The political manipulation of ethnicity in Africa

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The new civil war in Côte d'Ivoire, more than just a rebellion by demobilized soldiers, is the latest manifestation of politicized inter-ethnic rivalries that are present throughout the African continent south of the Sahara. Indeed, ethnic mobilization has been the main source of conflict in sub-Saharan Africa since independence (from 1957 onwards) and one of the major barriers to human and economic development in African societies. This essay seeks to explain why and how the ethnic dimension of society in Africa has been so prominent and so conflictive. The generalisations that are put forward about "Africa" are of course to be handled with care, as they cannot hope to take account of the wide variety of particular contexts and individual situations in such a large continent and over a long time period: the ambition here is only to provide a general model for understanding the core mechanisms at play. The key idea is that what often seems a bewildering primordial and uncontrollable source of instability, "tribalism", is in fact more a political contest, led and managed by elites, for influence in the state and control of its resources – "who gets what, when, how," as Harold Lasswell puts it. This instrumental use of ethnicity dominates political contestation at the expense of other cleavages, and it undermines efforts at nation-building; since it is largely an artificial construct, this "tribalism" may be reduced through responsible conduct by elites.

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Competition for control of the state has been dominated by issues of ethnicity at the expense of class cleavages and other issues.

In Africa, the main criterion according to which socio-political groups define and identify themselves is rooted in ethnicity rather than in class. It is through ethnic identification that competition for influence in the state and in the allocation of resources takes place, instead of it being a contest between the "haves" and the "have nots" as in most Western societies. While ethnic tension usually results from the perception of inequitable access to resources among groups and the fear of marginalisation from power (as demonstrated in Nigeria, for example, by the mutual distrust between the Igbo and other groups that led to the 1967-70 Biafran civil war and by the sectarian clashes between Hausas and Tivs in Nasawara state in 2001), in reality disparities in access to resources and policy influence are generally far more pronounced within ethnic communities than across them. The "big men" of every group lead a lifestyle very far removed from the vast majority of their followers, whose support for their community leaders is conditional on favours and special advantages bestowed on them through client-patron relationships.

This system is replicated at every level, forming a dense trickle-down network of patronage sustained by channelling the state's revenues to one's own group through pork barrelling, rent-seeking and corruption. When access to resources and power is not monopolised by one dominant group but shared out equitably between competing ethnic groups, as epitomised by the ethnic balancing acts of presidents Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya (1963-78) and Félix Houphouët-Boigny in Côte d'Ivoire (1960-93), the system is politically stable and socially cohesive within the self-identifying ethnic communities, though economically inefficient and ultimately unsustainable. Donald Rothchild identifies such relationships between state and ethnic groups as situations of "hegemonial exchange". He argues that "as an ideal type, hegemonial exchange is a form of state-facilitated co-ordination in which a somewhat autonomous central state and a number of considerably less autonomous ethnoregional (and other) interests engage in a process of mutual accommodation on the basis of commonly accepted procedural norms, rules, or understandings."

Unfortunately, all too often the temptation not to abide by the unwritten rules is too strong: sectarian leaders use numerical or strategic advantages to favour their own support base, upsetting the delicate balance and fomenting conflict. This has been particularly tempting in cases where full-blown racial differences have been evident, such as with Idi Amin's expulsion of the wealthy Asian merchant class from Uganda in 1972 or Robert Mugabe's expropriation of white farmers' land in Zimbabwe in 2001-02. In other cases, such as in Côte d'Ivoire from 1994 or in Zambia in 1995, the concept of nationality has been manipulated to exclude a proportion of the citizens (and in particular popular leaders such as Alassane Ouattara and Kenneth Kaunda) from a share in decision-making. In yet more cases, such as throughout Daniel arap Moi's rule in Kenya (1978-2003), or Mobutu Sese Seko's reign in Zaire (1965-97), ethnic groups have deliberately been played against each other to prevent the emergence of a broad, unified opposition movement likely to challenge for overall power. In states where certain ethnic groupings are powerful, even dominant, national stability has been extremely precarious. The political power of the Baganda in Uganda has traditionally far exceeded that of any other ethnic grouping, and was reflected in the special status of the Baganda in the post-independence constitutional settlement. This created resentment among other groups, and three consecutive leaders, Milton Obote, Idi Amin and Tito Okello, none of them Baganda, sought to minimise the influence of the dominant "tribe", resulting in decades of repression and civil war.

