Searching and Picking the Rotten Grain from Within: Conflicts as Barriers of Africa's Development

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Language has remained the basic tool for human communication and social interaction expressed through various forms such as music (songs) and drum language. Ethnicity, defined as group identity based on linguistic differential, is a logical product of language, hence the claim that language is the basis for ethnicity. With the multiplicity of languages in Africa, most of which are unintelligible to speakers of other languages, there is the tendency to "distance" and exclude others and regard them as people who do not "belong". To capture this heterogeneity, we build on the theory of "ethnic distance". The theory is based on the assumption that for as long as Africa remains ethnically heterogeneous, a poorly managed situation such as bad governance is likely to marginalize others thus resulting in chaos. The purpose of this paper, which is based on a random sampling of conflict zones in Africa, is to examine how language and ethnicity have influenced social, political and economic activities in Africa and how they have affected the overall development of the continent. It also seeks to take the position that African countries, over fifty years after independence, should rather look within the continent and accept the fact, albeit painful, that Africans can largely be held accountable for the economic deprivation and retardation of the continent.

Keywords: conflict; development; electoral (process); language; music; political

Introduction

The undeniable fact is that Africa paradoxically is the poorest continent in the world. Africa's rich natural resources notwithstanding, the continent contributes only 2% to the world's economy thus condemning almost all African countries to a perpetual dependency syndrome. The years after independence have seen various African governments making half-hearted efforts to correct this economic imbalance while constantly blaming America and Europe for the current economic quagmire. The truth, however, is that Africa cannot continue to blame the west forever. Instead, it is time for Africans to, as Achebe put it, look back and see where the rain began to beat us. Looking back within the continent, one would count several factors that retard economic and social development, one of which is armed conflicts arising from language and ethnicity. Language, being a two-edge sword, has the capacity to either hold society together, or disintegrate it. Therefore, the irresponsible use of language in politics, be it language of music or of ordinary discourse, has contributed a great deal to destabilizing the continent both socially and economically.

The high level of poverty of the African continent and its people is, according to Woddis (1960), a phenomenon that cannot be concealed or denied. A look at the continent's poverty situation shows countless reasons to despair for Africa. According to Harden (1990:15), at the end of the 1980s, per capita income was lower than it was thirty years earlier. Seventy per cent of the world's poorest nations are in Africa. The region is slipping out of the Third World into its own bleak category. The assertion by Harden may sound unsavory but it reflects nothing but the stark reality about the African situation. This trend persists as Africa's economic situation gets worse compared with preceding years'. Analyzing Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth and performance, the African Development Bank (AFDB) predicts that economic growth (in Africa) is likely to slow to 3.7 per cent in 2011 from 4.9 per cent in 2010 due to disruptions by political unrest and regime changes in North Africa.

Commenting further on the African situation, Harden (1990:16) notes: Civil wars spawned the world's largest refugee population: one of every two hundred Africans was a homeless victim of war. The number of stable democracies could be counted on the fingers of the hand. The political norm was near absolute power in the hands of a Big Man who tolerated no opposition, rigged elections, and

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regarded the revenues of the state as personal income. Three decades after independence, black-ruled Africa was falling further and further behind the rest of the developing world. Its people were sicker, poorer, less free. The tendency is for Africans to blame colonialism for the unacceptable slow pace of economic development of the continent that leads to the impoverishment of the citizens. This also is an undeniable fact since the influence of the activities of the so-called western powers on the economies of virtually all African states can hardly be wished away.

