

## Beyond Intractability: Ethnic Identity and Political Conflicts in Africa

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### Abstract

*The seemingly intractability of ethnicity, identity and the national question in Africa has provoked series of questions, which the paper seeks to explore, such as: Does ethnicity in itself represent an obstacle to building a viable and stable political system? How do we manage the seemingly intractable conflicts generated by ethnic identity? How can we build a unified nation for peaceful coexistence in a multi-ethnic society? The paper argues that while it is possible for ethnicity to truncate socio-political and economic development in a multi-ethnic state, the recognition of every ethnic group that they belong to a nationality and not a particular ethnic group may reduce the negative impacts of ethnicity. From evidences around Africa, the study concludes that a political project that place emphasis on national integration as well as inclusion in governance is a significant political tool to curtailing the negative impact of ethnicity in a multi-ethnic state.*

**Key Words:** Intractability, Ethnic Identity, Political Conflicts, Nation-building.

### 1. Introduction

The end of the cold war and the collapse of communism have fuelled the resurgence and politicisation of ethno-nationalism in Africa. In the post-Cold War era, ethnicity and nationalism turned out to be the most important parameters of intra-state conflicts. These new patterns of conflicts described as internal or civil wars, largely because they involved a clash of identities such as ethnicity within the state. However, they often overflowed across national borders and affected neighbouring countries in what has been described as “the bad neighbourhood syndrome” (Young, 2004, p.44). African states are territories whose borders were drawn artificially at the Berlin Conference in 1885 by colonial powers to fit their economic conveniences. In the pre-colonial period, African communities followed the natural process of ethnicisation with overlapping and alternate identities, significant movement of peoples, intermingling of communities and cultural and linguistic mixture. After claiming power, the colonial lords defined, classified, numbered and mapped African ethnic groups to create administrative units to facilitate better political and institutional control. Colonisation also created inequalities between ethnic communities based on the manner and degree of involvement in the colonial political economy.

Decentralised despotism under colonialism involved the use of traditional and local chiefs through patronising relationships where their loyalty was rewarded through access to resources controlled by the colonial power. These sources of wealth and power were distributed unevenly and permitted colonial powers to establish their legitimacy through the strategy of divide and rule. Ethnicity became axial to the colonial divide-and-rule device used for the “purpose of political control, enforcement of taxes and extraction of wealth” (Broch-Due, 2005, pp. 8-9; Rubin, 2006, p.5). The colonial state drove a wedge between ethnic groups by giving preferential treatment to some identity groups through appointments of local authorities or administrative staff in the colonial offices. The impact of these policies was new cleavage of class exacerbating existing internal differences of gender, tribalism and client hood. Power was given to some at the expense of others, created frustration and competition, which served the interest of colonial power. The post-colonial state in Africa was characterized by the limitation of political pluralism to small enclaves, the strong emphasis on statism and bureaucratic structures, the politicisation of administrative institutions, and personalistic forms of decision-making (Ekeh, 1975, pp.92-93). Due to the colonial history of state institutions in Africa, kinship, ethnicity, religion, and gender, among other things, formed the basis for collaboration and support in the state.

Identity became a political tool for contesting power and resources rather than a source of difference within the society and was used to clearly delineate between those who were included and those excluded from state power (Berman, 1998, pp. 310-311). Politicising and mismanaging the rich ethnic African diversity continues to be one of the causes of political crises and is often followed by ethnic wars. This paper is organised into five sections. The introduction situates the concept of ethnic identity and conflicts within the broader context of colonialism and the crisis of the post-colonial state in Africa. The second part examines conceptual and theoretical issues relating to identity and conflicts while the third section explores the role of identity in violent political conflicts in Africa from the 1990s. At the heart of the African crisis is the failure to manage identity in the process of democratisation and institution building; section four thus explores the conditions under which identity can be transformed into mechanisms for peaceful co-existence and nation building in ethnically-divided societies. Finally, the last section provides a summary and conclusion of the various issues explored in the paper.

