9-1-1996

Ethnic Particularism and the Creation of State Legitimacy in West Africa

Gwendolyn Mikell

ETHNIC PARTICULARISM AND THE CREATION OF STATE LEGITIMACY IN WEST AFRICA*

Gwendolyn Mikell†

I. INTRODUCTION

Many of the conflicts in Africa today are the product of political, economic and social deprivations, rather than "tribalism." It is more productive to contrast how African "ethnicity" was created in the past and used in the present, with the ways that it might be utilized productively in the future to facilitate legitimate processes of political representation. Much of the ethnic conflict and political chaos in Sub-Saharan West Africa has roots in distorted processes of political competition that began with western colonialism approximately one hundred years ago. Colonialism abrogated existing socio-cultural compacts about the nature of political processes, religious accommodation, and the representation of groups within African communities and states.

African "ethnicity" was very much the outcome of the nineteenth-century period of colonial conquest, when western metropolitan or settler groups used force to divide, conquer, and then politically subjugate the African indigenous populations. During the decade of African independence (1957-1967), elite politicians sought to negate and bury ethnic particularism and ethnic leadership in the race to achieve "modernity" and universalism. Their rhetoric reveals that they and their states were being buffeted by Cold War conflicts and global market

---

forces. Therefore, the received state institutions and processes were not regulated by African cultural sources of political legitimacy and morality, nor by the principles of western multiparty politics.

Africans agree that they need the state to protect their persons and their rights, and to link together their multiple cultural communities. But in Liberia and Nigeria, "ethnic entrepreneurs" have emerged, using cultural identities as tools to hijack the political process and garner control and resources within the state. These two areas have had difficulty attaining "democratic governance" because ethnic entrepreneurs foment coups and civil war to stymie the process. The struggle must be to find ways of structuring the state that allows equitable representation for traditional leaders who have cultural legitimacy, for African Traditionalist/Islamic/Christian communities, and for urbanites and new elites. These configurations must bypass older colonial-ethnic constructs while allowing lower-level legitimacy to reinforce the state. This will yield a new type of "democratic" state; but then democracy always involves the adaptation of principles to local cultural conditions.

II. REJECTING THE TRIBAL VERSUS DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION

It is fashionable now to describe this era as containing a clash between "tribalism" and "democracy." It is true that these new "isms" are often described as wearing the cloak of "oppositional civilizations,"[1] but they are treated as the same old phenomena, nonetheless. In this binary construction, tribalism is portrayed as the classic embodiment of primordialism and particularism—attachments based on blood and kinship, on ascribed identities such as 'body' and 'name,'[2] and on shared beliefs and symbols. But, in contrast to the past, when Apter, Almond, Coleman and Lipset believed modernization to be holding sway,[3] now tribalism or re-tribalization is portrayed by many as increasing in parts of the third world. In essence, the descent into particularism is viewed as a rejection of all that is universal. Isaacs describes tribalism as "the refuge to which, in any case, the great masses are retreating and withdrawing in the face of the breakdown or inad-

---

1. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations,* FOREIGN AFFAIRS, Summer 1993, at 22-49.

2. Harold Isaacs, *Basic Group Identity: The Idols of the Tribe, in* ETHNICITY: THEORY AND EXPERIENCE, at 29-52. (Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan eds., 1975).

3. *See* David Apter, THE POLITICS OF MODERNIZATION (1965); GABRIEL A. ALMOND, POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT: ESSAYS IN HEURISTIC THEORY (1970); James Coleman, *Modernization: Political Aspects, in* 10 INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES (David Shils ed, 1968); SEYMOUR M. LIPSET, THE FIRST NEW NATION (1963).

equacy of all larger coherences or systems of power and social organization."[4]

Conversely, "democracy" has been portrayed as a political system which allows individuals to transcend their local identities and to maximize reason and self-interest by participating in civic decision-making. Democracy celebrates "the freedoms and dignities of the individual, the principle of government by consent of the governed," and in western societies it uses the formal institutions of "universal suffrage, the political party, [and] the elective legislature."[5] In addition, the role of political choice in shaping democratic governance was seen as corollary with the role of supply and demand in supporting market based economies.

However, reflection on events in Sub-Saharan Africa during the 1980s and the 1990s (civic strife, state collapse, and civil wars)[6] raise serious doubts that these troubles could be adequately described and understood using the stereotypical concepts of "tribalism" and "democracy." Anthropologists and historians who study African politics have always had great difficulty applying these oppositional terms, even when they were in vogue in the western political usage. They acquiesced to critics like Shils (1963) who argued that the focus needed to be on processes of the new society and on the state, instead of on the smaller cultural groups that anthropologists had traditionally studied.[7] Accordingly, it was harder to hear the exceptional analyses,[8] and the focus on linkages between these local and national realities atrophied during the 1970s.[9] In the wake of global attention of the racial and ethnic confrontations in South Africa, Coetzee argued that it was unfortunate that anthropologists were not even included in the scholarly

---

4. Isaacs, *supra* note 2, at 30.

5. STUDIES IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS 8 (Frank Munger ed, 1987). Yet, democracy has had to break away from its Greco-Roman roots: "representation as an idea grew up within the imperial framework rather than in a democracy, and had to be released from the former." *Democracy, in* THE COLUMBIA ENCYCLOPEDIA 486 (1941).

6. This is true whether we speak of West Africa, or controversial areas like Rwanda/Burundi. *See* GWENDOLYN MIKELL, COCOA AND CHAOS IN GHANA (1992); THE FAILURE OF THE CENTRALIZED STATE: INSTITUTIONS AND SELF-GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA (James S. Wunsch and Dele Olowu eds., 1990).

