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in Conflict Resolution in Africa**



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# Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>Foreword</b>  | 5   |
| <i>Jannie Malan</i>  |     |
| <b>Identity and Peace: Reconfiguring Conflict Resolution in Africa</b>   | 9   |
| <i>Gerard Hagg and Peter Kagwanja</i>  |     |
| <b>Tunnel Vision or Kaleidoscope: Competing Concepts on Sudan Identity and National Integration</b>                                | 37  |
| <i>Atta El-Battahani</i>   |     |
| <b>Identity Politics, Democratisation and State Building in Ethiopia's Federal Arrangement</b>                                     | 63  |
| <i>Kidane Mengisteab</i>   |     |
| <b>Cultural Diversity and the Somali Conflict: Myth or Reality?</b>  | 93  |
| <i>Abdulahi A. Osman</i>   |     |
| <b>Political Management of Ethnic Perceptions: An Assessment of the African National Congress</b>                                  | 135 |
| <i>Mcebisi Ndletyana</i>   |     |
| <b>Ethnic Diversity and Conflict in Nigeria: Lessons from the Niger Delta Crisis</b>   | 161 |
| <i>Wilson Akpan</i>  |     |
| <b>Cultural Diversity in Conflict and Peace Making in Africa</b>   | 193 |
| <i>Molem C. Sama</i>   |     |
| <b>The Political Role of the Ethnic Factor around Elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo</b>                            | 219 |
| <i>Hubert Kabungulu Ngoy-Kangoy</i>  |     |
| <b>Identity and Cultural Diversity in Conflict Resolution and Democratisation for the African Renaissance: The Case of Burundi</b> | 239 |
| <i>Philippe Ntahombaye and Gaspard Nduwayo</i>   |     |
| <b>'Echoing Silences': Ethnicity in post-colonial Zimbabwe, 1980-2007</b>  | 275 |
| <i>James Muzondidya and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni</i>   |     |

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# Foreword

*Jannie Malan*

Three years ago, Volume 4, Number 2 (2004) was the first special edition of our Journal. Its theme was *Electoral Systems, Elections and Conflict Mitigation in Southern Africa*. This issue (Volume 7, Number 2) is our second special edition, which is the outcome of a project of the Human Sciences Resource Council (HSRC) of South Africa, and of a pleasant editing partnership between ACCORD and the Democracy and Governance Research Programme (D&G) of the HSRC. The theme of both the project and of this special issue is ***Identity and Cultural Diversity in Conflict Resolution in Africa***. In 2006, the HSRC, in association with researchers in Africa and the United States of America, commissioned ten research papers on the contribution of identity and cultural diversity to conflict resolution in Africa. This is part of the HSRC's new Africa Focus in which D&G partners with researchers and institutions in Africa on burning issues on the continent. D&G views this special issue as an invitation to interested researchers and institutions to develop cooperative relationships.

From the moment when the HSRC colleagues approached us at ACCORD, we realised that this topic was of the utmost relevance and importance, but also of extreme complexity. We therefore acknowledged the need to make up to date research out of several African countries available to the readers of our Journal, and we agreed to work together in this worthwhile publishing project.

We are sure that readers will agree about both the urgency and the difficulty of the topic, even before beginning to read any of the articles. We all know very well that the theme as formulated above is a short and rather optimistically sounding version of a more comprehensive and problematic one. Other identity-based realities are inevitably implied. For instance, one or more of the following terms may be inserted before '*conflict resolution*': conflict generation, conflict escalation, conflict exacerbation or *conflict intractability*. What readers will find in this issue, however, are frank descriptions and discussions of the divisiveness and belligerency that may be caused or propagated by any obsession with identity. When leaders and followers have adopted a mindset of narrow-minded loyalty to own cultural and/or ethnic identity, and of hostility to the identities of 'others', reciprocal intolerance, antagonism and conflict are bound to follow.

The overall thrust of the concept article by Hagg and Kagwanja and the articles from the different country contexts is, however, that cultural and/or ethnic identity can also function constructively in resolving conflict and building a climate of peaceful coexistence. The mindset with regard to identity can become inclusive. It can at least begin to include others and their loyalties. It can harbour a sense of cultural and ethnic diversity. And from such a mindset change, a chain reaction of significant changes can flow. Widely accepted ways of dealing with conflict and resolving conflict could be modified to be more appropriate in cases of identity conflict. International mechanisms of mostly retributive justice and local, traditional methods of mostly restorative justice may all be 'reconfigured' in such ways that identities are 'reconceptualised', diversities are acknowledged, and coexistentialities are experienced.

We do trust that readers will find seed thoughts to internalise and to share with others.

From ACCORD's side we wish to express our sincere thanks to the HSRC, not only for making all this significant material available to our Journal, but also for providing the funding for this special issue. A special word of

thanks goes to Drs Peter Kagwanja, James Muzondidya and Gerard Hagg of the HSRC, and their support staff, for all the work with regard to the peer reviewing of the articles, the translating of articles where necessary, and the forwarding of our correspondence to and from the authors.

We wish to ensure all the authors that we greatly appreciate their research work, writing of the articles, formulating findings and conclusions, and their cooperativeness when we had questions or comments.

Finally, we have an explanatory note which happens to be on the wavelength of identity. In the lists of sources at the end of articles, we try to follow a generally accepted bibliographical system, according to which only the initials of authors are given. We have decided, however, to deviate from this prescription in all cases where the authors of these articles did give the first names of authors or editors of the sources they had consulted. After all, such first names may help to disclose the gender and/or cultural identity of the people concerned. We therefore request our readers to bear with this deliberate inconsistency.







# Identity and Peace: Reconfiguring Conflict Resolution in Africa

*Gerard Hagg and Peter Kagwanja*

## **Abstract**

The emergence of intra-state wars based on identity requires a reconfiguring of existing conflict resolution mechanisms. The article recognises the limitations of liberal peace models originally configured to deal with inter-state conflicts, but increasingly applied to inter-ethnic conflicts with limited success and often disastrous effects. The article argues for the reconceptualisation of identities as building blocks of sustainable peace, justice and reconciliation. The article also calls for the recognition of the role of regional peace and security mechanisms in conflict resolution, as far as possible the use of traditional justice mechanisms, especially in the context of increasing state failure on the continent. The article cautions against enthusiastic embrace of international justice mechanisms that may sometimes create stumbling blocks to peace and reconciliation. Rather the article suggests nuanced interventions in identity-based conflicts that reconcile democracy and justice, guaranteeing the rights of both majority and minority groups.

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## Introduction

The dual processes of market liberalisation and democratisation in the 1990s substantially weakened the post-colonial state, ushering in new forms of violence and disorder as the hallmark of the post-Cold War Africa. These new patterns of conflicts have been described as ‘internal’ or ‘civil wars’ largely because they involved a clash of identities such as ethnicity within the state – although they often overflowed across national borders and affected the neighbouring countries: the ‘bad neighbourhood’ syndrome (Young 2004:44). It is true, as the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan (1998:3), argues, that the ‘sources of conflict in Africa reflect... diversity and complexity’. Africa’s ethnic diversity has been blamed for the escalation of violent conflict and the implosion of the state. In the post-Cold War era, such identities as Tutsi, Croats or Hindu have appeared armour-plated in deadly combats that have mirrored Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilisations on a global scale (Huntington 1996; Ross 2000; Deng 2005; Horowitz 1985). 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 2005:6; Khazanov et al 2004).

Thus, even as analysts confirm the importance of identity in what Mary Kaldor calls 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; Richards 2005). Braathen and others (2000) refute the importance of ethnicity in violent conflict, as reflected in the title of their publication: *Ethnicity kills?* A dominant explanation, the ‘greed-and-grievance’ thesis, has illuminated the link between the escalation of identity-based civil conflicts and the unfolding ‘war economies’ which feed and fuel them (Collier & Sambanis 2005; Elbadawi & Sambanis 2000). But the thesis overstates its case, committing the same old sin of perpetuating stereotypical and banal views of Africa as being driven by the ‘politics of the belly’ (Bayart 1993).

Despite this linking of ethnic entities with violent conflict, it has become clear that identities have a role to play in conflict resolution. Organisations like UNESCO (2005) and the African Union (2005) have embraced cultural diversity and the expression of different identities as important assets in peacemaking and nation building. Indeed, authors like Tan celebrate the diversity of identities as an asset in the re-engineering of the civic order (Tan 2006). Ethnicity is not in itself a venal or negative force. The historian John Lonsdale (1994) has distinguished between ‘moral ethnicity’ and ‘political tribalism,’ capturing the benign and negative forces of ethnic identities, respectively. In this regard, social movements have been acknowledged as potential counter-hegemonic forces to the centralising and domineering forces of the secular nation-state (Eyo 1999). In many respects, ethnic movements have oftentimes localised struggles for citizenship in ways that have created moral communities, mobilised resources and broadened the space for cultural citizenship.

This article argues that while identity has been at the heart of violent conflicts in Africa, sustainable peace on the continent depends on the reconfiguring of identities as the basis of conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction models. This argument is made in six stages of which the first four discuss the broader picture of violent conflict, while the last two deal with peace making. The first section situates the concept of identity within the broader context of the crisis of the post-colonial state in Africa. The second part examines the role of identity in violent conflict in Africa from the 1990s, while the third section discusses civil conflict as a response to the undemocratic state after 1990. Section four highlights the role of globalisation in conflict. Section five provides a critique of the dominant models of peace and conflict resolution which are largely informed by the liberal orthodoxy. Finally, the article explores the conditions under which identities can be transformed into mechanisms for conflict resolution and peacemaking in war-torn ethnically-divided societies. At the heart of the African crisis is the failure to bring identities to the centre of democratisation and institution building processes, both before and after conflict.

## Identity and the 'new wars'

Following the end of the Cold War, Africa became a theatre of violent conflicts from Burundi to Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Sierra Leone, Somalia to Rwanda and Guinea to Sudan. The indelible mark of the new wars is that they are linked to identity, particularly ethnic identity. While there are many identity markers such as race, nationhood, kinship, class, religion, language, gender, age, geographic location, cultural preferences, and occupation – such as military function or herders and tillers – by and large ethnicity is identified as the dominant axis about which conflicts have revolved.

Three arguments have been made to explain the new patterns of violence. To begin with, this violence is seen as senseless or a return to barbarism (Mamdani 2002). With the emergence of pluralist democracy, this violence has been seen as a ploy by the incumbents to undermine democracy and perpetuate themselves in power (Kagwanja 2001). Thirdly, some scholars view the explosion of ethnic-based violence in countries like Rwanda as a manifestation of the brutal legacy of manipulation of ethnicity in the colonial past now returning to haunt the post-colonial state (Mamdani 2001).

Trying to make sense of this violence, Kaldor (1999) argues that the new conflicts are not wars in the modernist sense between states or organised political groups for political ends. Rather, they are connected with the resurgence of identity politics after the collapse of the Berlin wall. In this regard, primordial identities have pursued claims to power within the arena of the modern nation-state. The ubiquity of identity wars is based on the fact that ethnic identity is indeed particularly strong in traditional societies – embodying the deeply-embedded sense of belonging to a group with unique identity markers, such as myths of common ancestry, shared memories, cultural values, traditions and symbols, and ownership of territory (Endalew 2002).

However, the accent on ethnicity as a cause of conflict is problematic in at least two ways. First, ethnic identity does not sufficiently explain communal wars. Some homogeneous nations like Somalia have been engulfed in civil war while many heterogeneous societies live in peace, as Osman argues in this issue (2007). Further, the so-called African traditional identities are often recent constructions, either by colonial powers or by their post-colonial successors, resulting in mythologies of Africanist cultures (Banégas 2006; Bayart 2005). Why then has the ethnic identity become so combustive?

Attempting to account for the implosion of ethnic-based violence, Arjun Appadurai (1998) linked the preponderance of identity conflict to the forces of globalisation, noting that ethnic violence is deeply rooted in the uncertainties, anxieties, disillusionments and chaotic environments created by economic globalisation. Africa's new wars neither corresponded to Frantz Fanon's (1967) 'humanizing native violence' against an equally violent colonial state nor to Hannah Arendt's (1975) 'dehumanizing' state violence against its citizens typified by the Nazi Holocaust or, more recently, ethnic cleansing in the now defunct Yugoslavia. The violence is non-revolutionary and 'non-liberative'.

When they came face to face with this new form of violence, many analysts understood it as a new trend by the leaders of the one-party vintage to resort to recruiting surrogates and clients to organise violence against rebellious citizens. Mohamed Salih (1989) unveiled how the Sudanese state recruited tribal militias to terrorise civilian populations in a move that contributed to the 're-tribalisation' of politics. The use of tribal authorities as agents of political violence became widespread in countries as diverse as Nigeria, Cameroon, Kenya, Malawi and South Africa.

Nevertheless, this violence was more complex than simply being one-way violence by the state against its citizens. Intellectuals and publics used the term 'nationalism' to describe the sensibilities and violence linked to culture, ethnicity, religion and other negative forces of society (Anderson 2004). As the historian Eric Hobsbawm has noted, nationalism in the new

age has acquired a reactionary character in contrast to that of the emancipatory nationalism that was associated with wars of liberation from colonial imperialism across the world. Bruce Berman (1998) christened this new form of nationalism as ‘uncivil nationalism’, largely because it is about identity politics and sensibilities or contestation for power on the basis of identity labels. In this regard Kaldor (1999) concludes that the ‘new wars’ that have ravaged Africa lack ‘geographical or ideological goals of earlier wars’ and are largely ‘internal or civil wars’.

Yet, these new patterns of violence are not simply ‘internal’ or civil wars as Kaldor and others posit. They are part of ‘regional conflict complexes’ or formations that link local and global spaces, revealing the ugly underside of globalisation. Ethnic militias, combatants or bandits feed into ‘economies of war’ which are inextricably connected to globalised illegal economic networks and contrabands in precious metals, gemstones, drugs, guns and human trafficking.

At another level, these wars are not simply about war economies. They are also linked to complex proxy wars involving regional powers. The war in Somalia, for example, has also come to be linked to the long-standing conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, with both protagonists underwriting and backing rival forces within the country. Moreover, as the case of America’s involvement in Somalia allegedly to rout out the Union of Islamic Courts’ fighters shows, what are viewed as internal wars are also linked to the ‘clash of civilisations’ which now defines the parameters of the global ‘war on terrorism’. This broad context must be borne in mind when seeking durable solutions to the emerging culture of ethnic violence and state failure.

## **Identity and the African state**

Historical analyses of conflict enchant the pre-colonial period as the golden era of identity relations, pointing to the low politicisation of ethnic or other identities in society. Mixing of identity groups often occurred during trade, wealth and provision of skills (Bayart 2005:92-96). But the

distinct mark of pre-colonial African societies was not the absence of multiple identities or conditions that could ignite conflict. Rather, it was the absence of the elevation and politicisation of a single identity – ethnicity, clan, gender or age gap.

Political ‘tribalism’ as opposed to ‘moral ethnicity’ which can form the basis of a civic order, is rooted in colonial politics. Part of Africa’s problem is what Peter Ekeh (1975:92) identified as the dichotomy between civic public and the primordial public, the former perceived as an amoral zone of rights and the latter as moral and governed by customs. Africa is still struggling to bridge the gap created by these bifurcated spheres inherited from the colonial society, which has produced two patterns of rights and obligations.

Picking from Ekeh’s point, Mamdani argues that the ethnicisation of politics started with the construction of ethnicity as a legal entity that was elevated over otherwise fluid and loose characteristics of populations. This process turned race and tribe into fixed denominators in the colonial legal project (Mamdani 2002). 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; Rubin 2006). 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. For example, the Belgian and French ascribed the Hamitic ‘race’ identity to the Tutsis in Rwanda as against the ‘Bantu tribal’ identity of the Hutus. This flawed classification laid the foundation for ethnic rivalry and conflict which would culminate in the 1994 genocide (Prunier 1997). The colonial manipulation of ethnicity bequeathed Africa’s post-colonial societies with the polarities of settler (migrant) and native (indigenous) categories. These have become the axis about which ethnic violence in Rwanda or more recently in Kenya rotates (Mamdani 1996:201).

Africa’s post-colonial states inherited these ethnic stereotypes and divisive patterns of power between and within specific ethnic identities, thus

sowing the seeds of competition and conflict along ethnic fault-lines. It did not help the matter that many post-colonial patrimonial elites continued this legacy of divide-and-rule to protect their power. The rise of one party states or no-party military systems enabled these rulers to keep the lid on the simmering inter-ethnic rivalry and animosity, but the democratisation process and economic reforms associated with the Structural Adjustment Programmes 'erased the earlier post-colonial state's claim to unencumbered hegemony' (Young 2004:43). The authority of the state also increasingly came under attack during the era of globalisation. As Appadurai (1998) correctly observes, globalisation has fostered uncertainties and inequalities that have reinforced primordial sensibilities and recidivist ideologies, inspiring the atomisation of political processes. The decline of the hegemonic state and socio-citizenship opened the vent for rival ethnic groups to challenge the authority of the central state and the ruling elite.

### **State crisis and new patterns of civil conflict**

The crisis of socio-citizenship and the challenge to central authority by peripheral forces resulted in Africa's new patterns of civil conflict. The vision of civic citizenship based on a multi-ethnic nation-state that punctuated the post-colonial nation-building project across the continent is everywhere being challenged by notions of localised citizenship based on ethnicity. From the outset, civic citizenship was expected to be inclusive in regard to political power, decision-making and access to economic and other opportunities. However, the prevalence of patrimonial systems led to the exclusion of 'outsider' identities, and to unequal development and widespread disaffection.

The prevalence of patrimonial systems based on ethnic identities also tended to exclude rival identity groups, placing ascribed barriers to their upward mobility (El-Battahani 2007). Thus what were essentially cultural identities became transformed into political identities. Through



this process, ethnicity was animated into a political force, with ethnic citizenship becoming a counter-force to civic citizenship.

With the collapse of the nationalist consensus that ushered Africa into independence, the one-party state was widely imposed across the continent as a visible symbol of 'unity-in-conformity' anchored on the hegemony and coercive capacity of a single identity group or a coalition of several identity groups. Corruption and lack of accountability became the norm as pressure intensified on public servants to use their civic positions to satisfy their own imperatives of sharing resources with members of their larger communities. With no other recourse, those communities that felt excluded from the state and discriminated against by the dominant group often resorted to violent tactics. This happens especially when the stakes for survival are heightened by democratic competition diminishing economic opportunities, livelihoods and increasing poverty.

This dire situation is complicated by what has been characterised as the predatory nature of the African state. This has happened when the dominant elite appropriates and personalises the state, using it as an instrument of self-enrichment and of rewarding ethnic kith and kin and clients. In the ensuing neo-patrimonial arrangement, the identity of the party and the leader appears as a giant octopus swallowing other identity and social groups such the intelligentsia, the working class, women, businessmen or youth (Richards 2005).

Nonetheless, predation has not been limited to the dominant party and ethnic group. Segments of the counter-elite (elite not in power) also seek to win control over the state as a prize to gain access to the privileges of power. In some cases, where counter-elite formations have failed to seize power in the context of a weak state, this has often resulted in the emergence of parallel centres of power based on a new social construction and identity (Biaya 2001). Many of the military coups in Africa were largely a product of this desire to win state power in an ethnically contested political terrain. Indeed, rebel movements such as those led by Savimbi in Angola and Sankoh in Sierra Leone reflected this ubiquitous

pattern in Africa. Similarly, with the emergence of multi-party politics in many parts of Africa, opposition political parties have coalesced around their ethnic base (Prah 2004).

More often than not, the African state has been too weak and dysfunctional to act as a neutral arbiter or to enforce authority based on a common notion of civic citizenship. Its economic weakness and endemic lack of resources and infrastructure have eroded the capacity of the state to exert its control and suppress any challenge to its authority, especially by identity groups in peripheral areas which tend to back rebels (Faeron & Laitin 2003:80). This is best exemplified by the inability of successive weak governments in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to effectively contain rebellions in parts such as the Kivu region. Cross-border ethnic identities and alliances have also tended to exacerbate the problem of central authority in the periphery areas. This is typical of the Great Lakes region where neighbouring states have hosted hostile rebel groups (Mamdani 2002).

Many of Africa's weak states are unable or unwilling to act impartially as neutral arbiters between conflicting or competing identity groups. Similarly, lack of modern institutions such as constitutions or independent judiciaries have denied identity groups of credible channels through which to address their grievances and quests for equity, fairness and justice. The only recourse is violence.

Apart from their weakness, dysfunctionality and predatory nature, African states have hosted existing regimes of resource-exploitation which have tended to transform identities into instruments of conflict. Broch-Due (2005:2) rightly notes that 'as resources dwindle and relations of wealth are reconfigured in the wake of violence, identities and ideas of belonging become the focal arenas of conflict and negotiation'. It is in this context of state failure that poverty has been identified as a cause of identity-based conflict.

But poverty in itself is not a trigger of identity-based violence. Indeed, a number of poor nations in Africa have not suffered any civil war or

serious challenge to the state. Inequalities between and within identities as well as patterns of identity-based deprivation tend to create fertile ground for poverty as a source of conflict. Not surprisingly, most countries facing civil wars have deep levels of poverty, often affecting specific ethnic groups. Africa's army of unemployed youth have become easy recruits by rebel groups, which offer attractive promises of employment or income-generating alternatives in situations of abject poverty and powerlessness. Conversely, countries like Botswana, which have sufficient wealth, above-average income and small populations have tended to be less conflict prone.

### **Return to barbarism or globalisation's demons?**

The crisis of the African state has been spiked by forces of globalisation, which have deepened the continents' new forms of conflict. While the expansion of globalisation was expected to open up opportunities that would ameliorate the crisis of the state, it has simultaneously globalised ethnicity and localised citizenship, creating conditions for violent conflict (Kagwanja 2003:112-152). Appadurai (1998) among others rightly traced the roots of the brutal surge of ethnic violence in Latin America, Eastern Europe and Africa to the uncertainties, anxieties, disillusionments and chaotic environments created by economic globalisation. In this respect Africa's civil conflicts are not only heavily dependent on local depredation, but also on global linkages and support. It is therefore a paradox that the resurgence of 'communal violence' was viewed in liberal circles as a return of barbarism to haunt globalisation.

Logically, the forces of economic globalisation have ubiquitously tapped into the markets of anarchy within Africa's theatres of war, producing dynamics which have escalated and sustained civil conflicts. As reports by the New York University's Center for International Corporation aptly noted, conflicts in the Great Lakes region constitute a conflict complex or formation with local, regional and global linkages.

The report concludes that:

Linkages between international corporations and the region have exacerbated conflict on a number of levels: not only do they provide financial incentives for contenders for power, but they have also employed mercenaries to provide security for commercial extractive ventures... In addition, international regulation regimes and other legal restrictions often make the black market more profitable. These restrictions provide financial incentives for cooperation to engage in business ventures with whoever controls and delivers state resources, regardless of the impact on local population or the political repercussions for the state (Kagwanja & Ntegeye 2001:9-10).

The direct and indirect role of the forces of economic globalisation in Africa's ethnic wars also tended to transform them into 'business wars'. Africa witnessed increasing involvement of mercenary companies in civil wars in Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in ways that carry eerie memories of colonial pillage and violence. Widely cited is the role of two British mercenary companies, Sandline International and Executive Outcomes, which aided militias in Sierra Leone to secure access to mineral-producing areas in return for direct payments and commercial concessions (Storey 1999:39-56). Notably, the area controlled by Liberia's warlord, Charles Taylor, in Sierra Leone and Liberia is said to have been the third largest supplier of hard wood to France in the 1990s!

The lucrative commerce in timber and 'blood diamonds' in West African conflicts also tended to reinforce the claim that markets are capable of thriving without states at all. This view of markets in corrupt states privileges the profits of war over the human rights of the people trapped in these cycles of conflict. Weakened or eclipsed by local and regional conflicts, contemporary African states found themselves stripped of most statecraft functions and sovereignty, and increasingly under untrammelled influence by business corporations, NGOs and international aid bureaucracies' (Broch-Due 2005:3).

African states have also found themselves becoming irrelevant in the eyes of many of their citizens as the externally imposed economic reforms whittled the ability of governments to meet the demands of social citizenship with regard to providing social infrastructure and services, such as health and education. Devastation arising from the greed of international corporations, such as Western oil companies, also undermined the livelihoods of local people, creating grievances as fertile grounds for the proliferation of militias in places like Nigeria's Niger Delta region (Akpan 2007).

Several studies point to the role of international actors in the proliferation of small arms in Africa's hotspots, which has intensified conflicts and increased tensions and deaths (IANSA/Oxfam 2007). While identity violence has tended to aid the course of globalisation in Africa in cruel ways, this linkage between localised conflict and globalisation has undermined citizenship and human rights of the African people.

### **The liberal peace and its discontents**

The globalisation solution to localised ethnic conflicts is liberal peace. The impact of conflict resolution efforts driven by the imperatives of 'liberal peace' has been mixed and controversial (United Nations University 2007:1). The concept of 'liberal peace' is based on the Kantian notion of three pillars on which global peace rests: republican representation, an ideological commitment to fundamental human rights, and transnational interdependence (Doyle 2005:463). Liberal peace has come to embrace democracy, individual human rights, market values, the integration of societies into globalisation, self-determination, and the idea of the state and citizenship.

In a number of instances conflict resolution initiatives based on the liberal peace principles have brought an end to violent conflict and created platforms for reconciliation. South Africa's model for political settlement that resulted in the transition from apartheid to democracy

in 1994 is hailed as a showcase of the success of liberal peace in Africa (Kagwanja 2007). Driven by the need to draw the warring parties to the negotiation table, the liberal peace model has followed a familiar, almost formulaic, path: preliminary talks ('quiet diplomacy') paving the way for formal talks; negotiations leading to a comprehensive peace agreement; establishment of a Government of National Unity (GNU) acting as transitional authority to arrange for a new constitution, and multi-party democratic elections. The role of unresolved identity grievances after the elections has not received adequate attention, making it difficult to explain implosions in countries like Kenya, previously touted as a showpiece of peace and stability. South African mediators have applied a variant of the liberal peace model with considerable success in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. However, the application of the model in Côte d'Ivoire had dismal success. In Côte d'Ivoire, intensive negotiations under the aegis of the African Union and the UN Security Council from 2004 led to the cessation of violence, but failed to resolve the conflict. In contrast, the battlefield victory by the government of Angola following the death of Savimbi in 2002 provided a case of peace following a chain of failures of interventions based on the liberal peace model.

Three aspects have limited the success of liberal peace as a conflict resolution model in Africa. First is the assumed universal validity of liberal peace principles, which emphasise the protection of individual rights and disregard African traditional perspectives on family and kinship (Fischer 2000:25). The second limiting aspect is the inherent contradiction in liberal peace theory, which is applicable to inter-state wars, but not to intra-state conflicts based on identity (Nkabahona 2007). This limitation is even more pertinent in regional conflicts in which rebels and refugees take the conflict across borders, causing intricate webs of conflict relationships that are identity-based rather than interstate wars. Another internal contradiction of liberal peace is its emphasis on majoritarian democratisation which tends to ignore the role of traditional authorities and polarise identities (Fanthorpe 2006).

The third limitation is the tendency of mediators to simplify liberal theory during implementation and the stereotyping of local contexts among mediators. Liberal peace prescriptions in African conflicts are often reduced to one or two of the three pillars, particularly democratisation and the commitment to fundamental human rights. Hence the popular adages: 'Peace and democracy are just two sides of the same coin', and 'democracies don't go to war' (Fischer 2000:1; Doyle 2004:1). While it is true that democracies are a key instrument to peace and that democracies are in most cases at peace with each other, in ethnically divided societies application of the winner-takes-all model of democracy has tended to stoke rather than prevent conflict. In a word, liberal peace has tended to ignore complex local contexts, leading to '... hastily erected "democratic" institutions vulnerable to political capture by the forces the project seeks to thwart' (Fanthorpe 2006:9). In environments where over time cultural identities have been transformed into political identities democratic elections have been fought along ethnic lines, leading to the tyranny of the majority, disaffection of the minority and intensification of identity conflicts.

The uncritical application of liberal peace in Africa has resulted in negative or cold peace based on peace agreements that settle the issue of power and 'ownership' of the state, rather than addressing the fundamental causes of conflict (Galtung 1996; Anderson 2004:106). Liberal peace models in Africa have tended to undermine the *process* of peace building, ending up as compromises within and between the various factions and fractions of the ethnic elite. Conflict resolution and peace making in Africa rest on the principle of power sharing but Western efforts to solve violent conflict through power sharing agreements have heavy hidden costs (Tull & Mehler 2005:375-398). Power sharing models create 'an incentive structure would-be leaders can size upon by embarking on the insurgent path as well. As a result and irrespective of the effectiveness in any given case, power sharing agreements may contribute to the reproduction of insurgent violence' (Tull & Mehler 2005:375). When peace agreements base power sharing and representation in government institutions on

ethnic identity quotas, such as in Burundi, these agreements may just extend conflicts. For example, the Ethiopian federal arrangement provides for ethnically-based power sharing, yet only dominant groups benefit (Mengisteab 2007).

Liberal peace models tend to entrench a culture of impunity by not addressing injustices to civilians. 'One of the greatest shortcomings of contemporary peace processes,' argues Gawerc (2006:437), 'is that they often fail to address the bitterness including the memories and images, and the sources that generate it'.

Overcoming the limitations of liberal peace, therefore, requires frameworks that reconcile peace and justice. This results in positive peace which is comprehensive and takes into account all social levels and identities (Anderson 2004:103). It aims at creating positive conditions for reconciliation leading to comprehensive agreements and democratic institutions that empower people (Annan 1998:6, 7). Moreover it addresses the socio-economic and political conditions upon which social structures that contributed to the inequality, injustice or lack of access to social services that is leading to violent conflict, are embedded.

### **Reconciling identity, justice and peace**

The missing link in the liberal peace model is the relationship between identity, justice and peace. While identity has a role to play in reconciliation and justice and may provide some building blocks towards the entrenchment of peace as the ultimate aim of a comprehensive conflict resolution approach, this fact has not been fully acknowledged in existing analyses (Assefa n.d.).

Justice and reconciliation imply the need for renewed inter-identity relationships, what is referred to here as *reconfiguration*. Rather than being the driving force in conflict, ethnic identities should be reconceived as important elements in peace building. The role of identity as an asset for



peace building and development has already been recognised by bodies such as UNESCO (2005) and the African Union (2005).

A central aspect of the reconfiguration process is the conversion of identity from a political identity back to its roots as a cultural identity, making it less prone to violence. This reconfiguration process would ultimately involve justice and reconciliation, the final stages of conflict resolution and peace building, in which identity must play a pivotal role. The two concepts of justice and reconciliation are interrelated and interdependent: 'There can be no reconciliation without justice' (Assefa n.d.:8).

Justice has many faces: retributive justice or punishing perpetrators; restorative justice aimed at healing relations; and reparative justice designed to compensate victims (Bloomfield et al 2003:97). Identity plays a major role in restorative justice. A distinction can be drawn between *incidental* and *structured* injustice, the first referring to injustices arising from inter-personal or group relations while the latter refers to deeply embedded forms of injustice that determine overall patterns of relationship between identity groups. It is important to stress the role of structured injustice which typically takes a legalised or institutionalised form, like in the defunct apartheid system in South Africa, although non-legal forms of exclusion such as the existence of the caste system within and between identities may also constrain justice.

Resolving both structured and incidental injustices requires building institutions to entrench justice, equality and fair play. Meeting this objective may require the reconstitution of a multi-identity state as multi-identity, inclusive of ethnic and other forms of identity – class, occupation, gender, educational level and generational groups. The institutionalisation of justice demands establishing harmonious relationships between the various identities and cultures and avoiding the tendency to paralyse politics along lines of identity, particularly ethnicity (Ross 2000:1005).

The recognition of cultural diversity as a resource in socio-economic development in UNESCO documents, and particularly the 2005 *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, underlines its potential role in reconciliation, justice and sustainable peace. In the same vein the *Charter for the Cultural Renaissance of Africa* (African Union 2005) states that 'all the cultures of the world are equally entitled to respect', and 'Cultural diversity (is) a factor for mutual enrichment of peoples and nations'. Respect for cultural diversity is a useful way of depoliticising identity and promoting coexistence and interaction within society. This cosmopolitan view of identity promotes civil nationality rather than parochial ethnic nationalism. The creation of an inclusive state would foster a climate for social cohesion, building of social capital and civic citizenship. Reciprocity within the context of civic citizenship is an inherent part of sustainable peace, a fact recognised by the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights (An-Na'im 2002).

It is necessary to reconfigure and reconcile democracy to the reality of Africa's ethnically divided societies, in order to enable the state to become a neutral arbiter between competing identities. Integral to this process is the establishment of viable institutions including democratic constitutions, robust parliaments, and independent judiciaries (Elbadawi & Sambanis 2000).

Justice has at least two global dimensions. First, the establishment of agreements that prevent the abuse of identity conflicts by international companies or governments. Examples are the Kimberley Process that curbs the trade in blood diamonds, and the African Union debate on a common framework on the exploitation of resources, both of which need to be urgently extended and finalised (Global Policy Forum 2006). Second, international pressure in the context of the UN Security Council has been used to force warring parties to come to the peace table. The use of political and economic sanctions by the world major powers in a unilateral fashion can undermine sustainable peace and justice.

In addition to justice, it is widely acknowledged that reconciliation is of tremendous value in ensuring sustainable peace (Bloomfield et al 2003:12). The concept of reconciliation is broadly referred to as a new relationship between adversaries based on honest acknowledgement of the injury each party has inflicted on the other, and on apologies, forgiveness and redress, leading to new mutually enriching relationships. Reconciliation has also been understood as 'a process through which a society moves from a divided past to a shared future' (Bloomfield et al 2003). The concept connotes two major processes: the removal of underlying obstacles to peaceful coexistence between and within identity groups, and the healing of identity relations.

The first stage towards reconciliation is the *demobilisation* of combatants, thus providing space for the reconfiguration of their roles and relationships within a civic space. While liberal peace models give pride of place to disarmament of armed groups, it is important to extend the notion of demobilisation to the mind as a crucial step in ensuring the sustainability of peace. As the adage goes 'war begins in the mind' and by the same token peace must begin in the mind. This entails conflict transformation that seeks to broaden perceptions and social relations by creating historical awareness, and destroying myths upon which adversary identity awareness rested. Identity wars were often based on myths and perceptions that created the 'other' as an adversary, and brought about grounds for violent conflict. Conflict transformation must confront and transform these perceptions, myths and stereotypes that inform the infrastructure of war, and entrench tolerance and respect for the 'other'.

The second stage of reconciliation entails crossing identity fault-lines. Critical to this stage is the creation of awareness of the 'other' through extensive interactions with other identities to 'develop a sense of assurance that its own existence is secure' (Kelman in Ross 2000:1017). As a result individuals and identity groups will come to recognise the reality of their multiple identities as a basis of assured destiny in a civic nation (Sen 2006).

In the 1990s, two types of instruments for reconciliation emerged in Africa: Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC) and traditional reconciliation institutions. The first instrument, popularised by South Africa's experience of transition from apartheid to democracy has been extensively researched, although views about its effectiveness vary. In many instances, TRCs have restored identity relationships to a level of peaceful coexistence and even forgiveness. One of the identified shortcomings of the TRCs is blanket amnesty for perpetrators of injustice and crimes against humanity. The insistence on forgiveness has often undermined justice and created impunity (Philpott 2007).

The TRC process is based on Western individualism and thus has tended to be a crude instrument in resolving identity-based conflict. This has given rise to the wide-spread use of indigenous or traditional identity-based institutions for peace building and reconciliation. The best-known examples are the *Gacaca* system used in post-genocide Rwanda. Another one is the *Abashingantahe* (wise men) in Burundi to reconcile various warring parties. It must be noted that the African approaches to reconciliation do not necessarily stand at variance with universal values or human rights. Rather they seek to make up for the weaknesses in liberal peace models, which subordinate the community to the individual.

Where one is referring to liberal peace models or indigenous frameworks of peace making, tensions appear at two levels: between peace and justice and between reconciliation and justice. In regard to the tension between peace and justice, debates have revolved around the question of impunity. From Charles Taylor's Liberia to Kony's Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda, rebels have tended to refuse making peace without impunity guarantees. This has brought into sharp focus the role of the International Criminal Court in resolving conflict. On the one hand those who call for justice call for a stronger role of the ICC, while those calling for impunity guarantees perceive it as a stumbling block to peace, a fact stressed in the Juba peace talks in Northern Uganda.

In regard to the tension between reconciliation and justice, human rights movements have stressed retributive justice as a way of removing hatred and restoring identity relations. On their part religious groups have emphasised forgiveness as a path to a new future (Philpott 2007). In both cases the issue is a moral one, 'because of the way it conceives the relation between the individual and the group' (Crocker in Philpott 2007:8). Despite the suffering of individual members, communities often want to get on with their normal life, which requires above all peace.

The dilemma between peace, reconciliation and justice also has a regional dimension. For example, inter-state peace deals between neighbouring countries have led to the surrender of refugees and rebels to the government of their home country without an assurance of livelihood. From a global perspective international actors have tended to stress prosecution against rebels for crimes against humanity, without considering the impact of the crusade for justice, peace and stability of the state involved. Both cases highlight the need for strong regional mechanisms of reconciling peace, justice and reconciliation, and harmonising interventions by regional actors and international organisations. This demands the strengthening of the African Union's peace and security architecture, especially its mediation component including the Panel of the Wise.

Mamdani's (2001:270-276) dichotomy between 'victors' justice' and 'survivors' justice' illuminates the challenges of reconciling peace and justice. Pursuing victors' justice, he argues, would tend to reinforce the building of a Zionist type state on the ashes of conflict of genocide, a development taking place in contemporary Rwanda. On the other hand, victors' justice can simply become revenge, masquerading as justice. This, therefore, calls attention to the need for survivors' justice that does not seek to obliterate the defeated. Finally, comprehensive peace demands reconciling justice to democracy in ways that recognise the role of ethnic majorities and minorities without excluding either.

## Conclusion

The forceful resurgence of new wars that are based on identity, particularly ethnic identities, has made it imperative to revisit existing conflict resolution models with the aim of reconfiguring them. These new wars have seen the increased politicisation of ethnic identity and the polarisation of society in ways that undermine democracy, justice and peace. The politicisation of ethnicity has also intensified the weakness of the African state already beleaguered by forces of market and economic globalisation, which have everywhere undermined social citizenship. Although liberal peace models provide for the cessation of violence and initial agreements, the imperative for sustainable peace requires justice and reconciliation. We have highlighted a number of national, regional and global factors that cause and fuel identity-based conflict, and have suggested several elements of a peace-building approach that are focused on the reconfiguration of identities. The expansion of globalisation was expected to expand space for democracy and economic empowerment. It has created uncertainties, anxieties and chaotic environment which have animated parochial ethnic sensibilities and undermined civic citizenship. In a sense, the forces of globalisation have at once globalised ethnicity and localised citizenship thus creating a climate that fosters ethnic violence. A cure for localised ethnic conflict is sought in liberal peace, but liberal peace itself is limited and embroiled in internal contradictions that undermine positive peace, democracy and justice. Overcoming the limits of liberal peace demands reconfiguring frameworks of peace making to reconcile peace, justice and democracy. A place to begin is to re-conceptualise identities and cultural diversity as assets rather than obstacles in conflict resolution. Reconfiguring conflict resolution must go beyond the liberal peace orthodoxy that emphasises demobilisation as disarmament without a focus on the mind. It also demands resolving the tension between justice and peace and that between reconciliation and justice. Establishing sustainable peace also requires reconciling democracy and justice in ways that protect the rights of both majorities and minorities. At the same time, it demands striking a careful balance between 'victors' justice'

and 'survivors' justice' in the post-conflict situation. Institutionally, the role of regional conflict resolution mechanisms is central, especially in the context of an increasing number of failed states in Africa. Finally it is important to rethink the role of international justice mechanisms, particularly the International Criminal Court, in resolving conflict in Africa. While these mechanisms have a role in resolving conflict, caution must be exercised to ensure that they do not become obstacles to lasting peace. This points to the role of traditional justice and conflict resolution mechanisms ensuring that they are aligned to universal values while at the same time addressing the cultural particularities within which identities are locked in combat. The road to sustainable peace in Africa is long and has many lanes. 'Unfortunately there is no order of priority amongst them [conflict interventions] to prescribe.... All of this must be done at once and at the same time, and the steps kept apace of each other as the process moves along... rather than as a series of discrete steps taken one step at a time' (Zartman 1995:273). Persisting on this road may again give us opportunities to celebrate identity as a building block for peaceful and sustainable societies in Africa based on multiple identities and the principle of civic nations and citizenship.

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# Tunnel Vision or Kaleidoscope: Competing Concepts on Sudan Identity and National Integration

*Atta El-Battahani*

## **Abstract**

Characterised as a bridge between the Arab-Muslim world and Black Africa; and as a melting pot where diverse ethnic, religious and language groups were related together, Sudan continues to baffle observers and analysts by protracted conflicts and crises inflicted on its population. Amid all these, major parties to the conflict accuse each other of sowing the seeds of disintegration and disunity, and on the other hand each claims to be the only one genuinely working for unity. This article discusses conceptual foundations behind these claims and positions of major parties to conflict. Taking the ethnic-cultural make-up of Sudan, the article compares and contrasts a dominant concept of ‘unity in conformity’, endorsed since independence by Northern ruling groups, to ‘unity in diversity’, propagated by marginalised ethnic nationalities and

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underprivileged classes. After setting the context of the debate between the two different concepts, and delineating traits of both, the article argues that in view of the diversity and complexity of the social formation of Sudan, and more important, the failure of ‘unity in conformity’ to deliver on its promises, the alternative concept of ‘unity in diversity’ is more adequate in laying down foundations for credible unity and viable identity.

## **Introduction**

Recently the call for maintaining and promoting conflict-ridden Sudan as unified entity has emerged as a central item in the agenda of most, if not all, parties to the ongoing political conflict since the 1950s. Indeed, each of the major parties to the conflict accuses the other of sowing the seeds of disintegration and disunity by what it calls for; and on the other hand each claims to be the only one genuinely concerned with, and capable of, laying down and maintaining the foundations of unity, thereby ridding the country of the dangers of disunity and strife. If anything, these accusations and counter-accusations manifest the predicament of all the parties – the elite groups that have been reigning the country since independence in 1956.

In these circumstances, it is of ultimate importance to have a clear understanding of what these different groups mean by unity and disunity. The need to examine the different concepts of unity and disunity advocated by the conflicting parties is all the more important since, in the context of Sudan (and Africa in general), concepts of integration and unity are premised on recognising the diversity(ies) of the country. In their manifestoes and charters, parties to the conflict generally begin by asserting and emphasising the diversity of Sudan before they proceed to give their account about how to deal with the question of unity. Hence, concepts of unity hereby advanced necessarily refer to relations binding various elements and parts together within a single whole. We shall consider below how some of these concepts endeavour to construct ‘unity

within diversity’ or ‘unity in differentiation.’ Certainly, it would be most useful to attempt to unravel the theoretical assumptions underlying the competing concepts.

It is not the intention here to identify the actual historical tendencies behind the emergence of these concepts. Equally, little attention will be paid to the social forces and movements at work that are capable of consummating/realising these concepts of unity.

In its present form, this paper consists of different sections. Section two defines the context of the debate between different approaches to the issue of unity/disunity. In the following sections we will confine our analysis to two concepts only. In section three, we consider one of the two major concepts ‘unity in conformity’ and how it deals with unity in differentiation and the difficulties encountered in tackling the issue of unity from this perspective. An alternative competing concept, ‘unity in diversity’, is considered in section four, with a suggestion that this alternative is believed to be more adequate than the ones which have thus far been dominant. The last section gives a general conclusion.

## **Elements of Sudan’s diversity**

An overview of Sudan’s diversity is in order if we are to appreciate the debate on rational integration. This begins by recognising the ethnic-national element of this diversity. According to the much referred to census of 1955/ 56, the main ethnic groups are Arabs (39 %), Southerners (30%), West Darfur (9%), Beja (6%), West Africans (6%), Nuba (6%), Nubia (3%) and Funj (1.7 %) (Republic of Sudan 19621956:Table 6.8).<sup>1</sup> Other accounts of the ethnic composition of Sudan classify these groups

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<sup>1</sup> According to the 1955/56 Census, ethnic groups are described as follows: Arabs (39%), referring to a mixture of Semitic immigrants and indigenous Hamitic and Negroid groups; Southerners (30%) as Nilotic-Hamitic and Sudanic Negroids; West Darfurians (9%), referring to indigenous Negroids with some Hamitic and Semitic elements; Beja (6%), indigenous Hamitic; West African (6%); Nuba (6%), indigenous Negroids; Nubia (3%) Negroid mixture with Hamitic and Semitic, and Funj (1.7%) as indigenous Negroes.

in terms of 19 main nationalities (Majmoua'a Gawmiyya) and 597 ethnic groups (Majmoua'a Airgiyya) (Beshir 1988). Yet, socio-economic changes since 1956 together with natural and man-made disasters (desertification, famine and civil war) must have resulted one way or another in some significant changes in the numerical and demographic weight of these ethnic-national groups. On this, the population censuses of 1973 and 1983 remain silent. Yet no one can claim that these changes have obliterated ethnic-national diversities. In peripheral social formations, ethnic-national diversities seem to have staying power and post-colonial developments actually had the effect of maintaining them.

Ethnic-national diversities have further been sustained by cultural, linguistic, religious, social and political differences. It is reported that there are 115 dialects with 26 of them as active spoken languages, each spoken by more than 100 000 people (Ahmed 1988:7-18). About 52% of the population are Arabic-speaking while 48% speak other languages (*Al-Ayyam* 1989). Diversity also expresses itself sharply in religion, with Islam, Christianity and 'other religions' professed by different sections of the population. Both Christianity and other religions claim the support of significant sections of the population. Religious heterogeneity is further sustained by the prevalence of sectarian cleavages within Islam, the religion of the majority.

An important aspect of the complexity of the Sudanese society is the diversity marking familial connections, social structures, cultural outlooks, value systems and gender statuses. These diversities do not only affect existing possibilities for social mobility and integration, but have equally direct bearing on moral norms, legal status and notions of identities (An-Na'im 1987:71-77). Furthermore, there is a diversity of traditional political structures; and the highly centralised authoritarian structures of the colonial state and the post-colonial state added more to the already existing forms of rule.

Equally, Sudan economy is marked by a high degree of heterogeneity. It encompasses different modes and forms of production, different sectors,



different activities and different interests relating to different social categories and classes. It is our contention here that an account of the main elements of the diversities of Sudanese society is not adequate without considering the distribution of the population into various occupational categories.

In a situation like the one in Sudan (as in many African countries)<sup>2</sup> where the process of nation formation has yet to mature, these elements of diversity work much more towards disintegration than towards integration.<sup>3</sup> In such a context then, it is only natural to ask what begets unity in a situation of diversity.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, an observer might ask: how come that Sudan, given its diversities and prevalent hostilities, is still holding together (Spaulding 1987:3-4). What is it that makes the different parts of the complex totality of the Sudanese society hold together? Could it be the economic structure (mode of production) which imposes unity on society? Or is it the efficacy of the political system (the state or political community), and the monopoly of power by one group commanding unity and suppressing dissent? Or is it the existence of an accommodatory and integrative value system at the centre which makes for the sustenance of unity?

### **Framework for analysis**

These questions and other related issues have generally shaped the debate on national integration in Sudan. Taking part in this debate, some

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2 Like Sudan, many African countries are characterised by ethnic, religious, linguistic, social and economic diversities. Among these are Uganda, Ethiopia, Senegal, South Africa and Nigeria, to mention but a few countries.

3 The National Population Censuses of 1973 and 1983 have dropped the category of ethnic (tribal) designation, probably in the belief that national integration in post-independence Sudan had rendered this categorisation redundant. However, a number of studies have attempted to challenge this contention. For example, see: Umbadda 1990.

4 The issue of governability and survivability of Sudan as a state was raised on many occasions. See Woodward 1988.

historians writing about Sudan between 1898 and 1956 conceived of the country as literally:

... [a] balkanized world of arrogant and warlike little nations, strutting about belligerently or crouching in surly defensiveness behind some tropical magnet line (Spaulding 1987:3-4).

It was the colonial state then, through its centralised and bureaucratic structures, which kept peace and ensured unity. Though such conception might have served an ideological purpose for colonial powers, it has some historical and empirical relevance, a relevance which can be attested to in the post-colonial period as well.

Other observers argue that what has bestowed unity on the country and prevented it from falling apart is not the state but the efficacy of the political system at large (Woodward 1988). Yet, some still do believe that it is the capacity of the dominant culture of the dominant group which is the source of unity and its maintenance in Sudan. What concerns us here most is that in this balkanised plural perspective, the emphasis is on groups and political centres.

Later a new generation of scholars initiated a shift in the studies concerned with the unity/disunity debate; a shift of their primary focus from the 'real' or 'alleged' centres of various communities (groups) to the very boundaries that were presumed to divide them. Consequently, the historical balkanised perspective

... [w]as replaced by one of a complex network of interactions among people in which all manner of economic, political and cultural influences made themselves felt in an intricate web of reciprocal relationships. (Spaulding 1987:4).

Given this, a rough classification scheme for studies on the debate of unity/disunity of the Sudanese society is provided. With warranted simplifications, one can think of a continuum with one pole representing studies focusing on groups, centres and agents, and employing various categories of sociological analysis (such as ethnicity, religion and

culture). The other pole of the continuum represents studies focusing on social processes and structures of under-development, peripheral capitalism and state formation, and using political-economic categories of analysis. In between the poles of this continuum, a number of studies attempted, with varying degrees of success, to synthesise the perspectives of the two poles, employing various categories of analysis, i.e. class, ethnicity and state. (Ibrahim 1985; El-Battahani 1988; Shadad 1988; Khalid 1990; Umbadda 1990).

Space does not allow for consideration of these studies here, but two major perspectives emerge that form the core of this study and merit close attention: unity-in-conformity and unity-in-diversity.

### **Unity-in-conformity concept**

This is a core concept with many variants. After briefly considering the theoretical assumption and general features of this concept-variant, this section will attempt to relate the concept-variant to the concrete situation of diversities in Sudanese Society. Concepts of unity and national integration are historically shaped by political conjunctures. But as we have already mentioned, the social determinants and historical transformations which produced this concept, important as they are, are not our prime concern here. An in depth inquiry into the nature of these transformations requires a separate treatment.

Historically, the structure of colonial capitalism enabled the centre of Sudan to firstly produce a unity-in-conformity concept, the main variants of which are Arabism and Islamism. Later, the peripheries of Sudan responded by advancing a different notion of unity (Africanism), giving a different perspective of Sudan identity and national integration. Yet, at a conceptual level, Arabism, Islamism and Africanism are all rival variants of the core concept of unity-in-conformity, and as such share the same

underlying assumptions of the concept.<sup>5</sup> A theoretical sketch of this core concept is presented by considering some features of these variants; e.g. Islamism. It is believed that an elaborate exposition of one variant will, to a greater extent, reflect more clearly the underlying assumptions of the core concept. Hence what is related to Islamism necessarily applies, in essence, to both Arabism and Africanism.

With this in mind, it is our assertion that in dealing with national integration, the unity-in-conformity concept is idealist, ethnocentric, and of totalitarian-authoritative nature leaving aside for the time being its patriarchal, retrogressive and other peripheral capitalist features. We shall briefly examine how the Islamist variant reflects the traits of the core concept.

