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Ethnicity and development in sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

This discussion hinges on the notion that sub-Saharan Africa's development problems cannot be divorced from the negative ramifications of ethnicity. Countries in sub-Saharan Africa must first deal with ethnicity before tackling problems of political misrule, poverty and human misery. Development efforts in the region must be preceded by the political will on the part of national governments to bring forth tangible solutions to the question of ethnicity.

Introduction

SUB-SAHARAN Africa is presently confronted by many socio-political and economic maladies. Many of these negative forces have reshaped people's lives and the manner in which institutions respond to their needs. It has been argued in the past that many problems currently besieging the sub-continent of Africa emanate from the wanton exploitation by imperial European nations of the region's human and natural resources for more than four centuries. This exploitation and subjugation still continues today although in a more subtle and refined way. Even though political or "flag independence" has been attained in sub-Saharan Africa there has been insignificant progress in areas of economic emancipation. This has led to the re-colonization of the region through conditional aid and the regulation of prices of the region's exports by former imperial nations.

Although this conspiracy thesis was accepted for some time, especially during the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s, 1960s and

1970s, some Africans today have also come to terms with the fact that many of the problems facing sub-Saharan countries are self inflicted. Indeed the blatant and senseless killing of Africans by depraved African regimes, such as those of Idi Amin in Uganda and Jean Bokasa in the Central African Republic after the attainment of political independence, has reawakened both scholars and activists to the reality that such factors contributed immensely to the region's current poor performance in areas of human development. Right-minded Africans are now more cautious about attributing Africa's woes wholly to colonialism or neo-colonialism. When we analyse Africa's political and economic catastrophes it is clear that one self inflicted misery that is central to Africa's current situation is that of ethnicity.

To someone who has not visited the continent, Africa south of the Sahara conjures up images of emaciated children, the victims of famines caused by drought and desertification. This is a very different image from the Africa of thirty years ago when the flags of the newly independent states were being raised and a feeling of optimism were widespread beyond as well as within Africa (Grove 1991:39). In contemporary political and economic parlance it is the continent's unstable and volatile situation that stands out.

Although this manner of speaking does not signify a rediscovery of sub-Saharan Africa it merely alludes to the unstable conditions in the sub-continent by highlighting the colossal human tragedies that became pervasive in the 1990s. Much of sub-Saharan Africa is on the verge of imploding as civil wars ravage families and communities while poverty-related problems continue to escalate. The falling prices of the continent's exports on international markets have led to a downward spiral of the economies in the region. Added to this, the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank continue to accentuate this already unacceptable situation.

Our countries' economic crises appear most pronounced in the field of social welfare, poverty and in standards of living, infant mortality, school enrolment and life expectancy (Hassan 1997). The debt burden compounds the sub-continent's socio-economic and political problems. By the mid-1980s the share of debts incurred by

sub-Saharan Africa was simply enormous, considering that most of the world's poorest economies are to be found in that sub-region. For example the total debt stocks for sub-Saharan Africa stood at US\$ 55.6 billion in 1980, US\$ 98.1 billion in 1985 and US\$ 171.4 billion in 1990. In other words the sub-Saharan African debt more than tripled between 1980 and 1990 (Adekanye 1995:358).

Ethnicity conceptualized

THE TERM ethnicity refers to some form of group identity. Ethnicity applies to a group of persons who accept and define themselves by a consciousness of common descent or origin, shared historical memories and connections (Chazan *et al.* 1988). Ethnicity can be broken into two components:

- *Instrumental ethnicity* – this emanates from material deprivation,
- *Symbolic ethnicity* – based on the anxiety to preserve one's cultural identity.

In extreme situations the two strands of ethnicity can combine and serve as a motive force for state formation (Oomen 1997:21). Such a situation epitomizes the present conflagration of internecine wars in countries south of the Sahara.

Ethnicity seems to thrive in chaotic social and political environments. Ethnicity is not only a contemporary phenomenon. It was also rife in the colonial era. In many instances African social interaction in urban colonial settings has been typified by ethnic rivalries. Here people of different ethnic groups and cultures met for the first time. Some of these contacts culminated in ethnic feuds which were – ironically – quelled by the white settlers. White settlers also established bodies such as the tribal elders' system to enforce law and order as well as manage conflicts between the natives. For instance in colonial Zambia on the Copperbelt there was hatred and fighting between different ethnic groups and killings as gangs of young men prowled around the mining compounds making it unsafe for people to appear outside their homes after dark. The hostilities in these colonial urban settings in turn cemented tribal stereotypes (Epstein 1973). In South Africa during the 1950s the tribal climate

was not dissimilar from that in Zambia. In the African township of Alexandra the tribal gang comprising the Bavenda and Bapedi tribesmen terrorized other tribes in the area (De Ridder 1961). This was more or less the picture when different African tribes in colonial Africa met for the first time.

