



Ethnicity and Political Stability in Uganda: Are Ethnic Identities a Blessing or a Curse?

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Abstract

Uganda has 56 ethnic groups, the largest being the Baganda, occupying the northern shores of Lake Victoria, and the smallest are the Ik, who are found in the north-eastern corner of the country. All cities and towns of Uganda as well as state institutions are known for high levels of heterogeneity and the country's politics has been a reflection of its ethnic plurality. However, peace, tranquillity, stability, regional economic equity and orderly transfer of political power have been elusive in Uganda. This paper addresses the role of ethnic identities in the politics of Uganda. It makes an attempt to unearth the extent to which ethnicity has ensured political stability with the view to illustrating whether ethnic identities have been a blessing or a curse. The paper is guided by the ethnic theories of primordialism and instrumentalism. Using interviews with key informants, archival information and a review of the available literature, the author concludes that ethnicity has largely been a curse in post-colonial Uganda but in the pre-colonial epoch it was a blessing.

ISSN: 2048-075X

Ethnopolitics Papers is an initiative of the Specialist Group Ethnopolitics of the Political Studies Association of the UK, published by the Centre for the Study of Ethnic Conflict, Queen's University Belfast.

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1. Introduction

From being seen a generation or two ago as a continent full of ‘tribes’, Africa has more recently been re-examined in light of western theories of ethnicity and nationhood. Since the 1960s and early 1970s, “tribes” have been replaced by ethnic groups in the literature while at the same time a burgeoning literature on ethnicity and nationalism in Africa has emerged (Posner, 2005:1; Olatunji, 2011:122-130).

In Uganda, ethnicity has proved to be more salient as a political force than in many other African states. Not only has the absence of any significant non-African settlement limited the racial tensions that have plagued other former settler colonies, but it has a very high level of ethnic diversity, with one recent data on ethnic fragmentation recording it as the most ethnically fractionalised country in the world (Alesina et.al, 2003:155-194; Green, 2008:473-485).

Uganda, along with a number of other African states, is a state struggling with the task of bringing a vast range of ethnic minority groups into one nation state decided by geographical borders drawn by European colonial masters. The effects of these colonial decisions and policies are widely known to have plagued the native population during the course of history (Tornberg, 2012:1; Aluko, 2003:93-99).

Ethnicity has been such a powerful political force in Uganda that it is reflected in the political parties, the military, local and national governments. Indeed, ethnic differences within the military and political parties have been contributing factors in Uganda’s numerous military coups. The aim of this paper then is to illustrate the extent to which ethnicity has shaped the politics of Uganda.¹ During my interviews with key informants, it emerged that the survival of a government depends on how much support a leader receives from their respective ethnic identity. I also used information from the national and district archives and a comprehensive review of the available literature on the subject of ethnicity. My key argument is that ethnicity has largely been a curse in post-colonial Uganda although in the pre-colonial epoch, it was a blessing. In the pre-colonial period, ethnic rivalries were minimal because people were largely confined within their ethnic cocoons where the sense of kith and kin (*wat obeno*) was strong.

Ethnicity is a term that has greatly suffered in equal parlance from polysemy and synonymy; it has been accorded multiple definitions by different scholars yet it is also

¹ This research was sponsored by Danish International Development Agency (Danida) through Building Stronger Universities in Developing Countries (BSU). I wrote the paper during the three months spent as a Guest Researcher of the University of Southern Denmark in Odense. My sincere appreciation goes to Associate Professor Sharon Millar and all the staff of The University of Southern Denmark, Danida and BSU for their invaluable support.

close in meaning to terms like 'race', 'tribe' and 'nation'. Smith (1991:21) states that the essential characteristics of ethnic groups or ethnic communities, as he calls them, are a collective proper name; a myth of common ancestry; shared historical memories; one or more differentiating elements of common culture; an association with a specific homeland; and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population. According to Rukooko (1998:xvii) ethnicity is mainly a conflictual social phenomenon which is linked to Aristotle's epistemological problem that the world is both permanent and changing at the same time. In this regard, ethnicity is similar to nationalism, racism and social class, all of which are inherently conflictual, linked by notions of difference. Thus, when Aristotle's interpretation of the universe is mapped onto the existing major theoretical constructions of ethnicity, there is evidently a relationship of coincidence and synonymy. In other words, while primordialism coincides with the material cause assumed to remain permanent, constructivism coincides with the formal or changing aspect of the universe (Rukooko, 1998:12).