It is not the case that all elites are unprincipled profiteers who purposefully exploit ethnic appeals for personal advantage and with total disregard for the wider consequences. It is enough that some are: as Sam Nolutshungu writes, "once one party opts for 'tribalism' or ethnic chauvinism, it becomes rational for any would-be rival to define and consolidate an ethnic base." Parties, and indeed whole ethnic groups, are faced with a Prisoner's Dilemma, in which, "whilst the outcome may be catastrophic for all concerned, no party can abstain from using ethnic strategies for fear of losing out to the ethnic mobilisation of an opponent." As such, issues and interests are either couched in ethnic terms or end up marginalised from the political scene.

The instrumental use of ethnic ties – "political tribalism" in John Lonsdale's language – is successful because it goes hand in hand with a strong cultural identification with the ethnic group on the part of followers – "moral ethnicity". Citizens have a deep-seated allegiance to traditional and cultural leaders – the "tribal" chiefs – who, often as a result, are also the political, social and economic elites. This link works both ways: political, social and economic leaders, conscious of the appeal of cultural ties, often portray themselves as "tribal" chiefs even when their claims are dubious, or seek the symbolic support of cultural leaders: Mangosuthu Buthelezi of the Inhkata Freedom Party in South Africa exemplifies both these trends, dressing in ostentatious chieftaincy robes to promote his chieftaincy and wheeling out the Zulu king at political rallies.

This politicization of ethnicity is parasitic on class mobilisation. According to Sam Nolutshungu, it involves the "necessary displacement of class politics." Leroy Vail remarks that ordinary Africans are prey to a "false consciousness" due to elites' "instrumental mobilisation" of the population along ethnic lines. One might wonder if it is ever possible for individuals' consciousness of ethnic belonging to be subjectively "false"; what is certain is that, objectively, it runs against what is in their material interest, which is to undermine prebendal and clientelist politics and demand transparency, the rule of law and the delivery of efficient government services. Ordinary Africans continue to favour ethnic appeals instead of focusing on class or other interests. Tom Mboya, trade union leader and first Minister of Labour in Kenya, argued that "no class problems exist today [the 1960s] amongst Africans." This was not meant to imply that Africa was a continent of societies with no status differentiation, which was and remains obviously false, but that it was not considered a salient issue. Only in heavily industrialised or urbanised states and regions, such as in South Africa or in the Zambian copper belt, is class-based political mobilisation a significant factor.

A good example of the artificial use of ethnicity to simplify and amplify political issues revolving around status and resources is the Rwandan genocide of 1994. It was portrayed, even within Rwanda, as an act of vengeance by the Hutu "tribe" on the Tutsi "tribe" for previous domination and repression: this was a simple and, sadly, highly appealing framework for fostering violence. But such a reading of the massacre is grossly misleading. In fact, Hutus and Tutsis share their language and their culture, and by and large have the same genetic origins. What

differentiates a Hutu from a Tutsi above all is his lower social status. As René Lemarchand explains, "a Tutsi cast in the role of client vis-à-vis a wealthier patron would be referred to as 'Hutu', even though his cultural identity remained Tutsi." During the Rwandan massacre, ethnicity was used as a vehicle for creating a "minimum winning coalition" (though not in the usual democratic sense of the phrase) around issues of status and class. Large numbers of moderate and materially comfortable Hutus were also killed alongside the Tutsis: they were not quite "Hutu" enough, which is to say that their social status was too high.

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The instrumental use of ethnicity has undermined the emergence of cohesive national identities.

As a result of the largely arbitrary colonial partition of Africa, in most independence-era African states ethnic identities have not been contiguous with national borders. For example, Nigeria contains over 250 ethnic groups, of which three, the Igbo, the Yoruba and the Hausa-Fulani, are usually regarded as the major "tribes". Strong ethnic allegiances dilute national identification, a matter not helped by the relative youth of most states.

The resulting lack of inherent legitimacy of the state has been a problem for generations of African leaders. A nation-state has fewer social cleavages, which, all other things equal, entails greater stability. The "nation", with its attendant attributes of (relative, sometimes imagined) homogeneity, unity and solidarity, is a source of great strength to the state. As a result nation-building has been identified by many post-independence African leaders as an important dimension in their development strategies. But the cohesive nation buttressed by a shared consciousness among its citizens, which Benedict Anderson defines as an "imagined community", has in general proved to be an elusive dream for those post-independence African leaders who have aspired to that ideal.

