



Crawford Young. *Ethnicity and Politics in Africa.* Boston: Boston University African Studies Center, 2002. iv + 102 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-915118-17-5.



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Published on H-Africa (July, 2003)

A Primer for Analyzing Ethnicity's Interconnections with Africa's Politics

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Purveyors of introductory courses on African civilizations, African politics, ethnicity in international politics, and comparative politics will rejoice on encountering this short but valuable essay by one of the "deans" of African political studies in the United States. An auspicious start for the Critical Themes in African Studies Series, the aim of the book is to "provide a broad synthesis of the scholarly debates on a major topic" (p. ii), along with case studies and an extensive bibliography. Felicitations to Boston University's African Studies Program for launching this enterprise, although a bit more money on formatting would be welcome. The book comes to hand resembling a typescript with one of those student term-paper, plastic bindings. Where is Penguin Books when we need them?

The book follows a model comparative government course: first, the organizing concepts, a review of the literature, and a description of the current thinking. Then comes a series of case studies of ethnicity in differing political environments that are representative of different

political developments, and accompanying problems. Finally, matters are concluded with a brief discussion of political arrangements that have been tried and possible ways of managing ethnicity amidst the compelling problems of democracy and development in contemporary African states. The thirteen pages of "further reading and resources," which include a wide range of websites and journals as well as books, are extremely valuable.

An important element, in the variable texture of identity, is the massive shift of populations that has transpired in Africa in the past half-century, resulting from especially urbanization, but also out-migration and the on-going refugee crisis. Africans are forced to renegotiate their solidarities and identities according to drastic changes in circumstances in time and space. Despite some flexibility, Young calls attention to the privileging of group identity over individual in many circumstances in Africa, noting that choices open to African individuals are more constrained than elsewhere, especially among Euro-Americans (p. 15).

In company with many current analysts of ethnicity,

Young pays homage to the primordialists and the instrumentalists, but aligns with the constructivists, suggesting that identity be approached as a “social construction” (p. 3). Nevertheless, Young is sensitive to the contributions in each of the analytic streams, observing that the primordial emphasis helps explain strong emotional attachments, while the instrumental approach illuminates ethnic mobilization in pursuit of material or psychic gain. Perhaps the most influential alien constructors were colonial missionaries, anthropologists, and government administrators, who created ethnic maps that developed their own authenticity for lives that were dictated by them. The mounting scholarship of ethnogenesis reveals strong group identities in Africa today which did not exist 150 years ago. Young boils down the core elements of ethnicity into “shared cultural properties, consciousness, and boundaries” (p. 5). A few telling examples undergird the view that “communal identity is ... multi-layered ... situational, circumstantial, and contingent” (p. 9).

An example of the utilitarian purpose of this short volume is at the end of the opening chapter where Young demonstrates the uses of all three approaches, or “alternative paradigms,” in analyzing ethnocide in Rwanda and Burundi in 1993-94 (p. 31). “And a complete interpretation of the genocidal disasters necessitates an examination of the origin of Tutsi and Hutu as social categories ... and how they hardened into collective representations during the colonial period under the constructivist impact of administrative and mission policies, then degenerated into ‘barricaded identities’ in Jowitt’s telling phrase” (p. 31).

Discussion of the three case studies, Tanzania, Uganda, and Congo-Kinshasa, benefit from Young’s first hand knowledge. They form something of a spectrum from Tanzania, “ethnicity at low intensity” (p. 35), through Uganda, “the problematic of state revival” (p. 44), to Congo, “the disappearing state” (p. 61). Despite an ethnicization of mainland Tanzania by British “native administration,” the spread and use of Swahili as well as the motivation and long tenure of founder-president Nyerere explain the relatively weak expression of ethnicity in the almost half-century of independence. Uganda remains honeycombed with only partially resolved, ethnically-related splits—religious rivalries, Buganda separatism, ethnic militias, an ethnicized military, and cross-border inter-penetration of ethnic disputes—to the point that communal divisions seem an enduring challenge to state reconstruction.

