



Democratization, Identity Transformation, and Rising Ethnic Conflict in Kogi State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT. This article explores the linkages between democratization, identity transformation, and rising ethnic conflicts in Kogi State, Nigeria. It argues that the changing character of identity politics in the state, partly a reflection of the contradictory character of the state such that it empowers some people and disempowers others, has been boosted by the democratization process. Ethnic identities have thus become an instrument for the construction and deconstruction of trust in the struggle for power among the competing ethnicities, which the democratization process typifies. The result has been rising ethnic conflicts across the state that do not bode well for sustainable democracy and development. The article concludes with a recommendation of the need for equitable power sharing/balancing devices among competing ethnicities, including minority groups. One viable path to this is to institutionalize a mutually agreed principle of power rotation on a one-term (four-year) basis among the various groups. This has the potential to generate a sense of belonging and ownership in all in plural and complex settings as Kogi State.

KEYWORDS. democratization identity ethnicity conflict Okun Ebara Igala Kogi State Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Contrary to the expectation of a post-Cold War peace dividend where the forces of identity, particularly ethnicity, would be relegated to the background, the reverse appears to have so far been the case. Rather than diminish in relevance, the question of identity has continued to gain renewed vigor and visibility in the New World (Dis)Order. The evidence in support of this can be found across the globe and have been the focus of studies at the international, regional, and national levels (see Albert 2005; McCrone 1998; Zalewski and Enloe 1995; Linz and Stepan 1992). As Zalewski and Enloe (1995, 279-80) document, the process of integration in Western Europe has created room for many new considerations of identity to emerge. They noted that some

European people who belonged to previously submerged minority nationalities (Basques, Catalans, Welsh, Scots, Romani[gypsies], German Turks, and Black Britons) continue to fight to reclaim their public voices. And outside Western Europe, they noted that political life had been remade, too, as Aborigines in Australia, Sikhs in India, Tamils in Sri Lanka, and black people in South Africa have spoken out, refusing to act as though their own identities were trivial or obsolete. In Canada, too, this tendency manifests in the form of what Linda Cardinal called "the politics of bilingualism," under which the Quebec and the federal government sought to establish a balance between contending language identities—French and English (Cardinal 2004, 81-87). Forces of identity, particularly ethnicity and religion, have equally contributed to the decomposition of states in Africa, as shown by protracted conflicts in trouble spots such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and Sudan (Omotola 2006a).

In this paper, however, we are primarily concerned with the transformation of ethnic identity in Kogi State, occasioned largely by the struggle for power by the dominant ethnic groups in the state—Igala, Ebira, and Okun—and how this affects intergroup relations and fuels ethnic conflicts in the state. While issues of identities in their diverse forms have attracted much scholarly and public attention in Nigeria, the democratization process seems to have opened up new spaces for people to reassess and reassert their identities. Often, such reassessments are predicated on perceived threats to such identities, especially in terms of political marginalization not only of ethnic minorities, but also of the majorities outside the corridor of power.

My central argument is that the changing character of identity politics in the state is a reflection of the contradictory character of the state, serving as a source of empowerment to some people and disempowerment to others. This may have been so because of the composition of the state and the nature of its power structure, which enable one group to dominate others. Specifically, the contradictory character of the state is reflected in its ethnic configuration, which merged three major groups such that one—the Igala—is large enough, both in size and population, to hold others for ransom. Yet, each of these groups, along with some minorities, constitutes a separate senatorial district. Worse, the dominant group accounts for only 7 percent of the internally generated revenue of the state, while the other two account for 93 percent of the state's internal revenue. Yet, it is this group that dominates political offices and the public bureaucracy. The

struggle for fairness, equity, and justice by the marginalized, therefore, remains critical to the understanding of growing intergroup conflicts in the state. The low productivity of these efforts may have accounted for the radicalization of identity politics, a development that fuels ethnic conflicts. While this may not be entirely new to the state, its recent manifestations and effects are certainly much more profound, exacting a heavy toll on the peace, stability, and development of the state.

The paper explores the linkages between democratization, identity transformation, and rising ethnic conflicts in Kogi State, Nigeria. In the course of the analysis, the following questions are pertinent. In what ways have the democratization process shaped and influenced identity transformation in Kogi State? How does the transformation of identity manifest in the state? How does such transformation affect intergroup relations, leading to ethnic conflicts? What can be done to effectively redress the situation for sustainable democracy?