Davidson (1992) perceives ethnicity as a negative force and asserts that it is utterly destructive to civil society, undermining a country's morality and flouting the rule of law. But Glickman (1995) takes a more optimistic view by linking it to political processes. He points out that, despite the persistence of ethnic conflicts in the politics of all African states, significant liberalization and democratization are possible. One reason is that the nature of ethnicity in most African states is instrumental rather than primordial.

Ethnicity and development

DEVELOPMENT is a multifaceted process that could be enhanced or impeded by a myriad of factors. There is no consensus on what should be understood by development. Neither is there agreement on how development can best be brought about nor why it has proved so difficult for most of the poor countries in the developing world to achieve any kind of improvement for the large majority of citizens (Martinussen 1997). But we usually assume a positive transformation of people's lives that is both quantitative and qualitative when engaging in debates about development. Adjectives that may denote development are: improvement, enhancement, elevation, progress; to mention a few. Ideally development should be a process that raises the material and living conditions of people. For development to take place, therefore, other kinds of improvements that can catalyze the developmental process must be present. These include improvements in education, health, access to credit facilities, social welfare and security. There should also be institutions that protect both human as well as property rights. Development also means improved access to life chances and opportunities such as employment and social security. When these life chances are blocked, due to the fact that people may be from one ethnic group or another, then development is impeded. But more importantly, development

has to unfold in countries where good governance abounds, because fair play and social justice must be entrenched by the state, thus keeping ethnicity in check at the national level.

In contexts where there is abject poverty like sub-Saharan Africa the state is the prime mobilizer of resources for the people. But when the state is hijacked by one or more ethnic groups, upward social mobility becomes a preserve of such groups, who use the state machinery for selfish ends as opposed to national development concerns. In this sense a predatory state emerges whereby, clientelism and nepotism are used as yardsticks in the acquisition of state contracts and tenders. Ethnicity in its negative form negates development. It becomes a powerful force that leads to the vices that in turn define the redistribution of a country's resources. Those who do not come from the ruling ethnic group are neglected by the state. In this way ethnicity emerges primarily as an agent of accumulation, both of wealth and political power (Bayart 1993). Indeed, the most striking examples of ethnic strategies are those connected with the resources of the modern economy, for example in gaining employment, education, or loans (Bayart 1993). This situation results in distorted regional development as certain regions are designated for development schemes and projects, even when such places offer no comparative advantages; the sole criterion being that the region is inhabited by the dominant ethnic group.

Development cannot take place in a turbulent environment: one of the pillars of development is stability. Once fuelled, ethnic tensions can and do result in death. Clashes between different ethnic groups have undermined development pursuits in sub-Saharan Africa, again providing fertile ground for full-scale civil wars. The ethnic tensions in Nigeria in the 1960s culminating in the Biafra war remain a case in point. Such a situation deters direct foreign investment into sub-Saharan economies. In many instances potential foreign investors have shelved investment initiatives initially earmarked for sub-Saharan countries because of the unstable and volatile social and political conditions caused by ethnicity. Furthermore, ethnicity leads productive human beings into channel their energies into ethnic clashes instead of using them to develop their country.

The 1990s have been typified by a resurgence of ethnic cleavages that now play marked roles in shaping national development efforts in sub-Saharan Africa. The problem of ethnicity has resurfaced with much vigour in the wake of the economic recessions that countries in the sub-continent of Africa are currently facing. Adekanye (1995:366) argues that the economic austerity measures being implemented by various governments in the sub-region, like SAPs have reinvigorated ethnicity. He asserts that an analysis of the interaction between SAPs and rising ethnic tensions seems to reaffirm a number of long-standing propositions from ethnic conflict studies: that differential economic development acts as an important catalyst of conflict between ethnic or regional groups within a given state. The coincidence of frustrating political and economic conditions with ethnic jealousies or of socio-economic classes with ethno-regional groupings, tends to intensify inter-ethnic conflicts. Indeed SAPs have revealed intense conflicts between different classes and ethnic groups for the minimal social and economic resources existing in their countries and access to avenues of upward social, economic and political mobility.

Features of the sub-Saharan post colonial state

IN SOME AREAS pre-colonial African societies possessed advanced political and economic systems that had generated cohesion amongst different assimilated tribes. Some empires had unified heterogeneous sub-tribes into unitary self-governing entities. For example, Barotseland and Buganda were polities which could have evolved into modern nation states if colonial rule had not arrested their evolution. The penetration and subsequent plunder of both natural and human resources of sub-Saharan territories by European countries led to the enfeeblement of their political and economic systems. Dumont (1966:36) reminds us of the ravages of slavery and notes that among the damaging effects of the slave trade were the internal wars it caused which became profitable and multiplied, blocking political and economic development and the evolution towards large empires and helping to dismantle those already in existence. Thus, it can be argued that the complexity of ethnic

cleavage is deeply rooted in the annexation and subjugation of the continent by European nations. Colonial rule thereafter attempted to undermine, obliterate or erode functioning pre-modern African states so as to make colonial domination effective.