### **1.1. Defining the Problem**

Although identity in world politics manifests in various concrete and abstract forms, its true significance lies in the fact that it impacts on world events and international relations on a spectrum ranging from conflict to cooperation. Due to its dysfunctional or destabilising influence, there is a natural tendency to over-emphasise the conflict-generating effects of negative identity. This approach suffices in highlighting what superficially appear to be the more salient aspects of identity, but it tends to neglect the cooperation-inducing potential of positive identity. What has to be borne in mind is that identity, apart from being a constitutive of world politics, also has a transformative power (Call, 2008, p.63). The reasons and motives for the upsurge in the wave of identity politics consist of neglected historical grievances, land claims, ingrained biological prejudices, religious fervour, sudden memory-lapses, long-standing battles for recognition and control of resources and power (Barbero, 2002, pp.27-29). Identity politics provides a space in which people can reinforce their belonging and ownership, or lack thereof; however, identities have generally been used negatively by colonial powers and ruling elites in the postcolonial state. Alternatively, identities could be used to create a universal identity, as in the case of nationalism and a search for a common identity in African countries, or more broadly, in Africa as a continent (Kagwanja, 2003, pp.113-114). African countries have to determine how they can manage identity differences that appear in political spaces, but should do that within the broad ambit of human rights, access to resources, equality, and citizenship.

Ethnic conflicts in Africa also respond to external influence in what “has been described as neo-colonialism” (Mengisteab, 2007, p.22). Throughout the Cold War, many African leaders were blindly assisted and this gave them a total liberty to manage ethnic differences as they wanted to, and often in violence. In the 1980s, African states' capabilities to provide social services weakened further more. The states were under pressure by International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) to undertake reforms. However, popular resistance movements broke out in many African states to protest the hardships created by implementation of neo-liberal reforms. In this chaotic context, ethnically-based movements exploited the situation to challenge the state for effective control. The democratisation process and economic reforms associated with the Structural Adjustment Programmes “erased the earlier post-colonial state's claim to unencumbered hegemony” (Young, 2004, p.43). As Appadurai (1998) also correctly observes, “globalisation has fostered uncertainties and inequalities that have reinforced primordial sensibilities and recidivist ideologies, inspiring the atomisation of political processes” (p.226). A consequence of the neo-patrimonial system was the creation of single party political systems to offer a national arena where distribution of resources between ethnic communities could be negotiated between leaders of various groups, without having to resort to the public mobilisation of their supporters ((Ekeh, 1975, p.92).

### **2. Theoretical and Conceptual Clarifications**

Basic needs theorists like Burton, defined four needs in particular that are universal and non-negotiable and, therefore, should be primarily addressed as a basis for negotiating peace settlements (Burton, 1990, pp. 150-151). These needs are not hierarchical, but rather sought all together: security or safety, meaning both stability and freedom from fear; identity, defined by needs theorists as a sense of self in relation to the outside world; recognition, including the recognition of one's identity and recognition from the others; family and community; and personal development, which includes a dimension of personal fulfillment, or in other words “the need to reach one's potential in all areas of life” (Marker, What Human Needs Are Section, para. 1-2 , 2013).

Identity is one of the most crucial needs identified by the basic needs theory because it is an extremely strong catalyst for social mobilization. Many scholars stress identity salience as a key factor in conflict. For example, (Rothbart and Cherubin, 2009, pp.59-70), assert that identity relies on a common set of narratives, symbols, and a shared sense of group differences. For these authors, causes of identity based violence often include the “shared normative commitments of the protagonists’ groups, commitments that center on notions of in-group purity and out-group vice” (ibid, p.59-60). This distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ represents a potential societal fracture. In that sense, causal analysis views conflict as the product of a strong competition among different players.

