



# Politics of ethnicity and dominance in Kenyan universities

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## Abstract

This paper uses descriptive survey research design to explore the influence of ethnic dominance in universities in Kenya. The focus is on public universities that are deemed to acquire resources and opportunities based on their geographical location as well ethnic proximity to the ruling elite. The paper delves into the dynamics fueling ethnic dominance among ethnic groups within the universities such as, education level, urbanization, political background, and the media. The findings suggest a close correspondence of differentials between urbanization and ethnic affiliation to the ruling elite. Some smaller and concretely identifiable ethnic groups have garnered an advantage over major community groups in the national population, in the area of education infrastructure and resources. Following its findings, this paper argues that ethnicity should be at the core of analyses in educational development in Kenya and policy formulation efforts to reduce inequalities in universities.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity; Inequalities; Education; Ruling Elite; Urbanization

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## 1. Introduction

Kenya's administrative units were created along ethnic boundaries by the British colonial administration, and they still depict the country's ethno-geography currently (Noyoo, 2000). The British settlers invested and settled in more productive and economically viable areas. Therefore, they ploughed their efforts in developing those areas where they got economic returns. Eventually, the British divided the Kenyan territory along ethnic lines into eight provinces; each province was subdivided into districts, often according to ethnic groups and subgroups. For example, the Luo are based mainly in Nyanza; the Luhya, in Western Province; the Kikuyu in Central Province, the Somali, in North- Eastern Province; and the Mijikenda, in the Coastal Province. The Rift Valley is dominated by the Kalenjin, but also contains the Maasai and other ethnic groups (Noyoo, 2000). The post-colonial government further consolidated this ethno-political structure by aligning parliamentary constituencies with ethnic boundaries, which has remained the style of Kenyan politics and provincial administration until today (Oucho 2002). Conclusively, the ethnic groups that had first encounters with the British colonial government, the missionaries and the settlers tended to have more chances of higher education because schools and other learning institutions were set up there (KNBS, 2009).

While theoretical debates about the definition of ethnicity continue, this paper adopts a constructionist perspective on ethnicity, which argues that ethnic identity is not primordial or fixed, but "the product of human agency, a creative social act through which such commonalities as speech code, cultural practices, ecological adaptation, and political organization become woven into a consciousness of shared identity" (Young, 1994, quoted in Yeros, 1999). Once constructed, ethnic identity appears to be natural, primordial, and essential. In this paper, however, we are interested in how ethnic markers such as language, skin color, or heritage become material as a result of educational levels, political practices and media influence.

Ethnicity is witnessed in forms of recruitment, promotion, transfer and deployment of lecturers and other non-teaching members of staff (Taaliu, 2017). In the universities there is ethnic consideration in recruitment of Chairs of the Council, Vice Chancellors and their Deputies and other top leaders. Politicians in many cases have tried to influence appointments of the top leaderships of public universities for example the incidence of Madagor in Moi University. The public universities have more lecturers and the non-teaching staff from the local ethnic group. Ethnicity has also impacted university students as well, especially when electing their student leaders (Taaliu, 2017). Mwiria (2006) also noted that there is regional and ethnic imbalance in representations in the universities in the number of students admitted to public universities, employment and leadership positions in the public universities, and the number of public universities and constituent colleges located in specific regions in terms of ethnic groups occupying those areas.

More often interethnic interaction increases with the level of education as people move from their districts of origin in search for opportunities in the more cosmopolitan areas of the country (Oyugi, 2000). The Kenyan policy of admitting students to high schools follow system whereby the best students are admitted to national high schools from all counties, extra-county schools admit students from the region and county schools admit students from the county. This system promotes ethnicity in that there are less than 150 national schools in the whole country, which means most of the students are admitted in extra-county and county schools which are within their locality, limiting their chances of interacting with students from other parts of the country

(Taaliu 2017). There are negative ethnic/ tribal stereo-types which have negative connotations against each tribe and if students do not have a chance of interacting with others from different tribes/ ethnic groups then they might grow up believing in the biased information about other tribes which is passed from generation to generation.

