Ethnicity and National Integration in West Africa

Many writers on West Africa, whether academic or popular, assert that there is currently a conflict between tribalism and nationalism which threatens the stability of the new West African nations. In fact, the relationship between tribalism and nationalism is complex. Although ethnicity (tribalism) is in some respects dysfunctional for national integration (a prime objective of nationalist movements), it is also in some respects functional. Discussion of the presumed conflict might be clarified by discussing this hypothesis in some detail. Before doing so, it should be noted that we deliberately use the term ethnicity in preference to tribalism, and we shall preface our remarks by carefully defining our use of the term ethnicity.

In a traditional, rural setting, an individual is a member first of all of a family and then of a tribe. The demands the tribe makes on him vary with the complexity of the tribal system of government, as does the degree to which family and tribal loyalties are distinct. To a large extent, however, family and tribal loyalties support each other harmoniously.

1 Revised version of a paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Society, 1959.
2 A tribe is what Murdock calls a community, and he notes: "The community and the nuclear family are the only social groups that are genuinely universal. They occur in every known human society..." (G. Murdock, Social Structure, New York, Macmillan, 1949, p. 79.)
Under colonial rule, the social change brought about by European administrators and the process of urbanization has led to widespread shifts of loyalty. This process has been called “detribalization”. Writers speaking of tribal loyalty often confuse three separate phenomena which it would be useful to distinguish: loyalty to the family; loyalty to the tribal community; and loyalty to the tribal government, or chief. Often what a writer means by detribalization is simply a decline in chiefly authority. It does not necessarily follow that an individual who is no longer loyal to his chief has rejected as well the tribe as a community to which he owes certain duties and from which he expects a certain security.

It may be objected that West Africans do not make a distinction between the tribal government and the tribal community. This is perhaps true in the rural areas but they do when they reach the city. For in the city they find that there are new sources of power and prestige which, for many persons, are more rewarding than the tribal government. Hence they tend to lose some of their respect for the authority of the chief. The tribe, however, still can play a useful, if partially new, function as an ethnic group. The Gemeinschaft-like community to which the individual belongs may no longer be exactly the same group as before; the methods of government are different; the role in the national social structure is different. This community, however, bears sufficient resemblance to the rural, traditional “tribe” that often the same term is used. In this discussion, however, we shall use “tribe” for the group in the rural areas, and ethnic group for the one in the towns.

Some writers have challenged the very existence of detribalization. Rouch, for example, says he finds instead “supertribalization” among the Zabrama and other immigrants to Ghana. For as Mitchell has commented of another part of Africa: “People in

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4 We shall not discuss further the role of the family in West Africa today. We note here that it would be an oversimplification to suggest that family ties have drastically declined in the urban areas. In any case, the strength of family ties can vary independently of the strength of tribal ties.

5 There are, to be sure, cases where the two loyalties decline together, and there is consequently severe anomy. Failure to distinguish this case from one in which primarily loyalty to the chief alone diminishes can result in much confusion. See this comment by Mercier in which he tries to clarify this confusion: “C’est dans cette minorité [la population saisonnière] que l’on peut parler réellement de faits de détribalisation, au sens de pure dégradation du rôle des anciens cadres sociaux. Au contraire, nous avons vu que, dans la population permanente, les structures de parenté et l’appartenance ethnique jouaient un rôle considérable.” (P. Mercier, “Aspects de la société africaine dans l’agglomération dakaroise : groupes familiaux et unités de voisinage”, p. 39, in P. Mercier et al., “L’Agglomération Dakaroise”, in Études sénégalaises, No. 5, 1954.)

rural areas are apt to take their tribe for granted, but when they come to the town their tribal membership assumes new importance." This is, however, a false debate. We shall see that quite often the group from which the individual is "detribalized" (that is, the tribe to whose chief he no longer pays the same fealty) is not necessarily the same group into which he is "supertribalized" (that is, the ethnic group to which he feels strong bonds of attachment in the urban context).