It might seem surprising that national identification has been such a weak current, and that ethnic rivalries have so dominated post-independence Africa, given that African independence movements, whether in the first wave in the 1950s or later, were largely based on nationalist appeals. On closer analysis, however, African nationalism can in most cases be shown to have been hollow. Indeed, the parallels between pre-independence nationalism and post-independence ethnic mobilization are very strong, as both have made instrumental appeals to identity, ideology and culture which, below the surface, hide issues of access to resources and power. Recent religious tensions between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria (such as during the Miss World contest in 2003) are a further expression of this same phenomenon.

The emergence of African nationalism during the colonial era was, in most cases, the product of the small African middle classes which the colonisers had created in order to help with the administration of the colonies. Socialised in a European context (educated, clerical or professional, urban, Christian…), these men found that they could not break through the glass ceiling of racial prejudice. Franz Fanon suggests that the middle class nationalist's dream was to "set himself up in the settler's place." A more charitable interpretation of middle-class nationalist motivation in the lead-up to independence is that, whereas it was perceived that Europeans were interested in exploiting rather than developing Africa and did not understand African ways, they, as Africans themselves, were more able and more willing to develop their state's potential and that of its people. Perhaps both interpretations contain a germ of truth.

In most cases, colonial administrations toppled fairly easily in the late 1950s and the 1960s in the face of increasing international and domestic pressure, both moral and economic, to dismantle empires. There was no need, therefore, for a mass nationalist movement to have coherent aims and be well organized prior to decolonization: it was enough to clamour the catch-phrase "Africa for the Africans." Nationalism was as good an excuse as any to fan the flames of protest and lay a claim to resources.

The real challenge for nationalism came at the onset of independence. Once the removal of the colonial masters had been achieved, the nationalist movement lost much of its appeal. Leroy Vail remarks that "African nationalist movements, ideologically shaped by the basically

negative sentiments of anti-colonialism and with little substantive philosophical content relevant to the day-to-day life of ordinary Africans living in post-colonial states, were simply unable to provide them with compelling intellectual, social, and political visions." Competition for resources was no longer with the white man: now it was with other Africans, and in this context ethnic appeals became tempting. Nationalist leaders such as Julius Nyerere in Tanzania or Léopold Senghor in Senegal attempted to keep the nationalist flame alive, but it became increasingly irrelevant. A state without a co-extensive nation must, in order to retain its legitimacy and foster a sense of belonging, produce tangible rewards for the citizen. But the huge social, economic and environmental challenges faced by African governments past and present have not favoured the distribution of sufficient rewards for the citizen. All too often, in competing for the allocation of scarce resources, regional – and national – leaders have therefore resorted to exclusionary ethnic appeals.

Ethnic mobilization, then, has been a political instrument of the African elites in the post-independence period in much the same way that the phenomenon of nationalism was in the decolonization years. As a result, the emergence of cohesive national identities which are essential for the implementation of cooperative development strategies has been stymied. Samora Machel, Mozambique's President between 1975 and 1986, highlighted the tensions between the different tiers of ethno-territorial allegiances in stark terms: "for the nation to live, the tribe must die." For Mahmood Mamdani, interactions between the state and the "tribes" are the key to understanding the political volatility that has plagued African politics since independence. The process of nation-building has been fraught by the artificiality of the parameters of nationality and by the failure of African governments to produce the tangible rewards required to induce African societies to accept the legitimacy of the state. Ethnicity has played a destructive role in both of these ways: it has laid competing and more intuitively appealing claims to Africans' allegiance, as compared to nationality, and the political instability it has fostered has been one of the biggest hindrances to the achievement of the potential benefits of a strong state, such as security and economic or social development.

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Today's bounded and mutually antagonistic ethnic groups are largely the creation of elites and colonial masters.