The paper is organized into five sections. The first deals with the geography and historiography of the study area—Kogi State. The second undertakes a critical review of the instrumentalist conception of ethnic identity as the theoretical anchor of the study. It then examines the linkages of democratization with identity transformation in Kogi State, reflecting on its form and character. This is followed by the analytical fulcrum of the paper that explores how the transformation of identity under the democratization process engenders a vicious cycle of ethnic violence in the state. The fifth and concluding section undertakes a critical reflection on the impacts of identity transformation and ethnic conflicts on sustainable democracy.

KOGI STATE: GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

What is today referred to as Kogi State was a product of the continuous process of adjustment to the structure of Nigerian federalism (Omotola 2006b, 4). It will be recalled that Nigeria was a colonial creation from an amalgamation of disparate and diverse ethnic groups. Consequently, the country, like several other deeply divided societies, has always found it difficult to forge a sustainable sense of nationhood among its diverse and competing groups. The attendant search for autonomy by each group and the transformation of identity politics have combined to exert irresistible pressure on the state to adjust and readjust in many respects. One such adjustment relates to the structural composition of

the federation (see Amuwo et al. 1998; Osaghae 1998; Suberu and Onwudiwe 2005; Omotola 2006c). Before the attainment of political independence in 1960, state creation was rife with problems, particularly the incessant agitation by ethnic minorities for their separate state. This led to the establishment of the Henry Willink Commission of 1954, which was responsible for investigating the problem and making appropriate recommendations, thus setting the tone for the post-independence identity politics of state creation (Omotola 2006b).

The demand for state creation has since been one of the surest ways to gain access to the “national cake”, states being the main locus of revenue allocation in Nigeria. It was, therefore, not surprising that after independence in 1960, the administrative structure of Nigerian federalism has changed significantly from three regions to thirty-six states and a federal capital today. It was under this process that Kogi State was created, in August 1991, under the thirty-state structure, in a way reminiscent of the defunct Kabba Province. The Kabba Province was, with the creation of twelve states in 1967, under the then Kwara state. However, following the creation of the nineteen-state structure in 1976, a division polarized Kabba Province, keeping the Okun and Ebira in Kwara State, and merged the Igala and others across the river with Benue state. In 1991, however, when Kogi State was created under the thirty-state structure, there was a reunification of sorts, such that the composition of the state was coterminous with the defunct Kabba Province. The Okun and Ebira of Kwara State were carved out and merged with the Igala and others across the river to form Kogi State.

As currently constituted, Kogi State is quintessentially Nigeria, with three dominant ethnic groups and several minorities. Located within the heart of Nigeria, or what is historically referred to as the Middle Belt of the country, but described in a new political lexicon in the country as the North Central geopolitical zone, its capital is located on the confluence of Rivers Niger and Benue at Lokoja on Latitude 6° 44' North and Longitude 7° 44' East. It is bounded by the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Niger, and Plateau states on the north; Anambra and Benue states on the east; and Ondo, Kwara, Edo, and Enugu on the west. The state comprises three senatorial districts: the East, West, and Central. In the East, the Igalas have not only dominated but also monopolized the highest political office in the state since inception. The Central is predominantly Ebira, but with a minority group known as Ebira-Koto; and the Western predominantly Okun, but with other minorities, especially the Oworo, Ogori, and

Nupe people. The 1991 population census showed that the state has a population of 2,141,756, broken down as follows: the Eastern Senatorial District, 943,434; the West, 444,865; and the Central, 753,456 (Yusuf 2006; Sani 2003; Mvendaga, Simbine, and Galadima 2001). The state is rich in natural resources, the most notable being expansive fertile land for agriculture, huge deposits of iron ore at Ajaokuta in the Central Senatorial District (where the Iron and Steel Company is located), and limestone at Obajana in the Western Senatorial District, which is the fuel of what is currently considered the largest cement industry in Africa under control of the Dangote Group of Companies.

Perhaps this composition of the state partly explains the squandering of hopes that accompanied the creation of the state, on the one hand, and the renewed faith that the democratization process elicited at inception, on the other. The reason is that, as presently constituted, the state has tragically become a source of empowerment to some, and vice versa. This has resulted in the transformation of ethnic identities, leading to increasing ethnic tensions in the state, with telling impacts on the delivery of democracy dividends.

