

Ethnicity and the State in Africa

Eghosa E. Osaghae



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Afrasian Centre for Peace and Development Studies

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Working Paper Series No.7

2006

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Kyoto, JAPAN

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ISSN

The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Afrasian Centre for Peace and Development Studies.

The publication of this working paper series is supported by the Academic Frontier Centre (AFC) research project "In Search of Societal Mechanisms and Institutions for Conflict Resolution: Perspectives of Asian and African Studies and Beyond" (2005-2009), funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, and Ryukoku University.

Ethnicity and the State in Africa *

Eghosa E. Osaghae **

The pluralistic character of most African states has led to the development of mechanisms of adjustment enabling the accommodation of the interests and needs of diverse ethnic groups. Most have developed norms and procedures enabling the maintenance of an ethnic balance within the political and administrative institutions. (Touval, 1985:224)

...there is no peaceful way out of anybody getting out of Nigeria. So we might as well find a peaceful way of living together. I know there are peaceful (and harmonious) ways of living together, and that is our creed; indeed that is what we are struggling for... (Nigeria's President Olusegun Obasanjo to separatist agitators in the country, *National Interest* (Lagos), 7 December 2001, p. 4)

Matters Arising

The coupling of ethnicity and the state suggests a trajectory of ethnic analysis in which two basic issues have to be confronted ⁽¹⁾. The first is the implication of ethnicity for state organization, legitimacy, coherence and stability. This is a familiar subject for integration analysis, which treats multiethnic, multicultural, plural, or so-called divided states, especially those of the African and Third World variety, as a special category of states with complex and state-threatening ethnic problems. The problem, however, is that short of saying that ethnicity in this sense is a defining element of underdevelopment it is not always clear why it is such a fundamental political problem in some situations (African states) and not in others (developed states). Is it material prosperity or democracy or good governance, which are in abundant supply in developed states but in short supply in African states? Or is it simply because Africans are obdurately, or “naturally”, ethnic, as some accounts suggest?

There is also a problem with the inherent assumption that ethnicity is a negative force which, *ab initio*, de-legitimizes claims and demands made in the name of the ethnic group. This is largely the product of an intellectual tradition that privileges the state as the repository of legitimacy, nationhood, conflict regulation and sovereignty – what Gottlieb (1999) denounces as ‘pernicious doctrine’. This was the dominant mode of analysis of African statehood and politics in the 1960s and 1970s that justified the hegemonic orientation of the state. But it raises obvious problems for non-state and anti-state

* The translated version of this paper in Japanese was published in M. Kawabata, and T. Ochiai, eds., *AFRIKA KOKKA WO SAIKOSURU (Rethinking the State in Africa)*, Kyoto: Koyoshobo, 2006.

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nationalisms, as well as analysis of positive ethnicity (see Campbell, 1997 for an essentially positivist view of ethnicity). As is argued below, the best way to approach and possibly resolve problems of this nature is to treat state and ethnic claims as competing legitimate claims, as Rothchild and Olorunsola (1983) did long ago. The National Question perspective, which treats ethnic claims as legitimate claims for group rights (including the right to self-determination), equity and justice and has been embraced by several African social scientists, has emerged as the key framework for analyzing the linkage between ethnicity and the state in Africa (cf. Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1987, 1993, 2001; Hendricks, 1997; Wamba-dia-Wamba, 1997; Mohammed Salih and Markakis, 1998; Momoh and Adejumobi, 2002). As articulated by Wamba-dia-Wamba (1996:154), the National Question refers

to how the global form of social existence, characterizing the relationship of society to its environment, is historically or politically arrived at. Who is or is not a member of that society? Who is an outsider? How has the social membership changed? Does every member enjoy the same rights as those of every other member? How are these rights recognized and protected?

Within this context and against the backdrop of “state oppression and authoritarian development”, Mohammed Salih (2001:22ff) has recognized the “emancipatory potential” of ethnicity from its use as a liberating force first against colonialism and after independence against authoritarian states by the elite and ethno-nationalists in Africa (also see Doornbos, 1998).

The second issue relates to whether ethnicity is an independent or dependent variable. It goes without saying that ethnic diversity would most certainly make ethnicity a problem for statecraft, but the question is how and why? A rational choice, problem-solving perspective approaches the ethnic problem as given and prescribes governmental systems that guarantee equitable accommodation of difference as the most appropriate for multiethnic situations. Thus the Livingston sociological school holds that federalism is the most appropriate form of government for federal societies, that is, societies where ethnic cleavages are territorially defined (Livingston, 1952, 1956). Obafemi Awolowo, one of Nigeria’s most avowed federalists, elevated this thesis to the level of a “law”:

Experts can propound learned thesis as to why people having different languages and cultural backgrounds are unable to live together under a democratic unitary constitution. But the empirical facts of history are enough guide to us. *It has been shown beyond all doubt that the best constitution for such diverse peoples is a federal constitution.* (Awolowo, 1947:50, emphasis added)

Accordingly, he argued in a later publication that, for Nigeria,

The constitution...must be federal...any other constitution will be unsuitable and will generate ever-recurring instability which may eventually lead to the complete disappearance of the Nigerian state. (Awolowo, 1966:12).

To a large extent, the British who found federalism an expedient formula for governing their erstwhile ‘divided’ multiethnic colonies (Australia, India, Canada, Nigeria, South Africa) also exemplify the rational choice approach to ostensibly difficult situations of multiethnicity and multiculturalism, in which federalism is approached essentially as a solution (Osaghae, 1997).