The ascendancy of the (Arab-Islamic) hegemony has been noted by many groups and perceived by them as negatively affecting their role and contribution in building a viable unity of Sudan social formation. Indeed, some subordinated groups feel that the overall thrust of the hegemony of the centre is systematically working towards nullifying their distinct cultural attributes. A former prime minister once stated that they were not willing to abandon their (Arab-Islamic) culture for a mirage (El-Mahdi 1988), referring to indigenous non-Arab-Islamic culture and the call for recognising its values and incorporating them into to Sudanese identity.<sup>6</sup>

For its part, the hegemonic centre believes that only by promoting its culture could unity of Sudan be maintained. Submitting to the will of the centre, or to put it in milder terms, conforming to the value-system

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5 See Beshir & Salih 1984 and Mazrui 1971. According to Hurreiz (1989:79-98), this was more in line with the social fabric of Sudanese culture and identity because it enabled different groups to mix and merge wishfully, thus forming wider groups. For example, cultural process of integration (Arabisation, Islamisation and Africanisation) did take place albeit *voluntarily, gradually and irregularly*. This created the contemporary Sudan with its relative unity and inherent disunity.

6 Former Prime Minister El Sadig El-Mahdi, discussing the proposed Penal Code for 1988 in the Constituent Assembly of 1988-1989.

of the centre by different groups is taken as a prerequisite for Sudanese unity and identity. On the other hand, emphasising the particularity and cultural individuality of groups in the peripheries is perceived as a threat to the unity of Sudanese society as a whole.

What is, then, the rationale of the centre? What are the philosophical bases of the centre's belief that extending and universalising its 'superior' culture (religion) over other cultures and groups would ensure unity, while resisting this process would foment disunity? As far as the Islamic part of the variant concept is concerned, its perspective of unity-disunity is essentially derived from Islam. To be more precise, it is derived from a particular idealist (revivalist) interpretation and ideological appropriation of Islam. (Hamed 1985)

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam is a monist religion with a built-in universalist drive which conceives the human race as but a target for conversion. It is, in effect, pitched in a constant competition with other religions and cultures (Mazrui 1990)<sup>7</sup> and consequently is less accommodating to other creeds and beliefs. This is more likely the case when Islamic-revivalist concepts of integration stress the need to universalise and absolutise their values as prerequisites for attaining unity and social cohesion. In other words, the argument here is that all parts of the whole must reflect and share the same essence if the unity of the whole is to be secured.

It is believed that the Islamist variant reflects, in an important way, a Hegelian idealist conception of totality. This is:

... an expressive totality, a totality all of whose parts are so many total parts each expressing the others, and each expressing the social totality that contains them, because each in itself contains in the immediate form of its expression the essence of the totality itself... (Collinicos 1976:40).

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<sup>7</sup> Mazrui, A., commenting on his book *Cultural Forces in World Politics* (Mazrui 1990) in the BBC World Service, Meridian Programme on 1990-07-12.

The unity produced by such a concept is immediately present in, and extricable from, each of its parts. Each part of the whole is but the expression of the essence of the whole (Collinicos 1976:40). Within this perspective, the unity of the whole suppresses the distinctness of the part and deprives it of instances (determinations) constituting it. This expression of the essence of the whole is but the will of the absolute truth, reason, or the divine. History is conceived as a process moving towards a predetermined end, the rising of the absolute to self-consciousness (Collinicos 1976:40) or the realisation of the Almighty's will on each.

It is not the intention here to discuss the theoretical or philosophical aspects of the idealist conception of history, but only to indicate that the realisation of self-consciousness by the absolute attainment of unity is hampered in reality by many distractions, albeit of temporary nature. History is the progressive unfolding of events towards the ultimate objective. Here, the role of conscious agents of history (bearers of truth) is to affirm the will and majesty of the divine on earth by transcending situations of discord and imperfections.

That these assumptions underlie the Islamists' variant of unity-in-conformity concept is not difficult to establish. The foundation of an Islamic society-state lies in the doctrine of *Tawhid*, the unity of Allah and human life (El-Turabi 1985:2). In the course of realising this unity, the *Ummah* (nation; in the broad sense) has to strictly adhere to sources of religious guidance (The Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet) and the model of Medina experience. In reality, however, many factors and historical challenges intervene to thwart the process of *Tawhid* and frustrate the *Ummah's* effort to unite and live up to its ideal and destiny. (Abdel Gabar 1985:121-134)

But how does this relate to the question of unity in Sudan? It is maintained here that in the context of diversities of Sudanese society, Islamism (the attempt to articulate a notion of unity on the bases of this perspective) is neither conducive to nor a plausible concept for workable unity. This, however, should not be taken to mean that Islam, as a repository

of values, symbols and aspirations, has no role to play in contributing to national unity. Rather, our concern here is confined to Islamism (as expressed by leaders of political Islam in Sudan): the concept-variant of unity-in-conformity, and it is this which lacks the capacity to positively contribute to a viable unity of a diverse society.

In Sudan, Islamism sanctions the Muslim endeavours to absolutise their (historically determined) values and culture as bases of unity and polity. Indeed, Sudan's unity and identity are both reduced, according to Hassan Mekki (1990:20), a leading Islamist intellectual, to nurturing and evolving Islam or, to be more precise, a particular version of Islam:

It is imperative to promote and develop the culture of the centre for it is this [Islamic] culture which unites the nation and gives it its distinct features and attributes. Without this Islamic factor Sudan would have never existed...

To reduce the objective complexity of Sudan cultural and social structures to Islam is surely to inflate one element of a diverse totality at the expense of others, if not to deny the very fact of diversity. The capacity and readiness, therefore, to accommodate different elements (for example non-Islamic, non-Arab groups) within a unified Sudanese totality is, thus, altogether undermined.

Calls to constantly maintain (Islamic) sources of unity are sometimes expressed in calls to a Jihad to defend Islam and extend its frontiers against the infidels in *dar al harab* (land of war). Attempts by different marginalised groups to press for their otherwise legitimate claims are outrightly rejected as impairing unity and publicly dubbed as racist, ethnic, 'tribal,' 'atheist,' 'secular,' 'crusader-like,' 'Zionist,' 'communist,' etc. Quite often, a conspiracy theory is invoked to explain away any attempt by internal forces to challenge this monolithic Islamist concept-variant of unity. The combined objective these enemy forces pursue is claimed to foment disunity by spoiling the creed of the Ummah. Consequently, revitalisation of sources of Islamic religion is thus proposed as a panacea to ensure unity and avoid discord.

However, in the context of a multiple Sudan, such a panacea is nothing but a call for an ethnocentrism or 'Islamocentrism'. This concept over-stresses the primary position of Arabic language and culture and regards the history of Muslims as the sole repository of values, symbols and norms in the light of which modern life of Sudanese people should be modelled. Aspects pertaining to Sudanese identity are believed not to be negotiable since they are not the product of historical processes, but a given fact of Islamic religiosity. Non-Islamic cultures are perceived as a threat to Sudanese identity, as they are informed by:

... a militant brand of secular discourse extremism. It is no wonder then (since 1955) for such discourse to express itself by raising arms, becoming involved in guerrilla activities against *the right of Islamic culture to exist in the South and to dominate in the North* (emphasis added) (Mekki 1990:10).

A corollary of this reasoning is the call for the establishment of an Islamic state and a totalitarian political system. The logic of this reasoning runs as follows: the state (which is a common affair among all believers and citizens of the Sudan) (Mekki 1989) attends to the demands of the majority; the majority are Muslims; in Islam the state deals with both private and public domains; thus an Islamic state is a guarantee for the unity of the country (National Islamic Front 1989:2; Hamid 1988). Notwithstanding provisions to safeguard minority rights, this logic expresses an eventually totalitarian concept of polity. In this polity: (1) power (legislative, executive and judiciary) is vested in an Imam, reflecting the will of the Divine more than the general will of the people, and (2) the modern concept of citizenship is lacking, or at least difficult to reconcile with the Islamic concept of polity.<sup>8</sup> Fears were expressed as to the tendency to stratify the population according to creed as male Muslims, female Muslims, male non-Muslims and female non-Muslims (*Sudan Times* 1988-1989).

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8 Consider the attempts by Sadig El-Mahadi, when he was at Paris, to reconcile between his concept of an Islamic State and the Modern (Secular) concept of citizenship.



Tied to this categorisation of citizens is the uneven distribution of political, economic and social goods and entitlements. Many observers believe that a version of the Islamist concept-variant of unity had been put into practice in Sudan between 1983 and 1985. During this period, social and economic differentiations were either religiously sanctioned or else not dealt with effectively. Forms of Islamic charity failed to curb social ills. Equally, attempts to structurally curb these problems and initiate socio-economic development led to a controversial situation, to say the least.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the ensuing deprivations have further consolidated an already existing schism and discord which the concept purports to transcend in theory. In a nutshell, Islamocentricism, a totalitarian political regime and economic stagnation are hardly conducive to unity.

However, this conclusion is not peculiar to the Islamist variant of the unity-in-conformity concept. Other variants (Arabism and Africanism) of the concept are equally predisposed to lead to the same dead end. Essentially then, this concept of unity-in-conformity with all its variants, is inherently antithetical to the very nature of Sudan diversities which are grounded on historical objective conditions. Instead of realistically dealing with these objective conditions (i.e. recognising and synthesising them), the concept obliterates them only to produce a monolithic concept of unity. Traced to its philosophical assumption this can be expressed in that, rather than comprehending the complexity and diversity of empirical realities, the sole interest of the concept is to discover and establish the Absolute (in Islamism, Arabism, Africanism) in:

Every element, whether of the state or of nature, and the actual subjects... come to nothing but their mere names. The world is left uncomprehended, reduced to a manifestation of the absolute (Collinicos 1976:33).

The limited capacity of this concept to offer a differentiated concept of unity can much more clearly be grasped if considered in relation to the potential of the rival concept of unity-in-diversity.

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9 For an example, see Shaa el-Din & Brown 1985.

## **Unity-in-diversity as an alternative concept**

Studies informed by this concept have, to some extent, emerged as a critique of the dominant concept of unity-in-conformity. Whilst unity-in-conformity focuses on the efficacy of cultural variables and political groups (the groups-agents pole of the continuum of our theoretical sketch), this alternative concept attempts to redress the imbalance by leaning more toward the pole of social structures and processes, without entirely neglecting socio-cultural variables (ethnicity, religion, etc.).

In order to better account for the complex unity of the Sudanese social formation, an urgent need has been felt by many researchers to synthesise the two poles of the theoretical continuum and, then, analytically integrate variables relating to both, i.e. class, ethnicity (and the state).<sup>10</sup> Heeding this, a number of studies O'Brien (1986: 898-907), El-Battahani (1988), Ibrahim (1985), Shadad (1988) have endeavoured, with varying degree of success, to deal with this theoretical synthesis and integration. This paper is an attempt to bring out much more forcefully the theoretical framework underlying these studies, and to contribute to nominating unity-in-diversity as viable concept. In contradistinction to the features of the unity-in-conformity concept, the concept we are suggesting here as a viable alternative is characterised as realist, non-centricist and of historical and dynamic nature. Before we elaborate on these traits, however, a note on the methodological premise of this concept is in order.

### **A methodological premise**

In view of the diversities of the Sudanese society (as indicated above), a methodological position of the alternative concept is that in peripheral

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10 Professor M. O. Beshir (Beshir & Salih 1984) expressed this need when, in one of his studies on Diversity and Unity in Sudan, he stated: 'I have not tried in this paper to discuss the issue of ethnicity and class in the case of Sudan. This is not due to any rejection and the suggestion that class is relevant or to the proposal that there is no correlation between class and ethnicity in other similar cases. The relations are rather hard to handle and there is overlapping which can easily lead to confusion.'

societies patterns of ethnic stratification (cultural stratification) and class/occupational stratification and the relations between social groups are massively over-determined:

It is this over-determined complexity which constitutes the specificity of the problem requiring analysis. It does not help, here, to depress some factors of this matrix (e.g. ethnicity or class) in favour of others (e.g. culture or religion) and then, analytically to subsume the former into the latter, since it is precisely the generative specificity of each, plus the over-determined complexity of the whole, which is the problem... (Hall 1978:152-153).<sup>11</sup>

This will be clarified further below. Here, suffice it to say that the overriding concern of the two competing philosophies or positions is unity in a differentiated society. Yet, issues relating to how such unity would be achieved are set within a different problematic. In the previous section, the account of unity-in-conformity concept has been considered.

As far as the unity-in-diversity concept is concerned, questions as the following are raised within this problematic. What fundamentally distributes the population of Sudan into different occupational/class categories? What, essentially, is the role of ethnicity in the distribution of these groups and the maintenance of the social order? How have these class structures evolved and what role(s) have the state and ethnicity played in this? How are we to understand the relations of these variables (class, state and ethnicity) in the totality of the whole social matrix and its stratification? How, then, is this matrix affected by what we might call the ethnic element? Or, for that matter, the religious? And given the diversities of Sudanese social formation, as indicated above, what is it that maintains the dominant structures of legitimation through this apparent complexity? What produces the structures of these societies as structure-in-dominance? Above all, what holds this society together?

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<sup>11</sup> Expressing a similar proposition, Al-Hardalo (1984) cautioned Sudanese Intellectuals and Politicians not to magnify one element of Sudan complex structures at the expense of another when dealing with the intricate issue of national unity in Sudan.

Monist and unity-in-conformity analyses suggest that overall cohesion is achieved through the domination of one segment in the political institutional order; the universalisation of the centre's culture and its imposition on the constituent parts-regions of the Sudanese society. Yet, these analyses, though correct in recognising the centrality of power and the hegemonic culture of the centre, conceive questions of unity/disunity in a too limited and segmentary fashion. Imperative integration is neither achieved in Sudan exclusively through political institutionalisation nor via cultural domination. It is our argument that the unity of Sudan's social formation is not a simple, undifferentiated unity as such analysts would like us to believe. In differentiated, complex societies, we are required to account, not just for the existence of culturally distinct institutions and patterns, but also for that which secures the unity, cohesion and stability of this social order in and through (not despite) its differences (Hall 1978:152-153). This called for an introduction of a new concept of totality, a concept which should be understood in a double way: 'as simultaneously involving tendencies to unity and differentiation' (Post 1990:14). Which pole of the relationship (unity in diversity) will be dominant depends on the historically specific conditions and the social formation (Wolpe 1989:8). In a word, the unity-in-diversity concept is based on a realist concept of totality.

### **Relevance of the alternative concept**

The idealist concept of totality, as interpreted by the unity-in-conformity analysis, acknowledges the centrality of the Absolute, the realisation of which bestows unity and suppresses the distinctness of the constituent unity as a condition for the cohesion of the whole. In contrast to this, the unity-in-diversity concept does not attribute the unity of the whole to the presence of actualisation of the Absolute nor does it consider the whole as something in, yet separable, from its parts. In the realist concept of totality:

the unity of the whole does not suppress distinctness of the determinations constituting it; rather this distinctness is the precondition of

any unity which is not the self-relation of the spirit (or the Absolute)...  
(Collinicos 1976:45).

These analyses, derived here from a number of studies, assert the materiality of the world without undermining the significance of spirituality and cognition (Post 1990), the specificity of the entities constituting the world; and at the same time, (in the case of social formation) their unity within a complex structure, 'structure-in-dominance' (Collinicos 1976:45). Unity of the social formation is the function of relations of subordination and dominance obtaining between the constituent parts of the structure in dominance. To further grasp the nature of this unity, it is essential to be more specific about two terms here: complexity and structure.

The complexity of the whole depends on comprehending it as consisting of a number of distinct but interrelated instances.

In a nutshell, then, the social totality is a complex structured unity. Its complexity lies in the fact that it is a unity of distinct, relatively autonomous instances with different modes of development. Its structures lie in the fact that its unity results from the hierarchy of the instances as determined by the economy in the final analysis. In Collinicos' (1976:62) words, 'that totality is structured is as essential to its nature as that it is complex'.

Contrary to the ethnocentrism of the conformity-based perspective of unity which considers differences as antithetical to unity, this perspective recognises differences as built-in elements of its totality. A tunnel vision perspective is irrelevant here. Instead:

... the differences have to be welcomed as part of the Kaleido-scope of national life, contributing in their various ways to the national whole. If this can be achieved, we can have unity with diversity – or, as we might put: ethnicity (or multi-religiosity) and diversity without conflict... (Stevenson 1989:207).

Within such a non-ethnocentrist perspective, no culture or value system of a particular segment has the moral right to universalise its attributes over others as a condition of the unity of the whole. Different parts contribute to nurturing unity and national cohesion. Consequently, factors which are often regarded as divisive and contributing to a breaking down of indigenous culture are now factors which unify (Stevenson 1989:205-206) and help bring together different groups, cultures and individuals in a dynamic interaction to create an integrated whole. Commenting on the utility of this approach, a Sudanese intellectual (Khalid)<sup>12</sup> had it that:

Sudan is an Arab country, but its Arabism is not like that of Syria, Sudan is a Muslim country, but Islam in Sudan is not like Islam in Saudi Arabia, and Sudan is an African country, but its African character is not similar to that of Kenya...

From the point of view of this perspective, differences are recognised and contradictions are not written off but dealt with by the people in the course of shaping their own destiny. In Callinicos' words, it is the working out of these contradictions between instances constituting the social whole which determines its trajectory. History is not the expression of a spiritual essence, nor is it the progressive realisation of innate characteristics of a nation (Arabism) or culture (Africanism). It is a process whose development is the outcome of the relations (and contradictions) of the economic, political and ideological instances composing the social whole.

It is peripheral capitalism which defines the trajectory of Sudan's social formation, organising and determining the relations in and between its various instances (economic, political and ideological). The resulting unity is essentially of an uneven nature, with hierarchically ordered instances (and contradictions) within the social totality. It is a unity of a janus-faced character; being always simultaneously functional and contradictory, both constructive and destructive, both integrative and

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<sup>12</sup> During an interview on SPLA/SPLM Radio.

disintegrative. Which side of the relationship will be dominant depends on the historically specific conditions and the social formation.

### **Obstacles to unity**

In Sudan the relations within and between instances are characterised by the fact that class and union-class contradictions (ethnic, religious, cultural) overlap and are materially and ideologically mutually reinforcing. In the present conjuncture, this has tilted the relations more towards a destructive and disintegrative pole. The situations actually obtaining can be generally described as hardly conducive, in political, economic and social terms, to unity and integration. We shall elaborate on this by briefly considering the rigidity of the social structure and social mobility processes.

In Sudan, the ethnic factor intertwines with non-ethnic factors (education, wealth, occupation, status) to produce a complex, unschematic stratification matrix. This does not mean that social differentiation in Sudan is exclusively ethnic-based as some studies have tried to establish. It is our position here that the stratification system is a class-determined one in which ethnic (or religious) elements constitute a relatively more visible index of more complex structured peripheral capitalist societies, like Sudan, where class, status and ethnicity interpenetrate. The public signification of the stratification system

... is more explicit than in societies where no ethnic (religious) index exists; it is a more rigid system, since any member of the society (in particular those of the oppressed nationalities) rising in status has to negotiate more than one system of status symbolism. The calculus of social mobility is far more complex... (Hall 1978:152-153).

That is, members of marginalised ethnos, classes and social categories (e.g. women) passing upward from one position to another have to negotiate (peacefully) the public signification of the social structure along several axes.

This point can be further developed by considering social mobility as an index of efficiency and rationality of the existing social structure. An over-simplified schema is used here to divide/classify the population into three core ethnic categories: Northerners, Easterners and Southerners. The dominant classificatory scheme, which reigned in Sudanese studies for some time, was based on a Northerners-Southerners dichotomy, but this has failed to capture the complexity and diversity of the Sudanese society. As an alternative, we suggest here that a category of Westerners (not in the geographical sense) be introduced to reflect the diversity of social structure. This category of Westerners refers to ethnic groupings occupying an intermediary position between Northerners and Southerners, sharing ethnic and/or cultural affinities with the former and social/economic status with the latter. The criterion thus employed is based on a combination of ethnic, social and economic indicators. The enhanced or restricted chances for social mobility of the three core ethnos, Northerners, Westerners and Southerners, is a function of the nature of the stratification system.

The stratification system approximates a pyramid with the upper triangle dominated by Arab-Muslim ruling classes and groups, together with a tiny fraction of Westerners and Southerners who were able to assimilate or come closer to the jallaba class in economic wealth, social status, language, education and values. The jallaba rank highest on all social, economic and political aspects, with their positions and privileges protected and legitimised as such by state ideology, national chauvinism and manipulation of cultural boundaries (i.e. religion). The middle layers of the social pyramid are likewise occupied by a predominantly Arab-Muslim middle class. This did not result from numerical strength, if any, but it is rather a consequence of colonial and post-colonial transformations in education and employment. Yet, there are increasingly significant numbers of Westerners and Southerners who managed to penetrate into middle ranking positions and occupations. Peasants, artisans and urban workers in the North are congregated in the lower layers of the pyramid, but these layers are overwhelmingly dominated by nomads,



poor peasants and marginalised groups of Westerners and Southerners, for example. The latter are typically incorporated in positions with the least status and material reward in the national labour market.

This social stratification system is not legitimated by culture alone, but mainly by underlying structures of peripheral capitalism. These structures historically evolved as an outcome of the intrusion of colonial capitalism in the period of 1898-1956, and since then have been maintained by post-colonial development. Endeavours to adjust the lop-sided nature of the system and remove (ethnic-cultural) irrational barriers to social mobility were all in vain. Stagnation, rigidity and inefficiency characterised the performance of the social stratification system.

Different analyses have attempted to probe into the nature of the 'dysfunctionality' of this system and account for its rigidity and the consequent threat it poses to unity and national cohesion. As suggested above, analyses derived from the unity-in-diversity concept are much more adequate than analyses based on the unity-in-conformity concept in accounting for the stagnation and disintegration of present structures. In broad agreement with the arguments of this paper, analyses by Shadad (1988), Ali (1990) and Umbadda (1990), for example, have stressed the role of the bourgeois class nature and the hegemonic faction(s) in mismanaging the economy and society and pursuing a dead-end line of development. Hence,

... war, political instability and the resurgence of obscurantist ideology (and disunity) are all symptoms of the present crisis in the Sudan. This is a crisis of structure and crisis of development (Shadad, 1987:29).

In other words, the structure-in-dominance is in crisis, meaning that the post-colonial national integration projects, largely informed by the unity-in-conformity concept and maintained through the hegemonic Arab-Muslim domination over all features of organised social life, have failed in historically transforming Sudanese society.

## **Conclusion**

Studies on integration in Sudan have been placed within a broad theoretical sketch of a continuum with two poles: studies on unity-in-conformity and studies on unity-in-diversity; each having its justifications and agents. These form the major dominant concepts of unity, albeit a 'unity' with different theoretical properties and reasoning. In this paper, some theoretical features of the two competing concepts on national integration have been considered together with their capacity of exploring issues of unity and diversity. Related to this, it is argued that the unity-in-diversity concept has much more analytical potential and scope than the unity-in-conformity concept. The latter, it is believed, does not provide the means for tackling intricate issues of complexities and historically evolved contradictions, since the concept is predisposed (by its philosophical idealist assumptions) to writing these complexities and contradictions off instead of recognising them as real.

As an alternative, the unity-in-diversity concept is not only capable of accounting for the structured contradictions and complexities of the Sudanese society, but is more conducive to constructing a viable project of unity in differentiation. This is so because the stagnation and disintegration characterising existing structures of Sudan are conceived as a product of socio-economic processes. Removing the rigidities of the system and its disintegrative factors does not mean wishing away objective contradictions and differences, but instead comprehending and dealing with them within a new paradigm that sets them as parts of the transformation and rebuilding process.

Though there are no guarantees in history and though the crisis-ridden situation in Sudan is open to many options, nonetheless, there are moments in Sudan's political history which point to a possibility of a way out. Armed with this unity-in-diversity perspective, forces of change would be able to thrash out an appropriate, sound political project which would, among other things, contribute to nurturing and consolidating peace, harmony and coexistence among the diverse groupings of society;

and create a stock of symbols, ideas and ideals sufficient to accommodate and contain contradictory impulses, and push forth a consistent, historical, progressive unfolding of Sudanese nation formation.

Since this is not an idealist conception, it is more plausible, for example, to conceive of differentiation in economic status and life-chances as a function of a rationally-based open system with no built-in ethnic and cultural barriers to social mobility. Therefore, a just and a fair system is all that is required for the working out of contradictions and complexities. And what is more, the potential for this, and consequently for a viable unity, is there. It is the task for further research to dig in the ethnography, social history and culture to lay bare the untapped symbols and resources that support and encourage coexistence, tolerance and accommodation. As people elsewhere, Sudanese people make their own history within conditions not entirely of their choice. Whether the Sudanese remain as one united, nation or whether they become disintegrated into many 'nations' would be the outcome of their own doing. Unlike proponents of the unity-in-conformity concept, adherents to unity-in-diversity are more in line with 'historic calling' and their choices seem to align more with progressive unfolding of Sudanese nation formation.

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# Identity Politics, Democratisation and State Building in Ethiopia's Federal Arrangement

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## **Abstract**

Relations between identity politics, democratisation, and state building are complex, especially in the cases of relatively young post-colonial countries, such as those in Sub-Saharan Africa. The complexity emanates, in part, from the multiplicity of the intervening variables. This paper proposes that the factors that impinge on the relationships include: the nature of the historical state-identity and inter-identity relations, the nature of the state, including the quality of its leadership and its effectiveness in promoting the well-being of its citizens equitably, the state's approach to state-building, the organisation of political parties, and the structure of electoral systems. Developing a general theory on the relations between identity politics, democratisation, and state building is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the paper aims to contribute to our understanding of the nature of the relationships by exploring how they have unfolded in Ethiopia's fifteen-year-old federal arrangement.

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## **Introduction**

Relationships between identity politics, democratisation, and state building constitute a complex analytical terrain in African realities. Part of the complexity emanates from the fact that in relatively new states, such as those in Sub-Saharan Africa, national citizenship and ethno-national citizenship are often in competition, if not in conflict. In addition, the relationships between the three variables are mediated by the interplay of a number of other factors, including the nature of the historical state-identity and inter-identity relations; the nature of the state, including the quality of its leadership and its effectiveness in promoting the well-being of its citizens equitably; the state's approach to state building; the organisation of political parties and the structure of electoral systems.

As a case study, this paper does not aspire to develop a general explanation of the relationships between identity politics, democratisation, and state building. Its rather modest objective is to contribute to our understanding of the nature of these relationships by exploring how they have unfolded in Ethiopia's fifteen-year-old federal arrangement, which has been instituted with the stated objectives of enhancing state building and democratic governance by granting identity groups the right of self-governance.

The paper is organised into five parts. The first outlines tentative propositions that intimate how the mediating factors identified above impact the relationships between identity relations, democratisation, and state building. It also attempts to clarify the concepts utilised in the propositions. The second part discusses the rationale for the institution and composition of Ethiopia's federal arrangement. The third part discusses how a federal arrangement facilitates state-building. The fourth part examines the basis for the sceptical reaction to the arrangement by many political organisations and appraises the performance of the federal arrangement in resolving identity-based conflicts in the country. The fifth part synthesises some of the key factors that have hampered



the federal arrangement from transforming identity relations and registering significant advances in the processes of democratisation and state building.

### **Factors affecting the nature of identity relations**

It is likely that the interaction between the state and identity groups and among identity groups would be more susceptible to conflict in countries where state building and consolidation of national citizenship are less developed, inter-identity relations are unequal and the state is perceived to be partial in its relations with identity groups. In such countries ethno-nationalism would be a strong mobilising force of the population, since it is not counter-balanced or mitigated by developed intra-group socio-economic differentiation, inter-group socio-economic ties, and national citizenship. Moreover, where identity politicisation and mobilisation are high, political parties are likely to be organised largely along ethnic lines. Under such conditions crafting a political system that accommodates the interests and demands of competing ethnic groups becomes highly challenging, especially where some forms of proportional representation and consociational decision-making systems are not in place, as Lijphart (1999) and Cho (2007) note.

Historically, the initial stages of state building were accomplished mostly through expansionist conquests or reactions to such efforts. Referring to nineteenth-century Europe, Lewis Namier notes that, 'states are not created or destroyed, and frontiers redrawn or obliterated, by arguments and majority votes; nations are freed, united, or broken by blood and iron, and not by a generous application of liberty' (Schwarz 1995:60). Charles Tilly (1975) also confirms that European states emerged as a consequence of wars. It seems that ethnic identity was rarely a major consideration in state making since most states are multi-ethnic. State building or consolidation, which follows the initial crafting of a country, is, however, achieved through various peaceful mechanisms, including economic integration, democratisation, and socialisation.

The initial carving of states is often the result of either internal expansion or external colonial conquest. The Ethiopian case would suggest that state consolidation is not impacted differentially by the two processes. The modern Ethiopian state was created through expansionist conquests in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the state-building problems the country currently faces are not any less challenging than those faced by most other African countries, which were carved out by European colonialism. Even if the differences are not inconsequential, what matters most seems to be whether or not the state develops the peaceful state consolidation mechanisms to integrate the populations under its domain into a political community of national citizens.

The colonial state had no interest in promoting state consolidation mechanisms in its colonies, which were essentially territories for monopolised plunder. In most cases, the post-colonial African state also has yet to develop such mechanisms. Often African states revert to coercive measures when challenged by identity groups. The results of the coercive approach have been dismal, however. The state in much of Africa lacks the military capability to quell quickly the armed challenges it faces from identity groups. Many African civil wars thus linger for a long time, as the examples of Somalia, the Sudan, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and the Ivory Coast demonstrate. Even when the violent conflict is brought to a conclusion through a military victory of one side or another, military success rarely translates into a permanent peace and successful state building without the appropriate mechanisms for consolidation of national citizenship. Several African countries, which were able to end their civil wars through military means, including Nigeria, Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, Angola, the DRC, the Republic of Congo, and Chad, remain embroiled in new conflicts or continue to face growing ethnic and civil strife (Mengisteab 2004). As Collier et al (2003) note, the economic destruction and disruption that accompany lingering civil wars also make future conflicts more likely by intensifying economic hardships and hatred.

In the present era, where human rights and democracy have been widely accepted as universal values, violent and coercive measures have also increasingly lost legitimacy. Countries that forcefully subjugate their citizens in the contemporary global realities often face condemnation by humanitarian organisations, the United Nations (UN) system, and other members of the global community, as demonstrated by the Darfur case in the Sudan. Okafor (2000:525) makes a compelling case when he asserts that ‘... violent, coercive unification and repressive homogenization are morally and socially bankrupt.’ State building in the present era has increasingly become intertwined with building a democratic system that allows the crafting of political arrangements that accommodate the various identities. Existing identity-based conflicts, however, often make the democratisation process more difficult.

The nature of the state is another factor with major impact on the relationship between identity politics, state building, and democratisation. If the state is perceived to be an effective agent for the advancement of broad social interests in an equitable and just manner, then the prospects are greater that the interaction between the state and identities as well as among identities would be more peaceful. By contrast, the state is likely to face challenges from ethnic identities if some groups perceive it to be incapable of advancing broad social interests or view it as partial to particular identities.

The nature of identity relations, in turn, is likely to impact the nature of the state. The more identity politics are characterised by state-identity or inter-identity hostilities, the more difficult it will become for the state to provide public goods and services effectively or to establish itself as a neutral promoter of broad social interests. It is also more difficult for the national elite to overcome the temptations of ethnic loyalties in favour of national goals.

The nature of the post-colonial state in Africa remains highly problematic. The state is widely viewed as a self-serving apparatus that is often dominated by one identity group or another and manipulated by external

actors. As a result, many African countries are caught up in a vicious cycle. They need an inclusive and democratic state which is committed to advancing broad social interests in order to reconcile identity relations and, thereby, promote state building. Such characteristics of the state are not attainable without reconstitution of the state and transformation of state-identity relations, however. In countries, such as Ethiopia, which are characterised by chronic crises of state building, manifested in the volatile state-identity relations and a state which is widely perceived to favour one identity group or another, breaking the vicious cycle and transforming identity relations is a daunting task. The combination of ethnic-based political parties and majority-based electoral systems adds to the complexity.

Before discussing the Ethiopian experience, however, it would be helpful to clarify the key concepts contained in the main thesis of the paper, including identity, state building, and state reconstitution. Most countries consist of populations with multiple identities – including those based on race, ethnicity, religion, territory, institutions and values. Such plurality often leads to diversity of interests and even differences in perspectives on various issues, such as political philosophy and economic and cultural policy. The diversity of interests and perspectives that emerge from the plurality of identities may not, in themselves, be a source of conflict if the liberal conception of citizenship in which the rights and obligations of individuals are well established and the institutions that guarantee such rights are firmly in place. Such conditions, however, rarely exist and, in their absence, individuals tend to rely on their ethnic membership for security, social support, and access to resources. Identity-based loyalties thus easily become a source of mobilisation when conflict over resources and power lead to antagonistic rivalries.

Distinctions are often drawn between ethnicity as a cultural identity – an identity based on shared cultural traits – and ethnicity as a political identity – where it becomes an organising force for purposes of advancing the group's broad socio-economic interests. It is not likely that cultural identities exist without some level of politicisation. In any case, this

paper is mainly concerned with the political aspect of ethnicity where ethnic groups constitute an ethnic or civic citizenship and participate in two publics and authorities – the ethnic group and the state (Ekeh 1975; Sklar 1993; Ndegwa 1997). One reason for focusing on ethnicity as a political identity is that Ethiopia's federal system is crafted largely, although not exclusively, along ethno-linguistic lines and the country's constitution has formally institutionalised ethnic citizenship. A more general reason is that ethnicity in Ethiopia, as in many other African countries, is politicised and groups claiming to represent ethnic entities are major players in political conflicts.

For the purposes of this paper, state building is used in two interrelated conceptions. One is in lieu of nation building to avoid confusion between state and sub-state nationalisms. It refers to the complex process of forging national unity and integrating the various identities in a country to form a community of citizens (national citizenship) under shared political and economic systems. The second conception refers to developing institutions of the state to enhance the capacity and effectiveness of the state in advancing the well-being of citizens and in managing society in line with the authority mandated to it by citizens.

State reconstitution is another equivocal concept that requires clarification. Given the African colonial and neo-colonial experience, the post-independence African state has retained many of the characteristics of the colonial state and operates largely outside the control of its citizens and in isolation from the traditional institutions and cultural values of its constituency. As a result, it largely operates as a predatory apparatus and as a source and dispenser of privilege rather than as an apparatus that advances broad societal interests. In addition, its governance structures often run parallel to the traditional institutions of governance, which are still adhered to by large segments of the population, especially in rural areas. The economic systems of African countries are also fragmented between the modern and traditional sectors. The duality of economic systems and institutions of governance, along with the disjuncture between policy and broad social interests, made possible

by the state's independence from societal control, have all contributed to the incoherence of African governance institutions, thereby, undermining state building, economic development, and democratisation. In addition to these general characteristics of the African state, the Ethiopian state, which was created through expansionist conquests, has its own particular characteristics. The state, at least until the mid 1970s, largely maintained close political and cultural ties with the (Abyssinian) identities that created the modern state through conquests, relegating the subjugated identities into second class citizens by marginalising them from political power and cultural influence.

State reconstitution is utilised to refer to two types of changes. One is to bring synergy in state-society relations by bringing the state under the control of the citizenry, thereby transforming it into an agent for the advancement of broad social interests. The second and related conception refers to state neutrality. Since a major aspect of politics deals with the allocation of access to resources, including political power, various identities in the pursuit of maximising their access to power, resources, and other opportunities, engage in competition. But they are also likely to cooperate in order to advance mutual interests and to prevent one identity from establishing a hegemonic domination over all others. Such competition and cooperation, however, take place within the socio-economic platform established by the state. If the state lacks the necessary level of neutrality for the fair management of identity relations and moderation of inter-identity inequalities, then identities are likely to engage in violent conflicts often against the state but sometimes directly against each other. As noted, such conflicts, of course, hinder democratisation, and the absence of democratic governance, in turn, hampers state neutrality and state building – producing a vicious cycle.

State neutrality may not be fully attainable in multi-ethnic countries, as some languages and cultures are likely to be more dominant than others. A democratic system of governance with equitable representation of all groups can, however, reduce biases. Decentralising governance structures

and building institutions that ensure separation of powers among the various organs of the state also mitigate biases.

### **Rationale for the ethnic-based federal arrangement in Ethiopia**

Between the early 1960s and the beginning of the 1990s the Ethiopian state faced a costly war against Eritrean nationalists, who opposed Ethiopia's annexation of their country by abrogating the UN-instituted federation between the two entities. Along with continued economic stagnation, the country also faced growing revolts by ethnic identities, who opposed what they considered to be a highly centralised system of governance that marginalised their socio-economic and cultural rights and suppressed their self-determination (Worku Lakew 1992; Gebru Tareke 1991). Such revolts were particularly rife among ethnic identities in the southern and eastern parts of the country which were incorporated into the Ethiopian empire through expansionist conquests, during the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the empire's expansionist conquests, ethnic relations evolved into a political, economic, and cultural subordination of the newly incorporated identities, who in many cases were reduced to landless tenants, while many of the occupying troops and administrators emerged as landlords. Following the country's incorporation into the global economy, beginning in the early 1950s, Ethiopia's political economy also evolved into uneven regional relations. With the centre of the empire and centre of modern economic activity located in Addis Ababa and its surroundings, even parts of the former core of the empire, Tigray in particular, were reduced to peripheral status.

As resistance by the subordinated and marginalised identities escalated in the 1960s and the country drifted into deepening turmoil, the rights of 'oppressed' nations and nationalities, along with land reform to restore land to the tillers, became key issues of debate and demands by the University Students' Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA) and other progressive elements in the country. The frequent protests by USUAA,

and its publication, *Struggle*, played important roles in articulating the critical problems facing the country at the time and in inciting opposition to the monarchy which was overthrown in 1974 by a military junta. The country's intelligentsia across the ethnic spectrum, including the leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), many of whom attended Addis Ababa University, was influenced by USUAA's debates and demands. USUAA's views on the right of nations to self-determination lacked a concrete conceptualisation of the specific governance structures that would actualise the right of self-determination of nations and whether self-determination included secession. At least one article in *Struggle* argued, however, that secession, in principle, is the right of an oppressed nation (Walleign Mekonnen 1969). The federal arrangement instituted by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991 is thus largely a response to the widely recognised discontent of various ethnic identities in the country with the centralised and oppressive governance structure. It also has an ideological basis that can be traced back to the movement of the country's university students of the 1960s and 1970s.

The federal arrangement also reflected political pragmatism on the part of the EPRDF leadership. The country was verging on disintegration along ethnic lines, as manifested in the multiplicity of ethnic-based liberation movements. At the time it was unlikely that the TPLF and its coalition partners would succeed in replacing the collapsed military regime in power and rule the country without addressing the demands of the identity-based political organisations. When the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam fell, the TPLF and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) along with various groups, which represented or claimed to represent 'oppressed' or 'marginalised' ethnic identities, were opposed to a centralised unitary structure of the state. Whether the federal arrangement was a top-down imposition or a broad-based pact among the elite of the various ethnic identities is, however, debatable.

As Aalen (2002:2) notes, the federal arrangement can be viewed as an arrangement resulting from an understanding among the identity-based



organisations that participated in the July 1991 National Conference. The Conference, which was attended by some twelve political groups with roughly 400 delegates, adopted a provisional Charter, approved the establishment of a transitional government led by the EPRDF, and recognised the right of nations to self-determination – including self-governance, cultural autonomy and even secession. An 87-seat Council of Representatives (CoR) was also established to implement the Charter. The CoR appointed a Constitutional Drafting Committee and the new constitution, which was ratified on December 8, 1994, confirmed the right of identities to secession.

Although ethnic groups were invited to send representatives to the National Conference (Said 1998), participation was not open to all political organisations that existed at the time. Merera Gudina (2004), for example, contends that the EPRDF leaders invited weak parties and excluded potential contenders for power from the process. Two non-ethnic-based political organisations, the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), which were opposed to the ethno-nationalist movements, were, for example, excluded from participation. Groups that are now opposed to the constitutional provision that grants the right of secession to ethnic groups also claim lack of adequate representation in the constitution-making process.

Another factor that hindered the process from being a genuine pact among all relevant entities was the uneven power relations among the groups that participated in the National Conference. The TPLF (and its coalition members within the EPRDF) was the most powerful actor followed by the OLF, while other groups were far weaker both militarily and politically. Such imbalance in power relations created at least the perception that the arrangement was authored and imposed by an understanding between the two more powerful organisations.

The nature of the TPLF was another factor. As an ethnic-based movement, the TPLF pushed for a federal arrangement with the right of

secession. As a movement that came to control central power through military means with little support from other identity groups, however, it was less than keen to share power with other regional actors and thereby promote genuine self-rule. The TPLF's rocky relationship with the OLF, which resulted in the destruction of the latter militarily, is a case in point. The federal arrangement can thus hardly be regarded as a national consensus that resulted from a democratic interaction among the country's various political organisations. It is, however, difficult to argue that it was destined to fail, since democratic governance, which develops trust among the various actors, was still possible, despite the initial missteps.

The foregoing discussion also explains why Ethiopia's federal arrangement was crafted largely along ethno-linguistic lines. The regional states, except the two chartered cities, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, and the regional state of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's, which are multi-ethnic, are carved along ethno-linguistic lines. Demarcation of the regions along ethnic lines, no doubt, was rather complex due to the historical demographic movements and intermingling of identities. The key players in the negotiation process at the National Conference were, however, ethno-nationalist groups and their demands were ethnic-based. The outcome was thus predetermined by the nature of ethnic relations in the country and by the composition of the key political players at the National Conference. Ethiopia is hardly an exception in this regard, however, since many successful federal arrangements in the world, including those of Switzerland, Belgium, Canada and Malaysia, are constituted along ethno-linguistic lines.

### **Identity relations and state building under the federal arrangement**

There are various conceptions of federalism. For most students in the field, it represents a political system in which a constitutionally guaranteed division of jurisdictions and functions between central and geographically defined regional governments precludes the total subordination of

one to the other (Riker 1964; Watts 1966; Elazar 1976; Lijphart 1979; Osaghae 2004). For others, it represents a relative difference in the degree of decentralisation of political power along a continuum rather than a different kind of political system (Livingston 1952). Despite the conceptual differences, a federal arrangement is widely regarded to have greater potential than a unitary governance structure in mitigating conflicts in countries where society is constituted of ‘... territorially based communities that are clearly differentiated by language and ethnicity...’ (Stein 1968:729). This potential emanates largely from the fact that it represents a constitutionally guaranteed ‘covenant or compact’ between the state and regional entities about how power is shared between them, thereby creating various centres of power through regional self-rule. Since the nature of the covenants, which combine regional ‘self-rule’ and central ‘shared rule,’ may differ in various countries, federal arrangements may also differ from one case to another.

In reality, federal arrangements do not always result from a negotiated pact between the central government’s elite and its regional counterparts. Two other conditions can lead to the establishment of a federal arrangement, although these conditions tend to undermine the arrangement’s effectiveness. One is the conviction of or calculation by leaders of the central government that some dispersal of power that addresses the demands of identity groups for group rights and self-rule might mitigate identity-based conflicts and facilitate state building. The central elite may also see the arrangement as a mechanism for consolidating its grip on power, especially if it can divide and weaken regionally based opposition or demands for self-rule. In any event, the arrangement, in this case, is largely authored by and imposed from the top – often without the consent of the regional elite or with the support of only a segment of the regional elite.

Another condition that can lead to the institution of a federal arrangement is a negotiated agreement or understanding among the leaders of various identities when the central government has collapsed, as in Ethiopia. In this case also, the arrangement and its terms may or may not

have the consent of all relevant parties. Consensus among the relevant parties on the terms of the arrangement is, however, a requisite for the success of a federal system. As Elazar (1976) notes, a government that decentralises power can also recentralise it.

The different parties to a federal arrangement have different expectations and they also have different criteria for success. The central government's expectations largely revolve around the avoidance of violent conflicts and the promotion of national unity (McHenry 1997). From the point of view of each of the ethno-nationalist claimants, however, success entails enhancing the group's interests, including autonomy in local governance and freedom to develop its own culture and economy. A successful federal arrangement would have to satisfy the key interests of the state and those of the divergent groups, not only in terms of outcomes but also in terms of the process in creating the arrangement and establishing its terms. With respect to the process, a federal arrangement requires certain preconditions – including a national consensus on preservation of national integration under negotiated terms and access of all political organisations, especially those with identity-based demands, to participate in the negotiation process to establish the arrangement.

Consensus on national integration is critical for the success of a federal arrangement, since identities not interested in national integration are unlikely to participate in its establishment and attempts to impose it on such groups may undermine the arrangement as well as the whole process of state building. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), for instance, did not participate in the National Conference that established Ethiopia's federal arrangement and it was not possible for the Ethiopian state to impose the arrangement on Eritrea without re-igniting the thirty-year-old war against Eritrean nationalists.

The terms of the federal arrangement also need to be established through a general consensus. The arrangement would likely be undermined by spoilers if the process of establishing it is not inclusive or if the terms of the arrangement do not have the consent of the relevant actors.

Exclusion of any entity from participation or imposing the terms of the arrangement on any entity over its objections amounts to denial of representation in the establishment of the political system that determines the process of state building and developing structures of governance.

In other words, to be successful, the establishment of a federal arrangement has to be conducted in a democratic or at least a consociational manner. The consociational requirement, however, implies that, if a pact cannot be reached, an option of exit from the state is available to identity groups that demand it. Needless to say, in addition to satisfying the preconditions, the government has to implement the arrangement properly so that the demands of ethnic identities or regional entities for self-rule and cultural autonomy are respected.

Given the identified criteria, Ethiopia's federal arrangement can be assessed by creating a composite index of indicators of success that would include the preconditions, the manner of implementation, and the outcomes. Such a list of indicators includes (1) a general consensus on national integration, (2) inclusiveness of the process of negotiation to establish the federal arrangement, (3) a general consensus on the contents of the federal arrangement among the participants, (4) dispersal of power among the federal constituents to ensure self-rule and cultural rights, and (5) avoidance of violent conflicts.

Since a key goal of a federal arrangement is to resolve state-identity and inter-identity conflicts and, thereby to foster state building and democratic governance, avoidance of violent conflicts over time can serve as a proxy for the proper institution, implementation, and functioning of a federal arrangement. The groups that rebelled against the highly centralised unitary structure of governance in Ethiopia prior to 1991, for example, can be expected to challenge the state again if their participation in the making of the federal arrangement was hindered, if they did not consent to its contents, or if implementation did not satisfy their demands. Identities that did not challenge the state under the previous regimes may also opt to do so if they feel bypassed in the establishment

of the new arrangement by the current regime. To the extent that the various groups that were engaged in conflict prior to its institution consented to the federal arrangement, the level of violence in the country would be expected to decline. If the arrangement is not properly implemented, however, the violence may begin to increase as disillusionment with the arrangement sets in.

### **Consensus on national integration**

Prior to 1991, there were several groups in the country that waged armed struggle for independence (see Table 1). None of these groups have officially renounced their independence goals. Yet, the demand for independence has sharply declined, at least in intensity, in the post-1991 era. The TPLF had a long standing bifurcated strategy of creating a united democratic Ethiopia or an independent Tigray. The alternative goal of independent Tigray has become mute since the TPLF assumed state power. Like the TPLF, the OLF also pursues the goal of independence of Oromia without rejecting national integration under terms it favours. Its participation in the 1991 National Conference as well as in the early phase of the Transitional Government, between 1991 and 1992, reveals the flexibility of its stand on independence. Even after its withdrawal from the Transitional Government and its resumption of armed struggle, the position of the OLF does not seem to have changed. The Ogaden issue is more difficult to read as it is complicated by the (Greater) Somali nationalism and irredentism. It also constitutes one of the most serious tests of the constitutional provision that grants the right to secession. The magnitude of the violence in the Ogaden, however, reveals that the right of secession that the constitution grants is merely nominal. Nevertheless, although failure to facilitate regional self-rule might rekindle them, demands for independence outside of the Ogaden are much less intense now than they were in the pre-1991 era. However, a strong consensus on national integration has yet to emerge, however.

## **Reaction to the federal arrangement**

As noted, the terms of the federal arrangement were more the product of an understanding between the more powerful organisations, the TPLF and the OLF, than a consensus among all identities. Partly as a result of the lack of inclusiveness of the process, Ethiopia's federal arrangement has remained controversial among many of the country's political parties. In any case, since most of the political parties are organised along ethnic lines, their reaction to the arrangement can serve as proxy to reaction by ethnic identities. It is important to note, however, that the political parties in the country and the inter-party coalitions, that are being established, are still in a formative stage and, as a result, the positions they hold on various issues, including the federal arrangement, are still evolving. Nevertheless, at least four competing views on the federal arrangement can be identified.

One view strongly opposes the federal arrangement in favour of a unitary political structure. This view, which is largely expressed by Amhara-based parties, such as the All Amhara People's Organisation (AAPO), is particularly opposed to the constitutional provision that acknowledges the right of ethnic identities to secede. According to this view, recognising the right of secession is a prelude to the country's disintegration. Some observers also see the federal arrangement 'as a path bound to lead either to increased repression or to mounting ethnic conflict and eventual disintegration of the country' (Ottaway 1994:47). A major campaign issue of the opposition parties within the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) during the May 2005 national election was to change the constitutional provision that grants ethnic groups the right to secede.

Another view accepts the federal arrangement in principle but opposes that it is ethnic-based and that it grants ethnic entities the right of secession. This view is expressed by various opposition political organisations, especially in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPRS). Parties, such as the Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP) also subscribe to this view.

A third view, predominant among Oromo opposition parties and organisations, including the OLF and the Oromo Federalist Party (OFF), accepts the ethnic-based federal arrangement and the right of secession granted to ethnic identities. It contends, however, that the arrangement is totally undermined by the government's unwillingness to disperse power. According to this view, Ethiopia's political system remains highly centralised and dominated by a single ethnic identity and the government uses the arrangement for purposes of divide and rule rather than for fostering self-rule by regional governments.

A fourth view, advanced by the ruling coalition and its affiliated parties contends that the arrangement has vested the right of self-determination upon ethnic identities and has charted a voluntary and democratic approach to state building.

Many of the political organisations critical of the federal arrangement were not in existence at the time of its formation. Nevertheless, the divergence in views reflects the democratic deficit that characterised the establishment of the arrangement.

### **Cultural rights, dispersal of power, and self-rule**

Notable progress has been registered in advancing the cultural rights of formerly suppressed identity groups since the institution of the federal arrangement. Identities, such as the Oromo, whose language could not be used in public settings during the era of the monarchy, are now able to develop their cultures and to use their languages in broadcasting through various media outlets. There is also greater recognition of religious rights. Moslem communities in the country, for instance, are now freer to build mosques and to celebrate their holidays. Such changes were initiated during the military regime but they have been advanced further under the EPRDF government. No doubt, many challenges still remain. There is, for instance, the difficult task of reconciling the different perspectives among identities on historical memories, as some historic events and personalities trigger ethno-nationalism among some



identities and nationalism among others. Some of the builders of the modern Ethiopian state, such as Emperor Menelik II, for example, are viewed as heroes by some identities while others view them as brutal colonisers, who engaged in slave trade and condemned their victims to poverty through devastating plunder and land expropriation.

Some progress has also been achieved in the realm of self-governance. The need to address the problem of identities is now widely recognised. Regional governments have thus been established with the federal arrangement, although a great deal of disagreement persists about the composition of the regional units. Progress with respect to empowering the regional states to conduct self-rule independently from the central state remains less visible. The absence of inclusive dialogue and general consensus on the establishment of the federal arrangement among the elite of various identities was one major factor that has obstructed progress. This democratic (consociational) deficit has hindered the development of trust and confidence between the government and the various identity-based opposition groups.

Ethiopia is a country with some 80 ethnic identities (Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities 1985). Three identities, the Oromo, Amhara, and Tigray, are, however, the most predominant, and success of the federal arrangement and the country's political stability are likely to, largely but not exclusively, hinge on the configuration of power among the elites of these three identities.

