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WHAT IS THE PROBLEM OF ETHNICITY IN AFRICA?¹

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What is the problem of ethnicity in Africa? Is there indeed a problem of ethnicity? Conventional wisdom suggests that ethnicity is phenomenally problematic in Africa. It is held partly responsible for the 'irrationalities' of the development project, for political instability and weak national identity. It has been blamed for outmoded values and regressive consciousness, for fostering corruption and destructive conflict. And now there is some concern that the ongoing process of democratization in Africa may release the politically disintegrative potentialities of ethnicity. Is ethnicity really all this?

Ethnicity is now popularly conceived as something constructed, invented or created (Barth, 1969; Anderson, 1983; Saul, 1979; Sharp, 1988; Cohen, 1978). Often associated with this view is the notion that the ethnic group has not a concrete existence but is rather a figment of the human imagination.

I cannot help thinking that this is a view of reality as it appears within the colonial situation. Ethnic groups are, to be sure, inventions and constructions in some measure, but they are also decidedly real, even in the sense that states are said to be. Before the colonial era, some parts of Africa had what may be described as ethnic polities - political societies with governmental institutions in a local space where territoriality and ethnic identity roughly coincided. Colonial rule, which amalgamated disparate ethnicities into the chaos called the colonial state, largely created the fluid abstract ethnicity which is so evident today by dissociating ethnicity from autonomous polity and territoriality.

Apart from the question of its historicity, the logic of the argument for the non-existence of ethnic groups is flawed. Ethnic groups are no less real for existing intermittently, for having fluid boundaries, for having subjective or even arbitrary standards of membership, for opportunistic use of tradition or even for lacking a proprietary claim over a local space. They are real if they are actual people who are united in consciousness of their common ethnic identity however spurious or misguided that consciousness may be. The concreteness of ethnic groups is invariably affirmed by ethnic markings which society categorically pins on them, markings which underscore the social existence of ethnicity even when they are arbitrary or shifting.

Nonetheless, ethnicity is not a fossilized determination but a living presence produced and driven by material and historical forces. It begins, becomes and

passes away. It can only be understood and interpreted through the complex dialectics of its being, dissolution and reconstitution. How ethnicity comes to be in the first place is not particularly problematic or interesting. The ethnic group is a descent-based group, a segmentary hierarchy with boundaries defined by standards of exclusion and inclusion which are objective and subjective. It is a common social structure of pre-capitalist and pre-industrial societies, the kind which Emile Durkheim characterized as mechanical solidarity. This social structure eventually disintegrates in social atomization and society reconstitutes in organic solidarity. The main, but by no means the only, cause of this transformation is the development of capitalism, especially the generalization of commodity production and exchange; that is to say, the constitution of a market society.

Despite its atomism and individualism, market society is solidary on account of generalized commodity production and exchange which makes its members mutually dependent. However, in Africa, while capitalism is the dominant mode of production, capitalist penetration is still limited. In most of rural Africa, mass expropriation of the means of production has not occurred. More often than not, rural people own or have access to some means of production and they still produce use values. To the extent that Africa remains pre-capitalist and pre-industrial, pre-capitalist social structures such as ethnic groups and their associated forms of consciousness will prevail.

What needs explaining is the disproportionate strength of ethnicity relative to the development of capitalism, a strength which is evident, among other things, in the reproduction of ethnic solidarities even in the urban setting. Also in need of explanation is the development of what may be called, for lack of a better term, political ethnicity, that is the politicization and transformation of ethnic exclusivity into major political cleavages.

Colonialism and the Provenance of Political Ethnicity

The cheapness of colonial rule was an early source of political ethnicity. The colonial governments committed a very small administrative corps to their extensive colonial territories and administered them largely on a cost-recovery basis. These meagre resource commitments meant reliance, in varying degrees, on existing traditional authority structures and institutions, the most famous and theoretically articulated being the British colonial policy of Indirect Rule. But all colonial administrations relied to some degree on indigenous structures. This practice altered power relations within traditional power structures but also among ethnic groups inducing intense political competition among them.

