

The nature of decline: distinguishing myth from reality in the case of the Luo of Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Narrative is an important means of structuring and giving meaning to experience. While the resulting framework is incomplete because human beings choose only particular aspects to remember, narratives often persist and influence behaviour, often to poor effect. Considering this, the example of the Luo of Kenya is a cautionary one, particularly given African neopatrimonial understandings of state and society. Luo lore establishes the group as once elite and now in abject poverty, victim of a powerful and jealous Kikuyu enemy. This article explores the nature of this elite status, and the means by which group members have responded to particular indicators at the expense of others. This re-examination invites questioning of Luos' conclusion that they were, as respondents say, 'put out in the cold' from a position of prominence, a stance that has helped shape Kenya into ethnic rather than policy interests.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of narrative as a means of structuring and giving meaning to experience is well established (e.g. Berger & Luckmann 1967; Bruner 1990; Goffman 1974; Klapproth 2004; Ochs & Capps 1996). 'Whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about' (Arendt 1958: 4). But while people may recognise that narratives are not comprehensive, both because human beings cannot process all aspects of information they receive (see, e.g. Fiske & Taylor 1991: 245–6; Kertzer 1988: 79; Nisbett & Ross 1980: 7), and because people generally look only for that information that strengthens the

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position they already hold (Festinger 1957), these narratives often persist, influencing behaviour. If critical aspects of information are discarded, faulty conclusions can be reached about oneself and others, and resources inappropriately expended accordingly. When such conclusions involve sentiments of persecution, actions taken may inadequately address the actual sources of problems.

With this in mind, the example of the Luo of Kenya is a cautionary one.¹ Ostensibly, in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, the group was doing extremely well. They were more educated than most, held a disproportionate number of elite positions as university professors, doctors, lawyers, and engineers, and were prominent in government, holding numerous civil servant positions and important national political leadership posts. Then, after the early 1970s, the Luo community declined. Even up to the present, this group is doing worse than average.

This supposition of Luo decline, widely asserted by community members both more and less privileged,² has served as a point of reckoning for a community that has banked its very identity on once having been elite, and now repressed, suppressed, and maligned.³ After first ‘dominat(ing) the national Kenyan political leadership’ (Gertzel 1970: 17), the perception of most Luos is that they were ‘marginalised [politically] and ... “subjected to institutional poverty”’,⁴ after their bold leader Oginga Odinga was forced from higher office by a jealous Kikuyu enemy. Proof of being ‘put out in the cold’ (as many Luos say) is readily proffered in a standardised Luo narrative. The stark nature of the perceived transition has resulted in a people particularly unhappy with any government that has come to power – a 2003 national opinion poll shows Nyanza to be the nation’s most dissatisfied region⁵ – and especially cohesive when it comes to national political activity, overwhelmingly following essentially one leader (first Odinga and then his son, Raila Odinga) since before Kenya’s independence in 1963.

Luos are by no means the only African ethnic group with such a script. In Nigeria, Falola (2004: 159) describes Yoruba lionisation of Chief Awolowo after he is perceived as victimised by northern opponents. This echoes Luos’ portrayal of Odinga. Meanwhile, Mustapha (2004: 262) reports Igbos feel ““marginalized”” from power since the end of the civil war in 1970’. This resonates with Luo malaise. Nnoli (1978: 11) suggests that ethnic groups are more similar than they care to admit. This is true not just with respect to group activities, but also in the ways that groups conceptualise their worlds and the consequences thereof. Nnoli (*ibid.*: 217) compares escalation of tensions between Luos and Kikuyus with processes in Nigeria, Uganda, Burundi, and Rwanda.

Indeed, this repeated script is unsurprising, given widespread understandings of the workings of neopatrimonialism, which Bratton and van de Walle (1994: 458) call ‘the distinctive institutional hallmark of African regimes’. State resources are regarded as the private domain of political elites, accessed through personal relationships with the country’s ruler. Young and Turner (1985: 165), speaking of Mobutu’s Zaire, note that the ruler judges these elites’ effectiveness in ‘secur[ing] compliance with presidential orders’, first and foremost by ‘maintain[ing] ... political control’ over their constituencies. The latter, more often than not ethnically based, are secured through further clientelist ties (see also Callaghy 1984; Joseph 1983; Lemarchand 1972, 1988; Sandbrook 1972, 1985). African groups understand that if they are in the state’s employ and loyal, they do well; if they are outside that employ and seen as disloyal, they will be victimised and suffer. It is a ‘politics of the belly’ (Bayart 1993) where those who ‘eat’ hold power ‘whole’ and consume voraciously (Schatzberg 2001), leaving little of a ‘national cake’ left to go around. That Luos should understand that they are victimised by a more politically powerful ethnic group rings familiar in light of these conceptions of how state and society are organised.

But Luos like others have not closely examined their assumed truth. This is important if they are not ‘innocent victims of unscrupulous petty-bourgeois tribal ideologues [but rather] ... conscious players in the game of politics in which they also play to win’ (Sithole 1998: 88). Meanwhile, scholars have keenly analysed neopatrimonialism, but without probing underlying perceptions that reify it. The consequences are grave. Luos feel entitled and bitter at having their presumed elite status reversed. These feelings further entrench perceptions that, ironically, perpetuate and aggravate group poverty.

Perceiving reality differently could spur Luos and others similarly situated to reflect anew on their condition. Nnoli (1978: 10), hearkening to Mafeje (1971) and others, urges Africans to do so, for ethnicity ‘oversimplifies, mystifies and obscures the real nature of economic and power relations’. A more nuanced view of history would require Luos to rethink their perception of being greatly victimised, and encourage them to consider solutions inconceivable while the perception persists. It could help alter Luos’ relationship to government and, by extension, a national polity defined by ethnic ties. As Stigler *et al.* (1990: vii) make clear, ‘our representations of reality (including social and psychological reality) become part of the realities they represent; and many causal processes are constraining precisely because of our representations of them and involvement with them’.

