

# Building Bridges or Barricades

## Considering Ethnic Identities in Africa

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Any contemporary discourse in Africa that undermines the postcolonial dimension in the explication of its experiences will run against that continent's historiography. Postcolonial experiences here concern the activities of interrelated periods that, in concert, determine and shape the future and destiny of the African people, both within the continent and in the diaspora. The periods identified in this article include the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial. Any discussion of the African condition without due recognition of the interrelated activities of these periods will obviously be wrongheaded. Therefore, the arguments in this work take into account the events of these periods and the way they have generated disappointment, frustration, despair, and, consequently, parochial identities in Africa today.

The article attempts to analyze the factors that, in concert, have contributed to multiple crises in the African sociocultural and political landscape. The most devastating of these—the political—concerns the inability to evolve a viable system suitable for the management of daily social experiences. This failure has produced many other problems in other spheres that have made the atmosphere in Africa one of frustration, which is largely responsible for the many crises of adversarial politics.

Truly, this has enabled the affirmation of parochial identities and ethnic strife to the detriment of the rather transcendental national identity in contemporary African states. But why have the affirmation of sectional identities and the attendant conflicts remained daunting, intricate, and resilient in spite of attempts

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to create a higher culture to transcend them? Why has the myth of common ancestry, religion, and tribes, among other primordial attachments, become the reason for sociopolitical alliances and thus the basis for the affirmation of narrow identities in contemporary Africa?

It is pertinent to examine these questions today, if only to offer an appropriate perspective to understanding the nature of Africa's present sordid condition and how we reached this level of our predicament. The fact is that unless we know the real nature of our problems, we may not be able to provide appropriate solutions to them. Many have described the African state as one on the verge of collapse and in the same breath have considered the present generation of Africans failures. All of this results from the fact that African political leaders and their followers cannot manage themselves, their societies, and their resources. The question is, why are things falling apart in Africa?

This article asks these questions in a way usually ignored by scholars who have dwelled on African crises. They have done so because of their belief that the resources in ideas, techniques, and, in some respect, values offered by certain traditions may not suffice to explicate or unearth the complexities of the nature of the African predicament. That is, sometimes whatever we do may be controlled by—or at least affected by—our assumptions although most of the time, we are unaware of them.

We need to seek a local solution to African problems since they have become resilient in spite of the several attempts to address them. Such a solution is based upon the fact that cultural values do not operate in vacuum but are tied to other presuppositions in the society that can be understood and measured only after we have laid bare the systems of knowledge, values, and symbols that structure the minds of the people in Africa. The point here is the promotion of an understanding of African belief systems through the exposition of their logical structures and the assumptions on which they stand. This would explain that our values depend on certain societal beliefs and practices that provide the framework within which human experience is interpreted. In view of this fact and, in particular, the role that culture plays in the organization of our social and political lives, the application of external solutions in mediating African crises may be the reason for the daunting nature of the problems. What, then, is the local solution to this African predicament? Before proceeding, however, we must gain some insight into how these problems—especially ethnic crises—arise.

## The Evolution of Ethnic Conflicts

In the discourse about African crises, the issue of ethnic conflict easily comes to mind. According to the literature, the cause of ethnic strife in Africa is the continent's sociocultural configuration or the divisive tendency of ethnic or tribal plurality. Chris Uroh says that this tendency is the product of the way ethnocultural groups, as a result of colonialism, have become chaotically crammed within the various African states—a situation that has brought Africa to the boiling point. Against this background is the view that the divisive structure of ethnic groups is one of the several manifestations of a more fundamental problem on the sociopolitical landscape in Africa.<sup>1</sup> This view presupposes that ethnic conflict in Africa is a product of the failure of African states to justify their existence by pursuing the common good of the people. That is to say, because the state has failed to meet its obligation, citizens must seek social fulfilment in their primordial enclaves.

