens the door to all manner of misunderstanding and mutation, both unintentional and deliberate. Information is passed from one individual to another in a way that is reminiscent of the children's game of Japanese Whispers, a game where the end result is a message very different from the original. This is compounded in a context in which 'the truth' about politics and political processes is never easily discernable.

Much of the information passed on via the pavement radio takes the form of rumour or gossip. Information, though not necessarily false, is frequently twisted and embellished to suit the purpose of the relater or the perceived interests of the audience. Research on rumour has suggested that it is a form of narration that occurs in situations where there is a lack of trust in information from other, more authoritative, sources (Donovan 2007, Fine 2007), or to provide meaning in the face of uncertainty, threat or ambiguity (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007). According to Ellis, the pavement radio is particularly salient in Africa where people are much more likely to trust what they hear from people they know than from official sources (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004:31). In Kenya, the evidence on trust in 'authoritative' sources of information is contradictory. When it comes to statements from government representatives, informants were likely to declare that they are highly sceptical. On the other hand people often act in accordance with the demands of their political representatives. This was exemplified during the referendum campaigns when informants in the Rift Valley repeated and vehemently defended blatant lies about the contents of the constitution spread by local MPs.¹⁷

The same contradictions are evident regarding the formal media. Several surveys have pointed to trust in the media being high (KNDR Monitoring Project 2010, Makokha 2010). This, however, contradicts my own findings where people claim to take what is

¹⁶ See Spitulnik (2002) for a discussion of how the use of 'small media' point to various forms of the public sphere in Africa, although these do not match the more common definitions based on Habermasian theory. She points out that small media are not very visible or public and not followed through as if they were part of a direct engagement with the state, whereas openness and directness are criteria for something to "count" as public sphere phenomena" p178, 181.

¹⁷ Interviews held in Kericho, Letein and Bomet, May-June 2010

written in the papers with a pinch of salt. One editor I spoke with claimed that people were still affected by the restrictions in the media imposed under the Moi era when political information was highly censored and controversial political events were reported in a round about way. The editor claimed that people still sought to 'read between the lines' and interpret what was really behind the story, rather than taking the printed word at face value¹⁸. This is confirmed through statements about switching between news broadcasts on different TV channels in order to glean the most likely story¹⁹. From this perspective, the media provide just one source of information that is combined with others in order to draw conclusions about the current state of politics, none of them trusted completely in and of themselves.

It is thus clear that information spread via word-of-mouth, from friends and acquaintances, is an important feature of everyday life in Kenya²⁰. I believe further, that much involvement in political discussion and conjecture is due to its high entertainment value. These discussions are full of jokes and speculation about the goings on of the stars of the political stage. The topic of conversation is almost never policy or issues, unless they happen to be the subject of a controversy between political rivals. It is rather the individuals themselves who are in focus. As discussed above, this is related to the clientelistic nature of politics and the importance of keeping up to date with the state of the patronage structures one is a part of. But also, these discussions are fun and entertaining in their own right, often reminiscent of the script of a soap opera or the coverage of the stars of reality shows that form the mainstay of the tabloids in Europe. Indeed, Street has suggested that it could be claimed that politics today not only *seems* like a soap opera but that it actually *is* a soap opera with the politicians as its 'stars' or 'celebrities', something which entails taking more seriously analogies between popular culture and politics (Street 2006:360). Further, political competition and the way it is narrated, shows an element of sports commentary. As Kadhi and Rutten write in relation to the 1997 general elections, the focus of Kenyan political reporting was 'the game of strategy' rather than the 'substance of elections'.

The exciting story of how the race was taking place and how one contestant was struggling to take over from another was always of great interest to Kenyan readers,

¹⁸ Interview with Catherine Gicheru, editor at The Star 2010-06-20

¹⁹ Interview with Micheal Soi, Nairobi 2010-07-22

²⁰ I have no statistics for Kenya, but according to the Ugandan census of 2005 49.2% of the population stated 'word of mouth' as their main source of information (Nassanga 2009:51).

viewers and listeners. People enjoy competition and take chances in backing winners and losers (Kadhi and Rutten 2001:253)

An additional reason for the perpetuation of rumour and gossip is their propensity to create and strengthen bonds between individuals and thus a sense of belonging, thus also creating boundaries (Das 1998, DiFonzo and Bordia 2007, White 2000). As such, the perpetuation of the rumour mill via personal networks acts to reinforce and renew ties between individuals, and even to exclude others in a continuation of the ethnic and cleintalistic logic so characteristic of politics in the country.