This approach to examining inequality also differs significantly from that offered by such scholars as Bates (1989), who emphasise rationality and instrumentality. Bates's approach is important for understanding formal institutions that establish market incentives in Kenya, and end up dividing society into haves and have-nots. But the parameters of informal institutions, in particular the understandings ethnic groups have about themselves in relation to others, are equally important. These understandings establish underpinning norms by which communities engage in national settings. Indeed, even if markets work according to rational incentives, if actors do not perceive this and instead perceive vicious slight, behaviour in other institutional settings will be affected. Luos' representations of themselves as a fallen elite group has constrained them from looking at alternative means of ameliorating their community's challenges, vehicles that could be within Luo control. Such representations have also helped reify and divide Kenya, and, given this model, other African states, into ethnic rather than policy interests.

With this in mind, the following pages begin a re-examination process. It is an exercise in deconstructing one myth. It takes a few simple quantitative indicators to probe the Luo reality, an exercise replicable with other groups. The research herein is not exhaustive, nor could it be.⁶ Regardless, it forces some reckoning with the notion that this group was doing much better than others in Kenya and subsequently had a reversal of fortunes.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Recent indicators strongly support the contention that poverty in Nyanza is indeed cause for great alarm. Luoland is doing quite poorly *vis-à-vis* other areas of Kenya. In addition, they bolster claims that the area has experienced grave decline. However, earlier indicators from a time of presumed Luo prowess paint a more complex picture, one more ambiguous than the story generally told. These require attention. They provide an opportunity both for understanding potential reasons for Luo perceptions, and for uncovering certain realities that may have been masked or ignored. When Luos have extolled their elites, they have apparently made assumptions about the entire community's well-being. Focus on a few has resulted in the veiling of the condition of the many. When these few were not as perceptible, the realities of the majority were revealed, seemingly as a new phenomenon. The result was a people all too ready to follow the dictates of a communal narrative that gave external reasons for the fall they perceived, and to justify political behaviour to vindicate the sensed wrongs done to them.

THE PRESENT: UNEQUIVOCAL DECLINE

Towards the end of President Daniel arap Moi's era in 2002, Kenyans of different class and ethnicity expressed deep concern about the eroding state of their country's polity and economy. One 2002 article notes that 'Kenyans are a fifth poorer now than when Moi took over in 1978' (*Economist* 29.6.2002). Early that year, one government study reports the Kenyan national average for absolute poverty prevalence as 52% (*East African Standard* 7.3.2002).

Yet as abysmal as was the overall state of the country in 2002, evidence indicates that figures for Nyanza Province, the Luos' home area, are even worse. The government study records absolute poverty prevalence in Nyanza at 63%. Heifer International (2003: 13) indicates that Nyanza 'has the nation's highest number of people living below the poverty line'. 2005 figures indicate that Nyanza remains the nation's poorest region; 64.6% of its residents live in poverty (*East African Standard* 26.5.2005). Moreover, the province's figure is not simply a recent aberration. Evidence indicates that absolute poverty is accelerating at a rapid rate; in 1994, the absolute poverty rate in Nyanza was 42% (*East African Standard* 7.3.2002).

More data support the conclusion that Luos are in desperate shape. Weinreb (1996, 2000), analysing select communal socioeconomic and elite data on parastatal positions, wage employment, and health and health-care, concludes that 'Nyanza Province, dominated by the Luo, continues to be the least "developed" province' in Kenya (Weinreb 1996: 9; 2000: 30). Looking at 1988 and 1993 Demographic Health Survey (DHS) data, he notes that Nyanza is one of two regions with the worst inter-survey trends – i.e. Luoland, at least of late, has experienced socioeconomic decline. For instance, Nyanza is the only province with an increase in both infant and child mortality. Weinreb's conclusions on health are reinforced by Heifer International (2003: 13), the Kenya *Daily Nation* (14.3.2003), National AIDS/STDs Control Programme (1999: 7) and other sources that indicate Luo Nyanza has perhaps the highest rates of both HIV infection and AIDS in Kenya, for both rural and urban sites (website Table 1).⁷

Data on education are equally discouraging (see Morrison 2004: 549–55). Nyanza Province Education Leaders' Meeting (1998: 3), convened because of shocking province school performance, reports that 'for over ten years now, the people of Nyanza have been mourning over their lost academic glory. The decline that started in the 1980s hit rock bottom in 1994 when Nyanza recorded its worst results in many years.' One indicator of this is Kenya Certificate of Primary Education

(KCPE) performance that ‘has continued to decline unabated’ (website Table 2).

Net primary enrolment rates also seem to indicate that most of Luo Nyanza is doing somewhat worse than the national average, and much worse than Kikuyu-dominated Central Province (website Table 3a). Net secondary school enrolment rates clearly indicate that Luo Nyanza falls below Kenya national averages, and significantly below Central Province rates. Female attendance is alarming, at only 9.7% compared with a national average of 13.2% (website Table 3b). This is of particular concern. I will return momentarily to the importance of data on women, and to the distorted perceptions of communal well-being that non-attention to them has caused.

Two primary education indicators, 1995 mean examination performance rates and mean drop-out rates, are also disheartening (website Tables 4 and 5). Performance data show that Nyanza is well below the Kenyan average for both overall performance and by gender. Meanwhile, attrition rates are the highest in the country, save for semi-arid, nomadic North Eastern Province. These figures are in line with 1986 World Bank (1990) figures (website Table 6). Again, they reflect a disturbing trend for girls; 73.7% of those enrolled, second only to North Eastern’s 88.8%, drop out of primary school.

Thus various recent socioeconomic indicators give credence to the perception that, comparatively, Luo Nyanza fares quite poorly. But this does not mean there was a glorious Luo heyday. Nor do the figures convey how the perception evolved. Thus, I look back, study some communal and elite variables that shed light on the Luo story, and introduce some new explanatory notions.

THE PAST: FONT OF PERCEPTIONS OF PROWESS AND DECLINE

The narrative claims that in the past the Luo community was doing well. But revered Luo leader Oginga Odinga’s own words indicate differently.⁸ In his autobiography, *Not Yet Uhuru*, Odinga recounts how he was motivated to start the Luo Thrift and Trading Corporation, precursor to the Luo Union (East Africa), to be discussed in a moment (see Parkin 1969: ch. 8; 1974: 140–1). The leader explains that he was disturbed by comments of members of other ethnic groups when he attended Makerere University in Kampala in the late 1930s (Odinga 1966: 77):

I had been hurt at Makerere by the accusations of fellow students from other tribes that the Luo were extravagant, self-centred, and exhibitionist; that they

used their money for show and not to save to improve themselves. The Luo needed to build a sense of unity, common purpose, and achievement. I hated the idea of our people begging from the government.