7. Edward Shils, *On the Comparative Study of New Nations, in* OLD SOCIETIES AND NEW STATES: THE QUEST FOR MODERNITY IN ASIA AND AFRICA, at 1-27 (Clifford Geertz ed., 1963).

8. *See* Clifford Geertz, *The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States, in* OLD SOCIETIES AND NEW STATES: THE QUEST FOR MODERNITY IN ASIA AND AFRICA, at 105-157 (Clifford Geertz ed., 1963).

9. The exceptions are important. *See* K. A. BUSIA, THE POSITION OF THE CHIEF IN THE MODERN POLITICAL SYSTEM OF ASHANTI (1951); A.L. EPSTEIN, POLITICS IN AN URBAN AFRICAN COMMUNITY (1958); MAXWELL OWUSU, THE USES AND ABUSES OF POLITICAL POWER (1970).

reassessment of ethnicity in 1975.[10] Today, it has become clearer that global economic decline, structural adjustment programs, and the post-Cold War withdrawal of western political presence in Africa have led to a dramatic escalation of these phenomena we had casually labeled as tribalism.

We must begin to accept these terms as misnomers. Given the increase in authoritarianism and repressive governments in Africa since the end of the Cold War, it becomes more difficult to accept that simple "tribalism" is reflected in the recent clashes between ethnic, cultural and religious groups, or that "democratic" principles are being rejected when such clashes occur. Now that CNN, BBC, VOA, and FBIS take us into the heart of strife-torn areas it is more possible than ever before to hear the voices of ordinary Africans rising above the din of statements from autocratic presidents, faction leaders, military government officers, and ethnic entrepreneurs. The mass-based voices question our conclusion that the conflict represents simple tribal animosity, anti-Islamic sentiment, or the absence of a value placed on the franchise and on elected national government.

This forces us to reexamine the social history and terminology that has supported our earlier judgements. Because we have mistaken "ethnic allegiances" for tribalism, and demands for "dual political authority"[11] as anti-democratic sentiment, we have missed much of the complexity of contemporary problems in Africa. Some of this complexity is evident in the recent situations of conflict in anglophone West Africa that I examine here: Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria. These cases show that the descent into particularistic conflicts is sometimes symptomatic of a subverted search for universal principles which can govern the interactions of social groups in national life. The data also makes the case that local phenomenon have a diverse parentage, and that global influences on local realities have encouraged us to use our designated misnomers.

III. MISNOMERS: "TRIBALISM" VERSUS "AFRICAN ETHNICITY"

There is no doubt that ethnic/political conflicts are endemic on the African continent.[12] However, instead of using the word "tribalism" to describe these conflicts, it is more productive to contrast the ways that African "ethnicity" and political culture operated in the past and the

---

10. J.H. Coetzee, Formative Factors in the Origins and Growth of *Afrikaner Ethnicity*, in Ethnicity in Modern Africa, at 235-252 (Brian du Toit ed., 1978).

11. *See* Richard L. Sklar, *The African Frontier for Political Science, in* AFRICA AND THE DISCIPLINES (Robert Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr eds., 1993).

12. Olusegun Obasanjo, former President of Nigeria, has written that "the continent is a theatre for more endemic deadly conflicts than any other region of the world. These have had devastating effects on African societies." CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN AFRICA (Frances Deng and William Zartman's ed., 1991).

ways that these were altered during the colonial period, with the ways that they might be used productively within the African context in the future.

The assertion here is that African ethnic loyalties (i.e., African identities that have particular cultural characteristics and legacies) may be used to facilitate legitimate processes of political representation. This conclusion is drawn from the observations that African cultural groups have traditionally moved in pluralistic environments, and that peaceful and integrative interactions with others having different identities has been common in Africa until recent periods.[13] Groups with different size, economic strategies, and levels of power met and competed for territory, space, resources, even the "state," but accommodation between groups was the normal outcome. This history negates the use of the term tribalism because it implies innate opposition and hostility between identity groups. The question to ask is what special circumstances were required to move ethnic interactions from accommodation to conflict.

An ETHNIC GROUP is the term that Barth and other social scientists have used to denote groups of persons who recognize themselves as members of a group that has very particular characteristics, including: (1) persistence over time, (2) shared religious, ideational, and other cultural features, (3) specific forms of communication and interaction, and (4) mutual self identification as a category distinct from others. Although these are culture bearing groups, the content of ethnic group culture can and does often change in subtle or significant ways over time, often in response to the social and environmental contexts within which the group lives, and the conditions of its interaction with others. Haaland has pointed out the economic determinants in the ways that Fur and Baggara ethnic identities shift in the context of life in the Sudan.[14] Therefore, anthropologists have stressed that *ethnicity is a social construct*, which exists in the presence of other groups of contrasting identity and characteristics. Ethnic particularism and ethnic boundaries exist, but these are adaptive and capable of change, rather than static and intransigent.[15]

Changing historical epochs have influenced the nature of integrative shifts among African cultural groups. But the integrative aspects of African religions have contributed to ethnic amalgamation, rather than conflict. The expansion of West African Islam, first through trading and

---

13. *See* Ronald Cohen and John Middleton, *Introduction, in* FROM TRIBE TO NATION IN AFRICA: STUDIES IN INCORPORATION PROCESSES, at 1-35 (1970).

14. Gunnar Haaland, *Economic Determinants in Ethnic Processes, in* ETHNIC GROUPS AND BOUNDARIES, at 58-73 (Fredrik Barth ed., 1969).

