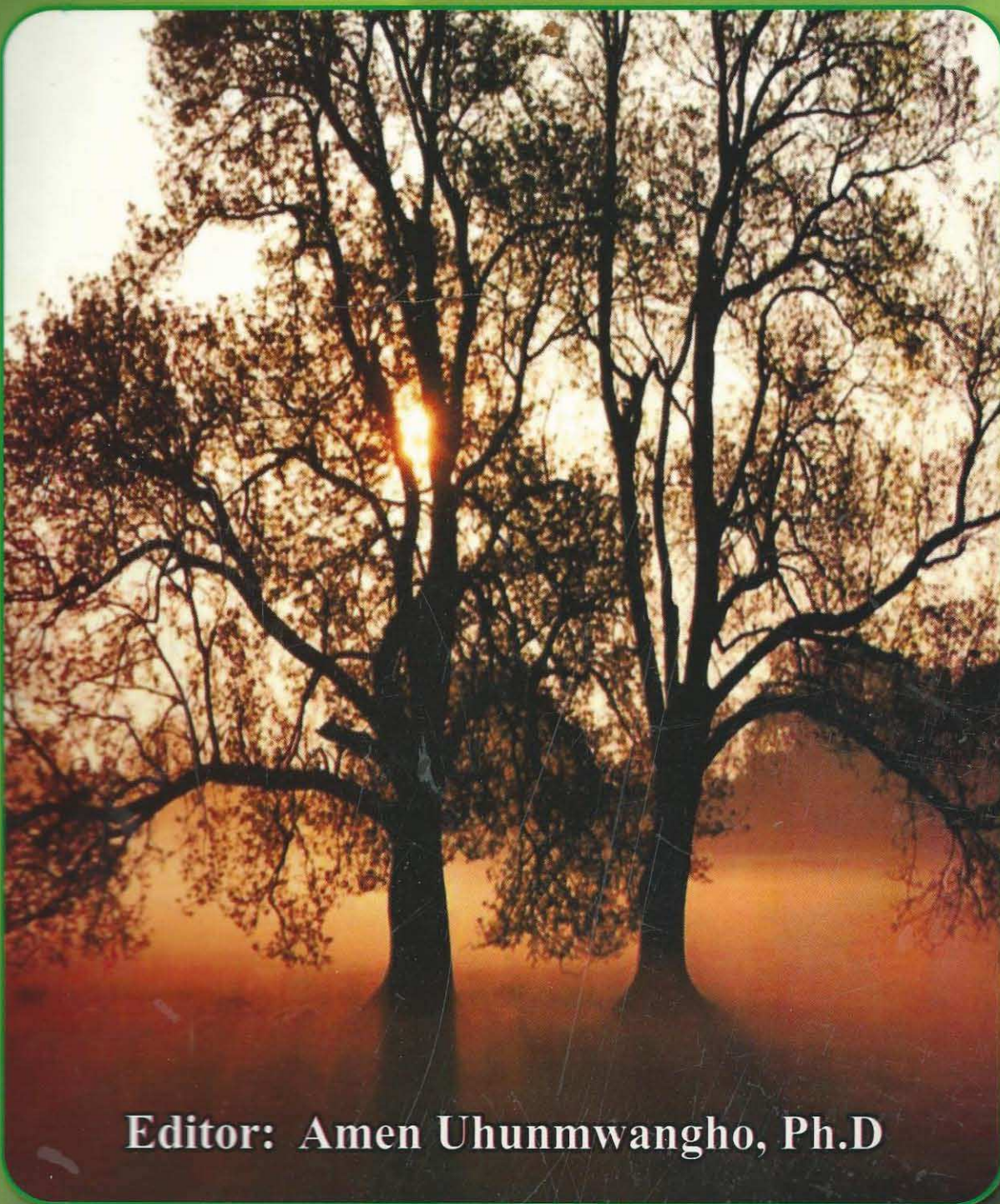


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Beyond Instrumentalism and Constructivism: Reconceptualising Ethnic Identities in Africa