The passage is indeed ironic. When Luos discuss their presumed victimisation, they ignore traits abhorred by other groups, traits that Luos otherwise admit with pride. Apparently, these same features originally spurred Odinga to form an umbrella Luo organisation meant to unify Luos and improve their lot. Odinga's exposure to Luos throughout East Africa, and his efforts on their behalf, gave him the credibility necessary to establish a politically significant national Luo welfare organisation, the Luo Union (East Africa). However, the characteristics motivating Odinga were subsequently hidden, masked behind discourse that focused on particular signs of success. In adopting this discourse, the community ignored latent signs of disaster. It banked its success and failure on the fortunes of a few until general conditions were too difficult to ignore.

Indeed, scholars intimate that Luoland has never done particularly well. Fearn (1961: 64) indicates that at the turn of the century, Nyanza was poverty stricken. By the 1930s, particularly in Central Nyanza, most males felt compelled to migrate, and travelled as far as Mombasa and Kampala seeking employment (cf. Francis 2000; Grillo 1973; Kitching 1980; Parkin 1969; Ross 1975; Stichter 1982). This pattern continues today. But Kitching (1980: 352) and Francis (2000: 119, 134, 143) indicate that while they sent money home (particularly to wives), these remittances did little but allow the two lower income groups to maintain a subsistence level of existence. They did not facilitate Luo advancement.

Such views force examination of the nature of the supposed decline. In determining indisputable Luo descent, Weinreb (2000) concurs with others (scholars and Kenyan popular opinion alike) in a neopatrimonial view; the ethnic group of the president benefits disproportionately during his tenure. Wortham (1990), backed by Kitching (1980: 315), disagrees. He notes that since prior to independence (Kitching says prior to 1952), relative positions of Kenya's ethnic groups have remained fairly constant while gaps between groups have widened. Apart from any external conditions, extant basic infrastructure and groups' institutional frameworks have provided a critical foundation for subsequent advancement. It was not simply favourable political positioning that led Kikuyus to do well under Kenyatta from 1963 until 1978, or Kalenjins to excel under Moi from 1978 until 2002. Rather, the preconditions for advancement were already established prior to regime control, there to be exploited given favourable political circumstances.⁹

If so, Luoland indicators would never have been particularly stellar. Additionally, during any particular era, communal indicators would probably have remained fairly steady. This would correspond with the accounts of former Luo Council of Elders chair, Adala Otuko, and of many non-Luos (Morrison 2004). Perhaps the Luo discourse, masking a difficult situation, abetted its becoming dire. At the same time, it may simply be, as indicated above, that people have been so focused on particular variables of a subgroup *within* the Luo community that they have been blind to general trends.

Communal variables

Looking solely at 1961 estimated expenditures for total development, education, and health by African district councils, one might conclude that Luoland was in very good shape before independence (website Table 7). For instance, outlays of £UK543,844 in South Nyanza far surpass those of any other district in Kenya. The next closest figure is £430,122 in Meru. The problem, of course, is that we do not know how moneys were spent in any locale. For instance, all might have been spent on a single project that benefited relatively few people. Indeed, Kitching (1980) reports that up to 1952, district council funds were used to finance council members' 'personal ventures'. They were both 'agent and beneficiary of progress' (Kitching 1980: ch. 7). Thus, it is more appropriate to concentrate on indicators that better gauge community impact. An index combining a broad range of data followed by communal health and education variables accomplishes this.

Composite Index: 1962, 1979, 1979

Wortham (1990) looks at socioeconomic indicators in 1962, 1969, and 1979, from prior to independence through the Kenyatta regime. He provides a composite index for all extant districts and ranks them. In addition, he compares his 1962 composite figure rankings with those determined in an earlier study by Soja (1968) (website Table 8). Wortham adds variables not considered by the earlier author. First and foremost, Soja only includes men; Wortham adds women. Second, Soja does not include healthcare variables; Wortham adds them. Third, Soja does not include urbanisation indicators; Wortham adds a manufacturing variable and looks more closely at population density. Their inclusion results in strikingly different rankings for Luoland in 1962, especially for Central Nyanza.

It is important to consider that Central Nyanza is where Gem and Bondo are located. These are the homes of those perceived to be Luos' most educated elite. Soja's figures show that Central Nyanza ranks 8th in 1962, decidedly among Kenya's top districts. This tallies with the general perception. However, Wortham's 1962 figures place Central Nyanza distinctly lower, 21st out of 36 districts. Then, in 1969, using the same variables, Wortham determines that Luoland rankings stay fairly constant. In 1979, immediately after Kenyatta's reign, when public discourse would lead us to expect that all Luoland would have suffered most, each district has done somewhat *better* comparatively. Urban Kisumu regains the Soja 1962 Central Nyanza placement. More rural South Nyanza and Central Nyanza have moved up somewhat. From this indicator alone it appears that Luos only looked at the performance of men. This is certainly to be expected. Like many African societies, the Luo are predominantly patriarchal.

Next, Wortham provides tables that isolate particular variables. I take several that are proxies for health and educational attainment, establish ranks of the districts provided, and tabulate a simple average for each. This exercise helps uncover which phenomena are reflected in Luo public discourse and general Luo perceptions, and which details may have been suppressed. This provides a more detailed appreciation of a reality gleaned from the composite measures.

Health: 1962, 1969, and 1979 total fertility, African women aged 15–49

First I examine 1962, 1969, and 1979 fertility rates of African women aged 15–49 by district (website Table 9). The 1962 figures show significant disparity in fertility rates between Central and South Nyanza. Taking low fertility as an indicator of relative advancement, Central Nyanza, including urban Kisumu and rural Siaya, is ranked quite high, with the 6th lowest fertility rate out of 33 districts. This is in keeping with the perception that Central Nyanza was doing quite well during early modern Kenyan history. Thus, these figures still correspond with the notion that Luos were doing well. However, South Nyanza's fertility rate, ranked 31st lowest (or 3rd highest) of the 33 districts for which data is available, causes pause. Again, it seems the Luo perception did not include all Luos, but rather only a few from Central Nyanza.