15. *See* FREDRIK BARTH, ETHNIC GROUPS AND BOUNDARIES (1969).

then through jihads, also challenged African cultural groups towards
new levels of integration. Although Islam was first confined to the
margins of society, it was gradually given special functional roles and
structural positions, and finally integrated in particular ways within
African ethnic constructs. In Senegambia and Nigeria, the Malinke and
Hausa were Islamicized through conquest, but in Ghana the Muslims
were placed in certain residential wards of the city, and were assigned
special administrative and supernatural roles to play relative to mem-
bers of the Ashanti/Akan ethnic group.[16] Nigerian Yoruba religion was
so integrative that the gods of new people were added to the pantheon,
and even Islam was accepted and integrated.[17] Christianity proved
more difficult because of western missionary refusal to allow integra-
tion, but after independence, Christianity too became a medium for
inter-ethnic amalgamation.[18] This integration belies the stereotypical
notions of conflicts between religions such as Islam or Christianity and
traditional culture as endemic rather than constructed.

IV. ETHNIC CONFLICT UNDER COLONIALISM

Many of the present situations of ethnic conflict, political chaos,
and state disintegration in West Africa have their roots in distorted pro-
cesses of political competition that began with western colonialism
approximately one hundred years ago. What we now call African "eth-
nicity" was very much the outcome of the nineteenth-century period of
colonial conquest, when western metropolitan or settler groups used
force to divide, conquer, and then politically subjugate the African
indigenous populations. In essence, colonial policy subverted the politi-
cal and cultural legitimacy of both strong and weaker ethnic groups.[19]
I have argued that it did so by abrogating the existing sociocultural
compacts[20] about the nature of political processes, religious accommo-

---

16. *See* SHAFFER & COOPER, MANDINKO: A MUSLIM HOLY LAND (1987); M.G. SMITH,
GOVERNMENT IN ZAUZAU (1965); R.S. RATTRAY, ASHANTI LAW AND CONSTITUTION (1927).

17. *See* Peter C. Lloyd, *The Yoruba, in* PEOPLES OF AFRICA (James Gibbs ed., 1965); J. S.
TRIMMINGHAM, ISLAM IN EAST AFRICA (1964).

18. *See* BENETTA JULES-ROSETTE, THE NEW RELIGIONS OF AFRICA (1977); ENID
SCHILDKROUT, PEOPLE OF THE ZONGO: THE TRANSFORMATION OF ETHNIC IDENTITIES IN GHA-
NA (1978); BENJAMIN RAY, AFRICAN RELIGION: SYMBOL AND ACTION (1982).

19. *See* articles in AFRICAN POLITICS AND SOCIETY: THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIETIES IN
TRANSITION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA (Irving Leonard Markovitz ed., 1970). These include
Jean Suret-Canale, *The End of Chieftaincy in Guinea*, at 96-117; Norman Miller, *The Survival
of Traditional Leadership*, at 118-133; Elliott P. Skinner, *The Paradox of Rural Leadership*, at
134-137.

20. This is my own term for the symbolic and verbal understandings between constituent
groups (familial, ethnic, religious, occupational, and gender) that made up an African political
community. See G. Mikell, *African Women's Rights Within the Context of Systemic Conflict, in*
PROCEEDINGS OF THE 89TH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF INTERNATIONAL

dation,[21] and the representation of groups within African communities and states. Thus, colonial policies forced individuals to respond to norms which promoted individual or western interests often to the exclusion of ethnic communal interests.

Emerging African scholarly data as well as newer western historical material now accept the economic and imperial motives for the European colonization of Africa as assuming priority over religious and social ones. These political economy priorities necessitated the interruption of existing African sociopolitical relationships when they interfered with British, French, or Portuguese territorial interests as set out by the 1885 Berlin Conference. Therefore, the policy of "divide and conquer" resulted in the subversion of ethnic alliances within pre-colonial West African states and the instigation of wars between neighboring ethnic groups that had hitherto had peaceful relations. The British policy of "Indirect Rule" was effected through a modified and subordinated hierarchy of African ethnic leaders, while the French policy of "Assimilation" separated the educated and literate Africans from rural and illiterate ones.[22]

Much of the existing tension between traditionalist, Islamic and Christian communities also derived from colonial policies.[23] During earlier periods, Islamic groups and other African ethnic groups sought cultural, familial, and political accommodations which resulted in some cultural assimilation,[24] but this was made more difficult by the European presence after the mid-1800s. In West African areas newly coming under French colonialism, the southward jihads of Usman dan Fodio in Nigeria, al-Hadji Umar Tal in Senegal, and Samory Toure in Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire, was intended to allow Muslims to conquer and convert local people before the French could take power.[25] These jihads

---

LAW, at 490-500 (April 5-8, 1995); G. Mikell, *Introduction*, in AFRICAN FEMINISM: WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF SURVIVAL (forthcoming 1996).

21. *See* John Paden, *Ethnic Pluralism, Integration, and Adaptation of Communal Identity in Kano, Nigeria*, in FROM TRIBE TO NATION IN AFRICA at 242-270 (Ronald Cohen & John Middleton eds., 1970).

22. *See* A. ADU BOAHEN, AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON COLONIALISM 59-63 (1987); Michael Crowder, *Indirect Rule: French and British Style*, in AFRICAN POLITICS AND SOCIETY at 26-36 (Irving Leonard Markovitz ed., 1970). *See generally* Immanuel Wallerstein, THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE: GHANA AND THE IVORY COAST (1964).

23. *See* F.K. Ekechi, *Colonialism and Christianity in West Africa: The Igbo Case*, in 12 JOURNAL OF AFRICAN HISTORY, at 103-116 (1971); S.K. ODAMTTEN, THE MISSIONARY FACTOR IN GHANA'S DEVELOPMENT, 1820-1880 (1978).

24. *See* Simon P. X. Battestini, *Muslim Influences on West African Literature and Culture*, 7 JOURNAL OF THE INSTITUTE OF MUSLIM MINORITY AFFAIRS 476-502 (July 1986).