The Tigray identity is the smallest of the three in population size. It was also politically and economically marginalised following the abrupt end of the reign of Emperor Yoyannes IV in 1898 and the shift of power to the Amhara of Showa. In 1991, however, the TPLF overthrew the military regime, in association with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, and assumed state power in conjunction with two smaller organisations; the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM). The TPLF created the OPDO and ANDM before it assumed power to form the Ethiopian People's

Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in an attempt to broaden its popular base beyond Tigray by providing representation in the front to the Oromo and Amhara identities respectively. The two organisations, however, have found it rather difficult to win legitimacy from their respective identities, at least in part due to the fact that they were created by the TPLF and not independently formed or home-grown. The OLF in particular resented the creation of the OPDO, which it views as a puppet organisation designed to serve Tigrean hegemony (Chanie 1998). While the reaction in rural areas is difficult to determine, the EPRDF's assumption of power was received with widespread scepticism and resentment by the urban population and political organisations in much of the country outside Tigray.

The Amhara comprise the second largest group in the country and the political elite came largely from this identity group during the period between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and at least the fall of the monarchy in 1974 (Clapham 1969). In the early 1970s, for example, about 65% of officers at the rank of lieutenant-colonel and above were Amhara, whereas 20% were Oromo. Even in the late 1970s roughly 50% of the officer corps was Amhara. In part due to their greater access to education, the Amhara are also said to have continued to dominate the bureaucracy, even after the fall of the military regime (Young 1996). Given the dominant role the Amhara elite played in Ethiopian politics, at least since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, their displacement by a new Tigrean elite in the top echelons of power has hardly been palatable to the Amhara elite (Henze 1998). While the dominant role of the Tigrean elite in the regime brought about convergence between national and Tigrean citizenships, it brought about divergence between national and Amhara citizenships, triggering the rise of Amhara ethno-nationalism (Tegegne Teka 1998). The TPLF's recognition of Eritrean independence, which left Ethiopia landlocked, also gave critics of the new regime the ammunition for questioning TPLF's patriotism. For these critics, the federal arrangement is essentially a TPLF scheme to divide the country along ethnic lines in order to facilitate the

extension of its control of power (Interviews with leaders of political parties, 2006; Walle Engedayehu 1993).

The Oromo constitute the single largest ethnic group in the country and are said to comprise roughly 40% of the country's total population. The Oromo masses were largely reduced to landless tenants after their incorporation into the empire through conquest during the waning decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The country's major exports, including coffee, largely come from Oromo areas. While the 1975 land reform liberated the Oromo masses from tenancy, the OLF and other Oromo militants contend that the Oromo still remain under domination, as they are underrepresented in the central power and the self-rule promised by the federal arrangement remains essentially nominal (Leenco Latta 1998). National citizenship and Oromo citizenship thus remain divergent under the current regime, as they did during the previous two regimes. The OLF is still operating as an armed rebel movement. It has, however, not yet been able to mount a serious military threat to the regime.

Given the widespread resentment of the EPRDF's takeover of state power and the absence of a national consensus in the creation of the federal arrangement, the rivalries and mistrust among the political elite of the different identity groups, especially among those of the three largest groups, have continued. Despite its control of the military, the TPLF has a distinct disadvantage and a dilemma in the inter-identity rivalry. The disadvantage is that, to the extent that ethnic affiliation remains an important factor in how people vote in elections, the TPLF, with a small population base of roughly 10% of the country's total population, can hardly be expected to maintain central power by winning elections that are conducted fairly. The dilemma is that perhaps it can extend its control of power through coercive means relying on the military but this makes it indistinguishable from the dictatorial regime it replaced and harms its relations with the donor community by spoiling the democratic image it attempts to project.

The TPLF seems to have devised a three-pronged strategy to deal with the disadvantage and the dilemma it faces. One aspect of the strategy has been to expand the circle of its coalition and affiliated parties by creating or attracting ethnic-based organisations throughout the country and win elections as a bloc. This aspect of the strategy, however, has created its own set of dilemmas. On the one hand, in order to win legitimacy among their constituents, which is essential for electoral success, its coalition partners and affiliates need to assert their independence from the TPLF. If these parties attain independence, however, there is the potential risk to the TPLF that the OPDO and ANDM, in particular, can overshadow it, due to their larger demographic base. On the other hand, if they fail to assert their independence these parties risk failing to gain legitimacy among their constituency, thereby undermining their chances of electoral success, without which their relevance to the TPLF also diminishes.

A second aspect of the strategy seems for the TPLF to rely on the application of decisive force against rebel groups and even opposition parties that pose threat to its regime, using the pretext of keeping order. The manner in which the government reacted to the protests following the announcement of the results of the May 2005 parliamentary elections seems to validate the existence of such a strategy. The protests resulted in the deaths of 193 people (BBC News 26 October 2006). It is, of course, possible that the deaths could have been due to spontaneous overreaction by the police forces. However, it is likely that the severity of the government's reaction was intended to send a message to opponents, since it was followed by the detention of some 76 opposition politicians, journalists, and civil society activists under charges that include 'treason and genocide', which are non-bailable capital offences (Human Rights Watch 2006). Repressive measures against suspected sympathisers of armed rebel groups, such as the OLF is another indication (Amnesty International 2006).

A third component of the strategy is to gain international legitimacy by establishing close relations with powers, especially the United States (US).

The regime's willingness to partner with the US in the 'war against terrorism' in Somalia has, for instance, gained the regime political and financial support. None of the aspects of the strategy, however, advance the self-rule that the federal arrangement is expected to promote.

The centralising impact of the dominant party created through coalition building has also impeded progress in promoting regional self-rule. Opposition parties and critics widely view the coalition partners and the affiliated parties of the TPLF as satellite organisations created and manipulated by the TPLF in order to camouflage its highly centralised control of power (interviews of party leaders). They contend that the satellite parties lack popular legitimacy to win elections. The dominant role of the TPLF within the coalition, along with the absence of overt policy diversity within the parties in the coalition, suggests that the autonomy of the coalition members and affiliated parties may be rather limited. Regardless, the EPRDF with its partners has become a dominant party and was able to win elections rather easily and to control power both at the centre as well as at the regional governments until the 2005 elections although the fairness of the elections it conducted since it assumed power is highly questioned (Merera Gudina 2004). Its success was largely due to disorganisation and fragmentation of opposition parties, which often boycotted elections alleging unfairness of the electoral process. The unexpected results of the May 2005 national election have, no doubt, shaken the EPRDF's dominance sustained for over a decade. The party lost all 23 parliamentary seats in the capital city, Addis Ababa; although overall it took 327 of 546 total seats. But the opposition claims that the government stole the election it had lost by manipulating the results.

Even with the humbling setback, the ruling coalition remains dominant and exercises tight control of policy both at the centre and at the regions. At the regional level, despite its loss in Addis Ababa in the 2005 elections, the EPRDF controls the most important regions, including Oromia, Amhara, the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's, and Tigray. Its affiliated parties also control the other five regional governments. The centralised party structure along with control of power in

the regional governments has weakened the regional self-rule. According to some opposition party leaders, interviewed for this study, the governance structure in the country, for all practical purposes, remains as centralised as it was during the previous regimes.

### **Avoidance of violent conflicts**

A crucial indicator of the performance of a federal arrangement is the extent to which it avoids or transforms violent conflicts. In this regard also, the arrangement has not been successful. The violence in the aftermath of the May 2005 election and the imprisonment of the leaders of opposition parties, along with the government's poor human rights record, especially in the Ogaden, indicate that the country remains deeply divided along ethnic lines. Regardless of their merits, the charges of genocide the government levelled against the leaders of the opposition also reveal that the federal arrangement has not transformed state-identity or even inter-identity relations in the country.

A growing number of identity-based armed movements have also re-emerged. The magnitude of the wars waged by such groups has not reached the pre-1991 level, when the country seemed to be verging on disintegration. Since the withdrawal of the OLF from the transitional coalition government and especially over the past few years, however, armed conflicts in the country have been on the rise (see Table 1). In addition, a number of political parties seem to have grown more militant. In the aftermath of the May 2005 elections, a number of political organisations, including the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), All Amhara Peoples Organisation (AAPO), the Gambella Peoples Democratic Organisation (GPDO) and the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) have forged an alliance with the rebel movement, the Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (AFD). As noted, many of these parties are opposed to the federal arrangement. Even when they accept it in principle, many of them suggest conflicting criteria for establishing the component units of the federal arrangement including, geography,

economic viability, size of territory and population, language, ethnicity, and culture. It is unclear, however, if the conflicts in Ethiopia are based on all the factors they suggest. In any case, given the current trend in the rise of armed groups, the institution of the federal arrangement can hardly be considered a success in reconciling state-identity conflicts and in advancing the processes of state building and democratisation.

*Table 1: Comparison of the number of armed rebel groups before and after 1991*

| <b>1960-1991</b>  | <b>Post-1991</b>   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF),</li> <li>• Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF)</li> <li>• Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF)</li> <li>• Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)</li> <li>• Western Somalia Liberation Front (WSLF)</li> <li>• Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF)</li> <li>• Afar Liberation Front (ALF)</li> <li>• The Somali Abo Liberation Front (SALF)</li> <li>• The Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromo (IFLO)</li> <li>• Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)</li> <li>• Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF)</li> <li>• Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (AFD)</li> <li>• Sidama Liberation Front (SLF)</li> <li>• Ethiopian People’s Patriotic Liberation Front (EPPLF)</li> <li>• Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union Front (ARDUF)</li> <li>• Afar Liberation Front (ALF)</li> <li>• Gambella Liberation Front (GLF)</li> </ul> |

**Conclusion**

A number of factors have contributed to hindering the federal arrangement from attaining its stated goals. Lack of inclusiveness in the process of its formation and the resulting absence of a general consensus on its terms are among the critical factors. Failure to implement it properly by

dispersing power is another factor. A genuine dispersal of power signals the emergence of a consociational system among the elite and between the centre and the regional governments that represent the various identities. Such a system had the potential to reduce the occurrence of violent conflicts, thereby facilitating state building and democratisation. In addition, a dispersal of power elevates the significance of power in the regions and leads to competition for power within the elite of the regional states. Such competition, in turn, can facilitate the emergence of organic national parties through formation of coalitions and unifications of parties with similar platforms across regions and ethnic identities.

Differences in capabilities between the centre and the regional governments may have contributed to the failure in dispersing power. A federal arrangement, as a constitutionally guaranteed political structure of non-centralisation, requires a certain balance of power between the central and regional elite so that the centralising tendency of the elite that controls state power is restrained. Without narrowing the gap in balance of power, the central elite's decision to formally adopt a federal structure does not necessarily indicate the elite's commitment to non-centralisation of power, as Enloe (1977) aptly notes. The different regions face a notable imbalance in capabilities that impedes implementation of extensive decentralisation.

Another major factor, which perhaps is an inherent structural weakness of the federal system, is how national parties, that encompass all or most of the ethnic identities, emerge out of the fragmented identity-based regional entities and parties. The Ethiopian experience, where the TPLF has created parties from other identities and forged a coalition under its wings, has resulted in hierarchical relations within the coalition. It remains to be seen if over time the EPRDF coalition will be transformed into a genuine national party with horizontal relations among its coalition members from different identities. At the present time, however, the EPRDF is largely viewed (at least by the opposition groups) as essentially a TPLF party with satellite parties as coalition members. As a result,



many of the opposition organisations view the federal arrangement rather cynically as a strategy crafted to extend the minority TPLF government's tenure in power. Yet, the opposition parties have also not been able to forge a national party. The CUD, which was the major contender in the May 2005 elections, for instance, is largely viewed as a coalition of Amhara parties with merely symbolic representation of other identities. It is hardly more inclusive than the EPRDF and it is highly unlikely that a party dominated by a particular identity would gain legitimacy among other identities. Moreover, its opposition to the federal arrangement is unlikely to be acceptable to other identities, which demand self-governance with extensive decentralisation.

Another obstacle to the success of the federal arrangement has been the centralising nature of a dominant party. National parties are inherently centralising, as they formulate policy platforms for the whole country. They may even be more centralising when relations among the various identities are hierarchical. The building of coalition partners from various identities by the EPRDF, for purposes of creating a national party has thus become a mechanism that compromises the goals of decentralisation of power and promotion of self-governance for regional and identity groups. The opposition parties have also not been able to propose a political formula that addresses such problems. These organisations have yet to formulate and propose a credible alternative structure of governance capable of fostering state building. The primary goal of these organisations, thus far, has been to dislodge the ruling party from power and trade places with it. From its continued centralisation of power and the flawed successive elections it has conducted (Merera Gudina, 2004; European Union Election Observation Mission 2005), the EPRDF, on its part, appears to have little inclination to share power.

Developing healthy identity relations, democratisation, and state building are intricately interrelated processes. Failure in one area leads to failure in all. Moreover, the specific factors that have undermined the federal arrangement in Ethiopia cumulatively reveal that the developing healthy

identity relations, democratisation, and state building require transformation of the elite, both those in power and those in opposition, and reconstitution of the state. Unfortunately, neither elite transformation nor state reconstitution has yet taken place in Ethiopia.

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# Cultural Diversity and the Somali Conflict: Myth or Reality?

*Abdulahi A. Osman*

## **Abstract**

The current conflict in Somalia has proven to be long and devastating to its people where thousands were killed, raped, robbed and made refugees or internally displaced. Despite its deadly impact, the conflict has defied all expectations both theoretical and practical. However, there are several studies that attempt to explain the conflict and its causes. These causes include the role of cultural diversity in both bringing and maintaining the conflict in Somalia and Africa in general. This article argues that despite the existence of many studies that emphasise this relationship, they remain empirically inconclusive. The Somali society consists of many communities that differ linguistically and socio-economically. Despite their differences, the conflict in Somalia and Sub-Saharan Africa in general stems primarily from inequality worsened by economic decline

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plus the easy availability of weapons that resulted from the massive sale of arms by members of the armed forces. The article concludes with several suggestions for bringing about resolution to this prolonged conflict in Somalia. One of the main suggestions would be an attempt to attract the vast wealth and brain power of the Diaspora communities.

## **Introduction**

The majority of the armed bandits in Somalia often act on behalf and under direction of brutal warlords battling for the control of the state. The bloodbath that resulted from this brutal power struggle, as well as subsequent droughts, claimed thousands of lives, created thousands of refugees outside the country and displaced thousands internally.

Despite this human catastrophe and suffering, the literature on the causes of Somalia's conflict remains inconclusive. The conflict has been explained as stemming from the problem of governance and bad leadership (Samatar 1993; Samatar 1994; Hashim 1997), from the problem of resources (Kusow 1994; Mukhtar & Kusow 1993; Besteman 1999; Casanelli and Besteman 1996) or from bad economic policy and lack of sustainable development (Osman 2007; Mubarak 1996). Other analyses portrayed the Somali conflict as 'continuing from Stone Age ancestral clan rivalries', but using 'Star Wars military violence' (Besteman 1999:4).

Most of the literature that examines conflicts in Somalia and the region in general give 'ethnicity' and 'contested identity' priority. Specifically, the literature concentrates on 'ethnicity' or 'ethnic-primordialism' as the main cause (Gurr & Harff 1994; Horowitz 1985). Over the years, however, a number of scholars have questioned the validity of such a causal link (Eyoh 1995; Adedeji 1999; Mamdani 1996; Braathen et al 2000). This article argues that ethnicity is indeed an important factor in explaining these wars, but in a specific manner not yet adequately addressed in the literature. It is insufficient to establish that often the members of the warring factions belong to different ethnic, clan or tribal groups. What must rather be explained, is why the warring factions are fighting.

This article examines the Somali conflict and the role that cultural diversity played in bringing and maintaining the conflict. In addition to social, ethnic, economic and political factors, Somalia's location has been a central factor in these conflicts. Many forces, both inside and outside the region, have always desired to control the strategic crossroads located in Somalia. Over the years these forces have been attempting to influence the Somali political systems. These forces include the Kingdom of Oman, the Mamluks of Egypt, several European empires during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and the superpowers during the 20<sup>th</sup> century Cold War (1945-1990). At the end of the Cold War in 1990, Somalia unfortunately descended into chaos. And since then the continued supply of fresh weaponry has further exacerbated the precarious situation of the country. Thus, the combination of social, economic and political factors along with the available weaponry has prolonged the Somali conflict.

This article concentrates on internal factors, specifically the role of cultural diversity, in both bringing and maintaining the conflict for the past 16 years. But, the article argues that despite the existence of the tribal/clan differences that are competing for the control of the state institutions; the Somali conflict resulted from three interrelated factors: inequality, economic decline of the 1980s and availability of weapons in the country. The article will be divided into four parts. The first part examines the causes of the Somali conflict. The second part examines the role of the cultural diversity in the Somali conflict. The third part examines the potential role that cultural diversity can play in the resolution of the Somali conflict. Finally, concluding remarks will be offered.

### **The causes of the Somali conflict**

The causes of the Somali conflict have their roots both in local factors, including social, cultural, economic and political traits of the Somalis, and external factors, including the geo-political and strategic desire of powers from inside and outside the region. Since its beginning, however, the causes of the internal war in Somalia have remained a mystery for both

Somalis and non-Somalis. The central question is, as Professor Ahmed Samatar (1993:69), one of the leading scholars in Somali studies, brilliantly put it as ‘... why and how could this society, one of the few nations in the continent with one ethnic group, one culture, one language, and one religion, find itself in such parlous circumstances – verging on self destruction?’

There are two explanations that are offered. On the one hand, Professor Samatar and others explained the internal war in Somalia as one that is stemming from:

- ♦ The characteristics of human nature oriented towards a ‘historical livelihood’ (Samatar 1993:69).
- ♦ The collapse of the ‘public space and institutions’, coupled with the political and economic failures of the former regimes, especially that of Siad Barre.
- ♦ The longevity of Barre’s dictatorial regime that created ‘myriad defects and antipodal propensities of anti-regime groups and forces’ (Samatar 1993:60-70).
- ♦ The lack of planning on the part of the anti-regime forces.

In short, Professor Samatar and a great number of scholars explained the Somali conflict as coming from a colonial legacy, militarism, anarchy, political struggle, tribalism and other related factors.

On the other hand, there are scholars who argue that the causes of the Somali civil war go much deeper than the explanations mentioned above. According to them, the main causes of the Somali conflict are attributable to the traditional socio-economic mode of production of the Somalis, which is *pastoralism* or *agro-pastoralism* (Kusow 1994:25). The Somali society, according to these scholars, can be divided into two groups, which differ in language, culture, and most of all in mode of production. Therefore, the conflict in Somalia stems from ‘... conflict/competition between Daroods and Hawiye for the control and domination of the inter-riverine region’ (Mukhtar & Kusow 1993:2). Still others



blame Somalia's geo-political location, which regional and world powers have regarded as strategically important. First, it is in close proximity to the all-important oil production centres of the Middle East. Secondly, it controls the important trade route through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. Over the centuries Somalia received military and economic aid from these powers.

The above contradiction is an indication as to why Somalia's civil strife is a mystery, and indeed why it is prolonged. These scholars fall into two schools of thought: *homogeneous* and *heterogeneous*. The homogeneous school assumes that the Somali people originated from Southern Arabia, that they share language, culture and common ancestry, that they subscribe to Islam, engage in camel nomadism, and especially that, unlike the rest of Africa, Somalis have been considered a nation.<sup>1</sup> This school became the standard among the scholars and students of Somali studies, and among the successive Somali governments from 1960 to 1991, the majority of which came from the nomadic clans of the Mudug and Majertinia regions.<sup>2</sup>

The *heterogeneous* school, on the other hand, assumes that the Somali society consists of settled as well as unsettled communities. This school points to the existence of communities that practice farming, fishing, ironwork, a mixture of farming and herding, trading, etc. in the country, specifically in the southern part (Kusow 1994:27-28). Also, this school argues that Somalis are a multi-lingual society where other languages such as Maay, Jiidu and Dabarre are spoken (Mukhtar 1989; Ahmed 1995).

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1 For a similar idea see Laitin & Samatar 1987 and Samatar 1988. This line of thought is the most accepted. This does not mean that other lines of thought were non-existent, but they were never encouraged or were even totally ignored.

2 At independence the news on radio Mogadishu was broadcasted both in *Maay* and *Mahaa* languages and by 1961 the government decided to use only *Mahaa*, which was the language of the ruling clan. The glorification of their culture and language continued. One example is the creation of the Department of Culture in the Ministry of Education during the 1960s. During the 1970s this department was elevated to the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education. The main idea behind this department was to collect and promote the nomadic cultures. See Mukhtar 1989.

In fact, I. M. Lewis (1980:5) described the difference between the *Maay* and *Mahaa* languages as ‘to the same extent as Portuguese and Spanish’. This issue, however, has become a point of contention among the students of Somali studies. In 1994 Professor Samatar mentioned in a footnote the existence of other languages in Somalia, but he insisted – despite their existence – that Somalis are homogeneous (Samatar 1994). Professor Samatar went on to say that the homogeneity of the Somali people ‘is more than defensible’. In light of the explanations offered by these two schools, the question is then: What is the root causes of the Somali conflict? Before we address this question we need to put the Somali conflict in perspective since it began in 1991.

Since 1991, the Somali internal war has had several observable patterns.

- ◆ First, there is the concentration of the war in the southern part of the country. The inhabitants of this area continue to carry the bulk of the death and destruction of the war.
- ◆ Second, the inhabitants of the most fertile parts of the country became the majority of the victims of this man-made starvation in Somalia. This was due to the looting of their reservoir, keeping them from all productive activities and finally blocking and looting the food and medicine that were provided by the international donor community in 1992. This blockage and looting caused millions of southern Somalis to die from this man-made starvation, and eventually this area was named the *triangle of death*.
- ◆ Third, the overwhelming majority of the warring factions, including the recent Islamic Courts and Transitional government, are from the nomadic clans of Mudug and Majertinia regions (Osman 2006). In light of this background and perspective then, the question is what are the main causes of the prolonged internal war in Somalia?

## Genesis of the Somali conflict

This paper argues that internal wars in Sub-Saharan Africa in general, and Somalia in particular, resulted from three interrelated factors, all of which exist because of actions by the colonial and post-colonial states as they responded to the whims of the international political economy.

1. The *social inequality* that was brought about by the colonial and post-colonial states has been extracting the country's wealth. This extraction was accomplished either directly through state-owned enterprises or indirectly through domination of the country's economic activities. The successive Somali governments created patrimonial paths to state benefits and became the creators and enforcers of social inequality within the society. The beneficiaries of this unequal distribution of state benefits in Somalia are advantaged on the basis of clanism, tribalism and regionalism. The result has been a decline in investment in social capital such as healthcare and education, and an increase in political instability and poverty.

2. The *economic decline* in the mid-1980s that resulted from among other things the reduction of the economic aid, which funded these states throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s. The result was the disappearance or diminishing of the large and corrupt central government's ability to maintain its reciprocal relation with the various groups (usually the relatives of the ruler) in the country.

3. The *access to weapons* among the civilians, which occurred when civilians turned to weapons as a mode of survival and defence during the disparate economic times of the 1980s. The abundance of the weapons was the result of Somalia's hyper-militarisation since independence, coupled with the armed forces who were impoverished by the economic decline and rampant inflation of the 1980s.

The following section explores the impact of these three factors on Somalia's internal war.

*Inequality and the Somali conflict*

According to the British anthropologist I.M. Lewis and many others, the Somali society could be described as fundamentally egalitarian and democratic. Lewis (2007) argues: 'Traditionally, decisions are made by councils of men. These councils are egalitarian... Somali egalitarianism permeates all aspects of society. In Somalia, it is not at all unusual for a poor and uneducated nomad to approach a high government official as an equal and engage him in a discussion about the affairs of state.'<sup>3</sup> However, in contradiction to this, Lewis (2007) goes on to say: 'While Somalia's political culture is basically egalitarian, social and political changes have created new patterns of social life. In recent years, a new urban group educated in Western-type schools and working as merchants or in government has emerged. These urbanites enjoy more wealth, better access to government services, and greater educational opportunities for their children than do other sectors of society.'

In the above paragraph Lewis establishes the existence of both an egalitarian as well as a stratified society in Somalia. The question is then who are these Western educated elite who enjoy the disproportional access to wealth and influence in this 'egalitarian' society? A careful review reveals that some groups disproportionately make up the majority of this elite club. As already mentioned, the arena in which Somalia's inequality and social exclusion function, is that of clanism and tribalism. It is evident that the Somali political and economic arena has been dominated by the nomadic clans of the Mudug and Majertinia regions since independence.<sup>4</sup> The members of these clans made up the majority of the ruling class throughout the short-lived Somali state (1960-1990). Moreover, the members of these clans are at the forefront of the devastating current internal war in Somalia.

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3 Lewis 2007 <http://www.culturalorientation.net/somali/ssoc.html>

4 Please note that these regions are based on the six regional administrations that Italian colonialists used, which the government of Siad Barre (1969-1990) sub-divided into smaller regions. Also, parts of the former Majertinia region were renamed as the Northeastern region.

*The Italian colonial state and its impact on the Somali state*

Colonial administrations provided the blueprint for the post-colonial states in Africa. Italy has specifically been the precursor of the failed Somali state by recruiting its future ruling elites. These elites were not recruited for their ability to develop the political, economic and social interests of the Somali people but were rather selected, as in many colonial states, for their contribution to the efficient functioning of the extractive colonial state. Therefore, historicism and the loaded dice analogy (implicitly or explicitly) established the Somali post-colonial political and economic structure, and the subsequent conflict that followed after 1991.

The seeds of the current suffering in Somali were planted at the end of the 19th century when the European colonial administrations of the British, the Italians and the French were established in Somalia. For the purpose of this paper, however, we will specifically examine the impact of the Italian colonial administration and its contribution towards establishing the current clan hierarchy of the country. Italy first established its authority in Somalia in 1889 when it created a small protectorate in the central zone. Italy expanded to the south and northeast, a territory deserted by the Sultan of Zanzibar. In 1925, the Jubaland treaty was signed, which detached the area east of the Juba River from Kenya to become the westernmost part of the Italian colony. In 1936, Italian Somaliland was combined with Somali-speaking districts of Ethiopia to form a province of the newly formed Italian East Africa. During the Second World War, Italian forces invaded British Somaliland. The British, however, operating from Kenya, retook the whole region in 1941, including Italian Somaliland, where it ruled until 1950.

Italy renounced its claim to the rights and titles of the territory in 1947 under Article 23 of the 1947 peace treaty. On November 21, 1949, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a resolution recommending that Italian Somaliland be placed under an international trusteeship system for 10 years. Italy, using tremendous local manoeuvres, won this trusteeship and the General Assembly granted Italy the

authority to administer its former Somaliland territory.<sup>5</sup> Italy established the *Amministrazione Fiduciaria della Somalia* (AFIS) which led to Somalia's independence on July 1, 1960. Immediately the northern British territory of Somaliland, which gained its independence on June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1960 joined the South and formed the Somali Republic.<sup>6</sup>

During its administration, Italy promoted the members of the nomadic clans from the Mudug and Majertinia regions as the local elites. One main reason was that the Italians needed agricultural products which were available in the south. Therefore, Italy created a system that helped them to effectively fulfil their exploitative ambitions, while at the same time using as little Italian manpower as possible. Italy established a patrimonial path to state where they hired the members of the Mudug and Majertinia clans to fill up the lower and mid-level jobs.<sup>7</sup> Such promotion of clan members from these 'chosen' regions forced the southern agrarian communities to pay heavily for the extractive colonial and post-colonial states. Additionally, this extractive nature of Somalia's governance has further spilled over into the anarchy that followed the collapse of the state in 1991.

### *Inequality and the politics in Somalia since 1960*

As argued, Somalia's elites are overwhelmingly from Mudug and Majertinia regions despite the fact that these clans are minorities in number.<sup>8</sup> In 1960 Somalia established a unitary government with a

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5 For details on the Italian manipulation during this period, see Mukhtar 1989.

6 This union has been broken since 1991 when the former British colony of Somaliland declared its separation. However, this breakaway republic has yet to receive international recognition.

7 This system was used extensively during the colonial era. A case in point is the Hausa's political domination of Nigeria. For details on this practice, see Rodney 1977.

8 Please note that this is based on the 1958 census, which is the only census available. This census showed a total population of 1,263,584 and was based on the entire Italian Somaliland's six regions: Majertinia 82,653 (7%), Mudug 141,120 (11%), Hiiraan 176,528 (14%), Banadir 387,600 (31%), Upper Jubba 362,234 (29%) and Lower Jubba 113,449 (9%). This makes the Southern regions of Hiiraan, Banadir, Upper and Lower Jubba the majority with 82% of the population. For details on the 1958 census, see

parliament that had 123 members from all the regions of the country at the time (eight, including two regions from British Somaliland). The government had a President and a Prime Minister who in turn appointed the cabinet. During the years between 1960 and 1969 the dominance of the Mudugian clans was clear. For example, members of these clans who occupied the posts of president and cabinet ministers between 1960 and 1969 were roughly two-thirds compared to the one-third occupied by all the other clans.

On October 21, 1969, army units took over the control of the government. The commander of the armed forces Brigadier General Mohamed Siad Barre assumed leadership (although he is not regarded as the author of the military takeover) of the officers who deposed the civilian government. President Siad Barre, himself from Mudug region and a member of the elite clans, installed a governing body, the Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC), and became its president. The SRC arrested and detained leading members of the government, including the late Prime Minister Mohamed Ibrahim Igaal.<sup>9</sup> The SRC banned all political parties, abolished the National Assembly and suspended the constitution.

The regime identified itself as a Marxist revolution that adopted the radical transformation of Somali society through the application of ‘scientific socialism’. The regime promised, among other things, an end to tribalism, nepotism, corruption and misrule. The new motto became: *maxaa taqaan* and not *ayaa taqaan*, which means ‘it is what you know’, and not ‘who you know’. Immediately in 1970, the government of Barre

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Mukhtar 1989:26. These regions remained intact until the Barre regime (1969-1991) subdivided them into eighteen regions. This division was mainly intended to create administrative enclaves for the Mudugian clans and facilitate the Darood expansion to Southern Somalia. For example, the Upper Jubba region was divided into Baay, Bakool, Gedo and parts of current Middle Jubba region. Specifically, the Gedo region was created for Barre’s Marehan clan. The capital city for the region was made a town called Garbaharrey – a small, mountainous and literally empty town – instead of the larger city of Bardhere, a boom city on the banks of Jubba river that has a very long history that is estimated at over 500 years.

9 Mohamed Ibrahim Igaal later became the president of the breakaway Republic of Somaliland.

organised a huge public rally, where a dummy symbolising tribalism was burned and buried. However, Barre established a totalitarian regime complete with indisputable absolutist power. His regime constituted an even more polarised clan-based structure than the previous regimes. For example, Barre's first cabinet in 1969 consisted of 14 ministers of which seven (or 50%)<sup>10</sup> were members Barre's Darood clan. As time progressed this domination became even blunter.

The overall domination of the Mudugian clans in the Somali politics has been clear through the years. For example, between 1960 and 1990 there were 26 governments that nominated a total of 567 posts. The Darood clan took 216 posts, Hawiye 125, Isaaq 102 and Digil and Mirifle 31. This domination was also clear in the individuals that were nominated for government posts. For example, there were 155 individuals that made up the ruling elite in Somalia's government including president, vice-president, prime minister, and ministers. The members from the Darood clan and their sub-clans made up 62,<sup>11</sup> followed by the Hawiye with 36 and Isaacs with 30 (see figure 1). This domination of the nomadic clans continues in post-1991 Somalian politics. For example, 11 out of the 15 warlords that attended the talks in Addis Ababa, including the late General Mohamed Farah Aideed, are from the Mudug region. Additionally, the leaders of the current political formation in Somalia, the Islamic Courts under Shekh Dahir Hassan Aweys and the transitional government under Colonel Abdulahi Yusuf Ahmed, are members of the Mudug clans. Despite the apparent inequality that continues in Somalia, social inequality alone does not explain why conflict in Somalia started and continues to bring misery to its people.

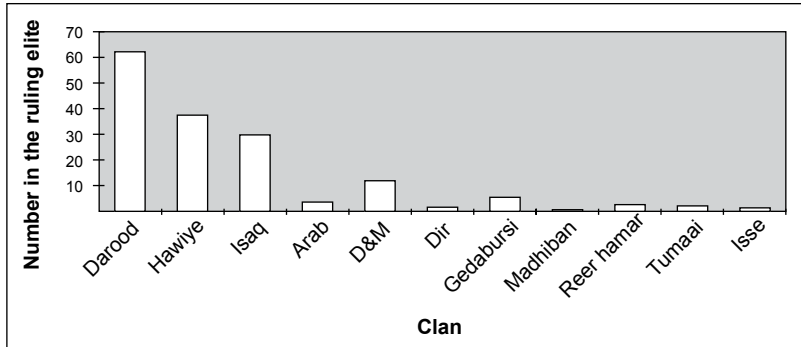
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10 Up from 32% in the government of the late Abdirshahid Sharmaarke (1967-1969).

11 Including two prime ministers – in 1967-69 under the late President Sharmaarke and in 1990 under Siad Barre.



Figure 1: The clan and sub-clans of individuals who held posts, including presidents, vice-presidents, prime ministers, and ministers between 1960 and 1990.<sup>12</sup>



Source constructed from Hagi & Hagi 1998:118-131.

### Economic decline

The economic decline in most African states, including Somalia, has resulted from social inequality coupled with the reduction of international donations during the 1980s. Over the years Somalia has been the darling of the international Donor Organisations. This was partly the result of the ideological war between the East and West during the Cold War. The Somali ruling elites over the years had received millions of dollars in foreign aid from various donors, which maintained their control of power for more than three decades. For example, between 1965 and 1987, despite the fact that the country’s economy had stagnated, Somalia received over US \$ 800 million from the United States (U.S.) alone (Ayittey 1994:3). The main reasons for the stagnation were corruption and the misguided economic policies of the various governments run by the regional and clan-based elites.

International aid had given the Barre regime the ability to maintain its grip on the state and keep the challengers at bay. Somalia, because of its

<sup>12</sup> D & M signifies the clans of Digil and Mirifle

strategic location, had been a magnet for the combatants of the Cold War (1945-1990). The port city of Berbera on the Red Sea has been, in specific, a point of contest and money machine for the regime. The former Soviet Union first established a naval base in the area and in return provided plenty of military hardware for the regime, thereby making Somalia's military one of the strongest armies in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, in 1977 during the Ogaden war between Somalia and Ethiopia, the Soviets switched their alliance to Ethiopia. The regime then turned to the U.S. for help. In 1980 the Carter administration promised supports for Barre on the condition that he would sever all relations with the Soviets. During that same year Washington and Mogadishu signed an agreement that would allow the U.S. navy to use the naval facilities at Berbera in exchange for military and economic aid. The Carter administration provided a package of about US \$ 45 million, which consisted of military, economic and budgetary support.

The Barre regime also received aid from its former colonial power, the Italian government, through its aid agency *Funda Aiuto Italiana*. Italy invested more than one billion dollars in various projects, but the majority of these projects were wasteful and misguided. Among the many projects was the over US \$ 250 million spent on the 450 km road in the sparsely populated and barren desert area between Garowe and Bosaaso (Ayittey 1994:3). The funds from these projects had been spent in a very wasteful and corrupted fashion and ironically the Italian government was aware of it. According to Italian Embassy in Mogadishu employee: '[The] Italian aid program was used to exploit the pastoral populations and to support a regime that did nothing to promote internal development and was responsible for the death of many of its people' (Ayittey 1994:3). This aid increased the inequality among the Somalis. For example, the number of luxury cars in Mogadishu increased, where it was not a surprise to see a Mercedes or a Toyota Land Cruiser in the streets and markets. More importantly was the increase in the number of luxury houses complete with swimming pools, air conditioners and all modern amenities. In fact, a whole area in southern Mogadishu where huge luxurious houses

were built by the elites became known as '*Booli Qaran*' meaning 'stolen public money'.

By the end of the 1980s, however, the large amount of aid that went to many African states, including Somalia, was devastating to their already weakened economies.<sup>13</sup> Keen (1998) argues that poor social service and poverty fuel conflict from below. Historically, poor parts of the society tend to turn towards banditry and other illegal activities. For example, in the late 1980s the city of Mogadishu has seen an unprecedented increase in the number of bandit groups and unruly teenagers from the poor parts of the city. One such group was a gang of former orphan children named *Ciyaal Faay Cali*, 'the children of Faay Ali'.<sup>14</sup>

The dissatisfaction that results from social inequality can become violent and may often lead to larger society-wide conflicts when it is accompanied by economic decline (internal or external) in the society. Bayart (1993)

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13 Foreign aid has proven to be a burden on many African economies. During the decade of 1970s and 1980s many countries opted for the easily available foreign aid and as a result ran into debt. Of the 32 countries with the highest debt, 25 belonged to Sub Saharan Africa. While many view foreign aid as beneficial to the economies of the recipient countries, others argue that aid flow has been disastrous to many developing economies. There are four factors behind the disastrous outcome. (1) Aid flows were generally closely tied to the geopolitical interest of the donor nations, mainly the West. (2) Aid revenue was not directly attached to production and has been continuously provided regardless of the recipient country's productivity or growth, which in turn hindered the incentive for local economy to grow. (3) Autocratic regimes became grant writers that declared what they intended to do with the funds, rather than promoting the country's economic development. Moreover, aid flows helped to increase the 'kleptocracy' among the ruling elite who had access to ready cash and used it for salaries and lavish lifestyles and for maintaining networks of patronage rather than productivity. (4) Aid has always been dependent on the domestic politics of the donor countries, which tend to distort any long-term economic planning and strategies (Brautingham 2000; Leonard & Straus 2003).

14 The name comes from a lady named Faay Ali who raised a number of orphans. These children reached adolescence during the 1980s, which coincided with the weakening of the Siad Barre regime. The gang was notorious for brutal actions including robbing, raping and even murders. But, importantly, they were partially responsible for the dismantling of the regime and the creation of public dissatisfaction and apathy towards the regime. This is based on an interview the author conducted during 1993-94 in Mogadishu.

argues that in the conditions of extreme poverty, scarcity, insecurity and political instability that exist in Africa, everyone is engaged in life-and-death struggles, both to survive and to accumulate wealth and power. In this struggle both rich and poor strategically attach themselves to networks and organise factions primarily based on one's family, friends, clan or ethnic alliance. This struggle is central to the understanding of political action in Africa. Its objective is the control of 'the distribution of the possibilities of realizing a primitive accumulation, in the strict sense of the concept, by the confiscation of the means of production and trade' (Bayart 1993:234). These factions, whilst engaged in the obtainment of an acceptable livelihood and security, provide the arena in which conflict and violence become more probable. Bayart concludes: 'Today, as yesterday, what is being fought for is the exclusive right to the riches claimed by the holders of 'absolute seniority' (Bayart 1993:241).

Overall, there is little doubt that the number of violent conflicts and internal wars has increased in the poorer countries of the third world. There is also little argument that the increase in the number of these conflicts was severe for Sub-Saharan Africa, coinciding as it was with an era of economic decline due to, among other things, the end of the Cold War. Stewart and Fitzpatrick (2001) assert that the high incidence of conflicts in poor countries results from three interrelated factors: (1) a widening inequality in wealth and income between *vertical* (social) groups and horizontal (territorial) groups in the country; (2) an increase in the uncertainty of future prospects; and (3) a weakened capacity of the state.

### **Access to weapons and the Somali conflict**

The economic decline, which resulted both from internal social inequality and from external factors such as the decline in the amount of aid and the enforcement of Structural Adjustment Programs, created an environment of declined security both economically and physically. Military expenditure is an issue of the security for the state. Hutchful (2000:211) argues

that among other things the state is created as a 'security racket'. He says, 'The relationship between governance and security is at once intimate and obvious. First, governance is both about creating and the management of the instruments of violence that at the same time necessarily underpins assuring conditions of security. Second, governance involves the effective administration, regulation and control of the instruments of violence'. However, Jackson (1992) argues that the security of the states in the post World War II era has been guaranteed by external forces e.g. former colonial powers, cold war superpowers, international and/or regional organisations (United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, Economic Community Of West African States, African Union, etc.) and the state is secured from external threat. Despite this minimum external security threat the African militaries expanded tremendously. For example, in 1963 the average African state had 0.73 soldiers per 1000 people, but by 1979 this figure had jumped to 3.10 per 1000 people (Herbst 2000:105). Therefore, over the years the state militaries became palace guards and a tool for the ruling elite to dominate the rest of the society.

The rulers of most post-colonial states in Africa have used the military as a reward for their clansmen. For example, in Kenya the Kamba and Kalenjin made up 34% of the Military in 1963, while these clans together accounted for only 9-11% of the total population. Also, in the same year in Nigeria, there were a total of 81 officers and 60 of them were Ibos (Odetola 1982). During Siad Barre's regime (1969-1991), the Somalia security apparatus was controlled by three groups: the Marehaan, which are Barre's clan, the Ogaden, his mother's clan and the Dhulbahante, his son-in-law's clan, who all fall within a larger clan family of Darood, an alliance labelled among the Somalis as MOD (Laitin & Samatar 1987). Over the years this large and tribalised military created an insecurity dilemma, where the average citizen was afraid of the military of his/her own country. Additionally, military expenditure dragged the economies of Sub-Saharan African countries to the ground. The result was that the responsibility for the security and welfare of individuals and groups

that were not part of the military or the bureaucracy fell to other social organisations such as clans or clan and kinship groups. There is no place where this issue was as grave as it was in Somalia.

Since its independence, Somalia received great attention from the combatants of the Cold War: the former Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR), and the US, which showered the country with huge supplies of weapons. Somalia always had a great appetite for weapons which was then matched by the willingness of the superpowers (during the Cold War) and regional powers (such as Egypt) to satisfy this demand. Since its independence in 1960, different Somali governments engaged in a policy of hyper-militarisation. Somalia spent an average of 20.45% of its budget on the military between 1960 and 1990 and had an average of 8 soldiers per 1000 of the population, well above the regional average of less than 4 per 1000 (Osman 2007). Between 1960 and 1990 Somalia's military grew steadily despite being one of the poorest states in the world. For example, the military expanded from 5,000 troops at independence in 1960 to 65,000 in 1990 (Lefebvre 1991).

Somalia's hyper-militarisation was greatly affected by its location, which is of great geo-political and strategic interest to the regional and great powers. During the early 1970s, the Soviets were allowed to establish a naval base at the strategic northern coastal city of Berbera, located at the entrance of the Red Sea. This was made mainly as a reaction to the large-scale American military support of Somalia's rival Ethiopia. During the war between Ethiopia and Somali war in 1977-1978, superpowers switched their allegiances. Soviets became allies of the Marxist regime of Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia (1974-1991), while the U.S. became an ally of Somalia. Between 1979 and 1990 the U.S. sent hundreds of millions of dollars worth of arms to Barre's regime in return for the use of military facilities at Berbera (Ayittey 1994; Lefebvre 1991). In addition to the support from the superpowers, the country also received military support from Arab countries, China, West Germany, Italy and Apartheid South Africa (Ottaway 1982; Lefebvre 1991).

In January 1991, Siad Barre's 21-year reign finally ended and Somalia descended into full-scale internal war. The Somali internal war had been in the making for several years. It resulted from a combination of several factors – local and international – and involved many different actors. At the national level, several years of continued frustration over basic human needs caused social unrest. Additionally, the government's ineffective policies created economic stagnation and brought about extreme poverty. Moreover, this decline made the government unstable as evidenced by the constant cabinet reshuffles, defections, loss of state authority and, worst of all, it politicised the armed forces. The difficult living conditions in turn created an incentive for young men to join factional militia that were opposed to the government of Siad Barre.

The economic hardship of the 1980s facilitated the transference of weapons to the public. Thus, by the beginning of the war in 1991 law and order immediately became non-existent and Somalia descended into total chaos. The chaos was further exacerbated by the failure of the international community to resolve the conflict at its early stages. All international organisations, including the UN and NGOs, and all diplomatic missions pulled out from the country. Regional organisations did not help either. Somalia is a member of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), the Organisation of African Unity/African Union and the Arab League but unfortunately not one of them had the capacity or the willingness to interfere. It took several thousands of Somalis to die, millions of dollars worth of property to be destroyed, and millions of refugees to show up in the neighbouring countries and as far as Canada and USA, for the west to come to the rescue. The Somali warring factions were left alone to fight and destroy the infrastructure of the country. In 1992 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 733 which called for an embargo on weapons and military equipment being sent to Somalia. However, since its passing, this resolution had become one of the most violated resolutions as Somalis kept

receiving fresh supplies of weapons from Arab and Ethiopian sources in clear violation of the embargo.<sup>15</sup>

The high military spending led to an economic slow-down in many Sub-Saharan African countries. As a country's economy declined it led to declining security and a leak of weapons through sale and theft into the hands of civilians. Where the bad economy is coupled with the availability of arms, the state becomes weaker and incapable of providing security (physically and economically), and this may lead to chaos and possibly the collapse of the state. As the central power weakened, and in some cases collapsed, the emerging groups must pay attention to their power relative to other groups. Power struggles ensue as these groups prepare and pool their resources in order to preserve their existence. These groups must organise themselves, choose leaders, set up bureaucracies to collect taxes (or sometimes loot others) and organise security forces in order to enforce internal cohesion and military forces to insure external security (Posen 1993). The power resources of the old regime, especially materials (e.g. weapons, money) and contacts (e.g. diplomatic relations), then become spoils for the contesting groups. For example, in the Somali internal war, the clans that had heavy representation in the military and the administration were best positioned to benefit from the disintegration of the state, both materially and politically. These groups were mainly from the clans of Mudug and Majertinia, in other words Darood and Hawiye. Overall, the conflict in Somalia resulted from the proliferation of weapons during the Cold War and the continued supply

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15 Time and again the Security Council revisited the observance of the resolution and came to the same conclusion. As early as July 1992 the violation of the resolution and the frustration of UN Secretary-General Boutros Ghali were apparent. For example, a report he furnished on 22 July 1992, says: '... the situation regarding the flow of arms and ammunition from outside and the continuing use of military weapons on a large scale inside Somalia had not changed since the last report.' (S/24343). This violation has been repeated several times since Boutros Ghali's report. A report furnished by the UN in November 1993 states: 'Major violations of the arms embargo against Somalia have taken place over a six-month period, but the weapons now arrive continuously in many small quantities, while large quantities arrive less often, a monitoring panel has told the United Nations Security Council.'



of weapons after 1991, which ignited and continues to ignite the war efforts among the grieving Somali clans.

### **Somalia's shared cultural values and heritage**

Earlier we have established the existence of two schools of thought in Somalia: homogeneous and heterogeneous. Depending on which school one subscribes to, one's conclusion is predictable. Somalis speak 13 living languages including Jiddu, Dabarre, Boni and Garre.<sup>16</sup> However, the overwhelming majority of Somalis speak the *Maay* and *Mahaa* languages. Despite the description of Somalis as a monolingual society, the speakers from each of these two languages are not intelligible to each other. In spite of this fact, however, I.M. Lewis, founder of the Somali homogeneous school of thought, described the difference between these two languages as similar to the difference between Portuguese and Spanish (Lewis 1980:5).

Closely following linguistic differences is the role of the clan. The Somali society is divided into six major groups who speak two distinct languages. These are (1) Hawiye, Dir, Darood, and Isaaq who are overwhelmingly nomadic and speak the 'Mahaa tiri' language, and (2) Digil and Mirifle who practice agro-pastoralism (a mixture of dry farming and herding) and speak the 'Maay' language. Additionally, there are smaller clans that include Bantu, Arab and Persian descendents.

The southern settled communities make up the overwhelming majority of the Somali population. According to the 1958 census<sup>17</sup> roughly 82% of the population of the Italian Somaliland live in the area south of Shabelle River. The Italian colonial administration divided the country into six administrative regions. These regions remained intact until the Barre regime (1969-1991) further divided them into eighteen regions.

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16 [http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_country.asp?name=SO](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=SO)

17 In 1974 the Barre government made another census, but its results were never published. For details on the 1958 census see footnote 9 above.

This division was mainly intended to create administrative enclaves for the Mudugian clans, specifically, the Darood expansion into Southern Somalia. For example, the Upper Jubba region was divided into Baay, Bakool, Gedo,<sup>18</sup> and parts of current Middle Jubba regions. But, let's look at the relationship between cultural differences and conflicts.

### **Cultural diversity and conflict**

The relationship between ethnic diversity and internal war can be traced back to Aristotle who had suggested that diverse nations are more susceptible to internal conflicts than their homogenous counterparts (Lipjhart 1977). Indeed, ethnicity *per se* constitutes the critical, if not the determinant, source of conflicts in general and in Africa particularly.

Most of the literature on conflicts gives 'ethnicity' and 'contested identity' priority. Specifically, the literature concentrates on 'ethnicity' or 'ethnic-primordialism' as the main cause of the increased number of conflicts (Gurr & Harff 1993; Gurr & Harff 1994; Horowitz 1985). Many internal wars in Sub Sahara Africa are attributed strictly to 'tribal warfare' and many Western analysts attempt to put the causes of these wars and violence on sociological factors inherent to Africa. This school looks at ethnicity as given, so that a person will belong to a group automatically at birth (Kaplan 1993; Connor 1994). The membership of these groups is given whether it is based on clan/tribal lines, e.g. Zulus or Serbs,<sup>19</sup> or common history, e.g. Italians.

Primordialism is the idea that ethnicity is fixed, fundamental and rooted in the unchangeable circumstances of birth. The primordialist approach asserts that 'the urge to define and reject the other goes back to our remotest human ancestors, and indeed beyond them to our animal

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18 See footnote 9 above.

19 Most of the Somalis feel obligated to participate in the tribal opinions and activities, and to contribute money to the fighting. This identification resulted from years of training and preparation by their families and community at large. One is raised to safeguard the tribal norm from infancy.

predecessors' (Lewis 1992:48). Edward Shils (1957) was one of the first scholars to assert that in the family attachments there are significant relationships that can only be described as *primordial*. This approach was further elaborated by Clifford Geertz (1973) who describes primordial tendencies as *ineffable*, with *coercive* ties, which is the result of a long process of crystallisation. Geertz advanced three major ideas that primordialism is based on:

- ♦ Primordial identities are natural or given.
- ♦ Primordial identities are *ineffable* and cannot be explained by other social interaction, but are rather *coercive*.
- ♦ Primordial identities essentially stem from sentiments and affections, rather than from realities of survival.

Geertz's description is based on biologically determined factors which are fixed and unchanging. This school suggests that whenever the need arises (with regard to survival, enhanced economic and security, etc.) people go back to their ethnic identifications in order to achieve their goals. Therefore, implicit in this line of thought is that the fixed and uncompromising politics of identity, characterised by communal exclusivity and tendencies toward xenophobia and intolerance, are natural to human societies.

Other approaches that examine ethnicity view it from an instrumentalist perspective, which looks at ethnicity as an instrument used by individuals, groups or the elite in order to gain more power, mainly material power (Brass 1985; Steinberg 1981). In this approach ethnicity is a multi-purpose tool employed by a variety of elite organisers in order to reach their target. Thus, in the majority of cases in Sub-Saharan Africa, ethnicity happens to be what is available in that setting. For example, in Somalia the warlords have been mobilising their tribesmen for the past 10 years, because ethnicity was the only tool available for mobilisation. Ironically, these combatants, who are organised along clan lines,

most of the time do not even know what they are fighting for.<sup>20</sup> So, in this approach, ethnic violence should not be differentiated from other conflicts.

Still another approach views ethnicity as a constructed mythology. This approach bridges between primordialists and instrumentalists. In this approach, ethnicity is neither given as primordialists argue, nor used as an instrument by the few elite, but rather stems from social interactions.<sup>21</sup> Constructivism argues that individuals belong to a multitude of groups, such as merchants or intellectuals, and eventually to the nation. For example between 1960 and 1990, although Somalis belonged to their particular clans, these groups were still intermingling and working side by side. In fact, it was politically incorrect during this period for one to even ask the clan of another person, especially in the urban areas. This inquiry would earn the asking individual the label of *reer baadiye*, which means country *folk*. However, after the collapse of the central government in early 1991 every person, including urban dwellers, was forced to seek security and protection from his/her particular clan (Lake & Rothschild 1998). Therefore, conflict in this approach results from a '... pathological social system, which individuals do not control... it is the social system that breeds violent social conflict, not individuals, and it is the socially constructed nature of ethnicity that can cause conflict, once begun, to spin rapidly out of control' (Lake & Rothschild 1998:6).

