REVIEW ESSAY

The Politics of Identity in Local African Societies


Few African states have been immune to intercommunal or ethnic conflicts. Even Tanzania and Ghana, countries known for their relative inter-ethnic harmony, have been forced to grapple with the emergence of politicized ethnicity and ethnic discord. The phenomenon of individuals and groups ascribing to particular ethnic identities is a primary part of the history of modern African societies and central to the process of state formation. It is tied, moreover, to the unfinished business of defining citizenship and social legitimacy that began under European colonial rule. Three recent books contribute to the growing body of work on ethnicity. They each provide different contexts toward a greater understanding of the various factors shaping the relationship between communal identity and socio-political status in Africa.

In his highly thoughtful study, Poison and Medicine, Douglas Anthony uses the relationship between Igbo and Hausa in Kano, Nigeria during the period of the Nigerian Civil War to demonstrate that, depending on who wields it, ethnic identity can be used for violence or benevolence. He alludes to this duality with the title of his text. The origins of ethnic discord as a source of political violence, as Anthony explains, lie to a large extent in the policies of British colonial rule. British colonial officials established the social and political infrastructure that defined these groups and shaped the nature of their interaction. In so doing, they fostered political competition between Igbo and Hausa during the closing years of British rule in the north, in which Igbo had a significant advantage. Consequently, Igbo became stigmatized among Hausa and other northerners as the ultimate outsiders and agents of the British colonial administration. In addition, opposition to what Hausa considered to be the
Igbos’ undue economic and political influence prompted initiatives for greater ‘northern’ unity. Similarly, according to Anthony, the subsequent civil war helped to sustain Igbo ethnic consciousness and political unity. After being forced to flee northern cities during the war, Igbos returned and negotiated a new identity for themselves in cooperation with Hausas.

Anthony also suggests that there is a direct link between political status in modern Nigeria and the process of ethnic construction and transformation before and during the war. Therefore, Nigerian citizenship and social legitimacy were defined in the context of colonial rule and post-colonial civil strife. However, this is a point Anthony implies rather than explicitly states. Although he does an excellent job explaining the nature of ethnicity and its role in political disputes, his study would benefit from a more direct undertaking of the issue of citizenship and its relationship to notions of ethnic identity.

In Landlords and Lodgers, Deborah Pellow addresses the issue of communal identity within the context of Sabon Zongo, a physically and politically marginalized community in Accra, Ghana. She raises similar issues as Anthony but argues that the physical spaces in which individuals and groups interact are the primary factors shaping identity, rather than the nature of the interaction itself. Specifically, Pellow presents the various ways individuals’ notions and uses of time and space shape relationships and, by extension, the identity of the community in which these individuals operate. Foremost among these influences has been the construction and use of social spaces by those who have a putative or actual relationship with Malam Bako, the community’s founder, and those who do not.

One’s putative or real claims to descent or some other affiliation to Bako and his family is a significant factor shaping political status and identity within the community and is one of the various characteristics of what Pellow labels zongwanci. She defines zongwanci, or zongo-ness, as a shared sense of morality and an ‘attachment that residents feel for the community’ (p. 233). This identity, which extends from the community itself to the resident, does not revolve around ethnicity. In fact, Pellow argues, ethnicity is far subordinate to other factors in shaping zongwanci. Yet, as in most predominantly Muslim communities along this stretch of West Africa, the Hausa influence on politics, religion, and social status is difficult to deny, particularly considering that Malam Bako founded the community for Hausas as a refuge from other Muslims. It was Hausas, in fact, led by Bako and their sense of ethnic superiority to other Muslim ethnic groups in Accra that led to the founding of Sabon Zongo.

In addition, similar to Anthony’s study, many of the issues that Pellow raises relate directly to the issue of citizenship in Ghana. For example, she explains that the failure of the Accra Municipal Assembly (AMA) to properly render services to Sabon Zongo, such as sanitation and road maintenance, accentuates the community’s marginality and uniqueness. In its neglect of Sabon Zongo, the AMA has failed to carry out its required duties and, as a result,
willfully discriminates against taxpaying citizens. Pellow clearly explains the ‘outsider’ status of Muslims in southern Ghanaian cities, so the basis of this discrimination is apparent.