Membership in an ethnic group is a matter of social definition, an interplay of the self-definition of members and the definition of other groups. The ethnic group seems to need a minimum size to function effectively, and hence to achieve social definition. Now it may be that an individual who defined himself as being of a certain tribe in a rural area can find no others from his village in the city. He may simply redefine himself as a member of a new and larger group. This group would normally correspond to some logical geographical or linguistic unit, but it may never have existed as a social entity before this act.

Indeed, this kind of redefinition is quite common. Two actions give such redefinition permanence and status. One is official government sanction, in the form of census categories, or the recognition of "town chiefs"; the other is the formation of ethnic (tribal) associations which are described more accurately by the French term, association d'originaires. These associations are the principal form of ethnic (tribal) "government" in West African towns today.

Some of these ethnic associations use clearly territorial bases of defining membership, despite the fact that they may consider their

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8 Mercier observes: "Il faut noter également que, moins un groupe ethnique est numériquement important dans la ville, plus la simple parenté tend à jouer le rôle de liens de parenté plus proches." (Op. cit., p. 22.)
9 In Dakar, Mercier notes: "Un certain nombre de personnes qui étaient manifestement d'origine Lébou... se déclaraient cependant Wolof, preuve de la crise de l'ancien particularisme Lébou." (Op. cit., p. 17.)
10 For example, G. Lasserre writes: "L'habitude est prise à Libreville de recenser ensemble Togolais et Dahomeïens sous l'appellation de 'Popo'." (Libreville, Paris, Armand Colin, 1958, p. 207.)
11 Epstein notes a similar phenomenon in the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt towns, where one of the major ethnic groups, sanctioned by custom and by census, is the Nyasalanders. Nyasaland is a British-created territorial unit, but people from the Henga, Tonga, Tumbuka, and other tribes are by common consent grouped together as Nyasalanders. (A. L. Epstein, Politics in an Urban African Community, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1958, p. 236.)
12 By government we mean here the mechanism whereby the norms and goals of the group are defined. There may or may not be an effective, formal structure to enforce these norms.
relationship with traditional chiefs as their *raison d'être*. For example, in the Ivory Coast, Amon d'Aby has described the process as follows:

="L'un des phénomènes les plus curieux enregistrés en Côte d'Ivoire au lendemain de la Libération est la tendance très marquée des élites autochtones vers la création d'associations régionales..."

="Ces associations groupent tous les habitants d'un cercle ou de plusieurs cercles réunis. Leur objet est non plus le sport et les récréations de toutes sortes comme les groupements anodins d'avant-guerre, mais le progrès du territoire de leur ressort. Elles ont le but d'apporter la collaboration des jeunes générations instruites aux vieilles générations représentées par les chefs coutumiers accrochés aux conceptions périmées, à une politique surannée."

It should be observed that the administrative units in question (les cercles) are the creation of the colonial government, and have no necessary relationship to traditional groupings. Such ethnic associations, formed around non-traditional administrative units, are found throughout West Africa. A presumably classic example of the significance of tribalism in West African affairs is the role which traditional Yoruba-Ibo rivalry has played in Nigeria politics. Yet, Dr. S. O. Biobaku has pointed out that the very use of the term "Yoruba" to refer to various peoples in Western Nigeria resulted largely from the influence of the Anglican mission in Abeokuta in the 19th century. The standard "Yoruba" language evolved by the mission was the new unifying factor. Hodgkin remarks:

="Everyone recognizes that the notion of 'being a Nigerian' is a new kind of conception. But it would seem that the notion of 'being a Yoruba' is not very much older."

Sometimes, the definition of the ethnic group may even be said to derive from a common occupation—indeed, even dress—rather than

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The article by Max Gluckman, which appeared since this paper was delivered, makes the same point for British Central Africa. Cf. "Tribalism in British Central Africa", in *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 1, janv. 1960, pp. 55-79.

