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The Ethnic factor in Internal Displacement of Populations in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

The ethnic structure of Sub-Saharan African countries has created an environment that is most conducive for ethnically based conflicts that trigger internal displacement of population in those countries. This paper surveys the evidence of the ethnic factor in population displacements during the colonial and independence periods. The theoretical framework used to interpret the evidence in colonial Guyana - "predisposing" and "triggering-igniting" factors - is applied to the situation in SSA.

Introduction

Sub-Saharan is a vast area which consists mainly of Black African countries inhabited by a variety of ethnic groups ranging from uni-ethnic to multi-ethnic countries. In their present form, the countries are largely the creation of European colonialism whereby different nationalities exist and exhibit ethno-centric behaviour which shows its ugly head in the event of conflict. Three critical phases of ethnic disturbances that triggered internal displacement of population in Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries may be identified. First, the race towards independence in the 1950s and 1960s, during which various ethnic groups entered into alliances to suit their particular purposes, sparked off ethnic disturbances which in turn displaced previously well-settled groups, arousing fears, particularly among foreign groups, some of whom felt compelled to emigrate. The second phase is the

first decades of independence when several countries, notably those in Western and Middle Africa as well as countries in the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa, witnessed episodes of military *coup d'état* which caused internal displacements of population and even emigration of nationals. Finally, as SSA countries pinned their hopes on a renaissance brought about by the renewed quest for multi-party democracy in the early 1990s against the background of political intolerance under the single-party rule and severe economic crisis, ethnic conflict again exploded, resulting in fresh episodes of internal displacement of population, but not emigration. Yet while the ethnic factor is dominant or perhaps the most overt, it is not sufficient to determine internal displacement of populations in SSA countries. The ethnic factor is usually compounded by other factors, including external forces, political instability and economic crisis. Indeed, it would appear that these three intervening factors are an acid test of nationhood so that when the pursuit of nationhood falters they help to trigger disturbances which manifest themselves in ethnic conflict, often accompanied by violence and, consequently population displacement.

This paper focuses on the ethnic factor: it attempts to analyse its place in internal displacement of populations in SSA countries during the colonial and post-colonial period. It cites relevant cases in order to provide empirical evidence, though not hard enough, backed by objective analytical techniques. The paper consists of five sections. This introduction is followed by an exposition of two main perspectives on, and the geography of ethnicity; section three provides evidence of the role of the ethnic factor in internal displacement of populations and emigration in selected countries of the region, highlighting other factors that conspire with the ethnic factor to bring this about. The fourth section discusses selected consequences of population displacement; and the final section concludes the paper with some policy suggestions for the SSA countries individually and within the framework of sub-regional and regional groupings.

The expression "population displacements" denotes forced movements of population within the country due to some compelling forces beyond the control of the movers. As the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in September 1994 (United Nations, 1995:65) explains:

Because there is no single definition of internally displaced persons, estimates of their number vary, as do the causes of their migration. However, it is generally accepted that these causes range from environmental degradation to national disasters and internal conflicts that destroy human settlements and force people to flee from one area of the country to another.

Perspectives and The Geography of Ethnicity

Definition and Foundation of Ethnicity

The Greek word *ethnos* (people) relates to a common character of a group of individuals. Therefore, the term *ethnicity* often refers to the “character or quality of an ethnic group” (Mann, 1983:114). According to Ratcliffe (1994:2) much confusion in both popular and academic discourse surrounds the concept of *ethnicity*. At one level, it is considered an euphemism for *race*, as in Great Britain where reference is often made to “ethnic minorities” or “minority ethnic communities”. The significance of ethnicity lies in its saliency for group consciousness and collective action. To avoid confusing ethnicity with race, Ratcliffe includes attributes such as “common ancestry”, memories of a shared past, and aspects of group identity based on “kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality of physical appearance”. Yet all these traits are wrought with problems such as difficulties in delineating “ethnic groups,” the erroneous assumption that the term refers to both a static and homogenous group (when in fact it is influenced by class and gender, for instance), and lack of awareness of the phenomenon of “situational ethnicity” given that this relationship changes with time, and is quite elusive. (*Ibid.*: 6-7).