This article addresses the development of these two dominant views on the question of ethnic conflicts in Africa. That is, regardless of the way we may want to look at these opposing views, they do not undermine the existence of diverse ethnic groups and the fact that from time to time, they come into conflict with one another. Our concern is not with the problem of what has been identified as regime legitimation but with how, in spite of the diversity of ethnic groupings and their attendant conflicts, we can harmonize our differences and live like brothers.<sup>2</sup> Only after we have effectively managed our differences can the question of the legitimacy of the state become meaningful. Even if the state is responsive to the common good of the people, because of the sociocultural differences in African societies, social relations will not eliminate ethnic conflicts. In other words, “because our societies comprise a multitude of religions, ethnic groups with competing interests, values and needs, conflict is inevitable and natural to most societies.”<sup>3</sup> If conflict is inevitable in this sense, then “the challenge is how to develop within African political processes, institutions and cultures that can mediate these competitions, peacefully, routinely, in a way that does not plunge our society into the spiral of conflict and violence.”<sup>4</sup> This is because stable societies throughout the world are not those without conflicts but those that can manage them in stable ways. But how can we routinely and peacefully mediate ethnic conflict in Africa? We return to this question in the latter part of the article but now consider an explanation of how these conflicts come about.

It is significant to note from the outset that conflicts are inevitable and natural to all human societies as long as we are constituted differently and our attitudes and behaviors are shaped by our geographical and social systems. No doubt, many

answers to how conflicts are generated in Africa vie for attention. This study concerns itself with what we may call the colonial dimension in the African predicament and its implications for social solidarity.

### The Colonial Dimension in Africa's Predicament

Undoubtedly, ideas vary regarding the structures and institutions bequeathed to us by our colonizers. Some have suggested that ethnic crises in Africa are not a product of the way ethnic groups were chaotically crammed into African states as a result of colonial conquest.<sup>5</sup> To assert the above is to say that there is something inherently conflictual about social or cultural pluralism.<sup>6</sup> Some culturally plural societies do not have crises or are not as crisis-ridden as those we find in Africa (e.g., Nigeria, Côte D'Ivoire, Somalia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, etc.). Nevertheless, it is equally misleading in the sense that if we examine the issue in this light, we are likely to overlook the intention of colonizers concerning state formation and its implication for social cohesion. For Olusegun Oladipo, with regard to state formation, the colonizers combined the "territories of formally distinct people to form colonial territories."<sup>7</sup> Eme Awa notes that "the colonial systems and the political processes of both the pre-and-post-independence era turned the normal cultural differences into debilitating ethnic cleavages. Poorly formulated and inefficiently executed economic policies over the past 50 years caused the retardation of certain areas and thereby tended to aggravate tension along ethnic lines in many countries."<sup>8</sup> The colonizers did this because they needed to separate the spheres of influence of different European rulers.<sup>9</sup> That is, the colonizers did not seek to create new states in the colonies for social and economic development; rather, as Oladipo observes, the demarcation was meant to "ensure colonial control and dispossession could be achieved without undue rivalry among colonizers."<sup>10</sup> Hugh Clifford, Nigeria's colonial governor in the 1920s, also attests to the fact that the ideas of the "cramming together of territories of formally distinct people to form colonial territories was deliberate policy of the colonizers." He told the members of the National Council for British West Africa that he was "convinced of the rights, for example, of the people of Egbaland . . . of any of the great emirates of the north . . . to maintain that each one of them is a nation . . . (and that) it is the task of the government of Nigeria to build and fortify these national institutions."<sup>11</sup>

The above indicates the colonizers' recognition of the differences of the many ethnic groups they jammed together, the implication of which was the dispossession of people having those values and practices that hitherto had served as vehicles for social identity and solidarity. According to Yaya Abubakar, this situation

