

Research Article
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Mediating Ethnic Identities in Africa¹

Abstract

In recent times, African states have experienced multiple challenges. The most disturbing is the inability to evolve a sustainable culture of dialogue that is suitable for the mitigation of ethnic conflicts in contemporary Africa. It is this failure that has generated many other problems in other spheres.

These problems, in concert, have made the socio-political space largely that of frustration, despair and disappointment. This accounts for the social design of unhealthy alliances and the basis for the affirmation of parochial primordial frivolities at the detriment of a trans-national identity. But why have the affirmation of these primordial alliances and its attendant conflicts remain daunting, intricate and resilient, in spite of the several attempts by scholars to mitigate it?

The attempt in this paper will be to argue that extant discourse of the above concern fails because it ignores the value of the conditions for the practical realisation of agreement in situations of conflict. Specifically, the attempt here is to explore indigenous mediation strategies in arriving at trans-national identity in Africa, which will be inclusive other than the divisive structure that has exclusive character inherent in extant discourse.

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This paper, therefore, will employ the analytic-descriptive method to interrogate the above in a manner many scholars are wont to ignore. Hence, it is expected that this paper will initiate a perspective that will challenge extant interpretation of the conditions of dialogue and consequently human solidarity in African States.

Keywords

Contemporary Africa, Dialogue, Ethnicity, Conflicts, Trans-national Identity.

INTRODUCTION

The fact that contemporary African societies are replete with all manners of challenges is not in doubt. These ranges from socio-political, economic, ethnic strife, poverty, corruption, mutual distrust etc which individually or in concert culminates into the dislocation of the value systems of most Africa States. The most disturbing of these is how we can evolve a viable strategy for the management of our social and political activities. Attempts by some scholars to meet this challenge has failed because they undermine context-dependent post-colonial dimension in the explication of the experiences of individuals and groups in different societies and by implication ignores the value of the conditions for the practical realization of consensus in situations of conflict. The attempt here is to explore indigenous mediation strategy in arriving at trans-national identity in Africa which will be inclusive - as against the divisive structure that has exclusive character inherent in extant discourse. Post-colonial experiences here concern the activities that influence the destiny of Africans both within the continent and in the diaspora. So, to undermine the events of this epoch is not only to disregard history, it will also lead one into a solution that will be wrongheaded as we have seen in extant interpretation. In other words, the arguments in this work will interrogate the account of the events of this era and how they have together, led to frustration, mutual distrust, despair, disappointment and consequently accounts for the social design of unhealthy alliances - the basis of which is the affirmation of parochial primordial sentiments at the detriment of a trans-national identity.

Clearly, this is what is responsible for the several clashes that we find in many African States. The question is, why have these remain daunting, complex and resilience, in spite of the attempts to meet them? It has become important today to examine the above question, if only to provide an alternative account to understanding the nature of the African condition. It is only after we know the actual nature of our problems that we can provide appropriate solution to them. Many have lost hope in the African project. Some have even said these generation of Africans have failed. All these negative assertions are as a result of the inability of African leaders to provide an appropriate platform for the management of their affairs, be it human or material resources. The point then is to look at the direction that will take into cognizance the shortcomings of extant views and account for what *Ben Fred-Mensah* has called the “*ingredients of harmony*” (2000:33). This is because the techniques or ideas associated with Western traditions may not suffice to explain or unearth the nature of the complexities of the African problems.

This is so because our ideas, beliefs or traditions may be tied to other presuppositions which control our actions we may not be conscious of.

The implication of the foregoing is the need to contextualize solutions to African problems since the problems have become resilient in spite of the several attempts to meet them. The rationale here is based on the promotion of the understanding of African belief systems through the exposition of their logical structures and the assumptions on which they are based. With this in mind, how then do we arrive at a solution that will avoid the vagaries of Western accretion, bearing in mind the complexities of the African

predicament? Before this, it is imperative to see how these crises, especially ethnic crisis are generated.