In this paper I discuss the double-edged roles of ethnicity in the social political and economic transformation of Uganda under the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial epochs. I premise this paper on the ethnic theories of primordialism and instrumentalism. Primordialism contends that ethnic identities are ancient, determinate and natural phenomena. It refers to a peoples' devotion to the conditions which existed at creation or in ancient times. In the opinion of Geertz (1963: 23), the concept of primordialism can be described as one that stems from the 'givens' or, more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed 'givens' of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection and beyond these, the assumptions that stem from being born into a particular ethnic community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. These congruities of blood, speech, custom, colour, physical appearance and so on, are seen to have an ineffable and, at times, overpowering coerciveness in and of themselves. Theories of primordialism, in relation to ethnicity, argue that ethnic groups and nationalities exist because there are traditions of belief and action towards primordial objects, such as biological factors and especially territorial location. This argument relies on a concept of kinship, where members of an ethnic group feel they share characteristics, origins, or sometimes even a blood relationship. Primordialism assumes ethnic identity as fixed; one is born in an ethnic group and remains a part of it until death.

The 'primordialist' view asserts that ethnic identity is part of our essential human constitution and that our desire to identify with a group whose characteristics we possess is simply reflexive. Furthermore, the argument suggests that we as humans identify ourselves in opposition to other ethnic groups: the urge to reject 'the other' was encoded in our oldest human ancestors (Geertz, 1967, Fishman, 1996). That urge has often resulted in oppression of weaker ethnic groups by more powerful ones, as well as xenophobia, and violent 'ethnic cleansing', the removal of one ethnic group from the land by another group who wants exclusive rights to the same land. According to Fishman (1967:63):

Ethnicity is partly expressed as being bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh and blood of their blood. The human body itself is viewed as an expression of ethnicity...it is crucial that we recognize ethnicity as a tangible living reality that makes every human a link in an eternal bond from generation to generation- from past ancestors to these in the future. Ethnicity is experienced, a guarantor of eternity.

The second theory the paper employs is instrumentalism. Under this theory, ethnicity is fluid. Individuals have multiple identities and these identities shift according to context. Ethnic mobilization is about getting something tangible, such as political gain. In other words, people join ethnic groups because there is a pay-off to doing so. Furthermore, when it is useful to them, they may even invent new identities. Ethnicity leads to conflict when someone has something to gain from going to war. This has been vivid in most of Uganda's civil wars since independence as will be discussed in the third section of this article where ethnicity is seen as a curse.

Lustick (2001:22) assesses instrumentalism as one variety of the ethnic theory of constructivism. Constructivism first overtook primordialism as a dominant paradigm of ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s thanks to anthropologists and sociologists such as Fredrik Barth (1969), Abner Cohen (1979), Aidan Southall (1976), Ernest Gellner (1987) and Nathan Glazer (1975). Ethnic identities, according to the theory of instrumentalism, are formed in pursuit of political and economic goals:

Do individuals identify more strongly with an ethnic group when they perceive economic advantages to group membership? This question is rooted firmly in an instrumentalist approach to ethnicity that posits a purposive and largely voluntary conceptualisation of identification. Actors are seen to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of ethnic membership consciously, and do identify on the basis of ethnicity when an ethnic group is seen to provide the means for attaining desired, social, political, and or economic goals. The correspondence of shared interests and shared identities promotes group solidarity and thereby provides the basis for ethnic organisation and mobilisation (Lynn, 2004:253).

Thus, to the instrumentalist theorists, ethnic groups are individual's affiliations to the communities which are beneficial to them or bring them practical advantages (mostly economic and political). They are based on rational needs and objectives, not closeness or kinship. The individual understands the community as an instrument for achieving their goals. These bonds of an individual to a community are characterized as cool-headed, formal, intentional, purposeful, requiring conscious loyalty and formed on the basis of choice, but also as vague, temporary, intermittent and routine. They prevail in organizations such as trade unions, political parties, professional unions, sports clubs, local interest groups, parent-teacher associations, and armed rebel groups. These groupings can be established, maintained and then just as easily cease to exist. In other

words, they are not universal and historically lasting. The attachment to them consists more in cool-headed calculation of interests. No emotions are assumed in the membership. Instrumental groupings are segmentary and simultaneous membership of an individual in several instrumental communities is therefore possible.

