Inter ethnic conflict in post colonial africa history essay

The struggle of ethnic groups for recognition, equality or autonomy within an existing territorial state, or for independence from such a state, is not a recent phenomenon. Such struggles appeared in the aftermath of decolonization during the 1960's, within the successor states of the European empires in Africa. Ethnic conflict has been frequent and pervasive in post-colonial Africa, thus peace has been a hard goal to achieve. A variety of explanations have been offered to account for this phenomenon. Perhaps colonialism is the most prevailing one. European colonialism had " profound, lasting, and wide-ranging effects on the development of contemporary African states" (Blanton, Mason, Athow 2001). One of the most profound legacies of the colonial period has been ethnic conflict. When the European powers imposed formal territorial boundaries throughout the continent in 1885, the " seeds for ethnic conflict in post-colonial Africa were sown" (Blanton, Mason, Athow 2001). Indeed, the " seeds were sown" in all the colonies, but not all of them experienced the same degree of inter ethnic tensions. Co-existence and coalitions are possible, peace is possible, but under specific conditions.

Before talking about ethnic conflict, it is necessary to define ethnicity. Ethnic groups are historically given collectivities or psychological communities whose members share a persisting

sense of common interest and identity that is based on some combination of shared historical experience and valued cultural traits such as religion, language, ways of life, and a common homeland (Smith 1987). Bases on this definition, ethnicity seems to be a primordial and natural aspect of the human being while in reality, it is constructed. Ethnicity is now popularly

conceived as something constructed, invented or created (Anderson 1983). Often associated with this view is the notion that the ethnic group has not a concrete existence but is rather a fabrication of the human imagination. It appears to me that this is a view of reality as it appears within the colonial situation. Ethnic groups are, to be sure, inventions and constructions in some measure, but they are also decidedly real in some cases.

During their African reign, the colonial powers imposed territorial frontiers throughout the continent with " little or no consideration to the actual distribution of indigenous ethno-cultural groups" (Blanton, Mason, Athow 2001). By doing such, Africa was left with wounded and defragmented countries. In fact, the artificial boundaries created and imposed by the colonial powers resulted in putting together many different ethnic groups within one state, that was expected to turn into a nation. Of course, the decolonization process was not an easy and smooth transition. It resulted in the formation of weak states that did not have the power and the ability to accommodate and provide for the cultural and ethnic diversity within its borders.

Political corruption, lack of respect of rule of law, and human rights violations are not unexpected outcomes in these conditions. In fact, these violations are commonly seen as the root causes of all inter-ethnic conflicts (Shah 2009). In some areas, when colonial administrations began to have control, Europeans were encouraged to settle, thus " creating

2

dominant minority societies" (Shah 2009) such as the Tutsi community in Rwanda. In some other areas, the classic ' divide and conquer' techniques had to be used to get local people to help administer colonial administrations whenever they did not have the resources to fully administer the territory (Shah 2009). Beyond the establishment of ethnic identities, the fermentation and evolution of ethnic hostilities also played an important role in establishing and furthering the modes of colonial control. As the pressure of being outnumbered on foreign soil grew, European settlers needed to temper and redirect growing hostilities among dominated natives. By highlighting and manipulating their ethnic differences, Europeans were able to prevent the formation of African nationalism, and isolate any potentially revolutionary ideas (Safty 2005).

Inter-ethnic conflicts in Africa are fascinating cases to study; many social scientists have done different empirical researches to identify the sources of ethnic strife. Most efforts to analyze ethnic conflict have employed grievance based models, which emphasize economic, political, and social deprivation or discrimination as sources of conflicts (Blanton, Mason, Athow 2001). Empirically, Lindström and Moore (1995) show that grievances do not have a direct impact on ethnic conflict. Instead, they affect the ability of groups to mobilize their membership for conflict. Mason (1997) found that structural variables, derived from the distinction between ranked and unranked systems of ethnic stratification, are even better predictors of both mobilization and ethnic conflict than are grievances. This leads us to separating the ethnic groups in two categories: ranked and unranked. A distinction that " rests

3

upon the coincidence or non-coincidence of social class and ethnic origins. Where the two coincide, it is possible to speak of ranked ethnic groups; where groups are cross-class, it is possible to speak of unranked groups" (Horowitz 1985).