COLONIALISM AND THE EMERGENCE OF ETHNIC CONFLICT

The cause of ethnic conflict as recorded in several literatures in African landscape is the socio-cultural configuration or the divisive tendency of ethnic or tribal plurality (Ebijuwa, 2012). In the words of Chris Uroh, this tendency is the product of the way ethno-cultural groups, acting under the influence of colonialism, have become chaotically crammed within the various African States, the result of which has brought Africa into a boiling point. But, as some would argue, this divisive tendency of ethnic groups is one of the several manifestations of a more fundamental problem on the socio-political landscape in Africa. The assumption here is that ethnic conflict in Africa is partly the result of the failure of the African States to justify their existence by providing for the common good. This is to say that because the State has failed in its obligation to meet the various challenges facing its people, is the reason the citizens to withdraw into their ethnic enclaves to seek for social fulfillment.

The above view appears conflicting from the face-value, but one should not undermine the fact of the existence of plurality of ethnic groups and the claim that they often conflict with one another. Our contention here is not the question of regime legitimation as Uroh (1998) argues, but that of how we can manage our differences in spite of our divergent positions. This is imperative because it is only after we have harmonized our differences that the issue of regime legitimation can be meaningful. This is more or less like putting the cart before the horse. The reasoning here is that the provision of the common good by the State cannot eliminate the conflicting nature of values and interests, if the existence of diverse socio-cultural differences is a factor in the generation of ethnic clashes. Now, if conflict is inevitable in this sense, how do we develop within African political processes, institutions and cultures that can mediate these conflicts routinely in a way that would not put us in crises? This is so since societies that are stable are not those without conflicts but those that have developed the mechanism for managing emerging conflicts. The question is, how can we peacefully manage ethnic conflicts? We shall return to this in the later part of this essay. Before this, let us see how ethnic conflicts are generated?

Clearly, many answers will contest for attention here. This is understandable because opinions are likely to be based on the intellectual orientation of each commentator. But one direction which scholars have shown some degree of interest is the colonial dimension in the discourse of ethnic crisis (Ebijuwa 2000).

Scholars differ on the mission of colonialist with regards to the structures and institutions handed-down to the colonies. Some have argued that it is wrongheaded to implicate ethnic pluralism or the manner in which groups were crammed together into African States as the cause of ethnic conflicts. This is because there is nothing inherently conflictual about cultural or social pluralism. (Ebijuwa 2000). Of course, there are culturally plural States that do not have crisis or are not as crisis ridden as we

have in Africa (Cote D'ivoire, Nigeria, Somali D. R. Congo, Rwanda, etc). The point of the introduction of the colonial dimension as a factor in the evolution of ethnic conflict is to say that the above view irrespective of its force does not underscore the intention of the colonizers with respect to State formation and its consequences for social solidarity. As noted by Oladipo, "the colonialists combined the territories" of formally distinct people to form colonial territories. (Oladipo 1998: 100-123) and to "ensure that colonial control and dispossession could be achieved without undue rivalry among colonizers" (Opcit).

Clearly, the implication of this dispossession is the erosion of those values, beliefs, and practices which hitherto served as vehicles for social identity, action and solidarity. As Eme Awa puts it:

... the colonial systems and the political process 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. (Awa 1996:1)

This scenario is what Yaya Abubakar says is characterized by the total collapse of moral consciousness or what he calls the result of a deep contamination of the original human-centred African Communal Philosophy, which unavoidably led to a continuous decay of the African socio-political framework which is now aggravated by exponential decline in economic viability (see preface of Awa, 1996:1). The reason behind this alienation of the people of the colonies from their values, beliefs and practices was not to "mould one citizenry from the many people" but to put this "people of the colonies under a form of control that would make them unable to question colonial practices and the assumption on which they were based" (Oladipo,1998). This, obviously is a position that colonialists will not accept because it could be used to question their legitimacy and authority. This is what is responsible for the adoption and prosecution of the divide- and- rule system which sufficiently disunite the people of the colonies.