Since the partition of Africa during the mid-19th Century, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, just like many other African countries, has been exploited of all its natural resources such as gold, diamond and renewable resources by various colonial powers. This has turned Africa into a resource reservoir for western colonial powers to harvest at their (the colonial powers') convenience, and a receptacle, loosely containing a good number of the most impoverished countries on earth. Again, citing the example of DRC, this previously rich, well-watered, and enviably densely vegetated tropical agricultural area of the Congo Basin has now become one of the three poorest nations in the world. Africa's export earnings declined massively in the past decade. The foreign debt burden, relative to Africa's income, was the highest in the world. About one-third of the earnings of African countries is spent on interest payments, yet there always heavy debts to pay

.**Methodology**

The study employed the random sampling technique to examine the effects of armed conflicts arising from language and ethnicity in Africa. Major flashpoints on the continent notably the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Lake Region, Sudan, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghanaand Togo constituted the basis for the survey. The material that served as raw data for the study is derived from various sources which included historical accounts from both oral and written sources, as well as new media and internet sources.

The research question that guided the study is whether the wildly held view by Africans that Europe and America should exclusively be held accountable for the economic woes of Africa is tenable. To arrive at a definite and reliable conclusion, the authors adopted the "ethnic distance" framework to do a qualitative analysis of the available data. We are thus satisfied that the conclusions drawn represent a fair assessment of the African situation.

The Debt Crisis

For decades, sub Saharan Africa, the poorest region of the world, was spending billions of dollars each year repaying debts to the world's richest nations and international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Indeed, many countries in Africa continue to spend more each year on debt servicing than they spend on health and education combined. Between 1970 and 2002, for example, Africa received $540 billion in loans. Over the same period, African countries paid back $550 billion ($10b extra), yet at the end of 2002, they still owed another 293 billion dollars (Economic Review: Report on the economies of Africa, 2006).

The region became more dependent on foreign assistance in the forms of grants and loans than any part of the developing world. Outside investment dried up. Africa grew more and more irrelevant, in economic terms, to the United States, accounting for less than 3 percent of total American trade in 1988 – less than half what it was in 1970. More than twenty African countries pledged themselves to free-market economic reform. But none of them showed a capacity to sustain long-term growth. "Structural adjustment," the West's most popular prescription for Africa's economic ills, exacted a high human cost. In reforming countries such as Madagascar the child death rate was higher in 1985 than in 1960 (Harden, Blaine 1990:16).

Can Africa continue to pass the buck?

By the late 1940s, Africans appeared tired of colonial domination and control. The result being that in many of the colonies, there sprang various forms of nationalist movements that began to initiate independence struggles. At the head of these movements were native leaders or"nationalists" as they were popularly known. One after the other and in quick succession, these African countries gained their independence starting from Ghana (the first in black Africa) in 1957, followed by Guinea in 1958. The peak year for independence came in 1960 when about seventeen African countries gained independence. At the close of 1970, very few African countries remained under colonial servitude. Though South Sudan gained independence only on July 8, 2011, their struggle was more of a secessionist move than independence from colonial rule. For their reward, these first generation nationalists became heads of government of thei various countries: Kwame Nkrumah for Ghana, SékouTouré for Guinea, Leopold S. Senghor for Senegal and Modibo Keita for Mali. Kenneth Kaunda, JomoKenyata and

Julius Nyerere also became presidents for Zambia, Kenya and Tanzania respectively. Initially, these heads of state led their respective countries with very high hopes for the future with forceful campaign messages.

The Ghanaian nationalist, Kwame Nkrumah, in a pre-independence speech to persuade his countrymen to accept the challenge and join the fight for independence, promised them: We shall achieve in a decade what it took others a century and we shall not rest content until we demolish these miserable colonial structures and erect in their place a veritable paradise. [1]

When in 1963 African heads of state met in Addis Ababa to form the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the concern was the unification of African countries. In the view of the founding fathers of the organization, a continental union would not only ensure economic integration, but social integration as well. Indeed, this philosophy of social and economic integration is what had all along been keeping African societies going in the form of communalism.

The strong desire of the African leaders for the integration of the continent was reflected in the objectives of the OAU (later The African Union), which include promoting sustainable development at the economic, social and cultural levels as well as the integration of the continent. In all these objectives, the ambition of these leaders was to see a united Africa that is resilient enough to repair the unfortunate economic exploitation suffered by the continent over decades of colonization. With the ethnic groups thus fragmented, they now lacked the internal cohesion that would ensure the integration of the continent as a whole.