Ellis and Ter Haar (2004:35) posit that for a rumour to be passed on, people must believe it to be true in some sense but I believe that 'truth' is actually secondary. More important is that the rumour conveys information about what information or events are deemed important. As White has noted (2000:30):

People do not speak with truth, with a concept of the accurate description of what they saw, to say what they mean, but they construct and repeat stories that carry the values and meanings that most forcibly get their points across. People do not always speak from experience—even when that is considered the most accurate kind of information—but speak with stories that circulate to explain what happened. This is not to say that people deliberately tell false stories. The distinction between true and false stories may be an important one for historians, but for people engaged in contentious arguments, explanations and descriptions, sometimes presenting themselves as experts, or just in the best possible light, it may not matter: people want to tell stories that work, stories that convey ideas and points.

In Kenya the truth content of the rumour mill and the national media is not easy to determine. Fact, speculation, misunderstandings, lies and deliberate misinformation combine and flow into one another with 'truth' seeming to become relative and contextual.

Political Lies and Misinformation

As shown political rumour is a central aspect of political life in the country and opacity seems to cloud every political statement and event. Haugerud, writing in the early 90s, drew attention to this fact and states that "ruse, disguise, feint and counter-feint are so much a part of Kenyan political life as to suggest that nothing should be taken at face value" (Haugerud 1995:52). Despite a more open and free media and expanded democratic space, the confusion, contradiction and ambiguity of information about politics that reaches the general public is still striking. It is still nigh impossible to interpret what is 'really going on' among the political classes.

The newspapers, although basically free, still lack depth, investigative reporting and seem more interested in publishing stories that will sell than following up and getting to the bottom of issues. Indeed, there is little interest in follow-up among the public who seem far more interested in the here and now. One political analyst stated that “Kenyans have a two-week memory span”²¹. In some ways, many of the papers are mere reflections of the pavement radio, feeding off and into the word on the street. Politicians themselves are seldom transparent about the reasoning behind their actions and decisions and are often known to contradict themselves from one day to the next. Although this lack of reliable information does not bode well for the development of an open and inclusive democratic culture, many people seem to enjoy the controversies and the guessing games that surround the political process. As mentioned, entertainment is a key aspect of political life and discussion in Kenya.

Another reason making it hard to distinguish between reality and fiction in Kenyan politics is that many, apparently real, events, seem too bizarre to be true. An example is the so-called ‘Artur brother saga’ in which two Armenian’s (?) turned up in Kenya in 2006. Apparently linked to a night raid on the Standard newspaper²², but also connected to Kibaki’s daughter, found carrying weapons through airport customs, granted official papers of deputy police commissioners and issued with government licence plates; the antics of the supposed brothers, who helped things along by parading around town in full bling looking like a Hollywood cliché of Russian gangsters, filled the papers and fuelled the rumour mill for several months (Wrong 2009:256f). The plot seemed to have far more in common with the script of a Latino soap opera than state business though it was debated in parliament and investigated by an official commission. Although the commission’s report has been tabled there still does not seem to be any real clarity as to what was really going on. Was it a plot to assassinate Raila? Or an attempt to distract attention from the recently released Anglo Leasing report on grand corruption in the Kibaki government? The pavement radio has forwarded many explanations.

The conduct of the first Lady, Lucy Kibaki, is another topic that frequently graces the ‘political’ pages of the newspapers. Throwing tantrums, threatening politicians, gate crashing a neighbour’s party and assaulting guests because the music was disturbing

²¹ Gladwell Otieno, director of AFRICOG, speaking at a civil society meeting on corruption at KICC in 2007

²² The public reaction of the Internal Security Minister when questioned about the raid also beggars belief. His comment to the media was ‘if you rattle a snake, you must expect to be bitten by it’.

her²³ as well as physically accosting journalists and officials. She also appeared, furious, at a press conference with her husband, the President, at the height of government coalition wrangles about which he had kept silent, where he proceeded to inform the public that he only had one wife, Lucy²⁴! Even the Washington Post has noted the antics and dubbed them 'Kenya's new soap opera' (BBC 2009, Standard 2009, Washington Post 2004).

These 'sagas' aside, there seems at times to be a deliberate effort to keep things ambiguous in the politics of the country. The building of a new coalition, or one politicians negotiations with another are presented as if they were dark secrets even though there is no apparent reason for this to be the case. There are a number of plausible explanations for this. On the one hand, secrecy increases the all important entertainment values of politics, providing ample material for the next day's gossip and speculation. And, as Hydén has noted, secrecy and discretion is key to a system based on patrimonial redistribution (Hydén 1994:79).