Rukooko (1998: ix) posits that ethnicity should be understood as a conflictual social phenomenon. He writes:

It is not ethnic groups that are negative but the conceptual scheme held about them and the practical approaches consequently adopted. Therefore, ethnic groups should be nurtured rather than destroyed which is concurrent with Aristotelian epistemological paradigm (Rukooko, 1998:ix).

Atkinson (1994) differs in this view:

Ethnicity is one of the most intractable problems facing Africa today. The political upheavals including civil wars, rebellions and massive human displacement and dispossession, which have bedevilled the continent during the last forty years, can, to a large extent, be attributed to ethnic rivalries, tensions and varying degrees of confrontation. No single country in Africa has been immune to the dynamics of ethnicity.

The contradictory views of Rukooko and Atkinson, as stated in the preceding argument, show that ethnicity is double-edged: it can be both a curse and a blessing. In pre-colonial Uganda, ethnic identities were basically primordial but during and after colonial rule many instrumentalist identities emerged as people began to struggle for national resources and positions in government.

2. Ethnicity as a Blessing in Uganda

The ethnic factor is part and parcel of the human existence and should be accepted and perhaps tolerated. Even when we want to downplay or ignore it, our roots are traced to an ethnic source (Getui, 1999:10). Because ethnicity implies common ancestry, kinship is the most obvious objective indicator of membership in an ethnic group. However, since many people cannot trace their genealogy through more than three generations, language, culture and territory often become more common signs of membership of a larger group, as stated by Kasfir (1979:369).

Ethnicity has been at the forefront of defending and promoting Uganda's rich and diverse cultures. Languages like Luo, Luganda and Lutoro have survived the onslaught of Western languages, especially English, during the colonial and even post-colonial eras because of the strength of ethnic bonds. Hastings (1997:31) argues that 'ethnicity is of its nature, a single language community'. Among the Acholi, one of the most important long-term consequences of the establishment and spread of the new socio-political order was that the response of any group to that order determined the groups' ultimate ethnic-

linguistic designation and general area of settlement. Those who accepted the order became part of a gradually developing mainstream of social, political, linguistic and cultural characteristics that began to define 'Acholi' identity. The most important of these characteristics was language. In what was to become western Acholi, and later Acholi as a whole, all those who accepted the new socio-political order, whatever their linguistic origins, eventually spoke Luo as their primary language (Atkinson, 1984:112).

In addition, belonging to an ethnic group gives an individual a sense of identity and a sense of belonging. This is expressed by a young Kikuyu girl (Muthoni) who insists on having clitorisectomy because of its social significance:

I am a Christian and my father and mother have followed the new faith. I have not run away from that. But I also want to be initiated into the ways of my tribe. How can I remain as I am...I want to be a woman. Father and mother are circumcised. But why are they stopping me, why do they deny me this. How could I be outside the tribe, when all the girls born with me at the same time have left me...I want to be a woman beautiful in the tribe (Ngugi, 1995:43).

In Uganda, the Sabinu practice of clitorisectomy has persisted in spite of the negative publicity and the determined efforts of local and international organisations to eradicate it.

As well as adopting ethnic identity or particular practices associated with specific ethnic groups, ethnic identification can also be a consequence of elite competition for political and economic advantage (Brass, 1991: 22). Elites select and frame aspects of existing cultural repertoire to differentiate one ethnic group from another and to build internal cohesion within a group. These cultural aspects can then be called upon to create a political identity used to assert and acquire political power, economic benefits, and social status for members of the group or the group as a whole. In Uganda, coup avoidance under the regimes of Idi Amin and Yoweri Museveni can be linked to the fact that government and army exhibited the same ethnic bias, whereas the coups during the Obote and UNLF regimes reflected either ethnic incongruence between civilian and military leaders (Lindemann, 2011:2). After suffering a second coup in 1985, a journalist asked Milton Obote whether he had any regrets. His answer fell short of saying I failed to appreciate the power of ethnicity in Uganda and suffered the consequence. He said, 'I consider control of the military as being my major failure. I regret ever having trusted Idi Amin. I should also never have left Tito Okello and Bazillio Okello in command positions in the army' (Karamagi, 2005). Although there were Langi officers in the Uganda Army, Milton Obote made Idi Amin, a Kakwa, army commander during his first tenure and in the second it was Tito Okello, an Acholi.

