

Ethnicity: A Cause of Political Instability in Africa?

By: Abiero Opondo.

As we say goodbye to the Organization of African Unity (O.A.U), and usher in new African Union, one of the issues African leaders need to ponder over is how to balance ethnic consciousness and national patriotism in the continent. Looking at myriad conflicts in countries such as Liberia, D.R. Congo, Burundi, Congo, Somalia, Algeria and Madagascar etc, one wonders as to what could be their causes. Depending on one's academic persuasion, many scholars have recognized ethnicity as a major cause of political instability, chaos and bloodshed in the continent. But we cannot rule out poor governance, dictatorship and abysmal poverty in the whole problem of conflict in Africa and the world. But we must define our concepts. Many times the terms tribe and ethnicity are used as if they were the same though they are not.

According to J.F. Ajayi, a Nigerian scholar, tribe and tribalism were the predecessors of the concept of ethnicity and their conception began in the colonial state. Coming from the Latin word, *tribus*, that meant territorial division of Rome, the word *tribe* was later used to describe the descendants of twelve sons of Jacob/Israel in the old Testament. However, the French, Belgians and British scholars and colonialists later seized this concept, loaded with racist connotations, to refer to 'simple' or lesser people, primitive folks, illiterate, pre-industrial, pre-scientific and static societies of Africa. Indeed the term *tribe* was, at its conception, the preserve of Anthropologists. Later on, the Wazungu, categorized all Africans, whether hunters or pastoralists, as tribes. It is an anachronism that even after independence, the term is still in vogue and used, in some countries, in the filling of forms for employment, marriage, passport, school admission and census thus perpetuating the very notion of tribalism.

But what is ethnicity? It refers to a shared cultural identity, involving similar practices; initiations, beliefs and linguistic features passed over from one generation to another. If we follow this definition it would be correct to say that Rwanda has one group of people with one language and similar culture hence one ethnicity. So is Somalia? Many countries in Africa have numerous ethnicities; for example, Nigeria has over 250 'tribes', Kenya over 40 and Tanzania over 60. Africa today has the highest number of 'tribes' and hence the highest number of conflicts and instability. To a great extent there would be nothing wrong to have all these ethnic groups since they are primordial, that is, we found them there when we were born. It becomes bad only when politicians and other leaders invoke "ethnic action and nationalism", for ulterior motives, to achieve political and economic objectives; and that is when conflict begins in a vicious circle with no end in sight as exemplified in Liberia.

"Ethnic Nationalism" is some kind of biological organism, based on real or mythical common descent, purity of race, sovereignty, language and culture and declaration of an exclusive zone for 'us' and not 'them'. This type of "tribalism", gaining political wave in Europe today, as shown by Jean Marie le Penn's politics in France, is very dangerous, as it is exclusivist and isolationist. It is this type of negative nationalism that caused genocide in Armenia, Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Hitler's Germany. This kind of ethnicity has wrought terrorism in the Middle East and the whole world. It has engendered political instability in Sierra Leone and even Liberia. It also led to Apartheid system of government in old South Africa.

In many parts of Africa where political conflicts exist, ethnicity cannot be ruled out, except in Algeria where there is religious extremism. Ethnicity has been used in many parts of the African continent in terms of mobilisation by political failures lacking tangible agenda for their countries, and for seeking economic power. When a politician fails to 'eat' he or she will probably run to his "tribe" claiming that they are being finished and this works on their psychology causing conflicts? Unpatriotic leaders use ethnicity to organise people for political action pretentiously to 'defend' ethnic interests. Ethnic consciousness is a product of contradictions embodied in political relations of structured inequality common in many African nations. A good example of this happened in Nigerian Biafra civil war in 1967.

At independence, and even in this era of multi-party politics, many political parties were not based on any fundamental ideology but ethnicity. In fact there is no doubt that many a times political parties were formed on ethnic lines, and this became a threat to stability as President Museveni of Uganda believes. In fact this era of multi-party competition political has worsened ethnicity. All in all, we cannot wish ethnicity to disappear, to go away, but can only tame it through education, good governance, and justice and increased economic development in Africa. We ought to understand that nation-states can exist only when the state apparatus is associated with a people who think of themselves as one and the same and it is pertinent that politicians unites us by creating a strong sense of nationhood and patriotism by their actions and utterances.

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