What distinguishes an ethnic group from any other kind of social group, according to Smith (1981:65), is the

Rationale that sustains the sense of group belonging and group uniqueness, and which links successive generations of its members. That rationale is to be found in the specific history of the group, and, above all, in its myths of group origins and group liberation.

Marè (1993: 23) contends that the concept of ethnicity refers to social identity formation that rests on three considerations: a culturally specific practice and a unique set of symbols and beliefs; a belief in common origin and a common history (“the past”) that is broadly agreed upon, and provides an inheritance of origin, symbols, heroes, events, values, hierarchies, etc.; and a sense of belonging to a group that in some combination confirms social identities of people (members) in their interaction with both insiders and outsiders. To Marè (*Ibid.*: 24), therefore ethnicity constitutes the way in which people think of themselves in relation to others, the way in which they act upon the world around them, and the messages addressed to ethnic subjects in their mobilisation, and to their outlook and practices as members of a group with some identity.

This paper considers all these factors which are critical in the region’s recurring internal displacement of populations, and the insoluble problem of refugees. Virtually all SSA countries have experienced them in one form or another; because

virtually all of them have inherited porous boundaries that sub-divide ethnic groups into different nationalities and hardly reflect the historical development of African social reality. As Knight (1978:1) observes in a special report:

People were torn apart ... Frontiers (were) created by colonialists and honoured by the new states ... Sensitivity and friction about frontiers are at the heart of many conflicts between countries and groups within them. Newly emerging countries are naturally anxious to avoid direct conflict with neighbours, but their government may oppress or terrorise a group or tribe known to have affiliations beyond its borders.

For example, the Ewe inhabit an area covering Ghana-Togo and Togo-Benin borders; the Maasai, the Kenya-Tanzania border; the Somali, the Kenya-Somali and Somali-Ethiopia borders; the Hausa and Fulani, many borders of Western African states stretching from Nigeria to Senegal and the Gambia; and the OvaHerero across the Botswana-Namibia border. In such situations, ethnic loyalties may be in sharp conflict with national loyalties thereby creating tension between the two identities and rocking the foundations of nationhood.

According to Nnoli (1989: 7) there are Marxist and non-Marxist definitions of ethnicity and ethnic conflict. The second perspective, which has been more pervasive in African as well as non-African interpretations of the two phenomena, consists of two main variations with several sub-themes (*Ibid.*: 7-13).

- The “tribalism” school of thought whereby: (a) the concept of tribalism was popularised by colonial anthropologists as a weapon by which the colonialists subjugated African peoples; (b) African linguistic groups were characterised as tribes to which colonialists attributed differences in culture and instilled the fear that only conflict could characterise the interaction of different groups; and (c) ethnicity was characterised by a common consciousness of being in relation to other ethnic group.
- The “modernisation” school in which ethnicity is represented both as a mere relic of an out-moded tradition that is destined to give way to modernity; and a product of the process of modernisation itself. According to this view, growth in urbanisation, education, communication and transportation lead to the integration of diverse ethnic groups. On the contrary, the literature on rural-urban migration in which the issue of ethnicity is addressed, suggest that urban migrants continue to maintain strong links with their rural origins and create new urban networks that reinforce their communal identities, including migrants’ associations which are intended, among other things, to develop the migrants’ home communities (Oucho, 1990; Oucho, 1996b).

Nnoli (1989:13) points out that the non-Marxist literature is silent on the link between ethnicity and class though the interaction between the two is probably the most complex, especially in the analysis of complex societies (*Ibid.*: 14).

It is on this interaction that the Marxist analytical tradition is useful. The literature from this tradition argues that ethnicity does not often involve the demand for sovereign status or the use of state apparatus on behalf of an ethnic group to the exclusion of others, or the incorporation of an ethnic group into a political society (Nnoli, 1989: 15). Yet, as will be seen in the third section of this paper, Africa's political leaders have mobilised the support of their own ethnic groups to suppress other ethnic groups who are perceived as a threat to their hold on political power. In some countries political parties have been formed along ethnic lines; and in yet others, ethnic groups have demanded or fought for their own sovereign state.

