The Identity Matrix and Contemporary Conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa

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The identity matrix that exists in much of sub-Saharan Africa is beautifully complex as well as dangerously divisive. In addition to creating opportunities for fluidity (McCauley, 2017), communication (Lewis & Larson, 2017), and interdependence (John, Mohammed, Pinto, & Nkanta, 2007), identity categories are also marred with years of violence and exogenous inference (Horowitz, 1985; Mamdani, 2001). An African can be black, a woman, Kenyan, Kikuyu, Christian, and a farmer. Each of these distinct identities come into play in moments of critical decision-making. Different identities assume meaning in different socio-political contexts, and an individual may foreground one identity at certain moments and others elsewhere (Elliot, 2018; McCauley, 2017). Each affects an individual's life chances, and the socio-economic and political opportunities that are available to her. Each has its own relative autonomy, yet somehow still connects an individual to specific rights and privileges from which others may be excluded (Olurode, 2004).

The study of conflict in sub-Saharan Africa has often centred around a narrow conceptualization of identity. In particular, scholars of political violence working in the region have long called attention to the significance and utility of ethnic ties for insurgent organizations (Horowitz, 1985) (McCauley, 2017; Weinstein, 2007). This has led to a bifurcation of African wars as either "ethnic" (such as the civil wars in Burundi, Ethiopia, and Chad), or "non-ethnic" (seen in Somalia, Nigeria and Mali) conflicts. This bifurcation leads Bowen (1996) to question the reductionist nature in which African conflicts are often over-simplified and framed through an ethnic lens (Bowen, 1996). My research suggests that such tendencies risk obscuring our understanding of the complex roles different identity categories can play in all conflicts. I am particularly interested in the role of ethnic identity in conflicts often coded as "non-ethnic," wherein the role of ethnic ties is often missed.

Even among groups that do not mobilize along ethnic lines, shared ethnic identity can play a powerful role in facilitating communication, broadening networks, and creating a shared sense of community and purpose. This phenomenon has led Deng to argue that "virtually every African conflict has some ethno-regional dimension to it. Even those conflicts that may appear to be free of ethnic concerns involve factions and alliances built around ethnic loyalties" (Deng, 1997). Indeed, despite the fact that many of today's conflicts are not driven by ethnicity, nor is ethnicity even the most salient macro-cleavage, individuals involved nevertheless have multiple overlapping social and political identities whose salience can be activated differently under different circumstances (McCauley, 2017).

My desire to unpack the relationship between identity, ethnicity, and conflict, stemmed from a rejection of earlier dualisms. Further fuel came from recent work done by Janet Lewis, who found that groups that form in ethnically homogeneous areas were more likely to succeed in becoming viable than groups that form in more heterogeneous areas (Lewis, 2017). This also seems true for a number of 'non-ethnic' extremist groups. Despite their projected religious ideology, Boko Haram, formed in Borno State, Nigeria, is estimated to be made up of 70-80% Kanuri members (Pieri & Zenn, 2016).

Similarly, the less known ISIS-affiliated group in Mozambique, known locally as Shabab (no known connection to Al Shabab in Somalia), is also said to have initially mobilised more quickly among particular ethnic groups (in particular, the Mwami people in Northern Mozambique). What effect does ethnic homogeneity and mobilization have on how

each group operates, and on its members' interactions with the wider population? And perhaps even more importantly, what effect does ethnic homogeneity and difference have on civilian resistance efforts?

I argue that overlooking the role of ethnic ties, and the ways in which ethnicity maps onto other identity categories in seemingly "non-ethnic" conflicts can lead to flawed inferences about armed group mobilization. Moreover, the stigmatisation and scapegoating of entire ethnic groups, and heavy-handed responses towards them from conflict adversaries, can be better understood through a sophisticated analysis of how ethnicity and other identity ties are activated in different political contexts.

In Northern Nigeria, for example, young Kanuri men 'suffered gross molestations and violations of their rights in all the Chad Basin countries where Kanuri are a minority' (Maryah, 2017). This stigmatisation can be so rampant that during my last visit to Maiduguri, a man who was not Kanuri, but had similar face markings, told me how he always made sure he had ID that proved he was not Kanuri to avoid mistreatment from authorities. The salience that different identity categories take on in different regions, time-periods, and socio-political contexts have crucial implications for how we understand armed group mobilization, and the repertoires, patterns, and disproportionate effects of violence on certain populations. Overlooking these patterns can further distance particular groups from the state, potentially fuelling recruitment, grievance, and perceptions of marginalization.

While I call attention to the importance of ethnic identity in conflicts in Mozambique and Nigeria respectively, I do *not* suggest that ethnicity is the driving factor behind either or any conflict. Nevertheless, myriad conversations with senior scholars within the field have prompted the question: 'why are you looking at ethnicity, this conflict is not ethnic?' Highlighting the role of ethnicity (alongside other identity categories) in 'non-ethnic conflicts' is not to reduce all social and political dynamics to ethnic politics. Rather, the goal is to better understand the complex social and political relationships that undergird mobilization, group viability, and conflict consequences, and to expose the complex ways in which social and political identities overlap. In scrutinizing both religion and ethnicity through the lens of social and political organization and power, my forthcoming research aims to situate our understanding of religious conflict within socio-historical context and advance our understanding of mobilization, resilience, and the organization of violence.

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