25. *See* Barbara Callaway & Lucy Creevey, *The Islamic Encounter*, in THE HERITAGE OF ISLAM: WOMEN, RELIGION, AND POLITICS IN WEST AFRICA, at 9-27 (1994). *See also* MIKELL, *supra* note 6, at 81 end. 59 (1992).

triggered waves of southern and coastal migration that introduced new
tensions with southern ethnic groups involving competition over rights
to land, and over the role of Islamic political leadership in local culture.
Given that the centers of colonial administration lay more in the south
and coastal areas of the colonies than in the north, colonial policy
heightened concerns about whether northern newcomers were more
recognized by the colonial regime than leaders of older, traditional and
less centralized communities.

The Islamic/traditionalist tension was also heightened by colonial
attempts to use dominant ethnic groups to control "lesser ones" (Indi-
rect Rule), as well as the attempt to offset the power of former domi-
nant groups by using marginal ethnic groups in the construction of
colonial institutions. Migrant traders from other territories often had
more flexibility to operate than indigenous entrepreneurs, who were
perceived as ultimately posing a challenge to local European
mercantilists. In Ghana, Chiefs of the Asante Confederacy were first
suppressed by colonial governors, then as self-government approached,
they were allowed to reassume the political power they held upon the
eve of colonial conquest. This development not only instigated upheaval
within the nationalist movement, but also gave incentive to the creation
of a political party which was Asante, elite, and business based, and
which competed with Nkrumah's amalgamation of middle class leaders
for control over the independence process.[26] In Ghana, where ethnic
conflicts since Independence have been few, ethnic confrontations usu-
ally involved resources. The two most potent ethnic conflicts have
involved the 1968 expulsion of migrant (mostly Muslim) traders and
"strangers" who were perceived as exploiting the already fragile econo-
my, and the 1994 tensions in the North of Ghana, involving a colonially
created "paramount chiefship" that allegedly gave newcomers greater
political voice than the acephalous indigenous people.[27] Yet these dif-
ficulties did not endanger ethnic participation in national political pro-
cesses.

In Nigeria, colonial policies widened the divisions between the
Yoruba, the Hausa/Fulani, and the Igbo, the three major ethnic groups
within the country. Ironically, the tensions over Fulani conquest of the
northern and southern areas had abated, and both Hausa and some
sections of the Yoruba had converted to Islam. However, the eth-

---

26. *See* DENNIS AUSTIN, POLITICS IN GHANA, 1946-1960 (1970); JOHN FITCH & MARY
OPPENHEIMER, GHANA: END OF AN ILLUSION (1966).

27. *See* N.O. Addo, *The Alien's Compliance Law of 1968, in* GHANA JOURNAL OF SOCIOL-
OGY (1969); *Ghana: Government Negotiating Team Tours Conflict Areas in North,* (Foreign
Broadcasts Intelligence Service February 14, 1996 (FBIS-AFR-96-031, p. 25)); *Ghana: North
Versus North, in* 36 AFRICA CONFIDENTIAL, at 4 end. 14 (July 7, 1995).

nic/religious tensions were revived and re-energized by colonial policies which favored the coastal Christianizing mercantilist Igbo communities and the increasingly educated and cosmopolitan southern Yoruba who were becoming state bureaucrats. But northern Hausa/Fulani communities were marginalized because they were required to operate within retained Islamic political communities and under the leadership of Emirs. Ethnic tensions between a numerically dominant Muslim North and an educated but numerically subordinate South were moderated as long as the economy of the post-independence state was growing, and as long as parliamentary strategies for equitable political representation of ethnic areas seemed to be working. However, with economic decline in 1966 onward, the stage was set for the first Nigerian coup by General Ironsi, and for the 1966 civil war in which the Yoruba and Northerners fought to retain the secessionist Igbo Eastern Region where the country's oil resources were located.[28] Such conflicts tell us much about the ability of economic shortage to fuel nascent ethnic grievances. Nor were Ghana and Nigeria alone in having such experiences. Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi as well as many other countries have gone though these conflicts as their country sought economic and political stability after independence.[29]

V. DEMOCRACY AND THE MARKET

Today, the greatest stimulus to new conflicts may be the many economic, political, and social deprivations felt by different ethnic communities within African states. African colonial economies were designed to maximize the export of primary products (agricultural) for western industrial production, so there was a government bureaucracy in place, but little sectoral integration, industrial development, or indigenous capital investment.[30] There is no question that those strata which were in privileged positions at the end of the colonial period were well-placed to continue their dominance after independence. But most African countries came to independence with inadequate institutions for redesigning and managing the economy, and with no roadmap for creating more equitable ethnic representation in governance. Although elite

---

28. *See* JOHN DE ST. JORRE, THE BROTHERS' WAR: BIAFRA AND NIGERIA (1969); ARTHUR AGWUNCHA NWANKWO & SAMUEL UDONCHUKWU IFEJIKA, BIAFRA: THE MAKING OF A NATION (1970).

29. *See* AUSTIN, *supra* note 26; Ali A. Mazrui, *Ethnic Tensions and Political Stratification in Uganda, in* ETHNICITY IN MODERN AFRICA, at 47-68 (Brian M. du Toit ed., 1978).

30. *See* G. Mikell, COCOA AND CHAOS IN GHANA (1992); Robert Bates, *The Commercialization of Agriculture and the Rise of Rural Political Protest, in* ESSAYS ON THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF RURAL AFRICA, at 92-104 (1983); *African Debt and Financing, in* 5 INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL ECONOMICS SPECIAL REPORT 2 (Carol Lancaster and John Williamson eds., May 1986).

politicians sought to negate and bury ethnic particularism and ethnic leadership in the race to achieve "modernity" and universalism, the evidence shows that they and their states were being buffeted by Cold War conflicts and global market forces. Some have argued that African economies did not and do not now offer the conditions which will defuse ethnic competitions and support democratic development.