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Abstract

Theories of ethnicity in Africa fall within three typologies -- primordialism, instrumentalism and constructivism. While early colonial-inspired primordialist models perceived ethnicity in Africa as a carryover from Africa's primordial past, instrumentalist models saw ethnicity mainly as a tool in the hands of both the colonial state and post-colonial elites in furthering their interests. More recent constructivist models construe ethnicity not simply as an instrument in the hands of a colonists or African elites but as the product of the complex socio-political dynamics of colonial and post-colonial societies. The 'invention of tradition' thesis and other constructivist models go further than previous models in acknowledging the complexities and nuances that underlie the historical processes that have produced ethnic identities in Africa. Yet, even this model is problematic in its essentializing treatment of ethnic identities in Africa. This essay offers a critique of the dominant paradigms that have been employed to explain ethnicity in Africa, with particular focus on the instrumentalist and constructivist models. It argues that for all the insights they provide for understanding the dynamics of social and political relations in Africa, there is a need to move beyond these models and seek novel ways of conceptualizing and historicizing social identities in Africa.

Introduction

In 1983, the Africanist historian Terence Ranger published an influential and groundbreaking essay titled 'The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa'. In this article and a later revision of it, he argued that contrary to the postulations of earlier 'primordialist' theories, ethnicity in Africa is not simply the result of forms of ethnic consciousness whose roots lie deep in Africa's pre-colonial and primordial past (Ranger 1991: 120). Contrary to what the 'instrumentalist' theorists would have us believe, ethnicity could also not simply be seen as a tool with which elites furthered their interests. Rather, Ranger argued that contemporary African ethnic identities, like other 'traditions' in Africa were largely 'inventions' or constructions of colonial intervention – the result of the divisive activities of European officials and missionaries working in concert with African elites. This argument typified a new constructivist model of ethnicity that not only sought to repudiate earlier primordialist and instrumentalist models but also chart a more nuanced framework for analyzing ethnic identities in Africa (Young 1994, 61-68). According to the constructivist theory of ethnicity or in this case, the 'invention of tradition' thesis, European colonial administrators set about inventing African traditions for Africans because few connections could be made between British and African political, social and other legal systems. Their own respect for tradition disposed colonial authorities to look with favour upon what they took to be tradition in Africa.

European colonists in Africa drew on European invented traditions both to define and justify their roles and also to provide models of subservience into which it was sometimes possible to draw Africans. Proponents of the constructivist paradigm argue that this primarily accounts for the tradition of contemporary African ethnicity (Ranger, 1983: 211).

Since its publication, the 'invention of tradition' thesis and the constructivist paradigm has been applied by a number of scholars to explain different facets of colonial African history and politics. The most significant of these has been the extension of the 'invention' thesis to explaining the origins and evolution of contemporary ethnicity in Africa as demonstrated in the publication in 1989 of the book, *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*. The central argument in this edited volume is that colonial invented traditions accentuated hitherto latent tribal consciousness among African peoples, making fluid ethnic boundaries and identities more rigid and making ethnic rivalries more pronounced. Ranger, in his contribution to this volume sought to demonstrate the novelty of ethnic consciousness and social cohesion and the process of their 'creation' or 'invention' during the colonial period by colonial administrators, missionaries and African political entrepreneurs (Ranger 1999). For instance, he argues that before 1890, the Shona speaking people of Zimbabwe were not conscious of a cultural identity much less a political one. The Shona speaking people were only conscious of identities centred on the local chiefly group and were not clustered together in self-conscious ethnicities. Between the Shona culture as a whole and the local chiefly group, there existed no intermediate concept of ethnicity. Identities along chiefly lines were fluid and not strictly defined. All these changed with the advent of colonial rule when a combination of missionary delineations, colonial restructuring and the complicity of African elites led to the intensification of ethnic ideologies (Ranger 1991: 120).

