

## **Introduction**

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The issue of identity has been one of the most central in human society. It has inspired the creative endeavours of many artists and writers. On a more negative plane, it lies at the root of most of the conflicts that have bedevilled the world for quite some time. Even a cursory look at most of the conflicts in the recent past would show how much many of them have revolved around the question of identity. The Irish Question, which had become perhaps one of the most intractable problems of identity and for long made normal life in the United Kingdom a difficult proposition, lasted for over a century. The Basques have been fighting for independence from Spain for a number of decades. In Asia, Kashmir has continued to pit India and Pakistan in interminable conflict, dangling ominously the prospect of a nuclear flare out. Chinese identity has been split since 1949 between mainland China and Taiwan, with the latter determined to hang on to their separate identity and the former pursuing with equal determination the goal of one China. In bi-lingual Canada, the issue of Quebecois identity has been a perennial test to the integrity of the republic.

The collapse of the Soviet Union has released a veritable floodgate of national and ethno-national identities not only among the formerly federated Soviet republics but also throughout the satellite states of Eastern Europe. As a result Yugoslavia is no more, having broken up into its constituent units of Serbia, Montenegro, Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The world has also had to come to terms with thinking in terms of the Czech Republic and Slovakia rather than Czechoslovakia. Only the relatively homogeneous states such as Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania seem to have escaped this fundamental shake-up.

Africa has been no exception to this global phenomenon. Particularly since independence in the 1960s, the continent has been rocked by both intra-state and inter-state conflicts, many of them concerned with the issue of identity. The post-colonial state has not been particularly successful in establishing a pluralist order that could accommodate multiple identities. Indeed, identity has tended to be manipulated by the political elite in the service of political power. This partly explains the persistence or even virulence of identity-based conflicts side by side with the formal declarations of African leaders to forge regional and continental unity. Examples of such conflicts abound.

The Eritrean struggle to forge an independent state succeeded only after thirty years of war (1961-1991) that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, massive displacement and the fall of two Ethiopian regimes. Sadly enough, the attainment of independence by Eritrea in 1993 has not been followed by peaceful relations between the two neighbouring countries. On the contrary, what could be characterized as the lingering ramifications of identity have ensued in a bloody war of unprecedented ferocity (1998-2000) and continuing tension that has defied and baffled international intervention. In neighbouring Sudan, a civil war that had pitted the south against the

north went on intermittently for nearly half a century until the rather precarious Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that was signed by the two warring parties in 2005. In Rwanda, nearly a million people perished in 1994 because they happened to belong to the wrong 'ethnic' group. Coming fast on the heel of that cataclysm was the movement of the Banyamulenge in Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo). Triggered by the issue of citizenship, the movement removed the venal dictatorship of Mobutu but at the same time plunged the Congo into a civil war from which it is only now recovering. Côte d'Ivoire, once the paragon of peace and stability, has become a hotbed of strife and xenophobia around the question of 'Ivorian-ness' (*ivoirité*). In Zambia, the citizenship of the very person who led the country to independence and ruled it for more than two decades (Kenneth Kaunda) was put to the test when it suited his opponents. Ironically, the same opponents were subsequently alleged to be 'un-Zambian' or 'not Zambian enough'.

Likewise, identity has been at the root of many other conflicts in states like Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Angola, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Mauritania, and Uganda, even if those conflicts have been recast as conflicts of governance or merely as problems of civil violence. Yet, pre-occupation with the all-absorbing and often oppressive present can easily obfuscate both the deep-rooted character of the problems of identity and the mutations they have undergone over time. It is the task of historians to investigate those roots and delineate the mutations.

Countering the policy of fragmentation and a history of inter- and intra-state conflicts has been the ideal of pan-Africanism that marked the struggle for independence from its inception. The pan-Africanist movement had its genesis in the quest of African-Americans and African-Caribbeans for their lost identity. Underpinning the movement was the conviction that all oppressed peoples of African descent shared a common destiny and should fight in concert the common enemy, colonialism and racism. After the Second World War, pan-Africanism was appropriated by African nationalists, spearheaded by Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta and given continental focus and direction. The establishment of the OAU in 1963, three years after the majority of African states attained independence from colonial rule, underscored the convergence of the ideals of national independence and continental unity. While the record of the OAU has not been without controversy, its successor, the African Union, has set off with a good deal of promise. Its organs not only provide for regional intervention in times of crisis but also go some way to accommodate non-state actors, thereby dispelling somewhat the image of the organization as a club of African heads of state.