is “characterized by the total collapse of moral consciousness or what he calls the result of a deep contamination of the original human-centered African communal philosophy, which unavoidably led to a continuous decay of the African sociopolitical framework that is now aggravated by exponential decline in economic viability.”<sup>12</sup> This “cultural and social dispossession” put the “people of the colonies under a form of control that prevented them from questioning colonial practices and the assumptions on which they were based.”<sup>13</sup> For the colonialists, to do the contrary would “mould one citizenry from the many people,” which would amount to the “formulation of policies geared towards development of a new consensus among the various peoples they brought together to form new colonial territories.”<sup>14</sup> The colonizers were not prepared to accept this option because it could eventually be used to question the legitimacy of their authority. Hence, the colonizers adopted the divide-and-rule system in their territories, which sufficiently disunited the people in their colonies. Again, Governor Clifford presented this point when he said that his administration would seek to secure “to each separate people the right to maintain its identity, its individuality and its nationality, its chosen form of government, and the peculiar political and social institutions, which have been evolved for it by the wisdom and the accumulated experiences of generations of its forbearers.”<sup>15</sup> This emphasis on the separation of ethnic groups created a new sense of communal consciousness and identity for the people where none existed and provided a new symbolic and ethnocentric focus for each group. This, of course, not only complicated the task of molding diverse elements in each colony into a coherent whole but also became the “source of many life threatening conflicts, which were to proliferate, and consequently impede the process of community development and social solidarity, in many African countries, a few decades after independence.”<sup>16</sup> We have examples of these conflicts in states like Liberia, Somalia, Sudan, Zaire, Rwanda, Côte d’Ivoire, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria, among others. In all, we can say that the divide-and-rule mechanism adopted by the European colonizers widened the social distance among the communal groups, consequently reinforcing the ethnocentric factor in the emergence of ethnicity.

Although colonialism as a system was exploitative and oppressed the African people and their resources, it also formed a bourgeoisie class in Africa in the form of nationalists whose policies and activities are partly the source of ethnic conflicts in Africa. When many African states gained independence, the nationalists who took over the mantle of leadership from the colonialists not only were “interested in replacing Europeans in leading positions of power and privileges” but also created opportunities for themselves and their cronies, enabling them to plunder the states’ resources and reserving existing opportunities and benefits in the states for

themselves and people from their ethnic or tribal enclaves.<sup>17</sup> As Nzongola-Ntalaja poignantly observes in *The Crisis in Zaire*, “It is the national ruling class itself that constitutes the principal obstacle to economic growth and development through the privatisation of the state, depriving it of those essential means and capabilities within which to generate economic growth [and] improve the living conditions of the masses.”<sup>18</sup> Mobutu Sese Seko is one of those who plundered the economy of his state for personal gain: “Since he came to power, Mobutu has been alleged to hold about US \$4 billion in a numbered Swiss Bank account he owns. Documentary evidence of the extent of corruption also attested to the fact that Mobutu, his family and friends own twenty-six extensive properties in Belgium and France.”<sup>19</sup>

In Nigeria, the story is not completely different from that of Mobutu. For a very long time, the North used its control of the seat of power to promote itself by the initiation and execution of policies and programs that secured key positions in the politico-economic spheres of the country. This move was supported by the much-disputed “Federal Character” clause in the 1979 constitution (section 14[3]a), meant to regulate any imbalance in the distribution of opportunities and benefits. The Nigerian situation, however, was unlike that in the United States where the principles of affirmative action were designed to compensate certain groups of people because of wrongs suffered in the past. Specifically, no group wronged another, and, as Peter Bodunrin declares, there were no victims of past discriminatory government or social policies by any other group. Here, we have no guilty group normally bound to make reparation for past misdeeds.<sup>20</sup> Hence, to use the principle of the Federal Character clause to distribute opportunities and benefits as it is being done in Nigeria generates confusion in the sense that those not so placed or represented in the scheme of things inevitably feel alienated from and thus completely lack confidence in the state. Consequently, the state becomes derelict in its responsibility to citizens insofar as it cannot provide for their common good, and they gradually withdraw into their tribal or ethnic enclaves for social fulfilment. This withdrawal is occasioned by the conscious or sentimental connection of the people to their values, especially their communal way of life. When individuals recoil into their ethnic enclaves, we can then say that the “moral bond” that tied the citizens to the state—the real basis upon which the state could justify its power over them—has been weakened if not cut entirely.<sup>21</sup> The state is no longer at ease, things have really fallen apart, and a kind of social dislocation has occurred.

In this circumstance, frustration, mutual distrust, and complete hatred become the order of the day. What follows is a complete disregard for the state, which becomes an arena of ethnic conflicts where social relationships can no longer produce “important common goals, interests and values in terms of which a

sense of neighbourliness can be developed among them and national identity forged.”<sup>22</sup>

If the foregoing discussion of the social predicament of the African state is valid, then Africa’s current situation is one of uncertainty and despair. Thus, the question becomes, how do we generate these important common goals, interests and values that will lead to the evolution of national identity that transcends primordial attachments and other forms of sociopolitical alliances?