It is important to note that this divide- and- rule system of the colonialists 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, further complicated the task of wielding diverse elements in each colony into a coherent whole, it also became a factor in the evolution of life-threatening crises and consequently impede the process of community development and social cohesion. Examples of these life-threatening crises abound in Rwanda, Somalia, Liberia, Sierra-Leone, Cote d'ivoire, and of course, Nigeria.

It is also important to note that colonialism as an instrument of oppression was not only exploitative of human and material resources, it created an elite class in the colonies in the form of nationalists through which they carried-on their ideals and continued the perpetuation of unjust acts. As one scholar puts it, in respect of Zaire:

It is the national ruling class itself that constitutes the principal obstacle to economic growth and development through the privatization of the state, depriving it of those essential means and capabilities within which to generate

economic growth, improve the living conditions of the masses ... (Nzongola – Ntalaja, 1984)

The elites that took over from the colonialists were not only “interested in replacing the Europeans in leading positions of power and privileges” (Ibid), they created opportunities for themselves and their cronies that enabled them to plunder the resources of the States and made sure that existing opportunities and benefits in the States were reserved for themselves and people from their ethnic or tribal enclaves. The consequence of these for social solidarity is the complete lack of confidence in the State. Since, the State has become an oppressive instrument to deprive its citizen from benefits and opportunities, the people saw the State as an “object” to be avoided and withdraw from. This withdrawal is occasioned by conscious or sentimental connection of their values, especially their communal way of life. When dislocations like these occur, what we have is frustration, mutual distrust and complete hatred becomes the order of the day. In what follows, the State becomes an arena of ethnic conflicts where social relationships can no longer generate common interests and values in terms of which a sense of social solidarity can be developed and group identity forged.

The question now is, how do we generate this common interests and values that will lead to the evolution of group identity that transcend primordial sentiments and other forms of social alliances? Or to put it differently, how do we arrive at a transnational identity in Africa, that will be inclusive other than the divisive structure that has exclusive character inherent in extant discourse? First, we consider one way by which this exclusion can be established in an attempt to provide a non-arbitrary and non-coercive basis for managing conflicting positions.

HABERMAS ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

In his theory of communicative discourse, Jurgen Habermas asks: “what is this situation in which if it were to obtain, we could be undistorted, in which our communication with each other and our self-understanding would be without ideological distortion?” In responding to this question, Habermas first rejects those claims that are rooted in projects that lack inter-subjective dimensions. He argues that for there to be “an ideal speech situation”, the situation must be one in which our legitimating beliefs must be found in conditions of absolutely free and unlimited debate. By this, Habermas means a situation in which all parties to the institutions and practices being set are capable of recognizing that they are freely consenting to their establishment under conditions in which the only constraints on their acceptance derive from the *force of a better argument*.

From Habermas position, we find one route out of the position of those who claim that the idea of consensus is an example of cultural imperialism and thus mistaken (see Lyotard 1987:73)

The believe is that the idea of consensus ignores the heteromorphous nature of moral systems and practices in societies. Yet, it is because of these differences both within and across cultures that Habermas argues for the need for consensus through

deliberative discourse. That is, a discourse that involves the coming together of rational minds to make decisions under conditions of absolutely free and unlimited debate.

There seems to be some problems with Habermas position. Although he says his ideal speech situation is meant to provide the procedure for allowing democratic participation in decision making and his concept of consensus a democratic norm of reaching an accord, we contend here that whatever may be the decision reached, it is not a product of consensual agreement.

No doubt, agreement can be reached though deliberative discourse. But such an agreement cannot be taken to mean that consensus has been reached, at least as presented by Habermas. This is so if we understand clearly what he meant by acceptance in a debate in whatever has the force of a better argument. Here, it is not that discussants reach a consensus because all the parties in the dispute are in accord with the issue at stake, but because of the superiority of argument by a party in the discourse.

It is against this background that postmodernists argue for the plurality of values. The pursuit of the plurality of values as a means to overcome the imposition of values is itself inadequate because to say so is to agree, on the one hand, that there are no independent criteria of ranking moral claims and social practices, and that moral claims and practices are equally effective means of coping with human experiences, and on the other hand, that there is no need for any criticism of the moral claims of other people or that in the case of conflict of moral ideals of two different individuals or groups within a society, we should adopt two different rules in its resolution.