It is in recognition of the contemporary salience and the historical depth of the issue of identity that the Association of African Historians decided to dedicate its Fourth Congress to the theme of 'Society, State and Identity in African History'. The Association thereby hoped to marshal the expertise and knowledge of African historians and historians of Africa into examining the issue of identity from a historical perspective. The following sub-themes were suggested to ensure the maximum possible participation as well as a multi-faceted treatment of the subject: pre-colonial identities, migration and acculturation, the formation of colonial boundaries, colonialism and identity, urbanization and multiple identities, conceptions of the nation-state and identity, perceptions of the other and xenophobia, the

challenge of writing regional histories, federalism and devolution, trans-national artistic and literary expressions, lessons of regional integration organizations (ECOWAS, SADC, etc.), and the challenge of creating a pan-African identity.

The Congress took place in Addis Ababa on 22-24 May 2007. The response to the call for papers was much more than the organizers had anticipated. One hundred seventy interested academics sent in their abstracts in response to the call. After a rigorous process of selection by the scientific committee designated for the purpose, a total of sixty-seven papers were finally read at the Congress. The papers included in this volume are those selected from among the papers presented at the Congress. They explore and analyse the issue of identity in its diverse temporal settings, from its pre-colonial roots to its contemporary manifestations.

### **Pre-Colonial Identities**

A recurrent feature of the pre-colonial history of Africa is the movement of peoples from one part of the continent to another. Migrations and population movements were so frequent that they have attracted considerable historiographical attention. Of these movements perhaps few have been of more enduring significance than the movement of the Bantu-speaking people across western, central and southern Africa. The result has been a configuration that has given these sub-regions their present linguistic shape (Flight 1981; Spear 1981). In the sixteenth century, the movement of the Oromo reconfigured the demographic and cultural landscape of the Horn of Africa (Hassen 1994; Merid 1971). In the nineteenth century, Zulu expansion in South Africa triggered a population movement known in history as the *Mfecane*, which resulted in the creation of the kingdoms of Swaziland and Lesotho as well as Matabeleland in present-day Zimbabwe; the ripple effect of this population movement was felt as far as the lakes region in East Africa (Omer-Cooper 1987; Oliver and Atmore 1981, 56-59). Finally, the Fulani jihad that started in northern Nigeria not only bequeathed the Sokoto Caliphate but also impacted across a wide belt of Western Africa as far as Senegambia (Willis 1979; Hiskett 1984).

These population movements were often attended by considerable destruction and dislocation. The term *mfecane* signifies 'troubled times' or 'interminable war'. And *jihad* by its very nature is bound to be violent. However, the end result was the forging of new identities (culturally or politically defined) or the merging of old ones.

Another salient feature of the pre-colonial African past is the importance of long-distance trade. Trade routes traversed the Continent across not only small principalities but also across far-flung empires. The most famous of this was the trans-Saharan trade route that linked the Maghrib with West Africa and continued to occupy a prominent place until the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Zezeza 1993: 268). In East Africa, another important trade route penetrated the interior from the coast, giving rise to a distinctively regional cultural and linguistic category of people, the Swahili. The Swahili are the example *par excellence* of a culturally defined identity, as opposed to the political identity that has now become the order of the day (Nurse and Spear 1985).

The Ethiopian empire was traversed by a long-distance trade route that stretched from the southwest to Massawa on the Red Sea coast. Another vibrant trade

route linked the Asante of Ghana with Kano in northern Nigeria. The lasting significance of these trade routes was to serve as conduit for the peaceful flow of ideas and people, as well as the formation of states that benefited from and sought to control the trade (Lovejoy 1980, 1985). They also gave rise to a cosmopolitan class of merchants - the Hausa in West Africa, the Jabarti in the Ethiopian region and the Swahili in East Africa - that served as a bridge between divergent cultures and political systems.

A third outstanding element in the pre-colonial period was the rise of a number of empires that brought under a common political umbrella divergent peoples and principalities. Examples of such empires were that of the Almoravids in the Maghreb, Mali and Songhay in West Africa, the kingdom of Monomotapa in Great Zimbabwe and the Ethiopian empire in the Horn. What is of particular interest in this phenomenon is the accommodation of local identities and the overarching identities represented by those empires. The low state of development of infrastructure performance meant that the state could not exercise the sort of intrusive and obtrusive control that was to be common in the colonial and post-colonial periods. The village, the clan, or the district developed a system of governance and adjudication that was more direct and immediate than the power exercised by the higher authorities (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972).