Generally, the Marxist tradition views ethnicity process within an evolutionary-historical framework in which politics and economics play a key role. Nnoli (1989: 15) cites works which have investigated cases where one class approaches an ethnic caste; works which stress the tendency for ethnically differentiated groups in individual societies to occupy specialised niches in the social division of labour; and works which have explored the important consequences (e.g. the resultant class antagonism assume the form of ethnic antagonism) of a split labour market for inter-ethnic relations.

Evidence of the Ethnic Factor in Population Displacements

A simple theoretical framework for analysing ethnic conflict in colonial Africa may be drawn from Premdas' (1992) study of Guyana which identified two sets of factors: *predisposing factors* and *triggering-igniting factors*. The predisposing factors include cultural pluralism, lack of co-operation and overarching values and internal communal beliefs of the separate sections. When these are exploited to advance ethnic exclusiveness, they may generate ethnic conflict and, in the process separate or displace groups that had co-existed previously. The triggering - igniting factors on the other hand encapsulate colonial manipulation, introduction of mass democratic politics, rivalry over resource allocation and imported political institutions adopted at independence (Premdas 1992: 5). In this paper our analysis of the evidence of the ethnic factor in population displacements will focus on the colonial and post-colonial periods. Relevant examples are cited to illustrate specific cases.

The Colonial Period

European colonisation started with the voyages of exploration and discovery

which paved the way for evangelising missions that were crowned with the establishment of colonial administration and the inequities it produced and sustained when it lasted. We need no more analytical mileage than mention how the British colonisation of Kenya and Zimbabwe displaced the African populations and segregated them into ethnically defined "native reserves" after their lands had been appropriated for European occupation; how in South Africa the descendants of the Dutch, the British and other European nations displaced indigenous populations and monopolised that country's resources until majority rule in 1994 ushered in a process of change and restitution to the African majority; and how British and French colonial policy displaced African peoples wherever their lands, minerals, forests and other natural resources were considered useful to the economic interest of the metropole. In uni-ethnic countries (e.g. Somalia) and bi-ethnic ones (e.g. Burundi and Rwanda with the majority Tutsi respectively), predisposing factors are generally overt. A recent analysis (Oucho, 1996a: 172) cautions that:

When tribesmen/women refer to their lot as better than their neighbours, as better educated, more advanced or superior in a particular way, they are simply sowing seeds of ethnic tension/ethnic conflict which often explodes, resulting in violence, armed struggle and so on.

Such prejudices are instilled through the colonial policy of "divide and rule". But while colonial governments took steps to contain the situation in order not to trigger population displacements, independent African governments of SSA seem to lack that capacity to manage ethnic conflict; or have allowed it to escalate uncontrollably; and in some instances even inflamed ethnic rivalries leading to appalling levels of violence.

The triggering-igniting factors have played even more overt roles in the region. As a recent analysis (*Ibid.*: 172) puts it vividly:

The history of colonialism provides overwhelming evidence of how manipulation of "more friendly" peoples to conquer "more stubborn" peoples, through primitive expeditions of denial of basic social services to the latter, laid firm foundations for conflict-in-waiting, a time bomb which exploded when the colonial administration was succeeded by independent governments. It is surprising that when ethnic conflicts arose in the post colonial era, the former colonial powers simplistically dismissed them as the result of tribalism, without bothering to trace their evolution, maturity and eventually their occurrence.

Three examples will illustrate this fact. These are the former French colony of

Chad; the two former Belgium colonies in the Great Lakes Region - Rwanda and Burundi; and the former British Protectorate of Uganda. The colonial-to-post colonial situation in Chad provides a classic case of one country sharply divided into two irreconcilable camps - in Anthony's (1991: 577) words, "radical separation". The French, for reasons of political expediency, separated the northern from the southern regions. While direct rule was established in the south, a military regime was placed in the more troublesome north and the north-central region vacillated between the two administrative policies. Towards the end of the decolonial era, the Muslim north and the southern Sahara administrative elite clashed over the right to control the state. At independence, the French handed power to the southern elite thereby polarising the country much further and plunging it into the prolonged civil war that ended recently (*Ibid.*: 577-8).