By 1969, when Luo discourse might have us believe that Luoland was declining, South Nyanza improves markedly *vis-à-vis* other Kenyan districts. This portion of Luoland, earlier overlooked when doing poorly,

may still have been ignored when doing marginally better. Its story was apparently not incorporated into the standard Luo narrative. Kisumu and Siaya are ranked much lower than they had been in 1969, respectively 17th and 21st out of 41 districts. But since urban and rural areas are not disaggregated in the original 1962 data, the degree to which each area declined significantly is unknown. Perhaps it was Kisumu that felt the brunt of any neglect while Siaya, an area Luos would expect to have been neglected since it was Odinga's home, in fact did better. Indeed, such a result would corroborate comments of a Luo former government official. He notes that roads to Odinga's home had been maintained, counter to what would have been expected (*Sunday Nation* 11.5.2003). Kitching (1980: 345) tells us that 1970 survey results 'confirm the long process of decline' of Kisumu, for structural reasons to do with geography and weather, not simply politics.

Moreover, if there truly had been decline in Nyanza, it is unlikely that just after the end of Kenyatta's rule the rankings of all three of these districts would have stayed approximately the same or improved somewhat. Fertility rates certainly increased, but they did so throughout Kenya at this time. In 1977, the population growth rate in Kenya was the highest in the world.¹⁰ The story for Luos seems to have been, as South Nyanza non-Luo respondents say, that life for them stayed pretty much the same (Morrison 2004).

1962, 1969, and 1979 infant mortality

Infant mortality figures for 1962, 1969, and 1979 (website Table 10) lead one to conclude that Luoland had always experienced grave problems. Even in 1962, when Luos were reputedly doing well, infant mortality in Luo districts was reportedly higher than for all other districts in Kenya.¹¹ This abysmal showing was maintained until 1979. In essence, all Luo districts continued to rank among Kenya's lowest.

When Luos determined that they had been politically marginalised after Odinga's ouster from government, they may have paid particular attention to indicators that supported their contention. If they noticed infant mortality after this time, they certainly could have felt abandoned, because these figures were so poor. The problem, of course, is that the figures had always indicated a problem, even before Odinga left. This would indeed have been in keeping with Odinga's reasons for founding the Luo Thrift and Trade Corporation and then the Luo Union (East Africa) in the first place: he did so because Luoland was experiencing socioeconomic ills.

Education

The difference between Soja and Wortham's 1962 composite scores implies that Luos had been reacting to Luo *male* educational achievement in Central Nyanza in early years. Additionally, the Luo narrative purports that Luos were highly educated; indeed, this distinguishes Luos as being more advanced than other groups. This section more rigorously parses out some education components, looking first at female then male attainment for the same three years hitherto examined.

1962, 1969, and 1979 female education. Data on women's education (website Tables 11a, b, and c) render hollow any claim that Luo Nyanza experienced an earlier 'glory day' and then declined after Odinga left office. Illiteracy and some primary education rates show Luoland females stagnating in the middle of Kenyan districts. Then, rather than signal Luoland decline, Luo females somewhat improved their relative position over time.

The claims are even more tenuous if one examines African females with more than primary education. In the early years, Luo districts are at the bottom: 0.1% of Luoland females attain more than primary education, compared with a national average of 0.3% (1.7% in Nairobi). Relative position improves during Kenyatta's rule. Possibly, those most intent on receiving education may have migrated to other areas, although Kitching, Stichter, and Francis's portraits of Luo migration make clear that even *males* taking advantage of higher levels of education were a distinct minority. Also, the number of females *anywhere* in Kenya achieving higher-level education was miniscule, particularly in the early years. These data do not support a contention that Luos were doing exceptionally well and then were marginalised.

1962, 1969, and 1979 male education. Female education significantly impacts community development (e.g. World Bank 1990: 53). But Luos' focus has apparently been on male educational attainment. However, even here, reality differs somewhat from the Luo story.

In 1962, male illiteracy in South Nyanza at 56.4% is below the national average at 62.7%, conforming to the Luo narrative (website Table 12a). But Central Nyanza is higher; 65.2% of its males are illiterate. By 1969, illiteracy rates have increased in each Luoland district, but are still lower than the national average. Rural Central Nyanza (Siaya) maintains its relative position, while South Nyanza drops from 11th to 19th place; overall illiteracy there increases more than 10%. Urban Kisumu has lower

relative illiteracy rates, ranked 10th best among 41 districts, although 64.1% illiteracy is certainly problematic. By 1979, positions of all three Luo districts improved somewhat. South Nyanza's relative position approximates its 1962 standing. So, thus far, Luo sentiment that their community had been unduly marginalised after doing extremely well seems unsubstantiated.

Data on educational *attainment* (rather than lack thereof) also seem problematic given Luo public claims (website Table 12b). As would be expected, they are in many ways the reverse of the last indicators. The 1962 South Nyanza and Central Nyanza placements were essentially what they were above. The same was true in 1969. In 1979, the three Luo districts were unequivocally among the top districts in Kenya. Again, the standard Luo narrative contention does not seem to find support.

However, a glimpse at Luos with higher levels of education hints at what may have been perceived (website Table 12c). Notable here is that Luos in *Central* Nyanza were among the top groups in Kenya in 1962. This corroborates Luo reports of high educational attainment of those from Gem and Bondo. However, over time, while urban Kisumu stays in the top ten districts as it does in the other male education tables, and South Nyanza's position remains approximately the same, Siaya drops rank to 23rd in 1969, below the Kenyan average, and stays well below average and at approximately the same rank in 1979. It now seems even clearer that the Luo perception of decline reflects the educational fortunes of relatively few males from Odinga's home area.

To further explore the impact that a few may have had on overall Luo communal identity, it is useful look at some elite indicators. These help to gauge the impression that particularly elevated status or highly visible positions had on the general Luo psyche.