Decades of Self-Rule

After close to five decades of self-rule by most African states, however, the situation on the continent has grown no better. Indeed, as noted earlier in this study, the African condition has deteriorated. The truth is that fifty years is long a time enough for Africans to be able to turn things around; and if they are unable to do so, then it is unjustifiable for the continent to continue passing the buck.

Picking the rotten grain from within: *Ethnic Politics /Conflicts in Africa*

Many linguists who investigate conflicts in Africa have established that political institutions are often the root cause. Electoral rules, for example, may privilege one of several ethnic cleavages. As (political) institutions change, the dimension of ethnicity changes too. Taking advantage of Zambia's shift of electoral institutions from competitive parties to a single party system and back, Posner demonstrates that at both elite and mass levels, 'tribal' identities were more effective in campaign discourse and voter choice in single party elections, whereas language identities succeeded more in multi–party elections.

In elections during the single – party regime, candidate success was organized in terms of the dominant "tribe". The difference was so marked that parliamentary candidates running in the same constituency who won on the basis of their 'tribal' appeal in a single-party election frequently lost in a succeeding multi-party election in which they affiliated with a party not associated with the 'home' language of that area (Posner Daniel, 2005).

Gory scenes: Typical ethnic manifestations

A typical armed conflict in Africa is a gory one which any country would want to forget quickly. Perhaps, a narrative of the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo will give a clue to the pains and loss that conflicts impose on the continent.

Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of Congo is fragmented into two hundred tribes and the only unifying factor during the independence period was the "black skin". Preferential treatment started on tribal lines from the few blacks who managed to entrench themselves in positions of government, sparking off intense envies among the various ethnic groups with most of these ethnic groups not wanting to be dominated by another. As a result of this struggle for supremacy and recognition among the various ethnic groups, fighting erupted in Kasai Province between the Baluba and BenaLulua. In that conflict, over two hundred (200) houses went up in flames shortly after independence.

As hatred for one ethnic group by another got entrenched, it developed into unending conflicts with devastating consequences. For instance, Kabila's forces consisted largely of soldiers from eastern Congo's small Bahyamulenge (Tutsi) minority who had Hutus and the Tutsis of neighboring Rwanda. These forces attacked Hutus and the remnants of Mobutu's army because the refugee Hutus in the Congo border with Rwanda posed a threat to the Tutsi-led government of Rwanda. Thus, a first war began on October 6, 1996, as a Rwandan drive to destroy the bases of the genocidal forces made up of

the army of *ancient regime* and the extremist *intrahamwe* militias in the Hutu refugee camps in Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo). To pursue and destroy the Hutu forces which would be retreating westward into the vast Congo territory, Rwanda needed Congolese allies to legitimize its invasion. This alliance was found in Laurent Desire Kabila, a retired revolutionary involved in cross-border ventures, and among the Congolese Tutsi, who were fighting for recognition of citizenship. While Rwandan troops were officially charged with the task of destroying armed Hutu soldiers and militias, they massacred thousands of Hutu old men, women and children between the Great Lakes in the east and the border between the two Congos in the north-west (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2004:3).

Reasons for the unfortunate situation: Language as a two-edge sword Language has sometimes been described as the 'soul' of a culture and as the 'vehicle' of culture. According to Awedoba (2002), these descriptions are apt because of the value of communication to human groups and individuals. Language enables information to be propagated. This is an essential function as far as people are concerned. Language enables people to influence and control each other's' behavior (Awedoba, 2002:49).

One function of human language which linguists have highlighted so much is its ability to integrate and harmonise society. According to Halliday (1973), this interpersonal or interactional function of language helps to build bridges between people and societies (Halliday, 1973). Ironically, however, the same language, when inappropriately used, can cause disintegration. The irresponsible use of language in Africa manifests in stereotyping other ethnic groups thereby creating acrimony and hatred, resulting in ethnic conflicts.