In the ranked systems of ethnic divisions that Horowitz proposes, there is a vertical ethnic and cultural division of labor, thus of power. This leads to a structural discrimination such that " individuals are assigned to specific types of occupations and other social roles on the basis of observable cultural traits or markers" (Hechter 1974). Here, ethnicity means class. As a result, ethnic identity is reinforced and the solidarity within every group is strengthened by the economic conditions. In this case, mobilization for starting an interest conflict is rather easy because the incentives are there and ready to use. Whereas in the alternative unranked systems, the relationships of the different groups are rather horizontal. In this instance, the ethnic and cultural division of labor and power is broken or non-existent. In these conditions, groups find themselves competing for the same resources and the same social roles (Blanton, Mason, Athow 2001). There are equal opportunities within each group. In this case, ethnicity is not synonymous with class and social status. Ethnic peace is more easily achievable in this situation.

These structural social variations did not naturally evolve across Africa (Blanton, Mason, Athow 2001). As said earlier, colonial powers were the source of ethnic divisions and thus heterogeneity in post-colonial societies. In

their peace studies research, Blanton, Mason, and Athow (2001) found an interesting relationship between the different colonial administration

4

styles and the probability of ethnic conflict. The different style of administration practiced by Great Britain and France had multiple effects on the structure of inter ethnic relations in the colonies, thus on the odds of post-colonial conflicts. They argue:

Specifically, we posit that ethnic conflict should be more frequent and intense in former British colonies precisely because their indirect style of colonial rule left intact traditional patterns of social organization. After the end of colonial rule, these structures facilitated the mobilization of aggrieved minorities for collective action. By contrast, the French strategy of administrative centralization amounted to an assault on traditional social institutions. This left ethnic minorities devoid of the mobilizing structures necessary to mount an organized challenge to the post-colonial state, regardless of the extent of their grievances against the state (Blanton, Mason, Athow 2001).

It appears that former British colonies are more exposed to the risks of inter ethnic rivalry than the former French colonies because the British did not effectively break down the traditional mobilizing structures that facilitate ethnic collective action (Blanton, Mason, Athow 2001).

The French approach to colonialism was based on the ideal of integrating its colonial peoples into a ' Greater France' through cultural assimilation and

administrative centralization (Clapham 1985). French colonial subjects even became citizens of France in 1946 (Delavignette 1970). All aspects of French colonial rule reflected this drive for a centralized state, which incorporated individuals from different regions and ethnic groups into a single social system, all under the control of an administrative state modeled after and controlled by the French state (Blanton, Mason, Athow 2001). Assimilation was the main objective; the French language was omnipresent and high numbers of French colonial subjects were educated in France (Clapham 1985). However, authority was only practiced by the French and very little discretion was left up to indigenous local elites. Locally, this centralization meant that agents of the colonial state

5

replaced traditional authorities, and traditional institutions were replaced by bureaucratic agencies of the colonial state. No longer were their relations with the central state mediated by traditional local elites (Blanton, Mason, Athow 2001).