Nigeria provides a classic case of conflict under conditions of scarcity where the state, after independence, has been seen as the major resource and is therefore the object of intense ethnic competition.[31] Nigeria watchers have noted that the ethnic alliances which formed and reformed after 1960 usually had the western Yoruba area at its center. They note, for example: "[the] dominance of the industrial and service sectors of Nigeria's economy by those located in the Lagos-Ibadan-Abeokuta triangle, who are, of course Yoruba."[32] But the popularly perceived outcome of ethnic and political competitions after 1960 was a Yoruba dominance over industrial power, Northern (muslim) dominance in political power, and Ibo attempts at dominance over the oil resources in the Eastern region. As shifts have occurred in the global economy, and the terms of trade for Nigerian cocoa and other primary product exports have declined, this ethnic-cum-economic competition has been politically volatile, and has fueled military coups, repression, and political instability. The military, under varying ethnic leadership, has ruled Nigeria for over twenty five of the thirty five years since independence.

The tensions undergirding the 1993 coup of Sani Abacha and his subsequent jailing of the apparent winner of the Presidential elections (Moshud Abiola, a Yoruba millionaire newspaperman) are but the most recent manifestations of ethnic political conflict.[33] The irony is that in the 1993 elections, ethnic tensions had abated sufficiently for the public to support the election of a candidate who appeared to be pro-demo-

---

31. *See* Richard Joseph, *Class, State, and Pre-bendal Politics in Nigeria, in* 21 JOURNAL OF COMMONWEALTH AND COMPARATIVE POLITICS, at 21-38, (1983); E. Gyimah-Boadi, *State Enterprises Divestiture: Recent Ghanaian Experiences, in* GHANA: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF RECOVERY, at 193-209 (Donald Rothchild ed.).

32. Jean Herskovits, CENTER FOR CONCERN, Memorandum dated February 2, 1996, at 4-5.

33. Coups and changes of government have been those of: 1960, First Republic; coup January 15, 1966 (Gen. Johnson Aguiyi Ironsi-Ibo) (the Biafran Civil War intervened); coup July 29, 1966 (Col. Yakubu Gowon-Christian Yoruba); coup July 1975 (Gen. Murtala Muhammad, a Hausa northerner who was assassinated, and replaced by Gen. Olesegun Obasanjo, a Yoruba) (Obasanjo made a transition to civilian rule in 1979—Second Republic—but the civilian regime became entangled in oil intrigues, and left the country in debt); coup Dec. 31, 1983 (Major Gen. Muhammadu Buhari, a Hausa-Fulani northerner); coup August 27, 1985 (Gen. Babangida, a Gwari Muslim) (on June 12, 1993, the Presidential election of Moshud Abiola, a Yoruba, was aborted by Babangida, and a quasi-civilian regime installed); coup November 1993 (Gen. Sani Abacha, a muslim northerner). *See* 1992 DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY, *Nigeria: A Country Study.*

cratic, without regard for ethnic identity. The public anger, "ethnic-baiting" and fear which was fanned by the Abacha regime after the election annulment and coup now make such ethnic alliances more improbable. Abacha's military clique appear even more reluctant to turn over power to civilians, although local elections and a timetable for national elections have been offered. The threat of U.S. oil sanctions does not move them, because they find the threat to be without teeth. The issue is that without economic alternatives for military elites in power, without sufficient western pressure or sanctions, and given the fear of ethnic reprisals for the fate of potential President Abiola, and former Presidents Babangida, and Obasanjo, there has been little incentive for the regime to civilianize. Indeed, it has been speculated that Nigeria's support for the peace process in Liberia through its role in ECOMOG gives Abacha a regionally democratic mask behind which to hide.[34]

The link between the market and democracy is a strong one, and continues to fuel ethnic tensions in Nigeria. Abacha has cleverly engineered "zero-party elections" in which people are allowed to achieve local representation but little influence over national political decision making.[35] On the one hand, many in Nigeria and elsewhere say that these struggles over control of the state are alienating to the public, and only further fuel the popular retreat from the state.[36] Can there be democracy if no one comes out to vote? On the other hand, many pro-human rights groups, and "pro-democracy" forces say that they wish for the political strength and financial support which would make it possible for them to carry a credible candidate to an election win. Must one be a millionaire like Abiola in order to succeed in "democratic elections" or must one always have the backing of strong ethnic (Yoruba or Northern) financiers?

VI. ETHNIC ENTREPRENEURS AND CIVIL WAR

Africans agree that they need the state to protect their rights and to link together their multiple cultural communities. But African States have a peculiar history and vulnerability because of their colonial heritage and their relative youth. They have been alternatively characterized

---

34. ECOMOG is ECOWAS' military monitoring group in Liberia from September 1990 until present. *See* interview by G. Mikell with pro-democratic, women's and peace groups, in Lagos, Kaduna, Zaria and Kano (Between June 14, 1996 and June 21, 1996). *See also* ECONOMIC INTELLIGENCE UNIT, *EIU Country Profile, Nigeria 1996-97*, at 9.

35. *See Nigeria: The Transition Process*, WEST AFRICA 185 (February 5-11, 1996); and *Nigeria: Transition in High Gear*, WEST AFRICA 263 (February 19-25, 1996).

