Ethnicity, Identity and the 2007-2008 Electoral Violence in Kenya

Violence surrounding the recent election in Kenya has gained high-profile media coverage in Europe and North America. In this context, the dynamics of nationalism and ethnicity[1] in Africa—and popular understandings of the role of 'identity'—represents a pertinent subject for critical analysis.

Prominent thinkers, such as Anthony Smith, argue that any effort to understand the emergence of national identities must start with an analysis of their cultural basis, and in particular their ethnic roots. For Smith, there is continuity between pre-modern ethnic communities (or 'ethnies') and modern nations and nationalities. He writes that "usually there has been some ethnic basis for the construction of modern nations, be it only in some dim memories and elements of culture and alleged ancestry, which it is hoped to revive" (1986: 17). Indeed, it is almost inconceivable that nations might form (andsurvive) without a cultural basis of "cohesive power, historic primacy, symbols, myths, memories and values" (1991: 52). For Smith, shared cultural practices are thus central in understanding the origins and dynamics of nationalism as well as the success of nations.

As such, it is perhaps not surprising that territorial nationalism in Africa is often dismissed as inauthentic. Colonial administrations drew African borders which suited their own purposes and which often divided, subsumed or assumed indigenous identities. Following independence therefore, nationalist leaders had great difficulty maintaining the discursive energies mobilised during the struggle. Crawford Young reports that "the self-confidence exuded by an earlier discourse has vanished. As nationalist thought was assimilated into State ideology, it suffered the delegitimation of the State itself, and the silent processes of civil society disengagement from the public realm" (2004: 5). For Smith, African nations were not underpinned by culturally-united ethnic communities, and this is central in explaining their demise. What we see instead, is competition between ethnic groups who seek to guarantee access to state patronage. During the violence which surrounded Kenya's recent elections, for example, newspapers reported that "tribal war" had exploded between the Kikuyu and Luo: "gangs went house to house, dragging people

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of certain tribes out of their homes and clubbing them to death". This was an "*atavistic vein of tribal tension that always lay beneath the surface* but up until now had not provoked widespread mayhem" (International Herald Tribune and New York Times, 2007, emphasis mine). The Mau Mau revolt, almost half a century earlier, was explained in strikingly similar terms, "cited for years… as an example of the atavistic nature of African politics lying just beneath the surface" (Meredith, 2005: 79). On this reading, it seems that the 2007 elections caused primordial tribal identities, which had previously been thinly veiled by the trappings of the modern state, to erupt with devastating consequences.

However, drawing on the work of Jean-Francois Bayart and John Lonsdale, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of events in Kenya. Bayart insists that there is no 'primordial' identity, in Africa (or elsewhere): "there are only *strategies based on identity,* rationally conducted by identifiable actors" (2005: x). Culture does not have some 'inner-core' which resiliently persists through history and neither do so-called cultural identities naturally or necessarily translate into political identities. Rather, identities are formed and reformed through history and political identity is constructed.

Whilst it is true that the colonial powers divided up Africa with little regard for indigenous populations, efforts to explain contemporary political events with reference to the misalignment of 'ancient tribal identities' and modern states are ill conceived. Far from being historically-rooted entities which have "always existed", 'tribes'—and dynamics of ethnic competition—were largely a *response* to the new institutions and rules imposed by the colonial powers. Indeed, "in the absence of any central power that might arrange groups in hierarchical relations… sustained 'tribal rivalry' could not exist" in Kenya prior to colonialism (Lonsdale, 2008). For Bayart, "the ways in which Africans have adopted the territorial frameworks handed down by the colonising powers is one of the salient characteristics of the continent's recent history. The imported state was immediately taken over by autochthonous peoples" because it represented the obvious (and often only) means by which to access colonial power structures (2005: 31). In Kenya, this power is

"concentrated in an executive presidency, now directly elected, capable of manipulating all public institutions, including a parliament elected from single-member constituencies that either singly or in contiguous groups coincide with what have become tribal territories" (Lonsdale, 2008).