Thus, if, as Habermas argues that consensus is based on the superiority of argument as we find in many democratic arena in many African States, then as Lyotard says:

Such a debate will presuppose the possibility of one party turning out to have the strong argumentative position, and thus imposing its own language-game or phrase-regime at the expense of other (Ipsa facto disadvantaged) party to the dispute. (see Harris 1996: 119-120)

In this sense, we can say, following Best and Kellner, that Habermas' idealized notion of consensus can be used to legitimize the manipulation of difference through the celebration of consensus as the ideal of coming to human understanding (1991:241). Or at least we can say that it is an agreement reached out of compulsion because those whose opinion differs from those with stronger argumentative power will only consent but cannot be said to have reached consensus. By consensus we mean a condition arrived at through deliberation in which two or more persons or groups:

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 (Sills 1986:260)

The essence of consensus then is to transcend the conflicting positions in such a way that all parties in a dispute "are able to feel that adequate account has been taken of their points of view". In other words, consensus does not entail total agreement as some are wont to believe. In fact, consensus as Wiredu says presupposes an original position

of diversity. But the problem here is, “how a group without unanimity may settle on one option rather than the other without alienating anyone?” Or, to put it differently, what will be the mode of discourse that will be all-inclusive, that is, that will ensure that one party’s values are not imposed on others as we have seen in the case of Habermas?

Note that we have earlier stated that the idea of consensus presupposes the existence of disagreement. And that the management of this disagreement involves an encounter between the parties in dispute that are willing to transcend their differences to reach a point of consensus. Such encounter cannot evolve in an atmosphere of the domination of one party by the other. This is to say that in a dialogic sphere of this nature, there is no privilege opinion. As Paulo Freire avers, dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one party depositing ideas in another. As an act which denounces the relation of domination, dialogue is a state where responsible people operate in an arena of *freedom*.

In addition to the above, dialogue as the common task of transcending differences cannot exist without humility. This is to say that in a genuine dialogic arrangement there is no monopoly of knowledge or truth. If, for example, I am offended by the contributions of others, how can there be dialogue. “In other words, in an atmosphere of dialogue, there are “neither utter ignoramous nor perfect sages, there are only men who are attempting together, to learn more than they now know” (Freire 1970:63). So, one major feature of dialogue “... is openness to viewpoints, a willingness to explore and an empathy for the relative truth of each viewpoint. A dialogue among viewpoints will eventually reveal, though, that many of the disparate views are actually interconnected, not by reference to an absolute, total picture, but through the fact that participants in any dialogue will have some common concerns” (Manuskhani, 2002:189).

As a direct consequence of the above is the fact that dialogue, as Paulo Freire says, requires an intense faith in one another. Without the initial faith in the possibility to transcend our differences, there cannot be dialogue. Put differently, 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 (Ibid). This is a fact that is not available in an atmosphere of domination of one party by the other as we earlier saw in Habermas’ view.

The feasibility of these conditions of dialogue we present above does not depend on the patience and persuasiveness of the dialoguers, neither does it place one party consistently in a position of minority. Rather, as we find in traditional African systems of consensual type, dialoguers ensure that all voices of the parties in dispute are heard, and through dialogic encounter, they would come to a unanimous decision. Here, unanimity and all the rigorous processes and compromises that lead to it are all efforts made to contain the wishes... (Nwala 1985:168) of everybody in dispute. Let us look at one concrete example of how decision could be reached by consensus opinion from traditional Igbo society of Nigeria. It is important to note that as appealing as this proposed model might seem, its strength lies in its operation in a dialogic sphere with the same linguistic stock to give room for adequate interpretation and understanding of thought patterns and ideas.

