

The Ethnic Problem In Africa

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most sensitive areas of social life in Africa is the problem of cultural pluralism, which usually rears its ugly face in inter-ethnic relations. This paper is motivated by the apparent intractability of the problem. With a mean of 53.63 ethnic grouping per nation in the continent, ethnic problem becomes readily identifiable, apparent and real.

Specifically, it is the aim of this paper to discover and discuss the manifestations and dimensions of the ethnic problem. Before doing this, however, a definition of the concept 'ethnic group' is in order. According to Narrol (1964) the concept ethnic group is generally understood in anthropological literature to designate a population which:

1. Is largely biologically self-perpetuating;
2. Shares fundamental cultural values, realized in overt unity in cultural forms;
3. Makes up a field of communication and interaction
4. Has a membership, which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order.

This definition looks sufficiently explanatory and comprehensive enough for our purpose in this paper. In short, ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries. According to Nnoli (1980) the relevant communal factor may be language culture or both. In Africa, language, has clearly been the most crucial variable. As social formations, however ethnic groups are not necessarily homogeneous entities even linguistically and culturally. Some minor linguistic and cultural differences often exist within the group. Young (1993) conclusively stated that the defining attributes of ethnic commonality usually include language, territory, political unit, or common cultural values or symbols.

The study of ethnic problem remains a fascinating one if only because it often reveals the nature and the dimensions of certain social processes, such as conflict and competition.

Berghe (1970) however argued that if a study is to make an important contribution to the discipline of anthropology as a whole, then it must meet the following conditions. These are:

1. Ethnic relations must be studied historically, that is, as part of the development process of a given nation. It should be axiomatic that one cannot understand the present if one does not know the past.
2. Ethnic relations must be studied holistically, that is, in the context of the total nation in which they take place; they can be understood only in the larger framework of political, social and economic institutions.
3. We must approach the subject from a comparative, cross-cultural perspective. This is a necessity if we want to generalize. Every situation is a mixture of unique and repeated elements, and one of the first tasks in trying to discover regularities is to establish what the range of both cross-cultural and intra-cultural variability is in the phenomena one is trying to account for.
4. We must resolve the problem of "objectivity" and "value-freedom"; scholars and researchers alike must refrain from making value-laden generalizations on the ethnic problem.

The above propositions seem to be in order as Nnoli (1980) has suggested. He argued that the analysis of the ethnic problem couldn't be fruitful unless it is based on a method which is objective, comprehensive, historical, concrete and which defines the most essential connections. According to him, an abstract presentation of the question is bound to be sterile. It must be investigated within some definite historical limits, focussed on a particular country, and related to differences between that country and others in the same historical epoch. These lines of reasoning are quite logical and will therefore be adopted in this study.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

A pertinent question that could be asked is, why is the study of ethnic problem of interest to Anthropologists? The answer is quite immediate.

International conflicts and civil wars are not simply products of failed diplomacy or policies of aggression. Virtually all have roots in endemic cultural features of nations. Patterns of languages, religious beliefs and legal institutions form as much a part of the environment enveloping nations. So also do collective perceptions of historical events and group stereotypes of other peoples. It is within this overreaching context of ideas and values that governmental goals are set and policies established, sometimes with disastrous consequences. The overall quest of anthropologists is to comprehend the nature of man's social relations in the society as it varies from place to place. Because the field of Anthropology is so broad, individual scholars concentrate upon limited aspects of social relations at one time and this thus explains the exclusive focus on the ethnic problem for now.

What then are the pedagogic necessities of studying the ethnic problem? The justification for this, according to Nnoli (1980) lies in the fact that the adverse effects on the revolutionary process must be counteracted. This cannot be done without a thorough scientific analysis of the phenomenon itself. Unless reality is fully understood it cannot be transformed in a way that is desirable. Coupled with this are the demands of the advancement of knowledge. An understanding of the dynamics of the ethnic problem inevitably advances the knowledge of social relations which are necessary for social transformation not only in the area of ethnic relations, but in the field of Anthropology in general. This is the duty of all social sciences, to create a better world.

Nnoli (1980) argued that we could not fully comprehend the ethnic problem in Africa without an adequate understanding of its historical origin. This is because different African countries display different historical patterns depending on their size, location, the strength and cohesion of their ruling classes, the courage, determination and leadership of the underprivileged, the degree of foreign influence, the pervasiveness and power of the dominant ideology, social custom and tradition, culture, kinship system and form of government. Therefore, the ethnic problem in Africa can best be studied through the historical analysis of concrete cases of particular African countries.