AN INSTRUMENTALIST VIEW OF DEMOCRATIZATION AND IDENTITY

The concepts of democratization and identity have been extensively debated in the literature over the years. Laurence Whitehead, a leading comparativist, observes that if democracy itself is an essentially contested concept, then democratization “cannot be defined by some fixed and timeless objective criterion” (Whitehead 2002, 26). However, democratization is generally seen as the movement from authoritarianism to a stable democracy, which ideally should transform various aspects of national life for the better. Eghosa Osaghae, a leading Nigerian professor of political science, defines it as “the process of establishing, strengthening, or extending the principles, mechanisms and institutions that define a democratic regime” (1999, 7). For Whitehead (2002, 28), democratization is a complex process that involves “political competition and the transition from one state to the other can be brought about rapidly, unambiguously and permanently, provided some of the prescribed institutional changes are implemented.”

The effective functioning and sustenance of such a society largely depends on the institutionalization of key elements such as the constitutional opening of the democratic political space so that no

“right” group would be denied access to participating in the democratic process, as well as the availability of multiple avenues for citizens, regardless of their identities, to express and represent their interests and values. It also requires an open, free, and independent press that provides alternative sources of information, education, and socialization while holding the government accountable for its actions and inactions. There is also need for the rule of law, which includes the political equality of citizens and the protection of their rights as well as those of minorities; and the availability of an independent judiciary within a culture of respect for judicial pronouncements by the other arms of the state, particularly the executive. These are not as simplistic and straightforward as they seem because they require the existence of people with democratic mind-set, capable of managing these structures and institutions in line with democratic demands.

But often, these requirements are grossly lacking, especially in developing countries including Nigeria. For example, the press is not only dominated by state-owned media, media activities are still censored, and media practitioners have been constant victims of state violence through closure, seizure, and unlawful arrest and detention even under a “democratic” regime. The rise of independent media, both print and electronic, has been unable to completely transform the political landscape, although it had a positive impact on the political terrain. Core political actors have also been known for the flagrant violation of rules in order to remain in power, as the 2007 general elections showed. Reports of domestic and international observers and the resulting political impasse and annulment of election results at the election petition tribunals confirm this (Adebayo and Omotola 2007). The perverse manifestations of these requisites for democratic and political development have tended to cripple efforts at nation building. The result, as we will soon illustrate with the Nigerian experience under the fledgling democracy, is the resort to the manipulation of ethnic identities as an emancipatory tool. The import of this is that democratization becomes a powerful weapon in the hands of ethnic chauvinists for the pursuit and advancement of their interests. As Philippe Schmitter has rightly argued:

All one can say for sure is that the sentiment of national identity and boundaries is the outcome of arcane and complex historical processes that are, nevertheless, subject to manipulation. *Democratization itself may encourage actors to attempt such manipulations in order to create constituencies favorable to their respective purposes, but it does not and cannot resolve the issue.* (1994, 66; emphasis mine)

What the foregoing suggests is the tendency for democratization to foster a system of identity transformation. What, then, is identity? First, we must realize that the concept of identity remains difficult to define in precise terms. As Hall reminds us, "identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think" (1990, 222; cf. McCrone 1998, 29). Nevertheless, it has been defined as "cultural representation or discourses which both facilitate or restrict choice" (Hall 1990, 292; cf. McCrone 1998, 30). The cultural elements include common history, language, and cultural symbols. For Attahiru Jega, an acclaimed expert on Nigerian politics, identity typifies "a person's sense of belonging to a group if [it] influences his behaviour" (2000, 14). As he elaborates, identity serves as a rallying and organizing principle of social action within the civil society and in state-society relations. One pertinent factor and perhaps the single most significant influence on the strength of identity is the perceived existence of an external threat to that identity. Zalewski and Enloe allude to this when they state that "clearly, one's felt need to claim identity or to restore lost identity will depend on whether there is or has been a threat to that identity" (1995, 286).