Students from different parts of the country are admitted to any public university the country not necessarily the one in their county (Noyoo, 2002). This promotes national cohesion and integration at the university level because students are able to interact with students from all parts of the country. The Kikuyu, Kamba, Luhya, and the Luo however constitute the largest number of the total citizens. This is big misrepresentation of the minority ethnic groups which are majorly marginalized. This translates into employment in the public sector including in the public universities (Taaliu, 2017).

According to Section 7(2) of the NCIC Act of Kenya, no public establishment should recruit more than one third of its employees from one ethnic group. But a study carried out in 2016 by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) only six out of the thirty one (31) Public Universities and constituent colleges complied with the above provision. What is on the ground is a situation where the Vice Chancellor or Principal is from a certain tribe and he/she is appointed in a university within his/her own locality, then majority of the employees are recruited from his/her tribe. In universities where the Vice Chancellor or Principal is from a different tribe other than the one in the locality, then again the majority of the employees are from the local community or tribe (NCIC, 2016). Terribly, the Kikuyu is the largest ethnic group in Kenya in terms of the proportion of the total population (17.7%) but takes up 23.6% of all the jobs in the public universities and constituent colleges in Kenya. The Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya, Kalenjin, Kisii and Kamba make up 72.3% of the Kenyan population but constitute 86.9% of the total workforce in public universities and constituent colleges. This denies opportunities to enhance the face of Kenya in the public universities by excluding 36 other ethnic groups who reside within the country (NCIC, 2016).

The principal limitation with existing research exploring ethnic inequalities in education is that many studies fail to account for the role of political structure in the relationship between ethnicity and education, and in particular, the role of the ruling elites in African states and the impact of their exclusionary practices along ethnic lines (Platteau, 2000). Even though ethnic groups were constructed by colonial administrations, the advantage or disadvantage of belonging to a particular ethnic group soon consolidated ethnic difference into material ethnic divides visible in universities especially when politicians want to radiate support from public. Political and economic power, and the wealth affiliated with it, is highly skewed to the ruling ethnic group, whose exclusionary practices have created marked inequalities in access to resources, including educational resources and employment capacities within the universities.

The political parties in Kenya have tribal affiliations. The tribal affiliations mean that if a leader of a political party is a Kikuyu, the party will be predominantly be a Kikuyu party or a party of Mt Kenya region. These party affiliations are brought to universities through influence of the political leaders. In many public universities and constituent colleges there are tribal students' associations, for instance you may find the Luo or Luhya Students' Association (CUE, 2017).

The bitter pain felt and witnessed following the 2007 elections left majority of Kenyans (67%) with fear of interaction and free integration with other ethnical groups especially at the university levels (Taaliu, 2017). This instances of ethnic violence though have been witnessed in the country, a great majority (57%) of university citizens frequently interact with people from different ethnic communities. This implies that there is room for understanding among people of different ethnicities because they are brought together by their day to day activities (Taaliu, 2017). However, this study transcends beyond what is visible as normalcy by ordinary Kenyan to what is tucked behind the ethnic stigma of the affected people within the university environment.

Inappropriately, hate speech is the greatest manifestations of ethnic intolerance and media is very fast in reflecting the tribulations both in visual and audio platforms (Scutari, 2009). This reflected on the minds of youth and those within universities far from their home areas gives them insecurity as the fact is that politics is the main source of ethnic violence. Hate speech may be perceived to occur more in the rural areas than in urban areas, may be due to the fact that most of the residents in the rural areas are from one ethnic group hence allowing exploitation of the use of local language, the use of common culture and beliefs and the use of common social amenities to manipulate the community members. However, politicians run away from urban areas and propagate hate speech in the rural areas in the bid to run away from the media and the public eye but technology catch up with their message to their surprise (Platteau, 2000). Most youths are up to per with the technology and the influence of what they hear or see is mortal slaying.

## 2. Methodology

The study espoused both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method employed the use of Questionnaires in universities. This was done through the use of multi-stage probability sampling with probability proportional to the size of population (PPPS) to get an accurate statistical representation of students across the identified universities. A total sample of 6085 respondents was realized at the select universities level. The respondents were distributed in a manner proportionate to their population sizes. Further stratification of the respondents was based on demographic descriptions: Sex, Age group, level of education and the urban and rural characteristics of the population.

The qualitative method included the use of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) - also referred to as Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). This involved interviewing workers or employees with wide knowledge and experience on ethnicity. FGDs were conducted with public policy makers and representatives from civil society organizations and the citizens.