The process of decolonization also contributed to political ethnicity. To begin with, the nationalist movement had mobilized ethnic groups into politics.

Politicization changed to political ethnicity when the nationalist movement, which was united mainly by common grievances, started to disintegrate on the verge of independence as its leaders manoeuvred to inherit power. In a situation in which class consciousness was rudimentary, those leaders who came from numerically large ethnic groups could not resist the temptation of using an ethnic ideology to consolidate a substantial political base.

In some colonial territories, for instance Nigeria, the strategy of decolonization gave impetus to political ethnicity. In the spirit of indirect rule, the major administrative and political units of Nigeria were made to coincide with the spatial locations of the three major ethnic groups. Then, under pressure from nationalist forces, the British devolved power to these regions. The Constitution of 1954, sometimes described as the 'regionalist constitution', gave residual powers to the regional governments and also granted them self-government under regional premiers who would be the leaders of majority parties in the regional legislature. The three leading nationalist leaders, Alhaji Ahmadu Bello in the north, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe in the east, and Chief Obafemi Awolowo in the west opted for power in the region instead of remaining in the central government which was still controlled by the British. As they all won their regional premiership and consolidated their power base in the regions, Nigeria came to be dominated by three regional, ethnic parties.

No account of political ethnicity can be complete without consideration of the character of the state in Africa. A law unto itself, the colonial state used violence to maintain its domination, to appropriate the colony's resources, to proletarianize peasants in order to ensure an adequate labour supply for its projects, to maintain order against a hostile population.

In the context of the logic of colonialism, its violent assault on the colonized was inevitable but in confronting its subjects so violently, it foreclosed all prospects of legitimation. Its forceful ecumenicism only reinforced its delegitimation by making it even more threatening and helping to drive its subjects to traditional solidarity groups, especially ethnic groups. These became centres of resistance, means of self-affirmation against the colonizers' aggressive deculturing of the 'natives', and also networks of survival strategies. By being all this, they became polities and essentially displaced the state, depriving it not only of legitimacy but also of a civic public. Instead of a civic public, political society was parcellized into a plurality of primordial publics framing primordial polities which are competitive with 'the state'.

Political ethnicity received additional impetus in the post-colonial era. For the most part, the nationalist leaders who came to power in Africa inherited the colonial state instead of transforming it in accordance with the democratic aspirations of the nationalist movement. As disappointed expectations turned

into opposition, the post-colonial state became more violently repressive and gradually drifted towards political monolithism. This greatly accentuated political ethnicity as the image of a hostile and threatening state turned people to traditional solidarity groups which invariably became centres of resistance to state repression.

On the instantiation of political ethnicity, ethnicity is politicized, politics is ethnicized and ethnic groups tendentially become political formations whose struggles with each other and competing interests may be all the more conflictual for the exclusivity of ethnic group membership. Are we then to conclude that ethnicity is a problem as virtually every one does, apparently impressed by what appears like a high incidence and high intensity of ethnic conflict in Africa?

That conclusion would be too hasty. It is not clear that ethnicity by itself generates conflict or that it is inherently threatening. One may prefer one's kinsfolk or one's own community without being antagonistic to others. It is odd that those who consider ethnicity as a manipulable instrument are also the ones who regard it as a problem. If ethnicity is manufactured at will and manipulated to serve any number of selfish purposes, then it is only an 'object', the case for calling it a cause of the numerous problems regularly attributed to it would not be sustainable. Conflicts arising from the construction of ethnicity to conceal exploitation by building solidarity across class lines, conflicts arising from appeal to ethnic support in the face of vanishing political legitimacy and from the manipulation of ethnicity to divide colonized people, are not ethnic problems but problems of a particular political dynamics which just happens to be pinned on ethnicity. By the same token, solutions to these problems must address the political dynamics in question, not ethnicity.

But how can we address ethnicity when we deny it? When we regard it as the ephemeral concoction of a false and vitiated consciousness?