Identity may be defined as a combination of socio-cultural characteristics which individuals share, or are presumed to share, with others on the basis of which one group may be distinguished from others. Identity is a group concept in the sense that it is based on traits which make individuals members of a group; such traits also provide responses to the question, “Who am I?” Identity has a combination of ethnic, religious, gender, class and other layers all of which refer to the same person either in self definition or as defined by others (Alubo, 2009, pp.1-2). With regard to ethnicity, two opposed theories could be explored to explain the phenomenon - primordialism and constructivism. On the one hand, primordialism explains ethnicity as a social association, which is innate. On the other hand, constructivism sees ethnicity as an identity, which is socially and culturally constructed. Ethnicity is viewed in this paper as social construct, which always implies a differentiation between a group and the ‘other’. If ethnicity is primordial, conflict would be intrinsic, leading to a Hobbesian war of each man against each other (Mamdani, 2002, pp.5-7). However, if conflict is not primordial, then it is constructed by historical, cultural, and social habits. It has been proven that ethnicity does not per se explain conflict, but it is its exploitation by political actors for political and economic purposes that shape conflicts as ethnic. Therefore, mobilization explains and reshapes the role of ethnicity and tribalism in African conflicts (Akpan, 2007, pp.20-21).

An ethnic group is a group of people whose members identify with each other through a common heritage, often consisting of a common language, culture, religion, ideology or geographical area. Ethnicity as an identity inevitably occupies a great space within the political arena and also it is the easiest and most natural way for people to mobilize around basic human needs such as security, food, shelter, economic well-being, inequality, land distribution, autonomy, and recognition (Kelman, 2007, pp. 64-65). Although *ethnic* identity on its own does not necessarily cause or perpetuate violent conflict, it has become “a sort of universal shorthand that marks a host of much more complex issues of identity and difference” (Broch-Due, 2005, p.6). Thus, even as analysts confirm the importance of identity in what has been described as the ‘new wars’, they have also underscored the importance of the specific cultural, social, economic and environmental conditions that transform identities into instruments of conflict (Kaldor, 1999, pp. 4-23 ; Richards, 2005, pp.1-21).

Identity, considered as a social construct and a dynamic process, is in reality a fluctuant ingredient subject to alliances, mobilizations and manipulations. On one hand, identity is a catalyst, a vector of mobilization through which people can express their deepest concerns and strongest collective fears. On the other hand, identity is also an ideal credo for leaders or warlords to reach their political objectives and to legitimize their means of action. Mobilizing a population using identity is much quicker and more efficient than mobilizing through political convictions (Doucey, 2011, pp. 4-5). When conflicts rely on the mobilization of identities, people simply cannot remain outside of the game, either because they have a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic group, or because they are seen as – and therefore targeted as – *de facto* members of the enemy’s group. In other words, when identity is at stake in a conflict there cannot be free riders. Society is then deeply polarised and fractured, which has strong consequences for later reconciliation. Political leaders often manipulate identity and ethnicity for electoral purposes or to support a conflict. Mobilised groups find a special resonance in identity discourse because they are able to identify themselves with narratives which emphasise shared values and collective fears. This is why identity is one of the most important basic needs to be considered when analysing conflicts, because of its ability to be mobilised and its strong interaction with violence and security.

Identity is thus a human need whose denial can dramatically increase the probability that a conflict will become prolonged and violent, that is intractable. Generally speaking, conflicts over deep-rooted issues (e.g. identity and human needs) tend to generate more strife and violence and become protracted. Intractable conflicts are not just longer-lasting conflicts, they are also more likely to be violent and destructive, and of course more difficult to deal with or manage.

The term 'intractable' is used to describe conflicts that sink into self-perpetuating violent interactions in which each party develops a vested interest in the continuation of the conflict (Bercovitch, Characteristics of Intractable Conflicts Section, para.1-2, 2003). Deep feelings of fear and hostility coupled with destructive behaviour make these conflicts very difficult to deal with, let alone resolve. However, this does not imply that such conflicts can never be managed. Intractable conflicts have features in common with other conflicts and as such, intractable conflicts can be managed and resolved (Coleman, 2011, pp. 533-534).