Usually, threats to an identity, real or imagined, often generate a reaction from the affected to ward off the threat, which compels identity transformation. The transformation of identity connotes a "continuous process, which suggests the changing role of identities and the heightening and increasing magnitude and consequences of identity politics" (Jega 2000, 6), as opposed to creating an entirely new identity. In this connection, scholars have argued that identity is neither static nor immutable after all (see Goffman 1973; Giddens 1991; Seal 1995; Bah 2003; Owolabi 2003; Omotola 2006d). By implication, identities are subject to manipulations, depending on the prevailing social, political, economic, and cultural realities. This is because the construction of a collective identity, most especially ethnicity, is assumed to guide strategic action for access to and/or control over resources. The centrality of ethnic identity is underscored by the fact that an ethnic group, defined as "primarily the political community that inspires the belief in common identity" (Osaghae 1994, 138), has propensities to change and take new forms, depending on reactions to the various questions always generated when "self" confronts the "others." This perhaps explains Owolabi's (2003, 10) definition of ethnicity as "a fluid process of composition, decomposition and recomposition." It is perhaps this tendency of ethnic identity to serve as a political resource that facilitates its propensity to engender

conflict, depending on its management. As Turton points out, “in many cases rivals for power make use of ethnic differences as a political resource, but the differences are not responsible for war” (1997, 3).

The instrumentalist conception of ethnicity as an identity that is fluid and manipulable in defense of collective action in the pursuit of individual or shared interests, however, contrasts sharply with the primordialists’ view. The primordialists view ethnicity as “an inherited cultural inventory and the product of *longue durée* historical process, which although not permanently fixed or naturally given, is difficult to change” (Hindley 2001, 282). A third perspective, which seems to reconcile the two seemingly diametrically opposed perspectives, is social constructivism. But while the constructivists share the instrumentalists’ assumption that ethnicity is made rather than given, they emphasize the imaginative creation of ethnicity to satisfy the social needs of groups in the process of profound political, social, and economic change. Against this background, Lijphart argues that “the constructors of ethnicity are sociocultural brokers rather than political entrepreneurs” (1995, 885).

Without doubt, each of these perspectives has its merit and demerit. For example, as Lijphart (1995, 855) argues, while politicians will always attempt to appeal to ethnic sentiments, such an appeal can hardly be successful in the absence of basic cultural differences among people. He adds that even where such differences exist, it is equally unrealistic to expect politicians to ignore taking advantage of such divisions. Such neglect, Lijphart insists, would be at their own peril as it may signal their political demise. In both instances, there must be an object that informs and at which the ethnic appeals are targeted. This is more the case within a plural society with multiple minority problems, which often generate tensions in the democratization process as to how to effectively accommodate the minorities. This may not be unconnected with the usual conflict of interests between the majority and minority ethnic groups. As van Amersfoort puts it:

Situations where majority aims and minority aspirations coincide are the exception rather than the rule. Thus resolving such minority tension is likely to prove a more complex and potentially explosive challenge to democracy than accommodating minorities based on non-ethnic and racial criteria. (1978, 218-34; quoted in Stone 2001, 439)

In the context of democratization, political power, the master of all other powers (at least in the context of Third World politics), remains the most coveted resource that all actors struggle to capture.

The politics that generates and sustains this struggle for power will ordinarily serve to reinforce forces of identity, particularly ethnicity, in plural societies. However, such reinforcements can either be positive or negative, depending on the degree of protection the political processes offer or are perceived as capable of offering the contending groups. Whatever the case, the ease of its manipulation as a strong force of identity underscored the salience of ethnicity to the understanding of group conflicts in Nigeria. The end result, most often, has been the escalation of ethnic mistrust and conflicts. Lijphart asserts that “efforts at manipulating ethnic identity in order to build culturally unified nations have had very limited success and attempts to discourage or suppress ethnic differences have often backfired, strengthening ethnic feelings and exacerbating ethnic conflict” (1995, 855). The analysis that follows will buttress this position and broaden our understanding of the linkages between democratization, identity transformation, and rising ethnic conflicts in Nigeria.

DEMOCRATIZATION AND IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION IN KOGI STATE

The democratization process under way in Nigeria, following the successful completion of the longest and most expensive transition program in the country (1986-1999) with the handing over of power to a democratically elected government headed by Chief Olusegun Obasanjo on May 29, 1999, radiates new hopes and faltering prospects (see Aremu and Omotola 2006). One threatening dimension is the unprecedented rate of the transformation of identities, particularly ethnoreligious and ethnoregional bent, resulting in violent ethnic and religious conflicts across the country (Akinwumi 2004, 2005; Adebani 2004). It would be recalled that prior to May 1999, Nigeria had been under the firm grip of military dictatorship for an uninterrupted period of sixteen years. During this dark era, the democratic public sphere was excessively constricted, barring interest groups and social and political formations from advancing their interests and expressing their grievance through democratic means (Adebani 2004, 328). As a result, ethnic tensions are on the rise across the country. The perversion of the democratization processes has strengthened the resolve of contending identities to exploit such categories of organization for more space in the public spheres.