But the question is: is it multiethnicity as an objective reality that creates problems of state coherence and stability and necessitates federal-type solutions or other delicate governmental arrangement? To answer in the affirmative, as some analysts of ethnicity in Africa do⁽²⁾, is to confer a large measure of independence on ethnicity, and to assume that ethnicity is a motive (read as natural) force that, *sui generis*, propels social and political action. A case in point is Campbell’s (1997:5) sarcastic assertion that because it appears so fluid and mobile in the modern conception, being at once fragmentary, dangerous and integrative, ethnicity “can now be used to explain almost anything that happens socially”. Notwithstanding the obvious sarcasm, this might be true to some extent of aspects of ethnicity that relate to identity, language, cultural and religious autonomy, but it is not so with politicized ethnicity, which is the form of ethnicity relevant to the discourse in this paper. By politicized ethnicity, I mean the mobilization of ethnic identity, culture, territory, and other symbols or markers into a pedestal for exacting demands, which range from cultural autonomy to outright independence, from existing political systems – the state and international system alike.

This is a different connotation from say cultural (read as primordial) ethnicity, which is largely symbolic and involves the expression of language, art, dressing, food and music, although cultural ethnicity can itself be politicized when these outward expressions are asserted to back up claims to autonomy. The point here is that as a number of perspectives of ethnicity, notably the rational-instrumentalist (cf. McKay, 1983, Nnoli, 1994, Ake, 1994) and constructivist (cf. Yeros, 1999; Azarya, 2003) have tried to show with remarkable success, ethnicity in general and politicized ethnicity in particular is more mobilizational and instrumentalist than primordial or natural (for a critical examination of the primordial and instrumentalist perspectives in relation to Africa, see Osaghae, 1994a).

When ethnicity is analyzed in these terms, it is easier to see why multiethnic states do not suffer problems of ethnicity in the same way and to the same extent, why multiethnicity does not always invite the federal solution, and why, contrary to what one might expect, the more diverse countries (for example Tanzania) are not the more problematic, just as the least diverse (Rwanda, Burundi and Somalia for example) are not also the least problematic and prone to violence. These variations can only be explained if ethnicity is approached as a largely dependent variable, which is propelled by certain conducive factors (uneven development, structural discrimination, injustice, oppression, state authoritarianism), and whose political salience and potency is the result of mobilization and manipulation by the state, its power holders, and other elites (and non-elites as well).

The implication of the foregoing is that a coupling of ethnicity with the state is more intriguing than a first sight consideration might suggest. To be sure, ethnicity has implications for, and impacts upon, the state, and vice versa, in a variety of mostly troubling and challenging, if not threatening ways, but the nature of this interface has to be explained because, as we have argued, politicized ethnicity is more of a dependent variable than an independent variable or a given. The next section of this paper therefore addresses the question of how and why ethnicity has been critical and inimical for state construction in Africa. This is followed by an examination of how the state has responded to the challenges of resurgent ethnic nationalisms within the context of political transition and democratization. Part of the task here is to critically interrogate how ethnicity can be put to positive use in the reconstruction and reconstitution of the state. The final section presents the conclusions of the paper.

But before going to these, we shall briefly dwell on the clarification of some key concepts used in this paper, namely ethnic group/ethnicity, tribe/tribalism and nation/nationalism. Although all of them are commonly and interchangeably used in reference to primary identity categories in Africa, there are important differences among them that need to be highlighted. Arising from the struggles for independence from colonial authorities, nation and nationalism were mostly used in relation to the state. Nationalism basically involved the struggle for independence on the platform of asserting the right to (national) self-determination, which amounted to the right of the state. The predominant conception of nation as a state in which particularistic and sub-national identities and loyalties have been subordinated to those to an overarching 'nation-state' also had this statist bent. As the formulation goes, African states are not nations yet because identities with and loyalties to ethnic, religious, regional and racial groups are stronger than those to the state, something that has been attributed variously to the 'artificiality' of the state as a colonial creation, its irrelevance to the material well-being of citizens, and its inability to satisfy the imperatives of statehood (cf. Ihonvbere, 1994, Osaghae, 1999). The process of nation-building entails reversing the order to make national identity and loyalty stronger than those to the sub-national groups (cf. Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1993; Palmberg, 1999).

Despite the state-centredness of the nation and nationalism discourse, however, the terms have also been used in relation to ethnic groups which seek to assert their rights to self-determination, equity and justice either within extant states or separate states. Ethno-nationalism, which is mostly anti-state in character, was high in the immediate post-independence period and was a major factor in the civil wars that ensued in Sudan, Congo and Nigeria. There has been a resurgence of 'emancipatory' ethno-nationalism in the post Cold War period, whose defining elements have included the ascendancy of ethnic claimants the world over, thanks to processes of state reform. For example, in Nigeria which has been a major centre of these claims, one interesting development is the redefinition of ethnic groups as nations and nationalities by elite of the groups, which supposedly qualifies them to lay claims to 'self-determination'. But even though ethnic nationalism has gained legitimacy and currency as part of globalization, the state continues to treat it as a threat to its own survival. We shall have more to say on these developments later.

We next turn to tribe/tribalism and ethnic group/ethnicity which are used to describe essentially the same structures and processes. Nevertheless, although tribe and ethnic group refer to primary groups that are distinguished from others by name, language, core territory, myth of common origin, culture and social organization, and tribalism and ethnicity describe animosities among members of different groups, tribe and tribalism are used specifically to refer to pristine, rural and traditional – or primitive – formations and, ethnic group and ethnicity to ‘modern’ and contemporary formations that exist within the context of the modern state. This, and the pejorative connotation of tribalism (for a long time it was reserved for describing primary relations in Africa while similar phenomena in the North were described as ethnicity), have led to a paradigm shift in which ethnicity is preferred as a more useful and relevant analytical category. Tribe and tribalism as they relate to autonomous and primitive kinship groups under ‘tribal government’ are vanishing and ethnic groups and ethnicity, which are not limited by primordial origins – many scholars (cf. Nnoli, 1978, 1998) indeed trace the roots of contemporary ethnicity to colonial acts of creation – and have adapted well to contemporary social, political and economic realities, have taken their place in African social science. Ethnicity is used in this more contemporary sense not only to describe animosities among members of different ethnic groups who meet in situations of sustained ethnic mixes, but also the adversarial and conflictual relationships that ensue between the state and aggrieved ethno-nationalists from time to time.