The individual's attachments to particular communities that are of an instrumental character are the opposite of primordial attachments. These are individual's affiliations to

communities that are beneficial to them or bring them practical advantages. They are based on rational awareness, not closeness, and the need for protection of common interests. The individual understands the community as an instrument for achieving his or her goals. These bonds of an individual to a community are characterized as intentional, purposeful, requiring conscious loyalty and formed on the basis of choice (Bacova, 1998:33). Ethnic identity is, in the view of the instrumentalist approach, regarded as a rational reaction to the demands of a situation or to the social pressure within the community or from another community. Ethnic identity is not 'given' to an individual in advance and for ever, but is constructed during one's development and can undergo changes during a lifetime (Bacova, 1998:36).

Ethnic identity formation in the pre-colonial period in Uganda promoted egalitarianism and collective efforts. Such strenuous activities like hunting and territorial expansion were only possible through joint efforts. While hunting began primarily as a method of survival, in time, it became interlinked with other aspects of culture. Initiation ceremonies sometimes included a demonstration of hunting skills and prowess. Ceremonial hunting was also used to deepen a sense of collective identity (Mazrui, 1986:63). In 1946, Reverend Father Lucien participated for two days in one of such hunts and this is what he reported:

What did I see in the two days? Something deep rooted in the Acholi nature. Man at his primitive hardest and best. Something not yet ruined by the so-called progress of civilization. Something far more valuable for them than the horns, skins and meat[...]The importance of these great hunts is their spiritual and social value. In them from childhood upwards are born the virtues of endurance, courage and resourcefulness. In these hunts the qualities of cooperation and the sense of community effort and mutual help are unconsciously fostered (Lucien, 1946:178-184).

Reverend Lucien took part in the Acholi hunt as an independent observer and anthropologist interested in understanding the culture of a people. The interest of the hunters was to acquire meat, fame and valour but he discovers that, indirectly, the hunt cemented the feeling of a single ethnic identity as participants benefited from the efforts of each other in the process of killing the animal, skinning it and smocking the meat.

In northern Uganda, the pressures of late 18th and early 19th centuries promoted two more immediately tangible examples of collective functioning and identity beyond the individual chiefdom level. One of them was the emergence of a number of military confederacies and alliances (Atkinson, 1984:265). Military confederacies were formed against hostile neighbours. This was the case in the chiefdom societies like the Banyankole, Acholi and Alur. Neighbouring chiefdoms would form military alliances against any society that threatened their existence. Among the Acholi and Alur, the greatest alliances were formed against slave traders from the Egypt and the Sudan. Atkinson (1989:19-43) states that slave trade in northern Uganda was weakened by increasing Acholi attacks from 1885 onwards. Finally, in 1888, defeat at the hands of a multi-polity Acholi force prompted a final

Jadiya (slave traders) withdrawal from Acholi. Ethnicity further contributed to the creation of nations, states and chiefdoms in pre-colonial Uganda. By the time the Europeans arrived in this part of Africa, the Baganda were already a single people traditionally fixed on a relatively well-defined territory, speaking the same language, possessing a distinctive culture - a social organisational system based on patrilineal exogamous totemic clan lineages with the Kabaka as its head - and shaped to a common mould by many generations of historic experience (Green, 2010:18).

3. The Curse of Ethnic Identities in Uganda

The postcolonial history of Uganda has been dotted with civil wars, military coups and cases of human rights abuses. The principal coups were in 1966 against President Edward Muteesa; in 1971 Milton Obote was ousted; in 1979 against Yusuf Lule; in 1980 when Lukongwa Binaisa was the victim; and the last was in 1985 when Milton Obote was a victim for the second time (Alai, 2008). All these coups occurred, in part, due to ethnic fractionalisation in the national army. The coups against Milton Obote were the most spectacular. The 1971 coup could have been avoided had Obote listened to the advice of the Governor. He later wrote:

I had been Prime Minister for only a few months when Governor Sir Walter Coutts asked me go to State House. He told me the story of the murder of the Turkana by one Lt. Idi Amin. Sir Walter told me about the inquiries made by the Kings Africa Rifles (KAR) in Nairobi about these killings and the case against Idi Amin. He was found guilty and faced dismissal but Sir Walter sought my opinion. I advised that Amin be given a severe reprimand. I regret to say that part of Uganda's suffering today can be traced to the opinion I gave Sir Walter. After I had given my advice, Sir Walter told me that an officer like Lt. Idi Amin was not fit to be in the KAR. He said: 'I warn you this officer could cause you trouble in the future' (Karamagi, 2005).