These multi-layered pre-colonial identities are highlighted in at least five of the contributions to this volume. Bundjoko Banyata argues that, as in so many other parts of Africa, the people of Bas-Kasaï in present day southern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), were members of a larger polity that permitted them to develop multiple layers of identity, both ethnic and supra-ethnic. As Doulaye Konate shows, the same situation prevailed in the Western Sahel, where memories of past empires – Ghana, Mali and Songhay – still prevail. The challenge is to identify the points of articulation of these rich sub-regional memories to consolidate the process of regional integration as well as the writing of sub-regional histories. The free movement of peoples across wide spaces also promoted inter-cultural borrowings and adaptations, as is demonstrated by Hamadou's exposition of the impact of Fulani, Hausa and Kanuri migration from northern Nigeria to Cameroon. On the other hand, experiences of domination, including its most brazen edition, the slave trade, triggered the sharpening of identities, as was the case of the *Sereer* vis-à-vis the Wolof in Senegal.

### **Colonialism and Identity**

It is difficult to think of a development that had a more decisive impact on African society than the establishment of colonial rule at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Not only did that rule divert the historical path outlined above but it also shaped the nature of post-colonial African society and polity in more ways than one. The first major innovation of the colonial order - indeed, one of its distinctive marks - was the drawing of relatively watertight boundaries, where previously there had only been almost imperceptible borders. The European colonial rulers brought to Africa their concept of clearly delimited and demarcated boundaries between separate political entities. The first two decades of

colonial rule were thus characterized by the negotiation and conclusion of treaties defining and marking those boundaries.

A corollary of this innovation was the emergence of new states that combined hitherto independent peoples within the newly defined territorial limits. Almost every colony could be said to have undergone this process. Thus, the Ibo, Yoruba and Hausa, along with several dozen smaller groups, were merged into the new entity known as Nigeria. The Kikuyu, the Luo and the Masai and many other smaller groups likewise became Kenyans. The French, who tended to consider their colonial subjects as potential members of the larger French community, were less zealous in this exercise of creating the embryonic nation-states. For long, they administered their extensive colonial empire as two regional entities: French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa. It was only on the eve of independence that they broke up those entities into the nation-states that we know today (Brunschwig 1982, Person 1982). Yet, what is remarkable is the way in which these new entities in francophone Africa were able to forge their own separate identities (Burkinabe, Malian, Ivorian, etc.) in the post-colonial period.

While the creation and consolidation of larger territorial entities by the colonial boundaries could be seen as a relatively progressive development, those boundaries were not without some negative consequences. To begin with, they hindered the movement of peoples in quest of trade or transhumance. Even more seriously, the boundaries created the phenomenon of 'partitioned Africans' (Aswaju 1984). Almost every colonial boundary bears testimony to this fact, whether it relates to the Masai in East Africa, the Mande in West Africa or the Somali in the Horn.

Colonialism, while it forged the nation-state, also invented new 'tribes' or 'ethnic groups' when the politics dictated and promoted ethnicity in politics, economics and society (Mamdani 1996). The British, who opted for a policy of ruling indirectly through indigenous or 'native' authorities, were particularly adept at this. However, the most disastrous invention of ethnicity was made by the Belgians in Rwanda and Burundi. The transformation of what were amorphous social categories in pre-colonial times into water-tight ethnic groups pitted the Hutu against the Tutsi and plunged the two countries into a period of chronic tension, ultimately paving the way for the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Conversely, as illustrated in Mumbanza Bawele's investigation in this volume, colonialism could elevate a term of restricted coverage like the Bangala to a supra-ethnic identity marker encompassing a number of peoples of Central Africa.

A country like Cameroon, which experienced three divergent colonial regimes (German, French and British), inherited triple colonial legacies that conditioned its post-colonial existence. As Nicodemus Awasom's study in this collection shows, those legacies, particularly the last two, explain the persistent tension between the Anglophone and Francophone communities in the country, with the mutual recriminations of being secessionist or assimilationist. The colonial intervention had its effect on religious identities as well, as was the case with Islam in Senegal. The 'black Islam' of colonial vintage, with its implications of inferiority and simplicity, has been transformed to 'Senegalese Islam', a religion that takes its colour and flavour from the society with which it is meshed.