Commenting on forms of ethnic conflicts, Agyemang (1998) argues that ethnic conflicts in Ghana today take both overt and covert forms. Overt ethnic conflicts, according to him, appear in the form of open violent confrontations between different ethnic groups; covert ethnic conflicts, on the other hand, appear in the form of insinuations and political verbal attack, and counter-attacks through the print and electronic media. Other types of covert ethnic conflicts are found in the form of political propaganda which aims at painting the leadership of a political party as tribalistic so as to arouse anti-tribal feelings against that party. This happened in Ghana during the 1992 Presidential elections. The author concludes that both overt and covert ethnic conflicts frustrate nation-building and the development of a sense of national identity and unity among the people (Agyemang,1998:183). Looking back at the various conflicts on the continent is not to

remind the war victims of their grueling past, far from that. Rather, the aim is to establish the underlying causes of the various conflicts. From the exposition, therefore, it can be ascertained that every bit of conflict has the ethnicity variable as a cause. It must be admitted right away that ethnicity is increasingly creeping into partisan politics of all African states.

As rightly observed, ethnicity is at the heart of all day to day political concerns and social practices. Governments and citizens alike are haunted by the tribe to the point of creating a duality between national sentiment and the sense of a nation state that represents a whole entity.

According to Kellas (1991), "the notion of ethnicity is both amorphous and imbued with extreme doses of subjectivity. He therefore explains ethnicity as a state of being ethnic or belonging to an ethnic group". Schermerhorn (1970) defines an ethnic group as; A collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood (Schermerhorn, 1970:12). One can see from Schermerhorn's definition that the symbolic element he mentioned may include kinship patterns, physical contiguity, language and dialect forms, religious affiliation, ethnic affiliation and sense of solidarity.

At the political level

Language behavior in songs used in political campaigns in Ghana by political parties and their members is influenced by free-flowing with alluring melodies and musical jiggles. Many of these types of songs can be described as topical in character and usually portray specific political messages. These musical expressions trigger emotional responses in which the performers and listeners experience tension that alternates with relaxation to accept or reject views put forward by those in authority; be it traditional or governmental.

In electioneering campaigns in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa, ethnicity becomes more fanned by themes of party as well as ethnic songs which sway electorates to vote on ethnic lines for their own kinsmen without necessarily considering the merits of their candidates in terms of suitability, qualities and capabilities to work in the interest of the people. When the electorates see the affluent and bourgeois life styles of their leaders in government and compare them to their poor living standards, they feel cheated and denied of their basic human needs, therefore in terms of poor health, educational facilities,

infrastructure etc., they consider various forms of protest as alternative ways of redress in order to survive.

In Ghana for example, access to leaders in government positions is highly restricted for a number of reasons - security, status, lack of education, illiteracy etc., and political expression through music and dance is considered as avenue of reaching leaders in government. The reason is that it allows the down trodden who are denied some basic human needs to express their grievances and feelings via a medium that not only offers them a common platform to share views about their problems but also grants them the opportunity of a gregarious life that enables them to collectively seek redress for their concerns without fear of intimidation. A fascinating feature about song texts in Africa is that in a song, the individual or a group could express deep-seated feelings not permissibly verbalized in other contexts. It is in this vein that   Tracey (1948), in speaking about the African, remarks:
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You can say publicly in songs what you cannot say to a man's face and….this is one of the ways African society takes to maintain a spiritually healthy community. Nketia (1974:189), further comments on the essence of song texts in African musical culture that "the themes of songs tend to centre on events or matters of common interest and concern to the members of the community". Merriam sums up by stating that "song text can be used as a means of action directed towards the solution of problems which plague a community. While this can take the form of ridicule and shame, or a sanctioned legal action, it is also apparent that song texts provide psychological release for the participants" (Merriam, 1964:201).