However ethnic groups may come into being - through the cynicism of political elites seeking easy strategies of power, the stupidity or machinations of colonial administrators, the contradictions of a predatory post-colonial state, or through the survival strategies of ordinary people threatened by violent repression and exploitation - the reality is that they *are*. Not only are they real, they are also rational. Ethnicity is functional for the politician who wants to survive or to conceal exploitative practices by building solidarities across class lines. Many ordinary people who give their primary loyalty to the local community or the ethnic group do so for very good reasons. For ethnic groups are often the major engine of development in rural Africa and the closest thing in existence to a social welfare organization. Therefore, if ethnicity is held to be a problem, one may well ask, problem for whom? Or, problem for what?

If the current state of scholarship on ethnicity and development is any guide,

it is apparently a problem for development; ethnicity supposedly epitomizes backwardness and constrains the development of Africa. This presupposition is misleading, however, for it is development rather than the people and their culture which has to be problematized. Development has to begin by taking people and their culture as they are, not as they might be, and proceeding from there to define the problems and strategies for development. Otherwise, the problematic of development becomes a tautology. The people are not and cannot be a problem just by being what they are, even if part of what they are is ethnic consciousness. Our treatment of ethnicity and ethnic consciousness reflects this tendency to problematize the people and their culture, an error that continues to push Africa deeper into confusion.

In all but a few African countries there is an obsession with ethnicity and its problems. Even if this interest in ethnicity is hostile, it nonetheless underlines the fact that it is a most significant element of the African reality. If that is the case, we do violence to the African reality by failing to explore the possibilities of ethnicity, by failing to follow its contours and its rhythm, for that would be part of starting with the way we are instead of discarding it for what we might be. The point of course is not to romanticize the past and be captive to it but to recognize what is on the ground and strive to engineer a more efficient, less traumatic, and less self-destructive social transformation.

Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa

I want to clarify 'the problem of ethnicity' by discussing it in the context of social transformation in Africa - especially the ongoing process of democratization in Africa. As Africa democratizes, there is concern that the liberties of democracy will unleash ethnic rivalries whose embers are forever smoldering in Africa and destroy the fragile unity of African countries. Some African leaders have encouraged this thinking - President Arap Moi of Kenya has argued along these lines. Kenneth Kaunda, former President of Zambia, struggling to remain in power against a strong democracy movement, argued that the adoption of a multiparty system would bring 'chaos, bloodshed and death'. President Paul Biya of Cameroon, another hold-out on democratization, defended the power monopoly of his Cameroon People's Democratic Movement by arguing that it ensured 'a united Cameroon devoid of ethnic, linguistic and religious cleavages'.

Concern that democratization might cause ethnic violence and political disintegration is shared by many who are committed to democracy, Africans and non-Africans alike. Carol Lancaster, an astute student of Africa and a committed democrat, fears that with democratization,

... political divisions would increasingly fall along ethnic or regional lines, heightening tensions and, ultimately, threatening

national unity. The volcano of ethnic or clan strife remains dormant throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa. But it could erupt - as it has in recent years in Ethiopia, Liberia, Somalia, and Sudan - should ethnicity become the leading factor in the struggle for power (Lancaster, 1991:158).

It is fair enough to worry that democratization will unleash ethnic conflict which will render democracy impossible. But we might well consider whether democracy is possible in the present conditions of Africa without ethnicity, without at any rate coming to terms with ethnicity?

Increasingly the possibility of democracy is linked to the existence of civil society and its vitality. Civil society, the realm of associational life, is credited with checking the totalitarian tendencies of state power by pluralism which is its very essence. But where is the pluralism which will underwrite democracy in Africa?

The implications of this question are not usually fully grasped because we tend not only to separate political movements from social movements but also to restrict the pluralist basis of democracy to political pluralism. Indeed the prevailing tendency is to denigrate social pluralism which is now regarded as not only unnecessary but also detrimental to democracy. For instance, it is judged inappropriate to base political movements on nationality, cultural identity, linguistic affinity or social class. This posture found enthusiastic support in Africa where some leaders have declared social pluralism a danger to unity and political stability and discouraged political movements and parties based on primary group affiliations, religion, and ethnicity.