Ethnicity and State Construction in Africa: An Over View

The purpose of this section is to address critical theoretical and conceptual issues arising from the interface between ethnicity and the state in Africa, as a backdrop to the more substantive arguments to be made in the next section. The key question is, why has ethnicity been crucial to state organization in Africa? At least three reasons can be proffered. The first, which is rather general, is that by making basically the same demands as the state, including the loyalty of individuals and the right to self-determination, ethnic claims compete with those of the state (Brass, 1985; Kimenyi, 1997). If not well managed, they could threaten the existence and legitimacy of the state. Second is the historical fact that the ethnic principle has been critical to the construction and reconstruction of the ‘artificial’ contemporary state in Africa, and third is the manipulation and mismanagement of the ethnic question by the colonial state and its successor, the post-colonial state. We shall consider each of these factors in turn, and then examine why ethnicity is often considered inimical to state and national politics.

First is the point that ethnicity is the fulcrum of various forms of nationalism, which range from assertions of language and cultural autonomy, to demands for local political autonomy and self-determination. These nationalisms, which are informed by the perception ethnic groups have of themselves as “incipient whole societies” (Horowitz, 1985:22-36; du Toit, 1995:39ff), take place within or against the state and, as such, compete with claims made by the state. As it were, ethnic groups and the gladiators, strongmen and warlords who lead and mobilize them, represent rival or alternative sites of power to the state, which are inter-locked in a continuous struggle for power, dominance and hegemony. This is the more so that many states in Africa are controlled or dominated by people from one or a few ethnic groups, and invite counter-mobilization and counter-nationalism

by members of 'excluded', 'marginalized', 'oppressed' and 'minority' groups. But even where the state is relatively autonomous and "insulated" from ethnic capture, its power holders often have to reckon with ethnic grievances and demands, in part because ethnic gladiators know that demands made in the name of ethnic groups tend to be taken seriously by state power holders who know the destructive capacity of festering and unattended to ethnic demands.

Rothchild and Olorunsola (1983:10) classify ethnic claims on the state in Africa into "reasonable" or low to medium intensity demands, and high intensity demands. For them, reasonable demands, which mostly arise from structural and historical inequalities among groups competing for the benefits of modernization, include distributive, re-distributive, redressive or remedial claims, typically for just and equitable political and bureaucratic representation, access to and allocation of scarce resources, greater local political autonomy, and their like. These demands are 'reasonable' to the extent that they do not threaten the legitimacy and existence of the state, and can be managed through the use of appropriate (re)distributive policies and formulas such as quota system, affirmative action, income re-distribution, equalization allocation to backward areas, 'catch-up' development programmes, and so on. High intensity demands – which in effect are unreasonable – involve absolute and non-negotiable claims to self-determination and independence that "threaten the very existence of the state itself and generally cannot be reconciled by minimalizing policies" (Rothchild & Olorunsola, 1983:10).

So, how does the state cope with these demands? A lot depends on its legitimacy and ability to satisfy the imperatives of statehood, including the assertion of authority over its entire territory. This is one area of empirical statehood where the post-colonial African state has proven to be less than able (Herbst, 2000). Its characterization as soft, weak, fragile, 'oppressive and authoritarian, but powerless' (du Toit, 1995), and as collapsed or failed (cf. Zartman, 1995), all point to the inability of the state to resolve endemic crises of penetration, integration, legitimacy and development and to satisfy the demands and expectations of citizens (Englebert, 2000). The weakness of the state has of course meant the strengthening of rival ethnic centers of power and their ethnic gladiators and challengers, many of who ironically exploit state resources to sustain patronage networks. This provides one major explanation for the resilience of ethnicity in Africa.

From its weak position, the best option open to states is to negotiate and bargain with ethnic challengers in order to establish the necessary balances and proportionality to douse the fire of ethnic agitations and tension. This is the essence of the epigraph from Touval and Obasanjo. At the level of official declarations and institution-building, some countries, notably Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, have made progress in this direction (cf. Osaghae, 1999), but by and large, state power holders are generally reluctant to bargain with ethnic challengers, in the mistaken belief that doing so suggests that the state is weak, and that ethnic demands can be eliminated through suppression or outright defeat in war (the attempt by the Sudanese government to crush the Southern rebels into submission is a case in point). The result of this mistake is to be found in the intractable ethnic conflicts and wars that dot the African political landscape.

The second reason why ethnicity is crucial to the state in Africa is that, historically, ethnicity has been central to the process of its construction and reconstruction. This is clearly seen in the manner in which the contemporary state, which is widely regarded as ‘artificial’, was constructed under colonial rule. The foundation for this was laid in the pre-colonization pattern and consequences of European trade and political relations with Africa. The advent of European trade, beginning with the slave trade, propelled the notorious “tribal” wars that changed the face of pre-colonial state formations and ethnic relations in Africa, beginning from the late 17th century. Warlords, usurpers, adventurers and other new men of power, backed by European and Arab slave dealers, ravaged the length and breadth of the continent in slave raids, destroying established states and building new ones. The slaving and trading wars propelled massive population displacements and forced migrations, which continued right down to the 19th century, introduced new relations of ‘superior’ - ‘inferior’ groups based on military strength, new forms of conquest and dominance, and new kin-based safety and security networks in places where extant states were unable to protect their ‘citizens’ from the ravages of the warring groups. Next came the piecemeal incorporation of the groups and territories that eventually made up the colonial state. This set the stage for uneven development especially between coastal peoples who had longer periods of exposure to European influence and hinterland groups whose incorporation came much later. Then there were the discriminatory interventions and practices of the colonial state, which are widely believed to have been part of a divide and rule regime. Foremost among these were systems of ethnic profiling which defined colonial subjects in ranked ethnic terms, complete with the privileges and disadvantages the location of the group in the rank structure conferred. This made it possible for favoured groups like the Muslim Fulani in Nigeria and the Baganda in Uganda to lord it over other (proximate) groups – so-called ‘pagan’ minority groups in the case of the Fulani – and wield disproportionate political influence in the colonial and post-colonial state. Also, the “warrior tribe” policy of recruitment into the army and police favoured a number of groups, which subsequently dominated post-colonial military governments.