BEYOND ETHNIC IDENTITIES

Let us begin by saying that the traditional Igbo political system provides for formal representation of adults in the society. This is because every adult in the Igbo traditional setting is a member of an age group, which is made up of persons born within five-year age bracket. Membership of each group is compulsory. Each age group participates in all decisions that affect their lives. Any decision that is to be taken that affects them and their community must pass through two stages. The first is the council of elders (Ichie), which consists of members of the oldest age group and few important persons in the society. This group refers matters to the various age groups for rigorous deliberating. Now, because decisions are usually arrived at after thorough deliberations by all age groups who are supposed to be equal, creates an atmosphere of fair deliberations. According to Afigbo, “all segments at the same level of the social organism are considered equal and equivalent” (see Nwala 1985:168) irrespective of status or social standing.

The second stage is what Uroh calls the “collation” stage. At this level, all age groups come together to deliberate until they reach agreement on any pressing issue. This group is known as the *oha na eze* which consists of both the “high and the low” in the society. Ejiofor describes the job of this group in the following manner:

When a motion is tabled there is exhaustive debate. Everyone in the assembly is free to speak on it. Questions are asked and answered. Should all who want to speak not have the opportunity the same day, debate is adjourned for as often as it is necessary to hear all speakers. The aim is general consensus. There is no formal voting... In the end one person advises that “we have seen the point clearly and cannot delay any longer: All approve and the presiding officer summarizes the point of consensus. All answer, that’s it. The decision is taken. (1981:140)

The point of allowing everybody to speak is to seek the opinion of all members who are likely to be affected by whatever the decision would be. The decision reached here is not the result of majoritarian opinion as such. This is because the consensus position is aimed at how the community as a whole would be fair with the adoption of any of the available points of view (Uroh, 1997:211). When, therefore what is eventually accepted is the alternative suggested by the “majority, it would be more appropriate to say that majority prevails not over, but upon, the minority, they prevail upon them to accept the proposal in question, not just to live with it...” (Wiredu, 1995:62). This is not to say that the majority decision has defeated those of the minority in the tribunal of argumentation, but that the minority have been made to “see the point clearly” and are thus convinced of the practical necessity or at best have seen that the view is expedient for the community at that point in time.

We can say at this point that the decision reached is the *whole* and the contributions of all stakeholders are the parts, which in concert, is the totality of the ideas. This view should not as Manuskhani avers, be equated with any form of metanarrative. For, such “totalizing views, experience has shown only marginalises certain cultures or certain sectors within a discourse that holds such metanarratives” (Ibid 190). Wholeness therefore, is a standpoint, a reference point, in which various

views about the issue at stake are perceived as interconnected, and interdependent. They are not connected by a single metanarrative, but by common human concerns with family resemblance among them” (Ibid:191). This wholeness can be described metaphorically in this way:

...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 (Leighton 1998: 14 see also Manuskhani 2002:191).

This notion of consensus that brings about the uniformity of thought and opinion, Nicholas Rescher (1996:196) says is misconceived. For him, “Consensus is not a general goal whose pursuit should regulate the way in which we actually proceed in the conduct of our cognitive and practical affairs” (Ibid). This is because, as he further puts it, in “many contexts the interests of the entire community are best served by a fragmentation of beliefs and values within its ranks” (Locit). This is to say in another way that consensus does not create room for creativity or variety of opinions. In fact, as Rescher succinctly avers, consensus can be the cause of boredom, inaction, stagnation and complacency. It can result in the narrowing of horizons and a diminution of options that is destructively stultifying that substitutes bland uniformity for an invigorating variety (Opcit:197).

Obviously, Rescher missed the point. To be sure, in matters of practical decisions at individual or family level variety of discensus as Lyotard will call it can be a significant desideratum. We are always at ease when we try our hands on a variety of views concerning personal welfare. But this cannot be so in matters that concern human progress and happiness in a community. On this, *variety is not the spice of life*. We must all speak and operate with one voice. This is not to say that we do not have discensus opinions in matters that concern communal welfare. Like Ejiofor puts it, “when a motion is tabled there is exhaustive debate. Everyone in the assembly is free to speak on it.” This procedure allows the existence of all shades of opinion irrespective of status or social standing. And when what is accepted eventually is the view of those with dissenting position, it means that others have “seen their point clearly” and are convinced through the tribunal of argumentation of the optimality of their point. The concern is for the overall well-being and this cannot be a source of boredom. If anything, it is a rigorous exercise that creates room for social solidarity and human happiness.

