

#KenyaDecides2013 – Part 3 – Aborted primaries muddy the local elections in rural Kenya

The polls have closed, votes are being counted, but the full picture is still obscure. As the world waits for the presidential results of the 2013 Kenya elections, [Gemma Jones](#), anthropologist and [J.Omondi](#), candidate for ward representative in rural Luoland, Nyanza Province, look back at events over the last few weeks and its effect on the regional elections.

Six weeks ago, just one day before the deadline for party candidates lists to the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), a non-event took place in our corner of Nyanza: the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) primaries. That day a new Luo saying was coined in the village: Okbichaloni, or “things aren’t what they seem to you”. Specifically, this refers to the idea of being thoroughly convinced that your understanding of a situation is clear and correct, yet finding in the final reckoning that tables have turned. Everyone, villagers say, will be affected by this okbichaloni at some point. Reflecting on election events over the past few weeks we think they are on to something.



J.Omondi reflects on an unusual campaign Photo: Issue

In, let us call it, Odongo County, the primaries were marred by disorganisation, constantly changing deadlines and rumours of dirty tricks by some candidates. As we wrote in our [previous post](#), J.Omondi’s became despondent about his own campaign and Kenyan politics in general. The Star-kuz team, newly reunited to help on the campaign trail, temporarily dispersed; some returned to old habits of idleness and drink. Villagers told us they were tired of politics. We wondered then whether the real elephant in the room during these elections might be low voter-turnout. Long lines of voters patiently waiting to vote on the 4 March testify this was not to be the case.

In hindsight, we now see that some good has come out of what seemed like a depressing situation. In J.Omondi’s corner of Luoland, Nyanza, it is fair to say that ODM, the party of Luo presidential candidate Raila Odinga, was previously the only viable party – so much so that a local ID card was enough to assume party support. In effect, it meant that the primaries and elections would have been one and the same.

However, a few days before the primaries, there were signs of the confusion ahead. ODM called its ward representative candidates to two word-of-mouth meetings. J.Omondi made it to both. At

the first, the candidates were asked to contribute more money on top of their nomination fees. All refused. There was huge concern among the candidates because they could see the party had no clear formula on how it would run the primaries, choose clerks or polling stations. If there was a moment to think of jumping ship to another party, this was it.

At the second meeting, all the county electoral candidates, after lengthy negotiation, agreed on a number of polling stations spread as fairly as possible across the constituency and wards. On the day of the primaries, however, eager voters arrived at these stations to find them deserted. Word quickly spread that only five stations would open. Some hardy souls made their way to these locations only to be disappointed yet again. Most gave up and went home. J.Omondi's team were already playing football.

The following day, five polling stations did open, but there were no ballot boxes. One box had arrived at the party headquarters, but was destroyed before it got to its polling station. In any case, the majority of people, who had waited in the hot sun the previous day, had decided not to come out again. There were rumours that one polling station had resorted to an alternative voting system. People living around the station were "lining-up" behind a nominated person, a visible form of voting normally used in community meetings to agree on candidates for voluntary positions like community health workers. Even though this system was inappropriate for politics, some thought it might be validated because of the impending IEBC party list deadline. J.Omondi arrived at that polling station late in the day, but did not take part. Instead, he sat nearby playing cards with his friends, quietly observing to see what would happen next.

After two weeks of court cases and bitter recriminations, the primaries were nullified and the incumbent MP retained his nomination. He put forward his own choice for ward representatives (who also happened to be the incumbents). In the immediate aftermath of the aborted primaries, J.Omondi was one of several candidates who managed to switch to parties who did not need to hold primaries in the area as no-one was running under their banner. Although not ODM, these small parties were under the CORD alliance which still supported Luo figurehead, Raila Odinga for President. Suddenly the elections were no longer a foregone conclusion in this area. Furthermore, after widespread community dissent on a post-primaries tour of his tribal homeland, Prime Minister Odinga's appeal to his supporters to automatically vote ODM across the board on all elected positions (known as six-piece voting) was dropped. In time, excitement over the elections started to build again in the village.

The elections took place peacefully in the region in contrast to predictions in the international media such as CNN's "Kenyans armed and ready to vote" curtain raiser to their coverage. Three days have now passed since the elections. People are still calm but as the crucial presidential vote continues to be tallied amid technical issues, the mood is cautious and people are being sensible. In Kisumu City, where J.Omondi has gone right now for some rest, the streets are quiet. In the 2007/8 post-election violence it is believed 90% of the casualties in the city were attributed to police action. People are moving around freely but making sure to clear the town centre early, just in case.

In our rural area, however, the wait is mostly over. We know, unofficially, who the ward representative will be. It is not J.Omondi, neither is it the incumbent ODM candidate. It is too soon and a little too complicated to analyse this result fully now.

But as J.Omondi reflects back on his campaign, one incident stands out in his mind as encapsulating the Kenyan political scene and the sense of "okbichaloni" (things aren't what they first seem to you), the new village buzzword. While heading home on the day preceding the primaries, J.Omondi, wearing an ODM party cap, was stopped by a group of women. They greeted him like a famous person with "go sigala gala" – a celebratory cry – clapping and dancing. He let them talk and they told him their issues (lack of water, matches, small business opportunities) and promised that they would vote for him because they knew him and he was good. One asked for his policies. Tounge-in-check, he told them "Since you will vote for me I will give everyone here a lot of money, that is my policy." Most agreed, one challenged him that he still

need to have a plan for the future. At this point, J.Omondi revealed to them that he knew they were not really waiting for him. The village he was passing through was not even in his ward. They did not know each other. He told them to think about this: “Someone like me could be your husband or son. What if they were running because they see a need and they want to help? When you lie to them, it is the same as those politicians you complain of who fail to fulfil their election promises.”



ODM-supporting women in Nyanza Photo: J.Omondi

J.Omondi learned a lesson from this encounter – there are many different motivations for voting, which only become clear in hindsight and perhaps not even then. He wondered then if all the talk about policies and issues was more of an entertainment feature during the campaign process. This idea was reinforced when he saw people who had sworn to vote for him lining up behind their clan-man during the aborted primaries.

His conviction grew even more when, on election day, he was beaten in his own home-ground polling station by the – widely disliked – incumbent ODM candidate, a “settler” in the area, but who benefits from the long-term support of the incumbent MP. On the other hand, J.Omondi gained most of his support in some polling stations in an area outside his clan where the residents had engaged in many discussions with him. Ironically, the winner of the race to be ward representative turned out to be another individual entirely who comes from the other side of the ward. Was the election fair? “I do feel that every vote was counted,” J.Omondi reflects. “The results are the choice of the people and it was not me. But it also turned out to be about loyalties and wrangles at the level of clan, sub-clan and even family. It felt like on the day, many people could not see there are supposed to be connections between voting and area development. But a candidate from another small new party did end up being given a chance, so maybe that is change.”

As we narrate the events of the last few weeks – and follow the presidential tallying process now – the phrase *ookbichaloni* has ever more resonance. Things are never quite what you think they are. This was also reflected in the lack of subtlety in news reports like CNN’s which described Kenyans as arming themselves in preparation for war. From afar, this portrays a bizarrely-warped image of the day-to-day life of ordinary Kenyans. In this, the villagers coining the term *ookbichaloni* to describe the ever-changing election story, seem miles ahead in their thinking.

Listen to Gemma Jones discussing the Kenyan elections on the Voice of Russia radio station this week.

http://ruvr.co.uk/2013_03_05/Kenyan-election-politics-or-tribalism/
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnIMcQ_6uQg

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