36. Claude Ake, *The Future of the State in Africa, in* 6 INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE REVIEW, at 105-114. *See also* G. Mikell, *Peasant Politicization and Economic Recuperation: Local and National Dilemmas, in* 27 J. MOD. AFR. STUD., at 455-478 (1989).

as "irrelevant states," "third-wave democracies," "failed states," "soft states," "pre-bendal states," and "post-colonial states."[37] But areas like Liberia and Nigeria have undergone ethnic conflict and civil war not because of "tribal animosities," but because groups have never been able to reconstruct their sociocultural compacts in the aftermath of colonialism, and their states remain weak with little or no legitimacy. In this transitional environment,[38] "ethnic entrepreneurs" have emerged, using cultural identities as tools to hijack the political process and garner control and resources within the state. But Liberia and Nigeria have had difficulty attaining "democratic governance" because ethnic entrepreneurs foment coups and civil war to stymie the process.[39]

Liberia is a classic case study of ethnic entrepreneurship leading to civil war, but against a background of what Mazrui has called "ethnocracy"—the domination of one ethnic group over the politics and distributions of resources within the state.[40] Amos Sawyer, former head of Transitional Government in Liberia, has described the liberian situation as one in which, without western colonialism, one hegemonic group of expatriated slaves from the Americas (Americo-Liberians) succeeded in creating the state and coopting the ability of local ethnic groups to govern themselves.[41] The ensuing hostilities between the Americo-Liberians and the indigenous peoples were mediated but not resolved by processes of intermarriage and concubinage between the elite and the indigenous ethnic people. Meanwhile, the Americo-Liberians expanded their ties with foreign owners of capital, established a dependency relationship with the United States, and recruited some new indigenous members into this urban elite group.[42] However, the rural folk remained marginalized from the center of state power, and the state accumulated more control over land and mineral resources (rubber

---

37. *See* Julius O. Ihonvbere, *The Irrelevant State, Ethnicity, and the Quest for Nationhood in Africa, in* 17 ETHNIC AND RACIAL STUDIES, at 42-60 (January 1994); S. HUNTINGTON, THE THIRD WAVE: DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE LATE 20TH CENTURY (1991); G. Hyden, *Problems and Prospects of State Coherence in Africa, in* STATE VERSUS ETHNIC CLAIMS, at 74 (D. Rothchild and V. Olorunsola eds., 1983); R. Joseph, *Class, State, and Pre-Bendal Politics in Nigeria, in* 21 J. OF COMMONWEALTH AND COMPARATIVE POLITICS, at 21-38 (1983); C. YOUNG, THE AFRICAN STATE IN COLONIAL PERSPECTIVE (1994).

38. *See* Rene Lemarchand, *Africa's Troubled Transitions,* 3 JOURNAL OF DEMOCRACY 98-110 (1992).

39. Nelson Kaffir, *Soldiers and Policy Makers in Nigeria,* FIELDSTAFF REPORT, at 7, 3 (1977).

40. Mazrui, *supra* note 29, at 48.

41. *See* Amos Sawyer, *Proprietary Authority and Local Administration in Liberia, in* THE FAILURE OF THE CENTRALIZED STATE, at 148-173 (James Wunsch and Dele Olowu eds., 1990); A. Sawyer, *The Development of Autocracy in Liberia, in* RETHINKING INSTITUTIONAL AND DEVELOPMENT (V. Ostrom, D. Feeny, and Harmut Picht eds., 1988).

42. *See* J. GUS LIEBENOW, LIBERIA: THE EVOLUTION OF PRIVILEGE (1969).

plantations, gold, diamonds, etc). The coup by Samuel Doe in 1980 against the oppressive Americo-Liberian government of President Tolbert was hailed by insiders and outsiders,[43] because rural folk saw it as freeing them from Americo-Liberian domination. Instead, Doe became even more repressive than Tolbert as he reinforced the police, military, and state institutions with members of his own Krahn ethnic group, forced Americo-Liberians from their positions and property, and fomented hostilities against the Gio and Mano groups which he perceived as backing his adversaries. By the mid-1980s, most Liberians (whether refugees abroad or citizens within the state) had come to see the Doe regime as a "coup against the people."

The second Liberian coup and the civil war in 1990 typified the type of situation in which *strategically placed persons (often ethnic entrepreneurs claiming to rescue their compatriots from repression) can capture the state with the aid of external arms and young unemployed male troops, then utilize state resources to enrich themselves while terrorizing the public.* In this case, Charles Taylor (who invaded from Cote d'Ivoire with his NPFL forces) recruited even 10 to 15 year old boy soldiers, and ultimately succeeded in removing and executing President Doe. However, Taylor set in motion a horrible civil war in which various warlords leading regional factions emerged, claiming to defend the interest of their ethnic members, but whose real purpose has been to plunder, rape and rob the citizenry. The Liberian civil war has also been an event which everyone decried, but the world (including U.S.warships off the coast of Monrovia) initially stood by and watched, unwilling to intervene decisively. In 1993, United Nations involvement finally took the form of UNOMIL peacekeepers (160 military observers)[44] whose task was to assist the military forces of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOMOG)[45] in holding the capital city Monrovia as a safe area, assisting in the establishment of conditions of peace, and the disarmament of demobilization of armed factions. Nigerian troops (and to a lesser extent, Ghanaian) are the largest

---

43. Kieh charges the U.S. with backing the Doe regime in order to maintain a power balance in Liberia, even when it was clear that Doe was anti-democratic and repressive. *See* George Klay Kieh, *The Obstacles to the Peaceful Resolution of the Liberian Civil Conflict in* 17 STUDIES IN CONFLICT AND TERRORISM, at 97-108.

44. Res. 866 U.N. SCOR, 3281st mtg, U.N. Doc. S/RES/866 (1993), *amended by* Res. 1020 U.N. SCOR, 3592nd mtg, U.N. Doc. S/RES/1020 (1995) (adjusting the mandate of UNOMIL). *See also* Res. 1041 U.N. SCOR 3624th mtg, U.N. Doc. S/RES/1041 (1996) (extending the mandate of UNOMIL until May 31, 1996).