In Rwanda and Burundi, the Belgian colonial system involved the creation of a governing class. From the time the Belgians arrived in the former Ruanda-Urundi (now two separate countries), the colonial power chose to rule through a tribe that they considered to be the elite and almost aristocratic in the European sense - the minority Tutsi, thereby elevating the latter's socio-political status. Consequently, the Tutsi became the better educated and were preferred for appointment into the civil service. Invariably, Belgium colonial policy placed them in an advantageous position to enable them assume the reigns of power at independence. At the same time, the Belgians sponsored the formation of Hutu political parties as the Tutsi tried to consolidate power. The result of Belgium machinations was the *coup d'état* which was aimed at bringing the Hutu to power. In Burundi, where the Tutsi also assumed control of the state, the situation was less volatile (Anthony, 1991: 581-2). Yet the seeds of discord had already been sown. Accordingly, the two countries have witnessed untold dramas of coups and counter-coups, and a cycle of inter-ethnic wars. At the time of writing this paper, the two countries are more or less ungovernable and civil war continues unabated, resulting in some of the worst cases of genocide in sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, both Rwandans and Burundians are not only internally displaced; but also they have become refugees in most of East, Central and Southern Africa.

The British exploits in Uganda provide yet another scenario of how a colonial power created a governing class through the policy of indirect rule (Anthony, 1991). While indirect rule was established in the kingdoms of Buganda, Binyoro, Toro and Busoga, direct colonial rule *par excellence* was launched in the north which was inhabited by segmentary Nilotic peoples without monarchs. For a long time, education and economic opportunities were open to the peoples of the 4 kingdoms. When at independence the north produced the first Prime Minister (Milton Obote) with the Kabaka of Buganda as (a mere figure-head) President, the stage was set for a power struggle. Subsequently, Obote not only overthrew the Kabaka who later died in exile in Britain, but also abolished all the kingdoms. The

justification was that they were anachronistic and contradictory to the spirit of Ugandan nationalism. In the midst of all this confusion, Idi Amin, then Obote's confidant, exploited the Buganda-North disagreements to overthrow the Obote government in January 1971 while he was on a visit to Asia. The period 1971-1985 saw the once prosperous Uganda plunged into successive civil wars which almost tore the country apart.

The examples cited are by no means historical accidents; they were carefully designed colonial devices of dividing colonial dependencies along ethnic, religious and other lines, acts of manipulation in which the indigenous populations of these countries became entrapped. Thus, at independence, ethnic groups in most of SSA countries looked like "independent nationalities" for whom national flags, national languages, national identities and nation-building made little or no sense. The colonial policy of divide and rule was particularly effective in South Africa where the rivalry between the Xhosa and the Zulu and the establishment of "homelands" were crucial in the *apartheid* era. An article by Andrew Roberts in the *Natal Witness* of 21 January 1992, set the "unimaginably war-like" Zulu against the ANC ... which explains current political violence and warns against "a civil war so brutal that blacks of all tribes would look back to apartheid with nostalgia" (Marè, 1993: 3). Yet since majority rule in 1994 the Zulu-ANC relations have been much less hostile than in the *apartheid* era.

The Independence Era

During the thirty or so years of independence, SSA countries have witnessed ugly incidents, including ethnic conflict and civil wars. Some of the worst incidents have occurred following the current wave of democratic reforms and multi-party elections when the scramble for power became acute and often involved the mobilisation of ethnic cleavages to secure political and economic advantages which they had been denied in the past. In many SSA countries, rivalry over resource allocation - land in Rwanda, Burundi and Kenya; other resources (e.g. rainfed agricultural regions, and oil) in Southern Sudan as well as the Horn of Africa - attests to the triggering-igniting effects of resource-centred rivalry. Ethnic rivalries that have exploded into serious conflict in a number of countries, resulting in population displacements, include the following:

