

Also by Paris Yeros

POVERTY IN WORLD POLITICS: Whose Global Era?
(co-editor with Sarah Owen)

Ethnicity and Nationalism in Africa

**Constructivist Reflections and
Contemporary Politics**

Edited by

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89. This concept is present, for example, in Abner Cohen, 'Introduction: The Lesson of Ethnicity', in Cohen (ed.), *op. cit.*, in note 24; Chapman, McDonald, and Tonkin, *op. cit.*, in note 4; Ringer and Lawless, *op. cit.*, in note 9; and an important and insightful article by John Comaroff, 'Of Totemism and Ethnicity: Consciousness, Practice and the Signs of Inequality', *Ethnos* (Vol. 52, No. 3/4, 1987), pp. 301–22.
90. A recent, and readable, discussion of these developments is Jan Vansina's chapter, 'Professionals and Doctrines', in his *Living with Africa* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), pp. 197–221.
91. Lonsdale, in Berman and Lonsdale, *op. cit.*, in note 81, p. 269.
92. Vansina, *op. cit.*, in note 79, pp. 19–20.
93. Justin Willis, 'The Making of a Tribe: Bondei Identities and Histories', *Journal of African History* (Vol. 33, No. 2, 1992), pp. 193–4.
94. Greene, *op. cit.*, in note 79; Burnham, *op. cit.*, in note 5.
95. Ronald R. Atkinson, 'The Evolution of Ethnicity among the Acholi of Uganda: The Precolonial Phase', *Ethnohistory* (Vol. 36, No. 1, 1989), pp. 19–43; and Atkinson, *op. cit.*, in note 79. The same point is also argued explicitly in Pier M. Larson, 'Desperately Seeking "the Merina" (Central Madagascar): Reading Ethnonyms and their Semantic Fields in African Identity Histories', *Journal of Southern African Studies* (Vol. 22, No. 4, 1996), pp. 541–60, and was suggested earlier in Peel, *op. cit.*, in note 30. Acknowledging that particular colonial and contemporary expressions of ethnic identities in Africa have been 'invented', Peel also argues that unless any such invention 'also makes genuine contact with people's actual experience, that is with a history that happened [including pre-colonial history], it is not likely to be effective' (p. 200).
96. This summary draws on Atkinson, *op. cit.*, in note 95; Atkinson, *op. cit.*, in note 79; and Atkinson, 'Acholi', in John H. Middleton and Amal Rassam (eds.), *Encyclopedia of World Cultures, Volume IX: Africa and the Middle East* (New York, NY: G.K. Hall and Macmillan, 1995), pp. 3–7.
97. See, for example, Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tribalism in Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1985), and Terence Ranger, 'Missionaries, Migrants and the Manyika: The Invention of Ethnicity in Zimbabwe', in Vail (ed.), *op. cit.*, in note 33, pp. 118–50.
98. Terence Ranger, 'Postscript: Colonial and Postcolonial Identities', in Werbner and Ranger (eds.), *op. cit.*, in note 77, pp. 271–81, especially pp. 273–4.
99. Pier M. Larson includes the Ranger sources cited above in note 97 in his criticism of research on ethnicity in Zimbabwe as 'particularly illustrative of the tendency to privilege European and African elites'. Larson, *op. cit.*, in note 95, p. 543, fn. 12.
100. Tim Allen, 'Ethnicity and Tribalism on the Sudan-Uganda Border', in Fukui and Markakis (eds.), *op. cit.*, in note 77, p. 112.
101. *Ibid.*
102. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
103. See Atkinson, *op. cit.*, in note 79, pp. 40–2 and 210–28.
104. Katsuyoshi Fukui and John Markakis, 'Introduction', in Fukui and Markakis (eds.), *op. cit.*, in note 79, p. 6.
105. *Ibid.*

3. A Non-ethnic State for Africa? A Life-world Approach to the Imagining of Communities

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

In this chapter, I address the process of social and political identification with particular reference to that vast continent conveniently summarised under the label 'sub-Saharan Africa'. The discussion is partly epistemological, partly analytic, and partly plainly policy-oriented. I will set out by outlining some standard social science models of nationhood and ethnicity, and will then proceed to a discussion of social and political identification and integration with reference to a few examples. I will then consider an important perspective, drawing on the phenomenological concept of *life-world* (*Lebenswelt*), which has been neglected in many scholarly analyses of collective identity formations.

How does a sense of group membership develop, and under which circumstances do groups behave as inverted refrigerators – emanating coldness outwards for every degree of heat painstakingly generated inwards? What is it about collective identification that makes it so susceptible to being exploited by warlords and Machiavellian power brokers? And – granted that ethnic group sentiment cannot be done away with by scholars and politicians fuelled by Enlightenment sentiment – how can all the energy invested into ethnic politics be harnessed for the progress of humanity?

Such are some of the typical questions asked by academics studying ethnicity and nationalism. Being one of those academics myself, I should add that something important is often missing from our scholarly diagnoses of contemporary ethnicity and nationalism. The main paradigm represented by academics is not only at odds with, but to a large extent incommensurable with, the experienced life-worlds of the people that we ostensibly study and, perhaps, for whom we make policy recommendations. It also, with a few notable exceptions, tends to caricature those life-worlds, often creating contrasts between a (benign, liberal) cosmopolitan attitude and a (totalitarian, irrational) localist or ethnicist attitude; a kind of contrast which is less marked in ongoing social life than in social science models, and which is both inaccurate and potentially politically harmful. Let us keep this in mind as we move on to the world of models, explanations, and empirical examples.

Towards the end of the article, I shall return to the discrepancy between local life-worlds and scholarly analyses.