FOCUS ON AFRICA

Africa, is the second largest continent in the world, and one of the three in the old world, the others being Asia and Europe. It has an area of about 30,250,000 sq. km. It stretches from the Mediterranean in the North to the South Atlantic in the Southern end. In population, the continent is said to have taken the fourth place. With an estimated population of 500 million, which is about 10 per cent of the estimated global population. Many authorities believe that the continent may have been the first to be inhabited by human beings. At least the fossils discovered in the Eastern part of the continent show that man-like creatures lived there three million years ago. Coincidentally, this continent had one of the earliest civilizations - the great culture of ancient Egypt. At later periods, several civilizations developed within the continent.

The North African region is "African" only by convention as more than eighty percent of the total populace are Arabs. Its population differs markedly in culture and race from Africans living south of the Sahara Desert. North Africans exhibit homogeneity in language and religion that contrasts notably with intricate diversity of the rest of the continent.

Each of the more than forty nations of Sub-Saharan Africa incorporates a multitude of regionally significant groups most bearing grievances against some or all of their neighbors. Virtually all politically binding forces of the present states are legacies of colonialism. These include common languages, infrastructures, and governmental institutions. Due to the inherent diversity of the states, few can yet claim to have forged unified nations as the problem of integration stares them in the face endlessly.

In the African continent, the last two decades have been tales of woes, anguish, sorrows, deprivations, sadness in most of the member states. Natural disasters like drought, soil erosion brought famine, crushing hunger to many families in the continent. This is complemented by unnecessary civil wars which were usually fall outs from ethnic hostilities, fought in many nations of the continent such as Nigeria, Sudan, Somalia, Angola, Liberia and Sierra Leone, and even many nations of the great lakes region of the central Africa were in a turmoil.

Political instability, economic and social

disequilibrium became rampant in countries like Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda and the two Congo's. Africa is now the continent of refugees and destitutes. The continent is the most impoverished part of the world. We score the highest percentages in all the indices of underdevelopment when compared with other regions of the world.

ORIGIN OF THE ETHNIC PROBLEM

The following quotes from Robin Wright (1994) gives a clear picture of the origin of the ethnic problem:

"To a large extent, history is catching up with us. Most ethnic conflicts have a background of domination, injustice or oppression by one ethnic group or another".

"In our case in the Sudan, it goes back to centuries of the slave trade. The northern Sudanese were the slave traders selling people from the south".

"Yet the proliferation of hatreds is simply history's legacy to the Post-Modern Era, a cruel trick that has made old differences seemingly emerge out of thin air after disappearing for decades. History provides only the context".

"Ethnicity is not enduring and unstinting; it's shaped and given form. And what we take to be historic and ancient is often modern and recent".

"The passions have instead been produced by a confluence of diverse factors ranging from modernization and migration to democratization and limited resources, according to specialists. They flourish on fear and uncertainty".

"On the eve of the 21st Century, fewer than 10% of the world's 191 nations are still ethnically or racially homogenous".

"The sheer magnitude of migrations in an ever more crowded world makes clashes and conflict virtually unavoidable".

"President Samuel K. Doe's heavy-handedness against all Liberian tribes except his own Krahn people and President Mohamed Said Barre's manipulation of Somalia's diverse clans sparked two of Africa's nastiest civil wars. Both nations have since exploded".

"The tremendous psychological pressure on human populations from political change creates a sense of anxiety that frequently makes people seek refuge in belief systems that involve definitions of membership and belonging".

"In Sudan, Garang charged that civil war

erupted largely because Hassan Turabi, the power behind Khartoum's government, wanted to impose Sharia, or Islamic law throughout Sudan".

"Contemporary leaders use the accumulated historical animosity for their own political and economic gains. Turabi uses it to promote his Islamic agenda, which we consider a threat to our way of life and a violation of our human rights. And when those conditions reach a level of intolerance, the people go to war".

"Transitions to democracy, for example can create uncertainty that fuels ethnic and religious passions, and eventually rivalries. The problem is not democracy *per se*, but the turbulent transition to democracy".

"In South Africa, much of the black-on-black violence, now bloodier than black-white clashes during decades of apartheid, is a product of changing times..Zulus particularly have been reluctant to surrender their legendary identity, and the tacit power that went with it, in a new multiracial state"

"The most visible case is the explosion of political Islam in places like Algeria and Egypt. But as Islamists redefine identities and agenda, Algeria's ethnic Berbers and Egypt's Coptic Christians sense new threats- and are acting accordingly"

"The final factor relates to resources and economics. At the simplest level, the struggle to survive can spawn or deepen ethnic problem. The more limited the resources the greater the danger of ethnic problem".