Pellow, however, is not as persuasive in her efforts to define what makes Sabon Zongo unique. She might have more success if she gave the reader a sense of the differences and similarities between Sabon Zongo and other predominantly Muslim communities in Accra. Nima and Medina, for example, are both larger and better-known predominantly Muslim communities that Pellow barely mentions. Their absence from her study precludes any conclusion on Sabon Zongo’s unique characteristics compared to other communities. Consequently, the reader is left to assume that the lack of paved roads and the negligence of the AMA to provide basic services does not also prevail in Medina or other communities outside of the heart of the city, and that the lineage-based community leadership is not the defining characteristic of Nima’s local political structure. Perhaps, these issues do set Sabon Zongo apart and contribute to its physical and cultural isolation. A brief comparison, however, would more clearly demonstrate this quality and eliminate what serves as a central weakness and a distraction in an otherwise fine book.

In * Becoming Walata*, Timothy Cleveland explores the history of the Arab-speaking Lemhajib of the southwestern Saharan town of Walata, Mauritania to determine the process through which they became a self-conscious group and the nature of their relationships with neighboring groups in and around Walata. He concludes that, while the southern Sahara may be a multiracial and multiethnic region, within its communities there have not been fixed notions of race, lineage, and ethnicity. Rather, identity was and continues to be mutable. Specifically, according to Cleveland, Mahjub identity grew out of a conscious effort among particular families to gain and sustain a political and commercial advantage in the region by forming coalitions through partnerships and intermarriage a process in fact central to the history of Walata itself. Explaining the origins of Walata is a subtheme of Cleveland’s study, which aims to determine what happened to its original Mande inhabitants. Known primarily as residing in the Sahel, the Mande are the earliest known controllers of Walata, called Biru in Mande. Cleveland insists that they were not pushed out, as Biru became Iwalatan under predominantly Berber control and then Walata under its Arabic-speaking controllers. Yet, as Cleveland states, by 1800 there was no one left in Walata who claimed a Berber identity, and the only people who considered themselves to be Mande were marginalized people whom the elite Arabs defined as “slaves or people of slave origin” (p. 38).

He concludes that the coalitions and intermarriage that gave rise to Mahjub identity were formed out of the Mande, the Berber and Arabic-speaking peoples over time in response to challenges to more recent arrivals (p. 194). The resulting social formations transcended lineage and racial categories (p. 6).
Cleveland’s reconstruction of Saharan social formations contradicts the European colonial model of Saharan society, which defined it as static and determined by patrilineal descent. Indeed, Cleveland attributes the ossification of Walata’s ethnic groups and their associated lifestyles (i.e. sedentary versus pastoral) to the French colonial officials’ political interests and their misinterpretation of textual and cultural sources. Based on these interests and misinterpretations, colonial officials wrote their perceptions of what constituted a Saharan community, its origins, and political structure into colonial policy. Cleveland does not suggest, however, that communal identities are a product solely of colonial rule. Yet, what colonial policies shaped in many respects continues to constitute officially recognized identities in modern Mauritania and much of the rest of Africa. A comparison of the Anthony and Cleveland books demonstrates the impact of colonial rule on identity formation, and its contemporary manifestation, in West Africa.

Similar to Cleveland’s argument, Anthony explains that during the closing years of British rule in northern Nigeria, the largely negative northern perception of Igbo service to galvanize Igbo solidarity and foster a sense of ‘northern-ness’. Perceptions of Igbo grew more positive among northerners in the aftermath of the war. Anthony concedes that there were demonstrable social, political, and cultural differences between groups prior to British rule. British policy, however, exacerbated notions of difference and a sense of competition between the groups. Furthermore, the British established an economic and political order that led to a large and influential population of Igbo in northern Nigeria, who northerners largely regarded as agents of the colonial state. As Anthony explains, Igbo ‘wore the clothing of the invader and spoke the invaders’ language; some took great pride in doing so’ (p. 32). Together with the educational disparities that existed between the south and the northern regions, the sense of distrust that the British fostered between the two groups laid the foundation for the violence that erupted in 1966. To a large extent the violence was about defining citizenship and political power in independent Nigeria.