The consequences of intractable conflicts are huge, most of them negative, because intractable conflicts tend to be pursued in damaging and destructive ways. The violence that is very common in inter-group and international conflicts causes widespread loss of life and damage to property. This creates massive economic costs, which are supplemented by the costs of defence. But the social and psychological costs are huge too: the fear, the hatred, the anger, the guilt are difficult to deal with while the conflict is ongoing, and are equally difficult to remedy after the conflict has supposedly been resolved (Burgess and Burgess, What are Intractable Conflicts Section, para. 1-2, 2003). Beyond intractability as used in this paper meant getting beyond intractable conflicts, that is, getting over it by transforming it to something better, even if it cannot be resolved. Even though intractable conflicts may not be amenable to final, near-term resolution, they are not hopeless. The parties, with or without the help of intermediaries, can move beyond intractability to make their interactions less destructive and more constructive. Even when conflicts cannot be resolved, parties can learn to live together with less distrust overt hostility, and violence. They can learn to work with people on the other side, and come to understand the reason for their differences, even if those differences do not go away (Burgess and Burgess, Beyond Intractability Section, para. 2-4, 2003).

### **3. Ethnic Identity and Political Conflicts in Africa**

Conflicts in many African countries have often been presented as ethnic or tribal conflicts, as they were usually fought by contending ethnic groups or "tribes." The Rwandan genocide, for instance, was fought between the Hutus and Tutsis; the first and second civil wars in Sudan were fought between an Arab Muslim North and an African Christian/Animist South; the Darfur crisis presents itself as a fight between Arab militia, the '*Janjaweed*', and African tribes; and Somalia has been depicted as a conflict between different clans. Certainly, the ethnic and tribal identities are relevant in these conflicts, but they are only secondary factors. Ethnicity and tribalism are only the lines along which wars in Africa are fought. Using ethnic and tribal affiliation as the root causes of conflict is misleading, because it hides the real causes for war. In many cases, the political choices made by states lay the foundation for ethnic mobilisation. Ethnic conflicts often emerge in multi-ethnic, under-developed societies when the behaviour of the state is perceived as dominated by a particular group or community within it, when communities feel threatened with marginalization, or when no recourse for redressing grievances exists. Ethnic thinking and mobilisation generally emerge from the resulting inequitable access to power and resources and not from an intrinsic hatred.

The competition between ethnically based patronage networks for access to state resources and power was intensified by open electoral competition and through elections. Votes could be exchanged for political positions and expected redistribution of material benefits. Furthermore, the use of majority votes in Africa tends to enhance this trait. What's more is that the little variation in ideology or programme between political parties leaves little but their ethnic base for politicians to appeal to. From the early 1990s, the African post-colonial state witnessed diverse forms of intra-state violence ranging from Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In most of these conflicts, rebel groups and insurgency movements have not only challenged the legitimacy of the governing regimes at the center, but in cases such as Cote d'Ivoire and DR-Congo, issues of autochthony and who should belong to post-colony, with full citizenship rights have exacerbated local violence. The attendant fall-outs were massive human rights violations, displacement of civilian populations, rape, torture and the use of child soldiers (Abubakar, 2011, pp. 1-2). Past and ongoing crises in Africa like the Rwandan genocide, crisis in Darfur, civil war and religious conflicts in Nigeria, the quarrels between the whites and blacks in Zimbabwe, the Tutsi and Hutu in Rwanda, among others show evidence of the role that ethnicity plays as a trigger of conflict in many parts of Africa. In Rwanda, for example, power has always been ethnic centered. As a consequence, between 1959 and 1962, there was record of ethnic violence between Hutu and Tutsi. The Hutu-led political forces succeeded to abolishing the Tutsi monarchy in 1961, and the colonial administrator, in concert with Hutu politicians, led Rwanda to independence by July 1, 1962.

Hutu authorities used each attack as an excuse to strengthen their authority by massacring Tutsi civilians, causing a wave of Tutsi refugees into neighbouring nations. In 1990, the Tutsi exiled decided to come back home by force and this resulted in the 1994 genocide of Tutsi and unprecedented massacre of Hutus in retaliation by the newly Tutsi regime in Rwanda.