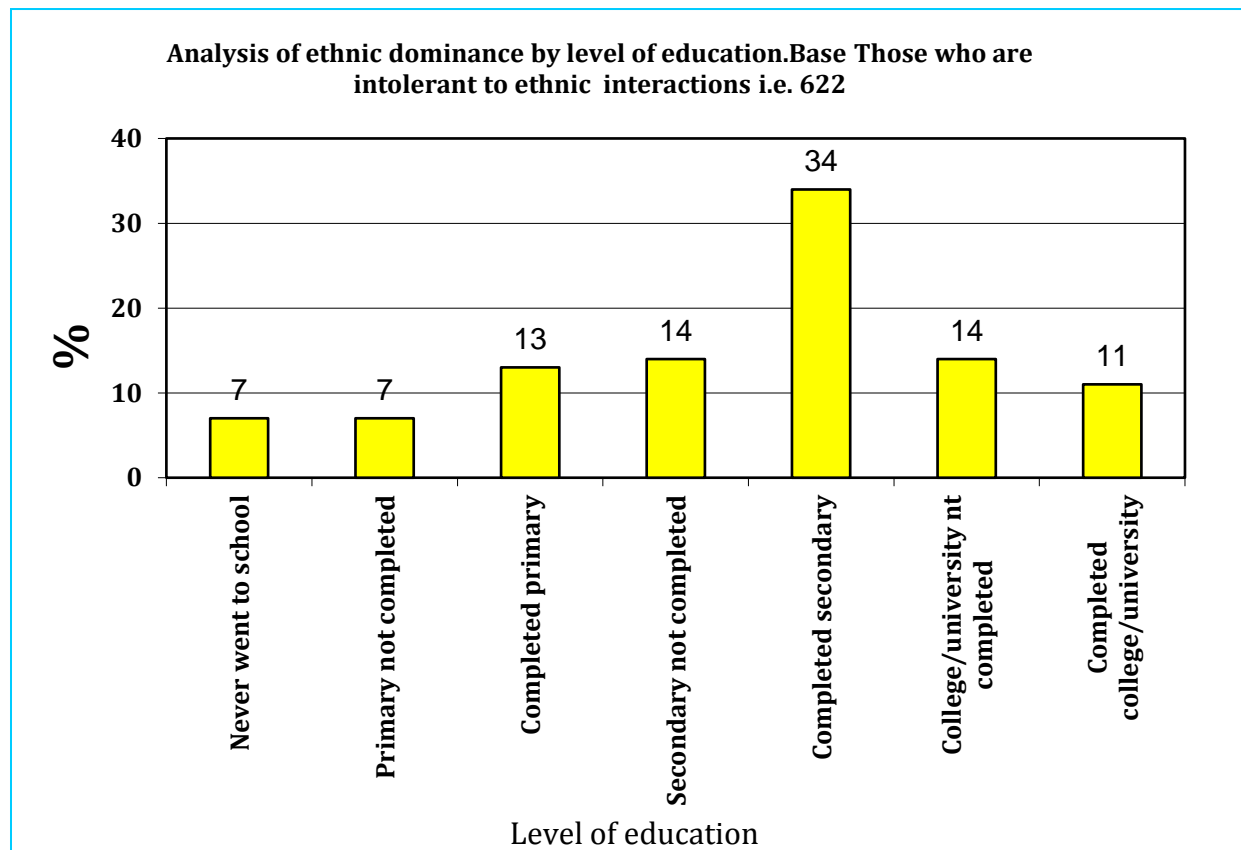
## 3. Findings

### 3.1. Ethnic dominance by level of education

Out of the 47 counties, 20 have a public university or a constituent college and 17 do not have a single one located there. Nairobi alone has 5 major public universities namely, University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University,

Multimedia University of Kenya, the Cooperative University of Kenya, and Technical University of Kenya. Not to mention that Jomo Kenyatta University of Science and Technology though in Kiambu County is less than 10 kilometers away from Kenyatta University.