If we want to talk seriously about democracy and pluralism in Africa, we have to consider the status of civil society. The society of the bourgeoisie is highly homogeneous. Its members are similar in two senses. First, in the sense of their social atomization - they are utility-maximizing individualists. Second, they are similar in their abstract existence as faceless commodity bearers. But despite its atomization and orientation towards self-seeking, civil society is also solidary, the effect of the generalization of commodity production and exchange. These features of civil society which get very little attention may well be its most important features. For they define the relationship of state and civil society - a relationship which is far more than mutual countervailing forces.

Civil society throws up the state and sustains it and the state keeps civil society coherent and adaptive. It is the homogeneity and solidaristic ties of civil society which underlie the conception of the state as *res publicae* or a commonwealth, terminologies whose significance is now largely forgotten. The membership of a state is ideally a public, an aggregation of people with some sense of basic equality, common identity, common interests and common purpose, even if this

is no more than the sense of common cause at a shareholders' meeting. In the final analysis it is these similarities and common interests which necessitate and legitimize democratic participation.

Civil society in Africa is a complicated fact for the simple reason that the development of commodity production and exchange is rudimentary as is the process of social atomization. So where is the public? There is hardly any public in the sense that all the subjects of the state have some sense of homogeneity, common identity and common concerns. What would normally have been called the public sphere is a contested terrain peopled not by loyalists but by takers who struggle to appropriate what they can for themselves and the communities to which they are loyal - the local community and the ethnic group. The civic public in much of Africa is more potential than reality. What exists is a plurality of publics which may be called, following Ekeh (1992), primordial publics. These primordial publics are important elements of social pluralism in Africa, arguably the most important. Do they also represent the democratic prospects of civil society in Africa? While they defend the interests, rights and freedoms of their members and thus contribute to the establishment of human rights and democracy, their orientation is too limited to their members to give depth to their contribution in this respect.

Nonetheless ethnicity has been a major element of political pluralism in Africa. Ethnic formations are often the most significant countervailing force to state power as well as the best defense of a separate space against the totalizing tendencies of the post-colonial state. They have been major contributors to the defense of human rights although they have done so largely within the narrow confines of their membership.

Since political authoritarianism in Africa was so often associated with personal rule and reliance on an ethnic political base, opposition to it tended to be organized in ethnic formations - for instance in Uganda, Benin Republic, Togo, Kenya, Mauritania, Liberia, Sudan, Somalia. The same could be said of the opposition to military rule especially in those cases such as Nigeria and Togo where the ruling army is seen to be dominated by a particular ethnic group. Because the way that repressive domination was organized required the ethnic organization of opposition, Africa is seen to be ridden with ethnic conflict. However, these seemingly ethnic conflicts are actually the false face of something else - quite often, emancipatory struggles of people who are politically oppressed, marginalized or effectively disenfranchised.

Competition among ethnic groups is not always malign as is often assumed. In Nigeria for example, it has made some modest contributions to human rights and democracy. As the prospects of independence improved in Nigeria, attention shifted from uniting against colonialism to manoeuvres for getting a good share

of the spoils of the nationalist struggle. In the course of these rivalries those ethnic groups which did not feel that they were strong competitors for power in the post-colonial era began to worry about marginalization and domination. Thus ensued a rash of minority movements making a wide variety of demands - separatism, federalism, confederalism, the guarantee of human rights, minority rights, affirmative action for minorities, strong local autonomy within the regional framework, etc.

In 1957 the British colonial secretary of state appointed a Commission of Inquiry to 'ascertain the facts about the fears of the minorities in any part of the country and to propose means of allaying those fears whether well or ill'. The commission found against the demand for the creation of states and constitutional provisions which might encourage ethnic separatism. But it came out strongly for the guarantee of rights. The general import of the minority movement was to encourage a tone of politics and political arrangements which favours incorporation, equity and the rule of law rather than exclusion, marginalization and discrimination.