It was out of ethnic consideration that the Prime Minister Milton Obote decided to retain Amin in the army. Both Obote and Amin were Nilo-hamites, the former being a Lango and the latter, a Kakwa. Over the years, Amin had learnt Luo, Obote's language, and was quite fluent in it (Ocaya, 2006). In terms of geographical and regional blocks, both leaders were from northern Uganda. The coup itself was masterminded by Kakwa soldiers and as Amin's rule continued, it rested increasingly on the support of a small group of people known in Uganda as Nubians or Nubi, to which Amin himself was considered to belong (Leopold, 2006:180-199; Kokole, 1985:420-448). By 1962 there were only two commissioned African officers in the Uganda's army, Shaban Opolot and Idi Amin. Milton Obote, a Lango, felt closer to Idi Amin, a Kakwa and northerner like him, than Shaban Opolot, an easterner. Amin had married a Lango woman and spoke fluent Luo, Obote's language (A lot, 2010).

In the 1985 coup, the discontent was between Acholi and Lango ethnic factions in the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA). This army was battling the National Resistance Army (NRA) rebels in the jungles of Luwero Triangle:

The army was war weary, and after the death of the highly capable General Oyite Ojok in a helicopter accident at the end of 1983, it began to split along ethnic lines. Acholi soldiers complained that they were given too much frontline action and too few rewards for their services. Obote delayed appointing a successor to Oyite Ojok for as long as possible. In the end, he appointed a Lango to the post and attempted to counter the objection of Acholi officers by spying on them, reviving his old paramilitary counterweight, the mostly Langi Special Force Units, and thus repeating some of the actions that led to his overthrow by Amin. As if determined to replay the January 1971 events, Obote once again left the capital after giving orders for the arrest of a leading Acholi commander, Brigadier (later Lieutenant General) Basilio Olara Okello, who mobilized troops and entered Kampala on July 27, 1985 (OnWar.com).

In the wake of this move against the capital, Obote, together with a large entourage, fled the country, first to Kenya then, for Zambia.

Secessionist attempts in Uganda have also been premised on ethnic sentiments. In 1962, shortly after Uganda became independent, Bakonzo and Bamba joined hands in the Rwenzururu movement which aimed at establishing a separate district for themselves as a way of improving their political status. This united front came about in the Toro Rukarato (Council), where elected representatives of the two groups had been meeting since 1961 and had come to know each other's grievances. For a variety of reasons, however, both the Toro and Uganda Governments resisted Rwenzururu demands. A prolonged deadlock ensued, with violent conflict between Rwenzururu and Batoro following and particularly severe clashes occurring between 1963 and 1965 (Cooke and Doornbos, 1982:37; Rubongoya, 1995:75-92).

As time passed the issue became exceedingly complex, with not only the Uganda and Toro governments, but also major factions within the movement adopting different positions. In 1962, one wing of the movement, led by Isaya Mukirane and based in the inaccessible Rwenzori Mountains on the border with Zaire, declared itself an independent state called Rwenzururu Kingdom. Other factions, primarily identified with Yeremiah Kawamara and Petero Mupalya, continued to press for some kind of arrangement where they could remain within Uganda (Syahinka-Muhindo, 1991:2; Cooke and Doornbos, 1982:37).