Compared with earlier primordialist models which perceived ethnicity in Africa solely as a carryover from Africa's primordial past and the 'instrumentalist' model which sees ethnicity as merely an instrument in the hands of the both colonial and subaltern elites in furthering their interest, the constructivist paradigm is regarded by many scholars as the most persuasive in explaining ethnicity in Africa. Yet the constructivist thesis as exemplified by the 'invention of tradition' thesis has its own limitations which several studies have identified. This essay offers a brief critique of these dominant paradigms that have been employed to explain ethnicity in Africa, with particular focus on the instrumentalist and constructivist models. The object here is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of the discourse on social identities in Africa but to evaluate the significance and limitations of some dominant stands in the discourse on ethnic identities in Africa. The paper argues that for all the insight they have provided us in understanding the dynamics of social and political relations in Africa, these paradigms are limited by their tendencies to essentialise ethnicity and privilege ethnic identities over other forms of social identities in Africa. The paper concludes that there is now

a need to move beyond these models and seek novel ways of conceptualizing and historicizing social identities in Africa.

Transcending the Instrumentalist Model

Since the 1970s, the dominant paradigm for explaining ethnicity in Africa has been the instrumentalist model. Forged within the traditions of Marxist scholarship and class analysis that dominated the era, proponents of the instrumentalist thesis saw ethnicity essentially as an instrument used by the elite to promote individual and class hegemony. Ethnicity was seen as an ideological mask employed by ambitious members of the upwardly aspiring groups to obscure growing class divisions within their ethnic groups, so as to secure their own narrow interests through demagoguery and mystification. Ethnicity then, when ordinary people embraced it, was the very epitome of 'false consciousnesses. Writing within this intellectual tradition, Okwundiba Nnoli in one of the earlier sociological studies on ethnicity in post-colonial Africa argued that ethnic politics in Nigeria was primarily the result of the history of divide and rule, which the colonial government employed for their administrative convenience. However, African chiefs and ruling elites welcomed the new boundaries and ethnic delineations created by colonial policies of divide and rule because it provided them with new spheres of influence. It provided them with new avenues of control over land and other local resources. Under colonial rule, ethnicity was as much an instrument for colonial control as it was for African chiefs and rulers. At independence, Nigerian politicians further exploited ethnicity to secure political power and as a bargaining tool to forge political alliances. Ethnicity, in Nnoli's view had thus been an instrument of political manipulation in both the colonial and post-colonial contexts (Nnoli 1978: 67-73).

The main value of the instrumentalist approach to explaining ethnicity in Africa is that it repudiates the old primordialist view that ethnicity and tribalism are simply atavistic residues from the distant pre-colonial past; that Africans are inherently tribal beings and that much of their history can be explained in terms of tribal or ethnic consciousness. Forged in nineteenth century discourses of colonial paternalism, the 'civilizing mission' and European ethnocentrism, the primordialist model perceived ethnicity as sign of a backward and underdeveloped society -- a state which African societies could leave behind as they became more developed and modern. This view revolved around the modernity/ tradition dichotomy. The ethnic group was seen as a static, tribal unit from Africa's past, because it was thought to conflict with modernisation. All these notions, informed as there were by the scientific racism that shaped early ethnographic, anthropological and historical studies of Africa were part of what the instrumentalist model sought to challenge. Unlike the primordialist theories, the instrumentalist model seeks to locate the origins and workings of African ethnicity in terms of historical processes.

While this instrumentalist model for explaining ethnicity in Africa has been useful in challenging colonial notions that tribalism is inherent an African malaise, it also raises a number of significant questions that Africanist scholars must address. First, if ethnicity is solely the product of colonialism, how do we explain the uneven development of ethnic identities among certain African peoples in territories where the colonial state employed roughly the same divide and rule policies? Secondly, how do we explain the persistence and intensification of ethnicity in the African polity decades after the departure of the colonists? These are some of the questions that the instrumentalist model fails to adequately address. As Leroy Veil has rightly noted the instrumentalist explanation of ethnicity falls apart mainly because it fails to explain ethnicity's appeal (Vail 1991: 2-3). This is so because it goes too far in depicting ordinary people, as credulous masses that can be manipulated at will by an elite few, whether colonial or indigenous. As several writers have pointed out, the notion that ethnicity is wholly an elite concoction denies an active role to the masses by placing ethnicity solely in elite circles. This implies that the masses are non-rational actors who cannot make use of the ethnic resource (Osaghae 1994). Thus, the instrumentalist model fails to explain why today, as in the colonial period, the ethnic message continues to find appeal with ordinary people (Vail 1991: 5). These are some of the limitations of the instrumentalist model, which, to some extent, also apply to the constructivist model.