"For a range of reasons not necessarily bad or intentionally divisive, ethnic groups are also often positioned differently in an economy. Again, change can accentuate differences, triggering hostility or drastic action".

The legacy of Colonialism. The problems of most colonial nations of Africa are direct products of their colonial experience. The problems had been created by colonialism in different ways, especially by the indiscriminate merger of various ethnic groups to become monolithic entities, and at the same time treated the units as separate entities and allowed each to develop in whatever direction it chose in isolation from others (Nnoli, 1980. Dare 1986 and Young, 1993). This was the trend in virtually all the Anglophone countries of the sub-Saharan Africa and some Francophone countries too.

Colonialism also created structural im-

balances within the colonies in terms of socio-economic projects, social development and establishment of administrative centres. This imbalance deepened antipathies between ethnic groups. In Nigeria, the South achieved a higher level of social development than the North. Similarly, the Baganda advanced farther than the other Uganda ethnic groups, the Chagga and Haya were ahead of the other Tanzanian groups, the Kikuyu, Ashanti and Bemba made more rapid "progress" than the other Kenyan, Ghanaian and Zambian ethnic groups respectively. In fact, inter-ethnic relations in Kenya have been characterized by the hostility of all the other groups to the Kikuyu.

Colonialism added fuel to the burning fire of ethnic sentiments through the policy of 'divide and rule'. This was a mechanism or device to maintain domination over the colonies and used to douse the fire of African nationalism. Even in the post-colonial period ethnicity has continued to serve the interests of imperialism: Rivalries had developed in the colonial period that could not be forgotten. Invariably, colonial policies instead of reducing ethnic problem promoted it.

In Nigeria, colonialism created the problem of regional imbalance, leading to the North-South dichotomy, the evolution of political parties and voting along regional lines which eventually worked seriously against efforts aimed at national integration. It had been argued in academic discourse that Britain intentionally created this lopsidedness in regional size and social development to serve its imperial interests.

Apart from Colonialism, the multiple barriers of language, values, customs, culture and expectation and so on limit mutual understanding in most of the multi-ethnic nations of Africa. This was the true picture in virtually all the sub-Saharan African nations.

MANIFESTATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE ETHNIC PROBLEM

The manifestations and the consequences of the ethnic problem can be discussed under the following sub-headings:

1. Emergent culture of violence and civil wars
2. Attempts at secession
3. The problem of refugees and Genocide and mass killings
4. Retarded developmental efforts and stagnated economic growth

5. The problems of political instability
6. Emergence of 'ethnic ideology', its internalization and impact on national integration.

Today, many nations of the sub-Saharan Africa are in one turmoil, violence or civil disorder of one kind or the other largely originating from the ethnic problem. Such countries include Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Angola, Chad and the Democratic Republic of Congo. According to Iro (1994) African civil wars have resulted in the death of 8-10 million people, a number equal to or higher than the number of Africans exported in the slave trade. The civil war deaths represent a total loss of human life, while the slave trade left living people of African descent in the diaspora. Some others have experienced attempts at secession in the past. Such countries include - Belgian Congo 1960, Uganda 1966, Nigeria 1967, Djibouti 1991, Senegal 1991 and Zambia. Such secessionist pressures reflect the inability of virtually all sub-Saharan African regimes to secure for themselves a sense of legitimacy by all people within their states.

There is also the refugee problem and genocide, which is largely a direct, fall out from ethnic hostilities. Today, the African continent is a continent of refugees and mass killings. All told, there are at least more than one million refugees in Africa. That of Rwanda and Burundi is quite alarming. In the 1994 genocide, over 100,000 were massacred in two weeks. This is unprecedented in the post-war period. According to 1996 estimates, Democratic Republic of Congo accommodates 250,000 Angolans, 25,000 Rwandans, and 40,000 Sudanese. Burundi received 78,000 Rwandans and 45,000 Sudanese. Ethnic hostilities in Burundi in 1972 resulted in the deaths of 200,000 to 300,000; half a million fled as refugees. The 1990 invasion in Rwanda resulted in over 700,000 persons being displaced.