But by far the most deliberate and consequential of all colonial acts of state construction was the adoption of the ethnic principle in the structuration of the state. Political and administrative units, which enjoyed varying forms of autonomy, were established on the basis of ethnic units being “the natural expressions of the [African] political genius” (Governor Hugh Clifford of Nigeria cited in Coleman, 1958:194). The search for suitable ethnic frameworks sometimes involved the creation, *ex nihilo*, of ethnic “groups” and territories, complete in many cases with traditional rulers – the so-called “warrant chiefs”. Following cases like that of the Baluhya of western Kenya who emerged as a “tribe” in the form of a colonial administrative unit between 1935 and 1945, Apthorpe (1968:18) has argued that in some cases, “the colonial regimes created tribes as we think of them today”.

But ethnic groups do not simply exist on the basis of territorial boundaries and other objective markers. They require solidary processes of “getting it together” to become “real” groups. This usually involves manipulation of language and myths of common origin and political destiny by an incipient elite – what Ekeh calls domain-partition ideology – to engender affinity and loyalty to the group. Thus, in relation to Nigeria, Ekeh (1975:105) argues:

No ethnic group existed before Nigeria emerged as a corporate entity with the boundaries now claimed for them, and the loyalties now directed at them. What existed before Nigeria were amorphous polities...Even the languages by which some claim to identify the ethnic group in modern Nigeria...are, to a large extent, a product of this domain partition ideology.

Ekeh's insight leads to the inevitable conclusion that although colonial structuring created the 'infrastructure' (common or standard languages, common name and common territory) for ethnicity, it took the interest-begotten efforts of the incipient elite, the new men of power, who exploited the infrastructure, for ethnic identities and claims as they exist today, to flourish. In other words, while it is true that colonialism was the cradle of ethnicity in contemporary Africa as Nnoli (1998) argues, the political elites and ruling classes have the greater responsibility for concretizing so-called ethnic interests and transforming the ethnic group-in-itself into the ethnic group for itself.

Nevertheless, the point made by those who hold the colonialists responsible for ethnic problems in Africa is that the ethnic principle was adopted to engender the divide and rule regime that sustained colonial rule. The system of indirect rule, it is argued, was designed to keep members of the different groups as far apart as possible. In Uganda, for example, the local government ordinance of 1949 "provided a legal basis for the institutionalization of parochial tribally oriented local governments" (Burke, 1964:39). In Nigeria, integration was clearly not part of the colonial agenda, as is evident from the following statement by Governor Hugh Clifford in 1920: "I am entirely convinced of the right, for example, of the people of Egbaland,...of any of the great Emirates of the North,...to maintain that each one of them is, in a very real sense, a nation...*It is the task of the Government of Nigeria to build up and to fortify these national institutions*" (cited in Coleman, 1958:194, emphasis added)⁽³⁾. The policy of regionalization by which the north and south of Nigeria were kept apart after amalgamation in 1914 was pursued to the same ends. Nationalist elites from the two regions met for the first time in the legislative assembly in 1948. To further maintain separateness, restrictions were placed on the movement of southerners to the Muslim parts of the north, and the few who found their ways there were quarantined in areas designated "strangers' quarters" and denied equal citizenship with the "indigenes".

Examples like these, which were common in the British colonies especially, have led Campbell (1997:164) to argue that "African ethnicity was fostered by imperial powers to thwart the African liberation struggle, which had adopted a nationalist form". In particular, he insists that the accent on ethnic rights – summarized by Governor Clifford of Nigeria as the right of each group to maintain its identity, its individuality and its nationality, its chosen form of government – which the British presented as a "natural stepping stone to the full national right to self-determination", and which became a key issue in the writing of many independence constitutions (cf. Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya), "made the prospect of national division more easy to swallow for the nationalist elite". For Campbell then, "The only possible conclusion is that the constitutions were designed to make the newly independent states more vulnerable to outside interference".

The manipulation of ethnicity in the construction of the state was not, however, solely a colonial project. Controllers of the post-colonial state also found it expedient to manipulate ethnicity in their bid to consolidate power bases and confront the legitimacy crisis. This leads to the third and final reason we have advanced for the centrality of ethnicity to state and national politics in Africa: the manipulation and gross mismanagement of ethnicity by the state. To be able to manage or regulate ethnic conflicts in just and equitable ways, the state needs some degree of relative autonomy that can somewhat “insulate” it from ethnic and sectional capture. If, as constitutionalists believe, constitutions and other legal provisions can make the state so autonomous, it follows that the underdevelopment of constitutionalism and democracy in most African states is a major factor in their inability to properly manage conflicts. For indeed, rather than be relatively autonomous, states in Africa have been captured and used by ethnic forces to further narrow ethnic agendas, including genocide. This is probably truer for the post-colonial state than it was for the colonial state, but there can be little doubt that the seeds of ethnic domination were sown in the colonial era. By privileging favoured groups like the Baganda in Uganda in the contest for state power that hallmarked the process of decolonization, including the composition of the bureaucracy, military and security agencies, the various colonial authorities ensured that the transfer of power at independence preserved the captive ruling classes that had been nurtured under colonialism. This constrained the efficacy of whatever pacts were embodied in the bargains and constitutions that led to independence.

Given such antecedents, it would have been a surprise if the post-colonial state did not become a terrain of ethnic contestation. The several factors that served to aggravate the situation have been well covered in the literature (cf. Kasfir, 1976; Horowitz, 1985; Rupesinghe, 1989; Osaghae, 1995a; Nnoli, 1998; Attah-Poku, 1998). They include the rise of state capitalism which gave the state the main responsibility for development and engendered the repression or emasculation of the non-state sector; the heightening of the tendency towards exclusionary ethnic states for which authoritarian one-party and military regimes were conducive, and which further eroded whatever legitimacy was left of the state; manipulations of ethnic divisions by ruling coalitions desperate to sustain their fragile and contested hold on state power; Cold War interferences and other external sources of conflict; and the continued weakness and softness of the state, its inability to establish and effectively exercise its authority over its entire territory, and the consequent field day enjoyed by rival ethnic centers and their strongmen.