Elite indicators: source of original perceptions

A generation or two ahead of us [Luos] were very well educated. Lots of professors, very highly qualified directors ...

Some time in the past, [Luos] were really educated, very very well read. And they held high posts in government and even in private companies had fairly senior jobs ... (‘Helen’, 16.8.2000)

Helen reminds us of the predominant view held by Luos, and often by non-Luos, of the pre-eminent position of Luo elites in early modern Kenyan history. This section examines some of the indicators to which people refer, to ascertain the validity of their comments and the origins of their perceptions. To recapitulate, the standard Luo narrative asserts that

in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, Luos were doing better than other Kenyan ethnic groups. Luos are emphatic that they were more highly educated than others, with a disproportionate number of doctors, professors, and civil service positions.

Given this claim, I examine some of these positions: first, new doctors registered by the Kenya medical board prior to 1950 up to 1985; then professors and administrative positions at the University of Nairobi and its predecessor institutions; and finally numbers of positions held by different ethnic groups in three government ministries between 1965 and 1970. Ethnicity is determined by the name of the position holder. These were coded by native Kenyans and then tabulated by the author. This system is not error free for determining the ethnicity of any particular subject. Indeed, even I detected some mistakes when reviewing the lists of coded names. Morrison (2004: 566) provides various reasons for this. But name is certainly a reasonable proxy for ethnicity.

While the following enumerations are not definitive, they are instructive. First, they suggest rough trends over time. Second, they intimate Luo and others' perceptions about Luos, particularly in early days. University, doctor, and Ministry of Education results suggest that an early, largely symbolic presence of Luos as African representatives may have imprinted upon Luos such a sense of their relative importance that the small numbers were largely irrelevant. Symbol was everything.¹² Over time, as more Africans entered professions, Luos may have maintained or increased their numbers, but their community would have perceived their presence and relative importance as diluted. Given an expectation of excellence, dilution may have been deemed equivalent to disaster.

University positions: number of professors

A striking example illustrating the importance of symbol is a pre-independence list of professors. This is shown in Table 1 (website Table 13a) below. In 1959–60, there was *no* African representation. Two years later, out of 94 Royal College of Nairobi professors, senior lecturers, and lecturers, five were now African. Four of these were Luo. This must have greatly impressed those first seeing Africans in such a high-status role. Although the numbers were minute, Luos indeed provided a disproportionate number of professors at this time. Their presence far outdistanced that of any other African ethnic group.

Through Kenyatta's and into Moi's rule (up to 1985), faculty ethnic representation changes at the University College, Nairobi and then the University of Nairobi (website Table 13b). In 1964–1965 Luos and GEMA

TABLE 1 (website Table 13a)
Number of professors by ethnicity, pre-independence

Date	Faculty	Luo	Kikuyu	White	Asian	Total African	Total
1959–60						0	All Non-African
1962–63	Faculty of Arts						
	professor			2			2
	sr. lecturer			4			4
	lecturer	2	1	12 ^a	1	3	19
	Faculty of Science						
	professor			9			9
	sr. lecturer			15			15
	lecturer	2		21	8	2	33
	part-time lecturer			7			7
	reader			2			2
	visiting lecturer			2			2
	demonstrator			1 ^b			1
	Total:	4	1	75	9	5	94

^a Includes 2 persons who might be coded as white or Asian.

^b This person might be coded as white or Asian.

Based on data presented in *The Royal Technical College Calendar, 1959/1960*, and *The Royal College Calendar, 1962/1963*.

(predominantly Kikuyus)¹³ are still the only Africans represented among professors at the university level. But Kikuyus have gained on Luos numerically. Now there are five GEMA compared to six or seven Luos. However, in the faculties of arts and sciences, the only faculties represented in 1959 through 1963, Luos still disproportionately predominated, with just one GEMA represented.

Throughout the 1960s, Luo numbers in academia increase. But so, too, do numbers of other ethnic groups. Luos continue to hold a majority of positions in the faculties of arts and science, but they predominate ever less. Not only do Kikuyus match total Luo positions save one, the total number of positions held by other ethnic groups now also match the Luo numbers. Luos as the only African professors has been replaced by Luos as one group among many. However, the change may not have been noticed yet or proved disconcerting. All are still a small percentage relative to the number of white foreign academics. Indeed, the latter numbers increase steadily throughout the 1960s: there are more than twice as many whites at the end of the decade as in 1964. This presence may have served as a point of comparison for Luos, who continued to see their group as significantly represented up to this date.

From 1974 up to 1985, Luo positioning among professors definitively wanes. Although Luo numbers steadily increase, this does not happen nearly as fast as the increase in both GEMA numbers and those of other ethnic groups. By 1985, almost twice as many GEMA as Luos are in academia. Luos and GEMA numbers are still at par within the arts and sciences, but the number of faculties has increased, with the result that positions have multiplied. It is doubtful whether these positions could have had the impact they once did. Luos upped their numbers, but GEMA professors far outnumbered and continued to outpace them, leaving an unfavourable impression of the Luo position. This is particularly so if Luos were not well represented in faculties (such as medicine) considered highly prestigious. Adding representatives from all other major ethnic groups also diluted the initial Luo impression. By 1985, GEMA outdistance Luos by more than two to one, while other group totals surpass Luo numbers.

Moreover, numbers of whites in academe significantly decrease between 1969 and 1985. In 1969, there were 256 white professors; by 1985, only 60 remained. Physical characteristics no longer distinguish Luos from academic colleagues. This may also have sealed the impression of their decline.

Number of academic administration positions

More starkly illustrating Luo perceptions of their communal representation are figures showing Nairobi university administration by ethnicity from 1964 to 2000 (website Table 14). The available data indicate that Luos were represented in administrative posts every year except 1984–85 and 1988–89. But this left little impression. Examining the top two or three administrative posts each year reveals the important story. Throughout the 1960s, a Luo occupied one of these three posts, although he did not fill the top post. In 1974–75, Luos were absent from these three top positions. When asked for indications of Luo marginalisation, various respondents mention that Professor David Wasawo, deputy principal in the two years aforementioned, had unjustly been kept from the top position, even though he was, they say, the best qualified. Because Professor Wasawo was not promoted, all Luos felt spurned.