Young has written authoritatively and regularly on

Congo for several decades. An early playground for the invention of ethnic groupings and subsequent deadly competition, Congo has come to symbolize Africa’s nightmare. The country is now raggedly divided into four facsimile statelets, in and across which ethnic groups divide, sub-divide, and re-form into new groupings, spurred and preyed upon by armed gangs, abetted by foreign militias, and projected onto an alphabet soup of local and foreign-puppet political parties. Young concludes that “path dependency” plays a strong role in ethnic politics: “The configuration and expression of ethnicity are framed by the large structure of politics at any given moment. The sequences of politics play a large part in determining such configurations” (p. 75). Yet amidst the evidence of state disintegration, a cross-cutting vector of hope for maintaining state unity appears in the rising animosity to foreign interventions and new calls among intellectuals for recognizing a Bantu cultural unity among Congolese citizens (pp. 74-75).

In the final chapter Young seems to want to offer some strands of optimism in dealing with ethnic differences in politics. Here the enforced brevity of the volume may raise questions. Noting that some states in Africa today harbor constructive partnerships among diverse cultures (e.g., Tanzania, Senegal, Mali, Mauritius, Benin, and Zambia), Young claims that “[e]thnicity in Africa has some particular characteristics that may make it more compatible with stable politics than communal differences elsewhere” (p. 79). His reasoning is that European-type ethnonationalism is absent. “Buganda [is] an oddity” in “its episodic separatist aspirations” (p. 80). Africa does not display scenes of ethnonational self-determination movements, such as Chechnya, Kosovo, Tamils, and Aceh (p. 81). Recognizing that Arabs (in North African states and Sudan) “have the kind of historicized ethnic assertiveness” (p. 81), he maintains that African ethnicity “lacks for the most part the hard chauvinist edge” that we see in places like the Balkans or the Caucasus (p. 81). Perhaps the distinction is academic. Conflict in formerly stable countries like Cote d’Ivoire transformed an ethnic mosaic into ethnic warfare. The grievances of subaltern back-country ethnic groups quickly turned lethal in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The separatism of the administrative sub-division, e.g., Biafra or Casamance, morphs into complaints of ethnic discrimination by regional subordinate groups. Africa’s civil wars, lacking Euro-chauvinism, seem no less murderous.

Secondly, multilingualism pervades the African social landscape, “an adaptation to a language market sep-

arated from connotations of dominance of 'the other' ” (p. 81). Thus, language politics, so contentious elsewhere, are largely empty of conflict. Further exploration is warranted. In explaining the difficulties of the post-Mobutu leader, Laurent Kabila, one reason offered was the strangeness of his Swahili, and that of his entourage, in Kinshasa and the western part of the Congo (p. 73). In Ethiopia, the dethroning of Amharic as a virtual national language seems part of the rationale of Tegrivic leadership and ethnic provinces today. In Tanzania the *lingua franca* of Swahili, which over-rode issues of linguistic subordination in the past, does not seem sufficiently robust to suppress initiatives toward separation of the mainland from Zanzibar.

The final sections of the conclusion survey the experience of African states in accommodating ethnic diversity. Key here is leadership, as evidenced in the example of Nyerere, who put public before private and, though se-

riously misguided on economic policy, steadfastly willed a nation into existence and built a civic scaffold for a territorial state. Unfortunately few African presidents have followed Nyerere's model and Young offers no new examples. A number of African states have pursued imaginative institutional projects to manage and reduce ethnic conflict: electoral systems requiring support in several geographic zones, proportional representation, federalism, and mixtures of these arrangements. Yet none display durable effectiveness. Young claims greater sophistication for the current generation of leaders (p. 85). Familiar country examples recur: Tanzania, South Africa, Mauritius, and Senegal, offering cold comfort, since only South Africa seems capable of wielding much influence beyond its borders.

A new generation of African students of African politics may extrude some of this new leadership. They will be well-served by this wise and elegant little book.

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Citation: Harvey Glickman. Review of Young, Crawford, *Ethnicity and Politics in Africa*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. July, 2003.

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