As John Lonsdale's distinction between "political tribalism" and "moral ethnicity" reveals, ethnic mobilisation is not only an instrument for the control and distribution of the state's resources; it is successful because it carries a powerful emotive appeal. Differentiation through ethnicity has always existed in Africa and humans have a universal propensity to form collective identities, to distinguish outsiders from insiders, along ethnic lines. For example, some African ethnic groups in equatorial Africa willingly cooperated with the pre-colonial slave trade, capturing individuals deemed to belong to other ethnic groups and exchanging them for goods. There were, moreover, some notable pre-colonial kingdoms and nations, such as the Kongo, Zulu or Baganda, whose members had a strong collective consciousness.

Nevertheless, as has been confirmed by countless studies, in much of pre-colonial Africa ethnic identity was fluid and ill-defined, and the largest collective unit conceived of by most Africans was rather parochial, for instance at the level of the lineage group or clan. Aidan Southall notes that pre-colonial African societies were characterised by "interlocking, overlapping, multiple identities" based on ethnic, cultural and geographical communities that were smaller than any "tribe". In most cases Africans had only a very weak allegiance, if at all, to what might now be classed as a "tribe" according to objective criteria of genetic, linguistic or cultural homogeneity within a geographical region. These objective criteria, in any case, were rarely clearly demarcated, as much of the African continent was marked by a gradual change in customs and ways of life from one village or community to the next, depending on local geographic, agricultural and climatic conditions. Indeed, the process of consolidation of dialects into a single tribal vernacular was often not begun until the arrival of Christian missionaries intent on spreading the (printed) Word. Jean-Loup Amselle goes so far as to claim that "there was nothing that resembled a bounded ethnic group during the pre-colonial period."

Far from being primordial units with defined boundaries, ethnic groups are largely a colonial legacy, which emerged as instruments for the control and distribution of people and resources. European colonists encouraged the assimilation of Africans into groups, via the creation of administrative units which were subsequently labelled in ethnic terms, as occurred in British-run Uganda, and the compulsory classification of local people according to "tribe", as occurred in Belgian-run Rwanda. In British-run Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), an astonishing catalogue of stereotypes was drawn up: the Ngoni were "strong" and "warlike", the Lamba were "lazy and indolent", and so on for the 70-odd "tribes".

Whereas pre-colonial African societies had tended to operate on the basis of limited horizons which did not require a large degree of social organisation, the efficient administration of vast swathes of colonised territory by an external coercive power required categorisation and order, rigid boundaries and parameters. As Mahmood Mamdani comments, the scarcity of colonists in most parts of Africa (though not southern Africa, or, to a lesser extent, parts of East Africa) demanded the creation of a system of "indirect rule". Colonial administrators, too stretched to sort out matters at the village level, wanted to be able to negotiate with a few "big men", the supposed traditional chiefs. These chiefs were to be responsible for the execution of colonial policy in their allocated region. Where existing ethnic communities were fragmented (i.e. in most places), these communities were amalgamated or assigned to other groups, and a single chief was chosen to represent them all. Ethnic groups such as the Yoruba in Nigeria (containing at least 12 important sub-groups within the collective "tribe"), Akan in Ghana or Xhosa in South Africa were largely artificial amalgams of linguistically similar cultural groups. Cultural symbols and ancient customs were identified, and where necessary created, to give ballast to the idea of a unitary and timeless "tribe". It was, to use Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm's idea, the "invention of tradition".

Africans themselves participated in this creation of "tribes" because not to do so would exclude or marginalise them from the bargaining process for state-allocated resources. Ethnicity was promoted and defined "in the pursuit of material advantage", to use Crawford Young's description. Robert Bates argues that communities amalgamated not because of an emerging common ethnic consciousness but to profit from the comparative advantages of size: the larger the "tribe", the more influence it could wield in negotiations with the colonial administration. Ethnic elites in particular, as the state's agents in the distribution of the resources allocated to their "tribe", had a great deal to gain from larger ethno-regional groups, and as opinion-leaders they were able to influence the acceptance of a tribal consciousness among ordinary Africans. An excellent example of this process was the creation of a Tiv "paramount chief" in central Nigeria to represent central Nigerian interests in the face of an increasingly hegemonic tripartite structure, North (Hausa-Fulani), South-East (Igbo) and South-West (Yoruba). Conversely, the colonial administrators and, in those parts of Africa in which Europeans settled, neo-colonial white minority governments, manipulated ethnic rivalries as a form of "divide and rule". Long after the end of colonial domination elsewhere, apartheid South Africa deliberately fomented sectarianism, both within its own borders (encouraging Zulu differentiation from the main black consciousness movement) and among its neighbours (in Angola for example), in order to prevent the growth of African nationalist sentiment. Both coloniser and colonised participated in defining and encouraging the emergence of bounded and mutually antagonistic ethnic identities. J. Iliffe summarises the situation as one in which "Europeans believed Africans belonged to tribes; Africans built tribes to belong to."