Below is a song of protest titled, *Yɛ' ani abere kɔɔ* composed in *Twi*, (a Ghanaian indigenous dialect), and sung in a procession to draw the attention of authorities concerned to forms of hardship and oppression that citizens suffer under them.

Yɛ' ani abere kɔɔ (Our eyes are red hot)

Figure 1. Song of protest titled, *Yɛ' ani abere kɔɔ* composed in *Twi*, (a Ghanaian indigenous dialect).

Text	*Meaning*
Yɛ'ani abere	Our eyes are red
Yɛ'ani abere kɔɔ	Our eyes are red hot
Yɛ'ani abere,Yɛ'aniabere	Our eyes are red, our eyes are red
O! Yɛ'ani abere kɔɔ	O! our eyes are red hot
Yɛ'ani abere	Our eyes are red
Yɛ'ani abere kɔɔ	Our eyes are red hot

Good leadership and governance are very central to a country's credibility in terms of political and bureaucratic accountability, freedom of speech, association, information and a sound autonomous judicial system etc. It goes without saying that the effectiveness of a system of governance is dependent on how the masses see and feel it. In many cases, these important virtues of governance have been flouted by some African leaders. Selective judicial injustices in which individuals or groups of persons who commit heinous crimes like armed robbery, murder, assault etc. against innocent people are left to

roam about freely without being tried and punished by the courts of law. Situations of this nature always degenerate into inter-ethnic strife that sees the killing and displacement of innocent citizens with women and children being the most vulnerable. A glance at the system of governance of many African countries fifty years after independence still shows absolute clenching to power after their tenure of office and a gross display of political misconduct. Innocent citizens who dare point out flaws of the leadership of

ruling governments suffer repression and brutalities and are at times thrown into jail for no crimes committed. A case in point is the Togolese musician, AgbotiYawo who went on self-exile to save his life for calling on the presidency of the late Gnasingbé Eyadema to grant the people of Togo *Ablɔde Gbadza* (total freedom) a popular song composed in Ewe, a language (spoken in Ghana, Togo and the Republic of Benin).Below is the opening theme of the song *Ablɔde Gbadza.*

Text	*Meaning*
Enubueke, amesiame do la nya	It is a new day, everyone ought to know
Ablɔde gatrɔgbɔ	Freedom has come back
Ana miakata miasɔ enu nenyo	For us to be one and united
Eyadim e miele loo!	This is our wish
Tɔtrɔyeye vado loo!, nɔvinye	A new change has come, my brother/sister
Ablɔde gbadza	Total freedom

As it were, the then Togolese head of state judged the words of the song insinuating and so began to antagonize the composer. Quickly, this antagonism between a president and a musician escalated and contributed greatly to the bitter enmity between Eyadema's Kabbye and AgbotiYawo's Ewe ethnic groups in the early 1990s.

Economic and Social Cost

The costs of ethnic/armed conflicts to Africa are huge in a variety of ways. Western partners of Cote d'Ivoire acknowledge that following the ethnic conflict, that country's economy has tumbled, and that $25bn was needed to revamp it. Indeed, nothing sums up the African situation better as, on average, according to the research, armed conflict shrinks an African country's economy by 15%. The real cost could be much higher.

Apart from the loss of several millions of human lives, it is estimated that armed conflict costs Africa around several billions of dollars per year. In many of the countries, conflict has led to the diversion of rich mineral, agricultural and human resources that should have benefited the citizens. In most of the war ravished countries (Liberia, Sierra Leone, Congo and recently Algeria, Egypt and Libya) it will take many years to recover from the destruction of infrastructure, the damage to business and the loss of life and livelihood. The billions of money lost to conflict is money Africa can ill afford to lose. According to IANSA (International Action Network on Small Arms), Oxfam, around $300bn since 1990 has been lost by Algeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte D'Ivoire, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea – Bissau, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South

Africa and Uganda. In the view of IANSA, this sum is equivalent to international aid from major donors in the same period and if this money was not lost to armed conflict, it could solve the problem of HIV/AIDS, or it could address Africa's needs in education, potable water and sanitation, and prevent tuberculosis and malaria (Debbie, 2007: 9). Economic activity falters or grinds to a halt while income from valuable natural resources ends up lining pockets of individuals rather than benefiting the country. The country suffers from inflation, debt and reduced investment while people suffer from unemployment.