Models of Ethnicity and Nationhood

It is widely held that the members of human groups have an 'innate' propensity to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, to delineate social boundaries, and to develop stereotypes about 'the other' in order to sustain and justify those boundaries.¹ If this is indeed the case, ethnicity can be conceived as being nearly as universal a characteristic of humanity as gender and age – unlike phenomena like nationhood and nationalism, which have been so conceptualised in the academic community as to concern the modern world only.² Marx and Engels held, probably correctly, that gender, age and the insider–outsider distinction, based on kinship in 'barbarian' societies were universal criteria of social differentiation.³ If, on the other hand, ethnicity as we conceptualise it can be shown to be a product of a particular kind of society, it can, of course, not be regarded as an ahistorical and universal phenomenon. I have argued elsewhere that this discussion is a dead end.⁴ In the present context, I would instead like to draw attention to the very process of collective identification, which is currently represented as a negotiable commodity in most of the world and which may, apparently, just as well end in nihilism, individualism, postmodernism, and hybridism as in vehement and stubborn identity politics with all the conventional trappings of firm boundary-markers and negative stereotyping of others – to mention some of the more extreme options.

By isolating 'ethnicity' as a focus for research, one easily loses everything else from sight. This is perhaps *the* cardinal sin committed by many students of ethnicity; and although one should not overestimate the importance of concepts generated by academic research, they can have very noticeable effects on the outside world through their potential as self-fulfilling prophecies. Concepts can serve as both intellectual tools of liberation and as straitjackets. Their only claim to legitimacy lies in their ability to help us conceptualise the outside world more accurately; when they cease to do that job, they are ready for replacement by others.

It has become a ritual exercise in social science theses and most theoretically ambitious papers on ethnicity and nationalism to interrogate the theories of nationalism developed by the late Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, and Anthony D. Smith, concerning whether nationalism and ethnicity are 'old' or 'new' phenomena, and to which extent they are 'invented'.⁵ While everyone seems to agree that nationalism is a child of that fusion between Enlightenment and Romanticism that we are accustomed to label Modernity, not everyone is convinced that it is this historically recent. For didn't already the Vikings distinguish between Dane, Swede, and Norwegian? And didn't

the writers of the Bible attribute a certain saying about Jews and Greeks to Jesus Christ? And weren't the ancient Greeks pathologically xenophobic, as evidenced in the writings of Herodotus? To this, Modernists would reply that, although the collective self–other distinction harks back to the mists of human prehistory, the peculiarly reflexive character of the modern individual was missing, and that, besides, the nation-state places peculiar demands on its citizens, as well as abstract solidarity.

At this point, enter Benedict Anderson, famously quoted for the title of a book few seem to have read properly;⁶ with all due respect, if they had, they would have realised that already on page six, Anderson notes that, in a certain sense, all communities beyond the family are imagined. In other words, to state that the nation is an 'imagined community' is pretty vacuous as a distinguishing mark. Rather than focusing on ethnic identity as the paradigmatic prerequisite for nationhood, as so many do, Anderson emphasises the impact of print technology and a capitalist system of distribution in his explanation of the development of imagined communities of an unprecedented scale, involving, through shared commitment, solidarity, and ritual communion, very large numbers of people who will never meet.

Although Anderson notes the similarity between ethnicity and nationalism as modes of belongingness, he does not explicitly relate nationalism to ethnicity; he does not talk of the 'ethnic origins of nations'.⁷ An historian of South-East Asia, Anderson writes extensively about nationalist movements in the Philippines and Indonesia, countries which, if they are to be considered nations at all, are arguably non-ethnic ones.

Nations are conceptualised and defined in crucially different ways in different parts of the academic community. In the European press, incidentally, nationalism seems to have become virtually a synonym for xenophobia. In my own discipline, social anthropology, nationalism tends to be seen as identical with ethnic nationalism,⁸ whereas political scientists often regard it as a chiefly civic kind of ideology, as what German intellectuals describe as *Verfassungspatriotismus* (Constitutional Patriotism). The two 'kinds' of nationalism, sometimes described as 'German' and 'French', or even 'East European' and 'West European', are not mutually exclusive in practice. Even the civic British nation, to the extent that it exists as an imagined community, has an easily identifiable dominant ethnic group, namely the English; just as the WASPs can be seen, with slightly greater difficulty, as the hegemonic ethnic group of the USA. This does not, however, mean that nations are by default built around the shared collective memories, territorial attachments, customs, and values of ethnic groups. I will shortly invoke an example which shows the opposite. Besides, any realistic discussion of nationhood in Africa must find its point of departure in a model of nationhood which does not equate national identity either with ethnic identity or with a subservient ethnic identity. In the African context, bickering

about ethnic diversity as being somehow irreconcilable with nationhood, describing the African states as being 'unnatural', with 'artificial boundaries', would lead us nowhere analytically, if the ultimate aim is to understand the construction of identities *from the inside*. Such bickering would also reveal a rather weak understanding of empirically existing European nations, which, as it has been pointed out repeatedly since Walker Connor's seminal article on nationhood and ethnicity, are much less mono-ethnic than it has been customary to believe.⁹

The issue at this stage concerns the extent to which a sense of common identity can be developed in the poly-ethnic African countries, and which models of the nation can be reconciled with the facts on the ground.

In order to discuss this question properly, it is necessary to dwell briefly on the problem of cultural integration and its relationship to ethnicity and nationhood. Most theorists and commentators on nationalism describe it as an ideology which promotes cultural homogeneity and a subjective feeling of we-hood. The first clause is evidently true, but it needs qualifying. How much do the citizens of a nation need to have in common, culturally speaking, in order to be regarded as culturally homogeneous? The answer cannot be of an either-or kind, since shared culture is a matter of degree. Smith and others have stressed that a shared public culture is sufficient, but even if that much is conceded, there are some very real difficulties associated with the delineation of such a public culture.¹⁰ Even societies regarded as homogeneous, such as mono-lingual countries, have greatly differentiated public spheres. The social philosopher Jon Elster once suggested that a society might be defined as a place where people stop at red traffic lights. This will certainly not be sufficient as a general definition of a nation, but it is difficult to tell exactly what is. This, obviously, is a core issue.

The second clause, regarding the subjective feeling of we-hood, is no less difficult to define in an unambiguous way, if not only because the compass and composition of the we-group shift situationally. In general, there is a widespread tendency, also present among academics, to conflate cultural similarity and subjectively defined nationhood. One may have a lot of the latter without much of the former, as when conservative Protestant fundamentalists in Western Norway and post-Marxist babyboomers in Eastern Norway take it for granted that they share the same culture, despite their very considerable differences at the level of objective culture. Conversely, the middle classes of Milan and Lyon may have a lot in common culturally, but not at the level of collective self-identity. The imagined community does not have an existence unless it is being *imagined actively* by its members. This does not mean that it is any more 'imaginary' than other communities, but that it can only exist at the inter-subjective level: it is defined *from within*. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the 'soft' African states, which only rarely come into being as relevant aspects of inter-personal life-worlds.