Beginning from the late 1980s, there was an ascendancy of ethnic conflicts all over Africa, leading to civil war in a number of countries, notably Liberia, Rwanda, Burundi, Congo, and Congo Democratic Republic. The escalation of conflicts is perhaps the clearest indicator of the underdevelopment of conflict management mechanisms. Conventional wisdom on this issue points to the absence of democracy and a culture of constitutionalism, and the related underdevelopment of ingredients of multiethnic democracy (tolerance, power sharing, reciprocity, equity, justice, accountability) as key elements of poor management. The escalation of conflicts has however been explained in terms of other aggravating factors. These include economic decline and crisis, in particular diminishing

resources and austere structural adjustment; the further weakening and virtual collapse of the state in several key areas, which have emboldened its ethnic rivals in their demand for state reconfiguration; the opening up of previously closed systems through volatile and unregulated processes of democratization and political reforms; and continued external meddling, which in the post-Cold War period has become more directly interventionist, hegemonic and supportive of ‘politically correct’ anti-state nationalisms (for elaborations of these various explanations, see Adekanye, 1995; Glickman, 1995; Nnoli, 1994, 1995; Osaghae, 1994b, 1995b, 1999; Ake, 1993, 1996; Ottaway, 1999).

The poor management of conflicts and, in particular, the underdevelopment of structures of multiethnic democracy belie Touval’s claims in the epigraph, which are to the effect that African states have domesticated ethnic diversity and adapted well to their pluralistic make-ups. The claims are most probably informed by the reconciliatory gestures and rhetoric of state power holders, usually to douse immediate political tensions and crises (and no more), or by the elegant constitutional provisions on power sharing. But, with a few notable exceptions like South Africa, these have usually not worked according to the spirit of pronouncements, legislations or constitutions. For a long time, the overwhelming desire to make nations of divided countries, or what may be called absolutist state nationalism, as well as the hurry to develop, which required state centralization and control, provided the enabling factors state power holders needed to flout elegant provisions on pluralistic democracy (open and multiparty systems, separation of power, free and fair elections, etc) and suppress ‘divisive’ and ‘opposition’ ethnic claims. In many cases, the management of ethnicity got reduced to the adoption of tokenist and symbolic ethnic arithmetic formulas, such as the Tutsis devised in post-genocide Rwanda to, as it were, put the Hutus in their place as defeated peoples. Other varieties of tokenist strategies have led to the cosmetic and self-serving co-optation of opportunistic and vocal “opposition” elites.

Another problem, which is even more fundamental to the inadequacies and failings of ethnic management formulas and practices in Africa, is that too much emphasis has been placed on the reconciliation of elite differences – in fact, this seems to be the *raison d’être* of ethnic management for the most part. Whether one talks of non-territorial devices of power sharing such as consociational ethnic arithmetic formulas (proportionality, quota system, affirmative action) for composing government, or territorial devices such as decentralization, local political autonomy, and federalism, the political elites are always the main beneficiaries. This orientation can be excused on the grounds that the elite are at the vanguard of ethnic demands and in the frontline of the contest for power in all sectors – military, academic, bureaucracy, business, civil society, economic, social and political.

But, no matter how critical it may be, elite management represents **only one** aspect of ethnic management and, even at that, it tends to be too focused on reducing or resolving short to medium-term political tensions (this is most clearly seen in situations of open conflict or war). This narrow focus of the elite perspective of ethnic management in Africa and elsewhere fails to address the fact that ethnicity breeds on much more fundamental inequalities, injustices and perceptions of relative deprivation, which can neither be reduced to, nor dealt with by, the appeasement of ambitious power-

seeking elites. The real danger in placing elite accommodation above all other considerations is that it diverts attention away from the need to reduce or eliminate if possible, the underlying structural factors that foster and provoke genuine ethnic grievances and mobilizations. This is because the half-hearted attempts at winning and building support bases within groups, such as the expedient provision of social amenities and infrastructure, and appointment of elites from so-called marginalized, excluded, minority, and oppressed ethnic groups, all in the name of managing ethnicity, have not translated into less domination, marginalization or exclusion of the group as a whole.

The point in the foregoing, which amounts to a critique of Touval's rather overstated claim, is not however to discountenance the notable efforts that have been made, both at the formal and informal levels, at domesticating and managing ethnic diversity in Africa. As was pointed earlier, countries like Nigeria, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Tanzania operate various forms of the federal solution, which is believed to offer the most effective institutional framework for the management of diversity. Also, thanks to the forces of democratization, many more countries have made remarkable progress in the areas of constitutionalism, power sharing and decentralization, as well as pluralist and toleration politics. Still, the point is that in spite of these efforts ethnicity remains one of the formidable problems faced by the post-colonial state in Africa. This is not only because it is perhaps the most popular basis for political mobilization and the articulation of grievances within and against the state, but also because state power holders themselves are major actors in the ethno-political drama. This provides a useful point of departure for an interrogation of the new and aggravated challenges posed for the state by ethnicity in the context of recent and on-going political and economic reforms and transitions in Africa (for elaborations of these challenges, see Olukoshi and Laasko, 1996; Joseph, 1999). This is the focus of the next section to which we now turn.