Some of the counties do not have a public university or a constituent college like Wajir, Mandera, Marsabit, Isiolo, Lamu, and Tana River. These counties are located in the arid areas which were originally marginalized by the colonial government because of lack of resources to exploit from there. Analysis of ethnic intolerance by way of education levels reveals that intolerance reduces for those who join university (11%). The fact that ethnic intolerance is highest at the completion of secondary school is consistent with the argument that in Kenya, primary and secondary school education does not enhance cohesion and integration. As is the case of interethnic interaction, it emerges from this study that people who live in urban areas are more tolerant to others compared to those in rural areas. The in-depth interviews attributes to the fact that urban areas are mostly cosmopolitan and people tend to be more exposed to other ethnic communities in their day- to-day interactions as opposed to the rural settings where in some instances one ethnic group is dominant, find Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Analysis of Ethnic dominance by Level of Education

Education is critical to fostering nationalism, patriotism and promote national unity. The Ministry of Education notes that; “the university students and workers are of diverse ethnic groups, races and religion, but these differences need not divide them. They must be able to live and interact as Kenyans”.

From the findings of the survey, majority of students and workers (57%) frequently interact with people from different ethnic group while a significant proportion (32%) interacts occasionally. Only 11% reported that they rarely interact with the people from a different ethnic group. This implies that there is room for understanding among people of different ethnicities because they are brought together by their day to day activities. These findings demonstrate that, despite instances of ethnic violence that have been witnessed in this country, a great majority of Kenyans frequently interact with others from different ethnic communities and could live harmoniously with each other regardless of their ethnic background.

**Table 1.** Ethnic composition of students in public universities in Kenya

S/N	Ethnicity	Population (2009)	Pop %	Students %
1.	Kikuyu	6,622,576	17.7	37.8
2.	Kamba	3,893,157	10.4	13
3.	Luo	4,044,440	10.8	12
4.	Luhya	5,338,666	14.2	10
5.	Kalenjin	4,967,328	13.3	8
6.	Meru	1,658,108	4.4	7
7.	Kisii	2,205,669	5.9	4
8.	Embu	324,092	0.9	3
9.	Others	273,519	22.4	5.2
	Total	31,288,129	83.5	100

**Table 2.** Ethnic composition of employees in public universities in Kenya

S/N	Ethnicity	Pop (2009)	Pop %	No. of employees	Employment %	% pop ratio & employment
1.	Kikuyu	6,622,576	17.7	7050	23.6	5.9
2.	Luo	4,044,440	10.8	4658	15.6	4.8
3.	Kalenjin	4,967,328	13.3	4586	15.4	2.0
4.	Luhya	5,338,666	14.2	4562	15.3	1.1
5.	Kisii	2,205,669	5.9	2470	8.3	2.4
6.	Kamba	3,893,157	10.4	2393	8.7	-2.4
7.	Meru	1,658,108	4.4	1348	4.5	0.1
8.	Mijikenda	1,960,574	5.2	652	2.3	-3.1
9.	Embu	324,092	0.9	419	1.4	0.5
10.	Taita	273,519	0.7	370	1.2	0.5
	Total	31,288,129	83.5		96.3	

From Table 1, the Kikuyu ethnic group with 17.7% of the total population has a 37.8% of the total number of students in the public universities and constituent colleges. The Kikuyu, Kamba, Luhya, and the Luo constitute 72.8% of the total number of students in the public universities and colleges while the remaining 38 ethnic groups have only 27.2% to share amongst themselves. This is big misrepresentation of the minority ethnic groups which are majorly marginalized. This translates into employment in the public sector including in the public universities as shown in Table 2.

Further, the study sought to find out the contribution of the school curriculum to national cohesion. The findings indicated mixed reactions on such contribution. While 26% of those surveyed felt that the curriculum is weak in promoting ethnic cohesion, 35% contended that the curriculum has contributed significantly in promoting ethnic cohesion. The remaining 35% were midway. These findings demonstrate that, there are elements of the school curriculum do not promote ethnic cohesion and may need to be reviewed. While at the same time, there are elements of the curriculum that promote ethnic cohesion which need to be strengthened. Some respondents also noted that the subjects in the curriculum are aligned to national goals. The curriculum includes subjects and activities that underscore respect for other people's cultures and value systems.