The common conflation of shared culture with shared ethnic identity makes the task of crafting accurate concepts even more difficult. Just as cultural similarity does not by itself lead to collective identification, ethnic similarity does not vouch for cultural similarity, even if there is often a strong correlation. As it has been pointed out many times, the most protracted and bitter ethnic conflicts are often staged between ethnic groups who, at the level of culture, are very similar, such as Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, or Orthodox, Catholics, and Muslims in Bosnia.

The role of history is a related question in discussions of nationalism and nationhood. To what extent do nations need a shared past as a foundation for their present collective identity? Although it is difficult to imagine a national ideology totally devoid of invocations of shared memories, their importance varies, and some theorists assert that the shared past is always a more or less arbitrary invention. In some nations, the future seems to play a more important role in popular national imagery than the past; twentieth-century Sweden and the United States are perhaps good examples of this. The governments of post-colonial African nation-states have also tended to stress ideas of progress and modernity rather than the mythical past in official national symbolism.¹¹

Let me sum up this part of the discussion before moving on to the main example. There are several moot points in the discourse over nationalism with immediate relevance to the discussion about African nationhood.

- (1) Whether or not ethnic groups are 'modern' is a contested issue. In the classic collection edited by Fredrik Barth, most of the contributions dealt with traditional societies.¹² For my purposes, however, I shall accept that ethnic corporations and ethnic imagined communities in Africa are recent developments, partly produced in the context of colonialism and associated with the rise of individualism, capitalism, and the state. Earlier corporations and collective identities, although they might have carried a label later seen as ethnic, were constructed according to a different logic.¹³
- (2) The relationship between conceptualisations of ethnicity and nationalism is complicated. Some analysts see nations simply as ethnic groups writ large, with leaderships of state-building ambitions; others stress the civic, non-ethnic aspects of nations. Scarcely a single state is ethnically homogeneous, and many do not even have a dominant ethnic group. Here, I shall see the African nation as a supra-ethnic or poly-ethnic phenomenon, which may nevertheless be appropriated by ethnic groups in a number of ways, including the monopolisation of power and secession.
- (3) The relationship between nationhood and culture has been insufficiently explored. Although Gellner brazenly, and probably correctly, stated that nationalism and successful nation-building inevitably

imply cultural homogenisation, the degree of cultural similarity varies both inside and beyond the boundaries of the state in question.¹⁴

(4) Cultural similarity, ethnic incorporation, and collective self-identity are granted unequal weight in rivalling conceptualisations of nationhood. In Hobsbawm's work, for example, collective self-identification takes on a paramount importance, while Smith stresses the sharing of customs and memories, frequently through an idiom of ethnicity.

(5) The role of historical continuity, whether real or imagined or both, is also a difficult aspect of nationhood, and one faced with deep gravity by the African states, many of them manifestly lacking a shared history.

A Quasi-African Success Story

Commenting on the genre of biography, Virginia Woolf lets the protagonist of her novel *Orlando* assume an enormous and seemingly unrealistic variety of social roles and identities, right down to the point of changing gender.¹⁵ Yet, the narrator says towards the end of the book, she has written only a small fraction of the possible biographies that could be written about Orlando. In other words, people have many more facets than a single book might possibly reveal.

The people of Mauritius, I think it would be fair to say, collectively exploit a fair proportion of Orlando's vast role repertoire. Mauritius, a multi-ethnic island-state in the south-western Indian Ocean, has for historical reasons an ethnically very diverse population of about one million, four major religions, a large but uncertain number of languages, and no indigenous population.¹⁶ Widely considered an economic miracle in the 1990s, Mauritius is also a stable multi-party democracy which has experienced several changes of government since independence in 1968.

Arriving on the island to carry out fieldwork early in 1986, I half expected to find a society where postmodern relativism was as deeply ingrained as the faith in technological progress had been in the Europe of the 1950s. Instead, I encountered a very wide range of perfectly solid and confident personal identities, often based on qualitatively different premises. The eclectic approach to identification which can be observed in a society such as Mauritius is evident already in the now obsolete colonial grid for dividing the population into ethnic categories. The last of several such classificatory exercises, abandoned officially in 1982, divided the Mauritian population into four mutually exclusive categories: Hindus, Muslims, Chinese, and 'General Population'. Two of them are religious categories, one refers to an ancestral country, and the final one is residual and contains most but not all of Mauritius' Catholics, with origins as diverse as France and Madagascar, and with no collective sense of ethnic community. However, if a common myth of origin is an important defining mark for an ethnic group, then the island

has at least eight ethnic groups;¹⁷ if one chooses to stress the endogamy rule, the number may rise to around twenty; whereas if ancestral language is to be invoked as a differentiating criterion, fifteen ethnic groups might be counted. This ought to make it clear, if there should be any doubt, that ethnicity is, and remains, a relational and situational kind of social phenomenon. However, the ethnic identities are not the only important identities in Mauritius, although they have justly or unjustly formed the focus of most research on identification in the island. Let me, by way of illustration, provide a list of the most important over-arching identities I have recorded during fieldwork in 1986 and in 1991–92.¹⁸ By 'over-arching', I mean identities which may, in certain situations, overrule all other identities and appear as imperative in the sense that they induce action.

(1) *Ethnic identity*. Although criteria for ethnic differentiation are not consistent with each other, there is always a close link between ethnic identity and kinship. Politics, jobs, and marriage are often, but far from always, regulated through an ethnic idiom.

(2) *Class identity*. Trade unions frequently cut across ethnic lines, and two general strikes in independent Mauritius testify to their occasional efficacy. Also, the sense of belonging to a certain class rather than to an ethnic group is strong in parts of the urban middle class, which often intermarries and tends to regard itself as cosmopolitan. Shared professional identity, also not negligible under certain circumstances, can also be included here.

