

Ethnic Diversity and Economic Instability in Africa: Interdisciplinary Perspectives edited by Hiroyuki Hino, John Lonsdale, Gustav Ranis, and Frances Stewart, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, xvii + 335 pp.

This edited volume offers an interdisciplinary approach in enhancing understanding on the relationship between ethnic diversity and economic instability in Africa. A common thread running throughout the book is a dialogue that seeks to dispel the one-sided and rather simplistic view that ethnic diversity is a causal factor of economic instability in Africa. The authors point at the need to examine contextual issues through which ethnic diversity in Africa becomes a source of economic instability.

The book is organized in three interrelated sections. In Part I, the authors address the black box that is the concept “ethnicity” and its linkage with the economy. In Chapter 2, Brown and Langer provide a summary of the three analytical approaches that can be discerned from the debates on the character of ethnicity. To them, there are variations on how ethnicity is perceived depending on whether one is operating from a scholarly or a non-scholarly plane. The three approaches are primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism. A unifying message that connects the three chapters under Part I is the dynamism of the character of ethnicity. As Lonsdale argues in Chapter 1, the defining characteristics of ethnicity are contextual and vary through time. Thus contrary to the perception of primordialists, ethnicity is not static but organically dynamic across space and time.

In Part II, the volume investigates the linkage between ethnic diversity and economic performance in Africa. The authors of the three chapters in this section observe that it would be academically mischievous to ignore the role of “context” while addressing the question on the relationship between ethnic diversity and economic performance in Africa. As rightly pointed out in this volume, ethnic differences do not themselves lead to inter-group conflict, neither does ethnic diversity “by itself cause economic under-performance or political or economic instability” (p. 316).

Part III of this volume closely examines the relationship between ethnicity and stability. Consistent with Brown and Langer (Chapter 2), Shipton (Chapter 7) advances the view that ethnic diversity and ethnic discord contribute to economic instability and uncertainty. Shipton notes that reverse causation is also possible, although here again, the issue of context comes into play. Thus, ethnic differences alone do not necessarily lead to inter-group conflict, but could stem from various other factors that tend to fuel discontent.

This volume makes an interesting reading for readers interested in the question of ethnic diversity and its impact on the market economy in Africa. This is a pertinent development issue in the African continent given the diverse nature of ethnic composition of the various countries in the continent. It is notable that the promise of development in Africa has yielded mixed results and often lags behind other continents in key development indicators. Thus it is valid to question whether this depressing state of affairs in Africa’s development could be linked to ethnic heterogeneity. In Chapter 9 of the book, Yamato and Shimomura find that contrary to the conventional wisdom on the negative impact of ethnic heterogeneity on economic outcomes, ethnic diversity has a stabilizing and welfare enhancing effect

on the economy (p. 287). Similar findings are reported in Brown and Stewart (Chapter 8) on “Horizontal Inequalities and Market Instability in Africa.”

The volume rightly points to the relevance of ethnicity in Africa. Ethnicity is a powerful tool in terms of political mobilization and distribution of public expenditure. In the Kenyan context, voting patterns have become particularly more predictable since the introduction of a multiparty system. Without exception, since the first multiparty general election in Kenya, the presidential election has been won or lost at the altar of ethnic expediency. For instance, to win a presidential election, top politicians strive to form alliances with the most populous ethnic groups (e.g., Kikuyu, Luo, Kalenjin, Luhya, Kamba). This has been dubbed “the tyranny of numbers” in the Kenyan context and was most evidenced during the 2013 general election. During that election, some political analysts had correctly predicted the looming win by the jubilee coalition not on the basis of the strength of their campaign manifesto, but on the strength of the ethnic groups allied to that coalition. A similar trend is reported for Ghana and Ivory Coast.

Ethnic mobilization for political objectives is also raised by Ogot (Chapter 3) and Berman (Chapter 5). Because of ethnic-based voting alliances, this practice also informs public management schemes of the resultant regime. Thus, the distribution of public goods and services are often skewed in favor of the pro-regime ethnic blocks. This line of thought is mentioned sparingly in this volume, although, tied with ethnic-based voting, this issue forms a key challenge toward balanced economic development and national cohesion in multiethnic African countries. Politicians, through ethnic mobilization before, during, and after elections, tend to treat ethnicity as a commodity that can be traded in the market. This tends to reengineer the character of ethnicity away from a sense of belonging to what can be termed as “commoditization of ethnicity.” It is here where ethnic identity becomes a liability to the wider economy given the likelihood of allocation of public goods and services on the basis of appropriating ethnic loyalty by the ruling regime. Commoditization of ethnic identity has been the source of numerous inter- and intra-ethnic conflicts across the continent. From Ivory Coast to Kenya, Rwanda to Burundi examples abide. Commoditization resonates very well with the instrumental view on the character of ethnicity.

In Chapter 3, the author raises a fundamental issue on the character of ethnicity in Kenya. Ogot notes that Kenyan society has produced an “us” and “them” dichotomy with all Kenyans being seen as belonging to a particular ethnic group. From a primordialist and instrumentalist point of view, this is true. However, the character of identity is not static but dynamic. The volume does ignore the fact that ethnic identities are created and recreated across the African continent. This is happening through interethnic marriages, interracial marriages, emergence of same sex unions, the rising middle class and hence diminishing ethnic affiliation, and the rise of other subnational identities (e.g., youth, religion, marginalization) that cut across ethnic divides. Through time, these subnational identities are slowly killing ethnic chauvinism and leading to the emergence of more value-based subnational identities. This is not to say that the emerging identities are better than ethnic identity, but some of them may make it easier to model modern nation states in the African continent, the foundation of which stems not from diverse ethnic identities but from shared values of nationhood.

In trying to address the challenge of ethnicity in Africa, constitutional reform holds promise. In the Kenyan context, agitation for a new constitutional order in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s was partly informed by the need to evolve a state that respects ethnic diversity while tapping on this diversity for the country's economic development. As Ghai observes in Chapter 4, "[a constitution] creates institutions and mechanisms broadly acceptable to the people. . . . constitutions reflect different economic ideologies," (p. 130). Constitutional reform should entail critical reflections on the ethnic diversity of the country in question and evolve a workable formula in view of that diversity. In the Kenyan context, recognition of ethnic diversity and the need to respect the same is a key innovation of the Constitution of Kenya 2010. Thus, given the experiences of the post-election violence in Kenya in 1992, 1997, and 2007-8, respect for ethnic diversity was accorded a similar status, as has been done with gender balance. This constitutional anchoring makes it criminal for a regime to discriminate against a people on the basis of ethnicity.

Besides constitutional reform, institutionalization of political parties in the African continent holds another avenue through which negative ethnicity can be mitigated. At present most political parties in multiparty African states are ethnic inclined. Thus as ethnic alliances mutate, so do political parties angling for political power. Passage and strict enforcement of laws that seek to institutionalize political parties and redefine their character to the confines of national outlook will go a long way in mitigating against negative ethnicity. This will also nurture a culture of issue based politics, tolerance, and predictability, three ingredients for a thriving market economy.

In conclusion reading through the voices of anthropologists, historians, economists, and political scientists as presented in this volume opens new horizons in the emotive issue of the place of ethnic diversity and Africa's economic development. Though still retaining technical rigor, the various chapters are reader friendly, irrespective of the academic acumen of the reader. The book is both enriching and conscientious not only on the character of ethnicity, but also its linkage with stability in Africa.

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