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Ethnic mobilization may be reduced through responsible conduct by elites.

Far from being primordial and a largely uncontrollable source of instability, then, modern ethnic sectarianism is political and, to a large degree, artificial. By encouraging a clientelist attitude towards the state, whose resources are perceived as a pie from which each group must try to carve out as large a slice as possible, and by hampering any efforts at cooperative nation-building, the politicization of ethnicity is also one of the major barriers to human and economic development in African societies. Devising methods to discourage the political calculations that lie at the root of ethnic appeals has exercised nationalist African leaders since independence. President Milton Obote of Uganda (1962-71, 80-85) complained that Ugandan politicians always seemed to be playing some curious game of "Tribal Development Monopoly".

All over Africa – and the case of Milton Obote is a particularly clear example of this – the need to pursue nationalism at the expense of this much decried "tribalism" has been expressed through authoritarianism and the one-party state, parties being perceived as essentially ethnic associations. It also happened to be the case that the dangers of ethnic mobilisation were a good excuse for the elimination of political rivals. In an era in which democratisation and participation have become key conditions of bilateral and multilateral aid, the same logic has been applied in more subtle forms. The current President of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni (1986-), has pioneered what he calls "no-party democracy" in response to the ethnic partisanship of existing political parties. In addition, in an effort to reduce citizens' identification of their interests with existing ethnic groupings, he has dismantled the old, "tribal" administrative regions and replaced them with a larger number of smaller, town-based districts. In Nigeria, similarly, opposition political parties are allowed but only if they are not associated with any ethnic claims.

More so than any institutional engineering or forcible repression, however, the responsibility for the successful elimination of ethnic manipulation rests with African elites. So long as resources are scarce, there will be tensions between groups competing for a share of them. However, these tensions need not be expressed in ethnic terms, as they overwhelmingly have been in the past, nor do they have to spill over into violence, as has occurred with depressing regularity. Although competing political leaders have repeatedly expressed their commitment to peaceful negotiation and democratic processes of decision-making, when things have not gone their way they have tended to resort to exploiting sectarian sentiment, or have felt obliged to respond to pressure from their client networks and ethnic base for a more favourable distribution by abandoning cooperative strategies at the national level. Current Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo's use of rioting youths in Abidjan to express disagreement with an attempted compromise solution imposed by France, the former colonial power, at the Paris summit in January 2003 is a typical example of the instrumental use of ethnicity that has blighted African development efforts.

While it is difficult to persuade political leaders to eschew strategies of ethnic manipulation, there is reason to hope that it is possible for new generations of African leaders to adopt successful political strategies that avoid turning issues of status, power and access to resources into issues of ethnicity. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela purposefully avoided resorting to ethnic appeal, neither in terms of the black-white dichotomy despite the obvious injustices of the apartheid system, nor within the black majority despite the repeated provocations of the Inkhata Freedom Party. From the start of his political career, when he symbolically abandoned his royal Xhosa roots, he promoted his vision of a unified "rainbow nation". History rewarded him with 27 years in prison and a Nobel peace prize.

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Real ethnic tensions exist independently of political leaders. African elites do not create mutual distrust between competing communities but merely harness it. By doing so, however, they perpetuate these tensions and make them worse. Colonial administrators encouraged artificial groupings and divisions between communities in order better to rule over them. Both before and after independence, African elites have contributed to the continuation of this system by encouraging perceptions of national politics as a zero-sum game, and by presenting issues of influence and distribution under an ethnic slant. Manipulating ethnicity for political gain is a dangerous game, however. In its half-century of independence, sub-Saharan Africa has been scarred by multiple internecine conflicts, many of which could have been wholly avoidable. Partly as a result of this, Africa begins the 21st century prey to a crisis of confidence and marginalised from the international scene and the world economy. Promoting an understanding of the roots of ethnic conflict may perhaps contribute, in a small, indirect way, to the human and economic development of the continent.

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