The Constructivist Model and the limits of Invention

The essence of the constructivist model as demonstrated by the 'invention of tradition' thesis is that it sees ethnicity not simply as an instrument in the hands of a few colonists and African elites but as being the product (construction) of the socio-political dynamics of the colonial state. The constructive model recognises that while colonialism may have been crucial to transforming ethnic identities, Africans were part of this process of identity transformation. African agency is recovered but there is an inherent assumption that it is a process driven primarily by colonialism as evidenced in the frequent use of the term 'invent' and 'invention'. As John Illife put it in his *History of Tanganyika*:

The British wrongly believed that Tanganyikans belonged to tribes. Tanganyikans created tribes to function within colonial framework. [Governor] Cameron and his disciples created indirect rule by 'taking the tribal unit.' They had the power and they created a new political geography. This would have been transient however had it not coincided with similar trends among Africans. They too had to live amidst bewildering social complexity which they ordered in kinship terms and buttressed with *invented* history. Moreover, Africans wanted effective units of action just a [colonial] officials wanted units of government.... Europeans believed that Africans belonged to tribes; Africans built tribes to belong to (Illife 1979: 324, emphasis added).

The 'invention of tradition' thesis and other constructivist models clearly acknowledge the complexities and nuances that underlie the historical processes that have produced ethnic identities in Africa. But while the invention of tradition thesis brings new insights into the constructed nature of African ethnicity, it also suffers its own drawbacks, some of which

Terence Ranger, himself an early proponent of this thesis, have acknowledged in two separate revisions of his original essay (Ranger 1989).

From a historical perspective, there are two main problems with the 'invention of tradition' thesis. The first is the polarized distinction it makes between pre-existing or indigenous African customs and later invented traditions. This dichotomy tends towards ahistorical dualism and essentialism that many historians will now be uncomfortable with. It tends towards the old oppositional models that have dominated African historiography but now being increasingly challenged. If anything, the stark distinction between indigenous customs and later invented traditions that is drawn in the 'invention of tradition' thesis ignores the fluidities and continuities in the historical processes of ethnic identity formation in Africa as elsewhere. The invention of tradition thesis thus essentialises the character of colonialism and its simple stereotypes of colonial classification also ignore the intensely tested nature of colonial knowledge. As Ade Ajayi has argued, colonialism was only an episode rather than an epoch in Africa's historical development and the tendency to ascribe so much of what Africa is today to that episode alone, amounts to privileging it over other aspects of African history (Ajayi 1967, 1969). A fuller version of the European colonial encounter in Africa can only come from telling it alongside the history of other externally and internally driven empire building projects that came before it and those with which it shared time and space (Cooper 2005, 22).

Another problem with the invention of tradition thesis has to do with the notion of invention which evokes a certain totalizing and unique process of scientific creation. The term 'invention' when used to explain the origins of ethnic identities in Africa, implies too one sided a happening. If the inventors of tradition were the colonial administrators, settlers and missionaries, it implies that Africans were merely onlookers or at most 'laboratory assistants' in the process of invention. Besides, the term 'invention' makes little allowance for the process of continuity, contestation and ambiguity. The analogy with the scientific process of invention is here poignant. Once an invention has occurred, all that remains is for the inventor to apply for a patent to protect his invention. But even the most ardent constructivist will acknowledge that this analogy is deeply flawed. The development of cultural traditions and ethnic identities is often a gradual and continuous social process rather than a once for all happening.