- **Central Africa Republic, 1970s.** Jean-Bedel Bokassa's reign of terror, thrived on the support of a militia drawn from his own ethnic group until he was eventually overthrown. More than a decade since the regime was overthrown, atrocities perpetrated by his militia have left an indelible mark on sections of the population of this country.
- **Uganda, 1971-79.** This decade witnessed Idi Amin's reign of terror, repression and murder of educated as well as economically and politically influential

Ugandans, targeting the Nilotic Acholi and Langi (from which President Milton Obote hailed) and the Baganda after exploiting the differences between the two groups. The regime became so repressive forcing many educated Ugandans to flee together with their families into exile in Kenya, Tanzania and farther afield. The Obote II regime (1980-84) was equally repressive as it tried to “redress” the situation through acts of vengeance against ethnic groups other than his own. Although Uganda has been relatively peaceful since 1986 when the Museveni government came to power, the country is still far from being one, united nation.

- **Kenya.** The assassination of Tom Mboya, on a Nairobi street on 5 July 1969 sparked off ethnic violence between the Luo (Mboya’s tribe) and the Kikuyu (the tribe of President Kenyatta). As the Kikuyu were displaced in urban areas in Luoland, the Luo were attacked and displaced in Nairobi and its environs, the heartland of the Kikuyu. To this day, some twenty-five years after that incident, the rift between the Luo and the Kikuyu remains and attempts to heal it have not succeeded.
- **Burundi and Rwanda.** The two countries present a classical case of incessant ethnic conflict between the majority Hutu and the minority Tutsi who have engaged in an orgy of inter-ethnic genocide, including the well planned killing of the two countries’ Presidents in a plane crash in 1994.
- **Sierra Leone.** Tension among ethnic groups in this country in 1967-1983 led to coups in March 1967 and April 1968. Two ethnic groups - in particular, the Mende and the Temne (who constitute about 60 percent of the population) - were purged following an attempt on the life of President Siaka Stevens in 1971. That period saw displacement of populations. The situation eased; but has resurged since 1992, taking the form successive coups, and a civil war.
- **Togo.** This country has been polarised into the Ewe (about 44 per cent of the total population) who were politically dominant in the regime of Sylvanus Olympio, and the Kabrai of the north who dominated the army and who assassinated President Olympio to facilitate the assumption of power by an opposition leader. To this day, ethnic tension is rife, reaching a crescendo in 1991-2 when attempts to introduce multi-party democracy floundered with the Togolese strongman, Gbyasinge Eyadema, holding onto power. Displacement of the Ewe who straddle the Togo-Ghana border saw Ghana struggling to grapple with the problem of a large inflow of refugees from Togo. Although Eyadema later “won” the general elections, ethnic tension in the country has not subsided.

Clearly, all shades of ethnic problems - rivalry, tension, conflict and violence, have permeated every fibre of society in most SSA countries. Ethnic competition has been expressed in a variety of demands: for instance, "federal character", "ethnic arithmetic", "ethnic balancing" and "ethnic proportionality principle" (Nnoli 1989: 5). These rivalries have influenced admission to secondary schools and universities, recruitment into employment, representation in political institutions - indeed, in practically every sphere of life where resources are scarce. But as one author puts it, the most significant effect of ethnic rivalries has been internal displacement of populations.

Internal displacements of national populations have occurred in countries where ethnic conflict between larger and smaller groups or between those in leadership and those aspiring for it has sparked off violence (e.g. in Rwanda, Burundi, Nigeria and Kenya) where population pressure on land has pitted landlords against the landless; in countries where resettlement led to minority groups' alleged invasion of their land by majority tribe (e.g. in Kenya where the Kalenjin have clashed with the Kikuyu "invaders"); in the creation of national parks and game reserves which have restricted population to much smaller areas; in the establishment of large development projects which have led to the eviction of formerly undisturbed inhabitants; and during the era of the multi-party democratisation ... (Oucho, 1997: 101).

Consequences of Population Displacements

Anything that disrupts peace and tranquillity in a country, such as population displacements, is bound to have adverse consequences for the nation-state and its people. In what follows, we distinguish and discuss the demographic, political, economic and socio-cultural consequences.