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from a common language or traditional polity. For example, an Accra man often tends to designate all men (or at least all merchants) coming from savannah areas as “Hausamen”, although many are not Hausa, as defined in traditional Hausa areas. Similarly, the Abidjan resident may designate these same men as Dioula. Such designations may originate in error, but many individuals from savannah areas take advantage of this confusion to merge themselves into this grouping. They go, for example to live in the Sabon Zongo (the Hausa residential area), and even often adopt Islam, to aid the assimilation. They do so because, scorned by the dominant ethnic group of the town, they find security within a relatively stronger group (Hausa in Accra, Dioula in Abidjan, Bambara in Thies), with whom they feel some broad cultural affinity. Indeed, assimilation to this stronger group may represent considerable advance in the prestige-scale for the individual.

Thus we see that ethnic groups are defined in terms that are not necessarily traditional but are rather a function of the urban social situation. By ethnicity, we mean the feeling of loyalty to this new ethnic group of the towns. Epstein has urged us to distinguish between two senses of what he calls “tribalism”: the intratribal, which is the “persistence of, or continued attachment to, tribal custom”, and tribalism within the social structure, which is the “persistence of loyalties and values, which stem from a particular form of social organization”. This corresponds to the distinction we made above between loyalty to tribal government and loyalty to the tribal community. In using the term ethnicity, we are referring to this latter kind of loyalty. This distinction cannot be rigid. Individuals in West Africa move back and forth between city and rural area. Different loyalties may be activated in different contexts. But more and more, with increasing urbanization, loyalty to the ethnic community is coming to supersede loyalty to the tribal

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15 Rouch, op. cit., p. 59.
18 G. Savonnet observes in Thies, Sénégal: “Le nom de Bambara est employé généralement pour désigner le Soudanais (qu’il soit Khassonké, Sarakollé, ou même Mossi). Ils acceptent d’autant plus volontiers cette dénomination que le Bambara (comme tout à l’heure le Wolof) fait figure de race évoluée par rapport à la leur propre.” (“La Ville de Thies”, in Études sénégalaises, No. 6, 1955, p. 149.)
19 Epstein, op. cit., p. 231.
community and government. It is the relationship of this new ethnic loyalty to the emergent nation-state that we intend to explore here.

There are four principal ways in which ethnicity serves to aid national integration. First, ethnic groups tend to assume some of the functions of the extended family and hence they diminish the importance of kinship roles; two, ethnic groups serve as a mechanism of resocialization; three, ethnic groups help keep the class structure fluid, and so prevent the emergence of castes; fourth, ethnic groups serve as an outlet for political tensions.

First, in a modern nation-state, loyalties to ethnic groups interfere less with national integration than loyalties to the extended family. It is obvious that particularistic loyalties run counter to the most efficient allocation of occupational and political roles in a state. Such particularistic loyalties cannot be entirely eliminated. Medium-sized groups based on such loyalties perform certain functions —of furnishing social and psychological security—which cannot yet in West Africa by performed either by the government or by the nuclear family. In the towns, the ethnic group is to some extent replacing the extended family in performing these functions.

The role of the ethnic group in providing food and shelter to the unemployed, marriage and burial expenses, assistance in locating a job has been widely noted. West African governments are not yet in a position to offer a really effective network of such services, because of lack of resources and personnel. Yet if these services would not be provided, widespread social unrest could be expected.

It is perhaps even more important that ethnic associations counter the isolation and anomy that uprooted rural immigrants feel in the city. Thus Balandier has noted in Brazzaville the early emergence of ethnic associations tends to indicate a high degree of uprootedness among the ethnic group, which tends to be found particularly in small minorities.

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20 Mercier notes: "Nombreux sont ceux qui, dans l'actuelle crise de chômage, ne peuvent se maintenir en ville que grâce à l'aide de leurs parents. Cela aboutit à une forme spontanée d'assurance contre le chômage." (Op. cit., p. 26.)