(3) *Gender identity*. There are several feminist organisations, which have a certain impact on public debate and which explicitly try to bridge gaps between Indo-Mauritian and Creole women. Of course, gender identity is also highly relevant in a great number of everyday situations, probably most.

(4) *Age*. Youth increasingly tend to share social idioms, networks and activities irrespective of ethnic background, in addition to, in most cases, going to multi-ethnic state schools.

(5) *Religious identity*. Although the correlation between religion and ethnic identity is high, Chinese Catholics, Indo-Christians, and Muslim Creoles, among others, worship with members of ethnic groups other than their own.

(6) *Local identity*. although the ethnic element is rarely entirely absent from local politics in Mauritius, villages are often united on single issues, and sometimes divided along non-ethnic lines.¹⁹

(7) *Political identity*. Several political groups are explicitly based on non-ethnic premises, although national politics in Mauritius remains thoroughly ethnified.

(8) *Linguistic identity.* Although most Mauritians speak a French-lexicon Creole (*Kreol*) as their first language, other languages are also spoken in the island. Notably, French-speakers, regardless of ethnic affiliation, militate for the continued strong position of French in public life. Some of them would be, for example, Tamils by ethnic origin.

(9) *Kinship.* Much of what passes for ethnic organisation in Mauritius is simply kinship organisation, and a strong commitment to the family and kin group is found, both in ideology and in practice, in all ethnic groups in the island.

(10) *Supra-ethnic national identity.* Although this form of identification is most evidently present in parts of the growing urban middle class, among intellectuals, academics and the like, there have been historical situations where very large numbers of Mauritians have visibly associated themselves with the multi-ethnic nation rather than with their ethnic group. This is the case, for example, during and after the ritual following the death of Mauritius' first Prime Minister, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, and in connection with large international sports tournaments.²⁰ Significantly, during the controversy concerning whether Mauritius should change its Commonwealth status to that of a Republic (which happened on 12 March 1992), views did not diverge systematically along ethnic lines.

Mauritius now seems to be in the process of developing a common set of supra-ethnic, national myths and symbols which is invested with meaning and relevance by the bulk of its population, although ethnic identification still remains strong. Some of this mythical material harks back to the mists of colonialism, but some of it relates to the turmoil and social unrest in the years around Independence.²¹ It is impossible to state whether this symbolic framework will, in the long run, prove too feeble and fragile to sustain a sense of unity among its ethnic and non-ethnic groups and networks. It is nonetheless clear that any viable Mauritian supra-ethnic nationalism will have to reconcile itself not only with ethnicity, but also with the emerging *non-ethnic* constituent parts of society. Ethnic, non-ethnic, and post-ethnic elements, in other words, coexist side by side in a precarious but, nonetheless, stable equilibrium.

Two complementary, and sometimes competing, models of the Mauritian nation coexist, and each has its symbols and rituals. One of them is commonly spoken of as *le pluriculturalisme mauricien*; this sees the nation as being made up by the very 'cultural mosaic' that it embodies, and locates nationhood at the interface between the constituent ethnic or cultural groups and their mutual respect. The other model lifts nationhood to a supra-ethnic level and depicts Mauritian nationhood in terms of the universal values and institutions that all Mauritians share: the political, legislative, and educational

systems, the territory, and recently, the successful export economy. To the extent that these formal, or officially constructed, visions of nationalism are successful at the informal or popular level,²² they appeal both to ethnic sentiment and to supra-ethnic nationhood; both to particularistic yearning for community and historical embeddedness and to the universalistic ideals of the bureaucratic state. Although it is by no means unproblematic to develop, and although it requires a great deal of compromise and improvisation as one goes along, a combination of these two nationalisms seems to solve many of the potential contradictions inherent in multi-ethnic states.

If the topic of this volume were xenophobia and exclusion in Europe, I would at this point have raised the question of what Europe can learn from Mauritius.²³ Here, it is more appropriate to ask what the forty-odd multi-ethnic states in Africa could learn from Mauritius. The answer is simple. The model can be learnt, quickly and freely. On the other hand, it is unlikely that it can be implemented wholesale through the application of mere political will, since several of the institutional and objective underpinnings of the Mauritian model are missing in most African countries. First, the boundaries of the Mauritian nation are not questioned, and no European *Besserwisser* ('smart-alec') or local identity politician can plausibly argue that its borders are 'artificial'. There can be no secession, no irredentism in such a small, isolated island, unlike the case of many post-colonial African states, with experiences ranging from Nigeria's Biafra war to the successful Eritrean secession and the idea of an Afrikaner *Volkstaat*. Second, the Mauritian population has a high level of education and a *de facto* high level of cultural integration, which makes a national public sphere possible. The media infrastructure – radio, TV, and, to some extent, newspapers – reaches most households. As a result, the political system is governed by a shared system of common denominators. Third, Mauritius is a country of such small scale that the gap between elite and masses, or between centre and periphery, is much smaller than in most African countries. Although many African countries, like Mauritius, practice power sharing between major ethnic groups, there is comparatively little social integration between elites and masses within each ethnic group.²⁴ Thus, power sharing at the ethnic group level is not tantamount to national integration, if the state bureaucratic elite is more or less cut off from ordinary people. Admittedly, nepotism remains a well established practice in parts of the Mauritian public sector, but, unlike the case of several African countries, it cannot be said that the state is run by kinship corporations.

I have mentioned unquestioned sovereignty, high levels of education and cultural integration, and small scale as factors which may partly account for the relative success of Mauritian nation-building. As regards the second point, it might be added that the dialect variations in Mauritian Creole tend to follow regional and not ethnic lines, and that, although cultural differences based on

ethnicity invariably crop up during conversations and are sometimes observed as well, they rarely interfere with the functioning of the shared institutions of society. The message is, in a word, that if such shared institutions work reasonably impartially and according to universalistic principles, ethnic diversity is no obstacle to nation-building. Somalia could, in its tragic way, provide the mirror-image of this argument: the Somalis speak the same language, and share the same culture and ethnic identity in any reasonable meaning of the term, and yet their country has fallen into pieces because of a lack of functioning shared institutions.²⁵

In this brief discussion of Mauritian nationhood, I have mentioned ritual a few times. Rituals are crucial confirmers and producers of collective identification in any society; they simultaneously create a sense of identity and justify a power structure. When rituals fail to engage people, as is the case with many state-sponsored Independence Day celebrations in post-colonial societies all over the world, the power structure they implicitly symbolise is not seen as legitimate or as relevant for identity, and people look elsewhere for their collective identification. In a recent book on ritual in contemporary Africa, none of the rituals analysed, with the possible exception of Nigerian witchcraft accusations as mediated by the popular press, seem to be credible candidates as nationally cohesive forces.²⁶ In creating *communitas*, to use Victor Turner's celebrated term,²⁷ among the members of single ethnic groups, rituals contribute to strengthening rather than weakening ethnic incorporation.