### Beyond Ethnic Identities: Local Solutions

We must attempt to create a higher culture that transcends these plural identities. Central to the realization of the needs and interests of diverse groups is the healthy harmonization of the differences of all ethnic groups in Africa by allowing equal representation not only in decision making but also in the distribution of benefits and opportunities—what Kwasi Wiredu calls “formal representation.”<sup>23</sup> This in itself, however, can also engender disaffection among the groups because one group will probably “place any one group of persons consistently in position of minority whose right to representation is periodically violated.”<sup>24</sup> Here, representation in the decision-making body as we find in Western democracy cannot guarantee healthy relationships without ensuring representation of the will of the representatives in decision making. To do so, we must shift our platform of discourse.

Such a shift discourages the pursuit of individual or group interests through the oppression and exploitation of others. This is a type of consensual democracy, to use Wiredu’s terms, in which opinions of all the ethnic groups in the state can be harmonized. We may not be able to arrive at this form of consensus without the existence of a democratic atmosphere that will ensure the full representation of all ethnic groups. Here, we are not referring to the Western type of democracy in which the number game is highly prized. The conception of democracy that emphasizes majority rule constantly puts some groups “periodically to be substantively unrepresented minorities.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, rather than promoting cooperation among ethnic groups, this form of democratic arrangement generates conflicts and disaffection among them.

The following approach, which follows Wiredu’s, reflects a shift from the Western model of democracy because the latter is inadequate and at variance with African democratic aspirations. The Western democratic tradition does not square properly with Africa’s “specific historical institutional forms of democratic practice.”<sup>26</sup> Is there anything wrong, for example, with our devising creatively new institutional forms and practices relevant to African political experiences yet im-

bining the values and principles of democracy? For example, it is possible for us to accept the necessity of pluralism without necessarily adopting the criteria for differentiating between the pluralities. The idea here is to say that we can conceptualize political formation that can be based on tribal or ethnic groups, communities, or nationalities rather than political parties. To say that political parties are in the interest of national solidarity, political security, and progressive consciousness flies in the face of the fact that African societies are notable for their primary group loyalty and multinationalities.

The problem one can imagine from this is whether such social formations are sources of social cleavages or group solidarity and potential conflict, especially since political elites can exploit them for their self-centered goals. One cannot dismiss the possibility of this problem. Yet, to ignore such important social pluralism is problematic for Africa's sociopolitical development because it cannot be mediated if we do not see these formations as vehicles of political expression. Of course, to overlook it may elicit some form of "anomic interest articulation, communal violence and centrifugal tendencies" as we find in many African states today.<sup>27</sup> Hence, any viable democratic arrangement for the resolution of conflicts in Africa must reflect the sociocultural and historical realities of its societies. As Wiredu suggests, we require a democratic framework based on the consensus practiced in many traditional African settings—for instance, the Akan of Ghana. By consensus, we mean "a condition in which two or more persons or group(s): concerned with decisions . . . about which conflict might occur, are in appropriate agreement in their belief about what decision should be made and have some feeling of unanimity with each other and with the society as a whole."<sup>28</sup> This idea of consensus presupposes, among other things, the "original position of diversity" or disagreement.<sup>29</sup> The essence of the practice of democratic consensus is to transcend conflicting positions in such a way that all the parties involved in a dispute "are able to feel that adequate account has been taken of their point or view in any proposed scheme of future action of co-existence."<sup>30</sup>

From the foregoing, we can identify two advantages of this form of political system based on consensus. First, the democratic arrangement must be representative of all such opinions. Second, since all ethnic groups will be duly represented, decisions made through "dialogic confrontation," to use Mikhail Bakhtin's phrase, will be based on consensus. Adopting this framework ensures that in "working out solutions in a situation of conflict of opinions or disagreement, account should be taken of all the interests involved."<sup>31</sup> Doing so "smoothes the edges" or sorts out differences to arrive at what Ali Mazrui calls shared images.<sup>32</sup> This is possible, Mazrui says, because images grow, are modified, and interconnect with other im-



ages through what he refers to as rational discourse. In other words, through rational discourse we arrive at something suitable for everyone.