The entire episode of the minorities movement and the Minorities Commission gave great impetus to the development of civil society. The tour of the commission through the country between 1957 and 1958, the open hearings and campaign of the affected groups and the lively debates heightened political consciousness of the issue of human rights, minority rights and equal participation. Many small groups which had been politically apathetic came alive and became organized and assertive. The episode increased political pluralism as some of these groups formed political parties. A famous example was the Benin-Delta People's Party formed in 1953 under the presidency of the Oba of Benin; another was the Niger Delta Congress formed in 1959 from the Rivers Chiefs and Peoples Conference.

One notable effect of ethnic competition and the minorities movement in Nigeria was the broadening of the horizons of the ethnic formations. They were lifted above their parochial concerns as the three major parties of the three principal ethnic groups, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), the Action Group (AG) and the Northern People's Congress (NPC), tried to reach out to the minorities in each other's region in order to undermine their rivals and to increase their national following. This was particularly true of the Action Group 'which was transformed into a genuine national party, devoid of its secessionist taint of 1955, through the medium of its fight for the cause of ethnic minorities in the Eastern and Northern Regions' (Sklar, 1963:140).

On these considerations it is too easy to regard ethnicity as a problem or a constraint on democracy. These considerations show that the democratization of Africa, and indeed every aspect of social transformation has to come to terms

with ethnicity. No project of social transformation can succeed by ignoring it. This can be seen in clearer relief if, instead of thinking of the ethnic group in terms of boundaries, exclusivity and conflict as we usually do, we think of it as a bearer of culture.

Let us elaborate this with some examples. First, political participation: if we are sensitive to the cultural and historical realities on the ground in Africa, we have to rethink the haste with which we accept the liberal democratic notion of political participation. What can this democratic practice mean for a substantially illiterate and communal society?

The mere adoption of the colonizers' language as the language of politics is a serious problem for political participation in Africa. The adoption of the colonizers' language restructures the society into a new hierarchy of power relations. The mastery of the language is required for political competition and contestation, for the sharing of meaning and the appropriation of values. So there is constituted a hierarchy at the top of which stand those who command the language, leaving the rest of society who do not understand it not only in a subordinate position, but effectively disenfranchised.

African polities are not coextensive with one 'interpretative community' (Fish, 1980), the community which shares a common understanding of speech markers and the memory of language. By virtue of being an interpretative community, people are operating within the same political framework of shared values and meanings about goals, modalities, perceptions of reality, sense of efficacy, etc. The elite who speak the official language form the dominant political community to which the rest are subordinated.

But the subordinated are by no means homogeneous. They are divided by linguistic segmentation into a variety of localized interpretative communities (Heller, 1981). The localization of interpretative communities which means the placement of a community in location-specific linguistic paradigm or grammar of politics, isolates these communities, makes them uncompetitive and manipulable. This is particularly the case when the interpretative community coincides with a territorial locale, so that the 'geographical fragmentation becomes an expression of articulation of linguistic segmentation and the objective of social control is facilitated' (Clark and Dear, 1984). So the common language which is ostensibly a major instrument of political integration does not integrate but facilitates isolation, dispersion and alienation. This is an example in which sensitivity to ethnicity as a bearer of culture, in this case, language, might allow us to see the limitations of accepted practice. Let us consider a different kind of example where it suggests opportunities for democratization. To do this we have to return to civil society.

The private groups of civil society, the elements of associational life are

dissociated from consanguinity and primordial identities. They are defined by interests and constituted voluntarily or contractually; they presuppose social atomization, the privatization of interests, the subjectivization of the individual. In the Western tradition, it is only when privatized that being has identity, autonomy and freedom.

In contrast, some African cultures tend to posit being as essentially and unavoidably communal. Persons have identity only because they are part of a community, their freedom lies in the concrete capabilities, privileges and immunities which arise from communal life. Integrity is embedded in one's location in a community and the ways in which one manages the entitlements and obligations of community membership. Privatization of being is precisely its degradation for it renders morality, integrity and even real self-consciousness impossible.

Aversion to the privatization of being goes hand in hand with the resistance to the privatization of interests. Indeed for some traditional African cultures, the privatization of interests is meaningless. Meaningless in the sense that the communal element is the essence of the particular existence. Privatization of interest would imply the dissociation of persons from the context in which morality and integrity are possible for these are possibilities which arise only from our social nature and how we deal with the entitlements, demands and contradictions of communal life.