Towards the end of colonial rule the nationalism on the rise in sub-Saharan Africa was to become a necessary ingredient in the independence struggles that led to the emancipation of many countries. There are two categories of anti-colonial struggle. The first can be located in the eras preceding the First World War and the second after the Second World War. Randrianja (1996:21) points out that the former were often rural movements which were backward-looking, drawing their inspiration mainly from the pre-colonial past. In cases where they adopted a political programme their aim was the restoration of an old order. The latter were located in the nationalist mass movements principally generated by educated town-dwellers.

Nationalism, even in a Western context, is quite a novel concept. Many nation states emerged at the turn of the 19th century but European nationalism cannot be compared to that of Africa. The genesis of the African state was not intrinsic to an evolutionary process that could have provided fertile ground for the growth of unambiguous feelings of nationhood. The peoples of such states came from various, and often rival, ethnic groups. European countries created their African colonies without taking into account the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the African tribal terrain. By imposing artificial boundaries these colonies contradicted the concept of an African nation. It is for these reasons that ethnicity still remains a powerful negative force in Africa and still predominates in modern African political discourse.

In their rush to stake a claim to African territory the Europeans tore asunder whole populations, tribes and communities with arbitrary lines drawn on the map to demarcate which possession belonged to whom. The new boundaries had a permanent and often destructive result: in South Africa, for example, the Basotho of QwaQwa in southern Free State and their blood relations in Lesotho suffered the fate of being separated into two different countries. The African continent abounds with similar examples where native peoples were

not consulted about the demarcation of their lands and tribes, (Qwelani in the *Sunday Times*, 8/8/99).

The post colonial state in Africa has always been very fragile. The citizens of particular countries still cling to their ethnic identities and do not identify with the nation state. This is because new nations in Africa did not arrive at a clear conceptualization of citizenship. Further, modern institutions were not constituted so as to provide a framework for the resolution of internal conflict. The hurried transfer of power from the colonial authorities did not create an opportunity for cohesive nation building. There was no prior preparation for such national governments to assume the roles and functions of modern states with institutions geared towards group solidarity and specialization rather than communal existence. As traditional societies were held together by mechanical solidarity based upon group similarity, with their members adhering to a rigid pattern of traditional norms and values, there was a need for a transformation of such societies into modern ones with more specialized functions and institutions, thereby facilitating the rise of organic solidarity and increasing social differentiation.

Technological levels were also very low. Indeed most of the post-colonial states were artificial entities with juridical and military trappings but without an embedded and encapsulating political and administrative structure or integrated national markets (Bardhan 1997:1388). Only few examples can be cited where such structures existed such as Kenya, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Post colonial Africa was not to turn out according to the rosy picture painted during the anti-colonial struggles:

The nationalism which had originated as an anti-colonialist ideology extolling national unity against the foreign oppressor, was progressively transformed into an ideology of the newly independent states, most which were controlled by an oligarchy. The reality of the power enjoyed by the new leaders was hidden behind an anti-imperialist discourse, this new form being endorsed by nationalism from the end of the 1950s. The cycle of economic crises which began towards the mid-1970s, and the end of the Cold War, revealed the nature and function of this type of nationalism. The

progressive restriction of the resources available to African states, the major source of wealth and social advancement and thus the object of elite rivalry within this group for the control of power. These rivalries increasingly led to ethnic mobilization and, more generally, to the manipulation of the cultural identities of groups (Randariana, 1996:20-21).

THE FIRST generation of sub-Saharan leaders presided over loose collectives of numerous ethnic groups whose sole common purpose at the time was to dislodge colonial rule. There were no clearly defined ideologies apart from the need to have an indigenous leadership in power, with no due consideration of the consequences. This generation of political leaders had also tried to harmonize the various different ethnic groups and elevate the concept of a unitary state. The re-invention of the African nation state by these patriarchs depended on activities that stressed upon the promotion of cultural tolerance. The meaning of nationhood was also exhibited via slogans and national flags. In many sub-Saharan African states slogans by the ruling parties exhorted national unity and the circumvention or ending of ethnicity, for example in Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah, Tanzania under Julius Nyerere and Zambia under Kenneth Kaunda. But beyond the rhetoric no concrete steps were taken to reshape the attitudes of various ethnic groups for a proper assimilation into the nation state. The paradox is that the same leaders created the conditions for ethnic tensions by allocating opportunities in employment, education and other life chances to individuals from their own tribes or regions. Sloganeering did not lay a firm base to create an African state devoid of parochial social relationships and identities.