Transition, Ethnicity and the Re-constitution of the State

President Obasanjo of Nigeria's warning to secessionists cited at the beginning of this paper provides an insight into the ways in which ethnicity has featured in the processes of political transition in Africa since the late 1980s. There has been a resurgence of redress-seeking and separatist ethnic nationalisms and claims. These have degenerated to civil war and other violent conflagrations in a number of cases but, even where they have not led to such adverse consequences, they have threatened the survival of the fragile state more than ever before. The Nigerian case to which president Obasanjo was referring, witnessed an unprecedented rise in the number and activities of ethnic and youth militias, and a resurgence of old and new ethno-regional and religious blocs – including groups that claimed to be offshoots of the unsuccessful Biafran secession of 1967-70 (notably the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra, MASSOB). The various groups made seemingly irreconcilable demands for regional autonomy, resource control, true federalism (by which many meant confederation), and outright dissolution of the Nigerian state. What made matters worse for state power holders was the uncompromising stance of the more clamorous advocates of state re-construction, who believed that only a Sovereign National Conference (SNC), a variant of the National Conference mode of democratization made popular by Benin and other Francophone African countries, whose hallmark is freedom from state interference and possible

manipulation, could put the state back together again. How was the state to preside over its own dissolution, which many feared was high on the agenda of the agitation for the SNC?

To fully appreciate the challenges and dangers posed to the state by reinvigorated ethnic demands, we have to locate the demands within the larger context of the landmark global changes and paradigmatic shifts in the discourse on ethnicity in general and ethnic nationalism in particular. We saw in the first section of this paper how the (old) nationalism discourse privileged the state, and how ethnic claims were de-legitimized, even demonized, no matter how genuine, reasonable or justified they were. In the resulting approach to managing ethnic problems, loyalty to and identity with the ethnic group as well as claims and demands made on this basis, were deemed incompatible with those made by the state. The approach therefore permitted, in fact justified, the suppression of state-challenging ethnic claims, particularly in Third World countries where the nation-aspiring state was struggling to survive. It was on these grounds that rule by a single and supposedly “national” party or the military was preferred to a multiparty system, which was said to encourage the formation of ethnic parties and the articulation of divisive ethnic interests. It was also on similar grounds that ethnic associations and chieftaincy were proscribed and abolished in places like Guinea, Kenya and Nigeria under General Ironsi.

Things have changed rapidly since the end of the Cold War, as reflected by the following developments. First, identity politics and contestation have taken the front seat, and the new heroes are the feminists, minority and indigenous peoples’ rights activists, and the ethnic underclass, who are able to force the state to recognize the plurality of identities and respect the politics of difference. These movements are strengthened by their integration as integral parts of the reinvigorated civil society that has been in the forefront of democratic struggles. By coupling their activities with those of the larger civil society, ethnic movements in particular have enhanced their legitimacy and ensured that the resolution of the ethnic question – or the National Question as it is called in several countries – is a key item in the democratization agenda (for developments along these lines in Nigeria, see Osaghae, 2003).

They have also received a boost from members of the international community, especially influential organizations like the United Nations, European Union and the Commonwealth, which have not only given new meanings to the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples, but are also now more sympathetic to and supportive of the struggles to assert these rights. Declarations condemning various forms of discrimination, oppression and injustice, as well as the appointment of war crimes tribunals (Rwanda), human rights investigators (Nigeria) and truth and reconciliations committees (South Africa), whose works have exposed the atrocities of state power holders and others crimes against humanity, have been notable in this regard.

Second, the search for innovative models of conflict management, which the world badly needs in view of the proven inadequacies of conventional models, has turned to the presumed magical (or spiritual) and curative properties of primordial ethnicity hidden in the scripts of indigenous

knowledge (cf. Zartman, 2000). Third, the idea that ethnicity is negative, sinister and inimical to nation-state politics is gradually fading away. Scholars are increasingly forced to interrogate the positive aspects of ethnicity – how for instance, ethnic self help can be harnessed for productive purposes; how the ethnic component of civil society can enhance its efficacy; and how ethnic nationalism and mobilization serve the emancipatory needs of oppressed and weak groups.

But most of all, and partly for the foregoing reasons, ethnic nationalism, including the assertion of the right to self-determination, has finally won respect and legitimacy. And nothing seems to be sacrosanct about the state anymore – not with the collapse of the former USSR, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Somalia, and the exposure of the high levels of terrorism, human rights abuse and gross injustices on which many states were and are run. Resurgent ethnic nationalisms have gained so much ground and won over so many former foes that there are those in Africa who believe and argue that the time has now come to put right the ‘mistakes’ of colonialism by allowing representatives of the various ethnic groups to negotiate – in the name of self-determination – the configuration of the state. In short, the era of privileging the state has increasingly given way to that of privileging ethnicity as a key factor in state rethinking and reconstruction.

The changes in global discourse have emboldened ethnic claimants in their rivalry with the state, and the resurgence of ethnic claims and conflicts the world over can be partly attributed to this, though the opening up of previously closed political spaces through liberalization and democratization has greatly enabled this development (cf. Osaghae, 1994b). In Nigeria, one of the dramatic effects of the changing discourse is the new terminology of ethnic nationality by which most ethnic groups now prefer to be called, apparently in the belief that unlike ‘group’ and ‘tribe’, ‘nationality’ entitles them to new-found rights. However, in addition to global changes, there are local factors within Africa itself that support a de-privileging of the state and the growth of alternative forms and sites for reconstructing the social order, of which ethnicity is certainly one. These include the chronic ineffectiveness (read as non-legitimacy) and failure of the centralized state, which have led significant segments of the citizenry to exit into parallel and largely self-propelling organizations (Wunsch & Olowu, 1990, du Toit, 1995; Osaghae, 1999b); the reinvigoration of civil society and voluntary ethnic associations (Osaghae, 2000); and the drive for self-sustaining and autonomous centers of power and administration, as well as mobilization of local resources to complement or substitute for the dwindling resources of the weak and incapacitated state.