In Africa the person still resists dissolution into the abstraction of the legal subject. Indeed, the precondition of this abstract existence which is the dissolution of pre-capitalist social structures does not yet exist. In so far as the person has not emerged as a social atom and legal subject, the rule of law and bureaucratic organization, the pillars of autonomization of the state which underlie liberal democracy, do not exist. The rule of law means simply that law rules; law expresses the dialectical unity of particularities. Law in bourgeois society exists on the presupposition of individualism, a social arena of private interests and their real or potential collisions. This is the objective basis of the rule of law on one level.

On another level, the rule of law is the political correlate of generalized commodity production and exchange. It is the political condition for the maintenance of the market and the operation of the law of value. As is well known, the market constantly throws up contradictions which threaten it and have to be mediated. The rule of law mediates this contradiction in a manner compatible with the sanctification of the value of the market. The need for this artefact is that it is of the very nature of the market to prioritize formal freedom, equality and egotism. Those are precisely the values whose relevance are in question in some African societies - not because these values are in themselves unimportant

but rather because the constitution of these societies hangs on entirely different meanings.

However, that is not to say that the rule of law does not apply in these societies. Since the culture and ideology of these societies accepts laws as ideographs of total experience and so admits the relevance of personal, moral and value judgments to judicial arbitration, the admission of these considerations is by definition part of due process. The rule of law prevails in another sense. Whether rules and regulations are given cognition as norms, taboos or custom, there is clarity as regards to what they are and their significance is understood by everyone. The socialization process inculcates this knowledge with efficiency. Although the law is not usually coded or associated with specialized institutions such as magistracies, its enforcement can be remarkably objective. There is usually no specialist in the knowledge and interpretation of the law; there is no authoritarian control of the arbitration process.

For most of the traditional cultures which survive in rural West Africa for instance, laws are not just rules of convenience but the structuration of the values and behavioural modes which determine for good or ill, the material, moral and spiritual well-being of the community. A seemingly minor transgression, the violation of a taboo, a careless disregard of a custom, may be life-threatening to the entire community and may call for elaborate rituals of restitution. The moral and spiritual significance of the regulation for the entire society induces everyone to respect the law and to resist its corrupt exploitation for private benefit. These circumstances operationalize the rule of the law in a manner that is at once more rigorous and more concrete.

However, this is not achieved by placing the law above society, investing it with *de facto* sovereignty but by making law a means of the 'good life'. The question as to whether the law stands above society and rules it or whether it is a subordinate instrument does not really arise in this African context. For what prevails here must seem against the discursive practices of the West, as an incomprehensible collapse of identity and difference and a harmony of contradictions. There is clarity about what the laws are, about their sanctity and yet they are used with the casualness of currency in the routine transactions of daily life, interpreted with infinite variety by a consciousness which locates fairness in the unique treatment of each person and each situation, a uniqueness which is respected by renegotiating the rules on the spot, so that they are created and recreated constantly.

The law is at once sacred and commonplace, consumatory and instrumental as value, unchanging and yet improvised from day to day. It rules and serves as sovereign and subject, it strives for universality and equality by its insistent particularism. At work here is a mind-set which is completely different from the

presuppositions of liberal democracy but which nonetheless reconstitutes major values of democracy in an entirely different way. There is no issue here of choosing between the modern and the traditional, between ethnicity and democracy; there is just the necessary task of relating will to possibility and building from the realities on the ground.

This discussion sheds some light on why our consciousness of ethnicity is a problem. One aspect of this problem is that we think of ethnicity in terms of its boundaries, its exclusivity and by extension, its parochialism and collisions with its environment. We have virtually forgotten that the boundaries of ethnicity enclose a culture and a cultural identity even if this culture may be created ad hoc or sometimes from sheer misrepresentation of tradition or even from blindness to its constant mutations. Like every condensation of culture, the quality and behaviour of the ethnic group depends on the content of the culture that it bears. And the content is a complex totality of ways of being, perceiving, feeling, understanding, valuing, judging, aspiring, etc. It does not warrant the easy judgments we make about ethnicity, for instance its susceptibility to conflict and its hostility to economic and political development including democratization as has been demonstrated in the preceding discussion.