Rwenzururu as a political movement was rooted in the resentment of the discriminatory treatment of the ethnic minorities in the Kingdom of Tooro. Until 1967, Tooro had figured as one of the four semi-traditional states within Uganda, at the apex of which stood the

Omukama (King). Bakonzo and Bamba, who live along the Zaire border comprise approximately 45 per cent of the population of the Kingdom, whereas the Batooro were the majority (Cooke and Doornbos, 1982:37). Compared to the Batoro, the Bakonzo and Bamba had historical had fewer social and economic opportunities. They had limited access to education, health and other social welfare facilities and fewer chiefs or government appointments. Moreover, Bakonzo and Bamba were often treated as inferiors (Cooke and Doornbos, 1982:37; Rubongoya: 75-92). The strength of ethnic sentiments in the Rwenzururu movement can be clearly discerned from their war song below:

Welcome natives, Bamba/Bakonzo to visit us: good morning,
We thank God who passed you through guns and knives safely._
Let us pray God to give us courage so that we can all stick to one thing.
Let us fight bravely and whatever comes, we shall succeed.
We must send away the Batoro from our land.
We shall never dine with a Mutoro anymore. He must go away.
Goodbye; we have refused him totally (Cooke and Doornbos, 1982:37).

In the central regions of Uganda, the Kingdom of Buganda had attempted to secede even during the colonial period but the British thwarted that move. Then, following the outcome of the 1964 referendum which returned the two lost counties of Buyaga and Bugangaizi to Bunyoro Kingdom, the Kingdom of Buganda revived the call for secession. According to Milton Obote:

On February 9 1966, Muteesa called the British High Commissioner and asked for massive military assistance. When I asked Muteesa why, he said it was a precaution against trouble. I asked him, "Trouble from whom and against whom?" He just waved me to silence. Although he was president, head of state and commander in chief of the armed forces, Muteesa did not have powers to order for arms. Later, I sought the advice of my Attorney General, Godfrey Binaisa QC. He told me that given what Muteesa had done, I had to suspend him from being president of Uganda, the only way I could was to suspend the constitution itself (Karamagi, 2005).

Obote feared that this military assistance was needed for military action against the central government. He was vindicated on 20 May 1966 when the Lukiiko (Buganda Kingdom's Parliament) met and passed a resolution stating that: 'This Lukiiko resolves not to recognise the government of Uganda whose headquarters must be moved away from Buganda soil.' What followed was the attack on Lubiri, the palace of the King of Buganda who fled to England and died there three years later in 1969.

The most enigmatic ethnic factor for Prime Minister Milton Obote was the question of the seven Lost Counties. The counties were formerly the territories of the Bunyoro Kingdom but when Omukama Kabalega resisted the British colonial occupation, Colonel Colville attacked and defeated him with the support of Baganda allies. The British offered the seven counties - Buyaga, Bugangaizi, Buhekula, Buruuli, Bugerere, Singo and Bulemezi -

to Buganda Kingdom as a reward for their alliance (Karugire, 1980:204). At independence in 1962 both kingdoms claimed two of the Lost Counties namely Buyaga and Bugangaizi. These two were of historical and cultural significance to the Banyoro because they contained the tombs of their kings. The matter was decided in a referendum which returned a resounding 'yes' to revert to Bunyoro Kingdom (Kargire, 1980:175; Mutiibwa, 1992:33). The President Edward Muteesa, like all Baganda rejected the result of the referendum but the Prime Minister ratified it becoming an instant enemy of the Baganda. So strong was the hatred that when Obote died in South Africa on 10 October 2005, the Baganda of Luwero District refused his coffin to be transported through the district. It had to take the longer route through eastern Uganda where he was popular.

In the northern region there have been secession attempts in West Nile and the Acholi sub-regions. West Nile is separated from the remainder of Uganda by the Albert Nile. It is geographically part of the Nile-Congo Divide and has more in common with the neighbouring areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan than with the rest of Uganda (Middleton and Greenland, 1954:446-445; Kokole, 1985:420-448). The major ethnic groups of this region namely the Kakwa, Aringa, Madi and Lugbara formed the bulk of Amin's army and government (Leopold, 2006:180-199). Hence when Ami was toppled, the victorious UNLA soldiers went to West Nile with a vengeful and atrocious attitude. Together with their allies, the Tanzanian People's Defence Forces, conducted murder, rape, looting and destruction of property forcing many people to flee to exile in neighbouring Congo or Sudan as reported by (Kokole, 1985:420-448). A rebel movement, the Former Uganda National Army (FUNA) was formed. Its main objective was to cut off West Nile and secede from Uganda, and for this; it received massive support from the population (Leopold, 2006:180-199; Kokole, 1985:420-448).