The deterministic approach, specifically provided by primordialist theorists, suffers from two major flaws. First, they fail to make the distinction between cultural identity and politically relevant cultural identity. They assume that cultural differences, including language, religion and traditions, automatically lead to conflict because culturally defined groups tend to be exclusionary and are dominated by old values that outweigh universalistic norms. According to primordial accounts, parochial norms attributed to cultural groups are believed to isolate them and reinforce

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20 This is based on observation in the country's war pattern during my visit 1993-1994.

21 For details on this approach, see Brubaker 1995 and Kuran 1998.

their extremism. Second, primordialists ignore the role of state institutions in both easing and perpetuating culturally based conflicts.

Over the years, however, a number of scholars have questioned the validity of such a causal link (Eyoh 1995; Adedeji 1999; Mamdani 1996; Braathen et al 2000). This paper argues that ethnicity is indeed an important factor in explaining these wars, as compared to non-war situations, but that ethnicity has not yet been adequately addressed in the literature. It is insufficient to establish that often the members of the warring factions belong to different ethnic, clan or tribal groups. What must be explained rather is *why* the warring factions are fighting.

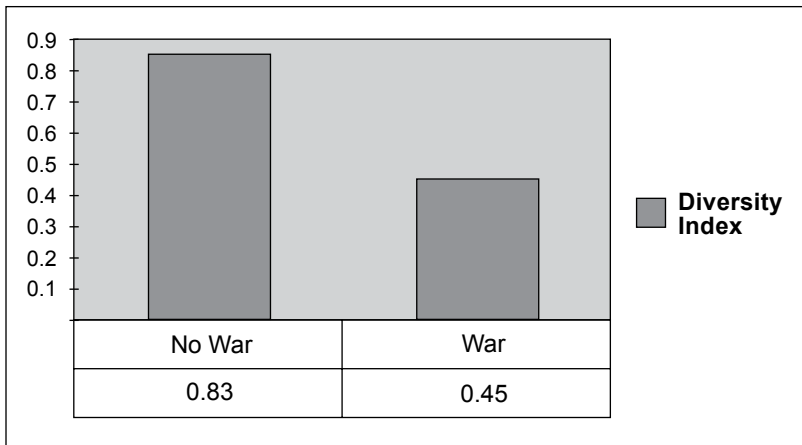
Braathen et al (2000:4) suggests that the warring factions must be ‘... understood in the light of the socio-economic context in which they operate, and within this context ethnicity is just one among many variables’. While ethnicity is an important factor, the key to understanding what causes internal wars in Sub-Saharan Africa is the attributes of the *post-colonial state*. They argue that these wars occur not because of the primitive social settings, but rather in the context of the ‘power game and the arena of modernity’. This arena of modernity is ‘... the *state* and the fight to gain control of state resources, power and possibilities’ (Braathen et al 2000:10). Specifically, the rewards (real or perceived) of capturing and maintaining state power have been a key source of conflict across the continent.

Since independence political conflict in this region was frequently waged in the *Zero-sum* mode, where the winner takes all. In short, the causes of internal wars involved ethnic identity as it was related to politics and power, rather than mere difference in identity alone. For example, Tanzania has over 100 ethno-linguistic groups, whereas Somalia has about thirteen. Despite its larger diversity, Tanzania over the years managed to maintain relative economic growth and social stability. On the contrary, Somalia with less ethnic diversity experienced internal war and the collapse of its state in 1991. Finally, comparing the countries

that experienced civil war since 1990 to those that did not the picture becomes even clearer.

Many studies support the view that ethnicity in fact produces stability in many countries. Elbadawi and Sambanis (2000) examined the cause of internal war in African countries and argue that the relatively high prevalence of war in Africa is not due to the ethno-linguistic fragmentation of its countries. They argue that Africa's ethnic diversity acts as a deterrent, rather than a cause of internal war. They empirically examined the relationship between multi-ethnicity and the occurrence of internal war in 32 countries in Sub Saharan Africa that achieved their independence prior to 1975.<sup>22</sup> Seven of these countries, which experienced internal war in the post-1990s era, had an average diversity of 0.45 whereas twenty-five countries that did not experience internal war had a diversity index of 0.83 (see figure 2).

Figure 2: The relationship between ethnicity and war



Adapted from Ethnologue 2006 <http://www.ethnologue.com>

22 Diversity is measured as the probability that a randomly selected two individuals in a society will belong to different groups. The index varies from 0 to 1. The value is zero for a completely homogeneous country where the probability of belonging to different groups is nil. The value 1 occurs in the hypothetical society where each individual belongs to a different group. <http://www.ethnologue.com>

In order to understand the connection between ethnicity and internal wars in Africa, one must examine Africa's ethnicity from the historical context, the institutional structures and the policies that the institutions adopted. The most important historical context in Sub-Saharan Africa is its colonial legacy, which shaped its ethnic structure. Colonialism created and strengthened particularism (divisions based on ethnicity, language, religion, etc.) by creating new 'countries' with artificial boundaries often populated by politicised, suspicious and envious groups (Mamdani 1996; Médard 1996; Braathen et al 2000). The colonial state shaped Africa's present-day ethnic divisions through the demarcation of African linguistic and cultural differences.

In an effort to establish an effective administrative system, colonial states instituted three policies that made cultural diversity relevant to survival of the individuals and groups. First, they made the loose tribal/clan affiliation in Africa into a rigidly demarcated identity schema and in some cases created a system of identity for millions who had previously had no tribal/clan identity (Ottaway 1999; Clapham 1988; Mamdani 2001).

Second, they politicised the identity groups by utilising ethnic structures, at different levels, in both the indirect rule of the British and the assimilationist direct rule of the French (Mamdani 1996; Young 1994). Third, colonial states encouraged local groups to advance their interests through tribal organisations. They sought the patronage of tribal leaders, thereby strengthening ethnic, clan or tribal loyalties. Today, these ethnic divisions are the source of much of Africa's violent politics. Even in places where internal war did not occur, ethnic, clan or tribal divisions typically weakened political institutions and undermined economic growth (Berman 1988). It is this legacy that shaped the structure and policies of the post-colonial African states and provided the basis for the conflicts in many parts of the continent. State power became concentrated in the hands of a few elites and clansmen benefit (often through nepotism and corruption) disproportionately from that power.<sup>23</sup> As a result, the post-colonial state in

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23 For a similar argument, see Chazan et al 1999.

Sub-Saharan Africa became a highly visible and contested resource, mainly because the members of the ruling clan often received disproportionate wealth and power (Adedeji 1999; Braathen et al 2000). Frederick Forsyth (1977:25) said the following about Africa's post-colonial politician:

In Africa as elsewhere political power means success and prosperity, not only for the man who holds it but for his family, his birthplace and even his whole region of origin. As a result there are many who will go any length to get and having got it will surpass themselves in order to keep it.

### *Cultural diversity and Somalia's conflict*

We have established that the foundation of the Somali diversity is the clan. The clan, in Somalia, is above every thing else, above political parties, religion and any ideology. Clanism in Somalia represents the primordial cleavages and cultural fragmentation within the Somali society. Clanism is the basis for numerous political and social problems including the current endless conflict. In light of the above narration, I would argue that cultural diversity has played a minor role in the Somali conflict compared to clan membership. Every Somali belongs to a particular clan, sub-clan and family. In this sense the clan is a uniting force and at the same time a great dividing force.

The two main groups among the Somali clans are the nomadic and the sedentary. The most fundamental difference between these two groups is how much value each attaches to the land. The settled communities attach a great value on the land, because they see the land as their source of income and survival. Thus, they do everything to save this land. The nomadic clans mainly look to the land as transient and temporary. Both the nomadic and settled communities have local customary laws (*Heer*). The nomadic *Heer* mainly concentrate on conflict settlements (*Diya Paying*).<sup>24</sup> The *Heer* among the settled communities do not only deal with

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<sup>24</sup> This is a blood compensation for the wrongful killing of a person from another clan. For more details on the *Diya Paying* system, see Lewis 1955, Lewis 1961, Touval 1963, Laitin & Samatar 1987, Casanelli 1982.



conflict settlement, but also with individual and group duties towards the common interest of the village community. For example, the Digil and Mirifle as settled communities established a well organised social and political structure based on hierarchical authority. Homogenists such as Laitin and Samatar (1987:27-28) have described the hierarchy of the inter-riverine communities as follows: 'Unlike decentralized nomads these communities have a highly centralized and hierarchical social order, whereby for example social pre-eminence is held not by numeric basis, but by virtue of seniority or urad (first born) status.'

The second most important cultural heritage that unites most Somalis is religion. Islam had arrived in Somalia within the 10th Century. The most important method for the expansion of Islam was the *Tariqa* (way or path) or religious orders. The rise of the Tariqa in Somalia was heavily influenced by the development of Sufism, which appeared in Somalia during the 15<sup>th</sup> century and rapidly became a stimulating and mobilising force. The main reason for the expansion of Sufism in Somalia was its appeal in providing a closer personal relationship to God through special spiritual disciplines. Many historical figures, including Sayyid Mohamed Abdulle Hassan and the Mad Mullah who fought against the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, used the Sufi sect of Salihyya as a mobilising method. Certainly, today's United Islamic Courts (UIC) are using religion as their mobilising method. However, despite the strong ability of religion to mobilise, the clan identity always supersedes all other identity schemas. For example, the recently deposed UIC leaders are overwhelmingly from the Hawiye clan, and specifically the Habargidir sub-clan. Therefore, in evaluating their leaders, the Somalis first ask the clan affiliation of the individual and only then other inquiries, including the qualities of the leader, follow.

Following religion as a uniting factor is the mode of production, which is mainly herding or farming. As we mentioned, prior to the period of colonialism the Somali clan families had for a long time occupied and been restricted to their particular geographical locations. However, due to the highly variable rainfall in some regions, especially the central and

northern regions, the nomads are often forced to move from one place to another in search of pasture for their livestock (Lewis 1955). The harsh conditions also make it hard for any one family to contain itself in one geographical location. In fact, most of the time all necessary resources to maintain both the clan and its herds cannot be found within any one locale. Over the years, the nomadic clans have therefore devised several inter-clan alliances, treaties and clientships to deal with these difficulties without compromising territorial and geographical boundaries. During the dry seasons, a whole clan can move from its homeland to the land of a neighbouring clan that have available water and grazing and with whom they have a formal treaty. In this situation, the guest clan will acquire the right to remain in the land in exchange for contributing to the collective defence of the host clan.

This type of patron-client relationship also existed between nomads and cultivators. The nomads would often move to areas with more water and grazing where they could enter into client status with the cultivators. In some situations the nomads accept a temporary clientship. In other cases, some of the nomadic clans that have lost their herds find themselves in a permanent subordinate client status. In this situation, the guest is allowed to farm the land without any direct ownership and is required to abide by the rules and regulations of the host clan.<sup>25</sup> Both the British and the Italian colonial powers would not interfere with the lifestyles of the Somali nomads, especially those in the north. In the south, however, the Italian colonial state settled along the agriculturally rich Shabelle River and used more direct colonial practices including the removal of traditional leaders and forced labour.

The most important figure in the diversity-related conflict of Somalia was the former dictator General Mohamed Siad Barre whose reign was known for its clannish 'divide and conquer' tactics. The government of Siad Barre (1969-1991) created a highly centralised and dictatorial state. Two major reasons helped his regime to achieve this seemingly

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25 For a good description of clan treaties and clientship, see Casanelli 1982:75-78.

cohesive appearance. First, the use of the Somali language since 1972 enabled the government to reach the people through its publications. Second, there were the nominal restriction and even the ban of tribalism, at least at the beginning of his regime. These two policies allowed the Barre regime to spread an ideology of unity and cohesiveness. By 1975, however, the regime was unable to distance itself from the clanism and tribalism, which together had created and maintained the Somali political organisations for centuries. By the end of the Ogaden war in 1978, several different clans started to voice their disappointment about their status under the Barre regime. One such example was the April 9, 1978 coup attempt (Samatar 1988:138). Immediately, Siad Barre started to ally himself with people from his clan and the Marehaan-Ogadeen-Dulbahante clan-based coalition known as MOD.<sup>26</sup>

Siad Barre's regime was an authoritarian, one-man, rigid and centralised rule, full of rampant corruption, injustice and economic mismanagement. During his 21-year rule, Barre manipulated clan loyalties and rivalries, favoured members of his own clan, and undermined independent sources of authority. In what was to be a recurring pattern, following an April 1978 coup attempt led mainly by army officers from the Majerten clan, Siad's forces singled out Majerten civilians for reprisals. After the creation in 1981 of the Somali National Movement (SNM), a guerrilla force that drew its support from the Isaaq clan, the government unleashed a reign of terror against Isaaq civilians, killing 50,000 to 60,000 between May 1988 and January 1990.<sup>27</sup>

From the outset, Barre's government favoured members of his own clan, the Marehan, who were recruited in large numbers into the army and who were also favoured within the civil service. Despite this favouritism, Barre purported to outlaw 'tribalism' by banning clan gatherings, such as engagement and wedding ceremonies. He manipulated the clan

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<sup>26</sup> For a good description of how the Barre regime changed its policy from nationalism to tribalism, see Samatar & Laitin 1984.

<sup>27</sup> Human Rights Watch 2006  
[http://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/somalia/#P68\\_12775#P68\\_12775](http://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/somalia/#P68_12775#P68_12775).

structure by corrupting and sometimes creating and legitimising clan elders and making them paid *nabad doon* or 'peace seekers'. All independent institutions capable of challenging the government's power were destroyed, leading civilian politicians were arrested, independent civic organisations and political parties were outlawed, and any form of political dissent was prohibited. Thus, in seeking to maintain himself in power, Siad Barre fanned the flames of clan animosity while systematically destroying any institution that could cut across clan lines or act as an authentic mediator in disputes between clans.

Siad Barre was also responsible for introducing the strategy of banditry into the civil war, particularly during the 1988 war against the SNM. During this brutal campaign, Barre's troops, many of whom later joined clan factions after the collapse of the central government, were openly allowed to loot and sell the spoils of the war in the markets of Mogadishu with no fear of punishment. This practice broke with traditional Somali customs governing competition between clans and changed the character of the civil war. After Barre's ouster, other clan factions continued these tactics. Dictatorial regime had oppressed people for more than a decade.

When Siad Barre's regime was overthrown, society was overwhelmed by its sudden freedom after more than a decade of dictatorial regime. Unfortunately, however, this freedom was marred by the increased poverty and availability of weapons in the markets which transformed the initial jubilation into an instant and endless nightmare. As Somalis were engulfed by this conflict, tribalism took an uglier turn and every clan created its own political party. In most cases, these parties included the word 'Somalia' in their names and pretended to represent all Somalis instead of one specific clan.

## **The positive role of culture in peace making, conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction**

Understanding culture and diversity is an important key to unlocking and understanding complex human nature. Acknowledging those that are culturally different can lead to a conscious awareness of how our thinking and actions affect others operating from different perspectives. Despite the fact the Somalis have been described as homogeneous, they do enjoy a rich and diverse cultural heritage. Many earlier and recent expeditions and studies point to the existence of a rich oral culture, and to resilience and creativity among the people. The most relevant aspect of the cultural diversity of Somalis is the use of the local customary laws known as *Heer*. Both the sedentary and nomadic clans used to mediate among themselves and maintain the rule of law inside the clan as well as in inter-clan relationships. However, as colonialism took root in the country and most of the continent, one of the earliest casualties was this noble institution.

More specifically, the Italians used a direct colonial system that practically destroyed the conflict resolution mechanisms practiced by the Somali clans. They created a pro-Italian cadre, as the French created the *evolue* and the Portuguese the *assimilados*. For its own colonial interest Italy recruited its cadre from the nomadic clans of the Mudug and Majertinia regions. Since independence, this pattern continues where the Western educated technocrats dominate the social, political and economic scene of the Somali society. Nevertheless, as Ekeh (1975) argued, these technocrats simultaneously exist in two diametrically opposed camps: one civic and one primordial. In the civic camp they are supposed to function as impartial workers dedicated to the national interest. In the primordial camp, however, they are supposed to be mindful of the interest of the particular clan. This quagmire needs to be understood in order to come up with a proper diagnoses of the causes, and perhaps, with a viable solution for the Somali conflict.

Once the conflict began, this cadre, who suffered from the dual identity crisis, could not put back together the country they had dragged into the ground. In British Somaliland, however, where the clan culture is relatively intact, mainly due to Britain's indirect colonialism, the local clan elders and leaders saved the day. Their counterparts in the south, on the other hand, continue to be disillusioned and to remain in a second-class position after the confused Western educated cadre.

As argued, the Somali cultural diversity is rich with conflict resolution mechanisms that can be used to end the conflict. However, for the past 15 years the international community has ignored the legitimacy of clan elders and leaders who possess the ability to penetrate the tribal politics and who may get results. On the contrary, the resolution efforts so far have mainly been concentrated in the hands of the warlords. They were given a blank page on which to draw Somalia's future. They met in Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, Egypt, Sudan and currently in Mogadishu, and each time they enjoyed lavish lifestyles. Each time they decided on something the decision was only worth the paper it was written on and the ink that it was signed with. Ultimately, the Somali conflict can only be resolved through its clan structure, by empowering and reviving the legitimate leaders and elders.

As established, for a long time Somalis have dominated each other using the clan as the basis for enforcing their worldviews and advancing their interest in their political system. More specifically, the nomadic clans dominated and continue to dominate the political system of the country. Their perspectives have often been degrading to the sedentary communities in the southern part of the country. In fact, among the nomads, land cultivation, as well as most physical work such leather making and ironwork, is seen as an inferior profession in which only those who have no livestock, especially camel, engage. This rift between nomads and cultivators has been the basis for many conflicts including the current genocide in Darfur, Sudan. Since 1991, over 15 peace conferences were

convened by the international community, at which tacit acknowledgement was given to the diversity of Somalia.

At the past three peace conferences that were held in Sodere (Ethiopia), Arta (Djibouti) and Mbagathi (Kenya) this reality had to be faced. After two years were spent on the conference in Kenya, which mainly gathered some of the biggest warlords that destroyed the country, a transitional government was eventually produced. In the parliament of 275 members that was to be elected, 61 members were allocated to each of the four large clans<sup>28</sup> and 31 to a cluster of minority clans. The parliament elected Sharif Hassan Shekh Adan from the Asharaf clan, a sub-clan of Dighil and Mirilfle, as the speaker and a former warlord, Colonel Abdulahi Yusuf Ahmed from the Mejrteen sub-clan of Darood, as president. The President in turn appointed a 51 year old from the Abgaal clan, a sub-clan of Hawiye, Ali Mohamed Gedi, as prime Minister. Mr. Gedi appointed a 41 member cabinet, the majority of which happen to be the strongest warlords in the country. Additionally, the new constitution accepts the existence of two languages, Maay and Mahaa, as official languages in the country.

Despite the fact that diversity has been acknowledged, the domination of the political power by the nomadic clans is however still apparent. For example, the current transitional government is headed by Colonel Abdulahi Yusuf Ahmed and the defence minister, police commander; and foreign affairs minister are all from his clan of Darood.

### **Conclusion**

This article examined the role of cultural diversity in initiating, maintaining and potentially resolving the prolonged conflict in Somalia. The Somali conflict primarily resulted from inequality, economic decline and availability of weapons. The conflict was initiated by clans who cited the existence of an inequality that preferred certain clans to others. Despite

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28 Darood, Dighil and Mirilfle, Hawiye, Isaaq and Dir

the existence of such inequality since the country's independence in 1960, the internal war started in 1991. The beginning of the war, however, followed the economic decline of the 1980s, which in turn facilitated the transference of weapons to the grieving clan members. The remaining question now is what, if any, resolution can be offered in order to bring Somalia's prolonged conflict to an end.

Somalia has two positive aspects that can enhance its rebuilding once the conflict ends. First, contrary to what has been published, Somalia is endowed with natural resources to sustain itself. These include the longest coast in Africa, two permanent rivers (Jubba and Shabelle), millions of acres of cultivable land and millions of livestock. There are also rumours of abundant oil and natural gas. In fact, prior to 1972, Somalia used to feed its own people and had surplus grain that was exported. However, because of the bad economic policies of the government of Siad Barre, the country became a net importer of grain by 1975. Second, there is the diversity among the Somalis in the diaspora, who have married foreigners and given birth to children in other countries. Some changed their religion and others their sexual orientation. Today about 750,000 (7%) of the Somali population live abroad and many of them have created large and thriving communities in prosperous countries including South Africa, Canada, United States and the United Kingdom.

Since the mid 1970s, the diaspora community has been the backbone of the collapsed Somali economy through remittance and in some cases investments. For example, the World Bank estimates about US \$750,000 annually are remitted by the diaspora communities using an informal system called Hawala.<sup>29</sup> The most important benefit of the diaspora, however, is not the remittance, but rather the hard work, education, saving and in some cases the humiliation they experience in their host countries, all of which can help to provide the basis for a future stable and prosperous Somalia. Many Somalis in the diaspora, including the

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<sup>29</sup> For more details on Hawala, see the UNDP report (UNDP 2006)  
<http://www.so.undp.org/Remittance/ssp-hawala.pdf>



author, are ready to repatriate for they understand the meaning of being a citizen. Currently, there are movements in the diaspora, especially in North America, that are very influential. For example, in the latest round between the Islamic Courts and transitional government the community has written petitions to both sides and for the first time they are willing to use economic sanctions. Unlike the earlier times when the diaspora was entirely influenced by the rigid and unchanging clanism; this new breed of the diaspora have understood that after all they are strangers in foreign lands without the claim to nobility that has blinded many Somalis before leaving their country.

In closing, the Somali cultural diversity can be a uniting force or a dividing and deadly force, and we need to come up with ways to utilise it for the good. One effective way is first to address and solve past wrongs that were committed against mainly the sedentary communities in Southern Somalia; secondly to conduct a fair and impartial census that will in the future determine a fair, representative and balanced political system, and finally to bring the wealth and knowledge of the diaspora by creating a conducive environment that accommodates diversity including religion, language and opinion and establishing the rule of law. After all, the recovery of Lebanese society from their years of civil war has been greatly facilitated and expedited by its diaspora community.

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## **Cultural Diversity and the Somali Conflict: Myth or Reality?**

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# Political Management of Ethnic Perceptions: An Assessment of the African National Congress

*Mcebisi Ndletyana*

## **Abstract**

This paper argues that the ANC has historically followed a moderate route – embracing tradition, whilst denouncing tribalism. Yet, this did not insulate the party from accusations of ethnic bias – a perception the leadership largely left unattended. But, entry into the arena of competitive politics has imposed a slight modification on the part of the party towards pandering to ethnic sentiments, albeit not officially acknowledged. The intention is not to cultivate political tribalism in a divisive sense. Rather, it is employed to cultivate among ethnic communities, which otherwise feel marginalised, a sense of identification with the ruling party. The party itself has done well to blunt the perception of ethnic bias to a point where it lacks popular resonance. That the perception itself still exists, reflects the saliency of (politicised) ethnic consciousness among the populace owing to past apartheid machinations in service of political hegemony.

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## Introduction

South Africa's political cohesion has been tested in recent years. Allegations of ethnic favouritism threaten to thwart current attempts at nation building. Newspapers and radio talk shows have been awash with discussions about the existence of an ethnic conspiracy within both the South African public sector and the African National Congress (ANC). Xhosa speaking groups, it has been alleged, are conspiring to preserve both the party and the public sector as their own domains of employment and influence, excluding the various other ethnic and language groups (*Pretoria News* 4 June 2002). These expressions of ethnic favouritism in both politics and government were also expressed in public discourse. Though the choice of leaders is technically the preserve of the ANC membership, some pundits even suggested before the December 2007 ANC conference that the ANC leadership needed to address the issue of 'ethnic favouritism' by making a public commitment that it would support the candidacy of a non-Xhosa speaker to succeed the incumbent president.<sup>1</sup>

Except for brief denials, the ANC leadership largely ignored allegations about tribalism since it came into power in 1994. The issue of ethnicity within the organisation and the country was only discussed at the organisational level in 2005 when it was tabled for discussion at the party's General Policy Council in June-July 2005. A discussion document titled 'The National Question', noted that 'ethnic prejudice persists'. This 'ethnic prejudice', the document noted, manifested itself in a various ways, including voting along ethnic lines such as 'amaZulu in KwaZulu'

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1 It is not uncommon in the ANC for the leadership to lobby for a particular individual prior to the election of office bearers. If friendly appeals fail to get rival candidates to bow out of a race, they are manoeuvred out. Nelson Mandela, then ANC president, nudged Mathews Phosa aside to ensure that Zuma was elected deputy-president of the ANC at the party's national conference in 1997. Mandela announced that Phosa had 'withdrawn from the race', when he had not. Phosa did not contradict the 'big-man', lest it appeared that he was challenging Mandela's integrity. Challenging Mandela's integrity would have alienated Phosa from many ANC supporters who immortalise Mandela.



voting ‘for their “own” party’. The document was quite open about tribal sentiments even within its own fold:

Others engage in low-intensity tribal mobilisation... in order to lobby support for positions in the ANC and in government. During the debate about provincial boundaries, tribal mobilisation took place among supporters of all parties, including the ANC. It was a rude reminder when even some of the most seasoned cadres of the liberation movement took positions on provincial boundaries based on tribal affiliation. Today it has become a habit among some to count the number of amaXhosa in the public service and in government. Accusations are made that many ministers and directors-general tend to appoint their own kind (ANC 2005).

The deliberation on ‘tribalism’ at the 2005 council was spurred by concern that ‘the call on the part of the founding fathers of the ANC to “bury the demon of tribalism” has not lost its validity’. However, the 2005 Council did not adopt any resolutions, especially to eliminate perceptions of ethnic bias within the ANC. Tribalism did not even receive a mere mention in the conference resolutions. Such silence, reflecting ambivalence towards a potentially dangerous issue, seems puzzling. For the ANC appreciated the danger that tribalism posed both to the unity of the organisation and the stability of South Africa’s political system. Yet it failed to adopt a resolution to thwart the resilience of this phenomenon within its fold and throughout society.

### **Contextual background: ethnicity and African nationalism**

Politicised ethnicity is not unique to post-apartheid South Africa. Nor is South Africa’s ruling nationalist party, the ANC, the only African nationalist organisation having to deal with this divisive phenomenon. Nationalist movements throughout Africa, both during and after colonialism, have had to grapple with this question. In most cases, African nationalist organisations came into being within a political context where ethnic identities had already been politicised. Ethnicity was the lynchpin

of colonial rule. Colonial bureaucracy promoted ethnic identification as a dominant medium of interaction between itself and the individual 'natives'. Access to state resources hinged on membership in one ethnic group or another. This was premised on the definition of 'natives', not as citizens within a nation-state, but as subjects that belonged to a particular ethnic community under a traditional authority. Thus a native could not lay any claims or demands for resources, shelter or security, from a colonial state, but from a traditional authority. The latter, in turn, demanded identification with that ethnic community and allegiance to its authority figure – a chief (Mamdani 1996:62-108).

The bifurcation of the citizens, on the one hand, and subjects, on the other, was itself revealing of the political *motif* on the part of the colonial state. The intention was to shore up colonial rule, as it provided the colonial state with a pretext to deny franchise to the numerically dominant indigenous population within a nation-state, whilst 'appearing noble' for granting natives rights within their 'own' indigenous institutions. Thus the settler population became a majority within the nation-state, supposedly free from any fears of being swamped over by the majority native population. Apart from the obvious strategy of divide and rule, the supposedly indigenous institutions of traditional rule had in fact become contaminated by colonial meddling. They no longer resembled the pre-colonial character that was largely defined by rule by consensus,<sup>2</sup> where a chief often followed the wishes of his subjects and was censured in case of a transgression. Rather, chiefs were appointed by the colonial authority, to which they had become accountable and were given powers that placed them beyond traditional censure. Essentially, chieftaincy was transformed into, as Mamdani puts it, a form of local despotism (Mamdani 1996:62-108).

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2 Pre-colonial forms of power and authority were, however, not entirely inclusive of all voices or tolerant of dissent. Often-times people held back criticism for fear that it might be construed as disloyalty, which would most likely invite punishment. Opinions of older and wealthy men tended to hold sway more than younger and ordinary men. Older men were considered wiser, and wealthy men wielded popular influence through patronage. See Soga 1939.

Colonialism, therefore, incubated ethnic identity – a cultural identity that rests on language and values – into a political identity with a heightened sense of consciousness approximating a dominant form of self-identification. Individuals accessed state resources to sustain their livelihood, whilst chiefs received patronage from the colonial state. There was a patron-client relationship – chiefs ensured popular obedience to the colonial-complicit customary rule, in return for ‘dubious’ titles, monetary rewards and control over local resources. Chiefs became ethnic entrepreneurs, while traditional institutions became markers of ethnicity.

Colonialism impacted unevenly on the various regions, a process that helped to intensify ethnic differentiation among the various ethnic groups inhabiting ethnicised regions. For instance, in a number of African countries, including South Africa, educational facilities were concentrated in particular regions inhabited by particular ethnic groups. The result of this misconstrued colonial developmental pattern, in most cases, was the production of an educated elite from specific ethnic regions. Nationalist movements in such countries ended up being dominated by members of the particular ethnic groups that had advanced education arising from uneven colonial development. The very presence (or feeling) of one group being advantaged over others created a grievance, especially on the part of those who aspired for leadership, but felt over-looked on account of their lack of requisite skills (given the elitist nature of early nationalist movements). Tribalism tended to be a convenient explanation for such exclusion or ethnic dominance (Berman 2004).

Nationalist movements reacted to ethnicity in two ways, each largely pre-figured by context. They either adopted a moderate stance that embraced traditional institutions, whilst denouncing tribalism in favour of unity; or a radical standpoint that called for the obliteration of ethnic identification or manifestation. Both reactions sought to undercut the divisive effect of ethnicity, which weakened the anti-colonial struggle. But, tribalism (or perceptions there-of) proved difficult to suppress, even by the radicals (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 1997:7-68).

Tribalism gained impetus from post-colonial competitive politics. In the post-colonial phase, leadership positions bestowed more than just a title. It came with access to state power and control over the allocation and distribution of resources. Access to state resources heightened the stakes, which could only be secured through popular support. Thus nationalists became ethnic entrepreneurs using ethnicity as a mobilising tool to create a support base that would catapult them to power. But that was not just a function of elite manipulation; it was also aided by popular (or ethnic) consent. Fellow ethnic members lent support towards their 'own' trusting that they would pay them back through greater access to state resources and provision of services (Ake 1993:4).

Access to material resources thus determines whether or not ethnic mobilisation finds popular resonance. Ethnic belonging is offered as explanation for one form of discrimination or another. Where there is no discrimination or seeming favouritism of one group over others, the possibility of a grievance arising is highly minimised.

### **Apartheid machinations and ethnic perceptions in South Africa**

That an accident of history acquired a conspiratorial appearance is largely a function of apartheid machinations. Colonialists, and later architects of apartheid, went to great lengths to give tribalism credence both rhetorically and through social re-engineering of residential spaces. The over-arching objective was political hegemony of a minority white rule over an African majority population.

The Union government, instituted after 1910, delivered the first salvo in the subjugation of Africans by defining them entirely as subjects of traditional rule, not citizens within a modern state. This was done through the promulgation of the Native Administrative Act in 1927. That law decreed that, henceforth, all Africans were tribes-people, whose natural habitat was a village under the rule of a chief. It did not matter how sophisticated or urbanised one considered oneself to be, the law

declared all Africans tribesmen by virtue of their African-ness. If for some weird reason, according to colonial logic, a group of Africans happened to be tribe-less, the Native Commissioner could easily constitute them into a tribe, find a village and assign a chief to rule over them (Mamdani 1996:62-108).

This was essentially institutional segregation, yet supposedly equal. Apartheid architects after 1948 added territorial segregation, but still retained ethnicity as its foundation. The African majority was reduced into multiple ethnic minorities and shoved into what were declared 'independent states', each ethnic group with its own. Whites kept 'South Africa' to themselves, and Africans, who were decreed citizens of one homeland or another, were 'justifiably' denied franchise and permanent residence within 'South Africa.' As Africans, who were supposedly innately tribal, the argument went, they exercised political rights within a tribal authority. Speaking in 1959, Minister of Bantu Affairs, M.C. de Wet Nel, put it thus:

The Zulu is proud to be a Zulu and the Xhosa proud to be a Xhosa and the Venda is proud to be a Venda, just as proud as they were a hundred years ago. The lesson we have learnt from history during the past three hundred years is that these ethnic groups, the whites as well as the Bantu, sought their greatest fulfilment, their greatest happiness and the best mutual relations on the basis of separate and individual development... the only basis on which peace, happiness and mutual confidence could be built up (Mare 1987:30).

Apartheid government did not let up an opportunity to promote ethnic consciousness where inter-ethnic mingling took place. Urban residence, within 'South Africa' was designed along ethnic lines. Soweto, for instance, a predominantly black residential area in Johannesburg, is notorious for its spatial demarcation along ethnic lines: Jabulani, Mdeni, Zola neighbourhoods were mostly populated by Zulu-speakers; Naledi, Moletsana, Mapetla by Sotho-speakers; and Chiawelo by Shangaan-speakers. Hostels and compounds, which accommodated mine-workers, were also

divided along ethnic lines. It must be noted, however, that ethnic consciousness among Africans also had an independent life of its own even within urban settings. Migrant workers, for instance, tended to form social networks with fellow home-boys within an urban setting. These networks provided both moral and material support to migrant workers within a strange urban environment often associated with danger. Most importantly, they reinforced ethnic consciousness for continued membership depended on one's display of loyalty towards ethnic practices. Thus they bore ethnic markers, as in a dress-code, and engaged in traditional rituals that set them apart from their urbanised counterparts (Mayer 1971; Wilson & Mafeje 1963).

Successive oppressive governments, therefore, utilised tribalism as a form of control. They were in fact following an old advice offered by the Governor of the Natal Colony, Theophilus Shepstone, in the early 1880s: that the 'main object of keeping natives under their own law is to ensure control over them'.<sup>3</sup> But the oppressors were not the only ones adept at ethnic manipulation. Opportunistic African politicians exploited ethnic stereotypes to build support bases for themselves. Gatsha Buthelezi, founder and current leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), distinguished himself as one such ethnic entrepreneur.

Buthelezi positioned his party as a proponent and guardian of the Zulu 'nation' and culture. Anyone who considered himself/herself a proud Zulu was encouraged, especially through the state controlled regional media and official rhetoric, to support the IFP. In some instances, locals

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3 In Shepstone's Natal, Zulu chiefs were primary administrators of customary law. Chieftaincy was remoulded and harnessed to serve the colonial project. The 1878 Code of Native Natal, which evolved to the Natal Code of Native Law in 1891, made the Governor-General supreme chief, empowering him to appoint and dismiss chiefs, break and remake tribes. Chiefs were no longer subject to the checks and balances measures that historically existed within the system of chieftaincy. Chiefs became accountable to the colonial administration and despotic towards their subjects. They issued commands and expected obedience from their subjects. The long-held customary practices of consultation and consensual decision-making no longer applied. Chiefs became local despots. See Mamdani 1997:67.

were coerced into supporting the IFP, as membership of the party became a pre-condition to employment into the civil service. Such ideas were also instilled through recruitment into State/party controlled formations such as Youth Brigade and United Workers Union of South Africa (UWUSA). All other political organisations that opposed the IFP, especially the ANC and its affiliates, were not just political rivals, but were declared enemies of the Zulu 'nation' itself. Speaking at a public meeting in 1989, Zulu King, Goodwill Zwelithini, explained it this way:

You know that the UDF and Cosatu have come into your midst to turn you against Inkatha. Why? Is it because Inkatha is led by a Zulu? I am not being party political... Does the ANC encourage you to be Zulu, to do your Zulu thing and play your Zulu role?... What does the UDF say about your Zuluness? (De Haas 1994:438).

How then, has South Africa's ruling African nationalist party, the ANC, dealt with political tribalism in post-apartheid South Africa? How salient is this phenomenon within contemporary society?

### **Tribalism and the ANC: a historical perspective**

Tribalism is not a recent concern within the ANC. Founders of the ANC at the very inception of the party warned against ethnicity and pleaded for unity. Writing on *Imvo Zabantsundu* newspaper, in October 24, 1911, Pixley ka Seme, stated:

... the aberrations of the Xosa-Fingo feud, the animosity that exists between the Zulus and the Tongaas, between the Basutos and every other Native must be buried and forgotten; it has shed among us sufficient blood! We are one people. These divisions, these jealousies, are the cause of all our woes and of all our backwardness and ignorance to-day (Karis 1972:72).

Decades later in 1949, Dr Alfred Xuma, ANC president then, reiterated similar sentiments as his predecessor at a meeting in Port Elizabeth:

Tribalism is the arch-enemy of our freedom and progress... The greatest danger to our unity is not the white man but the African

himself. In the past it was divisions that destroyed our race and reduced it to the position in which we found ourselves to-day. Let us therefore organize a crusade against tribalism as the first step in our struggle for national liberation (*Bantu World* 16 Jul 1949).

Xuma's concern was not without basis. African newspapers in the 1940s and 1950s were awash with reports of ethnic controversies within the ANC. The *Bantu World's* edition of April 12, 1944, for instance, was moved to laud the election of C. S. Ramohanoë as president of the Transvaal branch of the ANC as 'an exposure of the myth that Transvaal Africans wanted a Transvaal Mosuto to lead them'. It hailed this development as an indication that 'the age of narrow nationalism is past'. But, subsequent events proved that announcement premature. Three years later *Inkundla ya Bantu* newspaper reported that Ramohanoë sent around a circular citing tribalism as the reason for some of his colleagues disagreeing with him: 'These people have no policy except to splatter nasty glaring words of forming a tribal Congress whose leaders must be Bapedis' (Gerhart 2003). As the controversy evolved, the name-calling metamorphosised into 'Sotho versus Nguni'. This followed an executive vote of no confidence in Ramohanoë's presidency. But his supporters claimed that the motion lacked merit since, according to them, it was driven by Nguni-speakers and thus motivated by tribalism. They reasoned that the national president of the ANC, Alfred Xuma, 'has broken wantonly resolutions of Congress and has gone unpunished... Why then rush for a no-confidence motion now?' They attributed this 'inconsistency' to Xuma being Nguni, and Ramohanoë being Sotho.

Transvaal was not the only province caught up in ethnic bickering. *Inkundla* warned of a similar phenomenon happening in Natal. There 'no outside non-Zulu African is allowed to express any political opinions or suggestions', whilst 'the people are ripe for organization'. The newspaper went on to explain: 'A despicable aspect of this foreigner complex is the fact that it exploits the very tribalism which the White has boosted for our exploitation, and which is the very anti-thesis of the nationalism we are striving to cultivate and foster. But people who want to keep up



a myth of their own greatness will stop at nothing to gain their ends' (*Inkundla ya Bantu* 1 Feb 1949).

The ANC could not escape accusations of tribalism even in the post-1960 period, after it had been banned. The leadership reportedly instituted no less than five commissions to investigate tribalism within its ranks. The contents of these commissions were not widely publicised, and interested researchers have had difficulty locating them (Gerhart 2003). A few sketchy details are available, though. A meeting of the ANC's national executive committee (NEC) held in Luanda on 2-5 December 1981, for instance, discussed the issue of tribalism within the organisation. That meeting acknowledged 'that tribalism exists outside South Africa and is being used' by individual political leaders to promote their personal agendas. The meeting resolved that the 'ANC should study the phenomenon of tribalism and its various manifestations'. The NEC went further to commit itself to 'work-out the strategy of destroying' tribalism. That strategy would include educating 'its members to the dangers of tribalism'. The leadership also resolved that, as that: 'The ANC should root out tribalism out of its vocabulary even as a word. We should use such positive words as nationalities' (Gerhart 2003).

However, the adoption of new vocabulary did not eliminate the problem. Perceptions of tribalism within the organisation persisted right through the mid-1980s. Around the time of the 1985 Consultative Conference in Kabwe, Zambia, a member of the NEC, John Pule Motshabi, was still urging the leadership to eliminate 'tribal deployment, development and grooming for leadership'. Motshabi went on to plead: 'I therefore call for equal political selection from all ethnic groups among the Africans...' (Gerhart 2003).

Clearly, the ANC has been fraught with accusations of ethnic favouritism throughout its history. The leadership's response to this problem has been ambivalent. On the one hand, the ANC leadership has always frowned upon ethnicity. On the other hand, the same leadership has encouraged ethnicity by enveloping itself in the symbolism of traditional

ethnic institutions and values. First, the very founding of the ANC, as noted in Pixley ka Seme's inaugural speech, was based on an attempt to weld together the different ethnic groups into a cohesive whole. Second, the presence of traditional leaders at the founding meeting and their appointment into the 'Upper House' of the organisation sought to convey a sense of unity among all African ethnic groups. Third, whilst seeming to underplay ethnic distinctions for the sake of forging national cohesion, the ANC nonetheless sought to give itself an African ethnic imagery in its organisational business. Proceedings at conferences, for instance, simulated traditional practices. Typical of an *imbizo* gathering, traditional leaders recused themselves from deliberations by delegates, limiting their role only to announcing the consensus of views of the delegates. Thereafter, 'President-General would... have the last word, as ordinary members could not resume discussion of an issue after the chiefs had spoken' (Walshe 1971:210).

Yet, whilst enveloping themselves in traditional symbolism, ANC founders rejected the society and the value system traditional figures represented. Langailele Dube, the first ANC president elected in 1912, even encouraged his followers to strive towards 'higher places of civilization and Christianity – neither backwards into the slump of darkness nor downward into the abyss of antiquated tribal systems' (Walshe 1971:38). This reflected their Eurocentric orientation. As Christian converts and graduates of missionary schools, those nationalist leaders considered mastery of English culture an acceptable condition for equal treatment and rights. Dube couched the demand for African franchise in the language of civilisation:

We feel that the time has come when we should have some measure of legislative representation, some way of making our influence felt in the law-making powers. Our progress in the Gospel life and its accompanying civilization demands it... (Walshe 1971:39).

To be sure, the ANC's appropriation of traditional symbolism was intended to project Africans' familiarity with democracy, for the colonial

authority had denied Africans franchise on the pretext that they were unfamiliar with democracy. Nationalists, in turn, contended that chieftaincy was an epitome of Africans' democratic heritage. Nelson Mandela, who has a rural background and doubles as both royalty and nationalist, expresses this notion quite eloquently in his autobiography as he describes proceedings at a public gathering organised by a chief to discuss community affairs:

Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among speakers, but everyone was heard: chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, and landowner and labourer. People spoke without interruption and the meetings lasted for many hours. The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and were equal in their value as citizens (Mandela 1994:20).

Moreover, chiefly presence within the ANC depicted a sense of continuity with the past, particularly continuity of resistance against colonial rule. It conferred upon the ANC an imagery of a confluence of the old and young warriors against the same enemy for a similar objective. Nationalist leaders were heirs of the legacy of resistance bequeathed upon them by their predecessors who had fought, but failed to topple colonial rule. An ANC Youth League statement urging mass involvement in a National Day of Protest in 1950 put it thus:

The protest is to us a manifestation of all those divine stirrings of discontent of the African people since 6th April 1652, onward – through the period of the so-called Kaffir Wars, through the days of Dingana, through the days of Moshoeshe, through the days of Sekhukhuni... (Karis 1972:445).

Founded by Westernised African elite, the ANC shunned tribal identities, though revelling in their symbolism to gain popular legitimacy as the authentic representative of the nationalistic cause. This placed it in a contradictory location: aspiring towards a universal identity, whilst also adopting an essentialist posture.

Competitive politics in South Africa was to take place within a context where ethnicity was politicised. Thus both resources and terror were employed by the state to incite tribalism in South African society. Whether coerced or willingly, it was not unexpected that some people would view society through an ethnic perspective or identify themselves by an ethnic identity. A public opinion survey conducted in 1999 (<http://www.presidency.gov.za> accessed 6 Jun 2006) established that 23% of the African population defined themselves predominantly in ethnic terms (which declined to 14% by 2004).

How did the ANC deal with this situation, especially as it entered free and competitive politics in 1994?

### **Political management and natural dissolution: an unofficial policy**

Since it came into power in 1994, the ANC's official treatment of ethnicity and traditional leadership has been marked by two, somewhat contradictory elements. At the theoretical level the organisation has sought to underplay the saliency of politicised ethnicity within popular consciousness or the collective psyche, but at the practical level it has undertaken measures that appeal to ethnic sentiments.

The first and only figure to pen an authoritative insight on ANC thinking on tribalism in post-apartheid South Africa, was Pallo Jordan, who in 1997, in a paper titled 'The National Question and Nation Building', saw ethnicity and its guardian institution, traditional leadership, essentially as an artificial phenomenon moulded by colonial regimes to counter anti-colonial struggle and, subsequently, to shore up their rule. The extent to which ethnic consciousness does exist, argues Jordan, is not an 'articulation of a "psychological urge" ... to cohere as members of a unique ethnic community', but a function of the colonial distortion of traditional leadership and the material benefits bestowed upon such leaders.

Apartheid legislation, in its many forms, elevated traditional leaders into 'a caste of privileged Africans' in numerous and different ways. It removed popular censure on way-ward chiefs, converting a formerly accountable institution into a form of despotism, provided them with monetary rewards and unqualified control over local resources especially land, and gave them positions and status as 'Prime Ministers' of Bantustans. This was all on account of them being 'traditional' and thus placing value on them exhibiting their 'traditionality'. These 'traditional leaders' had a material interest in 'fostering ethnic consciousness by wielding totems, symbols and other paraphernalia of a particular "culture" or practices that differentiated their subjects from those of other chiefs'.

The net result of this colonial meddling, Jordan continues, was to cloak what was otherwise a fluid social phenomenon with an appearance of rigid naturality. Ethnic consciousness and allegiance to traditional leadership, for instance, dissolves in the face of economic development and the attendant process of urbanisation. Within an urban setup, individuals that formerly defined themselves solely in ethnic terms acquire multiple other identities, which they share with individuals of different ethnic backgrounds. Ethnicity thus decreases as a dominant factor in one's self-definition. The creation of Bantustans and the forced residence there-in was thus an attempt to freeze this process of urbanisation, as it threatened ethnic consciousness. A counter-measure to ethnic consciousness or mobilisation within post-apartheid society, thus Jordan proposed, is a policy regime and party behaviour that disregards ethnic identity. This policy has found expression at three levels: state-citizenry relationship; ANC's treatment of chieftaincy and tradition; and selection/election and assignment of party officials.

### **State-citizenry interaction**

The ANC-led government has tried to deal with the role of the state in the production of ethnic identities by restructuring the manner in which the national government interacts with both individual citizens and the

largely ethnically-defined provinces. Though retaining the provincial system of government inherited from the apartheid state, the national government determines budgetary allocations to various provinces on an equitable basis. It takes into consideration population size and the extent of socio-economic needs. Thus poorer provinces, which tend to be rural and dominated by one or other ethnic group – i.e. Mpumalanga, Limpopo, Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, North-West – receive more for social expenditure than richer provinces – say Western Cape and Gauteng – which are urban-concentrated and ethnically diverse. Having de-ethnicised the post-apartheid state, ethnic identification, in relation to the state, is thus rendered unimportant and ethnic groupings have little cause to complain of neglect or marginalisation by national government from which they get equitable resources.

### **ANC and tradition: reform vs. appropriation**

As noted above, there has been a strong linkage between traditional institutions and ethnic consciousness in South Africa. Ethnic identification has been a prerequisite for access to residence and resources within tribal territories. In instances of competition among various political formations for support, ethnic consciousness was harnessed for political purposes. Members of a particular ethnic group were encouraged to vote for a particular ethnic party that purported to represent their values and history. Ethnic consciousness, therefore, can be politicised under particular conditions. A pre-emptive measure against politicisation of ethnicity is to eliminate conditions that incubate this phenomenon, or dilute the saliency of its primary source – i.e. ethnic consciousness.

To the extent that traditional institutions served as instruments of ethnic consciousness, this has been nullified by South Africa's democratisation. Africans are no longer coerced subjects of traditional authorities, but citizens with rights to services provided directly by the State. Ethnic identification or allegiance to a tribal authority is not a prerequisite for access to State services or resources. Free movement and residence

in urban areas has eliminated the need for African urban residents to maintain their tribal links as a way of securing access or residence to the country-side, which were previously administered by chiefs. Governance in rural areas is now under democratically elected councillors (Municipal Structures Act 1998).

Legislation on communal land seeks to divest chiefs of powers to allocate land in favour of a new body, the Land Administration Committee (LAC), whose membership will be elected and inclusive of government officials, with a strong bias for women representation. By insisting on the representation of women and electing a quarter of the membership, the legislation envisages that the LACs in particular will function in a democratic and sensitive manner towards women, who have historically been victims of discrimination (Communal Land Rights Act 2004).

The reforms, however, have also been accompanied by measures to placate chiefs. The position of traditional leadership remains a considerable source of patronage. Traditional leaders are still handsomely rewarded – i.e. monthly remuneration – even though they are simply symbolical cultural figures, without any official duties. Government bought them luxury cars, a practice that former President Mandela pushed for. As for those chiefs appointed under dubious circumstances or with dubious titles, they still retain their positions (Ndletyana 2006:143-188).

The combination of reforms, patronage and retention of powers of traditional authorities by the ANC government not only betrays its cautious political approach but also its pandering to ethnicity. Government seeks to reduce the significance of traditional leadership and adapt it to the democratic order, on the one hand, but also wants to avoid alienating chiefs on the other hand. Chiefs in KwaZulu-Natal, who tended to be sympathetic to the opposition IFP, posed a particular concern for the ANC-led government. The ANC was particularly concerned that political disagreements in KwaZulu-Natal were prone to flare up into violent confrontations. As a result, national government often took threats of violence from the IFP seriously. It delayed holding the 1995 local

elections, whilst other provinces went ahead for fear that they would be disrupted by hostile chiefs who felt that their demand for inclusion in local government had not been addressed by national government. Similar threats of violence were to force national government to postpone announcing the exact date for the 2000 local elections until the IFP-aligned chiefs felt their concerns had been adequately addressed. Notwithstanding the reforms, the ruling party seems careful not to undertake any action that will yield a disruptive effect on local rural governance (Ndletyana 2006:143-188).

The ANC believes that chiefs still hold significant influence over the local rural population which they use to sway political support. The ANC thus views chiefs as useful allies in its electioneering and it sometimes goes to great lengths to associate itself with the institution. For instance, during the 2000 election in the village of Xhwili in the Eastern Cape, the organisation even dissociated itself from own its allies who were anti-chiefs – i.e. the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) – to gain votes. ANC activists opposed SANCO presence in Xhwili, for fear that they would also be seen as anti-chiefs. One Xhwili leader explained: ‘We made a point of telling people that we were not SANCO. We told them we were ANC and that we worked with chiefs. The ANC was for chiefs, we would say to them’ (Ndletyana, 2006:198).

Even the urbane and sophisticated Thabo Mbeki got on the bandwagon of traditional symbolism to win votes during the 1999 national elections. Shortly before the 1999 elections, the ANC ‘re-introduced’ Mbeki to the Transkei countryside as a man with strong traditional roots, just like the local population. The organisation organised a traditional ceremony at his home village Ngcingwana, Dutywa, to ‘reacquaint’ him with his ancestors (after his return from exile). The ceremony was to be hosted by his *AmaZizi* clan, where he ‘would also undergo a cleansing ceremony to prepare him for the rigours’ of being president. The occasion was to be a purely traditional affair marked by the slaughter of a beast, traditional singing and Mbeki was to be dressed up in traditional attire. Contrary to his celebrated image of a renaissance man projected in urban areas,



during the occasion Mbeki was referred to by his clan-name, *Zizi*. The ANC disputed claims that the ceremony was an electioneering ploy, even though it was held during an election season. According to the organisation, the ceremony was a delayed event which had not been held in the last eight years because Mbeki was simply too busy (<http://www.iol.co.za> accessed 24 Dec 1998).