Instead of promoting a sustainable regime of stability and development, the democracy project has tragically given rise to a vicious cycle of violence. According to Jega (2003, 6), Nigeria witnessed forty major civil disturbances in the form of ethnoreligious and commercial clashes between 1999 and 2002. Groupson-Paul (2003, 24-27) puts it at fifty-three between May 1999 and May 2003. *The News*, a leading weekly magazine in Nigeria, reports that in 1999 alone, the police recorded 200 violent clashes nationwide (cf. Adebaniwi 2004, 335). The country has since witnessed many more deadly incidents of violence that have spared no part of the country (see Omotola 2006d; Akinwumi 2005). While motivations for these conflicts vary, all of them relate to the struggle for relevance in the scheme of power politics by competing interests through the manipulation of ethnic and religious identities.

The experience of Kogi State since 1999 does not differ in any fundamental sense. To be sure, the democratization process has sharpened identity politics and transformation in the state. The seeming inevitability of this trend is understandable, given the plural character of the state in ways reminiscent of the composition of Nigeria. The power structure and politics of the state have been such that it empowers the Igalas, who, by virtue of their numbers, have dominated key institutions and positions of government in the state. This dominance has been a key tool in the marginalization of not only the minorities but also other major groups in the state. The Igalas have not only monopolized the highest political office but also exploited this position to disempower others in several aspects of national life. Tables 1, 2, and 3 illustrate this fact.

It is important to note that the seeming advantage of Kogi West over Central may not be real after all. The reason is that most of the allocations to the zone ended up in Lokoja, the state capital, which is a part of Kogi West. A viable alternative would be to remove Lokoja from Kogi West and constitute it into a no man's land in the state, like Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory. This way, the marginalization of Kogi West will become more glaring. If these allocations had been predicated on the needs of each group, the question of domination would have been a non-issue.

The "others" had hoped for better deals, following the defeat of the All Nigerian People's Party's (ANPP) government of Alhaji Abubakar Audu and the emergence of the People's Democratic Party's (PDP) government of Alhaji Ibrahim Idris in 2003, both of which are from

Table 1. Kogi State workforce by senatorial district, 1991-2003

Senatorial district	August 1991– August 1992	August 1992– December 1993	December 1993– April 1999	May 1999– May 2003
Kogi East	9,769	11,843	12,345	13,529
Kogi West	8,244	8,675	8,789	8,872
Kogi Central	1,995	1,825	1,859	1,870
Total	19,806	22,345	22,993	24,125

Source: Yusuf 2006, 69.

Table 2: Award of contracts, 1999-2003

Contracts	Kogi East	Kogi West	Kogi Central	Total
Commissioner's quarters	15	07	08	30
Civil servants' quarters	150	28	22	200
State university staff's quarters	250	105	45	400
Supplies, state university (%)	63	25	12	100
Renovation of palaces	03	01	0	04

Source: Yusuf 2006, 70.

Table 3: Distribution of projects, 1999-2003

Projects	Kogi East	Kogi West	Kogi Central	Total
Transformers	59	17	06	82
Rural electrification	19	09	04	32
Bore holes	31	11	05	47
Water tap/pump	65	45	30	140
General hospitals	12	07	02	21
Ecological fund (%)	73	27	0	100

Source: Yusuf 2006, 70.

the eastern senatorial district. These hopes are understandable. Audu's high-handed governance of the state had led to the formation of a broad-based coalition that cut across the whole state, an alliance that worked and led to his defeat in the 2003 gubernatorial elections. A major factor that aided the success of the alliance, according to Omotola (2006b, 6), was the PDP's choice of another Igala native, Alhaji Ibrahim Idris, as its gubernatorial candidate. This strategy, as Omotola has argued, worked in favor of the coalition in at least two ways. One, it won the Igala people's support, who were obviously fed up with Abubakar Audu's misrule, but would continue to prefer him to any of the "others." Two, it also helped secure federal support, which the PDP government needed to extend its tentacles to states then outside its control. But the new hopes were short-lived for obvious reasons. The most important of these was that no sooner had the new government assumed office than succession politics for 2007

began. The emerging signals then were clear that the government of Idris had an eye on a second term, which others considered as tantamount to a betrayal of their agreement (for Ibrahim Idris to run for only one term) as well as inimical to their aspiration to power in 2007. This development not only damaged political relations but also polarized the new power bloc within the PDP into two antagonistic camps, which subsequently crystallized into the power-stay and power-shift movements in the state.