But, as Catherine Coquery-Vidrovich's demonstrates, colonialism has left its imprint on the coloniser as well as the colonised, on the perpetrator as well as the victim. In France, a colonial power probably least prepared to engage in the process of decolonisation, national identity became synonymous with imperial identity and love of country with love of empire. That is what made the colonial divorce so difficult and often bloody, as was evidenced first in Indochina and later in Algeria. Hence the enduring attraction of the concept of francophonie and the abiding appeal of the French Union.

### **The Post-Colonial State**

Independence opened a new chapter in African history. At the formal level at any rate, it has put Africans in charge of their own destiny. Whatever its imperfections and disappointments, it marked the end of a period of history when Africans were deemed incapable of determining what is best for themselves.

But independence did not represent a complete break with the colonial past. It would indeed be ahistorical to expect such a complete rupture. The nation-state, a creation by and large of colonial rule, continued as the dominant form of political association and the main vehicle for the expression of identity. The new flags and national anthems consecrated it. Colonial boundaries came to be regarded as sacrosanct and obtained legal sanction in the OAU charter and subsequent international agreements. This was understandable, as trying to modify them would be opening a Pandora's Box. Nonetheless, the paradox has persisted of African leaders seeking at one and the same time integration and unity at the regional and continental level while jealously guarding the boundaries and territorial sovereignties bequeathed to them by colonialism.

The consecration of the nation-state has had its ramification at the historiographical level as well. The writing of national history became the all-pervasive occupation. As a result, not only local history but also trans-national or regional history has tended to be ignored or undermined. Yet, a number of regions in the continent lend themselves readily to regional historiographical perspectives: the Maghrib, Senegambia, and the Horn of Africa readily come to mind.

Far from ensuring peace and security, the life of the post-colonial state has been attended by conflict and dislocation of unprecedented magnitude. Both intra- and inter-state conflicts have littered the landscape. As a result of these endemic conflicts, millions of Africans have either lost their lives or been condemned to precarious lives as refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Xenophobia and ethnic cleansing have reared their ugly heads, in Africa no less than in many other parts of the world. It is not an exaggeration to state that many of these conflicts are the outcome of contestations of identity or the failure of African states to accommodate multiple identities. The challenge still remains in much of Africa of creating a political framework that can accommodate different layers of identity, the ethnic and the national, the local and the general. Drawing from Ndlovu-Gatseni's analysis of the Zimbabwean situation in this collection, neither the 'tribe' nor the 'nation' has to die. What must die is the concept of 'a monolithic nation' that has no room for multi-culturalism.

At the root of these problems has been the issue of governance. Independence from colonial rule has not been marked by the inauguration of democratic governance. On the contrary, the initial years of euphoria and high expectation were soon followed by a general picture of misrule and dictatorship (mostly of military vintage). This state of affairs led not only to economic stagnation or even regression but also to an almost pathological intolerance of plurality of views and identities. On the other hand, the democratization process that has set in since the 1990s has triggered the surfacing of those suppressed views and identities.

At the same time, the colonial policy of accentuating ethnic differences or fostering separate development has been exploding like a time bomb and adding to the prevalent picture of insecurity and instability. The Sudanese Civil War, while admittedly abetted by Islamic fundamentalism in the north, has its genesis in the policy of accentuating the regional differences that the British colonial rulers had pursued systematically (Lesch 1998: 31-32). Likewise, Belgian colonial policy of 'biologizing' political identities ossified Hutu-Tutsi relationships (Prunier 1997; Mamdani 2001). Accumulated Hutu resentment of past Tutsi dominance exploded in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. In the Horn of Africa, the British fostered the policy of Greater Somalia in the twilight hours of their colonial presence, thereby sowing the seeds of Somali irredentism, which culminated in the Ethio-Somali war of 1977-78 and the resultant collapse of the Siyad Barre regime and subsequent disintegration of the Somali state, developments whose ripple effects are being felt to this day.