Nigeria was divided in 1947 into three political regions including the three main ethnic groups: the North with the Hausa-Fulani; the West with the Yoruba, and finally; the East with the Igbos, accounting for 30, 20 and 18 % of the population respectively. As the nation marched towards independence, the issue was reduced to the quest for ethnic dominance with minority groups rebelling and fighting for ethnic dominance. At this time, ethnic and sub-ethnic loyalties threatened the survival of both East and West, while the North was religiously divided between Christianity and Islam. It was a period of politicised ethnicity and competition for resources, which worsened the relationships between ethnic groups. There was a high degree of corruption, nepotism and tribalism. Military intervention culminated in the gruesome ethnic war from 1967 to 1970 involving the Hausa-Fulani and the Eastern Ibos (Biafrans), the Yoruba and the minorities of the oil producing states of the South. Since the end of the civil war, Nigeria has been witnessing recurring incidents of ethno-religious conflicts which continue to claim thousands of human casualties and at the same time, threatening the corporate existence of the country.

The Côte d'Ivoire conflict also arose as a result of a contested national identity and citizenship, uncontrolled cross border migrations, porous borders, struggles for scarce resources and politicised ethnicity. The concept of a 'pure' or 'mixed' identity assumes an essence of 'being' that can only be achieved through birth, which is highly unattainable in a country that has undergone decades of a locally settled colonial administration. Northern Muslims lost their Ivorian identity while people in the Christian south maintained their national identity. The north was also deprived of public services and public administration. Anti-foreigner rhetoric marked Ivorian politics in the 1990s and ultimately led to the renewal of ethnic violence.

#### ***4. Transforming Identity Conflicts in a Multi-Ethnic States into Peaceful Coexistence and Nation Building***

Conflict transformation does not suggest that we simply eliminate or control conflict, but rather that we recognise and work with its "dialectic nature" (Lederach, 1995, p.16) Social conflict is a natural occurrence between humans who are involved in relationships. Once conflict occurs, it changes or transforms those events, people, and relationships that created the initial conflict. Thus, the cause-and-effect relationship goes both ways -- from the people and the relationships to the conflict and back to the people and relationships. In this sense, "conflict transformation" is a term that describes the natural process of conflict. Conflict transformation is also a prescriptive concept. It suggests that the destructive consequences of a conflict can be modified or transformed so that self-images, relationships, and social structures improve as a result of conflict, instead of being harmed by it. Usually, this involves transforming perception of issues, actions, and other people or groups. Conflict usually transforms perceptions by accentuating the differences between people and positions. Effective conflict transformation can utilize this highlighting of differences in a constructive way, and can improve mutual understanding (Call, 2003, pp. 828-829).

How can we build a unified nation with many ethnicities peacefully coexisting? One of the steps is infrastructure development and economic growth. These tools have shown to be effective in fostering social harmony in places where poverty is a trigger of ethnic tensions. Also a strong state can transform ethnicity from a negative force into a positive one with democracy as a superstructure. But democracy in Africa has been manipulated by those who crave for power. This is why democracy means much more than elections, which can be taken over by dominant ethnic groups, but a government by the people, whereby citizens' rights, duties, and representation are honoured. It also means independent courts, strong civil society participation, robust institutions, rule of law, property rights, free press and especially tolerance and open space for minorities. The process to this ideal of governance is nation building which means the subordination of all competing ethnic interests and loyalties to the state provided that it give to all a sense of security and a national identity. In nations with long history of ethnic conflict, Democracy can be a solution to ethnic conflicts, but it must go beyond elections. It must be a true nation building tool with social, political and economic policies that promote social harmony. The mismanagement of the richness of ethnic diversity is often linked to the absence of visionary, civic-minded and nationalist leaders. This is particular the case of apartheid in South Africa. However, the first black South African President, Nelson Mandela and Frederik de Klerk, the 7th South African white President were able to walk through the painful legacy of apartheid and chose the path of peace and democracy.

Leaders such as Nelson Mandela (South Africa), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana) and Julius Nyerere (Tanzania) have shown the path forward in their own nations and it is up to each generation to take their achievements to the next level.