From the notion that ethnic identity is a threat to national cohesion in multi-ethnic societies, it would follow that ethnic rituals are dangerous centrifugal forces. The loyalty to the state would then be inversely proportional to the degree of loyalty to the ethnic group. This, indeed, is the view held by many politicians and theorists, not least in African countries. This is, nevertheless, a position which, by overestimating the political dimension of ethnicity and underestimating its dimension of identification, may paradoxically inspire a politicisation of ethnicity. A suppressed kind of cultural practice may easily re-emerge as a resentful political one. State intolerance towards ethnic rituals does not usually lead to popular support for state rituals, but rather to the creation of ethnic countercultures. This is one problem which has been avoided in the dual Mauritian construal of the nation, in which cultural expressions of ethnicity are positively encouraged and are not seen as a threat to nationhood; they are seen, instead, as complementary to it.

The paucity of rituals which are actually, and not merely officially, cohesive at the national level in many African countries, is a symptom, not a cause. The causes for the lack of national cohesion have to be found elsewhere – in the usually oligarchic and often kleptocratic political structures, in the widespread lack of *lingua francas* spoken by the bulk of the

population, and in labour markets which fail to offer jobs to individuals who can no longer return to functioning clans and who therefore remain suspended in limbo between a lost traditional society and a mock modernity which reveals itself as little more than a showroom. The question is why it is that divisive and conflictual ethnicity emerges, or – as some would have it – re-emerges, in this kind of situation. In order to fully understand this, it is necessary to look more closely at the phenomenon of identification than I have done so far.

The Rationale of Social Identification

What is the self? What does the word 'I' mean, let alone the word 'we'? As Anthony P. Cohen has noted in an important recent book, mainstream social science has tended to avoid the question, taking individual agency for granted and regarding groups in society as 'social facts', even if they pay lip service to the fact that identification is *situational* and *relational*: given appropriate structural conditions, they need not be politicised.²⁸ Furthermore, social identity cannot be taken for granted by the analyst, but must always be investigated empirically; and which identity is construed as 'the most primordial' varies – whether, say, gender, ethnicity, kinship, or class is considered to be a person's most crucial criterion of belongingness in a particular society or a particular context. Therefore, an investigation of identification must begin with the individual and the meaningful relationships he or she enters into with others and with a world ordered through classificatory schemata.

People are loyal to ethnic, national, or other imagined communities not because they were born into them, but because such foci of loyalty promise to offer something deemed meaningful, valuable, or useful. This kind of perspective may be denounced as 'utilitarian' or 'individualist', or even 'reductionist'. I would like to argue that it is not. First, as I have argued with reference to Mauritius, ethnic identification is but one of several identities in which any individual engages. It is made relevant under particular circumstances over which the individual may not exert much control. Second, what is deemed valuable is culturally determined; it is defined from within. This means that there may be, and indeed often are, discrepancies between definitions of the good life, especially in societies where cultural diversity is considerable. Third, the 'instance' that finally perceives alternatives and chooses between them, is a human being, an individual, who, nevertheless, does not choose his or her own cognitive matrix, that is, his or her cultural context. Fourth, it may be that, say, kinship and natal villages may always command nostalgia and warm sentiment, but unless they are socially activated through some kind of resource flow perceived as relevant by the actor, they remain at the level of representations and do not emerge as social and political

corporations. It is within this kind of framework that we may properly inquire into the circumstances in which classes and ethnic groups may emerge.

In other words, individuals choose their allegiances, but not under circumstances of their own choice. For them to invest symbolically, politically, or economically into a corporation or an imagined community, it must offer something in return. Which collectivities are at any point the most important both to individuals and to the functioning of society, is therefore an empirical question. This way of reasoning is not utilitarianist, since it emphasises the importance of the life-world context for action; it is, rather, tautologically true in the same sense as the Spencerian maxim of the survival of the fittest: people act, by definition, to achieve certain ends, but the ends are contextually defined.

On the question of why specifically ethnic corporations emerge, and why they tend to be poised against the state, Basil Davidson, reflecting on the traumas of post-colonial Africa, recently wrote that,

[t]he jubilant crowds celebrating independence were not inspired by a 'national consciousness' any more than were the Romanian peasants and their coevals in the nation-states crystallized some decades earlier from Europe's old internal empires. They were inspired by the hope of more and better food and shelter.²⁹

When these goods failed to materialise, they oriented themselves to new – or, in some cases, old – foci for social allegiance. For the great Pan-Africanists, the nation-state may have been too small. For very many Africans, it was far too big, unless they happened to live in a mini-state such as Lesotho or Mauritius, or if they had the kind of Western education and middle-class experiences which made the African nation-state seem relevant as an imagined community – or, again, if the state had something substantial to offer by way of education, employment, and security. For the vast majority of Africans, a community of this scale did not tally with their personal experiences, which were strictly local.

Generally, as every European critical of the Maastricht treaty or the EMU agreement would agree, when a large-scale community fails to deliver the goods, structures at the medium and low levels of scale emerge. Although these structures have always been present in African countries, they become increasingly invested with pragmatic potential as the higher level (the state bureaucracy) is weakened or simply severed from the majority of its citizens (who thereby become citizens in name only). We should keep in mind that a substantial part of what is conventionally described as African ethnicity is simply kinship; in other words, the failed nations are replaced by pre-existing structures, whose functioning has been transformed by historical changes, and whose political importance is inversely correlated with the strength and

legitimacy of the state. That an individual in, say, Congo should place his bets on his clan rather than on the state, should offer no surprise, as ethnographic studies show.³⁰ In some parts of the world, notably North Africa and the Middle East, political Islam plays the same part: it stands for resentment to the corrupted and inefficient state and an alternative path to authentic belongingness, prosperity, and integrity.³¹ In general, politicised countercultures are liable to take on an ethnic character in societies where kinship is the most important local principle of social organisation, since ethnicity is always, or nearly always, a form of metaphoric kinship.