In 1975–76, the deputy vice chancellor was Luo. This fact is not discussed by Luos, perhaps because it does not bolster the conclusion that Kenyatta's government marginalised Luos, a matter of cognitive dissonance. It may be because after this date, no Luo occupied one of the two or three top posts. GEMA have always been represented. But after

Kenyatta's rule ended in August 1978, Luhya and Kamba, groups previously unrepresented, gained access to these rare posts.¹⁴

Number of doctors

Data on physicians entering the medical profession tell much the same story (website Table 15).¹⁵ Once again, in the early years (here, the early 1950s) a minuscule number of practising physicians were African Kenyan. Of these, most (three out of five) were Luo. Over time, Luos continued to be disproportionately represented among physicians compared with their composition in the Kenyan population (only 11–13%). But once again, as happened with professorships, new GEMA (Kikuyus) began to equal new Luos in the 1970s, and representatives of other ethnic groups together exceeded the Luo presence. Waning numbers of white physicians would have heightened the perception of declining Luo status. The overwhelming dominance of Kenyan Asians in the profession, particularly in the early 1970s, may have aided this impression, although Asians always accounted for many times more doctors than Luos. This is also even though, according to this rough estimate, Luos accounted for the second largest number of new doctors in this period. Once again, the positive impression that Luos left in the early days, when they were three of the five African doctors, would have been seriously diluted over time.

Government ministry posts

Finally, I examine Luo positions in government ministries through the 1960s, using government staff lists.¹⁶ These lists are exhaustive, showing not only personnel at the highest levels, but at all ranks, including their salaries. Government staff lists were discontinued in 1971. One respondent, a Luo who had been a high ranking civil servant, told me that this was because the government did not want people to know that disproportionate numbers of Kikuyus were being employed, while other groups, especially Luos, were marginalised. This claim cannot be evaluated. Nevertheless, the data available help tell a story.

To evaluate Luo success in civil service posts during the 1960s, I enumerated Luos and other ethnic groups in three ministries over three years. First I chose a ministry with limited power or influence, proxy for general Luo representation in government. Given the Luo narrative focus on education, I examined the Ministry of Education: first in 1965, with Oginga Odinga still in office, and again in 1967 and 1969, after he had

gone. Numbers are tabulated by post, as designated in the staff lists (website Tables 16a, b & c).

Then I studied two ministries regarded as powerful: the Ministry of Finance, led by a non-Luo during this whole period (website Table 17), and the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, led by Luo Tom Mboya until his assassination in July 1969 (an event noted in the Luo narrative) (website Table 18). I look at these ministries in 1965, before Odinga left office; in 1967, after Odinga had left but while Mboya remained; and in 1970, after Mboya had died. These ministry positions are enumerated by salary. Those making over £1,000 per year are distinguished from those receiving less than £1,000 per year. The results follow.

The Ministry of Education, 1965, 1967, and 1969. Examination of Ministry of Education staff lists shows some similar trends to those established in higher education. Luo positions increased by ten in the 1960s, while GEMA (Kikuyu) positions increased by eight. Thus, their relative positioning stayed much the same. As with professorships, the number of whites expanded, in this case by an additional 273 positions. Given that Luos held only 33 positions by 1969, while GEMA, the most highly represented Africans, held 68, it is clear once more that the African presence was at this time largely symbolic. But again, by 1967, Luos, holding the second largest number of African civil service positions, had been surpassed, this time by the Luhya. By the end of the decade, the latter group had more than doubled its 1965 presence. Thus, these figures support a claim of Luos that after Odinga left, their relative influence diminished. Again, the perception is based on an all-important symbolic presence, particularly insofar as other African groups did not match it in the early years.

Important ministries: non-Luo head: the Ministry of Finance, 1965, 1968, and 1970. In the Kikuyu-run Ministry of Finance, considered a powerful ministry, Luos held their own and even gained positions through the 1960s. Both before and after Odinga left government and after Mboya's death, Luos maintained the second highest total number of positions by an African ethnic group, next to GEMA. Indeed, whereas in 1965 the number of Asians in posts outnumbered Luos, by 1970 not even this remained true. However, once again symbolic presence is what mattered. True, in 1965, Luos were second to GEMA among those with salaries above £1,000 (posts with more senior responsibility), but this was with only two positions to GEMA's eight. By 1970, despite Odinga's departure and

Mboya's death, Luos, as best can be determined from the name coding, held five senior positions. Numbers of posts with salaries below £1,000 had increased to nine. Thus, these data do not support the Luo perception of being politically ostracised because of events affecting Odinga or Mboya, although a year may be insufficient to weigh the impact of Mboya's death. This is so particularly insofar as Luos do not claim absolute decline until after the early 1970s.¹⁷

Luo head: the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, 1965, 1968, and 1970. Last, I consider possible changes in Luo status in an influential ministry run by a powerful Luo boss: the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, led by Tom Mboya. In 1965, Mboya is the only Luo with a senior post in this Ministry; two Luhyas and three GEMA hold such positions. Whites occupy more senior positions than either, with four. Luos do hold the second largest number of junior positions in 1965 with five posts, closely matching GEMA's six. By 1968, Luo senior posts had increased to five, while GEMA's had increased to ten. But other groups also gained: Luhya now held three senior posts, and Kisii, a group previously without posts, held two senior and one junior position. Thus, Luos gained more senior posts than they had had in the Ministry of Finance by this time, but other groups were also making strides in this small ministry. In 1970, contrary to any expectation of lost status, senior Luos maintained the positions they had held in 1968. Even Mboya's own post was kept (as he was replaced by a Luo). Junior Luo posts had almost doubled. However, GEMA had more than doubled, and Luhya had almost doubled. Having visited the village of one man who had worked in this ministry, it is clear that position did give access to resources to develop community even after Mboya had gone.

DISCUSSION

Examining these select elite indicators, what earlier seemed likely looking at communal variables becomes apparent. Perceived Luo pre-eminence in early years seems to have resulted from the powerful presence of a few Luos in fields with few if any Africans.