Conclusion

Africans generally acknowledge the fact that the greatest wrong which the departing colonialists inflicted on us, perhaps, and which we now continue to inflict on ourselves in our present state of disunity, was to leave us divided into economically unviable states which bear no possibility of real development. There is ample but not absolute justification for this accusation.

Despite the fact the root causes of some social conflicts are traceable to the era of our colonialists, who through land demarcation and divide and rule system setting ethnic groups against one another, some of these structures still remain unchanged by many African leaders, after fifty years of independence. In Ghana for example, leaders in authority either through inefficiency, fear or lack of political will or pursuing their own selfish agenda, have woefully failed to address some of these concerns which affect ethnic groups. In situations of this kind, it is inevitable seeing political parties developing along ethnic lines together with the

formation of 'ethnic liberation movements' to cater for their ethnic realities. According to Agyeman (1983), tribal wars resulting in carnage still exist in certain parts of Ghana even today. The Northern Region, for example, has been a scene of tribal genocide continuously for the past years. In 1991 there was a war between the *Kokombas* and *Nanumbas*. On 18th May 1992, another tribal war erupted, this time between the *Nawuri* and the *Gonjas*, also of the Northern Region (Agyeman, 1998:183). It is known that in most regions, there are constant agitations to get their own people in charge of public facilities and senior jobs as if anybody else will not do a good job though there are records to prove that there had been some political leaders in the history of Ghana's development who contributed greatly to the advancement of where they worked than to the regions where they were born. Equally, there are many who were made to serve in their own regions and performed abysmally. Ethnicity has also been at the heart of the many civil wars and disputes that have bedeviled this country and also at the heart of some chieftaincy issues.

According to Akosa (2010), the *Nanomba-Kokomba* war was a serious blight on the conscience of Ghanaians as is the *Mamprusi-Kusasi* rumblings that have made Bawku such a volatile area. The *Nkonya-Alavanyo* clashes of long standing seem to have been settled now and we must be grateful for small mercies. It also underlies the *Akuapem* debacle and the slit in the chieftaincy allegiances and declaration of autonomies. Land disputes also underlie many of the factitiousness that seems to retard our progress as a country. Many settler farmers from other parts of the country have worked on land for so many years, some with the understanding that the land will become theirs. However, because of the lack of documentation and illiteracy, theses have created hot beds of disputes between succeeding generations (Akosa, 2010:7).

Ethnicity still impacts negatively on the distribution of state resources in many African states in that some come under the control of one ethnic group, usually numerically dominant. Resources of the state and economy are then used for the benefit of that group, to the detriment of others. Gur and Marshal (2003), in their joint write up "Peace and Conflict", point out that "most African conflicts are caused by a combination of poverty and weak states and institutions". In this regard, those put in charge of managing government financial institutions in African countries lack strategies of designing policies that can create balanced economic distribution in order to foster inter-ethnic financial and development equity. If this fails, deprived people on a nation's periphery often provide fertile soil for inter-ethnic militancy with its attendant human, economic and social cost. Rather than blaming the west for their lack of development, therefore, Africans must look within, pick the rotten grain, and repair the damages imposed on themselves through years of political bankruptcy and ethnic/armed hostilities that continue to bedevil the continent.

Note

1. This is an extract from one of the many powerful and ambitious political speeches that characterized the nationalist campaigns of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah who eventually became the first president of independent Ghana.

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