Corporate kinship, in Africa and elsewhere, ideally works as a segmentary system. The segmentary model of identification, made famous in Evans-Pritchard's study of Nuer politics, but familiar to a vast number of people, including Jean-Marie Le Pen, depicts the modes of belonging of each individual as a set of concentric circles where loyalty, in absolute terms, becomes weaker as one moves outwards from the centre.³² It is illustrated in the famous formula, 'it is I against my brother, my brother and I against our cousins; our cousins, my brother and I against our remote relatives'. In Evans-Pritchard's words, 'although any group tends to split into opposed parts these parts must tend to fuse in relation to other groups, since they form part of a segmentary system'.³³ Each level of allegiance is activated when circumstances make it relevant. The contraction of such a system of concentric circles indicates that structures at a high level of scale are weakening and breaking down. This seems to be happening in many African societies in the 1990s, where an increasing amount of capital – political, economic, and symbolic – seems to be flowing through the inner circles. The severing of links between elites and masses is one important indication, which is serious not just from the peasant's point of view, but also from a nation-building perspective. As noted by John Lonsdale in a recent discussion of Kikuyu ethnicity and Kenyan nationhood, 'the experience of state power seems necessary to the growth of nationhood'.³⁴

An alternative view of social identification could represent a person's identities as a set of partly overlapping group allegiances. Such multiple identities cannot be placed in concentric circles in orderly ways; they can scarcely be represented graphically at all. They cut across each other: every person has a shared identity with different people at different times, according to the situation; one belongs to a profession, a political interest group, a neighbourhood, a kin group and so on. The most fundamental and universal human form of identification is arguably gender. In this kind of context, the status sets of individuals are not clustered about multiplex relationships to a limited number of people; they are diverse and flexible. The stiff and inflexible concept of culture typical of twentieth-century academia, depicting cultural systems as bounded and stable, has made it difficult to understand these complexities fully, since we have lacked tools enabling us to

conceptualise group membership as something relative and relational.³⁵ As noted by Cohen, group boundedness has simply been taken for granted in virtually all anthropological studies of culture and in all social science studies of ethnicity – and, let me add, in modern identity politics worldwide.³⁶ A simple distinction between personal identity and group identity would nevertheless be sufficient to show that boundaries are relational and that groups, even if their existence is not necessarily negotiable, are situational at least regarding their relative importance.

The general policy implications of this analysis are obvious: cross-cutting ties and conflicting loyalties may contribute to reducing tension and conflict potential. A world of many small differences is safer, all other things being equal, than a world of a few major ones – such as the ones promoted by ethnic nationalisms. Here it may be noted that even a major theorist sympathetic to nationalism, namely Smith, stresses the need for states to encourage multiple and conflicting loyalties.³⁷

It would seem, then, that if it is correct that the focus of social organisation in large parts of Africa is shifting from the grand, abstract imagined community to more manageable, tangible ones, political tension may be reduced. I do not think so, for the simple reason that the weakening of the state entails a weakening of that over-arching set of rules governing intergroup relations; that is, the universalistic structure, or common denominators, to which I referred in the Mauritian example. The division of labour between various institutions, functioning both at the macro and the micro level, which is characteristic of Mauritian society – and which, incidentally, is necessary to any society worth more than a few traffic lights – is skewed and incomplete in many African countries, where the highest level of scale is, to varying degrees, disengaged from the other levels.³⁸ In addition, the economic system operates at a level of very large scale, whereas low-level social integration is in no ways congruent with it and, thus, cannot monitor or control it efficiently.

If a sweeping statement can be allowed, let me offer the following: what is at stake for the majority of Africans is not primarily a vindication of their 'roots', popular culture and so on. In this, African ethnicity is quite different from West European ethnicity, insofar as kinship continues to play an important role, transcending public-private boundaries. This is to a much lesser extent the case in Europe, where ethnicity instead tends to be modelled on abstract, imagined communities in Anderson's sense. While meaning and *communitas* may certainly be scarce, more urgent concerns would in most cases be the satisfaction of basic needs, as well as compelling reasons for believing that one's personal ambitions will lead somewhere. When state institutions cease to deliver, kinship and, by extension, ethnicity is often the only alternative. It is chiefly in this context that we must understand the emergence of modern, sometimes militant African ethnicities as mass

movements. The state would in this case be a Trojan horse concealing not identity politics but kinship organisation.

I began this essay by a comparison of different models of nationhood, with particular reference to the multi-ethnic, post-colonial states of Sub-Saharan Africa. Obviously, most African states did not easily fit the standard model of nations as culturally more or less homogeneous, historically constituted entities. Neither, of course, did most European, American, and Asian states. The crisis in the African state, I have subsequently argued, is no more a result of ethnic heterogeneity than the breakup of Yugoslavia was caused by ancient ethnic hatred.³⁹ Ethnic homogeneity can contribute to national cohesion, but as the contrasting examples of Mauritius and Somalia show, it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition. I have argued that insofar as presumed shared state-level institutions – education, politics, labour market – do not function according to more or less universalistic principles and are perceived as such by the non-elite members of society, the state not only becomes illegitimate in a Weberian sense, but it also fails to form a sustained focus of loyalty and identification for the majority of its citizens. This may seem a banal insight, but it is meant as an urge for us, the academic community specialising in the study of other people's modes of identification, not to neglect the study of the subjective level of experience and of individual agency based on local life-worlds.

Coming to Terms with Essentialism

The social science project is, like the African nation-building one, essentially an Enlightenment one, but its subject-matter is largely constituted as a Romantic world in the wide sense; one drawing on unifying metaphors rather than on analytic dissecting tools for its cognitive power. In this divergence lies a great potential for misrepresentation and, as I think the African post-independence experience shows, political futility and disruption.