45. After agreement within the Organization of African Unity to modify its relationships to include peacekeeping operation, ECOWAS was able to constitute ECOMOG to undertake peacekeeping operations in Liberia. ECOMOG and UNOMIL succeeded in routing the NPFL from Monrovia in 1993. *See* DOCUMENTS OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AFRICAN UNITY (1990); U.N. SECURITY COUNCIL NOTES (November 10, 1995).

contingents among ECOMOG forces, but these were joined periodically by others from Kenya, Burundi, and a few other African states.

However, until 1996, UNOMIL and ECOMOG have moved slowly against the warring factions on the interior, for varying reasons involving lack of financial resources, lack of troops, and acknowledgement of a lack of international resolve. During my work in Monrovia in May 1994, people commented that they saw little genuine ethnic hostilities in the fighting, but they saw situations in which warlords fomented ethnic violence to frighten and manipulate the public.[46] Although the thirteenth and supposedly final peace accord was signed on August 20, 1995, and a Transitional Government was put in place, the demobilization of the factions has slowed down. The peace is threatened by skirmishes between the factions along border areas, new assaults against UNOMIL and ECOMOG troops, and renewed assaults against civilians.[47] Many Liberians commented that international peacekeepers and the returning Americo-Liberian elite who live in Monrovia do not seem interested in stopping the fighting since life in Monrovia itself exposes them to little danger.[48] As long as global responsibility remains weak, and the Liberian civil war is perceived as an ethnic and national issue which the Liberians themselves must resolve, then the war may drag on.

Liberia is only one of several scenarios for ethnic conflict and civil war. Sudan and Chad, are areas where the ethnic entrepreneurs who do combat for the state also foment religious hostilities as one means of heightening the competition. Many question whether Nigeria's escalating religious and ethnic tensions will be fanned into flames by the recalcitrance of a bloated military that is insensitive to mass economic deprivation.[49] However, in Nigeria the tensions between northern Muslims, southern Christians and Traditionalists is lessened by the fact that Islamicization crosses regions (especially in the Middle Belt), but the possibility of such conflict is always present. Although another civil war involving southerners (Ibo or Rivers people) is unlikely, conflicts

---

46. G. Mikell, USIA WORKSHOPS IN MONROVIA WITH WOMEN'S GROUPS AND NGOS (May 1994). *See also* G. Mikell, *African Feminism: Towards a New Politics of Representation, in* 21 FEMINIST STUDIES (Summer 1995).

47. *See Liberia: Peace in Sight, in* 36 AFRICA CONFIDENTIAL, at 8 end. 18 (September 8, 1995); *Liberia: NPFL Commander on Fighting Between Gribos, Krahns* (February 16, 1996 (FBIS-AFR-96-033 at 24)); Liberia: Monrovia Residents Stage Stay-At-Home Protests Over Fighting (February 20, 1996 (FBIS-AFR-96-034 at 28)).

48. Interview with Elma Shaw, a Liberian female film maker and researcher who had just returned from working in Monrovia (March 7, 1996).

49. The Nigerian military is the largest in West Africa, with 62,000 in the army, 9,500 in the Air Force, and 5,000 in the Navy. *See* EIU COUNTRY PROFILE, 1996-97 at 10; *See New Christian-Muslim Violence in Nigeria*, ALL AFRICA PRESS SERVICE at 10 (September 16, 1996).

between the military government and ethnic communities and their leaders are an ever present threat, as was evidenced recently by the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other militant Ogoni leaders from the oil-rich but impoverished coastal areas.[50]

VII. RESTORING POLITICAL LEGITIMACY: LOCAL AND STATE PROCESSES

The struggle today is to find ways of structuring the state that allows equitable representation for traditional leaders who have cultural legitimacy, for African Traditionalist/Islamic/ Christian communities, and for urbanites and new elites. This must be done using new models which allow local cultural identities to be salient but also focus on creating and sustaining national alliances for governance.[51] Thus, these configurations must bypass older colonial-ethnic constructs while allowing lower-level legitimacy to reinforce the state. This will yield a new type of "democratic" state; but then democracy is always the adaptation of principles to local cultural conditions.

In commenting on the possibilities for "dual political authority" within modern African states, Sklar commented that "[i]n Nigeria, a role for traditional authority is sanctioned by the Constitution of 1989, which permits the thirty constituent states of the Federation to establish Traditional Councils over which traditional rulers preside."[52] Yet, he notes that few traditional leaders have done so, although "[e]xperience indicates that traditional institutions are more durable and resilient than newly constructed forms of government."[53] However, in today's reality, politicians often shuttle back and forth between their roles in constitutional government and their positions as traditional leaders, but usually do not publicly combine them.[54] When the exceptional combinations occur, as they did with Ken Saro-Wiwa who led the campaign against the military government and the oil interests, the government will strike decisively against such leaders.

The recognition of the threat of dual leadership or of resistance movements defending traditional communities and leaders has not bypassed astute African military heads of government like Abacha. They cling tenaciously to office, while symbolically thumbing their noses at

50. *See* Wole Soyinka, *The Last Despot and the End of Nigerian History?*, *in* 6 INDEX ON CENSORSHIP, at 67-79 (1994); *No Minor Matter*, *in* 4/5 INDEX ON CENSORSHIP, at 218-9 (1994).

51. *See* Dele Olowu, *Centralization, Self-Governance, and Development in Nigeria*, *in* THE FAILURE OF THE CENTRALIZED STATE, at 193-227 (James S. Wunsch and Dele Olowu eds., 1990).

