

Ethnicity in Nigeria

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Africa has long been condemned for its seeming inability to break free from its traditions and fully enter the modern world. One area of particular concern and criticism is the politicization of ethnicity, both as a means of social organization and political policy. There are legitimate reasons for this concern; there is little argument that the genocide in Rwanda and the crimes against humanity in Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan were all provoked by ethnic antagonisms. But even in countries where there is little fear of wide-spread violence, the centrality of ethnicity to African politics is still viewed negatively.

Dubbed ‘tribalism’, these ‘ethnopolitical identities’¹ are denigrated for their role in obfuscating and corrupting government workings. African bureaucracies are typically imagined as some large family reunion, with officials favoring members of their own ethnic group over more qualified individuals for the attainment of coveted government positions. These officials also use their positions to fleece the state in order to provide for their families, both immediate and extended.

While corruption, kleptocracy and general incompetence are all serious problems that retard development, it must be noted that they are not the exclusive to African politics. Nor are they even the true cause of concern. Rather, Western development experts and policymakers are alarmed by the fact that these failures of governance are ethnically-based. A central feature of modern politics is the separation of the ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres of society; while affiliation with private sphere groups is not discouraged, for the health of the nation, greater emphasis is placed on what Burnell and Randall call ‘civic national identities’: the particular unity of citizens based solely on their membership in their state.² By allowing ethnicity to play a role in the political society, the development of this over-arching nationalism is hindered. Ake best summarizes this argument:

Consider, for example, Nigeria. It is still a contested terrain of conflicting identities even after three decades of independence and a still longer period of being one political entity. Possibly some of Nigeria’s elites think of themselves primarily as Nigerians and place their Nigerian identity above all other identities.

But many more are ambivalent about what their primary identity should be. And even more place their Nigerian identity below that of their local community, nation, or ethnic group. In Nigeria, as in most African countries, the state remains a battleground where individuals fight for whatever power or resource they can capture.³

There is some truth to this argument of ethnicity as a centrifugal force; the latter half of the 20th century was rife with examples of states falling into civil war ending with new, smaller states emerging along ethnic lines. However, strictly following the development, and therefore definition of, Western political society prevents possible reinterpretations of these institutions in such ways that may be better suited to their implementation in Nigeria. Yet, the prejudices of those of us who study development from a Western perspective are hard to dismiss. The first step is therefore to reexamine both the sources of ethnic conflict as well as its present day role.

The Rise of Ethnic Conflict

Despite the seeming inevitability of ethnic conflict in Africa, it is really a recent development, provoked primarily by colonial policies. This is not to say that there was no war or enslavement between neighboring ethnic groups, but ‘they expressed themselves also through diplomacy, treaties, the visits of wandering scholars, the diffusion of political and religious ideas, borrowing of techniques, and above all, trade.’⁴ However, once the European powers came to rule, they pursued a policy of ‘divide and conquer’, emphasizing the differences between the ethnic groups that would later make up Nigeria.⁵ The British openly preferred the Hausa-Fulani in the North at the expense of the other groups.

The North was... reluctant to embrace “modernity” out of fear that modern education and new industries would create new centers of power that would threaten traditional power, which was based on the prerogatives of birth and lineage.⁶

Not only did this practice encourage continued emphasis of ethnicity as a means of social organization, it created an ‘educational imbalance’.⁷ Unlike the South, which served as the seat

of colonial power, and thus required legions of civil servants, the North was left to its own devices, effectively curtailing the education of Northern elites. This disparity was further exacerbated by the swift retreat of the British following independence. 'The attempt [by the North] to create their own civil service was hurried and superficial. Quick training courses focused on how to wear uniforms, on etiquette and mores, and more generally ceremonial rather than problem solving roles'.⁸ Kohli reminds us that:

National power, like national wealth, has to exist before it can be distributed. The failure to understand and act on this key political insight by both the British and the Nigerians was the essence of the tragedy of state construction in colonial Nigeria, as well as in many other parts of Africa.⁹

By actively hindering the development of a united 'Nigerian' people through the play of the ethnic groups against each other, and later by quickly acceding to the demands for independence of the Nigerian elite and thus negating the need for a coherent nationalist movement, the British created power vacuum based in part on ethnic conflict that continues to pose a problem for both the unity and development of Nigeria to the present day.

Ethnicity and Civil Society

It is easy to see how ethnicity can become a centrifugal force, but could it have any positive influences? The answer is yes. Ethnicity is already emerging as a vital part of Nigerian civil society. Precise definitions of civil society vary, but it is accepted that some social institutions are quite positively not part of civil society, or rather, not of the 'public' sphere of civil society, the branch that is responsible for social capital. Religious, charitable and recreational groups are considered to be in the 'private' sphere, as is family, and therefore ethnicity. While it is acknowledged that these groups play an important role in the development of the individual, in the West, their influence on the public sphere, and on the government, is seen as negligible. For Westerners, vocational, educational and political groups are all considered acceptable influences, but the others are not, and this distinction is strictly observed. When applied to Nigerian society,

this becomes problematic, because the more informal and non-secular social organizations play a much larger role in society and politics in general. To some extent, the influence of these organizations outweighs that of the public sphere, giving rise to the belief that Nigeria lacks a civil society. In reality, the role that the public sphere plays in the West is filled by ethnic affiliations; social reproduction, networks for economic and political gain, oversight of government affairs, etc. In their book *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*, Chabal and Daloz discuss the emerging acceptance of ethnicity as a legitimate part of civil society. They note that Nigerians feel that the ties that politicians have to their ethnic and tribal groups increases their accountability; not only will the politician have to answer to his constituents, but extra dimensions of expected responsibility for the family also come into play.