Demographic Consequences

Population displacements disrupt established lifestyles and traditions, including forced abandonment of ancestral homes to take up temporary residence in an unknown territory; pitting in-migrants against their host populations; disrupting the reproductive cycle in affected populations (because couples are often separated in the process); disrupting the family system; and an increase in morbidity and mortality especially among children and the aged, particularly where the displaced persons cannot afford, or have no access to, medical care or aid. In a nutshell, the demographic clock stops all of a sudden when populations are displaced.

Political Consequences

Population displacements underscore the inability of SSA governments to contain situations that threaten the peace, unity and stability of the nation-state. First, it

provides opportunities for political elites of displaced groups to initiate actions that further undermine the fragile peace and stability of the country. Second, it raises the already tense political temperature; exacerbates ethnic animosity, and eventually triggers ethnic violence. Political parties often become “ethnic parties” to advance ethnic interests even if their actions contradict the spirit of national unity. The formation of ethnic parties raise the prospects of further balkanisation of SSA countries in the long term. In the short term the developmental goals of the nation are distorted by ethnic demands. Third, population displacements often expose SSA countries to foreign intervention which further threatens fragile national sovereignties. A good example is the current situation in the Great Lakes Region.

Economic Consequences

Population displacements tend to grind all forms of economic activity to a sudden halt. In many countries, agricultural activity stalls, resulting in reduced food production and consequently famine, lack of cash crops for export and, therefore, a fiscal crisis for the state concerned. On the other hand, it puts a heavy strain on the economy of the host country. Displaced populations are impoverished as they are deprived of their established means of livelihood. On the whole economic capacities are diminished even further exposing countries to what Ali Mazrui foresees as the recolonisation of Africa. What Mazrui has in mind is not classical colonisation but a new form of colonisation which is economic and social, given the fact that virtually all SSA countries cannot run their economies without the support of western countries and their donor agencies.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This paper has drawn attention to instances when ethnic strife has led to population displacements in Sub-Saharan African countries. Available evidence suggests that this has been so in the colonial and post-colonial periods, with ethnic strife during the latter epoch posing profound challenges to the peace, stability and progress of nations.

Policy actions designed to reduce the incidence of population displacements, whether attributed to ethnicity or other factors, should stem from, among other things, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) which was adopted in Cairo in September 1994; and programmes and activities of the World Council of Churches, with the active involvement of the OAU. The ICPD urges all countries to undertake four principal actions:

- Governments should address the causes of internal displacement with other governments and interested NGOs. In Africa, the ethnicity is one important

factor which governments have tendered to camouflage or ignore to the detriment of national unity.

- Governments and their partners should ensure that internally displaced persons satisfy their basic needs, besides receiving health, including reproductive health, services.
- The pastoralist economic system should be modernised in order to reverse declining environmental quality and minimise conflict over access to grazing land. In SSA countries where these problems are already acute, with pastoralists in conflict with agriculturists, the significance of these agents of internal displacements cannot be over-emphasized. The struggle between indigenous groups and foreign groups should also be minimised.
- Internally displaced persons should be assisted by governments, international organisations and NGOs to return to their place of origin. To this end, SSA countries should revisit their constitutions which allow citizens to stay anywhere in the country, uphold human rights, and acknowledge the economically devastating effects of population displacement on their economies.

The World Council of Churches (1995: 3-4) on the other hand, has been “outraged by the violence and injustice which uproot people and by the human suffering they cause.” It identifies three main causes of forced displacement, namely:

1. War, civil conflict, human rights violations, colonial domination and persecution for political, religious, ethnic or social reasons;
2. Severe breakdown of economic and social conditions that once provided people with survival in their traditional communities and in their own countries; and
3. Environmental devastation. The WCC calls on Christians (read God fearing people) to uphold life and the dignity of displaced people; work for justice and peace, and foster solidarity with displaced persons.

More especially, it is important that ethnicity should neither be a curse nor a source of arrogance to belittle or magnify a people’s achievement. It should be acknowledged as a demographic reality and, accordingly, as a basis for development planning with the aim of ensuring equity and justice for all. Once the adverse

connotations of ethnicity are eliminated, the ethnic factor could become a vehicle for development, not a constraint.

Notes

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