There appear to be at least three theoretical reasons for the Luo perception. First, Luos and others seem to have been making an *illusory correlation*. Hamilton and Gifford (1976: 392) describe it thus:

Illusory correlation refers to an erroneous inference about the relationship between two categories of events. One postulated basis for illusory correlation is the co-occurrence of events which are statistically infrequent; i.e., observers

overestimate the frequency of co-occurrence of distinctive events. If one group of persons 'occurs' less frequently than another and one type of behavior occurs infrequently, then [this] hypothesis predicts that observers would overestimate the frequency that that type of behavior was performed by members of that group. This suggest[s] that the differential perception of ... groups could result solely from the cognitive mechanisms involved in processing information about stimulus events that differ in their frequencies of co-occurrence.

Hamilton *et al.* (1993: 44) express this idea still more simply:

An illusory correlation is a judgment by a perceiver that two variables are associated with each other, even though they were not associated in the information on which the judgment was based.

In other words, people determine that two pieces of information are related and then make inferences on the basis of this relationship. With a so-called distinctiveness-based illusory correlation, when two highly infrequent events occur, people are likely to over-correlate their occurrence. (Hamilton *et al.* 1993: 45). One highly infrequent event is that Africans held elite positions at all. The second is that Luos held so many of these rare positions. Meanwhile, overestimation of the frequency with which Luos actually held elite positions became a supposition about communal performance. 'So many' high-profile elites doing well signalled that the community was also doing well. In fact, this was never true. A few shining male stars from a certain region did not mean that the majority from Nyanza also excelled, but because they were so prominent, the rest were more easily overlooked. Ignoring them became less possible when the few Luo elites became less unusual.

Scholars normally use this term to explain the persistence of negative stereotypes.¹⁸ However, it also seems applicable in this case, one of a strong positive stereotype. When any distinctive behaviour is attributed to members of a minority group – already few in number – the likelihood exists that a stereotype, negative or positive, will be generated. Once the stereotype exists, any instance reaffirms it. Thus, apparently, Luos established a notion about elites early on, and then confirmed it every time a Luo assumed a similar position, even if the group's overall percentage eventually declined.

Second, this effect seems due in part to the phenomenon of the 'salience of the solo' (Fiske & Taylor 1991: vi). In early years, Luos were indeed a tiny minority in elite positions, overwhelmed by the white presence in Kenya. It did not matter that Luos were not an insignificant minority of African Kenyans, for Africans did not hold these elite posts. All Africans were a minority. Thus, Luo achievements were not only notable, but they stood out – quite literally physically – in the society. The few Luos were

'solos' who attracted extraordinary attention, 'subject to disproportionate scrutiny [and] exaggerated inferences ... as a result of their highly visible status' (*ibid.*; see also Morrison 2004: ch. 7). Any individual accomplishments were magnified. However, when whites in posts began to decrease in the early 1970s, the conception of Luo dominance also lessened, for they were no longer juxtaposed against persons who looked different from themselves. Instead, other Africans held comparable numbers of these posts, further diluting the perceived Luo position. This was the point at which the Luo narrative took shape, a discourse arguing that Luos were being politically ostracised.

Third, these elite figures were exemplars. Perhaps these few prominent people, the ones people encountered, were the ones people remembered, and they drew inferences about their entire group from these figures (Fiske & Taylor 1991: 112; see further Smith & Zàrate 1992). This is unsurprising given male elites' longstanding institutionalised status in the community. Stichter (1982) and Kitching (1980) report that those earliest educated, at least from Central Nyanza, were sons of chiefs, already influential communal foci. The influence was heightened and re-formulated in 'modern' terms with these sons' access to colonial era missionary education. Mamdani (2001: 31) explains that settler identity of native populations became their own self-construction. Francis (2000: 131) adds that while many were first wary of Christianity, by the 1950s they pinpointed mission education (and thus Western standards) as key to doing well.

Additionally, colonisers assumed that patriarchal relationships were embedded in tribe specific customary law (Mamdani 2001: 31), reinforcing patrimonial relationships with male elites. This would have fuelled people's understandings of self and well-being in terms of a very few. Then, these patronage relationships were diffused throughout society. Even migrants providing few remittances (as discussed earlier) gained prestige through their actions, as did, potentially, their family or even kin-group (Grillo 1973: 63). A 'highly maintained system of rural-urban ties' (Parkin 1974: 128) increased this likelihood, and any personal accomplishment took on a communal character. Conversely, citizens expected their own advancement or favour with the elevated position of these few, also leading them to view the whole group as doing 'so well'.

Furthermore, the psychology of neopatrimonialism discourages individual advancement, instead emphasising dependence and loyalty to a few who provide for the many. This loyalty, an affective bond, is essential for maintaining the system (see e.g. Cohen 1969: 91; Lemarchand 1972: 73). It originally develops because people seek security in societies

devoid of other welfare options (Sandbrook 1972: 109). Indeed, ironically, Luoland poverty *reinforces* the patron–client relationship, strengthened when people seek security. In turn, as this relationship is reinforced, it boosts a myth of leader strength. This myth is essential to group identity. It also masks poverty.

With Odinga concurrently in the national political sphere, the few high-status figures in other fields signalled for Luos the prominence of their entire group. The effect was powerful. As noted, any Luo accomplishments became those of the community. This was further heightened by a Luo cultural emphasis on communal social ties over individual actuation. This was rendered explicit in the famous case of a pre-eminent Luo lawyer living in Nairobi who was married to a Kikuyu woman. At his death, Luo elders and family from his ‘home’ community successfully argued in court that his remains be buried in Nyanza, despite his wife’s or even the man’s own purported wishes. The very means by which a Luo individual lives his life are irrelevant; he is owned by and is part and parcel of that community (see Atieno-Odhiambo and Cohen 1992). His accomplishments are not personal.

The communal variables indicate that those persons who are the litmus test for the community have indeed been male. Moreover, they have been Central Nyanza male. The indication of their prevalence has been higher-level education. Other indicators that could have made Luos question the degree to which their community was thriving were seemingly overlooked. Oginga Odinga may have originally been concerned about these factors, but over time, a singular image of Luo supremacy emerged, reinforced through Luo self-discourse. Their narrative bolstered a particular image and suppressed others. It is therefore little wonder that some of these factors that always caused concern would have worsened recently. Communal resources had been corralled for political purposes, focused by the group’s standardised account of self.