But from the point of view of national integration is the ethnic group really more functional than the extended family? In the sense that the ethnic group, by extending the extended family, dilutes it, the answer is yes. The ties are particularistic and diffuse, but less so and less strong than in the case of kinship groups. Furthermore, such a development provides a precedent for the principle of association on a non-kinship basis. It can be seen perhaps as a self-liquidating phase on the road to the emergence of the nuclear family. Thus, it can be said with Parsons, that ethnic groups “constitute a focus of security beyond the family unit which is in some respects less dysfunctional for the society than community solidarity would be.”

The second function suggested was that of resocialization. The problem of instructing large numbers of persons in new normative patterns is a key one for nations undergoing rapid social change. There are few institutions which can perform this task. The formal educational system is limited in that it is a long-range process with small impact on the contemporary adult population. In addition, universal free education, though the objective of all West African governments at the present time, is not yet a reality in any of these countries. The occupational system only touches a small proportion of the population, and a certain amount of resocialization is a prerequisite to entry into it. The government is limited in services as well as in access to the individuals involved (short of totalitarian measures). The family is in many ways a bulwark of resistance to change.

The ethnic groups, touching almost all the urban population, can then be said to be a major means of resocialization. They aid this process in three ways. The ethnic group offers the individual a wide network of persons, often of very varying skills and positions, who are under some obligation to retrain him and guide him in the ways of urban life.

By means of ethnic contacts, the individual is recruited into many non-ethnic nationalist groupings. Apter found evidence of this in Ghana, where he observed a remarkable number of classificatory brothers and other relatives working together in the same party, kinship thus providing a “reliable organizational core in the nationalist movement.” Birmingham and Jahoda similarly

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22 Forde suggests that “This multiplicity of association, which is characteristic of the Westernization procedure, is likely to preclude the functional persistence of tribal organisations as autonomous units in the economic or political sphere.” (Op. cit., p. 485.)

23 T. Parsons, The Social System, Glencoe, Free Press, 1951, p. 188.

suggest the hypothesis that kinship (read, ethnic) links mediated Ghana political affiliation.\textsuperscript{25}

And lastly, members of the ethnic group seek to raise the status of the whole group, which in turn makes it more possible for the individual members to have the mobility and social contact which will speed the process of resocialization.\textsuperscript{26}

The third function is the maintenance of a fluid class system. There is in West Africa, as there has been historically in the United States, some correlation between ethnic groups and social class, particularly at the lower rungs of the social ladder. Certain occupations are often reserved for certain ethnic groups.\textsuperscript{27} This occurs very obviously because of the use of ethnic ties to obtain jobs and learn skills.

It would seem then that ethnicity contributes to rigid stratification. But this view neglects the normative context. One of the major values of contemporary West African nations is that of equality. Individuals may feel helpless to try to achieve this goal by their own efforts. Groups are less reticent, and as we mentioned before, its members usually seek to raise the status of the group. The continued expansion of the exchange economy means continued possibility of social mobility. As long as social mobility continues, this combination of belief in equality and the existence of ethnic groups striving to achieve it for themselves works to minimize any tendency towards caste-formation. This is crucial to obtain the allocation of roles within the occupational system on the basis of achievement, which is necessary for a modern economy. Thus, this is a self-reinforcing system wherein occupational mobility contributes to economic expansion, which contributes to urban migration, which contributes to the formation of ethnic associations and then to group upward mobility, which makes possible individual occupational mobility.

The fourth function we suggested was the ethnic groups serve as an outlet for political tensions. The process of creating a nation and legitimating new institutions gives rise to many tensions, especially when leaders cannot fulfill promises made. Gluckman’s phrase, the “frailty in authority”\textsuperscript{28} is particularly applicable for new nations.


\textsuperscript{26} Glick explains the role of Chinese ethnic groups in Chinese assimilation into Hawaiian society in just these terms. (C. Glick, “The Relationship between Position and Status in the Assimilation of Chinese in Hawaii”, in \textit{American Journal of Sociology}, XLVII, September, 1952, pp. 667-679.)


not yet secure in the loyalty of their citizens. We observed before
that ethnic groups offered social security because the government
could not. Perhaps we might add that this arrangement would be
desirable during a transitional period, even were it not necessary.
If the state is involved in too large a proportion of the social action
of the individual, it will be burdened by concentrated pressure and
demands which it may not be able to meet. It may not yet have
the underlying diffuse confidence of the population it would need
to survive the non-fulfilment of these demands.29 It may therefore
be of some benefit to divert expectations from the state to other
social groups.