### 3.2. Factors that unify people from different ethnic communities in the university community

When asked what unifies Kenyans from different ethnic communities, respondents mentioned religious beliefs, work, education and economic activities such as markets and intermarriage as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Factors that unify people from different ethnic communities

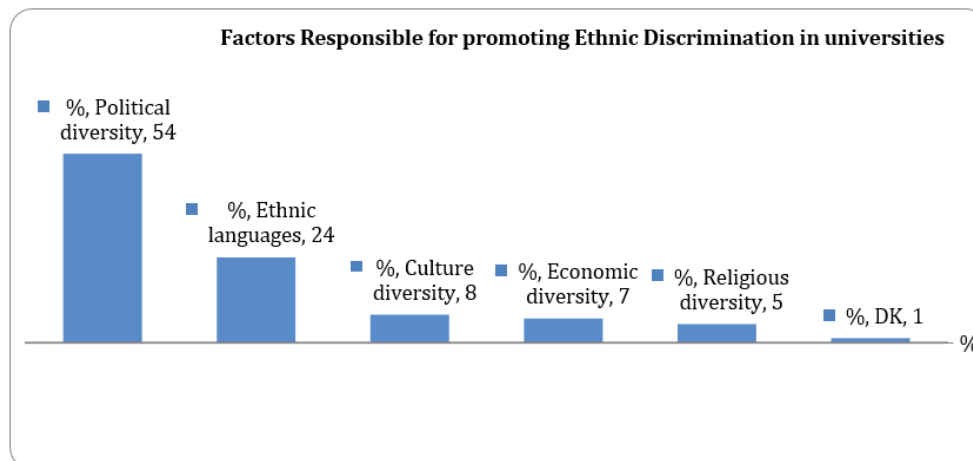
What unifies people from different ethnic communities	N	% Responses
Religion/ Churches/mosque	1,004	15.1%
Working together/ Working place	855	12.9%
School /Education	578	8.7%
Sharing / economic activities such as markets	510	7.7%
Intermarriage	501	7.5%
Use of national language	407	6.1%
Social forums e.g. sports , games	300	4.5%
Respect for peace between ethnic communities	471	7.1%
Interaction e.g. meetings	287	4.3%
Culture activities / Practice	285	4.3%
Equal distribution of resources	210	3.2%
National anthem	126	1.9%
Media	117	1.8%



Communal values shared among communities that respect the same council of elders chief Barazas	117	1.8%
Education on importance of good ethnic relation	106	1.6%
Buying land at other places in Kenya	99	1.5%
National peace accord	79	1.2%
The new constitution	77	1.2%
Others	518	7.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,647</b>	<b>100%</b>

Based on these findings, the study advocates the use of Kiswahili as an important strategy for promoting ethnic cohesion. Majority of the respondents (57%) held that the use of a common language could unify Kenyans. But despite the popular support for one language in attaining cohesion, others opine that this will not solve the problems of negative ethnicity; diverse languages are not in themselves a problem, but it's the way these differences are used to propagate intolerance. They contend that, unless the underlying causes of ethnic violence including incitement by politicians, competition over resources, among other factors are addressed, language will never sort out ethnic conflicts in university. In fact they argue that Kenya's different languages form rich heritage that must not be lost in the quest for one language. What should be done is to exploit the rich heritage of different ethnic groups for the posterity of this nation.

According to the respondents, the biggest threat to cohesion building in the universities is the political diversity in the country. The analysis show that the ethno-regional disparities created by the colonial and the early post-colonial periods are still significant in Kenya, and students in Provinces with little or no political power in Kenya have been disadvantaged at the expense of those where the ruling elite came from. See Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Factors Promoting Ethnic Discrimination in Kenyan universities



However, political diversity in itself is not destructive; it is the intolerance to differences in political opinion that corrodes the fabric of the Kenyan society. This could be attributed to the fact that politicians think that an easy way to build support is by playing on ethnicity, by stirring up ethnic loyalties on one hand, and ethnic animosities on the other. Sometimes they incite one tribe against other tribes as is well demonstrated by the Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence (CIPEV) report/ the *Waki Commission Report* (2008).

### 3.3. The media

The study explored the occurrence of hate speech by rural and urban areas and found out that hate speech occurs more in the rural areas (57%) than in urban areas (43%). This might be due to the fact that most politicians convey hate speech to 'their' own ethnic groups against other ethnic groups. In this regard, the context should be favourable to the ethnic group in question.