State institutions and structures that reflect ethnic diversity and respect for minority rights, power-sharing, and checks and balances reduce the perception of injustice and insecurity that facilitates ethnic mobilisation. In societies where justice cannot be obtained through public institutions, groups are more likely to resort to violence for resolving their grievances. A just society is more than the legal system, however. A genuine separation of powers and the rule of law are needed to prevent abuses of state power. Such measures prevent state functionaries from using their powers to benefit their ethnic groups to the detriment of other groups. Electoral systems and elections constitute another area of policy focus. Elections, on their own, do not necessarily lay the foundation for stability. On the contrary, they can be a source of ethnic tensions and violence. The practice of winner-takes-all electoral outcomes in a multi-ethnic and under-developed state where the government controls the bulk of resources makes winning an election a life and death issue. Accordingly, it is important that electoral systems are independent of political control. One of the differences between Kenya's and Ghana's recent elections was the independence and resilience of the Ghanaian Electoral Commission. Furthermore, once the Electoral Commission in Ghana has validated electoral results, private groups have the right to challenge irregularities in the courts. These multiple levels of accountability gave Ghanaians confidence in their electoral system despite very close 2008 and 2012 elections.

Furthermore, at the core of ethnic conflicts is the relationship between ethnic groups and the state in the search for security, identity, and recognition. How the state negotiates these interests and needs will determine the level of identity conflicts. A comprehensive legal system that protects minorities from the abuse of state power, respects their rights, and ensures that their grievances are taken seriously will reduce opportunities for ethnic mobilisation. Among others, this requires equitable access to civil service jobs and the various services the state provides. A significant aspect among these services is minority participation within the leadership and ranks of the security sector. The security sector can be a unifying institution, building bonds between ethnic groups by helping to forge a national identity for all ethnicities, and allowing minorities to advance to positions of leadership through merit. Diversity in the security sector also has tangible benefits as ethnically representative police forces are linked with lower levels of conflict in diverse societies (Sambanis, 2003, pp. 12-13). Complementing efforts to shift cultural and political norms surrounding identity, sanctions need to be created and applied to those actors who continue to attempt to exploit ethnic differences toward divisive ends. Two groups are critical here: the media and politicians. Penalties would take the form of a national law criminalizing the incitement of ethnic differences by political actors and public officials.

## **5. Conclusion**

Many debates about conflict resolution are based on the role of identity in conflicts. Identity does play a role in conflict situations, but identity tensions are usually the symptom of a deeper cause for concern. The colonial state in Africa set the blueprint for identity divisions in Africa that have been exacerbated by the politics of reward in the post-colonial period. The paper has argued that political conflicts in Africa and in many other parts of the world might have emerged due to the imposition of the nation state on pre-colonial structures that led to initial identity tensions. However, analysis of contemporary conflicts, especially, in the post-cold war order has pointed to more complex reasons like distribution of resources, allocation of wealth and power within political systems and the dynamism of globalization. Transforming intractable conflicts into peaceful coexistence and nation building therefore has to move beyond identity politics towards a system based on citizenship and equality for all. A holistic framework that takes cognisance of the legacy of colonialism, the post-independence crisis of governance, the dynamism of globalisation, and its attendant effects on the African economies should be adopted.

The character of identity-based conflicts calls for greater attention to the economic and political causes of identity construction and mobilisation, as well as to the crises that engender and exacerbate conflicts. These conflicts are ultimately related to the nature and role of the state in post-colonial Africa. In other words, their root causes could be located in the economic sphere and in governance. The external environment is also a major factor to take cognisance of, as the interests of major powers motivate them to enter into alliances with leaders who may use military assistance and political support from their patrons for aggressive purposes against their neighbours.

Concluding, given the weak economic structures and fragile politics that are highly susceptible to ethnic manipulations, the major lesson of ethnic identity politics and conflicts is to avoid exclusionary policies and practices that would raise the specter of ethnic violence. Innovative ways of power sharing and equitable and fair distribution of state resources for all social forces are categorical imperative for peace and security in Africa.

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