Regionally, there are now millions of refugees and displaced persons from Sudan South, through Uganda, DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania. In some areas, a whole generation has grown up as refugees with legal status in no country, and little hope of building lives of their own. United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) officials claimed that there are 250,000 Burundian refugees in Western Tanzania while the civil war between Tutsi troops and Hutu rebels has claimed the lives of 150,000 persons since 1993. (The Guardian Monday 16

February, 1998).

An African proverb notes "Strife never begets a gentle child". Nothing is more important to long-term development than solving conflicts. Continuing ethnic conflict strikes a particularly vicious blow against development. The nexus of conflict, refugees and poverty, creates other problems, particularly those of increasing agricultural and environmental pressures on the land. The climate in the African continent in general is not conducive to development. The Sudanese experience was at enormous cost in human suffering and a decade of development foregone. The Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970 brought developmental efforts to a standstill. No meaningful development could have taken place in Chad, Burundi and Rwanda during their respective crises.

Africa is experiencing severe political instability. In several countries there is full-scale civil war: Liberia, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, Mozambique, Sudan, Saharawi Democratic Republic and lately Sierra Leone. In others there are destabilizing interethnic skirmishes; Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Togo, and Democratic Republic of Congo. This is the common trend in nations where two or more dominant ethnic groups are competing for scarce resources, supremacy, power or the state machinery. Such situations have often generated feelings of oppression, resentment, denial, deprivation and even marginalization. When conflict ensues, the oppressed people see it as a war of liberation, while the dominant group sees it as a war to maintain its grip on power and the resources attached to it. This more than any other factor, has been responsible for political instability in countries like Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, Angola, Nigeria and some others. To a large extent, political instability is found to be positively associated with ethnic plurality.

On this note, Iro (1994) concluded that nothing positive can be achieved in a situation of war, hatred, and political instability. No state or nation can maintain a stable growth oriented economy, in the midst of political instability.

Finally, there is the problem associated with ethnic ideology, which emerges from persistent inter-ethnic hostilities. It is essential to reiterate the fact that ethnicity operates at the level of ideology and hence social relations are given ethnic colourations. Eventually the ideology is accepted and internalized by the members of the

different ethnic groups. Invariably ethnic loyalty, identification, hostility are passed on to successive generations through the process of socialization. The family, press, private and public conversation and other agencies of socialization are infected by the prescribed ideology. Therefore, when the original basis of inter-ethnic hostilities are eliminated, there remains the problems posed by the internalized dimension of ideology. The mind is not a black board where things can be rubbed off quite easily. The internalization of ideology in ethnic dimensions has often worked against efforts aimed at ensuring national integration in many polities of Africa as individuals often find it difficult to discard internalized norms and values.

From whatever perspective one looks at it, one is faced with the reality that the ethnic problem generates acute anxieties, resistance, violent response, alienation, strife and impairment of trust. Which way forward then?

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS TO THE ETHNIC PROBLEM

Using the functionalist paradigm which most anthropologists subscribe to, it is argued that every part of a system or organism has a function which cannot be discarded or else the system runs into a state of disequilibrium. This is very popularly reflected in the works of Malinowski, Radcliffe, Spencer and Parsons. From this premise, we submit that the major dominant ethnic groups of the nations of Africa must carry along the minority groups in all national activities and areas of human endeavours. From the African experience, attempts to marginalize minority groups have often been resisted fiercely with disastrous consequences. In fact, only few nations can succeed where the minorities are seen but not heard. History has not recorded successes as such but rather they usually end up in tragic failures. It is argued that ethnic problem rears its ugly head because of the failure of national institutions to explicitly recognize and accommodate existing ethnic divisions and interests. The majority must be induced to provide strong guarantees against the possibility of the annihilation of the minority. It is therefore recommended that nations must adopt political arrangements which accord to all ethnic groups a meaningful role in national life and which are able to keep ethnic problem within manageable

bounds.

Iro (1994) suggested that African leaders in multi-ethnic nations must learn to accommodate one another, be able to tolerate criticism of their policies and accept genuine suggestions that will improve the lot of the people in general as against catering for sectional or parochial interests. The whole is greater than any of the parts. Nnoli (1980) also suggested a fundamental change in the nature of the national leaderships in Africa along Iro's submission. According to him, no meaningful solution of the ethnic problem in Africa, including ethnic balancing, can succeed without this change. Invariably then, the leadership of these African states needs a new orientation.