The role of media is very critical in either fanning ethnic conflicts or preaching of peace and bringing about cohesion. Evidence from the study demonstrates the respondent's perceptions that the media has a role to play in promoting ethnic tolerance. Slightly less than one half (47.1%) are confident that the media is responsible in promoting ethnic tolerance. The Kenyan media are reputed as the most sophisticated in the region and have over the past 10 years grown tremendously in terms of ownership diversity and coverage.

The media have over the years played a critical role in the democratization process, especially in relation to exposing corruption and checking government excesses as well as providing a useful platform for opposition and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Moreover, the growth of local language FM stations has in the past five years availed to ordinary Kenyans extra-ordinary platforms through which to air all manner of views.

Key informant interviews acknowledge the place of laws that govern the media, such as the Media Act 2006 and the Communication Act, which clearly demand for a responsible media. They demand for editing of content to ensure responsible reporting. Generally, key informant interviews reveal the following in terms of media lapses in the ethnic tolerance equation.

- a. Use of propaganda to further individual or group interests;
- b. Exaggeration and misinformation;
- c. Biased reporting.

Some of the respondents argue that the media has not been responsible in covering and reporting sensitive issues that could spur ethnic conflicts. Respondents especially feel the editorial policy should be such that those utterances that could spur ethnic hatred are edited out. Memories of 2008 media reporting following the botched 2007 presidential elections are still fresh in the minds of Kenyans who accuse the media for having irresponsibly reporting at that time. The manner of reporting is perceived to have heightened tensions in the country during the post-election violence and especially the universities where most youths are enrolled.

Kenyans view the passing of a new Constitution in a peaceful referendum in 2010 as a major turning point in Kenya's history as this provides a firm basis upon which to build a unified nation based on principles of inclusion and equity.

#### **4. Conclusion and recommendations**

The paper has shown substantial difference in educational opportunity and educational resources between students from the Kenyan public universities where the ruling elite have originated, past and present. There are large differences in both access to and quality of educational and employment benefits. The Kenyan Government has put in place institutions and policies that are aimed at promoting ethnic cohesion and integration. The Kenyan Constitution (2010) itself provides a key basis for promoting national unity. Section 27 (4) of the Constitution provides that, 'The State shall not discriminate directly or indirectly against any person on any ground, including race, sex, pregnancy, marital status, health status, ethnic or social origin, colour, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, dress, language or birth.' The subsequent clause states that 'A person shall not discriminate directly or indirectly against another person on any of the grounds specified or contemplated in clause (4)'.

Some of these policies include that have been empowered to encourage cohesion in the country are: Kenya's vision 2030, Civil Service Recruitment and Deployment Policies, Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), the National Land Development Policy, the Media Content Policy and the enactment of the National Cohesion and Integration Act, 2008. But then again, the issue of ethnicity in Kenya affects all sections of the universities and constituent colleges. It ranges from admission of students to universities, employment of both teaching and non-teaching staff, appointment of Vice Chancellors and Principals and university council members. Since independence in 1963, the various regimes seem to be lacking commitment and good will to fight the deep seated ethnicity in the universities and constituent colleges in the country.

These policies must be implemented in all institutions so as to address the root cause as well as resolving conflicts on time.

The education system should ensure cultural context is relevant, the entire curriculum should be transformed to give youth and adults the type of quality education that promotes appreciation of diversity, richness, and dynamism of our cultures. These findings demonstrate that, there are elements of the school curriculum that promote stereotypes which threaten cohesion, and these need to be reviewed. While at the same time, there are elements of the curriculum that promote ethnic cohesion which need to be strengthened.

The structures and work of these institutions should be strengthened and public awareness initiatives of their work increased. There is also need for the public to be sensitized about their role in promoting cohesion so that they do not view these institutions as the only agents in the cohesion building process. The National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) has done much to make sure that universities adhere to the policy of not recruiting more than a third of the total workforce from one tribe, but much more need to be done. The commission has also introduced a policy where universities are supposed to integrate the teaching of national unity and cohesion in their curricula.

Instructively, the media is a key partner in promoting ethnic cohesion and national integration for example by use of national language. As such, the technology forum and university special media outlet should partner with bodies such as the NCIC and other, including the community in stemming out negative ethnicity and inculcating, within the population, the spirit of love, unity and accommodation of our diversity.

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