This sense of duty to the family, when directed towards the service to the state, is a manifestation of social capital, the supposed by-product of civil society. Development practice often focuses on its development, because although exact definitions of social capital vary, like its economic counterpart, social capital is the basis of the modern political system. It includes not only the teaching of good citizenry, but other social and vocational skills necessary to become an economically productive and peaceful member of society. Just as with the institutions of civil society, there is some debate over the exact link between governmental policies and the production of social capital; specifically, as to not only the role of public agencies in fostering or depleting social capital as well as the role of social capital in strengthening public agencies.¹⁰ There is no debate, however, as to the importance of social capital in holding a diverse society together. In truly simplified terms, Rwanda lacked social capital, and thus without the sense of investment in and protection of the state and society, it became easy for riots sparked by political unrest to escalate into full-scale ethnic violence. Nigeria, alternatively, has at least a modicum of social capital, as, despite its many upheavals, many quite violent, it has never experience the sort of human destruction that Rwanda has. The important thing is to further encourage the development of this social capital, rather than marginalize its sources because they do not fit the West's image of a proper society.

Ethnicity and the Government

If ethnicity does become a recognized influence on Nigerian civil society, a means must be found to harness its positive influence effectively. Luckily, one already exists, and has been implemented, at least in part, in Nigeria already. It is federalism. Federalism is a system of government which delegates as much responsibility to the state and local level as possible, allowing regions to govern themselves in the way that they find most effective, while still maintaining enough centralized control to prevent the dissolution of the country. The element that Nigeria lacks is the balance between the central government, which, due to the British's system of 'in-direct rule', was never very strongly established, and the regional governments, which are heavily influence, but not dominated, by the three primary ethnic groups in Nigeria.

But here we find that Ake may have been right in his description of Nigerians. The various ethnic groups are resistant to strengthen the central government for fear that they will fall victim to a tyranny of the minority. Again, however, observers of history will recognize that this problem is not unprecedented, nor is it uniquely African, although it does have a particular spin. The Framers of the US Constitution faced the same problem of regions and states which were very hostile towards the idea of relinquishing their power to a higher authority. Now, however, it is accepted that federalism can bring together highly diverse peoples and still protect their rights adequately.

Conclusion

Ethnicity has had both good and bad influences on Nigerian society. It has been the primary fault line of internal conflict, but it also serves as means of production of social capital, which can lead to greater unity. The question now becomes, what is the future of ethnicity in Nigerian politics?

If the good aspects of ethnicity can be harnessed and the bad discouraged, ethnicity could become a powerfully positive force in Nigeria. One possible method is to have a federal government. Federal systems relinquish control to the state level for most activities and thus

prevent tyranny of the minority, but they provide enough centralized power to Ostensibly, Nigeria already possesses a federal system, yet it has no been implemented fully, and so its failures can not reflect poorly on the influence of ethnicity. The three regions of Nigeria; North, West and South, represented by the Hausa-Fulani, Ibo and Yoruba, respectively, need a strong central government to bring them together. The alternative is for the three regions to split and become independent states. While this is not unprecedented, it is not a particularly viable option. The underdeveloped North needs what economic opportunities the South and West can offer. Nor should the minority ethnicities in South and West allow push for independences. In such states, the larger ethnic groups would dominate, thereby marginalizing the power of smaller ethnic groups, which, when banded together throughout Nigeria, easily rival even a coalition of two of the larger groups.

More importantly, Western development specialists must learn to look outside of their preconceived notions about what legitimate government, civil society and political organizations entail. Africa, and as discussed here specifically, Nigeria, offer possibilities. It is true that politicized ethnicity does have its downsides, but tribalism, the ‘discrimination against a citizen because of his place of birth’¹¹ is not a guaranteed result. It was systematically introduced by the British precisely because it not an inherent part of the system. The British, in order to save the expenses of conquering Nigeria and installing a fully functional government, developed and deepened the ethnic fissures which now exist. Ethnicity itself is not the problem with Nigerian politics, it is the fact that it was exploited, and now is continued to be exploited, as a tool for political division. But it is not antithetical to the idea of a strong nation, of a functioning modern government or development generally. Instead of trying to ignore and diminish the unique role that ethnicity can play in the development of civil society and social capital in Nigeria, Nigerians should embrace the networks and social ties that already exist, and develop them further so that they can create a strong, functioning government that is fully prepared for the requirements of the future.

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- [1](#) Scarritt 75
- [2](#) Scarritt 78
- [3](#) Ake 67
- [4](#) Uwazie 2
- [5](#) Uzoigwe 7
- [6](#) Kohli 339
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