Some form of institutionalized power sharing is also recommended. In other words political power must be shared democratically among the various ethnic groups making up the nations of Africa. Empowering the different ethnic nationalities in a nation can help to reduce ethnic problem. The winner takes all syndrome often encourages dictatorship and subsequent marginalization of opposition and minority groups.

In Africa the state is the primary source of private wealth accumulation. This is what makes the struggle for control of state power so intense. Another problem is readily associated with this. This has to do with the distribution of national resources, that is, revenue allocation. We submit that revenue allocation is a very sensitive and volatile issue that must be properly addressed. The distribution of national resources must be based upon objectively measurable and generally accepted criteria by all the various ethnic groups in a country. Where some sections of a country feel that they are cheated or deprived, problems could arise. Justice, fair play, and equity must be ensured in the distribution of national resources. This must also be spread to all the other sectors of the economy - education, health, housing, employment, provision of social infrastructures and developmental efforts in general.

Again, it is argued that collective security can prevent ethnic problem. In this sense a threatened nation, exercising its inherent right of collective self-defense can call on others for help collective security is a far more potent weapon for deterring aggression and maintaining peace and security than is the traditional right of self-defense standing alone.

Disarmament can prevent ethnic problem most especially those that are likely to degenerate into war or violence. People are less likely to let their ethnic differences degenerate into wars if there are no arms at their disposal to persecute such wars. The ready availability of arms often means that ethnic nationalities rely on them to settle disputes with other governments or domestic opponents.

Democracy where it has been consolidated can reduce ethnic problem. By adopting the tenets of democracy, ethnic problem can be resolved through legislative, judicial and constitutional procedures.

Intergroup dialogue can also reduce the incidence of ethnic problem. This could be facilitated through the teaching of philosophy, skills, and techniques of negotiation and mediation in a wide range of circumstances. There could be "Dialogue groups" which are saddled with the responsibility of influencing thinking in their communities.

Finally, there is a strong emphasis on institutionalized indignation. Edmund Burke noted several centuries ago that "what is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing". What we have seen over the decades is that the people keep quiet when the leader is from their own ethnic group, no matter what he does. They show little or no indignation and do not condemn questionable conduct. Sometimes this passivity has come to haunt them.

In Kenya, when Jomo Kenyatta victimized and brutalized people from other ethnic groups, the Kikuyus in general found it difficult to condemn this conduct. Now that Arap Moi is doing the same thing, many Kalenjin and Massai find it difficult to condemn the conduct. Ibeike-Jonah (1995) therefore suggested that we need institutionalized indignation whereby both the international community and the various ethnic groups show indignation and condemn brutal or deplorable conduct of whatever leader is in power.

CONCLUSION

Anthropology shows that certain kinds of social relationships are institutionalized in all human societies. But the form and the content of the relationships thus broadly characterized may differ vastly from one culture to another.

From all indications in the available empirical evidence and the excursions made into history,

there is yet no single or straight jacket models or prescriptions on how nations can tackle the 'ethnic problem' as each plural polity has its own unique configuration of diversity. For instance, while the Northern part of Africa is remarkably homogenous, coherent, peaceful and relatively stable, the sub-Saharan Africa is characterized by ethnic plurality, and are therefore scenes of instability, chaos, disorder, violence, tension, civil disobedience and wars. This consequently makes generalized prescriptions about the ethnic problem both difficult and an hazardous task. This notwithstanding, we will conclude by saying that multi-ethnic nations are not fixed entities. Historical, forces such as conquest, colonialism, and political independence form them. Such nations may lose their plural character if the diverse populations find common ground, reduce discrepancies of power and opportunity, accommodate their divergent interests, and reduce the extent of ethnic differentiation.

KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT The emergence of ethnic consciousness and nationalism is a volatile and increasingly powerful force in the contemporary world. It has pulled down empires, created new nations and generated a rising tide of expectations. Minorities are becoming more militant and more self-aware in all nations, whatever their stage of industrial and political development.

This paper in a fruitful way takes a new, critical and in-depth look at the origins manifestations and consequences of the thorny problem of ethnicity in Africa. This is done with a view to provide solutions to the ethnic problem so as to alleviate its overwhelming negative impact on the African continent vis a vis socio-political and economic development.

The paper concludes that each plural polity in the African continent has its own unique configuration of diversity and this inevitably makes generalizations a difficult task. However nations of Africa can move forward by

1. Identifying common grounds in their polities;
2. Reduce discrepancies of power and opportunity;
3. Accommodate divergent interests;
4. Reduce the extent of ethnic differentiation and
5. Embrace institutionalized indignation.

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