

Report 114
August 24, 2009

Kenyan Census

Today, August 24, is the day for the Kenyan census which is taken every ten years. It will be done in the old fashioned way where the enumerators visit each household and ask all kinds of questions that can take up to 30 minutes to answer. As expected, this has aroused a lot of controversy. People question how the enumerators can get an accurate count in the teeming slums of Nairobi or the lightly inhabited areas of northern and northeastern Kenya where people move about constantly looking for pasture (particularly in this time of drought). Others question the expense when up to 10 million Kenyans are reported to need food assistance. Others challenge certain questions like "how many members of the family live overseas?" or "how much support have you received from overseas relatives in the last year?"

But the biggest controversy is over the "tribe". The census asks people to identify themselves as a member of one of 42 tribes. Some object because after the ethnic violence of last year, this will just stir up the same troubles. Others object because they feel that their tribe is not on the list and they want to be recognized as a tribe. The Luhya are considered a tribe (the second biggest in Kenya), but they only became a "tribe" in 1940 when members of 14 different groups decided to consider themselves as one tribe in order to have more political clout. Then the Kalenjin's in the Rift Valley did the same thing, but in the census their various tribes--Nandi, Sabaot, Kipsigis, Turgen, and so on are listed separately. Then people question what a person is supposed to put down if their parents come from two tribes – the answer is supposed to be that you are the tribe of your father. Yet this is completely arbitrary. What happens when a person does not know his father? Or a person who I heard about in Mombasa who was half Luo and half Kamba but since he grew up in the city he knew neither language and did not connect with either tribe. Some people wish to call their tribe "Kenyan". Then in areas where tribes intersect there are frequently people who are culturally mixed and who can be identified with either of the two tribes. Some people say that they will refuse to answer the question on tribe – the Government responds that they will be forced to!

Then there are the political problems with tribes. In the 1989 census, when the government was controlled by the Kalenjins, the Kalenjins numbers increased from the previous census more than was humanly possible while the Luo (the out group) hardly increased at all. In a country based on tribal politics, each tribe is going to want to increase its numbers in order to have more political clout. This can lead to a large overestimation of the population. After the last census in 1999, the Government refused to release the data on tribes. Census officials this time also indicate that they don't have to release this data – in which case why is the data being collected?

I doubt that the Polish tribe (my tribe according to the rules here) will be included on the census so I don't know how I'll be categorized.

Is the racial classification in the US census any different from the tribal classification in the Kenya census?

Next year the United States will have its census. In the 1980 US census I was supposed to fill out the appropriate boxes. When my daughter, Joy, was about to be born, and we were asked by the nurse what race the child was, my Kenyan wife and I answered “human” – the only real race that exists. So how was I to fill out the form? By the census boxes, I was “white”, my wife, “black”, and our children — well, one had been classified on their birthing document as “black”, while the other one was classified as “white”. How could I participate in this? So I refused to fill out this section, crossing it out and writing, "This is nonsense". This made me liable to a \$500 fine which I would gladly have been assessed. I would then have had the ACLU take this to court, but alas, I was never challenged. I wonder how the census bureau counted my response since “refuse to answer” is not an option. Things are even more opaque with my grandchildren since they could check almost every box since they have parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents from the United States, Argentina (allowing them to check the Hispanic boxes), Poland, Kenya, and Japan. I continued to refuse to fill in the race boxes in the 1990 and 2000 censuses and plan to do the same again if I am in the US for the 2010 census.

I think that the 2010 census gives us a great opportunity to witness. The census has developed its own set of boxes, but these are based on pseudo-scientific nonsense. Read Stephen Jay Gould’s “The Mismeasure of Man” to learn about the details. Can I in good conscience participate in this charade which has caused so much suffering in the past — slavery, the holocaust of Jews and Roma during WWII, the genocide in Rwanda, racial discrimination, red-lining in housing, and a so long, long list?

In the 2000 census for the first time the census bureau included the category “multiracial”. This is a clear indication that the United States is finally starting to realize the arbitrariness of these “boxes”. Roughly 2.3% checked this box in the 2000 census and with the rapid increase in “inter-racial” children I expect this will increase to at least 5% in the 2010 census. Moreover, with the popularity of “multiracial” heroes such as Tiger Woods and Barack Obama, it may become “fashionable” to check the multiracial box (and it reality everyone in the world is technically multiracial since we all inter-procreate) and the response could be higher than 5%. It will increase again in the 2020 and 2030 census. I predict that the percentage checking multiracial in the 2030 census will be so high that it will make the racial classification meaningless so that by the 2040 census the boxes on race will be abolished.

One might claim that failure to check the racial classification box denies one’s identity. But a person has a complex identity that is not well measured by the few categories on the census form. Moreover, identity should be self-determined and not imposed upon a person by the state.

I hope that some others will follow me in this protest.