Meanwhile the Acholi have been fighting since 1986 under different banners. First the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA) formed in 1986, followed by the Holy Spirit Army (HSA) then Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which is still operational but is mainly concentrated in Democratic Republic of Congo, Southern Sudan and Central African Republic. The feeling in northern Uganda is that as long as Joseph Kony and his top commanders are alive, they can still return to northern Uganda. They remember that there was a lull in 1998 when Kony fled to Rubangatek in South Sudan and people thought the war had ended. Surprisingly in 2002 he returned much stronger than when he fled (Lalet, 2010). The rebellions that sprang up in northern Uganda following the 1986 ousting of General Tito Okello had a lot to do with the ethnic interests of the Acholi (Finnstrom, 2006:200-220; Ruddy and Koen, 1999:5-36; Tim, 1991:370-399). Their son had been destooled and many had lost jobs in the new government including the army. Getui (1999:9) reasons that:

One of the burning moral issues in contemporary African societies is that of tribalism. The modern multi-ethnic national states in Africa have not yet succeeded in creating pluralistic and assimilated societies able to overcome

multi-ethnic rivalry and conflicts. The problem of ethnicity or tribalism remains a major one in Africa. Many small and big wars in Africa have been of a tribal nature even when the reasons for them may be bigger than the tribal factor...Africans have been killing each other in the name of protecting ethnic interests rather than so-called national interests.

This long war, coupled with poverty and lack of adequate social services among the Acholi, has led to a feeling of neglect and even hatred by government. Many of them have openly demanded to secede from Uganda. According to one Newspaper columnist:

The marginalisation of the north is a real one and their quest for secession is only a manifestation of this problem. While it may be a fantasy right now, it cannot be ruled out that future generations will give it a serious thought, shape and even form. I am talking about the lost generation during the 20 year's war, who are now roaming the streets in the north. These remain a ticking time bomb (Komakech, 2013).

On the same note, it was reported in one of the dailies that:

A group of members of parliament from Uganda's north, angry at the misappropriation of aid money, accused the country's government this week of neglecting their region. Some have threatened to have the areas they represent secede....But on Wednesday, the Acholi Parliamentary Group, made up of members of parliament from northern Uganda, went one step further. It announced the intention to secede from Uganda, and form a new state called the Nile Republic. Gilbert Olanya (MP of Kilak County), a member of the group, said such a separation is the best thing for the people of the north. "We are saying the country needs to be divided. Let the people of northern Uganda have their own country," said Olanya (Heuler, 2013).

In the former Lost Counties when the Bakiga started settling in Kibaale, they mainly came in as casual labourers and took a lower social status than that of the Banyoro. With this status, they were not a threat to the privileges of the Banyoro and were thus accommodated, but this changed with the Bakiga's upward shift in numbers, economic status, and therefore political might (Ssentongo, 2009). Tension arose when the Bakiga mobilised and their candidate won the position of District Chairman. This was violently contested by the Banyoro who preferred that all top positions be reserved for natives. Despite the fact that constitutionally any qualified person is allowed to stand in any area where they have stayed for six months or more, by presidential decree, the Mukiga winner had to step down for a native Munyoro.

In the campaigning ahead of the presidential, parliamentary and local government elections in 2011, ethnicity not only featured among the issues politicians said they would resolve by, for example, adopting federalism but also a consciousness to be further embedded. However, for more political than development gains, the incumbent president

promised the creation of districts in several areas. Most of these developmentally non-viable districts were created along ethnic demarcations, hence further entrenching inter-ethnic divisions in a country already suffering from ethnic tensions (Ssentongo, 2009).

The effect of ethnicity has also been seen in the insurgencies that have plagued Uganda since 1981. The assertion that 'ethnicity is socially constructed' is common place among social scientists, and it is widely supposed that anyone who fails to grasp this fact will not be able to explain or understand ethnic violence (Fearon and Laitin, 2000:847). Ethnic violence is explained as both a means and a by-product of political elites' effort to hold or acquire power. Elites foment ethnic violence to build political support. This process has the effect of constructing more antagonistic identities, which favours more violence. Members of marginalised categories or individual dissidents may quietly subvert or loudly protest common assumptions about particular categories. Their actions may then result in construction of new or altered identities, which themselves change cultural boundaries as revealed by Fearon and Laitin (2000:856). The ethnic fragmentation that is present in Uganda today is arguably at the root of the LRA conflict and is therefore a central issue that must be understood in order to bring an end to the conflict (Tonberg, 2012:1).