*Suitable* does not necessarily mean what everyone consents to but what is considered existentially beneficial through dialogue and mutual agreement among the parties in dispute. In this way, the agreement of all parties makes it impossible to exclude a minority in the process of decision making, as can occur in a multi-party system. Anke Graness writes that this practice secures a “substantial representation of interest” of members in a dispute.<sup>33</sup>

As mentioned earlier, basing decision making in plural societies on majority opinions places some people permanently out of the scheme of things, invariably leading to the imposition of majority views on minority ethnic groups and denying them basic needs, opportunities, and benefits. This majoritarian kind of decision making is responsible for the well-known inclemency of adversarial politics in Africa, such as the Niger Delta crisis in Nigeria. The minority ethnic groups in the Niger Delta, which includes a substantial amount of the country’s oil wealth, suffer socioeconomic and ecological problems because those who wield political power have neglected the “goose that lays the golden egg.” The powerful majority groups use their position to exploit the offices of the state rather than transform it. In spite of the palliatives of amnesty, this situation can hardly ameliorate the suffering of the people in the means of plenty, instead producing a kind of alienation that destroys the foundation of any social solidarity.

The point, then, of the management of ethnic conflicts through consensus is to eliminate the problem inherent in the practice of keeping some people or groups permanently out of schemes designed to resolve conflicts in which they are involved. Put differently, any state that adopts this principle of consensual democracy in the resolution of ethnic conflicts stands to benefit because doing so would ensure that all the “voices” of the diverse groups would be heard. Moreover, such a conversation (not confrontation), to use John Rawls’s phrase, would facilitate a unanimous decision. Here, “unanimity and all the rigorous processes and compromises that lead to it are all efforts made to contain the wishes . . . of the majority and the minority ethnic groups in the state.”<sup>34</sup> In fact, it is designed to arrive at the “general will of the people in conflicts.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, consensus becomes desirable not as a means through which the majority imposes its will on others but as the “process of regulating normal life among brothers.”<sup>36</sup>

Since our consensual model of democracy presupposes a situation in which claims and counterclaims can be heard, thereby resolving conflicting claims in a nonviolent manner, such a democratic arrangement is characterized by undistorted communication among the participants as well as tolerance of each other’s views. Furthermore, participants in this arrangement deliberate on issues under a

condition of equal advantage. The fact that representatives of ethnic groups are equal, at least in terms of their status in the course of discussions, provides an opportunity for fair deliberation, the outcome of which will likely prove acceptable to all parties involved. Decisions can be reached through voting by all representatives. Wiredu emphasizes that the idea of voting should not be confused with the decision-making principle of the supreme right of the majority because that “consensus as a decision procedure requires, in principle, that each representative should be persuaded, if not of the optimality of each decision, at least of its practical necessity, all things considered.”<sup>37</sup>

This is to say, the parties whose views do not prevail come to understand the reasoning of those whose views are accepted. The latter “prevail upon them to accept the decision arrived at, not just to live with it.”<sup>38</sup> This is not a case of the oppression of weak groups by the strong but a case of one group convincing the other to see the practical necessity of its points. Decisions made through *rational conversation* of this sort would enjoy the support of all ethnic groups because the whole process involves every representative operating under a condition of equal advantage and tolerating all shades of opinion in decision making. In fact, we can say that the decision reached is the whole and that the contributions of all stakeholders are the parts—the totality of the ideas. This view can be equated with postmodernist absolutes or metanarratives, for experience has shown that such totalizing views marginalize only certain cultures or sectors within a culture that holds such metanarratives. Wholeness, therefore, is simply a standpoint or a reference point in which various views about the issue at stake are perceived as interconnected and interdependent. They are not joined by a single metanarrative but by common human concerns with family semblance among them. We can depict this wholeness metaphorically: “The universe [can be] . . . described as a vast net, and at each junction where the meshes meet sits a jewel. Each jewel reflects the light of all the jewels around it; and all of those jewels reflect others around them. In this way, the whole universe of jewels is ultimately reflected in every single jewel.”<sup>39</sup>