Anthony also argues that British colonial rule and then the Nigerian civil war shaped how other Nigerians perceived Igbo. His study is not only about the perception of Igbo, however, as he examines the ways that northerners used Igbo to shape their own identities. Yet, as Anthony describes, Igbo were the primary agents who articulated their identity as either poison or medicine: ‘It was Igbo themselves who transformed poison into medicine, by taking elements of an identity that offered stigma and converting them into instruments of uplift’ (p. 209). Consequently, as Anthony explains, ‘the violence of 1966 and the war itself had become indispensable ingredients in the glue that held Igbo identity together. The process of post-war reconstruction would likewise become a part of that glue’ (p. 209).

Similarly, the French were influential among the communities of the southern Sahara. Although their policies did not lead directly to civil war in
post-colonial Mauritania, their policies did shape the political status of certain communal groups, because French officials sought to fit ‘ethnic groups’ into neat categories based on lineage, lifestyle, and economic activities. They interpreted texts that they found in the southern Sahara to indicate that there were three distinct groups among southwest Saharan, using the oldest of these texts written in the mid-18th century by a scholar named Muhammad al-Yadali to construct a social and political model of Saharan society. This French model enforced distinctions between Arabs and Berbers that had become insignificant through centuries of social, economic, and political interaction between the groups. In contrast with the French, Saharan long recognized that social identities were malleable, and sometimes ambiguous and contested. Prior to French colonial rule, settled and nomadic Saharan made social, economic, and cultural adjustments in order to take advantage of economic opportunities.

Alongside European colonial rule, the interests of individual political leaders have been cited as a primary influence behind groups asserting an ethnic identity. As Cleveland points out, Max Weber, among others, linked the articulation and formation of communities and associations to the power of charismatic authority. Therefore, strong leadership more than individual or group desires shaped communal affiliation and identity. Cleveland argues, however, that the charismatic hero of a community must be separated from his community’s reconstruction of him (p. 196). He suggests that ‘supporters are motivated by their own interests from the very beginning and that charisma is largely a phenomenon of their own construction – not an indefinable quality of the individual who has attracted them’ (p. 196). Just as the social actors in Sabon Zongo who asserted a relationship with Malam Bako wielded considerable political currency, the Lemhajib was based their social and political legitimacy on their relationship to ‘Abd Allah al-Mahjub’.

Originally the Lemhajib was comprised of several Walati families that descended from al-Mahjub. His legacy came to be used as an instrument for unification and was reconstructed for that purpose. Consequently, the meaning of his name and the identity associated with it changed and grew more complicated over time. Through alliances with other families, Cleveland concludes, the Lemhajib expanded into a powerful coalition in Walati politics (p. 77).

Similarly, the Nigerian civil war presents several instances in which the legacy of leaders is either resurrected and given political currency or reshaped to serve the community’s political needs. Anthony describes this phenomenon as an integral part of Northerners’ efforts to assert a Northern identity during the First Republic. One example is the legacy of Ahmadu Bello, whose image was rehabilitated following his murder to serve the needs of ‘northernism’. He became, as Anthony describes,

a multi-faceted symbol of Northern self-determination, and of resistance to Igbo domination. His vision of a monolithic North and his murder would
become focal points in the coming struggle against unification, and would help to justify the anti-Igbo violence that accompanied it. (p. 61)

Although he had sought to construct a common northern identity different from Igbos to counter southern influence, the community constructed a post-mortem image of Bello to suit its immediate needs, as opposed to having been constructed by him.

The three books reviewed in this essay help to understand the factors that influence individuals and groups to affiliate themselves with particular identities and the ways that these identities shape the social and political environment. The examples of Nigeria and the southwestern Sahara presented by Douglas illustrate that it is the interaction between and within communities that shapes the characteristics of ethnicity. Moreover, Anthony’s book details the process through which ethnic discord leads to political violence. Rounding out this analysis is Pellow’s book, which provides a detailed study of the ways that individuals and groups shape their identities in their interactions with each other and their physical environment. Each of these studies contributes to a broader understanding of the processes shaping social and political relationships in modern Africa.

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