There is also a possibility that the opaqueness of the political process is related to the deliberate textual obscurity or traditional oral genres mentioned by Barber. According to her, knowledge was traditionally unequally distributed within a segmented society. Messages could thus only be interpreted by certain individuals; those who possessed the specialised knowledge needed to decipher them (Barber 2009:9). Within the Kenyan political context, the political elite exists within a sphere of their own, detached from the general population, physically, socially and morally. The veil of secrecy that covers politics could serve to keep political information from the general population, or to make it seem more interesting than it is, and thus to maintain the ivory tower on which the political class have positioned themselves. Barber also mentions, in a slightly different context, groups where certain "valuable knowledge is always withheld from some sections of the community" and that this may even give this information greater value. "Transparent, perspicuous texts are felt to be dull, even worthless. Very obscure

²³ The neighbour also happened to be the head of the World Bank in Kenya holding a leaving party. A little reported aspect of the story was that the Kibaki's were also his landlords. The entity supposed to be evaluating the development in Kenya and how and whether the bank should provide financial assistance, was living in the compound of the President, separated only by a small footpath (Wrong 2009:190f).

²⁴ There is much talk of Kibaki's second, unofficial wife, one Mary Wambui who he now denied. Described as a NARC activist, she enjoys Government protection and government vehicles. Her daughter, who Kibaki supposedly fathered, has reportedly married one of the above mentioned Artur brothers.

and allusive texts are prized, especially but not only by the privileged few who can expound them” (ibid: 10).

Having access to, or claiming to have access to this privileged information, would confer a certain status on the narrator. This could be a further explanation why people spread rumour and unverified information—as it would appear to enhance their status as someone ‘in the know’. “As a general rule, access to confidential or privileged information considered to be of some importance is connected to political influence and social standing all over the world” (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004:75). I also posit that at times, the salient ambiguity serves the interests of the politicians themselves and is deliberately used by them to serve their political aspirations as well as to hinder transparency and too much public oversight of matters of State. To this cause they make calculated use of the rumour mill planting scraps of information or misinformation, secure in the knowledge that this information will now spread around the country being sensationalised and transformed on its journey. Further, as Pierce has noted, opacity and the spread of political rumour is often used by authoritarian regimes in order to spread fear and uncertainty. This is achieved through forcing “speaking out of the open public debate and into the back allies of rumors”. In so doing, however, this can create an “alternative public sphere” where oppositional counter-narratives can be voiced (Perice 1997:1). Although there is seldom any persecution for voicing divergent opinions in Kenya today, this kind of behaviour and reasoning could be a remnant of more oppressive and authoritarian times (Haugerud 1995).

Michelle Osborn has described how rumours and deliberate misinformation were spread during the election campaigns and the post election violence, often using SMS and with no possibility of tracing the originator²⁵. She notes that, during civic elections in Kibera informal settlement “...politicians happily deployed and exploited rumour and misinformation as part of the political process. Rumours and deceit were undoubtedly used to circulate propaganda and half truths in hope of mobilizing voters” (Osborn 2008:325).

²⁵ The use of SMSs during the 2007 general elections, both for mobilisation and security, has also been covered in detail by Mbuga we-Mungai as well as by Shrum et al. The latter relate this information to the formation and maintenance of networks in Kenya (Shrum et al. 2010, wa-Mungai 2010)

Lies propagated by politicians were also evident in the campaigning around the new constitution. Those opposing the constitution travelled around the country claiming that the new law would rob Kenyans of their land and lead to an upsurge in homosexual marriages and other 'immoral' behaviour, issues that are highly emotive in Kenya. But, although the constitution does anticipate land reform and has strong anti-discrimination clauses, it will neither cause the eviction of the average citizen from their land nor legalise gay marriage (unfortunately). These claims were reported in the media and discussed back and forth on radio talk shows and among the general public but there were few attempts to 'set the record straight'. Several people I spoke to during the campaign period and beyond reiterated these statements as if they were truths.