Minority discrimination in Uganda is also rampant and this is precisely because of the politics of ethnicity. Nubians are seen in Uganda as foreigners and have, since the British colonial days, been discriminated against:

It is not in my opinion, policy, to allow any of the Nubians and Lendu to come here (Gulu) from Koba; the former are lazy useless members of the community and will not work, the latter are an inferior tribe, both fabricate native liquor for the purpose of sale (Gulu District Archives, A 46/ 351/ Opening of Gulu District Station).

Furthermore, Not only are Nubians regarded as aliens having descended from the forces of Emin Pasha of the Equatorial Province of Egyptian Sudan, but are also associated with the defunct government of dictator Idi Amin, who was a Nubian (Ali, 2010).

4. Conclusion

Once taken as primordial, ethnic groups are now recognised to be historical creations, products of tangible processes of administrative categorisation, political mobilisation, and socialisation (Posner, 2003:127-146). Ethnicity must be viewed as a plastic and malleable social construction, deriving its meanings from the particular situations of those who invoke it. Ethnicity has no essence or centre, or underlying features or common denominator (Smith, 1998:4).

Ethnic diversity in itself is not a recipe for conflict. It only becomes so in situations where ethnicity is negatively manipulated. Even in some areas where ethnic tension is witnessed today, people have lived harmoniously in diversity before. Kibaale District, where there has been conflict between the Bakiga and the Banyoro over land and political positions, serves

as a typical example. The Bakiga started settling in Kibaale in the early 1970s and were welcomed by the native Banyoro. They lived cohesively until the early 2000s when conflict started emerging between the two ethnic groups. Large-scale open violence took place between February and May 2002 when a Mukiga (singular for Bakiga) was elected as the district chairman. The incumbent Munyoro refused to hand over power to a 'foreigner' and clashes ensued between the Banyoro and Bakiga settlers. The Banyoro started to claim back their land (Ssentongo, 2011). This is why the instrumentalists emphasize mutability, freedom and goals in the formation of ethnic identities. In the words of Maier (1994:8):

People tend to regress. If the future cannot be clearly defined as the goal, one lives for the present. If the present is troublesome and perplexed, one falls back on the past. The past means ones ethnic, religious, cultural and national roots. It is a drawing closer of the circle within which one feels secure, a regression to the concept of tribe and clan.

It is not true that the Uganda's political disorder is mostly caused by politics of domination and manipulation from the territories of the former colonial rulers. Most of it, on the contrary, is caused by ethnic politics sustained by the ruling elite and their inability to deal with traditional moral standards that seem to be crumbling in the wake of rapid social change (Tarimo and Manuelo, 2009:10).

The matter has been compounded by the fact that in Africa colonial boundaries divided ethnic groups across states in some cases, and included large numbers of ethnic groups within their borders in most cases. Attempts in post-colonial period at fashioning supra-ethnic national identities, however have largely failed, with many African states, Uganda inclusive, caught up in ethnic violence and conflict at various points in time (Green, 2010:3).

National governments in Uganda have thus either been coalitions of various ethnic groups or ultimately unsuccessful attempts to dominate the state with the support of only a few numerically small ethnic groups, as under Idi Amin's rule in the 1970s. None have been successful at representing all major ethnic groups in government (Green, 2010:1-28). That is why:

Despite the villain efforts of President Yoweri Museveni, the troubles in Uganda still go on. And they are, in my opinion, likely to do so as long as northern and southern Uganda is considered as a single nation. The mainly Nilotic peoples of the north including the Acholi, Ateso, Langi etc. will never mix freely with the mainly Bantu-peoples farther south (Ginyera, 1992:11).

Ethnicity, as Fishman (1996:63) has said, is a guarantor of eternity. For the case of Uganda that was true in the pre-colonial period. In post-colonial Uganda, ethnic cleavages became responsible for coups, secession attempts, name-calling, stereotypes and wars. Ethnicity has, therefore, become a curse in Uganda.

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