Centralization of power

THE CENTRALIZATION of power in sub-Saharan Africa has also been another major obstacle that has impeded development in the region as well as compounded ethnicity. In effect the centralization of power was the natural corollary of the one-party state which became synonymous with the post colonial state. The one-party system extolled by many dictators as a way of harmonizing

ethnic relations in fact only heightened ethnic strife. It was best suited for the repression of ethnic minorities. The centralization of power also meant that people could not have a say over the development route the country was to follow and the manner in which national resources could be redistributed. The one-party state also created tangible opportunities for corruption, mal-administration, nepotism and political thuggery. In commenting on the performance of the one-party regimes Anyang' Nyong' o (1992:3) cannot have been more perceptive:

No one-party regime in Africa can boast of democratic practice nor of a good record on human rights. Sekou Toure's Guinea had its own Gulag Archipelagos; Mobutu's Zaire excelled in repression as a policy in maintaining a kleptocratic regime in power; Banda's Malawi has been the best run police state in Africa. The list can continue, and the records of single-party regimes will grow worse and worse no matter where we turn in Africa.

Whither sub-Saharan Africa?

THERE ARE several contentious issues that need to be re-explored when confronting problems created by ethnicity. Firstly, the time has come for Africans candidly to revisit the authenticity of post colonial boundaries. The clause in the Organization of African Unity charter which stipulates that boundaries created by colonialists be respected, stemmed in part from questionable motives. Some of the post colonial leaders who had entrenched this clause were tyrants or military dictators who merely sought to emasculate the spirit of regional autonomy.

In retrospect it can be noted that the quest for regional autonomy had surfaced after the post colonial state could not offer a lucid formula towards the realization of an African nationhood. One route that could be taken is the redefining of national boundaries in the light of contested areas. For instance it is clear that Sudan is made up of two distinct and separate entities in terms of religion, physical landscape and culture. Regional self-government could be a viable alternative given the fact the so-called unitary state of Sudan has been effective

only in creating conditions for social dislocation. The central government could guarantee regional autonomy in matters of local concern, whilst the centre could oversee the security of the country. As regards areas which are not dominated by people of a particular ethnic group such as urban conurbations or those dominated by migrant workers, there would be no problem if the government clearly articulates a national agenda that celebrates ethnic diversity as opposed to ethnic acrimony. A lucid national ideology that harmonises different ethnic groups would be profound as different groups would not see ethnicity as a viable recourse *vis-à-vis* opportunities and life chances.

The question of regional autonomy must be soberly examined if any headway in development is going to be made in sub-Saharan Africa. Regional autonomy or federalism, whatever it may be called, could nip problems of ethnicity, corruption and nepotism in the bud. This type of government would also enhance popular participation in development as ordinary community members would add their voices to the decisions taken by their leaders or even take decisions which their leaders would be obliged to respect. Policies would be more responsive to local needs as proper needs assessments would be conducted by the regional government as opposed to the central government. This would unlock the creativity and zeal of citizens of sub-Saharan countries, which has been deliberately thwarted in the post colonial state. The over centralized post colonial state in Africa has been a total failure.

Secondly, it is important to bear in mind that politicians have been using the ethnic card for political expedience. One redeeming aspect in this whole episode of sub-Saharan ethnic rivalries could be the creation of stable institutions that at least guarantee responsive leadership. Ordinary Africans have allowed themselves to be ruled by politicians with questionable credentials whilst those with skills have left the continent for greener pastures in Europe or America.

Lastly, Africans have to face their problems squarely and acknowledge their mistakes. It is ludicrous always to blame some hidden enemy when in actual fact most of the tribulations of sub-Saharan Africa are self-inflicted. It is also high time that Africans begin

to discard unprogressive traditions. This is because Africa is already part of the global village. People can ill afford to continue living as if they are still in pre-industrial times.

Conclusion

DEVELOPMENT is fostered, among other things, by an enabling environment. This should ideally engender peace and stability and guarantee the security of people and the optimal utilization of both human and natural resources. There are many reasons that have been put forward to explain sub-Sahara's economic malaise. The author had briefly touched on some of them in the early part of the discussion. The main argument in this paper was that ethnicity's ability to throw the development agenda of sub-Saharan countries into disarray has been downplayed or even glossed over. Both politicians and academics choose to deal with the consequences of ethnicity and not with the root cause itself. Development will remain a pipedream if the problem of ethnicity is not given adequate attention by all who envisage the re-awakening of the sub-continent of Africa. Some possible options were proffered by the author. There are many other strategies that could be employed to stem ethnicity, but there has to be a clear political will to do so from sub-Saharan governments. Only then can these countries begin to engage in the processes of development without any ulterior motives.

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