Chapter 1

Identity and Ethnicity

Simon Bekker

Introduction

Some one half of the participants at the 1998 Cape Town conference on which this book is based, were South African, the other half, African scholars invited from universities and other bodies located on three continents. The intention both of that conference and of this volume is to reflect upon debates on African identities as they are interpreted by these African scholars. This perspective, moreover, is situated within the continuing ferment regarding South Africa's role—both intellectually and politically—in Africa. It is only recently that South Africa was acknowledged to have become a partner, and to have rejoined the rest of the continent in this task of recording and analysing shifts in African identities. Accordingly, conference presentations and discussions were all deeply coloured by this purpose, and chapters in this book have been written from this perspective (rather than from that of a detached, "omniscient" observer).

Analyses of ethnic and religious identities predominate; historical investigations cover the period of colonial as well as postcolonial national rule; and issues of racial domination come to the fore as the geographical focus shifts to the south of the continent. Three themes in particular preoccupied both authors and discussants and are clearly reflected in this volume, namely

- language, and its embeddedness in ethnic and religious as well as national identities, is the subject of two separate chapters and is found implicitly in all the contributions;
- Western colonial influence, and its enduring effects both on identity construction and on interpretations of these identities, is directly

addressed in one chapter and is also found implicitly in all the contributions; and

- the relationship between shifting African identities and conflict on the continent, or, in Mazrui's words in his magisterial closing chapter of this book, "between ethnicity, religion and the balance of unity and fragmentation in Africa", underpins the work as a whole.

An introductory South African perspective

Three general observations on the notion of ethnic identity, as it is applied within African studies, are appropriate. The first is simply that the notion is a central one when we consider the motivations and actions of people caught up in competition and in conflict. Obvious though this observation may seem, it is worth re-emphasising, since the period (in South Africa, at least) during which scholars avoided or evaded ethnic issues, is recent (Bekker, 1993).

The second observation is that there is no current elegant theory on the construction and elaboration of ethnic identities which may be applied across countries, cultures and continents. Consequently scholars tend to fall back on the political economy (on instrumental explanations) to explain ethnic conflict. As a result, they are often analytically unable to explain why particular boundaries of conflict are drawn as they are by the actors themselves (for these boundaries rarely coincide accurately with socio-economic criteria).

The third observation is simply to underline that identities—in the case of this introductory discussion, *ethnic* identities—are constructed and manipulated, not "given". Though they may often be considered and even experienced as ascribed, this does not detract from their constructed nature. For Castells (1997), for example, identity refers to "people's source of meaning and experience" and to "the process of construction of meaning on the basis of (culture)".

The interpretation of ethnic identities on the African continent has not been without controversy. The evasive attitude held by a number of scholars toward the subject has already been noted. I remember attending three

conferences on ethnicity in Southern Africa in the early 1990s. At all three, I, together with almost everyone else present, felt that discussions on ethnicity, though necessary and important, were distasteful. There was something a bit unpleasant and perhaps even offensive about the subject. I also recall quoting Horowitz (1985) during a seminar at the time, and eliciting an immediate and antagonistic reaction to the quote. It read: "Ethnicity is one of those forces that is community-building in moderation, community-destroying in excess." At least in Western Europe in the 1990s, in my experience, but also in Australasia I believe, there is little such unpleasantness attached to the notion of ethnicity. The explanations offered for this offensiveness of the subject in Africa, include the following two. First, ethnicity is equated with backwardness, with the remnants of pre-modernity, with "tribalism". Accordingly, to be progressive, you need to develop a national if not a world identity. Some historians argue that African intellectuals, over the past century, have been divided into such modernists—many of whom espoused ideas of European nationalism and progress—and traditionalists, who promoted ideas of mixing African experience with foreign thought. So far, the modernists appear to have won the day, thereby entrenching negative ways of thinking about African ethnicity.

In South Africa, similar ghosts from the past and dreams of the future have emerged. Does race continue to carry deep meaning? Have the meanings attached to the ethnic and racial labels of the "old" South Africa persisted, labels such as "Zulu", or "Afrikaner" or "Coloured"? Have South Africans developed a new national identity? The implication appears to be that South Africans are able to make one choice only—to belong together to a new nation, or to remain divided by offensive cleavages inherited from an unjust past. The two positions stand in an inverse relationship to each other. If older racial and ethnic identities persist, a national identity cannot emerge and, conversely, if and when these former identities dissolve, pride in and identification with the South African nation will flourish (Bekker et al., 2000). In both the African and South African cases, this perspective obstructs the examination of new sub- or supra-national identities that may be emerging.