So how has the state responded to the new threats to its existence and survival? And what are the actual and potential roles ethnicity can play in the reconstruction of the state? In tackling these questions, we have first to underscore the point that, in general, the post-colonial state of the 1990s was much weaker and ineffective than the state of the 1960s and may be also, the 1970s. Although the latter was crippled by an endemic crisis of legitimacy, the state-centredness of the old development and nation-building discourse, together with the hegemonic contests of the Cold War, gave the state a strong hold on society which was advanced through what Bayart (1986) calls its totalizing tendencies. Coercion was central to this regime, though its sustenance depended ultimately on the state’s

economic viability and solvency, its ability to ensure just and equitable distribution of scarce resources and the provision of public goods and services to satisfy the expectations of the citizens, and the support of external patrons.

Beginning from the 1980s, most countries in Africa were in trouble on all these fronts, and this led to the advent of the notion of collapsed states. No thanks to excruciating foreign debts, diminishing resources, and austere state-weakening economic reforms, many countries reached the point where they could no longer discharge such basic functions as payment of salaries of civil servants, protection of lives and property, and provision of social amenities and infrastructure. The situation was far worse in countries that had been sapped by war and deadly conflicts. All this coincided with the end of the Cold War, the rise of a more critical hegemony-seeking international community, which made political and economic liberalization, human rights and good governance conditionalities for the much needed external support, and the democratic wave that swept through Africa and brought in its wake, a reinvigorated, foreign-backed and state-challenging civil society.

The ensuing weakness of the state gave ample room to its opponents and rival power centers in the struggle for domestic hegemony. The relative ease with which rag tag guerrilla forces routed standing state armies in Liberia, Congo, Congo Democratic Republic, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi and Sierra Leone showed the extent to which the state had collapsed in those countries. State weakness was also to be seen in the capitulation to the conditionalities and wishes of major actors of the international community. One notable example of this was multipartyism, which was forced on the leaders of Kenya, Gabon, and Burundi who were fixed on the old view that multiparty politics ventilated divisive ethnic politics. They acquiesced under threats of aid stoppage from major Western powers.

This was the background to the heightened opposition to the post-colonial state and its power holders, especially by groups and forces that had been previously suppressed, excluded, and marginalized. The opposition was spearheaded by warlords (in Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, Congo, Congo Democratic Republic), ethnic militias (Nigeria, Niger), and new-style opposition parties and movements (Zimbabwe, Zambia, Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire) whose objectives ranged from the capture of state power to state reconstruction. At the extreme, the objective extended to secession although, as has been the case in Nigeria, threats of secession were more often employed by leaders of aggrieved groups to seek redress and exact concessions from the state.

Rethinking the African State

The response of the state to these challenges varied according to the nature and history of demands and strategies employed by aggrieved groups, but in almost all cases, the response was moderated by the aggravated weakness of the state to which we have already referred. It had become quite clear that "As a general project...the idea that viable states can be constructed throughout Africa on the basis of the territorial units established by colonial rule has now reached the end of the road" (Clapham, 2001:13). Although this conclusion is somewhat exaggerated and underestimates the successes that have been recorded in transforming artificial colonial states into real states in the post-colonial era, it

provides a useful point of departure for rethinking the African state. Certainly, the weakness of the state made the task of reconstructing and reconstituting it relatively easier, for indeed, the old privileged state was all along an obstacle to this necessary process, which should have begun much earlier.

Our concern is not however to show that ethnic forces have become more powerful vis-à-vis the weak state, but to examine the possible role ethnicity can play in the process of reconstructing and reconstituting the (failed) state. This is more so that, as we have pointed out, ethnic forces and demands have been in the forefront of the state rethinking and reconstruction project in many countries. Given its largely negative and destructive connotation – some see it as the one force that has the potential to ultimately destroy the state in Africa – any talk of such a role, which places ethnicity in positive light, appears to be a contradiction in terms. Clapham (2001:14) complicates matters when, for good reason, he argues that ethnicity is too unpredictable to be employed in the state reconstruction project: “African ethnicity constitutes not a set of building blocks of different shapes and sizes...but rather a complex and variable set of elements that interact in different and often unpredictable ways”. Yet, ethnicity has been a crucial factor in state construction and failure, and the emergence of ethnic nationalism as one of the arrowheads (or fallouts) of recent and on-going transitions in many countries implies that there is no running away from the problem. Indeed, there are already a number of state reconstruction projects, notably in Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa, that privilege ethnicity. Azarya (2003) has recently analyzed three models of coping with ethnic conflicts: avoidance in Uganda, acceptance in Ethiopia and preventive measures in Nigeria. Of the lot, the case of Ethiopia, which has a long history of separatist ethnic nationalisms, is arguably the most outstanding. In 1992, the country became an ethnic federation in which the right of constituent groups to self-determination, including secession, is constitutionally guaranteed. As is to be expected, the Ethiopian case has since become a reference point for analyses of state reconstruction along ethnic lines, but it is obvious that the ethnic state trajectory, and least of all, one that is fully federal with the danger of a divided state that it portends, is one model that many countries would adopt only as a last resort.

The responses or so-called solutions to ethnic demands and challenges have so far tended to be as tentative and short-term as ever. In South Africa, for example, a reading of the interim (1993) and final constitutions clearly shows that the power-sharing instrumentalities (executive power sharing, proportional representation, affirmative action) were intended to facilitate the smooth passage to the post-apartheid state. Even Nigeria whose federal system provides a framework for managing ethnicity, adopted the principles of “power shift” and regionalization for basically the same purposes, as is the case with other countries where different shades of power sharing have been introduced due to the exigencies of ending wars or placating stubborn opponents, or simply yielding to pressures by powerful external forces. Apart from the short-term orientation, attempts to resolve the ethnic question have, as in the past, been largely directed at resolving and accommodating elite differences and competing claims.