But, as Samuel Negash's study of the Issa-Ogaden conflict in the Ethiopian Somali region shows, not everything could be laid down at the door of the colonial powers. The enduring conflict between the two Somali clans was triggered among other things by the competition for scarce and dwindling resources. Moreover the varying fortunes and policies of the two neighbouring states of Ethiopia and Somalia have played a decisive role in conditioning their allegiances. The Ishaq, who became disaffected by the repressive regime in Moqadishu, aligned their fate with the Ethiopian regime, whereas the Ogaden increasingly served as a spearhead for Somali irredentism. In the post-1991 political dispensation, the Ishaq became steadfast allies of the Ethiopian regime led by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), while the Ogaden, through the agency of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), are fighting for the secession of the Ethiopian Somali region. In a somewhat similar vein, Dereje Feyissa analyses the evolution of Anywaa identity in western Ethiopia in oppositional relationship not only to their age-old rivals, the Nuer, but also the dominant – and often domineering – Ethiopian state. State policy, which has tended to favour one ethnic group at the expense of the other, has exacerbated the enduring tensions as well as clouding the relations between the local and the national.

In Nigeria, as well, conflict over natural resources has been intertwined with the issue of identity. The most dramatic illustration of this is the case of the Niger delta (discussed at length here in Chris Ogbogbo's contribution), which has captured the headlines and whose repercussions are being felt in every corner of the globe through its effects on the price of oil. Conflicts over resources can pit not only an ethnic group against the state, as in the Niger delta, but also one sub-ethnic group against another, as has been the case with the century and a half old conflict between

the Yoruba sub-groups, the Ife and the Modakeke (see the chapter by Olajide Akanji). This hyper-ethnicisation or, in its French version, 'surethnicisation' is the subject matter of Philémon Muamba Mumbunda's investigation in the Sud-Kasaï province of the DRC. As Biyaya (2001: 55-56) has argued, urbanisation, far from mitigating ethnic identity, has had the effect of amplifying it.

Migration often lies at the roots of ethnic conflicts. Yet, migrant communities need not always be at loggerheads with their hosts. As it emerges quite clearly from Akachi Odoemene's study, while Igbo-Hausa relations in Kano have been fraught with tension and violence, they have been characterised by relative harmony in Enugu. Equally instructive is the way the Chewa, who had migrated from Malawi to Zimbabwe, continued to preserve and express their identity in their new milieu through ritual dances, even if these rituals have recently come to encounter the twin threats of xenophobia and modernity (Anusa Daimon, in this volume). On another angle of the same theme, Lily Mafela introduces a gendered interpretation of Batswana labour migration to the South African mines, describing the liberating effects of female migration and the patriarchal attempts to thwart it.

Another issue that is intertwined with identity is historical memory. Memory can be not only contested but also selected. While historians toil to reconstruct history as accurately as possibly, people choose what to remember and how to remember. Thus, as Leslie Witz's chapter shows, the same event – the arrival of the Portuguese in Cape Town at the end of the fifteenth century – is remembered and commemorated differently in apartheid South Africa five centuries later. To the whites, it marked the advent of a new era of 'progress and virtue' into a situation of 'indigenous idleness'. To the blacks, it represented an alien intrusion fraught with dire consequences. Similarly, Anselme Guezo argues that it is the Beninois educated elite that determine what and how to remember from the history of Dahomey, as it grapples with an existential dilemma that leaves it torn between the purportedly universal French culture to which it aspires to belong and the transatlantic slave trade that keeps it rooted to its Dahomean past.

As we enter the twenty-first century, Africa is faced with the challenge of resolving the problems of identity outlined above if the tragedy of the last four decades is not to be repeated. There are a number of questions that need to be addressed. How does Africa extricate itself from the constriction of the nation-state, which has proved to be not only economically unviable but also generally unable to resolve adequately the problems of multiple identities? Has the nation-state perhaps outlived its usefulness? How do we create a balance between national identity and local or trans-national identity? What are the lessons that we can draw from the pre-colonial traditions and experience of the Continent? How do historians meet the challenge of writing regional history over and above the standard preoccupation of writing national histories? These are the kind of questions tackled by the contributions to this volume. Hopefully, they would help to broaden the debate on an issue that permeated the African past, dominates its present and is bound to have a decisive import on its future. At the same time, the earnestness and thoroughness with which these burning issues are treated testify to the vibrancy of the historical discipline, notwithstanding the precarious life that so many of our continent's higher education institutions have been forced to lead.

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