### **Ethnicity and the selection and election of ANC party officials**

Since 1994, the ANC's appointment of premiers and provincial chairpersons of the party have emphasised geographic belonging. ANC candidates are usually chosen on the basis of having local roots, interpreted in terms of nativity. Within the context of competitive politics where local politicians have a better understanding of local political dynamics and a better chance to receive political acceptance among local voters, this selection criterion makes political sense. This political approach, however, tends to reinforce ethnic identification in politics and society.

Two important appointments made by the ANC in the 1990s help to illustrate the above point: Jacob Zuma's election as provincial chairperson of the ANC in KwaZulu-Natal in 1991 and Mosiuoa Terror Lekota's appointment as premier of Free State Province in 1994. Both appointments clearly show the ANC's pandering to ethnicity and its privileging of ethnic identity and nativity over political identity.

Jacob Zuma was elected chairperson of the ANC in KwaZulu-Natal in 1991 and re-elected in 1996. He became a member of the provincial government responsible for economic affairs in 1994. These appointments were incongruent with Zuma's political stature and background within the ANC and anti-apartheid politics, which put him in good stead for national politics.

Zuma was among the first recruits into the ANC's military wing, Umkhonto WeSizwe (MK), in the 1960s. He was captured and convicted to 10 years imprisonment at the notorious Robben Island Prison, where he made acquaintance with Mandela and other veterans of the liberation

movement. On his release in 1973, he fled into exile where he rose up the ranks of the MK to become head of intelligence. Zuma was also involved, alongside Mbeki, in the negotiation process right from the mid-1980s. By the 1990s, he was, therefore, a senior leader of the organisation set for national politics. His political peers, including Thabo Mbeki, Zola Skweyiya, Pallo Jordan and Joe Nhlanhla, all took prominent positions in national politics as ministers in Mandela's first non-racial cabinet, while Zuma was dispatched to the provinces.

The ANC's decision to assign Zuma to provincial politics was based on two main issues: his life-style and the ANC's rivalry with the IFP in KwaZulu-Natal. The IFP seemed to win the battle for political control of the predominantly Zulu-speaking KwaZulu-Natal. This stemmed, from the IFP's influence over the Zulu monarch, Goodwill Zwelithini, and the portrayal of the ANC as anti-Zulu or Xhosa-dominated. Most worrisome to the ANC, however, was the political violence between ANC and IFP supporters that raged through the province (fanned by reactionary elements within the police system), which the ANC partially ascribed to IFP's vilification of it as anti-Zulu (De Haas 1994).

In the ANC view, two things had to happen for the ANC to reverse this trend: wrestle the King away from the IFP and cultivate an image that resonated with province's ethnic-conscious voters. Zuma was seen as instrumental to that strategy succeeding. None of the ANC local leaders, though Zulu themselves, had the profile to pacify the monarch. They were enmeshed in the conflict and shared a modern and anti-tradition image that had been associated with the ANC and the UDF. Zuma was viewed as different by all accounts. He represented the traditional part of the ANC, especially Zulu tradition. He is a polygamist who still keeps a residence at his birth-place, Inkandla, which he visits regularly. Despite numerous years of exile, Zuma remained highly eloquent in vernacular, including Zulu folk-songs which he is so fond of singing. He was a regular feature at the traditional celebrations dressed up in traditional attire with a spear in hand, even after he had left provincial politics for the national scene as deputy-president of the country.

Zuma projected a non-threatening face of the ANC towards a suspicious 'Zulu' public and King. A major weekly, *City Press* (12 Jan 2003), described Zuma's impact in the KwaZulu-Natal politics as follows:

Zuma found himself being embraced not only by Zwelithini but became the only ANC leader who could move around with relative ease between Zulu traditional chiefs and indunas without causing consternation among them...He would wear Zulu traditional garb without anyone doubting his intentions.

Zuma's embracing of his Zulu ethnicity and tradition enabled him to strike a cordial relationship with the IFP leadership, especially the premier of the province, Frank Mdlalose, who became a crucial partner in the peace process. Zuma was also '... credited with ensuring Mandela held one of the first important meetings with the Zulu monarch at the King's KwaKhangela palace near Nongoma in 1996 where Mandela conveyed his desire to see Zwelithini calling an imbizo that would hopefully reconcile rival political parties in the province' (*City Press* 12 Jan 2003).

Zuma countered perceptions of an anti-Zulu ANC not only through regular public appearance alongside the King, but also through public statements that drew a close link between the ANC and the Zulu monarch. At one occasion organised to remember one of the Zulu Kings, Dinuzulu kaMpande, he said:

The hardships and suffering that King Dinuzulu went through for his people did not go unnoticed by the first liberation movement in Africa, the African National Congress. It was because of his opposition to white rule and his principled stand against colonialism that the ANC, when it was formed in 1912, made him a patron of the organisation, together with other traditional leaders of Southern Africa, like King Sobhuza and Moshoeshoe. The ANC respected the institutions of African traditional leadership as it continues to do so even today. King Dinuzulu supported the ANC and the ANC supported him (<http://www.gov.za/presidency>).

As a result of his political interaction with Zuma, King Zwelithini subsequently became impartial in the interparty rivalry between the ANC and the IFP. He began to associate with the leadership of both parties equally, reducing the perception that the ANC was less Zulu or was a nemesis of Zulus. The King even awarded the inaugural King Shaka Award to Nelson Mandela in 2001 in recognition of his contribution towards creating peace and democracy. This was a telling sign of improved relations, a far cry from the time when the King would not even meet Mandela. The IFP even feared that it was losing influence over the King to the ANC – a concern that prompted it in 2003 to rein him in by tightening the royal purse which the organisation controlled by virtue of being in control of the provincial government which in turn controlled budgetary allocations to the King. The IFP-controlled government refused to settle the King's son's school fees, totalling R93 834, and this resulted in the school suing the King. The ANC reacted furiously to this incident and denounced it as a deliberate act of 'humiliation' on the person of the King by the then IFP-controlled provincial government (<http://www.anc.org.za>).

Overall, the violence declined significantly in KwaZulu-Natal. Most observers and scholars ascribed this, inter alia, to Zuma's success in forging cordial relations with the IFP, especially the (IFP) provincial premier, Frank Mdlalose, between 1994 and 1999, and in softening the image of the ANC amongst the locals, particularly those who believed that the organization was anti-Zulu (Lodge 1999). The ANC subsequently made significant electoral gains. After losing the province by 32% to IFP's 50% in 1994, it narrowed the gap down to a three-percentage point in 1999 and eventually won the province in 2004 by 47% to the IFP's 35%. But, Zuma's deployment to KwaZulu-Natal revealed the ANC's privileging of geographical and ethnic origin over political origin in its politics.

Lekota's appointment as premier of Free State Province in 1994 provides another example of an ethnic-inspired appointment. Though born in Kroonstad (Free State), Lekota cut his political teeth in the KwaZulu-Natal. He had left Free State in his teens for schooling in Transkei (now part of the Eastern Cape Province) and later in KwaZulu-Natal where

he settled permanently, after enrolling at Turfloop University (now the University of the North, Limpopo Province). Lekota first dabbled in politics at Turfloop, as a member of South African Student Organisation (SASO). His activities landed him in prison at Robben Island for six years. This followed his involvement in organising illegal rallies – dubbed treason by the authorities – celebrating the independence of Mozambique in 1974 (Gastrow 1995).

On his release in 1982, Lekota went back to his adopted home, KwaZulu-Natal where he later rose up to national prominence. He became national publicity secretary of the UDF, a post he held whilst in and out of prison. Upon the unbanning of the ANC in 1990, Lekota was appointed ANC convener of Southern Natal region, making him responsible for leading local initiatives to re-establish the ANC. He ‘helped establish over 60 ANC branches in the area’ and was ‘centrally involved in attempts to establish peace initiatives in Natal’ (Gastrow 1995:119). Throughout his pre-1994 career, Lekota was never based in the Free State, except for a six-month stint in 1991 as an ANC organiser. He only returned to live there later after his appointment as premier in 1994.

But Lekota was basically an outsider in the local politics of Free State. This point was highlighted in his loss in party elections for provincial chairperson to Pat Matosa, a local hero, in 1993. This caused tension between Lekota, on the one hand, Matosa and his deputy, Ace Magashule, on the other hand. Matosa-Magashule and Lekota simply could not get along. The latter felt that they were more deserving of the position of Premier than the ‘political outsider’ Lekota, while Lekota felt they did not recognise his authority. At some point the ANC provincial executive led by Matosa and Magashula wanted to pass a motion of no-confidence in Lekota’s premiership. They were only dissuaded from doing so by senior ANC leaders such as Cyril Ramaphosa (Lodge 1999:18).

The only plausible explanation for Lekota’s assignment to Free State was his local roots and Sotho ethnic ties. This becomes even clearer when one considers that Lekota was taken out of KwaZulu-Natal, where he

had become a local hero, to lead the Free State. Lekota rose up to the highest level in the KwaZulu-Natal provincial hierarchy within the United Democratic Front (UDF). He was eventually appointed to lead efforts to re-establish the ANC in Southern Natal – a firm sign of his local popularity. Lekota's prominence in KwaZulu-Natal afforded the ANC an opportunity to transcend provincialism and affirm its nationalist identity. The KwaZulu-Natal membership of the UDF had taken the lead in this regard by embracing a Sotho-speaker from outside their province, but its national leadership halted this progressive movement by re-emphasising provincial belonging (nativism) and ethnic background instead. Throughout the post-1994 period, the ANC followed a similar strategy in the deployment of its senior office bearers.

## **Conclusion**

Ethnicity is not a salient phenomenon or destabilising factor in South Africa's contemporary politics. Despite a perception that the ANC leadership is an exclusive preserve for Xhosa-speakers, the party continues to garner significant electoral support across ethnic groups. And such perceptions have been undercut by state policies and rhetoric that disregards ethnic identity. However, a significant proportion of South Africans does define itself in ethnic terms, and the public debate that raged on in the media about the ANC and government being dominated by Xhosas indicates a potential for ethnicity to gain popular resonance. This is not surprising for a country where a substantial pool of resources was invested towards creating ethnic consciousness during apartheid.

The ANC has continued to view ethnicity as an artificial creation. Though averse to this phenomenon, the organisation has nonetheless employed ethnic and traditional symbolism. It has, by and large, used it positively, as in the case of Zuma and KwaZulu-Natal. The organisation has nevertheless succumbed to provincialism, which in the South African case, corresponds with ethnicity. There seems to be a conscious decision by the organisation to privilege geographic and ethnic origins

in the appointment of provincial leaders even in cases where better alternatives exist in the form of non-local leaders. This practice has in reality hindered efforts to overcome the apartheid legacy of tribalism and provincialism as well as attempts to develop a nationalist political identity.

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# Ethnic Diversity and Conflict in Nigeria: Lessons from the Niger Delta Crisis

*Wilson Akpan*

## **Abstract**

This article assesses the viability of ethnicity as an explanation for the worsening orgy of conflict and militarisation in Nigeria's oil producing region. This is against the background that the Niger Delta crisis, despite being widely portrayed as turning on an ethnic pivot, reveals attributes that should compel a rethink of its assumed social character. Drawing on primary ethnographic data, and on relevant secondary sources, the article highlights methodological and epistemic flaws in the argument that petroleum-related struggles in Nigeria's oil region are rooted in 'ethnic competition'. The article draws vital lessons from the Niger Delta crisis, for peace building and societal re-engineering in Nigeria and other African societies saddled with similar diversity- and resource-related challenges.

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## Some background notes

The contemporary map of conflicts in Africa does not showcase Nigeria – and for a good reason: there are no international peace keeping forces there. The main theatres of conflict on the continent have for the better part of the last two decades been the Great Lakes region, the Horn of Africa, and parts of West Africa. These include countries such as: Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Somalia, Sierra Leone and Côte d’Ivoire. To the Horn of Africa sample must be added Eritrea, which despite having secured independence from Ethiopia, still has unresolved border issues with that country.

However, as far as armed conflicts are concerned, Nigeria does have some experience – if one recalls that between 1967 and 1970, only a few years after gaining independence from Britain (in 1960), the country was engulfed in a bloody civil war. It cannot be reasonably assumed that the Nigerian government and people have done all they should to prevent the tensions and ‘civil disturbances’ which frequently erupt, or have become endemic, in different parts of the country from escalating into ‘bleeding’ conflicts. Such tensions include the restiveness in the Niger Delta (Nigeria’s oil and gas province) – a region that has since the early 1990s witnessed an almost unbroken orgy of violence and militarisation.

The following scenarios might provide a useful basis for pondering the role that ethnic diversity plays in the ‘suppressed war’ that has characterised Nigeria’s Niger Delta region, especially since the 1990s:

**Scenario One:** A ‘Bill of Rights’ issued by the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP)<sup>1</sup> castigates Nigeria’s federalism as arbitrary and constructed to favour the major ethnic nationalities (namely the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo). A major agitation for the ‘political control of Ogoni affairs’ as well as the ‘control and use of Ogoni eco-

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1 MOSOP is a major umbrella organisation of the Ogoni, a minority ethnic nationality in the Niger Delta.

conomic [notably petroleum<sup>2</sup>] resources for Ogoni development' ensues (MOSOP 1992; Wiwa 1992). The struggle denounces centralised state control and management of the country's oil and mineral resources, and vilifies the transnational oil companies operating in the area for 'environmental recklessness' (Wiwa 1992).

**Scenario two:** Another declaration, the 'Kaiama Declaration', is issued by the Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC) and similarly denounces Nigeria's 'unbalanced' federalism and the exploitation of 'Ijaw resources' for the benefit of other groups. IYC threatens to disobey all 'undemocratic decrees that rob our peoples/communities of the right to ownership and control of our lives and resources, which were enacted without our participation and consent...' IYC launches a struggle – which frequently turns violent – demanding 'self-determination and justice' (IYND 1998).

**Scenario three:** An IYC faction, formed by an erstwhile IYC leader, takes a more militant stance, metamorphosing into a fighting force known as Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF). It seeks greater local control of the Delta's petroleum resources. With the proliferation of sophisticated weapons in the Niger Delta, different armed groups emerge, and armed confrontations between them and the Nigerian authorities increase.

Africa's largest oil and gas producer, Nigeria, has attracted negative international attention in recent years mainly because petroleum operations in the Niger Delta have created conditions for the eruption of major 'civil disturbances' and other forms of social conflict that threaten the country's corporate existence. A number of issues foreground the conflict. First, since 1956, when a commercial oil well was struck in the small rural town of Oloibiri (in Bayelsa State) – but particularly since 1958,

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2 Ogoni communities (in Rivers State) were among Nigeria's earliest oil-producing sites. Commercial deposits were struck at Afam in 1956, not long after similarly lucrative wells had been struck at Oloibiri, Nigeria's first oil producing town (in the present-day Bayelsa State). By 1960, the Ogoni communities of Bomu, Korokoro and Egbubu had been confirmed as 'highly productive' oilfields (Abe & Ayodele 1986:87). For a detailed discussion of the history of petroleum operations in Nigeria, see Akpan 2005.

when the country commenced crude oil export – Nigeria has grown steadily dependent on this resource for its export revenues. For instance, while oil accounted for 57 per cent of total export revenues in 1970, this proportion rose to 96 per cent (1980), 97 per cent (1990), 76 per cent (2000), and 92 per cent (2004) (OPEC 2005). Second, the Niger Delta is composed of minority ethnic nationalities (in a country demographically dominated by three largely non oil-producing ethnic groups, namely Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo). Third, the Niger Delta is one of Nigeria's most underdeveloped regions. Lastly, the 'lack of development' in the Delta belies the fact that the region's petroleum wealth practically sustains the entire country.

Grassroots discontent in the Niger Delta has found expression not simply in protest marches but in such acts as oil pipeline vandalism, abduction of oil company employees, and reprisals against community subgroups considered by local activists to be sympathetic to the Nigerian government and transnational oil interests. Of late, armed confrontations with the national security forces have become prominent. All this has occurred amidst sustained environmental and civil rights activism spearheaded by local, national and international civil society groups, as well as the mass media. The Nigerian government has estimated the monthly cost of the Niger Delta crisis to be about US\$1 billion in lost petro-revenues (*The Guardian* 2006).

The growing body of literature on the Niger Delta crisis does seem to underline one point: there is an ethnic undertone to the crisis. For one thing, the argument goes, community groups in the Niger Delta regard the non- oil-producing regions (those of the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo) as the principal beneficiaries of federal petroleum exploitation and revenue sharing policies. Write Agiobenebo and Aribaolanari (2001:455): 'the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta are treated as objects (property) owned by the majority groups to be dealt with according to their whims and caprices'. Therefore, however otherwise the Niger Delta crisis disguises itself, there is a feeling in the region about ethnic domination and hence the main target of grievances (and possible future insurrection)

must be the non-oil-producing regions. What tends to give credence to this line of argument is that in ethnolinguistic terms, Nigeria is one of the world's most diverse countries, with some 510 'living languages' spoken across over 300 ethnic groups (Gordon 2005).

The question then is: to what extent does ethnicity explain the Niger Delta conflict? Based partly on relevant secondary sources and on ethnographic data obtained by the author in the Niger Delta in 2003, this study attempts to do the following: (a) examine the conventional assumption that ethnicity is at the root of grievance construction in Nigeria's oil-producing region, (b) ascertain if indeed the target of grievances is the non-oil-producing geo-ethnic regions, and (c) examine the possible implications of an ethnic model of analysis for conflict mitigation and peace building in the Niger Delta.

### **The Niger Delta conflict: an historical sketch**

What has come to be known as the 'Niger Delta conflict', and sometimes 'resistance', has manifested itself in one form or another since the 1940s, although this brief historical sketch is not concerned with the 'pre-petroleum' phase – the phase before 1956. Three broad phases can be identified in the struggle, namely: the pre-independence phase (between 1940 and 1960), the immediate post-independence phase (the 1960s), and what may be termed the 'phase of rapid internationalisation' (the 1990s).

#### **Pre-independence struggles (1940-1960)**

Nigeria was 'born' on January 1, 1914, from the amalgamation by the British colonial authorities of what was initially labelled the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria. Following the amalgamation, Nigeria was divided into Northern, Southern and Eastern regions,<sup>3</sup> each administered by a Lieutenant-Governor, who was responsible to the

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3 The regional (confederal) arrangement gave way to a 12-state federal structure in 1967. The number of states has steadily grown over the years. As of 2006, the country had 36 states and a federal capital territory. Each state is headed by a governor.

Governor-General. Lord Frederick Lugard served as the first Governor-General (1912-1919), and is credited with the propagation of 'indirect rule', a system and policy whereby Africans were ostensibly ruled through existing indigenous political institutions (Lugard 1965:194), although these were typically manipulated to serve the needs and interests of the colonial authorities (Nelson 1982). Colonial patterns of social formation accentuated and hardened ethnic differences, with 'superordinate' and 'subordinate' ethnic groups created within and across geo-political territories. In many cases, what had simply been ethnic groups-in-themselves, or what one might call 'passive diversity', virtually hardened into 'active diversity' or ethnic groups-for-themselves.

Arguably the most authoritative documentation of the Niger Delta struggle during the colonial period is the 1958 Minorities Commission<sup>4</sup> Report to Alan Lennox-Boyd, the then Secretary of State for British Colonies. Subject to space constraints, this sketch will closely follow the findings and recommendations of the Commission. Although the struggle gained greater visibility during the late 1950s, when Nigeria made its first export shipment of crude oil, and intensified towards the independence year of 1960, this phase of the struggle began before the discovery of oil in the country. The relevance of the Report to this discussion is that it contains some hidden codes for understanding both that early phase of the struggle and the significance of the struggle's subsequent mutations. One of the Commission's aims was to ensure that the country Britain 'created' did not, after independence, splinter into chaos.

The Report detailed the 'fears' and 'grievances' of Nigeria's Western, Eastern and Northern 'minorities'. The Eastern 'minorities' formed part of what is today known as the Niger Delta (consisting of such nationalities as the Ijaw, Ibibio, Efik and several others). While the Igbo were the major ethnic group in the Eastern region, the Yoruba and the Hausa-Fulani dominated the other two regions.

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4 The Minorities Commission, also known as the Willink Commission (after its Chair, Henry Willink), was formed as part of the political processes instituted by the British colonial authorities to prepare Nigeria for self-rule.

The Minorities Commission found that although the grievances of the minorities were mainly political, some of these had direct links to local ecological circumstances. For instance, many of the grievances expressed by the Ijaw and other riverine peoples of the Niger Delta were based on fears that a government that was geographically and culturally 'distant' from the coastal communities could not effectively address the problems that such areas faced. The Eastern regional government, it must be noted, was headquartered in the inland town of Enugu, about 180 kilometres north of Port Harcourt (the present capital of Rivers State and the Niger Delta's principal city). The town was even more distant from the deep riverine areas. The demand for the creation of a 'special area' in general, and for a 'Rivers state' in particular, to cater for the needs of the coastal communities, dates back to the early 1950s. It was felt that the ecological, socio-cultural and economic circumstances of the coastal areas – 'a territory where communications [were] so difficult, building so expensive and education such a scanty' (Willink et al 1958:51) – necessitated the creation of a separate state.

The Minorities Commission also found that the Eastern minorities were aggrieved about the extensive influence of the Igbo in the region. From their everyday experiences of the conduct of government, the minorities feared that an Igbo autocracy would emerge in the region at independence – an autocracy that would have an Igbo-dominated civil service. The Eastern minorities particularly resented the economic dominance of the Igbo. There was also the apprehension that a lopsided post-independence economic system would emerge in which the Igbo, on account of their demographic majority and control of the organs of regional government, controlled key socio-economic resources (especially land).

From representations made to the Minorities Commission in the different regions of the country, and the way the communities framed their grievances, there was a good chance that many people in the minority areas saw the creation of a new state (for the minorities) as a solution to the problem of socio-economic development. On the other hand, there was

a possibility that even some of those who demanded a separate state did so for reasons that had little to do with development (Boro 1982:67).

Among the major proposals submitted to the Minorities Commission was the dismantling of the regional system of government and the adoption of a (federal) state system, in which there would be 'smaller states within what is now the Eastern region' (Willink et al 1958:47).

Interestingly, despite a reported 'sharp recrudescence of tribal feeling' in the lead-up to political independence in 1960, The Minorities Commission did not view majority/minority relations as fundamental to Nigeria's problems, and thus did not endorse the creation of states as a way of 'allaying the fears' of the minorities. What the Commission did instead was to make detailed suggestions to instil a measure of fairness in the relations among social groups in the country. For instance, in response to the concerns of the swamp communities of the Delta, the Commission recommended the creation of a 'Special Area' to be comprised of the Rivers Province (excluding Ahoada and Port Harcourt) and the Western Ijaw Division (Willink et al 1958).

On the 'minority question' as a whole, the Commission recommended the creation of an Advisory Council for certain minorities or clusters of minorities, similar to the one that was already in operation in the Western Region. This council would advise the government on the socio-economic well-being of the areas concerned as well as 'bring to the notice of the Regional Government any discrimination against the Area' (Willink et al 1958:104). The Commission also recommended that the impending Independence Constitution should have clear provisions for a wide array of fundamental rights, protections and freedoms.

While all this might sound overwhelmingly 'tribal', Ake (2000) would, decades later, adopt a functional view of the struggle, shedding a new light thereon and revealing their hidden lessons. He maintained that the struggles defined for the country what should be the developmental and democratic concerns of Nigeria's national elite. They also helped to focus the discourse of the pre-independence movement on the 'internal



political relations of Africans themselves' at a time when the national elite (who had become ethno-cultural and political entrepreneurs of sorts) seemed preoccupied with resisting the coloniser, winning political independence and fighting one another (Ake 2000:45-46). An insight such as this (to which this author returns later) is crucial if one is to go beyond essentialist discourses in interrogating the contemporary Niger Delta conflict. The reader will notice particularly how Ake's epistemology debunks the apparent 'tribalism'.

### **Immediate post-independence struggles (1960s)**

The emergence of crude oil during the early 1960s as a principal export product introduced a new dimension to the Niger Delta conflict. People in the riverine communities who had hitherto seen the government as being 'too distant' to address their ecological concerns now began to see the petroleum industry as offering them economic opportunities. Not much was known in the region at this time about the fact that petroleum production brought in its train severe social and ecological hazards (Akpan 2006a).

By the mid-1960s, the Niger Delta had become an important arena of petroleum business, oil having been discovered in several communities. With the increasing importance of oil in the Nigerian economy, its utilisation began to emerge as a major grassroots mobilisation theme. Some people in the area felt that the existing framework for exploiting this new 'driver of growth' would not foster the development of the oil-producing areas.

Of the various expressions of discontent during the mid-1960s, those of Isaac Adaka Boro, Sam Owonaro and Nottingham Dick (all Ijaw activists) stood out, principally because of the militant form the resistance took and the language with which it was framed. All parts of Nigeria, it must be pointed out, were immersed in intense political conflict at this time (Nelson 1982). The three men sensed in the immediate post-independence political structures in Nigeria indications that the oil region

was ‘blatantly denied development and the common necessities of life’ and tried to rally the local people behind their cause (Boro 1982:66). They revived the campaign for a Niger Delta state – except that now they wanted an independent ‘Niger Delta Republic’.

To actualise their vision, Boro (a 28-year-old ex-policeman at the time), Owonaro and Dick established an armed group, the ‘Niger Delta Volunteer Force’ (NDVF), and vowed to excise the Niger Delta region from Nigeria. They felt that Nigeria’s ‘political party system orbited around three major tribes, Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo’ (Boro 1986:72-73<sup>5</sup>, Nelson 1982).

On 22 February 1966, NDVF launched an armed revolt against the Nigerian government. The ensuing battle was one that Boro himself, who was the NDVF leader and commander, was not totally convinced he could win, judging by some of his pronouncements. In his address to combatants before they took their positions in a grove in the town of Kaiama (in today’s Bayelsa state), he had emphasised the need for the combatants to maintain a high level of moral discipline and bear in mind that they were fighting for, among other things, *their* petroleum (Boro 1986). For their part the federal forces, superior in both numerical strength and military hardware, enlisted local informants who helped them to penetrate the Delta’s jungles and creeks. People who supported the creation of a Niger Delta state (let alone Niger Delta Republic) were intimidated.

Twelve days into actual combat with federal troops, NDVF was defeated, which is why Boro’s rebellion is popularly referred to as the *Twelve Day Revolution*. Boro, Owonaru and Dick were charged with treason, convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment in May 1967. Boro’s dreams of a ‘Niger Delta Republic’ and of himself as founding president were thus terminated. However, on 4 August 1967, barely a month into the Nigerian Civil War (sometimes called the ‘Biafran War’), the federal government

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5 Isaac Boro was killed in 1968. His book, *The Twelve-Day Revolution* (edited by Tony Tebekaemi) was published posthumously in 1982.

granted the three men amnesty (Boro 1982), arguably because it found that the men could be an asset in preventing Biafra from taking the Niger Delta with it in its bid to break away from Nigeria. The pardon could also have been a tactical move to placate the Ijaw and other minorities in the region, thus dissuading them from supporting the Biafran secessionists. As expected, the pardoned men fought on the Nigerian side.

Boro's failed dream of an independent Niger Delta Republic was fulfilled in a different way, though. Following the two military coups in Nigeria in 1966 and the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967, the regime of General Yakubu Gowon (the man who was made head of state as a result of the second coup) created a 12-state federal structure for Nigeria on 27 May 1967, which obviously brought the national government somewhat closer to the people. The Eastern Region was broken into three states, namely Rivers State (the present Rivers and Bayelsa States), East Central State (the present Imo, Abia, Ebonyi, Anambra and Ebonyi States) and South Eastern State (the present-day Cross River and Akwa Ibom States). Boro, who fought on the federal side in the three-year civil war, was killed on 20 April 1968 (Tebekaemi 1986). A theme park and streets in Port Harcourt have since been named in his memory.

### **The period of internationalisation (1990s)**

After the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) – which some believe was fuelled in part by oil politics (Giwa, 1985) – public attention shifted (at least in the immediate post-war years) from oil-related grassroots grievances that continued to build up in the Niger Delta, to issues such as national reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction. These were the key federal initiatives to heal the wounds the war inflicted on the national psyche. In the meantime, the military government consolidated its control of petroleum resources through several decrees, including the ground-breaking Decree 51 (now Petroleum Act) of 1969, which ended direct British control of petroleum resources in Nigeria. In 1971 Nigeria joined the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)

and, in keeping with OPEC's guidelines, established a parastatal named Nigerian National Oil Corporation (NNOC) – renamed Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) in 1977 – to represent its business interests in the petroleum industry.

By the 1980s, many communities had become relatively better informed about the environmental hazards of petroleum operations, having experienced some of those hazards directly. Even so, community protests against the activities of the oil companies would bring many people face-to-face with issues such as the security arrangements that formed part of an apparently 'anti-people' relationship between the federal military government and the oil companies (HRW 1999; Turcotte 2002).

Petroleum-related community discontent and protests in the Niger Delta began to gain prominence in the international media from around 1990. One of that year's major incidents was the killing of 80 people and burning down of over 490 houses in the town of Umuechem (in Rivers State) by anti-riot police. The police were sent to the town by the military government to quell public protests over the lack of electricity, pipe-borne water and other social amenities, as well as direct compensation for oil pollution of farmlands and water sources. Local residents felt that on account of their town's contribution to the national economy they deserved these entitlements. Umuechem at the time had 56 oil wells and hosted two flow stations operated by Shell (HRW 1999).

As shown presently, it is the events of the 1990s that deepened public interest in petroleum-related community issues in the Niger Delta and entrenched those issues on the campaign agenda of international environmental and human rights groups. Arguably, the 1990s witnessed unprecedented growth in the number of groups opposed to what Ekeh (2001) calls 'Abuja's struggles against the Nigerian nation', and made the Niger Delta conflict one of the more noticeable signifiers of popular disenchantment with the character of politics and governance in Nigeria since independence.

Central to the massive internationalisation of the Niger Delta struggles in the 1990s was the campaign led by Ken Saro Wiwa, author, activist and leader of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). It should be mentioned that much scholarly analysis of the Niger Delta conflict and grassroots struggles has been based on the activities of MOSOP and similar groups, rather than on the narratives of ordinary village people (the subsistence farmers, fishermen and petty traders), outside the context of formal activist groups. The weakness of this methodological approach will become clearer in the course of this discussion.

The 'Ogoni Bill of Rights', to which reference has earlier been made, denounced centralised state control and management of the country's oil and mineral resources, and vilified the multinational oil companies operating in the area for what MOSOP activists described as environmental recklessness (Wiwa 1992). Above all, it demanded 'political control of Ogoni affairs by Ogoni people' and the 'control and use of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development' (MOSOP 1992; Wiwa 1992).

One line of argument pursued by the Ogoni activists was that three decades of 'reckless' and 'predatory' oil exploitation had brought about widespread poverty through the destruction of the local environment and indigenous occupational systems. Capitalising on the fact that oil operations in Ogoniland were predominantly onshore (that is, land-based), with oil pipelines snaking through people's farms and homesteads, MOSOP considered that the effectiveness of its mobilisation would depend in large part on its ability to make its campaign Ogoni-specific, rather than seek alliances with other areas that suffered similar adverse impacts.

On 4 January 1993, MOSOP launched a critical phase of its campaign. An estimated 300,000 protesters marched on the streets of the Ogoni town of Bori, denouncing Nigeria's 'unjust' federalism, the Federal government's oil extraction policies and the activities of Shell, demanding the company's withdrawal from Ogoniland. Shell, it should be pointed out, is the oldest and biggest oil operator in Nigeria, having been involved

in oil prospecting in Nigeria since the 1930s. The company possesses to date the 'best' oilfields in the country, and (in partnership with NNPC) controls most of the country's crude oil reserves and production. This dominant (mainly onshore) position has proved rather ominous in recent years, though, as youths in the oil region have at different times since the early 1990s threatened to expel (and in some places have succeeded in expelling) the company from their territory because of what they perceive as Shell's anti-community and manipulative operational ethos (Akpan 2006a; Akpan 2005). Possibly as a result of increasing hostility, much of the company's new investment in the Niger Delta since the mid-1990s has been in the deep offshore.

The military authorities met the Ogoni protests with arrests, torture, harassments and detentions. Ken Saro Wiwa and other MOSOP leaders remained special targets of the clampdown (Trade and Environment Database 1997). The government also deployed a strategy of isolating the Ogoni community from the rest of the Niger Delta and Nigeria, and of turning the Ogoni community against itself. Thus, it was not long before MOSOP began to 'sound' like a separatist group, its demands began to appear as lacking in internal consensus, and its entire struggle seemed doomed to fail.

The above account must not give the erroneous impression that the internal politics of MOSOP was one of complete consensus. The leadership squabbles within MOSOP have been documented (see Ibeanu 2000), and so shall not be dealt with in any detail here. Suffice it to say that it was against the backdrop of the group's factional in-fighting, as well as bloody inter-community conflicts between the Ogoni and their neighbours, that the repression of MOSOP and the eventual hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists by the military authorities were orchestrated. Two prominent Ogoni factions became visible towards the mid-1990s, one repudiating the radical tactics of the Saro Wiwa-led faction and offering itself to the Ogoni community as a more viable alternative to the mainstream MOSOP movement.

With invidious tensions raging within Ogoni, a picture of insecurity of life and property became apparent. These and other local vulnerabilities were exploited by the military authorities to justify its criminalisation of MOSOP and its leaders. MOSOP responded to this threat by labelling the local chiefs and other prominent Ogoni indigenes in the 'moderate' faction 'sell-outs', 'traitors' and 'vultures'. The 'moderates' were now among the (internal) 'repressive' forces that MOSOP must deal with. A gathering of this group in the Ogoni town of Giokoo on May 21, 1994 drew the ire of MOSOP and its powerful youth segment, who raided the gathering, amidst resistance by police and soldiers. The fracas led to the killing of four of the prominent Ogoni leaders who had been the brains behind the 'moderate' group, namely Chief Edward Kobani, Chief Albert Badey, Chief Samuel Orage and Chief Theophilus Orage.

Following this incident, Ken Saro Wiwa and several other leading MOSOP activists were arrested, detained and charged with the murder of the four men. On 31 October 1995, under the regime of General Sani Abacha, a military tribunal pronounced a guilty verdict on Wiwa and eight of his colleagues. On 10 November 1995 the men were hanged.

In the course of the 1990s, struggles similar to those of MOSOP took place in many Niger Delta communities – attracting familiar patterns of government response: arrests, detentions, sacking of villages, killings, and (quite possibly) the instigation of divisions within and across communities. Among such struggles were those led by the Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC). With the proliferation of activist groups, weapons, and high levels of military presence, the Niger Delta has become highly volatile.

### **Grassroots struggles – disguised ethnicity?**

Even from the atavistic tone of the names of organisations championing the Niger Delta struggles since independence, the mobilisation efforts sketched above present a challenge for analysts, many of whom have simply interpreted the motivations and agendas of grassroots struggles in the Niger Delta as primordial, exclusionist and particularistic;

in other words, as fundamentally ethnic and capable of undermining national renaissance. For the purposes of this article, 'ethnic group' refers to the social identity built on the *mythomoteur* of language, history, cultural practices, myths, symbols and (in the case of Nigeria also) geographic location (Armstrong 1982). This working definition in no way endorses primordialist ideas of frozen or fossilised identities, and does certainly take account of the constructivist notion of changeability and manipulability. It does not accept extreme constructivist ideas of 'ethnic group' as something entirely invented or fabricated (Anderson 1983, see also Ake 2001).

A notable scholarly attempt to dissect the Niger Delta struggle and similar tendencies in other parts of Nigeria is Ikelegbe's (2001) work, which contains case analyses of the mobilisation activities of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), Oodua People's Congress (OPC), and Arewa People's Congress (APC). Ikelegbe tries to show how, contrary to popular notions of 'civil society' as 'the beacon of freedom, the fountain for the protection of civil rights and of resistance against state repression', the 'objectives, methods and roles' of 'civil society' organisations could undermine the democratic project (Ikelegbe 2001:1-2). The IYC, which as earlier indicated, has been involved in the Niger Delta mobilisation since the 1990s, is portrayed as only speaking 'the minds of the Ijaws and at least parts of the Niger Delta' – a prime example of what the author terms 'perverse' civil society. Accordingly, the author offers an insight into what the term 'ethnic' could mean, by contrasting it with 'civic' or 'ideal'. He argues that 'ethnic' mobilisation tends to be 'sectional', 'criminal', 'anarchic', 'parochial' and 'centrifugal'. The three organisations in his analysis are therefore ethnic movements 'masquerad[ing] as civil society' (Ikelegbe 2001:22). This focus on the activities of formal activist organisations, rather than on the narratives and lived worlds of the ordinary people the organisations 'represent', presents analytical difficulties of its own, as shown later. For one thing, it makes it easy to cast local struggles as 'sectional' and 'parochial'.



The organisations are also portrayed as ‘criminal’ and ‘anarchic’ on account of their protest methodology. Their key protest strategy is believed to be ‘violence’. The ‘tendency for aggrieved groups to take up arms in their encounters with the state and other groups’ and the support the groups enjoy from ‘civil groups of elders and political leaders’ are deplored (Ikelegbe 2001:19). This is despite sociological arguments that violence is sometimes a ‘smoke from the fire’ of unjust public institutions, state policies and the political process, or injustices in the corporate and transnational spheres (Keane 1998; Churchill 2005).

Cesarz et al (2003) also hint that the Niger Delta mobilisation could be disguised ethnicity. For them ‘interethnic violence is a longstanding feature of the oil-rich Niger Delta’ (Cesarz et al 2003:2), and Ijaw militancy in particular is viewed as a risk to international oil interests and to Nigeria’s future as a united and stable polity. Local groups, the authors suggest, are no longer to be seen as ‘a loosely organised ethnic, sporadic movement’: they are now an ‘armed ethnic militia’ capable of derailing Nigeria’s new-found democracy’ (Cesarz et al 2003:2).

Reacting to that line of analysis are Douglas et al (2003), who challenge the use of the term ‘ethnic militia’ to describe local activist groups. Such a depiction, they argue, misrepresents the essence of the Niger Delta struggle (cf Watts & Okonta 2003). However, whether the two groups of analysts are operating from different epistemic platforms is another matter entirely. For one thing, Douglas et al view the emerging coalition-building efforts among community groups in the Niger Delta as constituting a ‘bulwark against the ethnic majorities’ (Douglas et al 2003:3). What is the empirical basis for suggesting that ordinary people in the Delta as mobilising *against* the ‘ethnic majorities’, and how is this view different from Cesarz et al’s suggestion that the local activists are involved in a disguised ‘ethnic’ warfare?

There is also the argument that while local struggles might stem from economic and political disparities in Nigeria, they might fundamentally be attributable to ‘communal pressures that have characterized the Niger

Delta and many other parts of Nigeria' (Welch 1995:636). Welch calls these 'communal pressures' 'matters of ethnic self-determination', maintaining that economic and political change in a multi-ethnic milieu like Nigeria invariably triggers ethnic conflict. Short of portraying Nigeria's ethnic nationalities as fundamentally incompatible social groupings, he posits that Nigeria as an entity 'came into being long before a substantial number of its residents felt themselves to be "Nigerians"' (Welch 1995:637). While Welch uses this essentialist analysis to interrogate the concept of individual rights and to make a contribution to the 'group rights' debate, concerns might be raised as to whether his argument does not in fact distort the complexity of the Niger Delta crisis. A more nuanced insight into the Niger Delta conflict might be gained from Bangura's (1999:4) 'three crises' of post-colonial African state – those of 'capacity', 'governance' and 'security'.

The works of Osadolor (2002), Agbola and Alabi (2003), Agiobenebo and Aribaolanari (2001) and Uga (2001), among others, are more explicit in 'revealing' what it is that engenders disaffection between the oil-producing region and the major ethnic nationalities. They argue that it is the 'majority groups' that determine the framework for petroleum exploitation (as well as interethnic relations and political governance) in Nigeria and unfairly profit from it. As Agiobenebo and Aribaolanari (2001:455) put it: 'the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta are treated as objects (property) owned by the majority groups to be dealt with according to their whims and caprices'. There is even an implicit (but erroneous) assumption by these analysts that it is on behalf of their own people that the major ethnic groups 'control' political power in Nigeria and suppress socio-economic development in the Niger Delta.<sup>6</sup>

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6 The fact is that of Nigeria's 36 states, the poorest ten (Jigawa, Kebbi, Kogi, Bauchi, Kwara, Yobe, Zamfara, Gombe, Sokoto and Adamawa) are in the northern sector, a region that has produced all but two of Nigeria's Heads of State since independence in 1960 and remains, politically speaking, Nigeria's most influential region (*The Guardian*, 11 January 2007). The region however has a handful of business tycoons and very rich civilian and military politicians. This can only mean one thing: Nigeria's

It is noteworthy that Obi (2005) places the protests and demands of Niger Delta groups such as MOSOP within the rubric of grassroots struggles for broader societal transformation. He suggests that the Niger Delta conflict must be seen in terms of its connection to 'broader popular social struggles for empowerment and democracy' (Obi 2005:iii). This line of analysis, which forms part of what Idemudia and Ite (2006a) call an 'integrated explanation', and which speaks directly to the conflict's deeper social character, has been obscured in so much of the literature.

The above review also shows that while some analysts have acknowledged that the issues in the Niger Delta struggle transcend 'local concerns' (Cesarz et al 2003; Watts 2000), and that the struggle makes a strong statement on the pains that a 'distant state' has inflicted on the Nigerian society as a whole (Welch 1995:636), the failure of governance at the national level is not given the explanatory status it deserves. This begs the question as to why the search for empirical information on grassroots struggles such as those in the Niger Delta almost inevitably proceeds from an ethnic frame of reference. Could it be, as Mamdani (1996:187) has conjectured concerning conflicts in Africa, 'that the bifurcated nature of the state shaped under colonialism, and of the politics it shaped in turn, had now appeared in the theory that tried to explain it?' The next section sheds some light on this question.

Some of the aforementioned analyses, especially the strand that suggests that the Niger Delta struggle is a way of 'striking back' at, or at least resisting, the major ethnic nationalities, who appropriate the 'lion's share' of Nigeria's petroleum revenues at the expense of the oil-producing region (Agbola & Alabi 2003:270), have all the ingredients of the 'competition thesis' of ethnic mobilisation. This thesis holds that where state policies appear to disproportionately benefit some regions of a multi-ethnic society, heightened ethnic awareness and collective ethnic action across the society become common tendencies in the society in

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ethnopolitical entrepreneurs do not necessarily control political power on behalf of ordinary people in their geo-ethnic regions.

question. As Feagin (1988:1132) puts it, '[c]ompetition occurs when two or more ethnic groups attempt to secure the same resources'; besides, 'ethnic competition destabilizes group relations'.

Seen from such a perspective, the geologic fact of petroleum not being evenly distributed across Nigeria can be a basis for ethnic competition. However, the competition becomes exacerbated and produces invidious socio-political outcomes for the entire polity where state policies driving the utilisation of resources seem to favour some geo-ethnic groups while disadvantaging the others. The works of Osadolor (2002), Agbola and Alabi (2003), Agiobenebo and Aribaolanari (2001) and Uga (2001) generally make this point. Since groups in the Niger Delta could not be mobilising simply for the sake of doing so, the insight that these analysts attempt to proffer is that the Niger Delta mobilisation must be for the maximisation of sectional interests, with the non-producing ethnic groups a target of their grievance. It would, of course, not be correct to assume that the 'unfair' appropriation of national resources by some leaders from the major ethnic groups has been fundamentally for the 'greater good' of ordinary people in their geo-ethnic regions (see Akpan 2006b).

Since, as earlier stated, the author's attempt to understand the role of ethnicity as a basis of grievance construction in the Niger Delta, is partly based on primary data, a few brief remarks on how the data were obtained might be appropriate at this juncture.

### **Some methodological notes**

The ethnographic study was conducted over a four-month period in 2003, at Oloibiri, Ebubu and Iko, three small, rural oil-producing communities (in Bayelsa, Rivers and Akwa Ibom states respectively). Among other reasons, they were selected on account of: (a) their relative historical importance (Oloibiri being Nigeria's first oil town, and the Ebubu oilfield also being among the earliest batch, discovered in 1956); and (b) their relative experience with petroleum production-related grassroots

activism. For instance, at the time of the study, production activities at the Ebubu oilfield had been halted due to the conflict between the Ogoni and Shell Petroleum described in the second part of this article. Ebubu is part of Ogoniland. The three communities had all the hallmarks of poverty, rurality and neglect in Nigeria, namely: unemployment (the main economic activities were subsistence farming, fishing and petty trading), deplorable or non-existent community infrastructure (there were no functional health clinics, pipe-borne water and electricity, and no properly resourced schools or markets), and communal anger – especially towards the petroleum industry and the Nigerian state.

Besides observation and ‘social immersion’ in the communities – the strategies through which an ethnographer gains deeper insight into, in this case, local people’s narratives, discontent, and understandings of conflict and grievance construction – 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in each of the three communities. Respondents included authority figures (such as the chiefs of the three towns), youth leaders and other respondents (both male and female) selected in a non-probabilistic way.

It was important to focus the inquiry on the everyday narratives of local residents, rather than on the activities of formal activist organisations such as those referred to earlier in this chapter. The reason was to depart from a methodological orthodoxy that often presents the sentiments, protest strategies, logistical concerns and ideological inclinations of formal activist organisations and their leaderships as necessarily representing the nuances of discourses and grievances among people on the ground.

The in-depth conversations were guided by questions such as: (a) ‘What if the non-oil-producing areas of the country feel the Niger Delta region is asking for too much and that the region does not want to share the region’s oil wealth with the rest of the country?’ (b) ‘Would you want to see Nigeria restructured in any way – and if so, what should a ‘restructured’ Nigeria look like?’ (c) ‘Do you think the problems in the Niger

Delta would be better resolved if Nigeria were “restructured”? (d) ‘Do you feel any concern about the possibility of Nigeria breaking up due to the Niger Delta’s quest for resource control?’ (e) ‘What does Nigeria as a whole stand to gain from the Niger Delta struggle – and are you seeing any such gains already?’ (f) ‘Would you blame the non oil-producing regions for the development problems in the Niger Delta?’ These were in addition to the author making himself intimately familiar, through observation and a reasonable degree of ‘social immersion’, with the lived worlds of people in the communities and with the ways in which their everyday ‘grammar’ of discontent intersected with popularly reported socio-political discontents of ordinary Nigerians in the wider national community.

Extensive semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants at the Port Harcourt offices of Shell Petroleum (the major oil operator in the three study communities), as well as at one of the regional offices of Nigeria’s oil industry regulator, the Department of Petroleum Resources (DPR). This helped the author to have a glimpse of how these establishments perceived and/or responded to community problems associated with petroleum operations.

It must be emphasised that because of the qualitative nature of the inquiry, the primary data generated could not be a basis for firm generalisations. The analysis based on the primary data from the three study communities must, thus, be viewed as only illustrative of the bases of grievance construction in the Niger Delta.

## **Research findings**

The study found that oil-polluted fishing grounds and drinking water sources (especially at Oloibiri and Iko), excessively invasive oil pipeline facilities (such as the ones in some Ebusu neighbourhoods), and gas flaring (and the badly damaged rooftops of dwelling places in one ward at Iko), were among the adverse socio-environmental imprints of petroleum production in the three study communities. Through conversations

with community members, formal interviews with selected respondents and the author's observations, there was a strong indication that these environmental problems had negative effects on people's lives and on indigenous occupational systems. In all three communities, people spoke angrily about what they 'suffered' as a result of 'sharing' their socio-ecologic and cultural neighbourhoods with petroleum operators.

At the offices of Shell, the author obtained a document detailing the compensation rates adopted by the oil companies for the purposes of land acquisition, reparation for damaged crops, vegetation and heritage objects and general alteration to local land use (Akpan 2005). At the DPR, the author learnt about the activities, achievements and challenges of the regulatory agency vis-à-vis its mission (as stated on its website) of making sure 'national goals and aspirations are not thwarted, and that oil companies carry out their operations according to international oil industry standards and practices'. From a critical review of these it seemed evident that the Nigerian petroleum industry was riddled with contradictions and that at every turn, the community was at the receiving end. The industry operated along patterns whereby economics seemed to define ecology, commerce took pre-eminence over community interests, and social upliftment lagged behind oil sales statistics. Those respondents who seemed knowledgeable about the compensational practices of the oil companies and DPR's weakness felt 'abandoned' by the state and made subject to the whims of the companies. DPR was accused of serving the interest of the oil companies rather than the interest of 'the people' (a problem probably more recognisable among researchers as 'regulatory capture'). Local residents accused government of making Nigeria 'a colony of Shell'. The remark 'Shell is government and government is Shell' was a common expression of this resentment. There was a virtual 'absence' of statutory arrangements that compelled petroleum operators to forge genuine developmental partnerships with their 'host' communities and adhere to specific community service obligations and compensation benchmarks.

A comment made by one respondent at Iko captured the sentiments expressed in the three communities:

These are very tiny communities; even if [an oil] company, or whoever, were to embark on an all-out investment in social infrastructure and human capital development here – just to compensate the community for the resources they’re extracting from here, they would still have spent a pittance from their total revenue. But they are not doing that.<sup>7</sup>

Another respondent, an elderly authority figure, from the same community stated:

Each time we demand social amenities and jobs from the government as a reward for the oil they are extracting from here, they say: ‘We have asked the oil companies to develop your area; if they are not doing it, you should get them to do it’. You look around this town and tell me if we deserve a quality of life such as this.

Arguably, these are the sorts of discontents and local narratives that feed into the overt resistance of many activist organisations in the Niger Delta.

A close observation of social amenities in the communities (such as a concrete landing jetty and a water project at Oloibiri, a water project at Ebubu, and a borehole and a health clinic at Iko), a review of the processes through which they had been delivered, and an examination of the intra-community squabbles and discontents attending their delivery revealed the communities as classical cases of failed community development, chaotic and opportunistic development intermediation, and community fragmentation (Akpan 2006a).

Respondents blamed the state, and in some cases (such as at Ebubu and Iko) political leaders representing their communities at different levels of government, over the lack of broadbased consensus on ‘fairness’ and

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7 For a more elaborate insight into corporate-community relations in the Nigerian petroleum industry, see Idemudia and Ite (2006b) and Akpan (2006).



‘equity’ in the distribution and utilisation of petroleum revenues. There was deep discontent in the communities over the absence of democratic, grassroots participation in decision making affecting the petroleum industry. At Iko, one authority figure and a youth leader pointed out that this was also one of the major reasons why ‘not a single indigene of this town’ has found employment in an oil company.

While respondents felt at ease attacking the Nigerian state, ‘the powers that be’, their local political representatives, the oil companies, and (in the case of a segment of youths at Oloibiri) their chiefs (who in turn denounced some of their youths as ‘trouble-makers’), respondents’ remarks seemed strikingly devoid of bitterness towards the non-oil-producing ethnic nationalities. As one respondent at Ebubu put it:

Ours is not a sectional struggle; we’re not fighting the other [ethnic] nationalities, nor are we fighting for ourselves only. We are trying to let government understand that wherever you [extract natural wealth from] you owe that place a gift of development. You must give something back. We are trying to teach the political leadership that your work is to build the community, not to destroy it. Ours is a test case of how government shouldn’t treat the goose that lays the golden egg. If government does us good, why should they treat another community differently if they find a resource there? You can’t call this an Ogoni or Ijaw struggle!

Even when many respondents felt Nigeria should be ‘restructured’ to ensure greater local or regional control of resources, the view seemed to be that this would promote overall national development, since everyone would ‘sit up’ rather than wait for ‘transfer revenues’ accruing from resources exploited from ‘other’ regions. Equally noteworthy, the response from many respondents, such as the one quoted above, echoed a popularly reported trend in contemporary Nigeria whereby ordinary citizens in the different geopolitical regions are becoming part of a ‘new’ ‘social justice’ activism in which the state (and in some cases business) is urged to ‘give something back’ for localised natural resources exploited

for the benefit of the entire country. In some of the impoverished, rural dam communities in Kogi, Kwara and Kebbi states (in central Nigeria), for example, local people have embarked on a Niger Delta-like mobilisation to pressure the Nigerian state for roads, schools, electricity and other forms of 'just compensation' for the Kainji, Shiroro and Jebba dams, which utilise 'their' water resources (Ya'u 2002).