The suggestion in the 'invention' paradigm that colonial-invented traditions were rigid and inflexible has been repudiated by several scholars (Moore 1986, Spear 2003). Sally Falk Moore has argued that colonial and post-colonial recognition of customary law did necessarily not end the flexibility of customs as the Invention thesis suggests. Rather, customary law continued to be applied quite flexibly because the colonial state did not police the 'invented' customary law but left it largely at the discretion of the Native Authorities to implement (Moore 1986). Even Terence Ranger himself, the 'father' of the invention paradigm in relation to Africa later acknowledged the term 'invention' gets in the way of a full historical treatment of the dynamics of ethnicity and other traditions in Africa. He moved away from the notion of the 'invention of tradition' employed in his original article to the notion of the 'imagination of tradition', more along the lines of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (Ranger 1999: 81; Anderson 1983). It is noteworthy, perhaps ironic that just as the invention of tradition paradigm is being increasingly repudiated in African historical scholarship it seems to have found a new home in British historical scholarship (Pitcock 1991, Trevor-Roper 2008).

Recognition of the limitations of the invention of tradition paradigm has pushed some scholars to pay more serious attention to the African agency and the limits of that agency in writing African social history. Employing the invention of tradition paradigm J. D. Y. Peel in his essay 'The Cultural Work of Yoruba Ethnogenesis' highlighted the construction of Yoruba identity through the works of European missionaries and early African elites such as Bishop Ajayi Crowder and Samuel Johnson (Peel 1989). He argued that this new pan-Yoruba ethnic identity was built by expanding the existing ethnic identity of Oyo to the rest of Western Nigeria. In other words, contemporary Yoruba ethnic identity is not only the product of colonial social engineering but also the result of some form of cultural imperialism propagated by the elites. What makes Peel's article different is that although it employs the constructivist model and the 'invention' paradigm, he does so very cautiously, aware of its implications for African agency. His is a more nuance example of the constructivist thesis. Peel sees African ethnicity not so much as an invention but as a historical process, which was significantly influenced by the social and political changes that were wrought by the colonial encounter and changes preceding that encounter. He makes the significant point that the Yoruba did not present a cultural *tabular rasa* to the Christian missionaries. The colonists did not redraw the cultural map of the Yoruba as arbitrarily as the political map of Africa. Thus, although Peel locates the roots of Yoruba ethnicity in that crucial intersection between missionary activities, colonial incursion and African manipulation, he argues also that there was a pre-colonial dimension to this process. This is a more reflective and compelling approach to the use of the constructivist model for explaining ethnicity in Africa. It recognizes the changes wrought on African societies by colonial incursion while not ignoring the residual continuities on which these changes were based. It also demonstrates the construction of ethnicity as a historical process and argues the need for a properly cultural and historical explanation of ethnicity (Peel 1989). Several recent studies of ethnicity in Africa seem to have adopted this neo-constructivist approach (Spear and Waller, 1993; Bloom 1989; Udogu 2001, Dodds and Khosa, 200).

Beyond Ethnicity and Inventions

What is evident from the foregoing discussion is that all three dominant models that have been employed to explain ethnicity in Africa are fraught with their various limitations. The primordialist model has long been dismissed because it denies the dynamic and historical character of ethnic identities. Today, few will agree with the primordialist conception of ethnicity as a static relic from the past. Much the same can be said for both the instrumentalist and constructivist models. It is difficult to accept the notion that ethnicity is simply a tool in the hands of particular groups, however powerful or merely a modern 'invention' or construction of colonialism. If anything, what most scholars who argue for these models seem to ignore is that ethnicity is in fact, being used by both the elites and subaltern groups within the society to provide themselves with that which the state is either unwilling or unable to provide. This process cannot simply be reduced to manipulation and invention ethnic identities. It is also about shifting and contested social identities generally. It is about the ways in which people choose to self-identify in the process of negotiating their socio-political and economic circumstances. Ethnicity and ethnic identity has for so long been disproportionately privileged over other forms of identity in explaining historical and political developments in Africa. It has been the sole or dominant lens with which African politics and society have been studied and analysed. The result is a distorted view of the picture that not only obscures the place of other forms of social identities but also distorts the image of ethnic identity that we get in.