It is our view that this view can serve as an alternative to other theories that have attempted to resolve conflicting interests or values. We would like to emphasize here that the pursuit of consensus is a deliberate effort to transcend decisions by majority which often lead to conflicts in most African societies. Majority opinion is not good enough for decision making because it excludes the minority from the scheme of things by depriving them of their rights to have their *will* reflected in the given decision. A society that adopts consensus as a procedure of conflict resolution stands to benefit because that would ensure that the wills of the parties in dispute would be heard. In this way, consensus becomes desirable not as a means through which the strong imposes his will

on others but as the process of regulating normal life among brothers with different ideas.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have examined consensus as an alternative ideal for managing conflicting interests and values. As a rational procedure for meeting the challenges of unnecessary conflict, it proposes an unfettered atmosphere where people in dispute deliberate without the imposition of thoughts and opinions. We argue that deliberations involve the smoothing of edges, to use Wiredu's words, or the sorting out of differences to arrive at what Ali Mazrui called shared images (1990:399). This is so, as Mazrui says because "images grow, are modified, interconnect with other images" (Ibid) through what Wiredu has called "rational discourse". In other words, it is through rational discourse that we arrive at what may be considered suitable to all in dispute. It is our believe that what is suitable may not necessary mean what is consented to as in the case of Habermas. Rather, it means what is existentially beneficial through dialogue and mutual understanding among the parties in a dispute. This procedure cannot be boring or become an avenue for narrowing horizons and the diminutions of options" as some are wont to argue. Rather, it is a viable alternative for the promotion of human happiness and social solidarity in any given community in need of peace.

Afrika'da Etnik Kimliklere Aracılık Etme

Özet

Son yıllarda Afrika ülkelerinde pek çok tartışma yaşanmaktadır. Bunlardan en rahatsız edici olanı, çağdaş Afrika'da etnik çekişmeleri hafifletmeye elverişli, sürdürülebilir bir diyalog kültürü geliştirmede yaşanan başarısızlıktır. Farklı alanlarda daha pek çok sorunun ortaya çıkmasında tam da bu başarısızlık rol oynamaktadır.

Bu sorunlar beraberinde sosyo-politik alana hayal kırıklıkları, umutsuzluk ve hüsrana getirir. Sağlıksız ittifaklardan oluşan sosyal düzenin ve dar görüşlü ilkel ciddiyetsizliğin kabul edilmesinin ulus-ötesi kimliğe zarar vermesinin sorumlusu budur. Fakat bu ilkel ittifakların kabul edilmesi ve ona eşlik eden çekişmeler, araştırmacıların bunları hafifletme çabalarına rağmen neden hala ürkütücü, karmaşık ve esnek kalmaya devam etmektedir?

Bu çalışmanın amacı, mevcut söylemin başarısızlığının, çekişme durumunda pratik olarak anlaşmaya varılma koşullarının değerini göz ardı etmesinden kaynaklandığını ortaya koymaktır. Spesifik olarak buradaki amaç, Afrika'da ulus-ötesi kimliğe ulaşma sürecinde yerli arabuluculuk stratejilerini keşfetmektir. Bu stratejiler, mevcut söylem biçiminin doğasında yer alan bölücü yapı ve dışlayıcı karakterden farklı olarak kapsayıcı bir yapıya sahiptir.

Bundan dolayı bu çalışma, sözü edilen meseleyi sorgulamak için, pek çok araştırmacının göz ardı etme alışkanlığında olduğu analitik-betimsel metodu kullanmaktadır. Bu sebeple çalışmadan, diyalog koşullarının geçerliliğini koruyan yorumuna meydan okuyacak bir perspektife ve bunun sonucu olarak da Afrika Ülkeleri'nde insani dayanışmaya ön ayak olması beklenmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Çağdaş Afrika, Diyalog, Etnisite, Çekişme, Ulus-Ötesi Kimlik.

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