In an important sense, the deplorable social conditions in the three study communities – and the associated community discontent – appeared to coincide with the neglects, and grassroots grievances, in other parts of Nigeria (Akpan 2005). Thus, the results of the ethnographic research at Ebubu Oloibiri and Iko left the author wondering if grievance construction in these communities – and grievance constructions in similarly neglected communities elsewhere in Nigeria – were not in themselves indicative of ordinary people's imaginings of 'fairness', broad-based grassroots participation in governance processes, and broader societal emancipation (see Shils 1992:1-15).

### **Mobilising for what? Re-assessing the ethnic discourse**

While ethnic competition theory does help to highlight some facets of Nigeria's developmental challenges – not least the 'unwholesome' roles played by some political, cultural and civic leaders (Akpan 2006b) – Ake's (2000) insights underscore the need to go beyond an ethnic model of analysis and focus on the 'emancipatory' significance of struggles occurring in certain sections of a multi-ethnic society. It worries Ake that despite the overwhelming historical evidence of battles by 'ordinary' Africans against oppressors (such as slave traders, missionaries, colonisers, homegrown dictators, and foreign imperialists), analysts still find it difficult to '[accord] the status of democratic struggles' to such efforts. What could be more 'emancipatory' and 'civic' than a striving by ordinary people 'for access, fairness, equal opportunity, political expression and participation in the collective enterprise of a political community' (Ake 2000:132)? On the question of excessive reliance on ethnicity as

an 'explanation' for African conflicts, Ake points out that it is incidental that 'the interest which appropriates and privatises state power wears the ethnic mask, which [is what] detracts us from seeing that what is being opposed is not ethnicity but something else which is hiding behind ethnicity':

the seeming ethnic opposition [from grassroots groups] is conjunctural and deceptive because it is constituted, not by ethnics wanting to oppose holders of state power, but by holders of state power trying to conceal injustices and undemocratic tendencies (Ake 2000:44).

Ake's point can be stated thus: to understand the underlying basis of grievance construction in local communities or appreciate the complexity of grassroots struggles and draw vital lessons from them for purposes of peace making and broader societal reengineering, essentialist prisms (which typically magnify identity differences and cast those differences as root causes of conflict) have limited utility (see also Feagin 1988). The key policy challenge is to look beyond the activities of ethnic and political entrepreneurs, who sometimes deliberately or unwittingly help to transform immanent, 'passive' contradictions in a society into 'active' tensions and conflicts. There is also a need to understand the infrastructure of social oppression that such struggles have the potential of revealing. This is because struggles often hastily labelled 'tribal', 'sectional' or 'ethnic' could very well be 'emancipatory' struggles aiming to make social justice a reality in politics and governance in a given country. In the case of Oloibiri, Ebubu and Iko, grassroots narratives fundamentally reveal that it is the state, petroleum companies and local political representatives – and not necessary the 'other ethnic groups', who appropriate the 'lion's share' of Nigeria's petroleum resources – that must reassess their relationships with ordinary people.

## **Conclusion**

What the foregoing analysis has shown is that in trying to understand or explain the worsening orgy of violence and militarisation in the Niger

Delta, a somewhat excessive emphasis seems to have been paid to the issue of Nigeria's ethnic diversity and ethnic competition. While analysts have not entirely ignored the fact that grassroots struggles (even frequent eruptions of lawlessness) in the region transcend particularistic, ethnic concerns, there has been a tendency to treat such transcendence as merely 'tangential' to 'the more fundamental' issue of ethnicity. What has also been shown, especially from the ethnographic data reported in the previous section, is that a focus on the lived experiences and everyday narratives of ordinary men and women in specific oil-producing communities, rather than on organisations acting 'on their behalf', makes it easier to apprehend the true social character of, or at least the complex tapestry of forces shaping, such struggles. This obviously echoes Idemudia and Ite's (2006a) call for an 'integrated explanation' of the Niger Delta conflict. As Ake has argued, an ethnic reading of local struggles might cast such struggles as primitive, uncivil and retrogressive, but 'it does not eradicate their democratic significance' (Ake 2000:44). While not denying the fact that under particular conditions ethnic diversity could give expressions to civic tensions, one must agree with Ake (2000) that conflict is not necessarily the defining fabric of ethnic groups, as ethnic groups are no different from other social groupings.

One lesson that can be drawn from this is that under certain conditions – such as conditions of large-scale and prolonged social justice deficits – so-called 'sectionally-based' struggles could help to define for a 'deprived' region and for the wider society a more socially sensitive development and democratisation trajectory. In other words, it is only through a rigorous interrogation of the lived worlds, narratives and discontents of people on the ground that it will become clear what the authentic drivers of 'sectionally-based' struggles are. It is diversionary simply to closet such struggles in the dominant (essentialist) narratives.

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# Cultural Diversity in Conflict and Peace Making in Africa

*Molem C. Sama*

## **Abstract**

Contrary to common belief that Cameroon is a haven of peace in a turbulent Central African sub region, this paper demonstrates that the absence of war in the country does not imply that it is peaceful. Given the linguistic and cultural diversity of the country with its more than 289 ethnic groups and a colonial legacy of French and English cultures and languages, plus remnants of a German sub-stratum, it should be clear that there are many potential ingredients for conflicts in Cameroon. The politicians seem to have nurtured these cultural and/or linguistic diversities in ways that fuel conflict and can even spark civil war. The tension that results from these ethnic and/or linguistic and religious splinters is not overt, however, due to the repressive nature of the regime in place. However, this tension continues to grow, to the detriment of the country's socio-economic development. There is therefore an acute need for measures to defuse such cultural conflicts which have the potential of sparking future civil strife in the country.

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## Introduction

Since the late 1980s, the globalisation phenomenon and the resulting political liberalisation seem to have led to an increased obsession with ethnicity, 'autochthony' and the 'politics of belonging' in Africa and elsewhere, thereby creating a crisis of identity. So pervasive and disturbing was this issue of exclusion and new forms of identity arising from 'repackaging', 'retribalisation', 'reconstruction' and 'redefinition' of Africans that a special issue of *Africa Today* (1998) and a plethora of writers (e.g. Awasom 2004; Fawole & Ukeje 2005; Fonchingong 2005), as well as CODESRIA have focused on it in an attempt to x-ray its complexities. Cameroon is a special case study of identity construction and activation. Such a situation can be a threat to national integration because of Cameroon's triple German, Gallic and Anglo-Saxon colonial legacies and its more than 289 ethnic tribes.

Cameroon was born out of the erstwhile German colony of Kamerun, which became a United Nations mandated territory after World War I. The colony was splintered to cater for French and British interests against the backdrop of the imperialist morass that ensued. The north- and south-west regions of the country, known today as Anglophone Cameroon, were administered by the British, while the rest of the territory known today as Francophone Cameroon was administered by the French. These two separately administered regions reunified in 1961 after a plebiscite to form a two-state federation with two prime ministers, a federal legislature and a single president (Ngoh 1999). In 1972, the population voted in a referendum to adopt a new constitution setting up a unitary state to replace the federation whose name *ipso facto* changed from Federal Republic of Cameroon to United Republic of Cameroon. This event, referred to as 'the pacific revolution' was to turn the tide in Cameroon's chequered colonial history (Stark 1980; Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003) as it immediately resulted in what can be called a complete annexation of English-speaking Cameroon into a unitary state dominated by French-speaking Cameroon. A number of factors resulting

from the fusion of the two entities generated ethnicisation and a growing polarisation of communal identities: First, there were many inequalities which engendered disgruntlement. Secondly there was a spectre and repression of opposing voices – especially of leaders and supporters of a political party, Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), which had been founded in 1948. Finally the state had the ability to effectively encapsulate the vulnerabilities of regional fracturing that were a result of the union. More disturbing, however, is the fact that in present-day Cameroon, the ruling elite has adopted a rather naive approach to the concept of peace and security – as meaning the absence of internal and external armed war or conflict.

Peace and security must be viewed from a broader perspective than this narrow one of the absence of internal and external armed war or armed conflict (Jinadu 2000:3). It must be viewed from the more positive and more embracing perspective of creating an enabling environment for self-realisation and for the enjoyment and sustenance of self-development and self-actualisation (Jinadu 2000:3). Thus, from a human development perspective (UNDP 1994) and from a physical conflict perspective, Cameroon is today confronted with a serious security crisis. Unfortunately, the ruling elites in Cameroon have responded to the security crisis only by adopting mainly repressive and military security strategies (Bidima 2001; Gemandze 2003) within a framework of national security policies. The emphasis is thus on national security rather than on human or personal security. Yet, it could be argued that a policy of human security or personal security (Cilliers 2004; Dumas 2004) is more appropriate for conflict prevention and/or resolution.

In view of the persistence of internal conflicts, the absence of peace and security and the potential for the eruption of large-scale violent internal conflicts, there is urgent need for appropriate policies for managing cultural diversity and/or diverse socio-political identities in Cameroon. Given this background, this study situates the dynamics of the discourse on cultural diversity that has become polarised as a result of elite manipulations and the scramble for shrinking state resources. It sheds light

on the appropriation of ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences as a modality for reproducing elite hegemony on state instrumentality in a period of compulsory economic and political reform.

### **State (de)construction and hegemonic alliances**

The roots of the fragile Cameroonian stability are not self-evident. There is hardly another African country with greater diversity in terms of ethnic groups, languages and religions. Among the over 200 ethnic groups counted by experts, there are various types of Bantus. There are semi-Bantus on the Adamawa Plateau (or the Grassfields) in the south-west, and Fulbes (Peuls) and Kirdis in the north. The peoples of the north are predominantly Muslims, while those in the south and the west are predominantly Christians, but there are also large numbers of animists. Needless to say, Cameroon's inner and outer boundaries were drawn arbitrarily by the colonial masters and they cut across ethnic lines.

Colonisation added to the diversity because the once German 'Kamerun' was split into two protectorates under the League of Nations — British Cameroon in the west, and French Cameroon in the east. After independence, followed by reunification, French and English were adopted as official languages of the country. Besides these two officially widely used languages (French being significantly more widely used than English), there exists Pidgin English (considered by experts to have developed in the plantations) which is widely spoken along the coastline, even in French-speaking Douala and in almost all the major towns in the country. Cameroon's great ethnic diversity is therefore accompanied by a unique linguistic and cultural pattern which is particularly complex in politically sensitive areas like Douala and the Grassfields regions.

As if such diversity were not enough, the country was also divided along ideological lines at the time of independence. The communist-inspired UPC was in violent revolt against the Ahidjo regime, which was backed by President De Gaulle of France. President Ahidjo's first task was to build up a strong army and stop a guerrilla war. From the beginning,

Ahidjo's rule was autocratic (Jackson & Rosberg 1982:152-156) and quickly developed the three central features of neopatrimonial rule described by Bratton and Van de Walle (1997:61-68) as presidentialism, clientelism and the massive redistribution of state resources.

Under Ahidjo, presidentialism meant the almost total concentration of power around one person and one institution, 'la présidence' (Prouzet 1974:151-86; Bayart 1985:141-59). Ahidjo built up a large clientelistic network reaching into practically every corner of the country. People obtained their jobs, their licenses, contracts or projects through hire and were expected to show appropriate gratitude. Loyalty to the president was more important than performance on the job, and as a result, the private good had priority over the public good. Such patronage implied massive distribution of state resources.

Clientelism went hand in hand with the formation of a multi-ethnic ruling class that to this day includes representatives from almost all parts of the country. Given the great cultural diversity of the country, Ahidjo may not have had any other choice as no single group seems large enough to monopolise power. Whatever the reason, multi-ethnic elite politics has since been a Cameroonian reality (Le Vine 1986:20-52; Prouzet 1974:51-58, 85-126).

Interestingly, Ngayap (1983) pointed out that there are two levels of elite integration: a 'macroéquilibré géopolitique' and a 'microdosage régional'.<sup>1</sup> At the macro level, the cabinet and especially the 'ministres d'état' (senior ministers) have at all times been composed of representatives of all major regions and ethnic groups. Appointing both speakers of English and French to important posts deftly bridges the Francophone-Anglophone division. Ahidjo (the former president) and Biya (the current president), both Francophones, have often chosen English-speaking prime ministers or vice-presidents. 'Microdosage' until recently, shows at the provincial level, where the more important positions are deliberately assigned to

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1 The first leading to a broadly balanced geopolitical integration, and the second to a smaller scale regional integration.

representatives of all divisions. Furthermore, and in order to promote integration, regional provincial offices are often headed by non-locals (Ngayap 1983:68-87).

When Ahidjo resigned in 1982, his ethnic agenda was carried on by his successor, Paul Biya, who perfected it. It is institutional practice in Cameroon that during elections, high state officials and the well-placed urban elite leave their offices for their respective villages to garner support for the ruling party – the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM) (Fonchingong 2005). Those whose constituencies perform well are sure of securing their posts or gaining better appointments while those whose results are dismal subject themselves to the vagaries of the ethnic arithmetic, modulated by the wisdom of the Head of State. Monga (2000) succinctly refers to this logic of ‘national integration’ as the ‘ethnic alchemy’ that has characterised socio-political life in Cameroon since Ahidjo’s reign. It is the reason why the composition of the cabinet after major elections often leaves Cameroonians keen on analysing its geopolitical zoning and ethnic character. While the ethnic balancing has the advantage of pacifying a highly complex polity, it also entails the obvious disadvantage of waste, mismanagement and economic stagnation (Jurg 1999). The fault lines have become complex to manage and even the sisterly English-speaking provinces – North-West and South-West – have been dragged into the politicisation of ethnicity.

### **Politics of ‘belonging’ and exclusion**

Cameroon’s cultural diversity, instead of serving as a melting pot for state construction, has been used by unscrupulous politicians to foster dividing and ruling. The stalled democratic process under Biya, has led to a revival of ethnic sentiments. In their diversity, Cameroonians are trying to negotiate a sense of national identity against the backdrop of elite machinations and regionalism. Re-echoing the sentiments on cultural diversity, Geschiere and Gugler (1998) have examined the phenomenon of the ‘eleventh province’. These are the people with complex identities,

trapped at the Francophone/Anglophone frontiers and making attempts to adopt a new self-identity within the logic of incorporation. Geschiere and Nyamnjoh (2000) reiterate the upsurge of autochthony within the context of globalisation with underpinnings of notions of us/them opposition. Focusing on the tensions within Cameroon, they present autochthony and exclusion in relation to national politics. In this vein, Yenshu (2003) demonstrates that cultural diversity in Cameroon can be attributed to historical events at the local, regional and national levels. Ndue (1999) decries governmental ineffectiveness as he argues that it has continuously declined as a result of parochialisation of the public realm and resource allocation by government and other state institutions which have typically come to follow ethnic or religious lines. His concerns match those of Nnoli (1998), who points out that the intensified polarisation of society into sub-national, ethnic, and sub-ethnic cultures widely separated in terms of identity and loyalty, encourages further hostility rather than cooperation.

As Fonchingong (2005) points out, the euphoria and high expectations associated with the advent of multiparty politics in Cameroon in the 1990s were soon to become a mirage as the stage was returned to politics for parochial interests. Awasom (2004) and Jua (2004) underscore that ethnic/regional cleavages have crystallised since the institutionalisation of 'autochthonisation', 'politics of belonging', or 'the son of the soil' syndrome, following the re-introduction of plural democracy in Cameroon in 1990 and the use of identities to cultivate system-supporting attitudes. Against the backdrop of state clientelism and patronage politics the political landscape has been reduced to a zero-sum game of 'who is in' and 'who is out', thereby opening the floodgates for elites to negotiate identities on behalf of purported collectivities (See Fonchingong 2005 for details).

As the foregoing impinges on the question of national integration, Awasom (2004) wonders if the notion of unity is being ridiculed, as priority is given to belonging to a group first and to the nation second. If this is the case, the notion of unity is being jeopardised by ethno-regional

jangoism, formed and sustained by the state. The elite are in the frontlines fighting for ethno-political supremacy of the various ethnic groups and political representations in Cameroon. They play a prominent role in the fractionalisation and integration of classes and ethnic groups in national politics. As Ake (2000) notes, the only way for elites to secure life and property and some freedom is to be in control, or at least, to share in the control of state power. The phenomenon of exclusion and monopoly of power is commonplace in the state paradigm in Cameroon. Jua (1991) stresses that the government's hand-picked elite or barons serve as transmission belts between the president and the different ethnic groups.

Thus, political sloganeering and the 'motions of support' syndrome are frameworks under the manipulation of the elite (Fonchingong 2004; Mbuagbo & Akoko 2004). In essence, every important ethnic group feels represented within the regime and thus able to exercise some influence on government policy. Loyal followers in the ethno-client network are rewarded by appointments and nominations to state offices, state resources and rent-seeking opportunities. The extraordinary development of political and administrative tribalism is rife. It is a tradition that senior officials upon appointment or nomination seek tribal endorsements from their various villages and regions, which seems to confirm that ethnicisation and regionalism are inherent in Cameroon's political landscape. This tribal canonisation following high-level appointments put the elite in a political vantage point, as they bargain for the group's share of the national cake.

### **Ethno-political cleavages in Cameroon**

According to Le Vine (2004:215), the ethnic factor has been and remains critical to Cameroon politics, given the country's extraordinary ethno-cultural heterogeneity and a number of important ethnic and cultural cleavages operating on both the national and regional political areas. He mentioned that ethnic and cultural cleavages in Cameroon include the old North-South division based on historical, ethnic and cultural



distinctions between the mainly Muslim and Fulani peoples in the Northern Savannahs and the predominantly Christianised and non-Muslim populations in the South Central, South East and Coastal areas of the country. In the North, there is the split between the Islamised and the so-called Kirdi (pagan) peoples; in the South various permutations of identity politics involve the South Western Bamoun and 'Grassfields' peoples (mainly the Bamilekes); the Centre-South Ewondo-, Bassa-, and Beti-speaking peoples and the Coastal Douala (Le Vine 2004:215).

Amundsen (1999:466) offers a more detailed analysis of socio-cultural and political cleavages in Cameroon. He asserts that the political cleavages in Cameroon correspond to three distinct socio-political core regions; viz, the Northern, Western and South-Central regions.

Firstly, there is the South-Central region and the Beti (Amundsen 1999:467-468). The South-Central region consists of the Central, South and East administrative Provinces. The capital city, Yaounde, is in the Central Province. The dominant ethnic groups in the South-Central regions are the Beti and Bulu ethnic groups. The Head of State, President Biya, hails from this region. According to Amundsen (1999), tendencies towards ethnic cleansing of the higher echelons of the central power structure, especially in the security and military forces and the central administration, further accumulate power in the hands of the Beti ethnic group. Extended privileges and multiple key posts are said to be concentrated in the hands of Biya's closest family and among people from his village (Amundsen 1999:467). Moreover, various patron-client networks and ethnic loyalties have been nurtured over a long period by prominent government and party officials establishing close ties between politicians and their constituencies, and making dividends of all sorts reach this region more easily. All these factors have led, on the one hand, to an unquestionable loyalty on the part of most of the rural residents to the urban-administrative elite of the region and, on the other, to a certain possibility of control for the regime (Amundsen 1999:468).

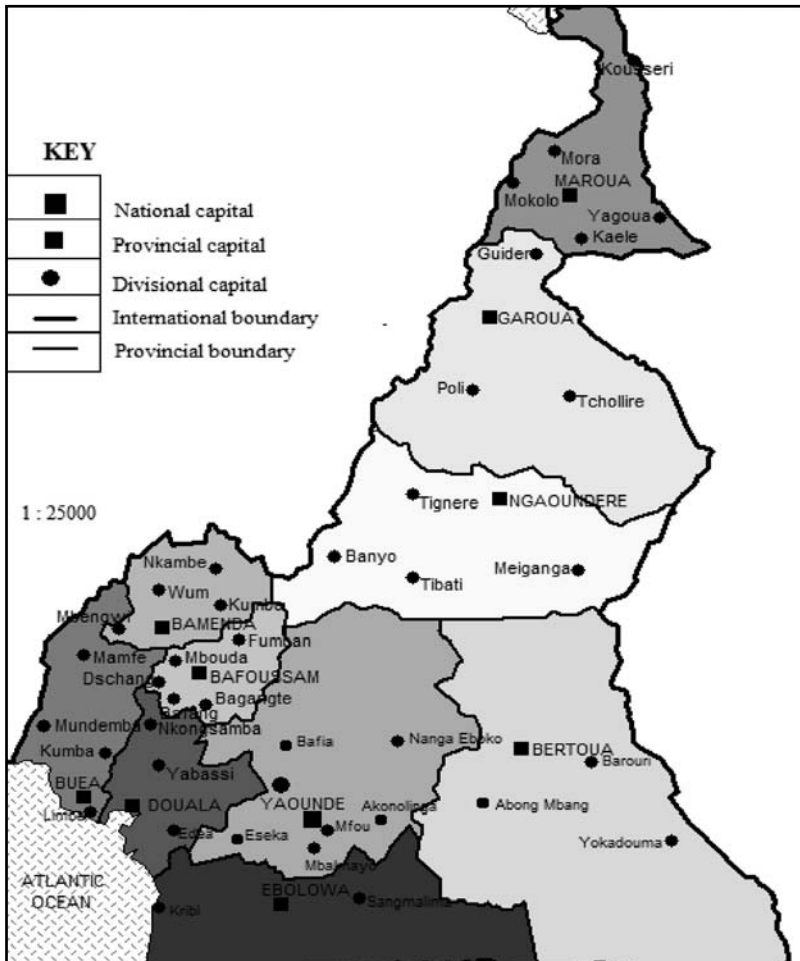
Furthermore, the Beti, both civil servants and coffee or cocoa farmers, vote massively for the ruling party and the Biya government (Amundsen 1999). This situation is partly explained by President Biya's ethnic preference for the Betis, which has led to an overwhelming Beti entourage around him with its extensive clientelist network in the Beti core-land. It is also partly due to the belief of this ethnic group that they entirely depend on the state sector for livelihood and so they must do everything in their power to make sure that the regime stays in place (Amundsen 1999: 408). From the perspective of conflict analysis, it is important to note that the government (or some clients of centrally placed politicians) has been using threatening propaganda to frighten the Beti masses into voting for the ruling party. Local broadcasts from radio stations in Yaounde are said to transmit covert political threats and various kinds of messages during political campaigns that foster distrust, fear and hatred on an ethnic basis in many Beti communities (Amundsen 1999: 408).

Secondly, there is the Western region and the Bamileke cleavage. The Western region consists of the three predominantly Bamileke provinces of the North-west, the South-west and the West, and in addition the Littoral province with different ethnic groups. These three Bamileke provinces are highly cultivated highlands with a dense population, making the Bamileke the most numerous (more than 20 percent of the population) among Cameroon's some 200 ethnic groups (Amundsen 1999:408-409). The Bamileke have the reputation of being among the most enterprising peoples of Africa and truly capitalist oriented. It is likely that they possess a greater share of the private wealth of the country than would be expected in view of their numbers. They have spread all over Cameroon, seeking business opportunities in most sectors. Furthermore, they are organised in extended family units, giving each other mutual and financial support and hence increased opportunity (Amundsen 1999:469).

John Fru Ndi, leader of the most important opposition party in Cameroon, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), comes from this region. In fact, one of the more promising tendencies in Cameroon is multiple efforts of different opposition groups in this region to form a hosting

coordination or alliance of opposition forces to contest the power monopoly of the Centre-South. It seems that they are able to coalesce their cultural, economic and regional interests and thereby to overcome internal dissensions in the face of the authoritarian central power (Amundsen 1999: 470).

Figure 1: Ethno-Political Cleavages in Cameroon



Source: Fombe 2007

Thirdly, we have the North, with the Fulani and the Kirdi cleavage. This region consists of the three administrative Northern provinces of the Extreme North, the North, and the Adamawa. The region is rather densely populated, and is characterised by Muslim domination. The Muslim Fulani (or Hausa or Peul) in all respects constitute the leadership of the region (in religion, culture, administration, ownership and wealth) (Amundsen 1999:470-471). The Northern provinces are also characterised by the presence of a multitude of different and oppressed non-Muslim peoples. The word Kirdi, meaning 'non-believer' in Arabic, has a negative connotation; but is usually employed to designate this non-Muslim population. Some Kirdi tribes have adopted Christianity as a form of protest against Fulani domination, thereby adding a second, religious, dimension to the extreme social tensions in Northern Cameroon (Amundsen 1999: 471-472).

### **Conflict situations in Cameroon**

Since reunification in 1961, inter-community and ethnic conflicts have been common in Cameroon. Inter-community or ethnic conflicts (with various degrees of intensity) have erupted in almost all of the ten administration provinces of the country. The ethnic/regional cleavages have crystallised since the institutionalisation of 'autochthonisation', or 'politics of belonging'. These conflicts are consistent with the drive of 'belonging'. Ihonybere (1994) argues that in a context where the state is absent, 'the masses turn to ethnic, religious, and philanthropic organisations for hope, leadership, self-expression and support', thus accounting for the bloom in associational and ethnic groupings in Cameroon. For example, in the logic of South West indigenes, the North West Elite Association (NOWELA) is purportedly protecting the interests of North Westerners. The La'kam stand for the ideals of the Bamilekes of the West, while the Essigan represent the interests of the Betis from the South, East and Centre. The SAWA<sup>2</sup> and

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2 SAWA literally means 'seaside', 'coast' or, as adjective, 'littoral' in the Douala Language spoken in the Littoral Province of Cameroon.

revitalised Ngondo cater for the interests of Bassas and Doualas. Recently, some elites of the Grand North joined the race to defend the interests of all Northerners (Adamawa, North and Far North Provinces) commonly referred to in the Cameroon ethnic/regional register as 'Nordist' (See Ardener 1967, Yenshu 1998:27, Monga 2000 and Awasom 2004 for further details).

These ethnic cleavages represent different geopolitical interests and are carved along tribal lines. Such ethnic groups are 'natural groups with ready-made cleavages for man-made conflicts and alliances in a wider state system' (Otite 1990:4). The ineffective control of voices of dissent and ethnic sentiments may lead to the institutionalisation of ethnic hatred and conflicts. These ethno-regional communities have become conduits in regional quests, thirsting for access to state resources. It is legitimate to note that such regional associations have resonated sharply in the search for inclusion in the polity.

Dominant ethnic groups in government dictate the pace of change. Along these lines, the Beti hegemony and confiscation of power in Cameroon were supposedly articulated by Cardinal Tumi, Archbishop of Douala, in an interview granted to *L'Effort Camerounais*. The Beti occupation of political space was proven right following a survey of senior administrators, the military and other top government functionaries. However, Cameroonian politicians are exploiting cultural differences by engaging in political discourses that couch cross-ethnic economic inequalities and social justice in regional terms (Monga 2000).

In this circumstance, as Fonchingong (2005) notes, we witness the sprouting of seemingly withdrawn identities that have the potential for agitation and protest engineered by the 'divide and rule' system in Cameroon as they scramble for scarce state resources. Associational life (Ake 2000) is blooming as the legitimacy of the state vanishes and the withdrawal of identity and loyalty, fear, suspicion and even hostility commences.

The fact that such ethnic affiliations (Awason 2004) are fashioned along lines of regional consciousness brings to the fore the categorisation of non-members as strangers and outsiders. This bifurcation syndrome (Fonchingong 2005) has marred relations between the two English-speaking provinces that are continually torn apart by the divisive politics of the regime in place. In most towns in the South West Province, non-indigenes are tagged as settlers, graffis, and kam-no-gos. These stereotypes are used for those from the Grassfields (North-West and West) regions of Cameroon.

In the major elections since 1990 (1992, 1997, 2002, 2004 and 2007), non-indigenes were often reminded of their 'stranger' status. Awason (2004) notes that the liberalisation of the political landscape in Cameroon had the undesirable and unforeseen consequence of realigning the citizenry into supporters of the ruling CPDM on the one hand, and opposition forces on the other, and this quickly assumed ethnic postures. Socpa (2002) states that the advent of multipartyism in the 1990s brought about ethnic tension and violence involving the Bamelike and Beti ethnic groups in Yaounde. He however underscores the fact that multipartyism is simply a pretext because the main causes of the ethnic conflicts are inequalities of access to land, political positions and control of commercial activities (Socpa 2002:76). For instance, in Douala where the main opposition party, SDF, won the 5 Urban District Councils, the Doualas, under the umbrella of the SAWA movement, organised a protest march against the domination of their municipality by 'strangers' (Awason 2004; Konings & Nyamnjoh 2000; Yenshu 1998).

The Biya regime, which had evolved and consolidated itself in the one-party context, saw itself threatened by the 'opposition enemies' and started perceiving Cameroonians as either autochthones or allogenes – those who belong (insiders) or those who do not belong (outsiders). The increasing currency of slogans about autochthones versus allogenes can be seen as marking a new form of ethnicity (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2000). The Government did not take the fall of the strategic economic city of Douala to the opposition SDF party lightly. It therefore instigated

large-scale demonstrations by the autochthonous people of Douala under the canopy of their traditional organisation, the SAWA.

Again, the elections in the capital city and Beti heartland, Yaounde, were given a special twist (Awasom 2004). In spite of its overwhelming cosmopolitan character, the Biya Government treated the elections in this city as if it was a Beti rural enclave, allowing no opposition party to win any of the Urban Local Authorities. In the Yaounde 5<sup>th</sup> District Council for instance, which is occupied predominantly by Anglophones and Bamilekes, SDF scored an absolute majority, winning all the 35 seats. But the government annulled the results on the pretext that the ruling CPDM party had petitioned against the inclusion of the name of Mani Theodore on the SDF list whereas the said Mani Theodore was still a member of the CPDM party. The SDF protested and produced Mani Theodore's letter of resignation from the CPDM party but that was to no avail.

Similarly, prior to the 2002 twin elections (municipal and legislative), the divisional officer overseeing the registration of voters in Buea (provincial capital of the South-West Province) blatantly told non-indigenes who complained of lack of voters cards to go and register in their province of origin. This has become a common practice in Cameroon. The then Prime Minister of the Republic, Peter Mafany Musonge (who hails from the South-West Province), even distinguished his national brethren when he told them not to let the 'graffis' (those who originated from the Western grasslands of Cameroon – North-West and West Provinces) have any control in the councils in Bakweri Land (*The Post* 2002). One cannot help wondering aloud about the scope of his administration and if he was Prime Minister of Cameroon or of a particular tribe. During the 1997 local government elections, one-time Governor of the same province, Peter Oben Ashu distinguished himself as a propagandist of the politics of belonging. The Governor gave firm instructions that non-indigenes in Kumba, another town of the South-West Province, should produce residence permits before they could vote. The Bamenda graffis, generally sympathetic to the opposition SDF, became inescapable targets of

the Governor's public campaigns. He presented them as 'land grabbers', 'ingrates' and 'bellicose strangers' (Awasom 2004: 283). This brings to the fore the cross-cutting identity and ethnic question in Cameroon's multiparty democratic dispensation.

The pre- and post-election violence that sanctioned the 1992 presidential elections showed the cracks in the state apparatus orchestrated along ethnic lines. The frequent molestation of Anglophones and Bamilekes, especially in the South and East Provinces, and the likewise harassment of some Southerners in the North-West Province is instructive of the instrumentation of tribalism and regionalism. Many political activists, journalists and students, particularly Anglophones and Bamilekes, were arrested and tortured. In the 2007 twin election, polling officers who found themselves in predominantly ruling party and opposition strongholds became victims of ethnic conflicts in their efforts to monitor the counting of ballots. Auto-defence networks, thuggery and ethnic militias were prevalent features.

After the 2002 elections, three officials of SDF were molested and exiled from their native Ekondo-Titi (South-West Province) for spearheading the opposition party's campaigns. This was done by the indigenous population, under the influence of the elite (*The Post* 2002). It is commonplace in Cameroon prior to elections for the elite associations, regional groups and ethnic cleavages to get together and indicate their leanings. Such meetings, organised by a handful of top elites, purportedly speak on behalf of their kith and kin. The meetings are usually sanctioned by resolutions and 'motions of support' transmitted to the ruling party and regime in place. Such slogans are given a high coverage on the state media (See Fonchingong 2005 for detail).



## The Anglophone problem

Today Anglophones constitute approximately one-fourth of the Cameroonian population.<sup>3</sup> What is known as the 'Anglophone Problem' in Cameroon, has received (and will probably continue to receive) considerable treatment in the literature (Balencie & de La Grange 1996; Gemandze 2002; Konings & Nyamnjoh 1997, 2000, 2003, 2004; Nkoum-Me-Tseny 1999; Jua 2001, 2004; Mbuagbo 2002). According to Konings & Nyamnjoh (1997:207), the root cause of the Anglophone problem may be traced back to 1961 when political elites of two territories with different colonial legacies – one French and the other British – agreed on the formation of a federal state. Contrary to expectations, this did not provide for the equal partnership of both parties, let alone for the preservation of the cultural heritage and identity of each, but turned out to be merely a transitory phase to the total integration of the Anglophone region into a strongly centralised, unitary state (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2004:192-197). The result over time was the creation of an Anglophone consciousness: the feeling of being 'marginalised', 'exploited', and 'assimilated' by the Francophone-dominated state, and by the Francophone population as a whole (Konings & Nyamnjoh 1997:2001). Konings and Nyamnjoh (2004:192-193) have analysed Anglophone grievances from three main perspectives – political, economic and cultural.

The resurgence of multipartyism in Africa in the late 1980s, starting with Benin Republic, provided Anglophones with an instrument to express their grievances. They therefore spearheaded the reintroduction of multipartyism in Cameroon and this act initially polarised the Cameroon polity along Anglophone-Francophone lines and provided an opportunity for both communities to publicly state what they thought about each other.

*Firstly*, from the perspective of the political domain, Anglophones complain of their exclusion from key government and party positions and

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<sup>3</sup> They are estimated at about 17,3 million.

their inferior role in decision-making councils and organs (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2004). *Secondly*, as regards the economic domain, Anglophones complain of the dismantling or neglect of their region's infrastructure, the lack of public investment in their region, and the rape and drain of their region's economic resources (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2004). *Thirdly*, the Anglophones complain of the continuous attempts at 'Frenchification', that is, giving pre-eminence to French as the special language and to inherited French institutions and bureaucratic practices in all aspects of state administration and public life, even in the Anglophone territory itself (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2004:193).

These grievances have been articulated with various degrees of intensity by a number of Anglophone movements. Prominent among these are the Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC) and its Youth Wing, the Southern Cameroons Youth League (SCYL). The SCNC was founded in April 1993 at the All Anglophone Conference (AAC) in Buea. It strongly advocates the restoration of the statehood and independence of the Southern Cameroons. In fact, the SCNC defines itself as an irredentist movement, representing the mainstream Cameroonians working for the restoration of Sovereign independence of the Southern Cameroons.

The Government has adopted a number of strategies in response to Anglophone grievances (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003:133-136):

- ♦ Trivialisation and demonisation of the Anglophone problem (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003:109-111).
- ♦ Divide and rule (Koning & Nyamnjoh 2003:111-121).
- ♦ The establishment of direct and indirect control over the mass media (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003:111-121).
- ♦ Repression (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003:133-136).

The above authors assert that most of the strategies employed by the government to deconstruct Anglophone identity have tended to be accompanied by ruthless repression of the Anglophone population and Anglophone activities.

In fact, in spite of the SCNC's 'stand' for 'The Force of Argument and not the Argument of Force',<sup>4</sup> it has so far borne the brunt of Government repressive machinery.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Amnesty International reports that in December 2005, the Appeals Court in Yaounde decided on appeals by imprisoned members of SCNC against their 1999 convictions by a military tribunal. The prisoners had been sentenced to between eight years and life imprisonment after an unfair trial before special courts directly controlled by the Ministry of Defence, on charges in connection with armed attacks in North-West Province in 1997. The prisoners had been denied an appeal for more than five years. Most of them looked sick and frail as a result of life-threatening prison conditions and medical neglect (Amnesty International 2006). In fact one of the prisoners, Julius Ngu Ndi, who had been serving a 20-year prison sentence, died from tuberculosis in July 2005. He had reportedly been denied adequate and prompt medical treatment for several months and was taken to hospital only days before he died (Amnesty International 2006).

Furthermore, peaceful political activities by SCNC members were met with arbitrary and unlawful detentions. For instance, on 15 January 2005, as many as 40 SCNC activists were detained and Intervention Unit Officers in Buea reportedly assaulted the group's leader, Henry Fossung. Ayemba Ette Otun and about 20 other SCNC members were arrested while meeting in October and detained for up to two weeks (Amnesty International 2006). *The Post* (2002) reports that Titiahonjo Mathew, a teacher by profession and SCNC activist, was arrested in Ndop with several other activists, tortured and transferred to Bafoussam Central Prison,

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4 See *The Post*, No 0803 of 6/10/2006 p.3, 'SCNC Leaders are not Cowards'. Prince Hitler Mbinglo, Northern Zone Chairperson of the SCNC, stressed the 'SCNC Motto: The Force of Argument not the Argument of Force, vowing that no amount of force will deter them. See also *The Post*, No 0713 of 31/10/2005 p.8, 'SCNC as Passive Resisters'.

5 See *The Eden* newspaper, No. 038 of 31/10-07/11/2005, 'New Mezam SDO told to Fight Secessionists'; *Le Front*, No 121 of 21/09/2006 p.4, '1<sup>er</sup> Octobre: Etat d'urgence dans la zone Anglophone', where it is reported that between 5000 and 7000 troops were deployed to pre-empt independence commemoration activities by the SCNC in the North-West and the South-West Provinces of the Country; and *The Post*, No 0830 of 22/01/2007.

where he died under undisclosed circumstances.<sup>6</sup> In another instance, as reported in *The Post* (2006), five SCNC activists (Henry Nshadze, Edwin Limfonyuy, Moses Komban, Thomas Kongso and Joseph Jumran) from Bui Division were taken to Bafoussam in September 2002 after being detained and severely tortured by Kumbo gendarmerie led by Captain Becklen. At the Bafoussam Central Prison, one of them, Nshadze, suffered a severe cough while Limfonyuy and Komban had swollen legs as a result of torture.<sup>7</sup>

From the foregoing analysis, there is no doubt that the Anglophone problem, especially as articulated by the SCNC and the response of the governing/ruling elite is potentially one of the most explosive conflict situations today in Cameroon (Balencie & de La Grange 1996). In fact, Freedom House (2006) states that the linguistic distinction in Cameroon constitutes the country's most potent political division.

### **National culture: towards conflict prevention and resolution in Cameroon**

There is a considerable body of literature on cultural and ethnic diversity in Cameroon. Part of this literature is concerned with the political instrumentalisation and/or mobilisation of cultural/ethnic diversity (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2000; Socpa 2002; Zognong & Mouiche 2002; Yenshu 2003). Much of this literature however, does not pay special attention to the question of prevention, resolution and/or management of conflicts resulting from the instrumentalisation of cultural and/or ethnic diversity. Internal conflicts in Cameroon are caused by the 'underlying' and 'proximate' 'causes' of internal conflict identified by Brown (1997:5). This is clear from the socio-cultural and political cleavages as well as the conflict

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6 *The Post* No 0400 of 26/08/2002, p.2, 'British High Commissioner Alarmed by Reports on Tortured', and p.3, 'Courts Orders Retrial of SCNC Case'.

7 *The Post*, No 0905 of 10/10/2006, pp 1-2, 'Troops storm SCNC Conference, arrest Nfor Nfor, 40 others'; see also *The Herald* No 1890 of 23-24 January 2007, pp. 1-2, 'Government Offensive seeks to wipe out SCNC'.

situations reviewed above. Crucial factors in this regard are 'underlying' causes, 'structural factors', 'political factors' as well as 'cultural/perceptual factors' (Brown 1997:5). Secondly, as regards 'proximate causes', internal conflicts are 'elite triggered', by 'bad leaders' (Brown 1997:5), especially through the instrumentalisation of cultural/ethnic diversity.

It could be argued that the 'underlying causes' as well as the 'proximate causes' of internal conflicts in Cameroon are both 'nurtured' by the absence of a nationalist ideology. In this context of cultural and/or ethnic diversity, the institutionalisation of national culture could be most appropriate for conflict management and/or resolution.

A classic statement on national culture is offered by Fanon (1963). He defines national culture as: the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence. A national culture in underdeveloped countries should therefore take its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom, which these countries are carrying on (Fanon 1963:233). Fanon further asserts that if culture is the expression of national consciousness, then national consciousness is the most elaborate form of culture. In Africa the problem of national consciousness and of national culture takes on a special dimension (Fanon 1963:247).

From this perspective, it could be argued that the promotion of national culture is compatible with some elements of the integrated theory of the politics of nationalism and ethnicity proposed by Kellas (1991). The Cameroon government has recognised the importance of national culture for national integration and national unity. Article 1(2) of decree N°2005/177 of 27 May 2005, establishing the Ministry of Culture, provides (inter alia) that the Minister of Culture is responsible for the formulation and implementation of government policy as regards cultural development, the promotion of culture as well as national integration.

More specifically, the decree provides that the Minister of Culture is responsible for:

- ♦ The development and dissemination of national culture; and
- ♦ The establishment of strategies and follow-up measures aimed at reinforcing national integration.

At the local level, article 22 of Law N° 2004/018 of 22 July 2004 governing Local Government in Cameroon provides that local authorities shall promote culture and national languages. More specifically local authorities shall (inter alia):

- ♦ Organise cultural festivities and/or events;
- ♦ Offer assistance to cultural groups and/or associations; and
- ♦ Participate in regional programmes for the promotion of national languages.

It is clear from these legal and regulatory provisions that Cameroon has a policy on national culture. The problem however is that no serious effort has so far been made to ensure the implementation of this policy.

## **Conclusion**

Contrary to official discourse, Cameroon is not an 'island of peace and stability' in a conflict ridden/war torn Central African sub-region. Peace and security must not be equated with the absence of internal and external armed war or conflict. The current socio-cultural and political cleavages and latent and/or overt conflict situations indicate that the Cameroonian polity is highly volatile and inflammable. The probability of conflicts escalating to large-scale armed struggle is high. The camp forming that exists in the country presently, fuelled by politicians for selfish reasons is a premonition for pending full-blown conflicts and wars. There is therefore an urgent need for a review of the current policy on national culture to ensure its effective/successful implementation.

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# The Political Role of the Ethnic Factor around Elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

*Hubert Kabungulu Ngoy-Kangoy*

## **Abstract**

This paper analyses the role of the ethnic factor in political choices in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and its impact on democratisation and the implementation of the practice of good governance. This is done by focusing especially on the presidential and legislative elections of 1960 and 2006.

The Congolese electorate is known for its ambiguous and paradoxical behaviour. At all times, ethnicity seems to play a determining role in the

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choice of leaders and so the politicians, entrusted with leadership, keep on exploiting the same ethnicity for money. Although the East-West rift is a reality which was particularly eminent during the elections of 2006, it is something that should be relativised. This divide is however not always linked to the ethnic factor. The analysis is more complex. At the legislative level, the voting pattern has always shown a contrast, particularly with the individual vote, the modification of ethnic allegiance, and the conflict of ethnic fidelity, as well as ethnic clientelism in its various forms. Individual interest often confronts and/or merges with the interest of the group, leading to a rather casual relationship.

Finally, political identification can be expressed in political, linguistic, economic or regional ways. The very subjective character of the vote has a negative impact on the political choices, and consequently on good governance, which then shows up, as often is the case, as incompetence and corruption. The study ends with some recommendations that may eventually contribute to voting for the sake of the advantages of democracy and the exigencies of good governance.

## **Introduction**

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) the period around elections has always been a moment of rift between the present and the past, a moment in which the question of identity is expressed in different ways.

Using both the psychoanalytic and the psychological approaches in the construction of identity, Eric H. Erikson (1902-1994) refers to identity as a process which is developed throughout existence, especially in times of rift. In this regard, 'identity is no longer regarded as a substance or an indispensable attribute in individuals or groups, as the case was with culture, for example.<sup>1</sup> Dominant contemporary theory

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1 To refresh our memories, 'in 1952 Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn published a compilation of various efforts to define the notion of culture – or notions close to it – in the social sciences. They found no less than 164. Their version did not stop only at their planned definition (content, function, properties) but went further to

insists that the image of self-esteem and communal or political identities are developed in the contradictions between individuals, groups and their ideologies. They all stress that the starting point of identification is psychological and that it never stops to build and update itself' (Ruano-Borbalan 1998:29).

The aim of this study is to analyse the ethnic factor as a basis for political choices in the DRC, the impact of the ethnic factor on democratisation, and the implementation of good governance. In fact, for Young (1979:107), 'no serious study on the political evolution of the Congo can neglect the difficult problem of "tribalism" or what may be referred to as "ethnicity". This is one of the major issues that place a question mark over the very existence of the Congolese entity'.

The role of the ethnic component will be analysed only at the level of the presidential and legislative elections of 1960 and 2006. It should be noted that the 1965 presidential elections could not be organised due to differences between Tshombe and Kasa Vubu in the race for power.

## **Context**

### **The electoral experience of 1960**

The first elections took place in May 1960. The entire Congolese electoral assembly was called upon to choose parliamentarians and political councillors for the chamber of representatives and the provincial assemblies. In total, 250 lists (individual and collective) were presented to voters with a view to electing 137 parliamentarians. In a population of

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the usage of the word in the widest sense'. See Journet 2002:1. But 'studies on contact and cultural change (constructivism – cultures on the move) caused in the seventies a revision of the notion of culture. According to Fredrik Barth (1969), culture is revealed more and more as an element of strategy, often unconsciously, by social stakeholders, especially if they are involved in social or political battles. Consequently the notion of identity seems to explain that of culture... The notion of culture is that of everyday usage, but its definition always seems to escape us. Its development, in all cases, is closely linked to that of human science' (Journet 2002:11).

over 15 million inhabitants (Congo 1960), only 2 733 595 voters participated in the elections (Congo 1960:264).

The Mouvement National Congolais of Lumumba (MNC-L) (41 seats) and its allies won a total of 64 seats out of 137 in the chamber (Congo 1960:269). Katanga province did not elect a single pro-Lumumba parliamentarian. The rift between the ‘people from the upper side’ (Ba-Likolo) and the ‘people from the lower side’ (Bato ya se) was already a reality at the time, and Leopoldville managed to elect only one MNC representative in the district of Lake Leopold (Mai-Ndombe). This is confirmed by Benoit Verhaegen: The capital ‘Leopoldville had three major ethnic groups: the Bakongo, who were slightly in the majority, the people of the “upper side”, who belonged to ethnic groups foreign to Leopoldville and non-Bakongo, and finally the Bateke-Bahumbu, the first occupants and holders of land certificates over most of the Leopoldville area’ (Congo 1965:208).<sup>2</sup> This configuration seems to have evolved with time into a more broad-based structure.

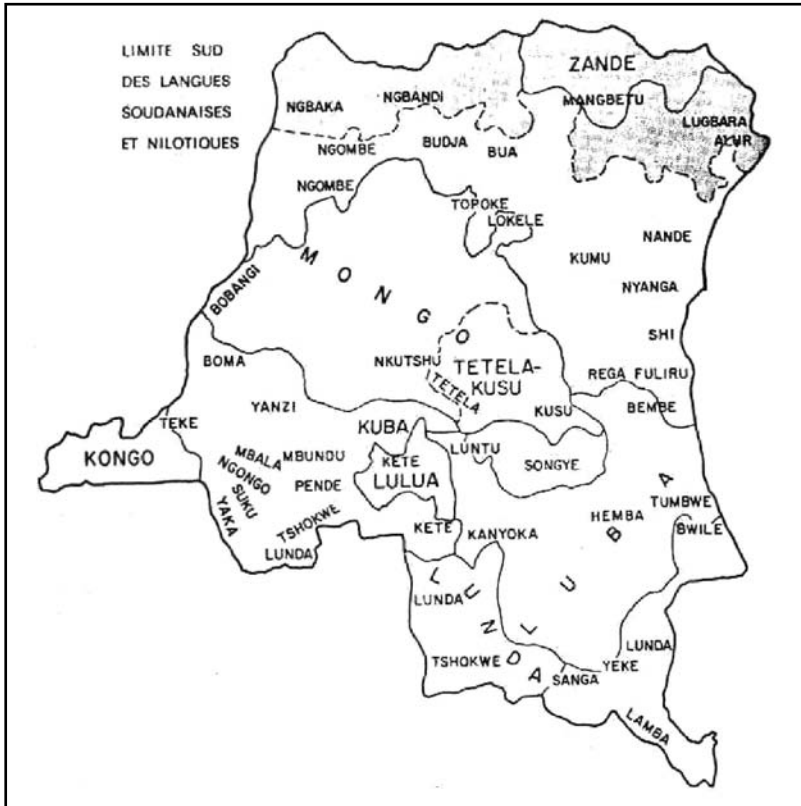
The electoral success obtained by Lumumba was very limited. Out of 34 purely MNC-L seats, 21 came from the Eastern Province of which the capital Kisangani had always been his headquarters. Using his pan-tribal base doctrine in his political campaign, Lumumba mainly focused on the Mongo ethnic group, which was very fragmented and extraordinarily scattered all over the country (Kusu, Lokele, Tetela, Mongo, etc.). Lumumba himself belonged to the Tetela ethnic group.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Kwilu and Lake Leopold II later became the province of Bandundu. All the groups living along the upper Congo River between the provinces of Equateur and Katanga are regarded as ‘people from the upper side’. The ‘people from the lower side’ are those in the provinces of Bandundu and Lower Congo. While the former are patrilineal, the latter are mostly matrilineal.

3 In 1960, ‘the provinces of the Congo could be divided into two categories: those where political consciousness in the cities was already well mastered but where energy was focused on other conflicts like those between ‘sons of the soil’ and ‘foreigners’, and those where politics was still reserved for only the elites. Kasai and Katanga belong to the first category. In these two categories, the conflict that arose during local elections in 1957 and 1959 continued to dominate political life’ (Weiss 1994:58).

Map 1: The ethnic regions



Source: Young 1968:113.

In Katanga and Kasai, another phenomenon was developing. The Luba, who were voting for Kalonji, Lumumba's greatest adversary in Kasai, were giving their vote of confidence to Sendwe, friend and ally of Lumumba in northern Katanga. But in Elizabethville (Lumumbashi), the same Baluba of Kasai voted for the Katangese National Confederation (CONAKAT) and ipso facto, Tshombe. Why this contradiction? The reason is because Kalonji had issued an injunction against Belgians who supported Tshombe. At the same time, the Lulua and the Baluba who were killing each other in Kasai in a determined fashion, were fraternising

and working together in welfare and cultural unions in Katanga (Weiss 1994:59). In fact, Weiss points out that ‘in Kasai, the first urban preoccupation of the leaders were closer to the real ethno-political divisions of their provinces, be it in Leopoldville or in Katanga. In fact, political life in Luluabourg was initially centred on the fight between the Lulua ‘sons of the soil’ and the Baluba (from Kasai) who were considered foreigners’ (Weiss 1994:59). But ‘as far as Leopoldville is concerned, the initial conflict led to the Bakongo opposing the people of the Upperside’ (Congo 1960:208) – the Baswahili and the Kasaians.

Map 2: The elections of May 1960



Source: Young 1968:159. Adapted from the electoral map of the Congo, prepared by J.H Pierre, Brussels, ARSOM, 1961. In this map, the PNP is not indicated separately, but is included in the category of local and individual lists.



Katanga was integrated into the General Association of the Katanga Baluba (BALUBAKAT) which had splintered from CONAKAT since November 1959. In 1960, the conflict of power between Tshombe's CONAKAT and Sendwe's BALUBAKAT became a community rivalry between the two main ethnic groups in Katanga, the Baluba in the north (pro-Sendwe) and the Lunda in the south (pro-Tshombe).