Tribe, as a stereotype of ethnicity in Africa—widely viewed as a Western colonial construction—is commonly conceived of as a kind of given traditional form of pre-modern society that characterised the pre-colonial past of Africa, a kind of fixed ethnicity. A number of writers who are interested in ethnicity globally have made a point that is of interest in this regard. The histories and the foundation myths of different ethnic groups—as they are defined and reinterpreted today—differ in terms of their age, or antiquity. If we think of the Japanese, the Korean and the Mongolian, or the Croat and the Slav, or the Welsh, the Scots, the Irish and the English, it is apparent that their foundation mythologies and histories cover very long periods of imagined time. In Central and Southern Africa the period of imagined time of ethnic groups, as they define themselves presently, is of significantly shorter duration. In South Africa, for instance, being Zulu, Fingo or Bhaca only makes sense in imagined historical time after the Mfecane—say 150 years ago; or being Afrikaner only makes sense over a period of less than 100 imagined years. A chapter in this volume uses a similar argument about the contemporary ethnic identities of the Hutu and the Tutsi. These interpretations appear to be related to how late European colonisation took place in most of Africa and, accordingly, to the relatively late introduction of the European-fashioned modern state (Young, 1994). So, rather than seeing Africa as having unchanging tribal identities, we have here a perspective on how recent these myths and identities are.

A third theme I want to raise is the prickly notion of "race". Ethnicity is a relational concept—it has to do with insiders and outsiders. It is often useful to speak about ranked ethnicity, where one group is perceived to be superordinate to another (as in the case of the Tutsi and the Hutu) and unranked ethnicity, where this is not perceived or experienced to be the case. In a number of chapters in this volume, race does not figure as an issue at all. In South Africa, it was important and pernicious in our *apartheid* past, and is still clearly a major issue in our present. It is self-evident that race is a ranked concept. Ought it to be analysed as a case of ranked ethnicity—with foundation mythologies and the like—which would imply that racial groupings can be compared to other ranked ethnic groups? Or should it be treated as a totally different kind of phenomenon closely linked to a

European colonial past? I believe the answer is currently of importance in Southern Africa, for if race is exceptional, the routes to regulate, if not eradicate, racial identities may well be qualitatively different from those that are intended to regulate ranked ethnicity.

The structure of this book

The succession of chapters follows a geographical trajectory from West to East and subsequently to South Africa. The next six chapters, which include two on Nigeria, one each on Congo (Kinshasa), on the Great Lakes region and on the Sudan, together with one on women of African descent in Europe, are presented as academic products that include referencing and comprehensive bibliographies.

Chapter 2 explores links between language and identity. This leads to an analysis of the influence language holds in both ethnic as well as minority relations in Nigeria. Chapters 3 and 4, which focus on Nigeria and Congo (Kinshasa) respectively, focus on social movements that intend to bypass state interventions in their communities. Accordingly the focus is on ways in which identities are employed to exit from state-civil society relations, and thereby to fashion parallel societies in these countries. Chapters 5 and 6 offer historical explanations for the rise of conflictual identity politics in the Great Lakes Region and in the Sudan. The former case focuses on the construction of ethnic identities, the latter on the construction of religious identities. In Chapter 7 the challenges of living and understanding hybrid identities is discussed. African heritage and European modernity meet in the identities constructed by second-generation French women of African descent.

Chapters 8 and 9 deal with Southern African issues and are presented as edited verbal presentations without references. Chapter 8 raises the question of the role played by divergent world-views—one of European and one of African origin—in interpretations of identities in Southern Africa, and of a Southern African identity itself. Chapter 9 discusses language identity politics in South Africa, and the gap that currently exists between formal constitutional provisions for multilingualism and an increasingly monolingual practice in the public domain.

The closing chapter draws together the various themes raised in this book and may accordingly be viewed as an elegant summary conclusion to the 1998 conference. It is fitting to observe that in this final chapter, Mazrui concludes by relating the debate on contemporary African identities to the idea of African Renaissance.

References

Bekker, S. 1993. *Ethnicity in focus: The South Africa n case.* Durban: Indicator Press.

Bekker, S., Leidlé, A. , Cornelissen, S. & Horstmeier, S. 2000. The emergence of new identities in the Western Cape. *Politikon*, 27(2):221-237.

Castells, M. 1997. *The power of identity*. Malden (USA) & Oxford (UK): Blackwell Publishers.

Horowitz, D. 1985. *Ethnic groups in conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Young, C. 1994. *The African colonial state in comparative perspective* . New Haven: Yale University Press.