As Geertz (1973: 195) notes, ‘men do not care to have beliefs to which they attach great moral significance examined dispassionately, no matter for how pure a purpose’. But the stakes are too grave not to. In the simple exercise undertaken above, an absolute premise of many is called into question. If Luos were not always and all doing so well, and if they were not unabashedly and unequivocally victimised, singled out in a polity increasingly difficult for all, then the solutions that they might seek in addressing unmistakable poverty would hopefully be quite different.

Instead of a polity conceptualised as one in which ethnic markers determine who get the spoils and who do not, it might begin to be reformulated as one in which different interest groups, based on policy concerns, bargain for their needs. In turn, this would open the way for cross-ethnic alliances in ways that have thus far not been adequately explored, and with them the broadening of alternatives for poverty alleviation, not only in Luoland, but in Kenya, and, indeed Africa, writ large.

NOTES

1. Of Kenya's more than 30.3 million people, the Kikuyu are approximately 22 %, the Luhya and Luo 13–14 % each, the Kalenjin approximately 12 %, the Kamba approximately 11 %, the Kisii 6 %, Meru (included in the GEMA grouping, see fn. 13) are about 6 %, the other 35 African ethnic groups about 15 % and non-Africans (Asian, European and Arab) approximately 1 % (Abacci Atlas).

2. The pervasiveness of the statement among laymen and elite alike became the basis for conducting the research on which Morrison (2004) is based.

3. For a full description of the political-historical treatise told by Luos of their victimisation at the hands of a jealous Kikuyu enemy, which this author calls the Luo standard narrative, see Morrison 2004.

4. Statement of a retiring Kenyan bishop in agreement with 19 Luo members of Parliament. 'Okullu backs Luo MPs' claim', *Daily Nation*, 25.7.1994, p. 2.

5. The *Daily Nation* notes that 'dissatisfaction with the Government's performance varies from region to region, with Nyanza, which views the Government as having done a poor job in all areas – national unity, security, education, health, human rights, economy, corruption, law review – with the exception of roads, as the most dissatisfied'. 'Education ministry given top marks', *Daily Nation* 15.9.2003.

6. Other indicators that could have been examined include numbers of Luo university students at home and abroad, Luo positions in all government ministries, and Luo private managers.

7. For reasons of space, detailed tables are excluded from this article, but are available at www.duke.edu/web/luodeclinetab/. For detailed elaboration of the parastatal, wage, and health indicators analysed or reviewed by Weinreb and others, see Morrison (2004: 544–9). As seen in website Table 1, Luo areas (marked in bold, as for subsequent website tables) have the highest percentage of cases in both urban and rural areas.

8. A non-Luo expatriate respondent who had been jailed for his anti-government views during the 1980s indicates that a few know that Odinga's well-known book was ghost written by Ruth First, a noted South African Communist sympathiser (Personal Communication, 27.5.2005). Whether or not this is the case does not detract from what is noted in Odinga's text, words that must be presumed to have been read and approved by the person whose name it bore.

9. Fearn (1961) lends support to this view. He indicates that the Kipsigis, a Kalenjin sub-group, were doing well in the late 1950s.

10. Thanks to Robert Wortham (personal communication) for reminding me of this fact.

11. Central and South Nyanza mortality rates are respectively 420 and 438 deaths per 1,000 compared with a Kenyan average of 227.

12. Thanks to Michael Munger for this pithy statement.

13. GEMA stands for the Gikuyu (Kikuyu), Embu, and Meru Association. Since these ethnic groups, the so-called children of the house of Mumbi, joined together for political purposes, they are so designated for the purpose of enumeration here.

14. Interestingly, post-Kenyatta, no Kalenjin (the ethnicity of then President Moi) is represented. However, both presidents were designated university chancellor. This system was changed after Kibaki's election in December 2002.

15. This table is derived from information provided by the Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentist Board. It keeps a continuous registry of doctors and dentists practising in Kenya. Started in 1978 when doctors practising already were re-registered, the Board's list notes the names, addresses, medical qualifications (including dates of graduation from medical school), and dates of birth (DOB) for all

medical practitioners who are practising or have practised in the country. Figures were available up until 2001, but I stopped at those entering practice in 1985. This is sufficient for matching Luo data with the Luo narrative.

16. Prior to departure for Kenya, I had been advised that the Directories of the government of Kenya that I had located in the United States would not give me an accurate picture of Luo representation in government since the Directories excluded many important positions.

17. One particularly interesting finding of this table is the increase in senior positions of Kalenjins. It is important to confirm the ethnicity of these persons. If it is true that Kalenjins did indeed hold four senior positions as early as 1970, this suggests that Daniel arap Moi had begun to entrench himself and his group in the Kenyan government bureaucracy long before his accession to president in 1978. Such a finding must cause reconsideration of a standard assertion that Moi was an anomaly, a 'passing cloud' who somehow maintained his presence once having become president against all odds. This finding is supported by claims in Moi's official biography, Morton (1998).

18. The author gratefully acknowledges psychologist Christine Grimes for elucidating the concept and for reasoning its possible application in the case of positive stereotypes. Personal communication, 29.1.2004. Also thanks to Valerie Anderson for bringing this concept to my attention.

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Website Tables

The following Website Tables are available at www.duke.edu/web/luodeclinetab/: A hard copy of these tables may be obtained from Duke University Libraries under this title with accompanying tables.

- Table 1: Percentage of pregnant women testing HIV positive by sentinel site in the 1990s
- Table 2: Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) Results, Luo Nyanza, 1996 and 1997
- Table 3a: Primary School Net Enrolment Rates by Sex, District, and Province, 1999
- Table 3b: Secondary Schools Net Enrolment Rate by Sex, District, ad Province, 1999
- Table 4: 1995 Mean Overall Primary Performance Score by Province and Gender
- Table 5: 1995 Mean Primary Drop Out Rate by Standard and Province
- Table 6: Proportion of Enrolled Children Who Finish Primary School, 1986
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