Finally, 'the failure by the MNC-L in its effort to find a solid base in two provinces of the Congo, Leopoldville and South Katanga, had a critical influence on later events. Outside Kisangani and its Eastern Province interior and some areas in Kivu, Kasai and Equateur, where he could count on ethnic influence, Lumumba came up against insurmountable obstacles; everywhere the situation had already polarised' (Young 1979:156).

As for the indirect election for the head of state, the election of Kasa Vubu as president of the Republic was obtained in the second round in the senate, for Lumumba eventually preferred Kasa Vubu to Bolikango (from the Equateur Province), to avoid the secession of the former province of Leopoldville (Kinshasa, Mandudu, Bas-Congo) from which Kasa Vubu originated. In fact, Lumumba, who had the majority in parliament, could get himself elected or have someone obedient to him elected. It has to be underlined that his choice was mainly based on identity. However, this identity aspect arose more from regionalism than from tribalism.

### **The electoral experience of 2006**

In June 2006, the DRC organised for the first time in its history, a general election with universal suffrage. A total of 25 420 199 out of a population of about 60 million inhabitants were registered to vote.<sup>4</sup>

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4 Decision no 031/CEI/BUR/06 on the announcing of provisional results of the 30 July 2006 presidential elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, appeared in *Echos des Elections* 2006:21. This announcement provoked burning tensions in the MLC camp, so that the president of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), Abbot Malu Malu, presented the results on national television from the IEC headquarters, without waiting to be escorted by an armed convoy.

These elections represented the culmination of a compromise by the government of national unity on 30 June 2003, and were a result of the Global and Inclusive Accord (AGI) at Sun City, after the 1998 war.

The elections were especially characterised by three phenomena: cartellisation, independent candidates and the East-West rift. Out of 500 national parliamentarians, the People's Party for Reconstruction and Development (PPRD) of Joseph Kabila won 111 seats, followed by Jean Pierre Bemba's Movement for the Liberation of Congo with 64 seats, and Antoine Gizenga's Unified Lumumbist party (PALU) with 43 seats. The other political parties as well as the independent candidates shared the remainder of the seats. Out of 58 seats in the Kinshasa province, PALU got 6, the PPRD and Z'Ahidi's Camp de la Patrie got 4 each.<sup>5</sup>

The choice of Gizenga (34 parliamentarians) as prime minister in 2006 can only be attributed to an attempt to maintain identity equilibrium. It would have been logical to offer this post to Mbusa Nyhamuwisi's Rassemblement des Congolais Démocrates et Nationalistes (RCDN) whose coalition with Olivier Kamitatu's Alliance pour le Renouveau du Congo (ARC) brought together more than 40 parliamentarians, or even to Pierre Lumbi of le Mouvement Social pour le Renouveau (MSR) with 27 parliamentarians, not even counting his allies. Obviously, Gizenga's aura in Kwilu, his stronghold and place of origin, cannot be questioned. The election of the two PALU parliamentarians in the Eastern Kasai falls into the same paradigm. This province is the natural extension of the Pende from Kwilu. A major section of the ex-Leopoldville province was part of the Kongo culture. Within the province of Badundu, the large tribes of the Hungana and Songo in Kwilu-Kwango come from the Kongo cultures.<sup>6</sup> In the same light, the weight of Nzanga Mobutu (8 parliamentarians) in the presidential camp can only be justified by the quest for equilibrium in the corridors of state power.

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5 *Echos des Elections* 2006:20-22 and decision no 032/CEI/BUR/06 of 7 September on the announcing of provisional results of the 30 July 2006 national parliamentary elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, *Echos des Elections* 2006:23-42.

6 Interview of the author with Professor Mbela Hiza, Kinshasa, 20 September 2007.

The Congolese voted for 'individuals' and not programmes. Most parties did not have an ideology. The proportional list which was used in a single vote system sometimes favoured the victory of independent candidates and small parties. The Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD) and its leader Azarias Ruberwa, considered as Kagame allies in the aggression against the DRC in 1998, suffered a defeat in the presidential and legislative elections, and won only 15 seats in the national assembly. The Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (UDPS) opted not to participate in the elections, feeling that Kabila had already won in advance. Yet many Kasaians had registered despite the UDPS's advice to boycott. The ambivalent Kasaian attitude caused Albert Kalonji to remind people about the experience of the 60s: 'The Kasaians should avoid the errors of the past... Kasaians have always chosen the boycott option',<sup>7</sup> and the result has been that they have often regarded themselves as marginalised.

The presidential election led to several political cartels like the Alliance of Presidential Majority (AMP) of Kabila Bemba's Union for the Nation (UN) and others like the Convention of Congolese Democrats (CODECO) of Pay Pay, Oscar Kashala's Union for the Reconstruction of the Congo (UREC) and Arthur Z'Ahidi Ngoma's Camp de la Patrie. Many small parties also joined forces to support one candidate or the other.

An analysis of the ethnic factor in the presidential election is not easy. Kabila got 58.05% of the votes against Bemba's 41.95%. In Kinshasa and in Bandundu, there was a rallying of Kabila and Lumumba supporters, (Kabila-Gizenga) and in Equateur between Kabila and Mobutu supporters (J Kabila-Nzang Mobutu). In the central regions, the alliance between Oscar Kashala and Bemba won in both Kasai states. With the alliance between AMP-PALU and the Union des Mobutistes (UDMO), Kabila reduced some of his isolation in the west. But he did not succeed in eliminating the unrest in the capital.

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7 Interview of Albert Kalonji on Digital Congo TV, October 2006.

The presidential elections ultimately reflected the registration of voters and the trend of voting in the constitutional referendum, depending on whether the population was under 'occupation' or under government authority. In a study on the issue, de Saint Moulin (2006:20) noticed at an early stage 'a peculiar behaviour of the populations of a number of territories in the two Kasais. It is in the Eastern Kasai that the lowest levels of registration were recorded, and with the exception of the town of Matadi, all the territories or towns where people voted in the negative during the referendum were in the two Kasais... The following observation was based on the first analysis: the three Kivu and Maniema provinces registered and voted massively, thus manifesting a strong desire to integrate into national life. This observation is also true of other regions which were subjected to occupation by rebel or foreign troops: the entire Eastern Province and the north of Equateur...' The author indicates that it is the same trend that was noticed in Sankuru and northern Katanga. Kabila has in effect been massively voted for in the formerly occupied areas. In the capital on the other hand, the linguistic bond between the Swahili-speaking East and the Lingala-speaking West seems to have been a fundamental determining factor in the choice of voters. The two Kasais once again adopted an unusual attitude.

### **The expression of identities in the electoral tradition**

In light of the Congolese tradition, one can notice that voting behaviour takes several forms.

First, the modification of ethnic allegiance. The quasi-non-existence of individual votes at the presidential level contrasts with the individual vote both at the presidential and the legislative elections, given that even 'brothers' and 'sisters' come into conflict with candidates during elections. The faithfulness of voters must be carefully considered, in the present as in the past. 'All attempts at defining the ethnic factor as a basis for political choice pose a problem which is complicated by the fact that

sometimes Congolese modify or even enlarge their ethnic allegiance.<sup>8</sup> The Congolese electorate is complex.

Second, the conflict of ethnic 'faithfulness' in voting. Belonging to one ethnic group or tribe does not automatically mean uniformity in the political choice of all the members of the community. The equation is complicated when we add the purchasing of consciences. In 1960, a Muluba from Kasai could vote for the 'federalist' Kalonji. Other Baluba, however, could vote for Sendwe, faithful to the central government, and yet other voted for Tshombe and secession (Weiss 1994:46). Young (1979:112) observes that 'ethnic identity is something ambiguous and opaque... For example, when the Kongo were pitted against the Bangala in Leopoldville, there was a remarkable solidarity among them. But when it was time to elect members of the executive committee for the Kongo ABAKO movement, there were frictions between the various Kongo sub-groups (Ntandu, Ndibu, Manianga, Mayombe, etc)'

The electoral map of the 2006 presidential elections also revealed the limits of ethnic loyalty and the complexity of geopolitics in making choices by the Congolese electorate. In the case of the two main contenders, Bemba and Kabila, nobody got 100% of the voters' ballots, even in their home provinces.

Third, the 'indigenisation' of political actions and institutions. Often, the decision to alternate is not well understood. Regionalisation and geopolitics play a great role in the appointment in institutions and in the day-to-day running of the state. In the Congo, the formula is generally well-known: the community X (or ethnic group) does not recognise itself in a government in which it is not represented. 'In people's minds, there is still a deep misunderstanding of the end-purpose of institutions and political actions, which people are trying to indigenize' (Ndaywel 1996:35).<sup>9</sup> This has given rise to the Congolese tradition of governments of national unity, which are mainly weak and irresponsible.

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8 For more information, see Wallerstein 1960, quoted in Weiss 1994:81.

9 It is also good to read Balandier 1982 and Zartman 2000.

Vice-president Bemba had called for the signing of a ‘commitment’, aimed at creating a government of national unity between AMP and the UN after the first round of the presidential elections. The proposal was rejected by the AMP.

Fourth, electoral clientelism. The practice of ‘clientelist’ votes or electoral clientelism may be defined as the voting for one’s ‘brother’ or ‘sociological voting’. It originates from the opinion that voters can only be politically represented by someone with whom they share the same ethnic origins. That is why most of the candidates run for posts in their villages, divisions or provinces and in areas where their kinsmen form a majority. The tribe represents the main point of identity. Ethnicity should therefore be seen as ‘an expression... of interactions in which individuals act like members of ethnic groups. [Or better still as]... cases of political factors that underlie the emergence and persistence of existing ethnic differentiations’ (Poutignat & Streiff-Fenard 1995, in Vinsonneau 2002:120).

The other aspect of electoral clientelism is linked to the inequalities in the distribution of the country’s various development projects. People have developed the idea (as one consultant from the Electoral Institute of South Africa commented) that ‘our area can only develop if we have a political leader. So people push their kinsmen into politics’.<sup>10</sup> This basic premise has often been true.

## **Consistent trends in Congolese electoral practice**

### **Similarities**

Elections in the DRC show many similarities. They are generally based on community allegiances. Money plays quite an important role. Conflict of interest around national leadership favours the emergence of dominant regionalist, pan-tribal factors. However, it needs to be said that the voters’ choices in 1960 and in 2006 were essentially, but not exclusively, based on

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Dieudonné Bala, Kinshasa, 31 January 2006.

identity. The divide between the Swahili-speaking East and the Lingala-speaking West remains evident during presidential elections. Kinshasa always shows a strong voting pattern against leaders from the Eastern Congo: Lumumba in 1960 and Joseph Kabila in 2006. Little by little in the Congo we are witnessing a kind of electoral tradition where 'culture [can] become indicative of ethnicity when it blends in with a mode of consciousness of people about themselves' (Vinsonneau 2002:120).

In any case, it is difficult to distinguish between the influence of the ethnic factor on political parties, and the role that it played in parties in the past and today. The formation of confederations and political cartels during presidential elections follows both objective and subjective patterns according to a loose demarcation. Amin Samir (1994:21) notes that 'in Sub-Saharan Africa, the breakdown of "national" unity often seems to promote "ethnicity" as a basis of legitimacy of competing powers. But Africa is not the only place where these centrifugal forces operate'. And M'Bokolo Elikya adds: 'In African history as well as in current times, ethnicity is certainly not the residue of an obscure tribal tradition; rather it is the endless materialisation of a historic situation where politics is never absent. The most appropriate definitions of ethnic groups actually refer to given political situations' (in Ruano-Borbalan 1998:324).

### **Differences between the 1960 and 2006 elections**

The impact of ethnicity on the presidential elections must be interpreted differently in 1960 and 2006. The elections of 1960 were organised as universal voting for legislative candidates and second degree voting (at Senate level) for presidential candidates. In 2006 there was general voting at both these levels.

In 1960, 'within the rural masses, ethnicity has always played a role in political identification, but it was incumbent on the leaders themselves to ensure that this factor was applied in the creation of political parties void of rival factions within the same party' (Weiss 1994:194). But the role of ethnicity should not be blown out of proportion, given that various

forms of support were given to parties, irrespective of whether they were national, regional or tribal parties.

In 2006, on the other hand, clientelism profoundly undermined the discipline of voting and candidatures. In both situations the Kinshasa electorate has as always been the most undecided and versatile, contrary to the situation in the interior where similar traits between voters and candidates constituted an essential element in the voters' decision making.

There are also some special trends that are unique to each period.

### **The unique features**

Contrary to 1960, in 2006 for the first time, Kasai did not ally with the Swahili-speaking areas to 'sanction' Kabila whom the Luba Kasai accused of excluding Tshisekedi from the elections. Only the Songye and the Tetela were exceptions to this attitude. Thus 'ethnicity seems to be a global social reality, which determines the long-term ordering of political equilibriums. The ethnic group is a centre of allegiance in either preliminary or subsequent competition with the nation. The mobilisation of ethnic solidarities constitutes a factor of rift in pluralistic states' (Loka-ne-Kongo 1997:10). Paradoxically, no candidate of Kashala, who is of Kasai origin, was elected in Eastern or Western Kasai. Yet Kashala was viewed as representative of Tshisekedi. The PPRD's Marco Banguli was not elected in the legislative elections in his stronghold Teke-Humbu of Kinshasa of which he claimed to be the leader. According to Kaputo Samba (1982), the Congolese experience has shown that the phenomenon of ethnicity is different in urban and rural areas.

In 1960, Lumumba of Eastern Kasai and Gizenga of Kwilu in Bandundu were able to establish their political empire in Kisangani in the East of Congo. This means that 'the existence of ethnic affinities is not necessarily opposed to tribal unity' (Loka-ne-Kongo 1997:9) and to the higher interest of the nation. During the last parliamentary elections the Katangese communities unanimously voted for Moïse Katumbi,



a southerner who was known for his generosity and social work and was subsequently elected as Governor of Katanga, to the detriment of the majority northern Luba. Also, compared to 1960, the solidarity of the 'people of the upper parts' was falling apart before the geopolitical and linguistic opposition of Bemba and Kabila. This shows again the relativity of ethnicity.

## **The impact of ethnicity on democratisation and good governance**

### **Ethnicity as a factor of under-development**

Democracy is at the foundation of good governance. The two cannot be separated. When talking about good governance, it is political governance that concerns us. In light of the last election, observers agree that the Congolese voted badly. It is obvious that with the political identities it is not always the best person who wins. Ethnicity favours bad choice of leaders. Bad choice of leaders sanctions bad governance. Therefore, ethnicity keeps bad governance in place.

In a democracy under construction this effect of identity raises the problem of the role and status of leaders – the whole question of leadership. The resulting leadership crisis may quickly translate, as is often the case in the Congo, into incompetence, corruption and impunity. As the country is trapped in the jaws of a vicious circle, the elected have obligations to the voters and vice versa. This introduces the risk of chronic underdevelopment. The question is how easily can a country descend to that stage? It seems that 'to answer this question, the rapid evolution of the notion of *leadership* in the Congo has to be analysed in detail, and then research has to be carried out on how the traditional scale of values has been lost in such a short time' (Nagy 1966:47). Together with mechanisms of reproduction and transfer, the issue of Congolese leadership cannot be elucidated without looking at the colonial political and social ideologies. Although such a study is not the focus

of this article, such an approach is the essential condition for revisiting the Congolese political culture.

Even though ethnicity generally results in bad governance, it is not necessarily the cause. In fact, it is not easy to establish a cause-effect link between ethnicity as a well-defined socio-cultural system, which is partly sub-conscious, and good governance as a 'scientific' concept. In other words, is ethnicity the cultural determinant of governance as a social action? To paraphrase Eugeen Roosens (1979:9), does ethnicity precede bad governance or does it follow as a result? A look at Congolese politics shows that the relation is dialectic: the two dimensions seem to mutually strengthen (and nourish) each other.

In fact, bad management of state affairs in the Congo is not solely linked to electoral practices, for at all times 'at all the levels of political structure, the power of the state and economic powers intermingle, the one feeding the other and vice versa' (Vanderlinden 1978:93). The causal link between ethnicity and the factors that cause bad governance is very difficult to trace. That may be explained according to the multiple facets of ethnicity by what Vanderlinden (1978:92) calls "'typologies" of various "dealings" that take place in contemporary Zairian (Congolese) administration', as well as by the ambiguity and complexity of the concept of good governance. It may be defined as 'a methodology of public administrative action which is based on several pillars: respect for the law, efficiency and democracy' (Delpérée 2002:201-202), but the definition varies according to the socio-political environment.

Phambu Ngoma-Binda (2000:331-336) defines political governance as the correct management of political governance based on nine principles which are all 'supported by ethnic power': the principle of the ethical imperative, the principle of strong resistance to corruption, the principle of separation of powers, the principle of political justice, the principle of democratic compromise, the principle of decentralised federalism, the principle of hospitality, the principle of vertical delegations of power and the principle of firm punishment. When these minimum requirements

have been accepted, the redirection of the Congolese nation, in a country where everything has to be redone, should be based on the unflinching use of good governance. The results of participatory consultations on the causes of poverty reveal that for Congolese, good governance implies 'human capacity in areas like health, education, environment, food production, public management, culture, management of human and financial resources as well as social and transport infrastructure' (Ministry of Planning 2005:24).

### **Ethnicity as a factor of conflict**

A recent report by Human Rights<sup>11</sup> reveals that the manipulation of the notions of ethnicity and citizenship with the aim of targeting political opponents is a common practice in Africa.

The Congolese experience shows that exclusion and all kinds of discrimination are the main ways in which intolerance is expressed during elections. This leads to frustration that can cause all types of conflict. The concepts of 'no son of the soil', 'stranger', 'regionalism', 'provincialism' and even of 'origin of Congo' are ever-present during election periods. Bamesa Tshungu (1996:68) reminds us that "tribalism", ethnicity, regionalism and/or territorialism are omnipresent realities in the political transition field in Zaire [DRC]. Their transformation into instruments has always exacerbated and continues to worsen inter-tribal, inter-ethnic and inter-regional antagonisms which give rise to intolerance and violence.<sup>12</sup> The conceptual debate on these issues is almost impossible to manage for the Congo, with its nine international borders, about 215 languages and 450 tribes and several communities and cultures living in the border regions. Conflict is inevitable when ethnicity is mistaken for political identity.

For the Congo to be reborn, there has to be a shift away from the power of ethnicity over political choice.

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11 On Radio France International in September 2007.

12 See also Goyvaerts 2000.

## **Conclusion**

Our research originated from a regional study on the impact of politics of identity on democratisation and governance in the region of the SADC (Southern African Development Community). The Congolese case study allows us to formulate the following attempts at a solution.

The ethnic factor fundamentally, but not exclusively, determines political choice in the DRC. But that does not mean that all Congolese politics are based on ethnicity. The linguistic and geopolitical component constituted the main cause of rift between the East and the West in the presidential elections. Although ethnicity appears to be the determining factor, the dispersion of votes is a permanent reality in both legislative and presidential elections. But generally speaking, the political identity of the Congo can have ethnic, linguistic, economic or regionalist aspects. In all cases it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish the precise role of ethnic belonging in political identity.

Good governance is the departing point of democracy. As observed in the 1960 and 2006 elections, there is obviously a direct link between ethnicity, democracy and good governance in the DRC. It is not easy to establish the causal link between democracy and good governance. The very subjective nature of voting has a very negative impact on political leadership and beyond that, on the proper management of public matters.

In order to bring together the virtues of political identity, democracy and good governance in the Congo, a certain number of recommendations have to be implemented.

- ◆ Systematic education has to take place at grassroots level, so that the masses can internalise the notion of democracy and good governance. In this regard the media and civil society can play important roles.

- ◆ Political stakeholders have to be educated and sensitised on their role, rights and obligations according to the demands of democracy and good governance.
- ◆ An obligatory military service for youth after their secondary school cycle has to be adopted to instil a patriotic sentiment.
- ◆ The capacity and the authority of the State have to be strengthened to improve the condition of life of the population.
- ◆ The DRC has to ratify the Anti-corruption protocol signed between member-states of the SADC.
- ◆ A common national language has to be adopted.

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# Identity and Cultural Diversity in Conflict Resolution and Democratisation for the African Renaissance: The Case of Burundi

*Philippe Ntahombaye and Gaspard Nduwayo*

## **Abstract**

Since its independence in 1962, Burundi has witnessed conflicts and violence. A multitude of factors help explain these tragedies, which include the creation of a negative image of the ‘other’; an ever-strengthened fear of the ‘other’; the blood feud between the Hutus and the Tutsis; and an illusion of the dominance of a so-called ‘ethnic group’.

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The article was translated from French by Dr Marcellin Vidjennagni Zounmenou.

The purpose of this paper is to underscore the part which the colonial state played with regard to the creation and instrumentalisation of ethnicity, based on racist ideologies. Since independence, the ruling elites continue to appropriate and radicalise this category. As result, they are not only able to enjoy political gains, but also simply perpetuate ethnicity with the help of an institutional framework, while pretending to fight it.

The Burundi nation that was built on moral and social values such as *Ubushingantahe*, *Ubuntu*, *Ubupfasoni*, a love for a work well done, and the value of effort, finds itself in a trap. There is a crisis of these values, which resulted in the legitimatisation of negative forces as criteria for social promotion and access to power.

The paper argues that because the Burundi issue is complex and multi-form, the solution has to be complex and multiform as well. To this effect and to be able to make an impact, it has to draw from many registers: political, institutional and cultural (the value of unity and the institution of *Ubushingantahe* philosophy).

The paper proposes a few political initiatives which are to be taken: advocacy on citizenry, participation in the culture of democracy, memory restitution through history, and depoliticisation and demystification of ethnicity. From a socio-cultural perspective, the initiatives will be based on deepening dialogue and negotiation at all levels, rehabilitating the social and cultural values and customs likely to enhance social cohesion and peace, promoting rehabilitation of the *bashingantahe* institution in order to incorporate peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms and human rights into the educational system, designing an integrated national reconciliation programme, providing support to the cultural organisations which promote peace and human rights, and advocating for media involvement in all the above initiatives.



## **Introduction**

Since its independence in 1962, Burundi has witnessed conflicts and violence with political assassinations and massacres of the population. This study analyses the nature and the cause of conflicts, the role of cultural diversity in conflict resolution and of identity in democracy. We are very convinced that resolution will not be easy because a multitude of factors helped transform this myth into reality. Here, we are talking about globalisation, discrimination, the exclusion of an entire ethnic group, the creation of a negative image of the 'other', an ever-strengthened fear of the other, the blood feud between the Hutus and the Tutsis, and an illusion of the dominance of a so-called ethnic group. In all this, and to agree with René Lemarchand (2002:19), nothing is more dangerous than what is left unsaid or, still worse, what is denied. The two 'can only fuel hatred born of a warped, ethnicised memory, which puts the good people on one side and the bad on the other'.

In Burundi, just like elsewhere in some other societies, there is no community that can honestly say that it is perfectly innocent. What empirical facts reveal to us is that the elites of both communities have their portion of guilt in the conflicts that are tearing Burundian society apart today. So, for our analysis, after presenting some general theory and methodology concepts, we are going to focus our paper on five major areas: political power and democracy; mobilisation and politicisation of identities in the Burundian conflict; the limitations of attempted solutions; identity and cultural diversity in Burundi; and the role of culture in conflict resolution.

In conclusion, we are going to reiterate the importance of some measures to be implemented that are based on the promotion of peace and national reconciliation within the framework of the African renaissance.

## Theoretical and methodological framework

We have to mention early on that identity, be it ethnic or otherwise, is a complex social phenomenon and just like all social phenomena, it undergoes multiple mutations. And here, we have to agree with Nnoli Okwudiba (1989:2) that ethnicity ‘can change its form, place or role in society during the existence of that given society. Its content can enrich other new elements. Its limitations vis-à-vis other social phenomena may be modified and in doing so, be subject to other new questions’. For that reason, we agree with the author that ethnicity in its purest and isolated form does not exist. It is always associated with political, economic and social issues that make up its essential components.

Jean Loup Amselle (1985:11) was not far from this theory when he said that ‘ethnic phenomena are linked to certain historical phases during which political stakeholders and social categories and classes feel compelled to express their ambitions, anger or frustrations in a tribal, ethnic or regional language’. That is similar to what was said by Philippe Poutignat and Jocelyne Streiff-Fenart (1995:147) when they wrote that ‘ethnicity is a social structure of belonging, determined and manipulated by the stakeholders according to a given situation’. The same authors go on to show that ethnic identity can transform itself into a conscious and organised political strategy.

This dynamic and useful characteristic of nature has been well documented by Frederick Barth (1969:11). For this writer, ‘ethnic identity, just like other collective or individual identities, is formed and transformed in the interaction of social groups by the processes of inclusion or exclusion that establish the limits between these groups and determine the rules’. Barth (1969:11) concludes that in these processes, ‘the qualities that are taken into account are not the crystallisation of the various objectives but only those that the stakeholders themselves consider to be significant’.

Given that the same differentials can change in importance or lose their efficiency in the course of history, we can admit that ethnicity is not everlasting. It is not an unchanging bloc of beliefs, values, codes and behaviour. It is the product of relations between one given group and the other within a social organisation. For the case of Burundi in particular, the fact that identity alliances keep changing and allegiances keep shifting according to the situations confirms our assertion. Identity frontiers and traits have highlighted that the aims of dichotomisation and stigmatisation are modified according to circumstances and their degree of political and economic usefulness.

While taking into account these empirical facts and current opinion on identity conflicts, our approach will take us through a theoretical discussion based on existing literature as well as the realities on the ground. It is necessary, as Léopold Nana (2005:20) has said, to use experience and reflection to stop and look back.

### **Political power, identity and democracy in Burundi**

Traditionally, as well said by Ntahombaye (2005:46), 'Burundi is a real nation-state where the social groups (*Baganwa, a more hierarchical group, and the Bahutu, Batutsi and Batwa as ethnic groups*) live in the same territory, speak the same language (Kirundi), share the same culture and are governed by the same socio-political organisation headed by the supreme authority, the king (the *Mwami*)'.

Royal authority had united all Burundians under the same allegiance, that to the *Mwami*. They all had the same priorities and believed in the same god. There was order in the society with a strong and hierarchical state structure. Burundians had a clear sense of a monarchical state. Supreme power was wielded and exercised by the *Mwami*, the holder of an institution: the crown, symbol of the unity of Burundians, and of durability and spiritual strength, as is proven by the rites performed when a king is appointed.

The hierarchical organisation was based on an administrative structure with several levels of authority, that is the *Baganwa* (princes), the *Banyamabanga* (custodians of rituals at the royal palace), the *Batware* (sub-chiefs), the *Ivyariho* (delegated leaders), and the *bashingantahe* (elders). These institutions formed a cohesive unit which integrated and transcended them and within which they all played a certain role. The princes were a separate social group around which existed a rivalry within the Hutu and Tutsi lineage. This rivalry was based on its specialisation in economic and social duties and not on ethnic identity. The society did not in any way reflect the feudal structure that was created by the colonial masters. There were no masters, no serfs; all were under the authority of one sacred king.

The current prominence of identities was created for political purposes. Started by the colonial masters and continued by the post-colonial government, ethnicity has become a profitable mobilising tool. Politicians use it to conquer or retain power. This process of transforming ethnic groups into instruments was accompanied by all kinds of divisive phenomena, manipulation, fear of the other, fabrication of perceptions, clichés and stereotypes. These phenomena were aggravated by a crisis of values. The socio-cultural dimension will be developed in the second part of the study.

### **The nature and the main cause of the Burundian conflict: general overview**

Several studies such as the one done in 1998 by a team of researchers of the University of Burundi within the framework of a vast research coordinated by Professor Adebayo Adedeji, Executive Director of the Centre of Development and Strategic Studies (ACDESS), on countries that are currently witnessing conflicts, show that the causes of the crisis that Burundi has been engulfed in since 1993 were multi-dimensional: ideological, socio-cultural (degradation of values), psychological (suspicion, fear), political (fight for power) and

economic (unequal access to economic and social opportunities with regard to education, employment and health).

Other studies, such as the National Report on Durable Human Development (Rapport sur le Développement Humain 2005), have identified the traditional explanations: the evolutionary approach based on ethnocentricity, the maverick approach where intellectuals try to shy away from their responsibilities by explaining that the crisis of traditional values and politico-ethnic conflicts was first and foremost due to colonialism, the influence and the hold of the strong regional powers and trans-border networks as well as the development paradigm that uses poverty as the basis of its argument.

The Arusha Accord (2000: Preamble, Protocol 1), signed by various political parties after several negotiations, took the political dimension seriously. It stipulated that the conflict was mainly political, with extremely important ethnic dimensions. It sprang from a fight by the political class to acquire or retain power. In addition to these ethnic divisions, there were other aspects like regionalism, clanism and clientelism.

The Arusha Accord also recognised the inculcation of a racist, caricatured and divisive vision of the Burundian society by colonial power, accompanied by prejudices and clichés, the manipulation of discriminatory practises, and the destruction of certain values that had until then been a factor of unity and national cohesion.

### **Political elites and politicisation of social antagonisms**

From the anthropological and historical point of view, the groups making up the Burundian society are the same ethnic group. An ethnic group has a name, customs, values and usually its own language. The ethnic totality is made up of a mosaic of lineages. The terms 'ethnic group' and 'tribe' are therefore out of place when used in Burundi to designate the various sections of the population. The *Bahutu* and the *Batutsi* especially live together, spread over the entire region and have warm relations with intermarriage, exchange of gifts, sharing of the drinking

straw (*gusangiran umukenke*) when beer is consumed, and mutual help in agricultural work (*ikibiri*).

Based on these facts, Ntahombaye (2005:51-52) rightly concludes that ‘nothing defines or justifies the existence of ethnicity in Burundi. The Baganwa, the Bahutu, the Batutsi and the Batwa are not casts, social classes, ethnic groups or tribes’. He clearly showed the damaging role of the colonial government in creating and manipulating ethnic groups on the basis of racist ideologies and ethnic distinctions derived from colonial and missionary history. The rifts thus created were conserved and nurtured in the mindsets of the people. After independence, the local political elite identified themselves with these structures and perpetuated them in industry and daily life. Here, we quote especially Jean-Loup Amselle who stipulates that ‘the invention of ethnic groups is the joint effort of the colonial administration, professional ethnologists and those who combined the two roles’. Lothaire Niyonkuru (1997:111) agrees with this view when he admitted that ‘Bantu-Hamitic ideology is the result of a (neo-)colonial creation destined to facilitate or maintain foreign dominion in the region between the East African lakes’.

The racial interpretation of Burundian society was indeed put into practice. Under the policy of indirect rule and efficiency, Jean-Pierre Chrétien (Chrétien & Mukuri 2002:73) points out that ‘the Tutsi masters’ were involved in administration to help the Europeans make the ‘Hutu serfs’ work. Thus, ‘able, adult men’, mainly Hutus, were isolated due to colonial constraints applied by the sub-chiefs who were increasingly being drawn from the Tutsi. This makes it clear to us that the Burundian politico-social system fell in the category of the model that Jean-Jérôme Maquet called ‘the premise of inequality’ in 1954 when he spoke about ancient Rwanda.

Currently, in Burundi, just like in other African nation-states where politics is likened to a milking cow, an appointment to a political position is likened to the securing of something to eat or a place where one can stay forever (*yampaye ukurya no kuryama*) whereas in the past, positions of

authority were considered to be as heavy as stones (*amabanga aremera nk'amabuye*). Each case of competition for already scarce resources could be used as an opportunity to let the masses sing to the tune of ethnicity. In a conflict over legitimacy, the strategy of the opposing parties in 1993 to mobilise ethnicity to auto-legitimise oneself and de-legitimise the opposing party corroborates this thesis statement.

UPRONA<sup>1</sup> for example wanted to be the rightful leaders due to their historical actions, their 'noble' institutions and the '*causa nostra*' objective of protecting the unity of the Burundian people, which made it very different from FRODEBU<sup>2</sup>. This party also expected to benefit from their ethnic practices and their demands that were often denounced on the part of the opponent. FRODEBU, on the other hand, wanted to get its legitimacy mainly from its solid ethnic base, hits and ethnic violence that had characterised the UPRONA regime, and from the necessity for change. An analysis of the socio-political landscape in Burundi reveals that the last few years have been characterised by a major meltdown of the social fabric. The social and political problems are now manifested in the identity issue.

The impression of national unity seems to promote identity as a basis for the renewal of the legitimacy of competing elites. In any case, the difficult and accelerated political mutation casts a fresh questioning glance on the issue of identity and its relation to political power and democracy in Burundi. The pre-colonial history of this country shows us a Nation with all the known characteristics of the territory – a people united by the same history, the same culture and the same destiny.

Bududira (1995:591) accuses the political elite of adopting these manipulated structures and being responsible for the current disintegration and radicalisation of ethnic belonging.

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1 The Union for National Progress, a political party in Burundi.

2 Front for Democracy in Burundi.

The sharpening of belonging and ethnic sentiments is a modern development. The proof of this is that there has never been an ethnic war before and even during colonialism. In traditional Burundi, ethnic groups existed, but they did not have the identity component and the exaggerated social importance that they have acquired since 1956. They did not play the role that is reserved for them in Burundian society now, that of being tools that can easily be manipulated for all sorts of objectives: conquering power, expropriating neighbours goods, killing etc.

The youth also accuse the political class of being responsible for these manipulations. This testimony by Céline Manceau Rabarijaona, a young rebel in the militia, is very revealing:

In my mind I could see that we are moving into a real conflict between Hutu and Tutsi. We want to fight to defend ourselves and defend our ethnic groups. Afterwards I understood that all of us we were lost. Our opponents believed that they were defending their ethnic groups. We on our part were thinking the same thing. But that is not what it was. It was the politicians who were using and manipulating us. It was in 2000 that I understood that there was no bad ethnic group; rather there was a bad policy (Rabarijaona 2006:16).

According to theorists on rational choice, ethnic groups are created when individuals want to acquire benefits (riches and power) that they cannot obtain by using individual strategy. The Burundian conflict falls within this category.

Thus, political conflicts bring about a lasting obsession with identity, and leave behind wounds in the memory, remnants of reciprocal fear and a state of intractable conflict. In such an atmosphere, the individual retreats behind identities and neighbourhood rivalries with the hidden agenda of living off another person's wealth. A proverb which we do not recommend illustrates this fact '*Umugabo ni uwurya utwiwe n'utwabandi?*' (A made man is one who enjoys his property as well as that of others).



From these illustrations, we can already state that if identity is a system of subjective images of oneself, submitted to the approval of the other, it is also a system of rifts and disruptions – a creative system indeed.

In summary, it should be said that in Burundi, political ethnicity manifests itself in economic interests and political strategy, which provokes radical ethnic-based moves. A reciprocal, nurtured fear has become a permanent feature by creating a big psychological distance and an ethnic hatred that social contact should have eliminated. Society should have had the courage to face the truth and put a stop to the ethnic tug of war which characterises the days of independence, especially the national reconciliation period of the 1990s. Discrimination was apparently replaced by democracy, but a precondition was disregarded: the political neutralising of forces of excluding and killing, and of claiming mastership of the values on which democracy is generally built.

### **Mobilisation of identities in a situation of competition for the exercise of power**

Certainly, the political culture developed by the post-colonial Burundian state has always been characterised by a denial of the ethnic issue. Yet, as Patrice Yengo (1997:209) points out, 'ethnicity is the screen on which are projected the contradictions of political society which, once resolved, make them seem void of meaning, for it is ethnicity which attributes meaning to policies that lack it'. The same author (Yengo 1997:210) adds that 'the origin of ethnic strife is not in the ethnic group itself but in fights between political factions for the acquisition of state power'.

In this regard, we can admit that all identities can be a legitimate political resource if the ideology or identity does not create ghettos and does not look for external scapegoats outside the group; or if it does not justify a rejection of the other by an obsession with purity or if it does not consider any individual who refuses to toe the line as a traitor.

On this issue, the electoral campaign of June 1992 in Burundi was especially characterised by the renewal of terms of reference about identity.

Speeches for recruiting and mobilisation of militants, based mainly on painting opponents as beasts, had profound effects on the tragic events of 1993. Ethnicity became a tool for mobilisation for concrete resources and was accompanied by a discourse that promoted bitterness, which was conveniently used to fuel the confrontational politics. The effectiveness of this discourse was in creating bonds that hid the specific interests for which that battle was really being waged.

Since 1993, we have been witnessing in the Burundian political class, nonchalant attitudes, radicalisation of politicians' behaviour, helplessness or wariness of others in situations that call for initiative. This situation reveals the importance of ideologies, constructivist strategies, divergent interests and clashing needs. These crises therefore implicate these strategic choices that prey on fear, paranoia and the misery of the masses that are being dragged along.

The promotion of the ethnic factor is therefore a strategic attitude which is not necessarily adopted against the state; rather the state is just the main actor and the playing field.

The agenda of domination and the identity may be confused because they both aim to change collective conscience and the way controlled populations react to power. This is the case for rebel Hutus who manifest the high political consciousness of a group that is trying to reverse domination. Their actions are based on feelings of discrimination and inequality. The leaders of these movements should rather try to solve uneven distribution of resources and power between 'a privileged central group' and 'penalised peripheral groups'.

It is basically in this context that identity became a vector for emotional mobilisation, using certain approaches as signs and emblems of differences. These interactions created a kind of political sub-state. In this situation, one may ask the question whether ethnicity in Burundi is a challenge to be overcome or a political instrument to be legitimised and strengthened. There are two sides to this question. To the masses, victims of political overexploitation, ethnicity has to be defeated. It is rejected on

account of the evils that it has caused. It is a source of violence that has to be eradicated. On the other hand, for the stakeholder who sees only the immediate benefits brought about, ethnicity forms a weapon that can be enlisted and relied upon. It is a joint undertaking of the first rate that can be promoted for the advantages that it brings with it.

Effectively, this means that a study of the phenomenon of modernism in Burundi needs to be approached from the angle of 'identity problems' coupled with 'democratic stakes'. In light of this statement, it has to be understood that the democratisation of institutions in this country comes with many uncertainties. It aggregates a conflict caused by economic interests, social frustrations and political ambitions that provoke radical ethnic ventures. Tribalism has become a political weapon. It is used for ideological manipulation linked to hegemonic scheming, and it enables the exploiters to perform as political leaders.

We agree with Padover (1967:24) that 'the departure point of democratic life is the recognition of human dignity. That sets a certain way of life in a society based on mutual respect'. Democracy cannot exist in a society where this sine qua non is non-existent. In this area, the Burundian political elite still has a long way to go. All the attempts to protect human rights and to ensure the viability of democracy have proven to be fruitless.

### **Attempts at solutions, their limits and way forward**

#### **Attempts at a solution**

Very recently, the Arusha Accord for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi, signed on 28 August 2000, only confirmed the recognition of ethnic groups 'represented' by families commonly known as G10 (group of 10 political parties representing Tutsi community) and G7 (group of 7 political parties representing Hutu community). Similarly, discussions started in April 2004 between political leaders with the aim of

putting into practice chapter III of the Accord, on democracy and good governance, followed the same pattern.

While pro-Hutu parties called for universal suffrage which would help them play the ethnic identity card so that the demographic majority should become the political majority, the pro-Tutsi parties proposed a distribution of posts based on ethnicity with 40% for Tutsis and 60% for Hutus. This quota system would definitely ensure that the Tutsi political elite never lose power. On both sides' agendas, the institutionalisation of identity or the 'identitisation' of institutions was evident. This 'turf war' is not fought on the base of political affinities. It is motivated by a dynamic combination of factors: a search for hegemony, personal needs, 'politics of the stomach', and the need to redistribute power within the political class and the security system. It is the strategy of hiding behind identity to create one's own political destiny, while each family tries to pose as a bloc that can influence power.

The political differences that we sometimes notice among politicians who hail from the same ethnic group or the same region rarely offer a counter-example or an opposing view to the forces that control the mechanisms of power. They simply express the plurality of regular factors that produce and reproduce political conflict, even if the forces that set ethnic tensions in motion may be determined by other factors. There are many identities that can be rallied and their usefulness depends on a given situation. It should be borne in mind that the political leader can only play his role in the particular scenarios determined by history and in the economic situation with its available strategies and instruments.

Since the negotiations of 1994 which led to the government convention and eventually to the Arusha Accord, it is this theory which guided the interpretation of the Burundian conflict as a 'political conflict with extremely serious ethnic dimensions'. While taking this factor into account, the main component of Protocol II of the Accord was power sharing between the ethnic groups and the parties. It was a matter of ensuring that the majority ethnic group obtained the political majority

and the minority ethnic group the political minority. The percentages of posts offered to the parties of the two sides tried to avoid a constant victory of Hutu candidates at each election. This happened despite the conviction that the campaign might be based on using ethnicity as the rallying cry every time. As for the current constitution, it maintains the same quotas in almost the same manner. These efforts of solving the ethnicity issue by incorporating them in institutions have been labelled the 'process of legitimising the illegitimate' by Julien Nimubona (2005:77).

### *Limitations to attempted solutions*

Concretely, we can pick out the following limitations to suggested solutions to the Burundian conflict.

The Kigobe-Kajaga accords after the macabre events of 1993 had a contradiction between the conception and the application of certain resolutions. The signatories agreed to set up institutions headed by people with integrity, that is, people who were not involved in the coup or the massacres. That presupposed that a judicial enquiry would first be appointed to establish those responsible. However, the creation of institutions did not meet the requirements, which shows that it was still not possible to distinguish criminals from honest citizens.

The government convention of 1994 (concluded between the political parties and the government) had a normative approach. It even had primacy over the constitution. According to Article 6 of the Convention, 'Pending its revision, the Constitution of the Republic remains in force in all aspects that are not contrary to the present Convention'. But is a convention which defines itself as an Accord signed between two political parties, a legal way of expressing public justice? The legality of the convention was shrouded in these uncertainties.

Another loophole in the convention was the absence of a competent body to verify the acceptability of candidatures for the post of president. This organ was envisaged in article 67 of the Constitution of 13 March 1992. This indicates the ambiguity which resulted from the coexistence

of the convention and the constitution, which on a legal level, mutually cancelled each other. This situation put in doubt the legitimacy of the administration's decisions. In this case, leaders manoeuvred between the Constitution and the Accord according to situations. This shows the importance of a legal system based on the consensus of the political stakeholders.

Indeed, the state can never be strong if the legal system is weak. On this issue, the words of the Iteka league (1996:4) show that criminals could easily infiltrate institutions, thereby proving our point: 'The political leadership that blocks justice knows very well which of them were directly or indirectly involved in the coup and the genocide of October 1993 as well as in other crimes that followed, especially the creation and running of militias and the ethnic cleaning of urban suburbs'.

Moreover, the Arusha Accord comes with the added threat that it can help multiply criminality, given that rebel movements have been transformed into political parties and criminality is seen as a political benefit. In these conditions, the taking of arms becomes a political enterprise or a first-rate syndicate. Worse still, the Accord is silent on individual and collective responsibilities that have been unsettling people from independence until today. The future commission of enquiry risks having among its ranks perpetrators of these tragedies or their accomplices and ipso facto, it would play the officious role of covering up reality and those responsible.

Further, the Accord resolves the ethnicity issue by embedding it in institutions. As well expressed by Julien Nimubona (2005:79), 'the Arusha process and the Accords that followed it yielded to a "governmental ethnicism" by examining the problem from an ethnic angle to give it an ethnic solution'. While agreeing with Nimubona's theory, we admit that this process, largely dominated by those who created political ethnicity in order to take full advantage of it, has validated ethnic ideology and made its beneficiaries more prominent. The politico-ethnic image of the institutions created by the process corroborates our assertion.

The solution of co-opting as a corrective political measure for ethnic attitudes of voters has certainly respected the ethnic quotas which the Burundian negotiators at Arusha reached as a compromise. The direct consequence was that institutions based on ethnicity were weakened. Even in so-called political bodies like the army, the police and the magistrates, appointment to top posts is based on ethnicity. These bodies are thus politicised and ethnicised and therefore weakened by ethnicised considerations.

Therefore then, the ethnic frontiers in Burundi have been produced and reproduced to be manipulated by political leaders during social interactions. The maintenance of these frontiers lies in the recognition and the strategic validation of differences. An analysis of identities and cultural diversity shows us that in Burundi 'ethnic groups have a history' and are social structures with an important role. In this atmosphere of fighting for power and mobilisation of ethnic identities, what can be the role of culture in resolving such conflicts?

### **Identity and cultural diversity in Burundi**

This section discusses the common and shared fundamental values, the role of cultural diversity in resolving conflicts and building peace, the role of traditional mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of conflicts, and the promotion of a positive contribution by cultural diversity in peace building and post-conflict reconciliation.

#### **Preliminary considerations on the key concepts: culture, cultural diversity, identity and peace**

According to the Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO 2005), culture should be considered as the distinctive spiritual and material, intellectual and emotional traits that characterise a society or a social group. In addition to arts and literature, it encompasses ways of life, living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

Cultural diversity is manifested in the various forms in which the human heritage is expressed, enriched and transmitted, not only through cultural expressions but also through diverse modes of artistic creation and distribution, by whatever means or technology.

Mudimbe (1993:96) says that 'if cultures are different, just like people and countries are different, the role of each culture is nevertheless the same everywhere: to promote liberty (in all its connotations) and affirm the right to existence in the political sense of the word'.

The Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005) states in its preamble that cultural diversity which grows in an atmosphere of democracy, tolerance, social justice and mutual respect between peoples and cultures is indispensable for peace and security at the local, national and international levels. It underlines the importance of culture in social and general cohesion.

The term 'durable peace' alludes to a situation characterised not only by the absence of physical violence but also by calmness of spirit and a climate of concord and confidence between members of the national collective. Such a situation helps to create a moral and political climate, which is a prerequisite for durable peace. It is in a political and psychological environment characterised by the feeling of the 'national us' that reconciliation of the past and the future, a dissolution of sentimental walls, and a commitment to common values and cooperation can be attained. Peace is a condition of stability and security that leads to development.

According to the declaration, culture is at the heart of contemporary debates on identity, social cohesion and the development of an economy that is based on knowledge. The declaration states that respect for cultural diversities, tolerance, dialogue and cooperation in an atmosphere of confidence and mutual understanding is one of the best guarantors of peace and international security.



Several definitions of identity exist. We are going to use the one offered by Alex Mucchielli (1994:5):

Identity is a collection of criteria, and factors that define a subject and an internal feeling. This feeling of identity is made up of different feelings: feelings of unity, coherence, belonging, values, autonomy and confidence – built around the will to live.

In the case of Burundi, in his article on ethnicity and citizenship, Ntahombaye (2005:50) showed that identity references in traditional society were individual identifications using individual names (*izina*) with motivations and meanings for acts of grandeur and bravery (*umuryango*), and details about belonging to the nuclear family (*urugo*, 'enclosure'), the clan (*umuryango*) and the *ubwoko*. This last category has been wrongly translated as ethnic groups, namely the Baganwa, the Bahutu, the Batutsi and the Batwa. These groups, however, just form components of the same people and a true nation state.

### **One people, one language, one culture**

As stated earlier, the Burundian nation was built by our ancestors, driven by a common desire to live together on a basis of fundamental values handed down from generation to generation through oral tradition (tales, proverbs, riddles, poems) and solid social structures which evolved and were adapted according to the context of time and place.

By drawing inspiration from the elements of culture as defined by Le Thanh Khôi: language, beliefs and associated ideological, religious and popular practices, family and social organisation, techniques of production and occupation of space, way of life, artistic perception and expression, daily activities, Philippe Ntahombaye and Domitien Nizigiyimana (2001:55-75) outlined the socio-cultural base of the Burundian nation as follows:

Firstly, there is the linguistic and cultural homogeneity with the use of the same language – Kirundi, spoken by all Burundians, even if there are some regional variants caused by social and lexical factors

– the popular beliefs – belief in one superior being, Imana, creator and giver of life, master of all men and all things – and works of art and literature – such as those described by Jean-Baptiste Ntahokaja (1993) in his book *Plaidoyer pour l'Afrique* (Plea for Africa), and those found in the diversity of cultural expressions.

Secondly, there is an organisation promoting social cohesion and peaceful coexistence, operating from the Hill with their lineage traditions and system of judicial arbitration by the *bashingantahe*. To this day, the Hill continues to be the first basic structure of political and social organization of the state, a real pillar of the society with a strong interrelatedness of the various components – the *Bahutu*, the *Batutsi*, the *Batwa*, and the *Baganwa*. Its organisation of daily life is stamped with unity and solidarity in its daily social and economic activities such as deeds of mutual help (*ikibiri*), particularly in difficult moments as when a family member dies or in celebrations of the various stages in life (birth, marriage, appointment of a noble, ending of funeral rites).

What are the essential elements of this common core? In fact, as the Charter for the Renaissance of African Culture (2006) states, all human communities are basically governed by rules and regulations based on culture. How do these values evolve and how can they help in the reconstruction of a nation ravaged by conflicts, a nation experiencing a crisis of values and of national identity?

### **The fundamental traditional values of Burundian society**

The various literary expressions that have just been mentioned, the customs, the beliefs and the various institutions reveal to us the fundamental values on which the Burundian nation was built: moral and social values like *ubushingantahe*, *ubuntu*, *ubupfasoni*, the love of common work and the love of effort, solidarity and mutual help, the sense of responsibility and of keeping one's word (*kugumya ibanga*), human rights (respect for life and for others' property), reconciliatory justice

(*kwuzuriza abatase*), the belief in one God without forgetting good neighbourliness and the sense of cohabitation, respect for the truth and even the duty to speak the truth no matter the cost, prudence, humane-ness, the spirit of initiative, a sense of honour and dignity, dialogue and concertation (*kuja inama*).

Unfortunately, the collection of values promoted by society coexisted with negative values, which were also visible in the same society. These anti-values have to be fought just like the habit of laziness and minimum effort, hypocrisy, the tendency to tell lies, egocentricity, injustice, exaggerated conformism and opportunism.

### **Crisis of values and increase of negative values**

From the anthropological and socio-cultural dimension as elaborated in this study, the most important component of this crisis is the degradation of the socio-cultural values that make up the Burundian nation as defined above. The degradation began with colonialism through education and evangelisation and continued under the various regimes, even though there were efforts to revamp national culture. Today, the bitter diagnosis is that the crisis which Burundi is facing has led to the degradation of cultural values and institutions that had over centuries built the identity and unity of Burundian people and the characteristics of the citizen such as respect for life, the spirit of dialogue, respect for the truth, mutual help and solidarity – values which had formed the moral, social and cultural bases of the society.

Liboire Kagabo (1995:392) highlighted three approaches through which the values of national unity were seriously shaken by the crisis of October 1993: an ideological commitment to division with the emergent idea of partitioning the state as a solution for the country, a parallel and even contradictory interpretation of the country's history and events that occurred, and a marginalising of those who defend national unity and reject extremism and ethnic polarisation. He stressed that the deterioration of the value of national unity was the starting point of the

deterioration of other societal values such as love for the nation, the sense of common good and the interest of all.

This crisis of value is accompanied by a crisis of parental, educational, administrative and religious authority and a crisis of identity that promotes ethnic belonging to the detriment of citizenship. As indicated above, this crisis and this deterioration of values also strengthened the overturning of values and the upsurge of the already mentioned anti-values which constitute a deadly blow to social harmony and a serious impediment to development.

In this degradation, the media played a devastating role by inciting hatred and violence, as was the case in Rwanda in 1994 'through a rhetoric that perpetuated the stereotypes, the fear of others and a feeling of imminent danger' (Marie Soleil Frère 2005:67).

The report of the international consultant Abdou Latif Coulibaly (2000:32) underlines the necessity to make the media serve the cause for peace, civil harmony and tolerance among the various groups and communities in the country.

These anti-values unfortunately led to the legitimisation of negative elements as the criteria for social promotion and accession to power. To this list we can add, for explanatory purposes, mimicry and resignation, obscurantist practices, failure to take control of one's destiny (*Imana ni yo yabishante*), sociability as well as a refusal to be original, sectarianism and negative solidarity, seeking of refuge in sects that have sprung up everywhere, discouragement of development that could alleviate poverty and de-escalate conflict. These tendencies affect collective life by often offering simple answers to complex aspects of human existence such as life, death, disease and poverty.