### Conditions for the Practical Realization of Agreement

What are the conditions for the practical realization of this form of wholeness? To put it in another way, what are the conditions that will create the atmosphere for a sustainable consensus of ideas? We stated earlier that the idea of rational consensus presupposes the existence of disagreement and that the resolution of this disagreement involves an encounter between the parties in dispute who are willing to transcend their differences to a position of consensus. Such an encoun-

ter cannot exist when one party dominates the other. In this dialogic situation, no privileged opinion can exist; rather, all opinions are subject to rigorous deliberation until the terms of truth are accepted: "Dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one party depositing ideas in another."<sup>40</sup> As an act that denounces the relation of domination, dialogue is a task of responsible people who operate in an arena of freedom.

Besides the issue of freedom to express one's view, dialogue as the common task of transcending differences cannot exist without humility or what Francis Deng calls the "reaching out" principle in his essay "Reaching Out: A Dinka Principle of Conflict Management." If a party considers itself over and above the other(s) or believes that it has a monopoly on knowledge or truth, that party will manipulate the discourse to its own advantage. For example, If I am tormented and disturbed by the possibility of being displaced or if I am close to and even offended by the contribution of others, how can there be dialogue? In an atmosphere of dialogue, we must develop the attitude of tolerance while admitting the possibility that previously held views can change. Note Deng's discussion of the Missiriya Arab tribes of southern Kordofan in Western Sudan:

Chief Babo Nimir told of a peace conference between his tribe and the Rezeigat, another Arab tribe in the western province of Darfur. A Missiriya had killed a man from Rezeigat. According to the Missiriya custom, blood wealth was thirty head of cattle, while among the Rezeigat, it was one hundred. Negotiations on the price were deadlocked. "We spent that whole day without result." Babo Nimir reports, . . . "We spent the night. The following morning, we withdrew and reviewed our position. I was the one who spoke with the Mamour. I said, 'Here we are, stuck at 30. Our position, I believe, is wrong. We are basing our argument on our own custom within our tribe. Conflicts within one tribe are not the same as conflicts between separate tribes.'" His position moderated the demands of the Rezeigat and a compromise was reached at 70 cows, with one bull for the burial cloth, setting a precedent at 71 cows.<sup>41</sup>

This resolution does not rest only on the humility of the Missiriya tribe; the principle of reaching out is a bridging function that involves magnanimity and generosity rather than weakness.

In addition to the above, dialogue requires an intense faith in one another. Without initial faith in the possibility of transcending our differences, there can be no dialogue. Faith in one another "is an a priori requirement for dialogue: the dialogical man believes in other men even before he meets them face to face."<sup>42</sup> Founding itself on freedom, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between discussants is the logical consequence. It would amount to a contradiction in terms if dialogue based on freedom, humility, and faith does not create the atmosphere of mutual trust that will eliminate the imposition of ideas. As Paulo Freire puts it, "Trust is contingent in the evi-

dence which one party provides the others of his true, concrete intention; it cannot exist if any party's words do not coincide with his actions. To say one thing and do another to take one's word lightly cannot inspire trust."<sup>43</sup> Whereas faith in one another is an a priori requirement for dialogue, mutual trust is established by dialogue. Without these conditions, we cannot talk of any meaningful dialogue.

It is important to note that these conditions are given expression in different cultural settings in Africa. For example, the concepts of *Ubuntu* in the Zulu language of South Africa, *Ujamaa* in Kiswahili, and *Parapo* in Yoruba of Nigeria emphasize cooperation, mutual respect, and support as well as unity within and across the community. The prevalence of this vital force is manifest in our collective goal, which is peace. It points to the commitments of the community as men and women of all ages are allowed to participate meaningfully in cooperation.

## Conclusion

The attempt thus far has been that, in spite of the differences of ethnic groups and their attendant conflicts, we can effectively control or resolve our ethnic differences. By doing so, we have deliberately avoided the question of whether ethnic crises in the African state are products of the sociocultural configurations of African society or of the state's inability to fulfil its obligation to its citizens. This is because ethnic conflict is a human phenomenon, and as social beings who must of necessity interact with one another, we must seek viable ways of transcending our differences and live like brothers.

## Notes

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