If we think of ethnicity less in terms of boundaries and exclusivity and more in terms of a condensation of culture, it will be easier to understand ethnic identity which remains strong in many parts of Africa despite every attempt to wish it away. History has saddled many Africans with the problem of crystallizing a sense of who they are and where they belong socially. Africans are under pressure from the hegemonic homogenization of Westernization.

This is a continuation of the colonial experience. Colonialism placed the highest priority on the deculturing of Africans in order to undermine their sense of purpose, their will to resist and to perfect their domination. This technique of domination reached its peak in apartheid South Africa which tried to reduce blacks to the Hobbesian simplicity of matter and motion, to the barbarians they have to be to deserve apartheid. Perhaps the most salient feature of apartheid is not the physical brutalization of blacks nor the ubiquitous signs of racial separation and inequality but the rigorous deculturing of the black population of South Africa. Apartheid confines them to settlements which are meticulously designed to prevent any possibility of culture - so much so that they are not even societies or economies, just labour reserves in the purest sense. Such drastic deculturing engenders resistance; its victims struggle to find for themselves a cultural identity and considering the likely options, it is not surprising if some of them find it in ethnicity. Perhaps better in ethnicity than not at all. For a decultured society is an improbable society as we have seen from the experience of post-colonial Africa. Societal incoherence, diffidence and dependence,

anomie and alienation especially among the elite, aggression, conflict and violence arising partly from lack of confidence, are manifestations of deculturing. In South Africa it is manifest in the manipulability of people which underlies township violence. We have not seen all the problems of the drastic deculturing of black South Africa yet; we will not see them in clear relief until apartheid finally goes.

Seen against this background, the construction of ethnicity is not only political, but also cultural; it is not always cynical and opportunistic, it is sometimes a survival strategy of people struggling to affirm their humanity. If the tenacity by which some Africans cling to certain cultural symbols and a fabricated past seems surprising, one must consider the implications of lacking a sense of self and of being lost in a cultural wilderness. More and more people are finding this intolerable and are fighting determinedly not only to assert their cultural identity but also to claim self-determination for it. And in making these claims they have brought into question the legitimacy of the present state system. We might be witnessing the beginning of a global political revolution which promises to be far more profound and far more dangerous than the present reconstitution of the world order.

Africa will need to pay more attention to these developments. And a good place to begin is the rethinking of ethnicity which we would rather judge than understand. The usual easy judgments are a dangerous luxury at a time when long-established states are decomposing under pressure from ethnic and nationalist assertiveness and when the international community is shrugging off their demise. The implications of this for Africa where hundreds of ethnic groups and nationalities are squeezed chaotically and oppressively into some 50 states are easy enough to imagine in their enormity.

Conclusion

To the question, 'Is there a problem of ethnicity in Africa?', I am inclined to answer that there is no such problem, that is, in the sense that ethnicity is inherently a problem. We see ethnic conflict too ubiquitously - in ethnic misrepresentations of survival strategies, in emancipatory projects and strategies of power. We confuse our abuse of ethnicity with its inherent abusiveness. Most importantly, we tend to forget that even though ethnicity might be constructed it is also a living presence, an important part of what many Africans are. Surely, part of what we are is people who must find themselves, most likely in the desperate act of inventing a cultural identity to assert a humanity and set ourselves on the path of becoming a going concern. How we are fabricated, cultural identity and all, cannot be a problem except in the context of some notion of how we might be. Even then, what can be appropriately problematized is not

the way we are but the process of 'becoming'. It cannot be desirable for Africa to return to the past or to stagnate in a present which promises no future. Africa must move on. But this forward movement has to be in the direction of self-development and self-fulfillment, not self-denial and alienation. It must begin with the crystallization of our identity and build on what we are, ethnic and all. For those who do not know who they are cannot really know where they are going.

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NOTE

1. This contribution was presented at the keynote address at the Conference on Ethnicity, Society and Conflict in Natal, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 14-16 September 1992.