We have to question the role that these new religious movements play in the creation or resolution of conflicts and their impact on the lives of the population, their contribution to the reconstruction or the destruction of the country, within a context of globalisation. It is therefore necessary

to analyse the reasons behind the current proliferation of sects that we are witnessing and the role that they play in relation to these cultural values. On this subject, a trend is beginning to reveal itself: it blames this proliferation of sects that attract large numbers of rural and urban people on the social crisis that Burundi is currently facing.

Among the faithful who fill up the worshipping sites of these sects, we mostly find people who have serious problems and who have found a promise of a solution only in the preaching of these sects. Since these problems are material, moral and/or psychological, the organising of meeting days between the established churches and representatives of these sects may make it possible to point out the unnecessary confusion caused by the many sects and to suggest a better way to follow when faced with an apparently unsolvable problem.

After looking at this bleak picture, what is the role that culture can play in conflict resolution and in the protection of harmony and social peace? In light of the conflicts that are tearing apart and undermining a society that shares a common culture, how can these fundamental values of the traditional society be reinstated to contribute to the reconstruction of the Burundian nation?

### **The role of culture in the resolution of the Burundian conflict**

In the tradition of Burundi, as already said, there are solid institutions, socio-cultural values, practices and rites that guarantee social harmony and peaceful conflict resolution. These institutions, practices and rites as well as social discourse, precepts and norms are part of the cultural heritage that need to be protected but also adapted for current circumstances. The prevention and peaceful resolution of conflicts are closely linked to education in a culture of peace and human rights. Among these institutions the family, structures of social relations and institutions of

social harmony and conflict resolution should be mentioned, and most importantly, the *bashingantahe* institution.<sup>3</sup>

### **The family evening school and other social structures**

The family is the ideal structure where education for peace should begin. It is here that the solid pillars of peace and social integration are shaped, paving the way for success. Isaac Nguema (1995:5) explains this eloquently when he says:

The prevention of violent acts can actually be done through education which must start within the family and continue at all levels of education; pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary – in all technical and professional directions (schools of public administration, police and security training, engineering, etc.).

This family education in the evening used to take place through stories, fables, proverbs and other literary genres that actually constitute an immense treasure chest for a culture of peace. In his doctoral thesis, Jean-Bosco Ndikuryayo (2000) eloquently demonstrated how proverbs are popular pieces of advice to protect the main values with regard to social harmony, such as respect, tolerance, solidarity and love for our neighbour.

In addition to the family, there exist neighbourhood structures and social relations that are based on family ties and marriage bonds, and are consolidated by systems of constant exchanging of gifts. Clans also represent a factor of unity. Even at the level of the Hill, there are several clans in which inter-clan and interethnic marriages have created blood relations and greater marriage unions that drastically reduce the risk of open conflict. These interethnic marriages that have been in existence for a long time need to be encouraged.

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3 The explanations here are based on a study commissioned by UNESCO, Ntahombaye & Manirakiza 1997.

The relationships that emanate from family and social structures are strengthened by habits and rites, social discourse, forbidden practices and taboos that contribute to education for peace and human rights. Among these practices and social rites, one can cite the habit of exchanging gifts and material goods with the intention of building and cementing good relationships among families, the last rite of the funeral procedure (*ukuganduka*), which presents an opportunity to assemble all the acquaintances and family relations in order to settle officially and publicly, and in presence of the entire lineage (*umuryango*), any dispute related to the succession of an adult person.

Examples of social expressions can be found in the names of individuals, various elements of dialogue and in the balancing effect when critical opinions are exchanged in the form of advising, calling to order or promoting good neighbourliness. It is therefore a means of resolving all kinds of social conflict.

Can we not liken the father who named his child Ndekatabane ('Let me live with you') to the dream of Martin Luther King, which all Burundians have to buy into? 'I have a dream', he said, 'that one day, all men will rise and finally understand that they were made to live together as brothers'.

Forbidden practices and taboos are guides, leading conscience in the right direction by showing the consequence of every action; preventing deviation from good habits and maintaining a peaceful society. So, for example, 'it is forbidden for a child to kill a lizard; if he or she does so, his/her mother's breasts will fall off' (*Nta mwana yica umuserebany, nyina yoca acika amabere*).

The question that we have to ask at this juncture is how to exploit and make full use of these treasures in the education for peace and peaceful resolution of conflicts. If there are no short-term answers for the political conflicts, it is this kind of formal and informal education that has to be envisaged and developed in the long term.

## **The use of traditional values, methods and institutions in the resolution of the Burundian conflict**

### *Reaffirming the value of national unity*

The Third Republic initiated the policy of dialogue that led to the adoption of the Charter of National Unity and consensus to reconstruct the country on the basis of values that, in the past, united the Burundian nation and people. In fact, the symbiosis and cohesion have to be sought and built around values shared by the various sections, while ethnicism is rejected. It is the culture of shared values, the culture of attitudes and behaviours, that can promote the coming together of the people.

The Charter of National Unity was elaborated by a national commission charged with studying the question of national unity after the tragic events of Ntega and Marangara (in the north of the country) on 15 August 1998. The commission had to propose durable solutions to the crisis of identity that the country had witnessed. This Charter is supported by monuments of unity built all over the country and which, in principle are unification symbols for the nation and reminders of ideals that the country wants to promote. Each year, one day, the 5<sup>th</sup> of February, is devoted to public celebrations and speeches reiterating the importance of this Charter.

Even if the appeal to this value has had limited results despite the massive efforts mobilised to ensure its success, it is the values that Burundian people share – that is, the culture of dialogue and mediation – that have enabled the various negotiations to bring about real results.

What has been lacking is the concrete application, not only of the recommendations of this Charter but also – and especially – of the correction of the injustice and exclusiveness that impede this unity.

It should be emphasised, however, that the initiative to rehabilitate the *bashingantahe* institution falls within this set of values to be strengthened with a view to rebuilding social harmony.



*The role played by the **bashingantahe** institution*

For long, the *bashingantahe* has been an institution of social cohesion and peaceful conflict resolution. The interdisciplinary study (Ntahombaye et al 2001), a product of thorough research, instigated by the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Nicolas Mayugi, on rehabilitating *ubushingantahe*, has revealed its origin, its development and its cultural, social, judicial and political functions. It also described its evolution and its weakening by colonial and subsequent powers. The institution is based on values like respect of the truth, a sense of family and social responsibility, the spirit of justice and equity, devotion and love of work, the sense of common good, moderation and stability.

The study on traditional techniques and mechanisms of peaceful conflict resolution (Ntahombaye 1999) provided an overview of the main characteristics (national, multidimensional and universal, collegiate and consensual) of the institution. It also highlights three mechanisms for the functioning of the institution, especially with regard to peaceful conflict resolution: mediation, conciliation (*kwumvikanisha*, *kunywaniha*) and arbitration in case conciliation fails. These principles have to be respected since they come from commitments made during appointment (*ukwatirwa*): adhering to undertakings (*kugumya ibanga*), neutrality, dialogue and conciliation (*kuja inama*), consensus and joint decision making; a sense of the common interests and responsibility; insistence on the truth, discretion and impartiality (*kugumya ibanga*), acceptance of the procedure (free oral expression in public) and the authority of the council of elders, voluntary participation (*agatuku k'abagabo*), and the sense of compromise and tolerance that makes consensus possible.

As Filip Reyntjens and Stef Vandeginste (2000:157) point out, the Arusha political negotiation occurred almost exclusively at the macro-political and urban levels. Despite the request that had been made, the *bashingantahe* institution itself was not formally included in the political negotiations. It is at the local level where the institution continues to

enjoy strong credibility among the population and plays a positive role in resolving conflict and maintaining social unity.

The role of the *bashingantahe* is fundamental because – as Simao Souisidoula (2005:57) points out when he talks about traditional chiefs – ‘these leaders are actually the veritable custodians of local values like tolerance, wisdom, moderation, compromise, general consensus and solidarity, a spirit of openness and peaceful alternatives’.

In fact, before and during the crisis, the *bashingantahe* played an important role in the resolution of family, social and land conflicts through a justice of proximity and conciliation (*intahe yo ku mugina*). The *bashingantahe* played a major role in the rehabilitation of victims and welcoming back of refugees. During the crisis, they saved human lives and helped to maintain understanding between the different groups despite certain shortcomings and difficulties.

On this subject, the study carried out with the support of the Life and Peace Institute, ‘The role of the *bashingantahe* during the crisis’ (Ntahombaye & Kagabo 2003), gives eloquent testimony on the *bashingantahe* as real defenders of human rights. The programmes broadcasted by Radio *Isanganiro* (*Inkingi z’ubuntu*) also attest to the same thing. Other studies also show the efficacy of this institution in resolving conflict and protecting social unity. It is also the conclusion of studies commissioned by the non-governmental organisations Africaire, RCN and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and carried out in provinces of the country with a statistical analysis of judgments passed by resident tribunals on the strength of *bashingantahe* advice in the settlement of land, family and social succession disputes at the level of the Hill (*intahe yo ku mugina*) before recourse to resident tribunals.<sup>4</sup> The efficiency of this institution is manifested by the proximity of justice to the seekers of justice, and by the conciliation in the settlement of disputes. In fact, resident tribunals have confirmed more than 60% of decisions.

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4 Cf RCN 2006:159.

The institution is currently legally recognised at the level of communal law, and collaboration is envisaged between the *bashingantahe* and locally elected leaders in the resolution of family and social disputes about relations between neighbours, succession, land disputes, organisation and structures at all levels. It is therefore allowed to play an efficient role in the quest for solutions, and to become rehabilitated as an institution. Although opinions differ on the form of this revitalisation, no one questions its justification. There are processes in place to find a common ground on this subject.

### Way forward and conclusion

#### *On the political level*

For long, ethnicity has dominated the political scene in Burundi. In a study on the perception of ethnic identity in electoral processes by Julien Nimubona (2000:29), which was specifically aimed at suggesting solutions to extricate the country from the ethnicity paradigm and rebuild a sense of citizenship, the answers suggested show that the masses are more and more aware that ethnic groups are used as instruments to satisfy personal interests. They believe that power sharing, good governance, equity and social justice could be the best remedies to deliver the country from the ethnic cleavage. Nimubona stresses that many analysts have already shown that the conflict which was characterised by ethnic reflexes, opinions, attitudes and behaviours was the result of a complex, dynamic and systematic socio-cultural construction and not the result of pure natural hatred. The various agreements and accords have rather (and unfortunately so) consolidated and even institutionalised these perceptions and attitudes. Political competition has been transformed into conflicts tainted by violent ethnic manipulations. These violent ethnic conflicts played a definite role in ruining the national economy. At the moment, therefore, the problem is not so much choosing the type of democracy, but rather pulling all forces together so that democracy should really be the foundation of economic development. In any case,

one of the functions of democracy is to establish an atmosphere in which social relations are negotiated without resorting to violence. Instead of allowing an institutionalised ethnicity to govern politics, the following should happen:

- ◆ An education in citizenship, participation and democratic culture. This should allow the emergence of a constitutional state in which responsible citizens courageously exert their rights and duties.
- ◆ The restoring of memory through the recording of the country's history. In fact, as Lemarchand (2002:21) has said, 'the time has come to restore the memories of the Hutu and Tutsi communities, as a memory neither selective, nor vengeful; but as a 'mixed' memory which keeps alive the common humanity of both groups'.
- ◆ The depoliticising and demystifying of ethnicity. That is, ethnic identity should not be a political favour. All identities have to be protected to guarantee unity in diversity.
- ◆ So-called ethnic groups should not benefit from favouritism by a regime, or suffer from discrimination.
- ◆ At least one year before its application, the usefulness and appropriateness of ethnic and political quotas for participation in institutions and the impact such quotas can have on the process of reconciliation, should be addressed (National Report on Durable Human Development 2005).

Finally, the election of institutions should be the moment for the Burundian people to choose from its midst the citizens who are most righteous, most enlightened, most meritorious and most worthy, and to confer the power on them. That would ensure the establishment of trustworthy, legitimate institutions enjoying national and international support. That is what has to be done if the Burundian politicians want to help the people get back to development. The advantage of a government of the best leaders will be that these remedies may be combined in a coherent plan of action. If these conditions are not met, democracy,

which wants the people to be the alpha and the omega, the source and the end of power, will risk promoting predatory politics and will prove to be, in this country at least, a political disaster and an unrealised Utopia.

*On the socio-cultural level*

*1. A cultural policy for the promotion of peace and national reconciliation*

This culture can always help to find dynamic solutions through language, cultural activities and manifestations, beliefs and customs that protect social unity. For this purpose, there should be a willingness and a clear commitment.

A cultural policy document for the promotion of peace and national reconciliation has just been developed by government. It outlines areas of priority. After looking at the serious identity crisis and the tragedies that the country has experienced since independence, the policy states the government's desire to prioritise culture for the sake of peace, reconciliation, social harmony and development.

In the retrospective study of Emile Mworoha and others (Mworoha et al 2005:110), it is said that 'in the face of the destructive role of poisoning with hatred, revenge and inciting to murder... the challenge is to find a route to the building of peace, the promotion of a culture of tolerance, the emergence of good governance and a contribution to the prevention and peaceful resolution of conflicts'.

According to the political analyst Julien Nimubona (2000:39), the pillars on which a culture of peace, reconciliation and good governance can be built are: a common and rich social base, a general quest for peaceful coexistence, a political will to safeguard national unity and to peacefully resolve conflicts through negotiation and the concept of power sharing.

It is therefore within the context of this cultural policy that the shared values and their benefits for peace building have to be elaborated.

The following main activities may be implemented with the aim of promoting peace, conflict resolution and reconciliation.

(a) *Generally strengthening dialogue and consultation at all levels*, not only between the administration and the people but also among politicians and in civil society. It will also be an opportunity to educate society on the importance of these values. Here, churches can play a major role.

(b) *Rehabilitating traditional social and cultural values that promote social harmony and peace* while taking into account the new forms of social interactions that should be encouraged in order to check the tendency towards individualism.

(c) *Rehabilitating and modernising the bashingantahe institution*, updating and adapting it to society. It is on the basis of the role that the *bashingantahe* play in the promotion of a humane justice, as recommended by the National Report on Durable Human Development (2005), that it is necessary to strengthen the structures of arbitration and conciliation that are locally available for the settlement of land disputes (*bashingantahe* councils and other family and community councils) while enlarging their legal base and competences in matters of procedure, land rights, individual rights, and family rights with regard to succession and donations.

With regard to the modernising process, it will also be necessary to explore how the *bashingantahe* institution and the Ombudsman envisaged in the Constitution can be linked and can complement each other. In the quest for truth and reconciliation to be embarked upon by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that will be set up as stipulated by the Arusha Accord, the *bashingantahe* institution has to be involved so that it actually plays the role of conciliation and reconciliation, based on what really happened on the Hills.

(d) *Incorporating the values of peace, conflict resolution and human rights into the education system*. This project is being implemented with a primary course on civil and human education and a secondary course

on education for peace and human rights. There are also initiatives like those of the BNEC (National Bureau of Catholic Education) which has just introduced this teaching of values in their schools.<sup>5</sup> This teaching of values has to be instituted and propagated in all public and private schools as well as in literacy programmes or via the media, cultural events, sports activities and development work, among others.

(e) *Implementing a vast programme of national reconciliation* especially focused on the youth. It should include programmes of civil education, and of the promotion of the values of peace, tolerance, democracy and citizenship (National Report on Durable Human Development 2005).

(f) *Involving and supporting cultural associations* in the promotion of values of peace and human rights through activities such as dance, story telling and plays.

(g) *Carrying out an extended study on the proliferation of religions and sects and on their role in resolving conflict and harmonising the efforts of different denominations to promote peace.* This study will make it possible to analyse the relationship between traditional and religious approaches to reconciliation. A discussion started by ACCORD between traditional chiefs (the *bashingantahe*) and religious leaders deserves to be relaunched within the framework of the search for truth and reconciliation.

(h) *Involving the media.* The Burundian society is still oriented towards oral communication. This is the reason why the media, both radio and press, can play a crucial role in this education and moralisation of the society on values of peace and conflict resolution. If in the past they incited racial hate and murder, today they have to be tools of peace, justice and reconciliation. That is why the training of journalists needs to be strengthened so that they can produce programmes and publish articles that promote a culture of peace, and prevention, management and resolution of conflicts. For this purpose, a general information and communication strategy is also necessary.

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5 Cf Bureau National de l'Enseignement Catholique (BNEC) 2005.

2. *Interrelating these perspectives with those of the African renaissance*

Among the objectives and the principles of the Charter of the African Cultural Renaissance, there is a strong emphasis on strengthening the role of culture in the promotion of peace and good governance as well as the development of all the dynamic values of African cultural heritage that promote human rights, social unity and human development.

The International Conference on Peace, Security, Democracy and Development in the Great Lakes Region (Dar-es-Salaam, 19-20 November 2004) also mentioned the need to promote policies and strategies that are guided by respect for values, principles of democracy and good governance and respect for human rights. Such approaches should combat the root causes of the conflicts concerned and find durable solutions for the persistent problems of refugees and displaced people – solutions such as peaceful coexistence of local populations, repatriation and voluntary return of people and integration into local life with the full participation of local authorities and host communities, and if need be, according to tripartite agreements.

The Head of States' Conference in Khartoum (2006) decided among other things in its Declaration on Culture, Integration and African Renaissance to promote the values and cultural practices that have been tried and tested in finding peace and resolving conflict, and to promote cultural diversity and inter-cultural dialogue as tools for integration and development.

The conference also decided to ensure that African values are deeply embedded in education so that the youth can be equipped and prepared to successfully, and from an African perspective, face the challenges of the contemporary world. These decisions provide an opportunity to continue the studies on inter-cultural dialogue and conflict resolution already started by the University.<sup>6</sup>

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6 This reference is to the Sub-regional Seminar on Traditional Social Institutions and their Role in the Promotion and Consolidation of Peace in the Great Lakes Region and in the Horn of Africa (Bujumbura, December 5-8, 2001)



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# ‘Echoing Silences’: Ethnicity in post-colonial Zimbabwe, 1980-2007

*James Muzondidya and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni*

## **Abstract**

In spite of its rare entry into both official and public discourses about contemporary Zimbabwe, ethnicity, alongside race, has continued to shape and influence the economic, social, and political life of Zimbabwe since the achievement of independence in 1980. In this article we argue that whilst post-independence Zimbabwe has since the days of the Gukurahundi war (1982-1986) not experienced serious ethnic-based wars or political instability, there is serious ethnic polarisation in the country and ethnicity remains one of the challenges to the survival of both the state and the country. This ethnic polarisation is to be explained mainly in terms of the broader failure by the state to develop an effective response to the political economy of ethnicity inherited from the colonial past.

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\* The subtitle of this article is derived from Alexander Kanengoni’s brilliant, semi-biographical novel about the rarely discussed violence and trauma of the war of independence, *Echoing Silences* (Baobab Books, Harare, 1997).

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As with most postcolonial African nationalist governments which have come to be haunted by ethnicity, such as Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and most recently Kenya and South Africa, the postcolonial government of Zimbabwe has largely remained reluctant to engage ethnicity as an issue in both politics and the economy, particularly with regard to addressing historical and contemporary factors that continued to make ethnicity an important issue in people's lives. The nationalist government's state-building project, especially its coercive mobilisation and nation-building projects of the early 1980s, paid little attention to the ethnic configuration of the inherited state, as well as the structures and institutions which enacted and reproduced ethnicity. Such neglected processes, structures and institutions included unequal development of the provinces and the marginalisation of particular ethnic groups in politics, economy and society.

## **Introduction**

Until recently, Zimbabweans have been conspicuously silent about questions of ethnicity. As in the colonial period, especially during the days of the nationalist liberation struggle, all attempts to discuss ethnic identities, especially their manifestation in the political and economic spheres, were brushed aside. Yet, ethnicity has continued to shape and influence the economic, social, and political life of Zimbabwe since the achievement of independence in 1980. This chapter seeks to discuss the influence of ethnicity in post-independence Zimbabwe. More specifically, it tries to understand why ethnic identities have continued to be important in the everyday lives of Zimbabwe. It does so by discussing the processes that have continued to enact, reproduce and reconstruct ethnic identities as well as ethnicity in Zimbabwe's post-colonial period.

## **The colonial background of ethnicity in post-colonial Zimbabwe**

The roots of ethnic tensions and divisions that characterise Zimbabwean politics and society today cannot be understood outside the context of two broad historical interludes: the colonial and African nationalist interludes which, through their socio-economic and political engineering projects, both helped to polarise existing ethnic identities. In both processes, pre-colonial social formations, especially the history of interaction among the various groups scattered across the Zimbabwean plateau, was used to provide the ideological basis for these social and political engineering processes. To understand how and why ethnicity was politicised during this period, we need to look at each of these specific historical junctures.

Rhodesian colonialism did not invent ethnic groups or divisions in Zimbabwe. Like many pre-colonial African societies, present-day Zimbabwe was a multi-ethnic society inhabited by a number of Ndebele and Shona-speaking groups. Some of these groups were the Shangani/Tsonga in the south-eastern parts of the plateau; the Venda in the south; the Tonga in the north; and the Kalanga and Ndebele in the southwest. The Shona-speaking groups included a number of sub-ethnic/linguistic groups: the Karanga inhabiting the southern parts of the plateau; the Zezuru and Korekore inhabiting the northern and central parts of the plateau, now constituting the administrative provinces of Mashonaland West and Mashonaland East and Mashonaland Central; and the Manyika and Ndau in the east, the area now known as Manicaland (Beach 1994; Ranger 1989). The political and economic relationships among the various groups inhabiting the plateau were always dynamic and changing. Their complex and fluid relations were characterised by both conflict and cooperation; both incorporation and fragmentation – as facilitated through marriages, political alliances and constant population movement. Their sense of identity was also more of a social identity rather than a political one (Beach 1984:46; Ranger 1989:121).

However, Rhodesian colonialism, like colonialism in many other parts of Africa, set into motion the politicisation of African ethnic identities by trying to construct and reconstruct people's identities and by compartmentalising them in cultural and geographic terms.<sup>1</sup> It also polarised and reinforced ethnic divisions among Africans, thereby deliberately preventing them from developing nationally integrated identities, by differentiating among them and favouring certain groups against others (Ranger 1985; Chimhundu 1992).

To illustrate, the Rhodesian colonial state, from its very inception in 1890, introduced laws and institutions which all defined the population into racial and ethnic categories: European; Asian and Coloured; and Native. Natives or Africans were further classified into various sub-categories, according to colonial notions of origin and geographical location. The world of the natives was made up of a variety of natives: 'aboriginal natives' and 'colonial natives'; the 'Mashona natives' and the 'Matebele natives' (Southern Rhodesia 1963:22). Race and ethnicity defined social and political relations between members of these different categories and also determined one's access to resources and position in society.

In addition to its categorisation of Africans into distinct groups, the Rhodesian colonial state divided the country into ethnicised administrative units: Mashonaland for Zezuru-speaking Shonas; Matebeleland for Ndebele-speaking groups; Fort Victoria (Masvingo) for Karanga-speaking groups; and Manicaland for Manyikas. Many groups, especially those speaking minority languages, were lumped into these ethnicised administrative units and their alternative identities ignored. The colonial state did not only categorise the country's nationals in terms of their geographical places of origin but also enforced their identities through what the renowned Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani has called an 'ethnic citizenship' regulated through a 'regime of ethnic rights' (Mamdani

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1 The role of the colonial state in the construction of racial and ethnic identities in Africa in general and southern Africa in particular has been well documented in influential studies such as Terence Ranger (1985); Leroy Vail (1989); Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido (1987); and Heribert Adam and Herman Giliomee (1979).

2001:29-31, 236-241; Mamdani 1996). In the case of Rhodesia, this idea of an ethnic citizenship among Rhodesian Africans was enforced through the National Identity Card or Pass Law system, used to classify Africans in terms of their village and district of origin. Under this system, which was surprisingly carried over into post-independence unreformed, every 'Native District' in the country was represented by a specific numerical code and every adult Native was issued a national identity card (*chitupa/situpa*), with details indicating one's rural chief, village and district of ancestral origin.

Under this regime of ethnic rights, African people's access to resources, especially communal land in rural areas, could only be attained through one's ethnicity. In the rural sphere, Natives had to adopt or assert their identities in order to access important resources like land. Equally, in the urban areas the Rhodesian state politicised African ethnic identities by according differential rights and privileges to its subjects. In the work place, for instance, the colonial state reserved specific jobs for specific subject groups, and settler stereotypes produced a hierarchy of wage differentials based on ethnic or racial categorisations. On the mines, Shangaans were stereotyped as 'the best workers above and below ground', Zulus as the 'best drillers', Ndebeles as the 'best foremen' and Manyikas and 'northern boys' (Malawian and Zambian immigrants) as the 'best house servants' (Yoshikuni 1989:68; Van Onselen 1976:81, 93; Ranger 1985). As a result, it was not uncommon for individuals to emphasise or claim those identities to open up wider opportunities and increase social mobility. The racial and ethnic stratification of Rhodesian society, as with other colonial African societies, thus tended to promote group exclusivity among subject groups. In this respect, Solomon Mombeshora is correct to assert that 'the seeds of ethnic factor were derived from the pre-colonial past, [but] the colonial era provided fertile soil in which the ideology of tribalism germinated, blossomed and was further propagated (Mombeshora 1990:431).

## Nationalism and ethnicity

The relationship between ethnicity and African nationalism during Zimbabwe's struggle for independence, as in many other cases on the continent, was a complex one (Mkandawire 2005:10-55). Ethnicity manifested itself both positively and negatively. One of Zimbabwe's specialists on ethnic studies Enocent Msindo (2007:267-290) has recently argued that Zimbabwean scholars have not yet fully assessed the complex interactions of ethnicity and nationalism, especially their co-existence as popular identities. Distinguishing between ethnicity and tribalism, he argues that 'whereas (political) tribalism is normally the mobilisation of ethnically conscious people to foment political enmity and disunity between ethnic "others" to the detriment of nationalism, ethnicity, its variant, is that capacity in people to classify themselves as social "others"'. In this endeavour, ethnic groups do not always stand as opponents to the development of a nation, but instead may complement efforts at developing an inclusive nation' (Msindo 2007:269). Basing his conclusions on an analysis of ethnic-based societies, clubs and unions in Bulawayo, such as Sons of Mashonaland Cultural Society, Kalanga Cultural Society and Matabele Home Society, Msindo argues that in the period 1950-1963 ethnicity and nationalism positively fed each other. Ethnic associations were the springboard for the emergence of nationalist leaders while ethnicity provided the needed pre-colonial heroes, monuments and local expressions of anti-colonial discontent (Msindo 2007:267, 275-276, 289).

During the formative years of mass nationalism in Zimbabwe, ethnicity was deployed positively to mobilise the masses. The major nationalist parties of the 1950s and early 1960s – such as the Southern Rhodesia African National Congress, National Democratic Party and Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) – all positively deployed ethnicity to mobilise the masses. They appealed to ethnic cultural symbols, such as the leopard skins worn by pre-colonial Shona chiefs and Nguni hats worn by Ndebele indunas, which early nationalist leaders like Joshua Nkomo and Leopold Takawira used to wear when addressing the masses.



However, from the early 1960s onwards, ethnicity became a divisive force in Zimbabwe nationalist politics. Ethnic divisions were mainly caused by leadership positioning for the takeover of the state and perceived inequalities in political participation by individual nationalist leaders and their supporters. In all this tribalism, instead of being an aberration, became a political resource used by political actors at crucial times to maximise personal power. In 1963, ethnicity within the nationalist movement led to the fragmentation of ZAPU when a core group of Shona-speaking leaders of the party revolted against the leadership of the Ndebele-speaking Joshua Nkomo to found a new party, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). The ZAPU-ZANU split resulted in faction fights and violence in urban areas, which increasingly took ethnic dimensions (Sithole 1984:117-125).

From the 1963 split onwards, the struggle for national independence was dominated by ZAPU, comprising mainly Ndebele and Kalanga-speaking politicians and fighters, and ZANU, comprising mainly Shona-speaking politicians and fighters (Sithole 1999 and Sibanda 2005). After the 1963 breakaway, ZAPU tried to maintain ethnic balance in its leadership but this strategy did not save it from ethnic politics and ethnic-induced crises. Some of these ethnic-motivated clashes of the 1970s pitted Ndebele/Kalanga-speaking politicians, such as Jason Moyo, Edward Ndllovu and George Silundika, against their Shona-speaking counterparts, James Chikerema and George Nyandoro. They culminated in the second split of ZAPU in exile (Sibanda 2005:144-151; Msindo 2004).

As the ethnic dimensions of the rift between ZAPU and ZANU widened, animosity and suspicion among ZANU and ZAPU leaders grew, assassinations and detentions of political activists from 'unwanted ethnic or dialect groups' increased, and recruitment and fighting became more ethnicised and regionalised. Shona-speaking recruits increasingly joined ZANU in Mozambique while Ndebele recruits joined ZAPU in Zambia (Tungamirai 1995; Bhebe 1999). Within the organisational politics of these two major nationalist organisations, ZANU and ZAPU, political elites also continued to mobilise different ethnicities as an important

political resource in contests for power throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In the case of ZANU-PF, power contestations were mainly between the three main Shona sub-ethnic groups of Manyika or easterners; the Karanga or southerners and the Zezuru or northerners. As Masipula Sithole has convincingly argued in his *Struggles within a Struggle*, it was tensions within these ethnicities which led to divisions within ZANU and to the assassination of Herbert Chitepo, the first Chairman of the party (Sithole 1999). Within ZAPU in Zambia, ethnicity fragmented the party as the Shona, Kalanga and Ndebele politicians mobilised on an ethnic basis (Sithole 1980:28 and Sibanda 2005). The lives of its top leaders, such as that of the ZIPRA commander Nikita Mangena, were also lost due to this Ndebele/Kalanga-Shona rivalry.

The dominant liberation movements of ZAPU and ZANU indeed tried to manage ethnicity within their organisations. Their strategies of managing ethnicity included ethnic balancing in the leadership of the party. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s both ZAPU and ZANU tried to deal with the issue of ethnicity through ethnic representation. ZAPU tried to fill its leadership positions with individuals across Ndebele, Shona and Kalanga ethnic divides. In ZANU, particular attention was paid to achieving balance in leadership by having leaders drawn from the three dominant Shona groups: Karanga, Manyika and Zezuru (Sithole 1999). At the ideological level, nationalist organisations tried to deal with ethnicity through political rhetoric that ignored realities of ethnicity in favour of nationalist and Marxist radicalism (Chung 2006).

Despite these efforts, ethnicity continued to manifest itself negatively. Part of the problem was the failure of these organisations to develop a proper mechanism to deal with the phenomenon. Some of the leading nationalists were also not committed to practical eradication of ethnicity. They condemned ethnicity during the day but used it by night as a political resource in their own battles for power. Zimbabwe was thus born with a very bad ethnic birthmark that was to negatively affect its national integration efforts.

## **The post-colonial nation-state building project and ethnicity**

Once it got into power in 1980, the nationalist leadership of Zimbabwe tried to restructure the inherited colonial racial and ethnic order in a number of ways. At the political and ideological levels, it placed emphasis on dismantling colonial institutions, laws and practices promoting ethnic polarisation. To promote national integration among the ethnically diverse Zimbabwean groups, government employment policies, for instance, emphasised the deployment of public servants to places away from their districts of origin. The government language policy emphasised the teaching of both Shona and Ndebele (the languages of the two major African ethnic groups in Zimbabwe) to develop a spirit of nationhood among the young. It promoted Ndebele and Shona, alongside English, as official national languages and introduced them in the curricula in formerly white-only schools. The other minority languages, such as Kalanga, Shangani, Chewa (Nyanja), Venda, Tonga and Nambya, were also officially recognised for use in education and on radio (Makoni, Dube & Mashiri 2006).

The government also tried to change group attitudes through the promotion of political reconciliation between the previously antagonistic and disintegrated groups of the nation. For example, the Shona-Ndebele ethnic divide which had been amplified during the days of the struggle was to be achieved through the promotion of political cooperation between ZANU-PF and ZAPU, the two antagonistic nationalist parties which had both assumed ethno-regional characters by the time of independence. The first government to be formed after 1980 independence elections was thus to include not only members from the defeated Rhodesian Front government but also individuals from ZAPU, which had been defeated at the polls by its rival nationalist organisation, ZANU-PF. The new army was also an integrated unit, consisting of combatants from both ZANLA and ZIPRA, on the one hand, and Rhodesian units, on the other (Rupiya 1995).

In spite of all these de-ethnicisation processes, Zimbabwe struggled to develop into a united nation-state because of its negative legacy of racial and ethnic polarisation inherited from both colonialism and African nationalism. The suspicions and ethnic tensions developed, as well as alliances built, during colonial rule and the nationalist struggle did not immediately disappear after independence. They continued to shape relations between political elites in the post-independence (Rich 1982; Sylvester 1986). The ZANU-PF government tried to deal with ethnicity and maintain the unity of both the state and the party through persuasion and coercion. However, as Mandaza has correctly pointed out in his introduction of Edgar Tekere's recently published biography, ethnic/regional tensions continued to be dominant in the contest for power within ZANU-PF and the state (Mandaza 2006).

Ethnicity was enacted and reproduced through a number of sites and processes during the early years of independence. The first site for the enactment of ethnicity involved the conflict between ZANU-PF and PF ZAPU which had constituted itself as the major opposition party in Zimbabwe following ZANU-PF's victory in the 1980 election. Though originating as a political conflict between the two leading nationalist parties with contrasting visions about their roles in the post-independence state, this conflict soon assumed ethnic dimensions through a number of events and processes.<sup>2</sup> First and foremost, there was ZANU-PF's controversial use of party slogans, songs and political speeches that not only valorised ZANU-PF and ZANLA as authentic liberators while disparaging ZAPU, ZIPRA and its supporters (represented as constituting a distinct ethnic group) as villains (Alexander 1998:151-182; Dabengwa 1995). The ZANU-PF government also inaugurated a narrow official narrative of liberation history which downplayed and denigrated ZAPU and other nationalist parties' role. This historical moment of ZANU-PF triumphalism was also characterised by the use of Shona pre-colonial

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2 From the time of independence in 1980, ZANU envisaged Zimbabwe as a one-party state while ZAPU regarded itself as an official opposition party in a multiparty democracy.

heroes and historical monuments to imagine the nation, while Ndebele heroes and history were marginalised (Kriger 2003:74-75).

Helping to develop a sense of marginalisation among former ZIPRA combatants was the preferential treatment of ZANLA cadres in the Zimbabwe National Army and sidelining of ZIPRA. Examples of this were the promotion of former ZANLA combatants, ahead of their former ZIPRA colleagues, to senior military positions within the new ZNA. These and other grievances led to military clashes between ZIPRA and ZANLA in Assembly Points of Ntumbane, Ntabazinduna, Connemara and Chitungwiza in the early 1980s. These simmering tensions came to a head in 1982 with the discovery of arms caches in ZAPU-owned properties around Bulawayo and Gweru. The ZANU-PF government reacted by arresting a number of ZAPU leaders and ZIPRA commanders, and sacked ZAPU leaders in the coalition government, including the ZAPU leader Joshua Nkomo. All this exacerbated feelings of marginalisation among ZAPU leaders and their supporters, including some ZIPRA ex-combatants. A few of these politically dissatisfied individuals expressed their disgruntlement by taking up arms to fight for a 'better deal' (Ranger, Alexander & McGregor 2000:180-196).

Utilising this opportunity to crush its only viable opponent in the post-independence period, the ZANU-PF government deployed both the army and a special militia unit – the Fifth Brigade or *Gukurahundi* (the rain that sweeps the chaff) – to suppress the few rebels. The violent and brutal method used by the Fifth Brigade seriously destabilised the regions of Matebeleland and Midlands between 1982 and 1987. More than 20 000 civilians were killed by these government forces battling to contain the activities of a few armed political rebels. As detailed in the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) and the Legal Resources Foundation (LRF)'s report, *Breaking the Silence*, the Fifth Brigade's military operation became a bizarre combination of random killing, abduction and torture of ZAPU supporters and Ndebele-speaking civilians, raping of women and girls, cultural imperialism, conducted through attempts to force Ndebele-speakers to speak Shona

only, and indoctrination aimed at forcing people to support ZANU-PF (CCJP & LRF 1997).

The violence and killings of this period only ended in 1987 after the signing of the Unity Accord between ZANU and ZAPU and the merging of the two parties into the Zimbabwe African National Union-Popular Front (ZANU-PF). But, the atrocities of this period have remained a bitter source of resentment among the country's Ndebele population, who also feel marginalised from both central government decision-making processes and the economy (Ranger, Alexander & McGregor 2000; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003). The lingering bitterness of the people towards the central government has been evident in people's voting patterns. Since the end of the killings in 1987, ZANU-PF has struggled to get votes from the provinces of Matabeleland.

Bjorn Lingren (2005:156-158), who did fieldwork on ethnicity in Matabeleland, has argued that one of the serious consequences of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities is that it solidified the feeling of Ndebele-ness among the people of Matabeleland that is currently making national integration very difficult to achieve. He noted that 'people in Matabeleland accused Mugabe, the government and the "Shona" in general of killing the Ndebele' (Lingren 2005:158). In the eyes of the Ndebele public, what was portrayed as a mission to stamp out dissidents became an anti-Ndebele campaign that deliberately conflated Joshua Nkomo, ZAPU, ex-ZIPRA and every Ndebele-speaking person into a dissident; a dissident collaborator; a dissident sympathiser and sponsor. This is mainly because the Fifth Brigade unit was almost entirely Shona and justified its violence in political and ethnic terms. For others, the violence and killings of the period, therefore, represented a 'Shona-crusade to make the Ndebele account for the nineteenth century raids on the Shona'. The state, in the eyes of most residents of Matabeleland and Midlands who endured the killings and violence, thus not only became tribalist, using ethnicity to suppress political dissent and to monopolise power (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003; Ranger, Alexander & McGregor 2000:204-231).

The consequences of this violence of the 1980s on the nation-building project have been dire and far-reaching. The ethnic nature of this state-sanctioned violence not only left many Ndebeles more aware of their differences with the Shona, but also provoked radical Ndebele cultural nationalism and radical Ndebele politics (Lingren 2005). This radical politics has sometimes been contesting the idea of a unitary Zimbabwe state. This spirit of radical 'Ndebele particularism' manifested itself through the formation of radical Ndebele pressure groups in the 1990s, such as *Vukani Mahlabezulu* and *Imbovane Yamahlabezulu*, focusing on a revival of particularistic features of Ndebele culture (Chikuhwa 2004:93). The more political-oriented groups include *ZAPU 2000*, a belated attempt to revive ZAPU following the death of Joshua Nkomo in July 1999, as well as *Mthwakazi Action Group on Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in Matabeleland and Midlands* and *Mthwakazi People's Congress (MPC)*, both diaspora groups concentrating on the issues of the *Gukurahundi* violence and government accountability for it (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003).

Arguing against what it views as the continued marginalisation of the three provinces of Matabeleland South, Matabeleland North and Midlands, *ZAPU 2000* agitates for a Federal state in which provinces retain greater political and economic autonomy. It has repudiated the Unity Accord which it has described as an elitist pact. The two *Mthwakazi* organisations, on the other hand, have agitated for Ndebele self-determination and have called for the establishment of an autonomous Ndebele state (United Mthwakazi Republic) (Mthwakazi Action Group 2006). All these organisations have tried to develop a regional/ethnic support based on Ndebele popular resentment of the neglect of the western region and perceived hegemony of the majority Shona ethnic group. While the social pressure groups such as *Imbovane* have managed to attract mass support, the separatist political groups have received limited support. For instance, *ZAPU 2000* attained only 0.4% of the vote in the 2002 presidential election, and did not even participate in the last 2005 parliamentary elections (Electoral Institute of Southern Africa 2007).

Separatist organisations have rather found more support among the young generations of Diaspora political activists from Matabeleland who have become sceptical of the territorial nationalism of ZANU-PF which they regard as a Shona tribal party. Ndebele ethnicity has become a major issue in the Diaspora, where displaced Ndebele communities are linking up via the internet, through web-based forums such as inkundla.net, and other public forums to promote a distinct Ndebele political identity. The more radical groups and individuals have gone to the extent of imagining an autonomous independent nation-state, built on a re-imagining of both pre-colonial history and a recounting of the recent history of the Fifth Brigade atrocities. The radicals have claimed a separate history from their Shona compatriots and have sought to appropriate the nationalist leader Joshua Nkomo, ZAPU and ZIPRA as the property and heritage of the Ndebele rather than the nation at large. They have basically provincialised Ndebele identity and tried to construct it as an antithesis to Shona identity and political power (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 1997; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003; Mthwakazi Action Group 2006).

Inside Zimbabwe, Ndebele ethnicity has continued to revolve around key developmental issues. These include complaints about the sidelining of the western regions in development projects, and perceived marginalisation of Ndebele people in both the economy and politics by the dominant Shona groups. Following the Unity Accord, the people of Matabeleland had expected affirmative action in terms of development projects since their regions had lagged behind in economic development during the Gukurahundi days. Shona-Ndebele tensions in urban centres like Bulawayo have centred on limited employment and educational facilities, with Ndebeles accusing their Shona counterparts of taking 'their jobs and vacancies at teacher and nurse training colleges'. The former Mayor of Bulawayo in the 1990s, Joshua Malinga, the late MP Sydney Malunga and the former Governor of Matabeleland North, Welshman Mabhena, were the most vociferous in airing Ndebele feelings of marginalisation (*Financial Gazette* 2004). The discussions on provision of water to the city of Bulawayo from the Zambezi River are also



entangled in Shona-Ndebele ethnic politics. Muchaparara Musemwa has described the politics around the Zambezi Water Project, particularly the reluctance of the government to sponsor this project, as a continuation of 'ZANU-PF's disciplining of a dissident city' (Musemwa 2006).

Ethnic polarisation has not just developed between the Shona and the Ndebele, but also among the various Shona groups – the Karanga, the Manyika, the Zezuru, the Korekore and the Ndau, which have accused and counter-accused each other of ethnic favouritism. Minority groups like the Shangaan, Kalanga, Tonga and Venda, located in the marginal borderlands with little economic development and less physical and social infrastructure, have felt marginalised from both the economy and society and have complained of political and cultural domination by both Shonas and Ndebeles. In the field of education, for instance, children of the minority language groups generally have little access to education in their mother tongue as these languages are taught in schools only up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Thereafter, Shona and Ndebele become the only indigenous languages on offer, meaning that children from these minority groups have to switch to them since the curriculum requires children to study at least one local language (Hachipola 1998).

The marginalisation of minority group languages in education and other national policies has particularly become a sore point around which political mobilisation of these groups has occurred. On a number of occasions, community leaders among these minority groups have complained against what they perceive to be Shona or Ndebele cultural imperialism enforced through government policies, such as its national language policy and employment policies. In the case of the southern border town of Beitbridge, for instance, the issue of language has become so politicised that it has become an important mark enforcing identity group boundaries between the local Venda-speaking groups and Shonas, considered outsiders (Mathe 2005:8-20). Shona-Venda tension in Beitbridge came to a boiling point in 2002 when a group of 'war veterans' dismissed the head of primary school in the district, allegedly because she was employing mainly Shona teachers, and not Vendas.

The Shangani-speaking communities in the south-western parts of the country have over the years also complained about the employment of 'Karangas (derogatively termed *vanyai* or foreigners) ahead of their sons and daughters' (Author's personal experiences, January-March 1988).

Local feelings about marginalisation in both politics and the economy as well as intensified competition for limited resources like productive land have equally given potency to the growth of a strong politicised Shangani ethnicity in this part of the country. Competition over rights to land has periodically provoked ethnically motivated violence between Shangani-speaking and Karanga-speaking groups living side by side. In the period leading to the 2000 election, the ZANU-PF Member of Parliament for Chiredzi South, Aaron Baloyi, allegedly incited Shangani villagers in Chilonga village to evict all Karanga villagers settled in the area. About 400 villagers, armed with sticks and spears, attacked livestock, uprooted crops, destroyed property and houses belonging to their Karanga-speaking neighbours (*Daily News* 2001). Many Shangani ethnic mobilisers have continued to complain about their 'land being taken over by the Karangas'. Ethnic relations between Shangani and Karangas have become even more polarised since the death of Baloyi in 2006 and his succession by a Karanga-speaking Member of Parliament (*Zimbabwe Standard* 2007).

Contested rights to land and to movement on ethnic or regional grounds have been a common feature in post-colonial Zimbabwe, and a number of individuals have been denied access to land or evicted in various parts of the country by both political elites and peasants opposed to any attempts by 'outsiders' to settle in their 'ancestral' lands.<sup>3</sup> For instance, in 2002 the *Daily News* reported that a ZANU-PF Member of Parliament for the Mashonaland Central district of Muzarabani, Nobbie Dzinzi, had instigated local villagers to evict 'Karangas in Muzarabani' for 'being Karangas in an area indigenous to the Korekore people' (*Daily News* 2002).

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3 The general understanding among many rural communities is that individuals have eminent rights (based on history, origin and ethnicity) to certain pieces of land. See Marongwe (2002) for a more detailed discussion of this issue.

In 2003, when the Mashonaland-born, Coloured businessman and publisher, Ibbo Mandaza, tried to occupy his newly acquired farm in the Bubi district of Matabeleland North province, his move was strongly resisted by local peasants on the basis of both ethnicity and regionalism. Local war veterans and ZANU-PF politicians who, according to newspapers, had 'publicly stated their unhappiness with the allocation of the farm to Mandaza whom they consider an outsider' had allegedly mobilised these locals to bar him from settling on this prime farmland (*Zimbabwe Standard* 2003; *Zimbabwe Independent* 2004).

Though not as intense as Shona-Ndebele conflict, intra-group conflict among the various Shona groups has always been a feature of their relations since independence in 1980. The Karangas, Manyikas and Ndaus have complained about the dominance of the Zezurus in politics and economy. Since the early 1980s, a politicised Ndau identity, revolving around the controversial ousting of Ndabaningi Sithole, a Ndau-speaker from Chipinge, from the leadership of ZANU in 1975 and the economic marginalisation of the remote eastern districts of the country bordering Mozambique, manifested itself in the way residents related to the state. ZANU-Ndonga successfully mobilised this Ndau ethnicity against a ZANU-PF government led by Robert Mugabe who replaced Sithole as leader. Until 2005 when the two parliamentary seats were won by ZANU-PF and MDC (Movement for Democratic Change, the people of these districts consistently supported and voted ZANU-Ndonga – a situation which led many commentators to view the party as a tribal organisation since these were the only districts where the party managed to attract support. During the Mozambican civil war, the dynamics of Ndau ethnic politics were also at play when some inhabitants of these remote eastern districts expressed their frustrations with both the lack of development in their region and the government's handling of the war by offering support to RENAMO (Alao 1994:122-123).

Since 1980, post-colonial expressions of ethnicity have also been strong in Masvingo, where the late nationalist Eddison Zvobgo tried to mobilise

Karanga identity to dilute what he and others viewed as Zezuru monopoly over power and resources. From independence, Karanga political elites and their supporters constituted themselves as another centre of power that could not be ignored in power calculations and politics of ethnic balancing (Mandaza 2006; Rukuni 2003). The roots of this politicised Karanga ethnicity go back to the days of the struggle when contestations for power were mainly between the Karanga and the Manyika (Sithole 1999). But, after independence their ethnicity was mainly derived from perceptions, both real and imagined, about marginalisation. At the moment, Karanga ethnicity has been revived by the ongoing succession struggle in ZANU-PF which has, to a large extent, taken ethnic and regional dimensions (Zimbabwe Institute 2006).

### **Ethnicity and power contestations in contemporary Zimbabwe**

In spite of all official pretences to the contrary, Zimbabwe has increasingly become ethnically polarised. As in the 1970s, ethnic and regional tensions have been quite dominant in the power contestations within both the ruling ZANU-PF and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change. Zezuru, Manyika, Karanga and Ndebele ethno-regional identities have become the main basis through which power has been contested. The dominant factions in the ongoing struggle for succession of the leadership of ZANU-PF and the country, for instance, have all mobilised on regional and ethnic basis (Zimbabwe Institute 2006). To illustrate, there are heavy Zezuru ethnic undertones in both the Mujuru and Mugabe factions struggling for the leadership of ZANU-PF. The leading proponents of Mugabe's continued stay in office, such as Nathan Shamuyarira, Webster Shamu, Ignatious Chombo and Nicholas Goche are by and large Zezuru-speaking elites drawn from Mashonaland West province. In terms of ethnic and regional classification, the majority of leaders in the Mujuru camp are Zezurus originating from the Chikomba and Chivhu districts of Mashonaland East province. The Mujuru faction

is often referred to in the media as the Chivhu Corridor Group (CCG) or 'Super Zezuru' because of the ethno-regional undertones in its leadership and membership (Zimbabwe Institute 2006).

The Zezuru character of these two factions has invoked fears of Zezuru political dominance among political elites from other provinces outside Mashonaland. These include Masvingo, and Midlands (dominated by Karanga-speaking groups) as well as Matabeleland (dominated by Ndebele-speaking groups). There are also rumblings of discontent in Manicaland province (dominated by Manyika and Ndaue-speaking groups), and Emmerson Mnangagwa and his faction have tried to mobilise their fears. As a result, Mnangagwa has a significant support base in his home province of Midlands, large parts of Masvingo province and the two provinces of Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South who all feel politically marginalised from the current configurations of power in ZANU-PF. The Mnangagwa group is, therefore, also tainted with ethnic politics, and it is sometimes referred to as 'South-South' group because of its attempt to mobilise on a regional basis. The convergence of grievance and resentment among various groups and constituencies has thus given rise to highly ethnicised politics in Zimbabwe.

The MDC has since its formation in 1999 been similarly plagued by the same ethnic and regional tendencies that have weakened ZANU-PF. Six years of infighting along regional and ethnic fault lines, as well as disagreements over strategy, accountability and violence within the party, eventually resulted in a split in October 2005 (Raftopoulos 2005; Magaisa 2005; *Financial Gazette* 2005). The MDC split resulted in two formations of the same party, one led by party-founding president Morgan Tsvangirai and another led by the radical former student leader, Arthur Mutambara and founding Secretary-General, Welshman Ncube. Since their split, both factions have been viewed as ethno-regional formations commanding regional support rather than national support. The Mutambara and Ncube faction has commanded more support in the Ndebele-speaking constituencies of Matabeleland and Midlands, whilst the Tsvangirai group has had more support in the Shona-speaking

constituencies of Harare, Masvingo and Mashonaland and Manicaland (Moyo 2006; Moyo 2007).

## **Conclusion**

The trajectory and process of nation building in post-colonial Africa has always been a complex and tricky affair, especially in countries such as Zimbabwe that inherited a highly fragmented society, divided along racial and ethnic fault lines. This article has argued that for the last 27 years ethnic tension has remained rife in Zimbabwe mainly because of the politics of silence. This silence has been experienced at two levels: the state and society. At the societal level, the politics of silence has been evident in the way members of society either avoid or try to silence all debates about ethnicity in the country. At the official level, the state's politics of silence has been experienced in the ZANU-PF government's reluctance to engage ethnicity as an issue in both politics and the economy, especially with regard to addressing historical and contemporary factors that continued to make ethnicity an important issue in people's lives. The government silence over, or failure to respond to, ethnicity was particularly evident in its nation-building project, especially its coercive nation-building and state-building projects of the early 1980s, which paid little attention to the ethnic configuration of the inherited state, as well as the structures and institutions which enacted and reproduced ethnicity. Zimbabwe's failure to build social, cultural and political systems in which all citizens stand in the same relation to the state and feel equally incorporated into the structures of both political and economic power has thus ensured that ethnicity, alongside race, continues to matter to Zimbabweans.

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