The existence of ethnic groups performing "an important scape-
goat function as targets for displaced aggression"30 may permit
individuals to challenge persons rather than the authority of the
office these persons occupy. Complaints about the nationalist
party in power are transformed into complaints about the ethnic
group or groups presumably in power. This is a common phenome-
on of West African politics, and as Gluckman suggests:

"These rebellions, so far from destroying the established social order
[read, new national governments] work so that they even support this
order. They resolve the conflicts which the frailty in authority creates."31

Thus, in rejecting the men, they implicitly accept the system.
Ethnic rivalries become rivalries for political power in a non-tribal
setting.

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The dysfunctional aspects of ethnicity for national integration
are obvious. They are basically two. The first is that ethnic
groups are still particularistic in their orientation and diffuse in
their obligations, even if they are less so than the extended family.
The ethnic roles are insufficiently segregated from the occupational
and political roles because of the extensiveness of the ethnic group.
Hence we have the resulting familiar problems of nepotism and
corruption.

The second problem, and one which worries African political
leaders more, is separatism, which in various guises is a pervasive

29 Unless, of course, it compensate for lack of legitimation by increase of
force as a mechanism of social control, which is the method used in Commu-
nist countries.
30 Parsons, op. cit., p. 188.
31 Gluckman, op. cit., p. 28.
tendency in West Africa today. Separatist moves may arise out of a dispute between élite elements over the direction of change. Or they may result from the scarcity of resources which causes the “richer” region to wish to contract out of the nation (e.g., Ashanti in Ghana, the Western Region in Nigeria, the Ivory Coast in the ex-federation of French West Africa). In either case, but especially the latter, appeals to ethnic sentiment can be made the primary weapon of the separatists.

In assessing the seriousness of ethnicity as dysfunctional, we must remember that ethnic roles are not the only ones West Africans play. They are increasingly bound up in other institutional networks which cut across ethnic lines. Furthermore, the situation may vary according to the number and size of ethnic groupings. A multiplicity of small groups is less worrisome, as Coleman reminds us, than those situations where there is one large, culturally strong group.

The most important mechanism to reduce the conflict between ethnicity and national integration is the nationalist party. Almost all of the West African countries have seen the emergence of a single party which has led the nationalist struggle, is now in power, and dominates the local political scene.

In the struggle against colonial rule, these parties forged a unity of Africans as Africans. To the extent that the party structure is well articulated (as, say, in Guinea) and is effective, both in terms of large-scale program and patronage, the party does much to contain separatist tendencies.

Linguistic integration can also contribute, and here European languages are important. It is significant that one of the Ghana government’s first steps after independence was to reduce the number of years in which primary schooling would be in the vernacular. Instruction in English now begins in the second year. We might mention, too, that Islam and Christianity both play a role in reducing centrifugal tendencies.

Lastly, there is the current attempt to endow pan-Africanism with the emotional aura of anti-colonialism, the attempt to make Unity as much a slogan as Independence. Even if the objective of

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32 Separatism, of course, arises as a problem only after a concept of a nation is created and at least partially internalized by a large number of the citizens.


34 There is normally room for only one truly nationalist party in a new nation. Other parties in West African countries, when they exist, tend to be formed on more particularistic (ethnic, religious, regional) bases.
unity is not realized, it serves as a counterweight to ethnic separatism that may be very effective.

Thus we see that ethnicity plays a complex role in the contemporary West African scene. It illustrates the more general function of intermediate groups intercalated between the individual and the state, long ago discussed by Durkheim. It points at the same time to the difficulties of maintaining both consensus and unity if these intermediate groups exist.