The fire brigade and elite-centred orientations of ethnic management show that the essence of the ethnic challenge for the reconstruction of the post-colonial state is still largely mistaken and misunderstood. As I tried to argue in an earlier section, that challenge lies in the just and equitable development of different parts and strata of the state and the entrenchment of relative state autonomy, to which the focus on the elite is diversionary. The imbalances created under colonialism and exacerbated by exclusivist post-colonial regimes have to be corrected to create a level playing field for all competing interests. The satisfaction of the predatory interests of highly opportunistic elites, which reinforces the predatory slant of ethnic demands, as is to be seen in the sharing of the proverbial National Cake, cannot adequately address the problem. Fortunately, the decline of the state and, inevitably, of the National Cake, has thrown up a developmental consciousness of autonomy and self-development at lower levels that are waiting to be harnessed. This is the essence of what elsewhere I have called “positive ethnicity” that is not state resource and benevolence seeking. As part of the state reconstruction project, new partnerships have to be forged between the state and these ethnic structures, which dominate the parallel sites of development that have evolved all over Africa in the last two decades and make up the bulk of those interests seeking self-government and autonomy at the local level. This seems to me to be a much more realistic and enduring way of domesticating and managing ethnicity in the new state project.

Ethnicity and State Reconstitution

The underlying premise of this paper is that ethnicity has been crucial to state construction in Africa since colonial times. The recent and ongoing trajectory of state reconstitution has not been different. Indeed ethnic mobilization has emerged as one of the key propellants of state reconstitution, as the analysis in this paper has shown. From the points and arguments that have been made so far, how can ethnicity help in the process of state reconstruction? How should ethnic relations look like in a reconstituted African state? These are the questions we shall briefly grapple with in this section.

The most important challenge ethnicity poses for the state is how equity and justice can be guaranteed in the exercise of power as well as the distribution of resources. The post-colonial state has failed for the most part in these tasks expected of it as an agent of distributive justice. Some of the reasons for this include the lack of resources and material insolvency of many countries; the overbearing and over-centralized power of the state in the development process; and the susceptibility of the state to ethnic and sectional capture and abuse. The economic recession and crisis of the 1980s and 1990s in particular have plunged several states into various levels of decline and collapse. How can equity and justice be assured under these circumstances?

This is where what has been called positive ethnicity comes in. This is the form of ethnicity that does not rely on government patronage, and is participatory and development oriented. State reconstitution has to recognize and grant institutional expression to demands for local self-government and non-governmental developmental initiatives embodied in this form of ethnicity. This strand of ethnicity, which is territorial and decentralist is different from elite-directed ethnicity, which has extractive, predatory and self-serving orientations, and encourages the tendencies towards over-centralization

and overbearing state power. As has been argued in several parts of this paper, elite ethnicity is too narrow, expedient and unproductive to constitute the basis for reconstituting the state. Indeed, the overemphasis on satisfying elite interests disguised as ethnic interests has been one of the main factors for the failure of ethnic management formulas in Africa.

The form of ethnicity being described here is historically and culturally embedded, and has been one of the distinguishing elements of indigenous civil society in Africa. It is expressed through the various self-help organizations, “tribal unions”, cooperatives and traditional associations that dot the social landscape of several African countries. The roles of these organizations have become more important with the decline of state capacity. In fact, in Nigeria and Kenya, local growth centres have been hijacked by government, which has attempted to mainstream them into the development process. This is not however the kind of mainstreaming that is being advocated here. Rather it is that as is consistent with the decentralization schemes already introduced in many countries, ethnic units, which are already serving as development units should be organized into self-administering building blocks of the state. This might require some form of state supervision and in some cases subvention, but it must enjoy a great degree of autonomy in revenue generation, development planning and overall administration. Already, in southeastern Nigeria, among the Igbo, there are sub-ethnic units called “Autonomous Communities”, which function along the lines being suggested here (for a good historical sketch of this system, see Uzoigwe, 2004). If ethnic communities are granted such autonomy and given a part in the determination of their development, this would go a long way to reducing the agitation that arises from allegations of marginalization, neglect, or domination. It would also go a long way in changing the perception of government as a Father Christmas of sorts, and give meaning to decentralization which, it is generally agreed, has to be a major plank of state reconstitution in Africa.

Conclusion

The challenge facing the state in Africa today is how to domesticate and manage ethnicity at a time when ethnic privileging has increasingly filled the void created by the decline of state privileging. Coming from a mostly radical political economy background, African scholars have approached this subject from the perspective of the resolution of the National Question. Although contributions to the debate have identified the authoritarian excesses of the state as a key factor militating against resolution, the adversarial characterization of relations between the state and ethnic groups is not very helpful (cf. Nzongola-Ntalaja and Lee, 1997; Mohammed Salih and Markakis, 1998). I have tried to argue in this paper that the collapse of the state provides the opportunity for forging new partnerships between the state and (mostly new) autonomy-seeking and development-oriented ethnic interests to accelerate the development of ethnic groups and reduce the historical inequalities and imbalances that have historically fed ethnic mobilization. By transferring the greater responsibility for development from the state to members of the groups themselves, a major part of the ethnic problem in Africa, that of approaching the state in extractive and predatory terms, would be reduced, if not eliminated. As I have argued, the emphasis on reconciling and accommodating elite interests in the name of managing ethnicity is the main obstacle to this trajectory of positive ethnicity.

End Notes

- (1) By contrast, the opposite coupling of the state and ethnicity, which is by far more popular in the literature, imposes a different trajectory of analysis. First, it posits the state as the central actor in the management (and mismanagement) of ethnicity and, secondly, it approaches ethnicity as a dependent variable whose form and character depends, among others, on the actions and policies of the state.
- (2) Thus, analyses of ethnicity in African states simply assume that the fact of there being Hausas, Yorubas, Igbos, Nupes, Edos, Idomas and so on in Nigeria, Krahn, Gio, Bassa, Kpelle, Gola, Kissi, Mandingo and others in Liberia, or Luo, Kikuyu, Kalenjin and others in Kenya, is sufficient evidence that ethnicity is a problem in these countries.
- (3) Governor Clifford actually dismissed the notion of a Nigerian nation as dangerous to the “very root of national self-government in Nigeria, which secures to each separate people the right to maintain its identity, its individuality and its nationality; its own chosen form of government; and the peculiar political and social institutions”.

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