52. Sklar, *supra* note 11, at 90.

53. *Id.*

54. *See* C. SYLVESTER WHITTAKER, THE POLITICS OF TRADITION: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN NORTHERN NIGERIA, 1946-1966 (1970).

the westerners who attempt to apply aid, trade, or sanctions pressures without sufficient resolve.[55] However, as the pressure from the public, the media, the elite, and western countries for a return to elected government have increased, many military leaders have opted for a halfway process—a corporatist process—which still leaves them in control of national politics. In Ghana in 1987, Flight Lieutenant Jerry J. Rawlings (who led his second coup which established the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) in December 1981) decided to allow local elections for 110 district assemblies rather than restore the legitimacy of multiple parties. This gave the government the power to have considerable influence in local politics from 1988 onward.[56] However, the Ghanaian situation shows that sometimes the politically invigorated local community keeps up the pressure for national elections. In this case, Rawlings stood for President as a civilian and won national elections in 1992, although the public contested the "free and fair" characterization of the elections.[57] Rawlings has been able to combine a centrist military style with the outer trappings of constitutional rule which continues to throw democratic opponents into disarray.[58] Sklar contrasts this with Nigeria, where Abacha effectively stymied national elections and has only recently allowed traditional leaders to return to a role in local governance, although he has set a timetable for the return to national democratic rule.[59] He also contrast it with Botswana, where traditional leaders are virtually locked out of roles in constitutional governance.

The question of the form that dual authority might take is one to which political scientists will have to give further thought. Perhaps the recent creation of new regions out of Nigeria large northern and middle-belt states might cut through the tripartite alliance configurations of the past which have had Yoruba-Hausa-Ibo interests at the core. The creation of 50 states which more closely approximate culturally legitimate communities would mean that Muslims were divided into many local blocks, often in combination with their ethnic/cultural compatriots rather than with their religious compatriots. This is not a unique formula, although Nigerians might deny that they have copied it from the United States. The doubters counter with the warning that this fragmentation of interests could tie the political system up in more complex

---

55. *See IFC Pulls Out of Shell Deal in Nigeria, in* BANK CHECK QUARTERLY 3 (February 1996); *Nigeria: Investing for Tomorrow, in* 36 AFRICA CONFIDENTIAL 3 (November 3, 1995).

56. Mikell, *supra* note 36, at 455-78.

57. *See Running With Rawlings, in* 36 AFRICA CONFIDENTIAL 4 (November 17, 1995).

58. Interview with Mrs. Hawa Yakubu, Parliamentarian for the Northern Region of Ghana. (June 25, 1996).

59. *See* Sklar, *supra* note 11, at 92; *Nigeria: Abacha Restates Regime's Desire to Hand Over Power* (February 28, 1996 (FBIS-AFR-96-040 at 22)); *Nigeria: Commentary on Attempts to Disrupt Upcoming Elections* (February 28, 1996 (FBIS-AFR-96-040 at 22)).

knots than we witnessed with the republican/democratic budgetary and policy standoffs in the US Congress between November 1995 and January, 1996.

However, the major reason for the resistance of military leaders and authoritarian Presidents to dual authority represented by dual political systems is that they fear the power of the public over their ability to *use public office for private gain*. Joseph (1987) has pointed to these pre-Bendal tendencies in the authoritarian governments in Nigeria,[60] and the same analysis could be made of resistance in Zaire, Kenya, Liberia, and many other areas. What if the traditional "responsibilities" of office were emphasized as a counter to elite privilege, as is customary in African traditional political ideology.[61] The power of the public to insist upon transparency in governance and decision making would limit the capacity of rulers to enrich themselves through use of state resources. Such considerations lead many authoritarian leaders to distort and evade discussions of cultural approaches to governance.

We should no longer accept the reason that military and authoritarian leaders frequently give for resisting democratization: the fear that "identity politics"[62] or "ethnic nationalism"[63] would distort the political process and lead to "tribal" animosities and religious violence. They warn against possible Islamic alliances against other ethnic and religious groups. But the reality is that many factions and sub-groups exist *within* most ethnic and religious groupings,[64] so that the possibilities of amalgamation *against* other ethnic constituencies may grow less over time. The time has come to redefine the conditions for African political participation, by looking again at the arguments for cultural relativism and against abstract universalism[65] in our approaches to African governance.

---

60. *See* RICHARD JOSEPH, DEMOCRACY AND PRE-BENDAL POLITICS IN NIGERIA (1987).

61. *See* Makua wa Matua, *The Banjul Charter and the African Cultural Fingerprints: An Evaluation of the Language of Duties* 35 VIRGINIA JOURNAL OF HUMAN RIGHTS (1995).

62. IDENTITY POLITICS: ISLAM AND FEMINIST CULTURAL REASSERTIONS (Valentine Moghodam ed., 1994).

63. This has been discussed more in Asian case studies (in particular for J.S. Furnival-like "plural societies" created under colonial conditions) than for African societies, where pre-colonial social compacts existed between groups. For examples regarding Sri Lankan or Tamil nationalism, *See* DAVID LITTLE, SRI LANKA: THE INVENTION OF ENMITY (1994); JANE RUSSELL, COMMUNAL POLITICS UNDER THE DONOUGHMORE CONSTITUTION, 1931-47 (1983); M.G. SMITH, THE PLURAL SOCIETY IN THE CARIBBEAN (1965).

64. *See Ghana: Regional Security Council Meets to Discuss Muslim Dispute* (February 20, 1996 (FBIS-AFR-96-034, at 27)).

65. *See* James S. Coleman & C.R.D. Halisi, *American Political Science and Tropical Africa: Universalism versus Relativism*, 28 AFRICAN STUDIES REVIEW 25-62 (1988).