Theorists of culture have in recent years developed a critical attitude towards 'native' appropriations of the concept of culture for ideological purposes.⁴⁰ The classic anthropological concept of culture, originating in German romanticism (where Herder is the main reference⁴¹) and cultural relativism (from Franz Boas onwards⁴²), depicts the world as an archipelago of more or less isolated cultures. Within this kind of model, culture becomes *reified*; it becomes like a fixed object, or a bounded vessel containing 'a people'. Against this model, theorists have posited a view which stresses the flow, ambiguity and unbounded character of systems of meaning.⁴³ One has tended to view kin groups and ethnic corporations as mere constructions, which they are in a certain sense, but not to their members, for whom they are resources which channel security, hopes, and dreams.

Native theories tend to be essentialistic, and argue for the objective, thinglike character of social and cultural identity. Criticism from an academic point of view does not change this. It may indeed seem that we, as theorists, represent perspectives which may be analytically valid but which are politically futile, as post-independence African experiences, whereby politicians and theorists eagerly applied European models to their societies, may show. It may, of course, be the case that the theory is *avant-garde*, but there can be no doubt that there are profound and systematic differences between the experiences, life-worlds, and structures of relevance (*Relevanzstrukturen*⁴⁴) upon which theorists and categories of 'natives', respectively, draw in their constructions of identity. Extrapolating from our own experiences of the world, we run the risk of generalising from our own, highly specialised experiences. As a result, large parts of the population about which we theorise would feel alienated from our theoretical models and would question their validity, since their own experiences and models of the world are radically different – not only from ours, but also from our representations of theirs!

The professional academic mode of engaging with the world could be described as detached, logical, disinterested and discursive. The academic discursive field is supra-spatial, or disengaged from place. By contrast, local modes of engaging with the world are experience-based, sensual, engaged, practical, and often kinship based. These world views are intrinsically connected with concrete places. They are often stigmatised (by cosmopolitans) as fascist, racist, reactionary and so on, after having been caricatured as much more solid and absolute than they may actually be.

Perhaps, it would be more accurate to state that both modes of engaging with the world are practical, but derive from qualitatively different kinds of practices, different embedded experiences, and thus different interests in a wide sense. The city-dweller walks on tarmac and lives in a flat; the rural dweller walks on soil and lives in the family's farm.⁴⁵ The urban social network is based on the public sphere of anonymous individuals, while the rural one is based on kinship and neighbourhood. It is perfectly understandable that different groups, with radically different experiences, do not develop the same ways of relating to kinship, resources, belonging, and identity. It is therefore the source of some worry that recent criticisms of ethnic and nationalist ideologies have not incorporated an understanding of such variations in our frequently one-sided dismissals of 'indigenous essentialisms', because the bias proper to the life-worlds of intellectuals hampers a sensitive understanding of such processes. *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) may be a perfectly appropriate metaphor for the collective interests of rurals in contemporary African life-worlds, just as human rights may be more important to urban dwellers. Furthermore, the sheer force of argument is scarcely sufficient to make people change their views on identity,

belonging, and loyalty. The rationale behind subjective identification with a collective entity is simply, as I have discussed at length, that it has something to offer which is deemed valuable, meaningful, or useful within a context of experience. Mauritians are not by birth more civilised, more tolerant, more industrious, or more democratic than, say, Togolese or Angolans, but for structural reasons, they are able to relate to identity options which make such virtues seem sensible and beneficial.

Conclusion

Tailbiting occurs in two very different ways where ethnicity is considered. While ethnopoliticians and their supporters bite the tails of others, scholars increasingly tend to bite their own. Scholars encounter risks of self-referential inconsistency, circular argument, and infinite regress, and ought to find no easy consolation in the alternatives of stringent positivism and reductionist objectivism. It remains a fact that ethnic groups are created from within – subjectively and intersubjectively – and also that a mere examination of the objective conditions for their genesis does not provide a full explanation for their existence. Many of us pay lip service to rather fuzzy ideas of 'interplay' between objective and subjective, or historical and structural, factors; but it is another matter altogether to demonstrate the actual complexity of ethnic phenomena.

What is crucial at this point is that we academics become able, not necessarily to sympathise with, but at least to understand what it is that makes people tick: in order to carry out an analysis of an entire society, we must first be able to understand the subjective experiences upon which people act.

A largely implicit theme in this essay, announced at the beginning, has been the contrast between social science models of ethnicity and nationalism, on the one hand, and ongoing group identification in actual societies, on the other. Social scientists, from political scientists to anthropologists, have excelled in developing sophisticated formal models of societal formations and cultural systems of classification. At the same time, they have paid much less attention to modelling and understanding the ongoing flow of social life as defined from within – and if they have done the latter, as many anthropologists would insist that they have, they usually fail to demonstrate the relationship between the levels.⁴⁶ Addressing the relationship between macro processes and local life-worlds, a classic problem in social analysis, is essential for any proper understanding of ethnicity.

In many of our societies, including, in this case, both European and African ones, it seems that the academic, political, and economic élites are moving in one direction and the rest of the population in another, and simplistic academic models of the world do not exactly mitigate this problem. An important task for analysts must therefore consist in relaying an

understanding of life-worlds, not just the way they are described by locals, but to come as close as possible to the ways in which they are *experienced*. Only then can we claim to have understood African ethnicity, and only then should our policy recommendations carry any weight.

NOTES

I would like to thank the participants of the ASEN conference on 'Ethnicity and Nationalism in Africa' and, in particular, Paris Yeros, for comments and criticism.