What seems to be common to all three models for explaining ethnicity in Africa reviewed here is that they all tend to essentialise ethnic identities and construct it as problematic to the state and society. They seem to imply or condone the premise that ethnicity is a 'bad' thing that must be explained in terms of institutional inadequacies or manipulation. But if ethnicity is something that can be manipulated and created at will, it can hardly be said to be the cause of the many problems that are usually ascribed to it. Other historic political, economic and social realities that define and mediate ethnic identities often do not get nearly as much attention as they deserve in discussions about ethnic identities in Africa. As Claude Ake makes clear, conflicts arising from appeal to ethnic support in the face of vanishing political legitimacy and from the manipulation of ethnicity to divide colonized people, are not ethnic problems *per se* but of particular political dynamics which just happened to be pinned on ethnicity (Ake 1993). Chinua Achebe makes the same point when he writes of ethnicity as being 'accepted at one time as a friend, rejected as an enemy at another, and finally smuggled through the back door as an accomplice' (Achebe 1984: 24). This is true not only of the subjects of study but also scholarship about African ethnicity itself. Very often, what appears to be ethnic conflict or rivalry is in fact the struggle of a group of people against unequal access to resources, marginalisation, or oppression. Ethnicity in this way represents a collective pressure for representation. It is therefore sometimes more appropriate to frame these issues more in terms of access to resources, marginalisation and oppression rather than strictly in terms of ethnicity. The point here simply put is that some scholars have been unwilling or unable to go beyond ethnicity in the explanation of ethnicity in Africa. The result is that the symptom is mistaken for the disease and ethnicity is explained not necessarily from the standpoint of what it is but rather, what it has been used for.

There is a related and perhaps more significant point to be made. Ethnicity has been presented by many scholars working within the tradition of the three dominant models, as the essence of African identity or at list a defining aspect of that identity. Ethnicity has been unduly privileged over other aspects of African identity such that the conventional wisdom today, particularly in the Western media is to portray any conflict in Africa as stemming from ethnic or 'tribal' issues. One needs only to go through Western media analyses of the conflicts in Rwanda, Burundi, Congo or Liberia to appreciate this point. Even in cases like Sierra Leone where it was common knowledge that resource competition and political jockeying were the primary drivers of the conflict, references to tribal rivalries and ethnicity still manage to creep into media and even scholarly analysis of the situation in ways that they probably wouldn't in other situations (Crossette, 1998).

There is a need for scholars of social identities and identity politics in Africa to be more aware of the epistemic pitfalls of privileging ethnicity over other forms of identities. More attention needs to be placed on the trying to understand ethnic identities as dynamic, contested and context dependent. It is imperative to move beyond from the hackneyed practice of 'ethnicising' and 'tribalising' all that has to do with Africa. There is a need for scholars, particularly Africanist scholars, to broaden the focus to other competing forms of social identities such as the emerging Christian Pentecostal identities in West Africa and the fluid town-centred identities in Southern Africa where people are beginning to see themselves more and more in relation and affiliation to big cities like Johannesburg, Soweto and Cape Town. It is gratifying that some scholars are already thinking along these lines (Hunt and Nicola 2001).

Conclusion

This essay has sought to make two main points. The first is that the traditional models and paradigms for explaining ethnicity no longer suffice. Primordialism, structuralism and lately

constructivism do not, in their classic forms, provide adequate or compelling explanations of the place of ethnicity in African societies, either in historical or contemporary contexts. Although each model offers some insights into the nature of ethnic identities, each model has its deficiencies that make it necessary for scholars to transcend them. The second point is that ethnicity has been unnecessarily privileged over other forms of identities in Africa. This has resulted in the relative neglect of the study of other forms of identities in the continent. The more damaging effect of this is that it has helped to foster what Mahmood Mamdani has described as Afro-pessimism in Western scholarship and media -- a highly sceptical view that questions the ability of post-independence and indigenous regimes in sub-Saharan Africa to rejuvenate local conditions from within (Mamdani 1985: 286). The call here is not for the abandonment for studies in ethnic identities which continue to be relevant to understanding African politics and societies. Rather, it is a call to broaden the field of identity scholarship to include other equally important forms of historical and emergent identities in Africa that may in fact help us better understand and contextualise ethnicity in Africa. Such a focal shift will not simply reflect the academic predilections. It will also reflect trends across the continent that indicate the emergence and persistence of complex and multiple forms of self-identification arising from the changing landscape of political and social relations.

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