The mobilisation of the ethnic identities formed in Kenya thus represents a *strategy* by which to gain access to—and capture—the state's resources. Colonial Kenya saw "what had previously been a multi-polar mosaic of scattered nodes of socially productive energy [become]… a layered pyramid of profit and power" (Lonsdale, 2008). Iliffe has

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summarised the popular (and academic) confusion as follows: "Europeans believed Africans belonged to tribes; [whereas] Africans built tribes to belong to" (1979: 324).

Reducing conflicts to cultural factors, as occurred with the recent political violence in Kenya, is damaging because it reifies representations and disables the political will to affect change. This dynamic has been seen before, perhaps most clearly in Rwanda, but also in Zaire where "the idea that this giant state [was] a mosaic of 'ethnic groups' ready to shatter into its component pieces" caused the West to resign itself to Mobutu's reign of terror (Bayart, 2005: 25). Yet "the great lesson of the history of the Congo is precisely the persistence of the idea of the nation" (ibid.32).

So how should we understand identity's role in the dynamics of African nationalism? Bayart suggests that rather than beginning with an analysis of 'cultural heritage', we are better off using a concept of 'imaginaire'. The success (or not) of African nationalism, and the mobilisation of African ethnicities, has little to do with the existence (or lack thereof) of persistent, culturally rooted and politically active identities. Rather, from "the latent social imaginaire… leaders fashion a political imaginaire deploying cultural definitions" (Pype, 2006: 476). There are no "identity-related divinities… that imperturbably traverse the centuries, each provided with its own core of authenticity" (Bayart, 2005: 85). Instead, "the act of enunciation constantly reshapes the straightjacket restricting action" (ibid: 101). 'Culture' does not dictate politics, it serves it.

Bayart identifies a number of ways in which cultural operations function politically. First, through 'extraversion', foreign cultural elements are often put into the service of indigenous elites allowing for what Michel de Certeau has described as 'the construction of one's own sentences using borrowed vocabulary and syntax' (in Bayart, 2005: 71). Second, 'transfers of meaning' within cultures occur (for example, they are drawn from religious environments). Third, through the 'fabrication of authenticity', notions of 'the ancient' and 'the modern' become elusive and inseparable. Finally, the 'formation of primordialist identities' often occurs with relation to an 'Other' (colonialism and economic change have fostered this dynamic). This process can see groups adopt characteristics of the 'Other' or define themselves against the 'Other' – crucially, "both scenarios can create 'traditional identities' which are markedly different to actual values typically associated with that movement" (ibid: 86). Several of these dynamics are evident in Kenya. For example, colonial anthropological analysis was "appropriated by an indigenous intelligentsia for its own constructions of ethnicity and identity" (Berman, 1998: 322) and "supposed ethnic qualities" were stereotyped in the formation of "Others" against which the various groups defined themselves (Lonsdale, 2008). This led to the transformation of older inequalities into "*new* differentiations less sensitive to existing moral audits of honour" (ibid, emphasis added).

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In seeking to understand the dynamics of nationalism and ethnicity—the rise and fall of nations, the mobilisation of ethnic and national groups—we are well served by Bayart's understanding of identity. Accounting for the emergence of nationalist or ethnic sentiments is less about the hunt for ancient culturally-based cores of identity, than the recognition of processes of formation and politicisation. Identities do not survive intact through history; rather, they are formed and reformed through the interpretation, enunciation and manipulation *of* history. Assertions that Kenya is suffering from an "*atavistic vein of tribal tension that always lay beneath the surface*", suggest an inevitability which paralyses efforts to affect change and blinds us to the ambivalence of politics. Simultaneously, it distracts us from key processes in the formation and politicisation of national and ethnic identities.

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[1] For the purpose of this essay ethnicity will be understood as a form of nationalism. This is not to say that they are the same, but rather, as will be argued, that they are produced and function in similar ways.

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