Similar misinformation has been spread about the ICC process in which six prominent Kenyans are being tried for their role in the post election violence. There have been accusations that the whole process is a plot by the opposition leader, Raila Odinga, that the prosecutor is biased, that witnesses have been paid to give false statements against the accused, etc. At a by-election campaign rally in Kirinyaga, where Uhuru Kenyatta, one of the accused, is the main presidential contender, I heard the Minister of Energy, Kiraitu Murungi claim that it was Raila who had initiated the ICC prosecution of the so-called Ocampo six. Murungi, a Harvard Law graduate, former Minister of Justice, lawyer and previous human rights activist, presumably has a good understanding of the way the ICC functions and should know that neither the prosecutor nor the judges would allow themselves to be manipulated in this way. I can only assume that he was lying deliberately to insight the audience and to rally support for Uhuru and his preferred candidate in the constituency²⁶.

I observed a perhaps less malicious example of political ruse at Kamkunji sports ground in Nairobi²⁷. One of the groups supporting the constitution was holding an interfaith prayer meeting/rally to show the uniting force of the new constitution. When I arrived I found my friend and informant, who I knew to be a Christian, dressed in a kuffiyeh and long white robes. When I inquired about the new get-up he said that the organisers had asked some of the participants to dress as Muslims to make it look as if the audience was truly representative of Kenya's religious diversity. This underlines the ambiguous

²⁶ PNU rally, Kerugoya, Kirinyaga Constituency, 13 February 2011. Recording on file with author.

²⁷ Rally, Kamkunji, Nairobi, 12 June 2010. Documentation on file with author.

nature of political performance where anything could be staged, not just the actions of the 'stars of the show'. It also points to an imagined audience that includes the press and the pavement radio. I doubt that the dressing up was aimed primarily at the inhabitants of the slum area who made up the majority of the spectators.

This political behaviour may point to varying conceptualisations of 'the truth' in Kenya. During the Kenyatta and Moi regimes, citizens became used to deferring to the political classes. Perhaps some of the professed agreements with, say, the MPs misleading statements about the constitution, is more about support for that MP than for real belief in what was said? This tendency is compounded by low levels of education among much of the population and by a high level of veneration for authority making people easy targets for manipulations and misrepresentations of the truth. In contexts where it is frequently difficult to differentiate between fact and fiction, it is perhaps not the 'truth' content of a statement that is its most important facet. It has been claimed that in these situations of uncertainty rumours that are repeated often enough become the "accepted representation of social reality and political life" (Perice 1997:2). And that these stories serve as functional explanations of what is going on that work for those affected (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004, White 2000).

I have thus argued that rumour and speculation are important aspects of the political process in Kenya and in extension of informing political understanding and behaviour among the population. Individuals are frequently preoccupied by the antics of political superstars and revel in discussing and exchanging their ideas and conclusions. This political talk, rumour and gossip, as well as speculative media reporting, merge to ensure that there is no single, clear picture of what is going on in the high echelons of politics. I claim that this may, at times, be utilised deliberately by the political classes in an attempt maintain a mystification of power and to avoid transparency. At the same time, the pavement radio can be used by the populace to create alternative explanations and perhaps even nascent oppositional spaces.

The main means of spreading political information among the general public is still via word-of-mouth. This is done via the ubiquitous personal networks that individuals subscribe to for economic, social and cultural survival. In a country where ethnic logic is paramount, networks are most frequently based on ties of extended family and ethnicity, ties in which the highest levels of trust are vested. Although networks would

seem to be expanding and, especially in urban areas, cutting across ethnic boundaries, in times of political contest and conflict such as general elections²⁸, individuals seem to retreat into their ethnic nucleus (Shrum et al. 2010). Political information will thus primarily reach the individual from members of the same ethnic group. As such, this form of political communication serves to constantly renew and reinforce ethnic ties and thus ethnic and clientelistic political divisions, acting as a conduit of both moral ethnicity and political tribalism (Lonsdale 1992:315ff). These networks are obviously not the only, or even a primary, cause of ethnic division in the country, much of which has been whipped up by politicians in their interminable competition for political support and access to resources. Though, as both a cause and effect, they form a self-entwining knot in Kenya's ethnic tangle. What they mean for the development of an inclusive civil society and whether the expanding networks point to the development of a less ethnically exclusive politics and public sphere are areas for future research.

²⁸ An individual is usually a member of several networks and many of these are not necessarily limited to the ethnic group, especially in urban areas where the mix and meeting of communities is frequent and necessary. Shrum et al, have however, shown that in times of crisis such as the post election violence in Kenya, people tend to retreat into their core, ethnically based networks where trust is higher and obligations stronger (Shrum et al. 2010).

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