1. See, for example, Lawrence Hirschfeld, *Race in the Making: Cognition, Culture, and the Child's Construction of Human Kinds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
2. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Second Edition (London: Verso, 1991), and Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).
3. This view is evident in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1968 [1848]), but also in later works by both authors.
4. See Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 'What Is Happening to the Concept of Ethnicity?', *Razprave in Gradivo* (No. 29–30, 1995), pp. 165–77.
5. See Gellner, *op. cit.*, in note 2; Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).
6. Anderson, *op. cit.*, in note 2.
7. Smith, *op. cit.*, in note 5.
8. See, for example, Marcus Banks, *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions* (London: Routledge, 1996).
9. See Walker Connor, 'A Nation Is a Nation, Is a State, Is an Ethnic Group, Is a...', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (Vol. 1, No. 4, 1974), pp. 378–400.
10. See Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right* (Cambridge: Polity 1994), and Hobsbawm, *op. cit.*, in note 5.
11. See, for example, Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (London: James Currey, 1992).
12. Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1969).
13. See, for example, Riachard Fardon, 'African Ethnogenesis: Limits to the Comparability of Ethnic Phenomena', in Ladislav Holy (ed.), *Comparative Anthropology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 168–88.
14. See, for example, Gellner, *op. cit.*, in note 2, pp. 35ff.
15. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928).
16. See Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Communicating Cultural Difference and Identity: Ethnicity and Nationalism in Mauritius* (Oslo: Occasional Papers in Social Anthropology, No. 16, 1988); Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Us and Them in Modern Societies: Ethnicity and Nationalism in Mauritius, Trinidad and Beyond* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1992); and Larry Bowman, *Mauritius: Democracy and Development in the Indian Ocean* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990).

17. French, African, (North Indian) Hindu, Tamil, Muslim, Hakka-speaking, Cantonese-speaking, and *gen de couleur* (mixed Euro-African).
18. See Eriksen, *Communicating Cultural Difference and Identity*, *op. cit.*, in note 16, and Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 'Nationalism, Mauritian Style: Cultural Unity and Ethnic Diversity', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (Vol. 36, No. 3, 1994), pp. 549–74.
19. See Eriksen, *Communicating Cultural Difference and Identity*, *op. cit.*, in note 16.
20. See Eriksen, 'Nationalism, Mauritian Style', *op. cit.*, in note 18.
21. See Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto, 1993).
22. See Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 'Formal and Informal Nationalism', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (Vol. 16, No. 1, 1993), pp. 1–25.
23. For such a discussion, see Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 'Modernity and Ethnic Identity: Fragmentation and Unification in Europe Seen Through Mauritius', *L'Express Culture & Research* (No. 5, 1995), pp. 12–15.
24. See, for example, Göran Hydén, *No Shortcuts to Progress* (London: Heinemann, 1983), and Kajsa Ekholm Friedman, *Catastrophe and Creation: The Formation of an African Culture* (London: Harwood, 1991).
25. See Ioan M. Lewis, *Blood and Bone: The Call of Kinship in Somali Society* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1994).
26. Jean and John Comaroff (eds.), *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
27. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1969).
28. Anthony P. Cohen, *Self Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 1994).
29. Davidson, *op. cit.*, in note 11, p. 185.
30. See Kajsa Ekholm Friedman, *Den magiska världsbilden: Om statens frigörelse från folket i Folkrepubliken Kongo [The Magical World-view: On the Liberation of the State from the People in the People's Republic of Congo]* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 1993).
31. See, for example, John Esposito, *The Islamic Treat: Myth or Reality?* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995).
32. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).
33. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
34. John Lonsdale, 'Moral Ethnicity, Ethnic Nationalism and Political Tribalism: The Case of the Kikuyu' (Unpublished ms., University of Cambridge, 1996), p. 9.
35. The conceptualisation of culture, or cultures, as discrete, stable, and homogeneous runs through much of twentieth-century anthropology, from Franz Boas to Clifford Geertz and Claude Lévi-Strauss. See Franz Boas (ed.), *General Anthropology* (Boulder, CO: D.C. Heath, 1938), Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973), and Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race et Histoire* (Paris: Plon, 1952).
36. Cohen, *op. cit.*, in note 28.
37. Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), and also Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).
38. See Göran Hydén, *op. cit.*, in note 24.

39. For a convincing argument regarding Yugoslavia, see Tone Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

40. See, for example, Jonathan Friedman, *Cultural Identity and Global Process* (London: Sage, 1994).

41. Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1968 [1774]).

42. Boas, *op. cit.*, in note 35.

43. See, for example, Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1992).

44. See Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann, *Strukturen der Lebenswelt, Band I* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).

45. In the words of my colleague, Eduardo Archetti, it is impossible to develop *roots* in an environment where one walks on tarmac and not on soil. Eduardo Archetti, personal communication.

46. This shortcoming can be traced back at least to Barth's 'Introduction', in Barth (ed.), *op. cit.*, in note 12. Interestingly, in a more recent statement, Barth makes a similar point about levels and their interrelationships; see Fredrik Barth, 'Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity', in Hans Vermeulen and Cora Govers (eds.), *The Anthropology of Ethnicity* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1994), pp. 11–32.

4. Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Horn of Africa

John Markakis

Both nationalism and ethnicity have earned the attention of social scientists because of their political prominence. The discussion here focuses specifically on the role of these two closely related, and often confused, phenomena in struggles for power. The state is at the centre of such struggles, whose bone of contention is, more often than not, access to state-controlled resources. Not infrequently, conflict is the result, particularly where resources are scarce and diminishing. Conflict involving nationalism and ethnicity rarely brings out the best in human nature; the reverse is the norm. Seeking to explain such behaviour, some scholars peer into the murky depths of the human psyche with its unfathomable emotions and uncontrollable passions, and pin the blame on the mindless subjectivity which presumably rules the behaviour of people in the throes of nationalism and ethnicity.¹ Others see the elemental logic of biology at work.² The conflictual aspect tends to cast an ethical shadow on our perception of nationalism and ethnicity, often obliging social scientists to add normative assessments to the study of these phenomena. Being entirely subjective, such additions seldom facilitate comprehension.³

Irrefutably, emotions influence human behaviour. Attempts to take them into account in a given instance confront two problems. First, by the nature of the subject, any assessment of their weight in the calculus of motivation is itself impressionistic, not to say subjective. Second, such attempts tend to isolate the phenomena they are studying, to reify and isolate them from the situations that give birth to them. As Thomas Hylland Eriksen comments in this volume, 'by isolating "ethnicity" as a focus for research, one easily loses everything else from sight'.⁴ In other words, effect is detached from cause. In order to avoid tunnel vision of this sort, the discussion that follows proceeds on the assumption that the political manifestation of nationalism and ethnicity is socially defined and historically determined. This means that one can comprehend and explain why they become hegemonic political forces by investigating the context in which this occurs. This will be demonstrated with reference to the Horn of Africa, a region awash in national and ethnic conflicts.⁵