In contrast, the British colonial state was characterized by a less centralized and an indirect rule with " a less thorough impregnation with an earlier absolutist tradition" (Young 1994). The British depended much more heavily upon local elites to manage the day-to-day affairs of the colony (Emerson 1964). Rather than colonize their African wealth with a large number of British citizens, the British government preferred to leave in place indigenous local elites and simply persuade or pressurize them into serving as agents of British rule. This strategy was especially successful in " Uganda and northern

Nigeria, where the British found strong structures of social control already in place and willing collaborators among those in charge of those structures" (Blanton, Mason, Athow 2001). So instead of breaking down the traditional local structures of society as the French did, the British used them as a tool to govern following the ' divide and rule' technique. For instance, in a multiethnic colony, the British often choose one of the smaller minority groups to receive British education. That group would come to dominate the colonial civil service and police/military forces. Thus, military units came to be dominated by the Tiv in Nigeria, the Acholi in Uganda, and the Kamba in Kenya (Young 1994). Exploiting ethnic divisions was a successful strategy in preventing the formation of anti-colonial alliances. Horowitz (1985) notes that " building colonial administration on a substructure of ethnic government helped insure that disparities would be interpreted through the lens of ethnicity". Therefore the British structured ethnic conflict into their system.

6

The system was characterized by the breakdown and the separation of the ethnic groups in diverse states. The comparison between the British and the French social structures in post-colonial Africa shows that conflict is more established in the British colonies. This is probably because of the prevailing heterogeneity that resulted from the British colonial rule. It is commonly known that the more heterogeneous a society is, ethnically and economically, the more conflict is likely to emerge. Therefore, if the very fact of heterogeneity is the cause of conflict and violence, then would not a

reasonable peaceful solution to inter ethnic conflict be to create new more ethnically homogeneous societies out of a single ethnically diverse one?

This might be a solution to conflict and a good introduction to peace. In fact, this approach to peace is power oriented because in order to do this, the state has to initiate a nationalist movement that aims at connecting everyone within the borders with the same strings. Power has to be used to eradicate the residues of local and ethnic traditions that might block the way of homogenizing. This can be done by the new leaders the very reverse way it was done by the colonists before them, by recreating an umbrella identity that unifies the different sub-groups of a certain country.

The post-colonial regimes can develop a nationalism discourse around a common bond that ties everyone within the borders. This common bond can be a local language, a historical hero, or even any chosen glorious historical event. They also may do that by mobilizing their colonized and oppressed identity in order to bring all the groups together. After their independence from France, Arab and Berber ethnic groups were brought together in being all Moroccans, Algerians, and Tunisians. This outcome is not always possible, especially when the

7

necessary resources are not available and when minority groups do not wish to blend in. Thus, it is not possible if the state does not have the necessary power to nation build. However, even if the power is there, is justice as well? Homogenizing inherently picks one culture and ignores many others. This can be seen as a violation of human rights and justice.

In the instance of irreversible transformations and high degrees of conflict, partition can be the answer. Partition and secessionism are argued to be the last option, but it is an option indeed. If the damages are irreversible, the competing groups should be separated. Keeping in mind that homogeneity is the key to national peace, anyway that leads to it is a good way. Historically, this has been a solution for many, but is it just? Is it fair to make people leave their homes when they do not wish what the majority does? There are different degrees of peace it seems. Never can all be satisfied and pleased at once.

As it has been pointed out above, the struggle of ethnic groups for recognition, equality or autonomy is not a recent phenomenon. Such struggles appeared in the aftermath of decolonization during the 1960s, within the successor states of the European empires in Africa. Colonial legacies, and charges of neocolonialism, are often cited as a primary obstacle to African stability and development. By fragmenting the traditional ethnic groupings within Africa in their quest to divide up the continent among themselves, the European powers created the potential for ethnic conflict (Blanton, Mason, Athow 2001). It appears that differences in the British and French colonial legacies and power oriented approaches in ruling lead to different outcomes. Violent ethnic conflict may have been less frequent in former French colonies, but that is largely because the French colonial legacy deprived subordinate groups of the traditional

8

mobilization structures. By contrast, the British style of indirect rule was based on the assumption that colonial peoples would never be the equals of the English. Therefore, they were best left to their own institutions of social organization (Blanton, Mason, Athow 2001). Ethnic minorities in former British colonies were more able to organize for political action than their French counterparts because the social institutions were already existent and ready to exploit.