This development may have accounted for the continuing marginalization of the Western and Central Senatorial Districts of the state in the scheme of things. Their marginalization, against the background of their invaluable efforts in the formation and success of the coalition that brought Idris to power, and the fact that these zones are responsible for more than 90 percent of the state's internally generated revenue, remains critical to the transformation of identity and attendant conflicts. The PDP won the gubernatorial election in 2003 with a total of 464,939 against ANPP's 292,589. Out of these, the East had 218,265; the Central, 94,025; and the West, 152,549 votes (Yusuf 2006, 102-4). The combined votes of the West and Central amount to 246,574, 28,309 votes more than that of the East, thus clinching PDP's victory. Moreover, while Kogi Central contributes 71 percent of the state's internal revenue, the West accounts for 22 percent and the East 7 percent. Consequently, there has been a resort to the reinforcement of ethnic identity not only by the marginalized in search of liberation, but also by the marginalizer in search of consolidation.

The struggle on both divides has drawn largely on related strategies. First is the proliferation of ethnic-based newspapers and magazines, serving as the propaganda arsenal of the contending forces. In Kogi West alone, notable ones include *The Protector*, *Searchlight*, *Kogi Affairs*, *Confluence Mirror*, and *Okun Renaissance*. Kogi Central has *Ebicom News* as the most notable. They have also resorted to media coverage and press conferences, the most eloquent testimony being the controversy that surrounded the composition of the state population commission for the 2006 population census. The exercise was to be presided over in the state by S. S. Lawal, the federal commissioner for Kogi State. Lawal's appointment was fiercely rejected by the Igalas, who said that being an Ebira man from Kogi Central, he could use his position to manipulate the exercise in favor of his people. Following this, the Igala National Solidarity Association (INSA) and the Igala Cultural and

Development Association (ICDA) fought fiercely for Lawal's removal. On the other hand, the Ebira Youth Forum (EYF) of Kogi Central and Okun Consultative Forum (OCF) of Kogi West vehemently protested the agitations for Lawal's removal at various press conferences in Lokoja (Yusuf 2006, 49-57). Unfortunately, these peaceful approaches to ethnic struggle have not yielded desired results, leading to the inevitability of the violent option. Herein lies the failure of democratization in accommodating and protecting the interests of other identities who are not in power.

IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION AND RISING ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN KOGI STATE

The transformation of ethnic identity in the democratization process has engendered a vicious cycle of intergroup conflicts across the state. The battle lines have been drawn between the Igala on the one hand, and the Ebira and Okun, on the other. This tendency is well captured by the political processes underpinning the 2007 succession politics. As noted earlier, the state has been polarized into two contending power blocs—power stay and power shift. The former, mostly drawn from Kogi East but not without limited following from Kogi West and Central, especially among those currently occupying political offices in the state, represents a movement of those who campaigned for a second term of office for Governor Idris. The latter, however, represents a movement of the anti-elements, who insist that power must move from Kogi East to the other parts of the state (West or Central) from where it draws the bulk of its following. The power struggle between the two blocs has affected practically all levels of village life, such that even remote towns, villages, and hamlets, which have very little or nothing to show as dividends of democracy, have been engulfed in the debacle. And, given the vulnerability of people in these rural settings due largely to their low level of education and poverty, the task of manipulating them with little inducement seems easy.

In the ensuing struggle, there has emerged what may be called an Okun-Ebira coalition that sought to wrestle political power from the Igala in 2007 at all costs. On many occasions, there have been violent eruptions for reasons closely related to the struggle. For example, an armed group believed to be loyal to Senator A.T. Ahmed, the spearhead of power shift from Kogi Central, disrupted the celebration of Democracy Day on May 29, 2005, at the Kogi State stadium in

Lokoja. Several people were seriously injured in the attack, which was widely believed to be ethnically motivated. It took the reinforcement of security operatives to rescue the state governor from the venue. On another occasion, the governor and his entourage to Okene, the heartland of the Ebiras, in the company of Philip Salawu, the deputy governor, were waylaid by militant Ebira youths, causing serious damage to their cars. This was repeated when the governor and his entourage wanted to attend the final funeral rites for Senator A.T. Ahmed in Okene. Embittered youths, angered by the effect of A.T. Ahmed's death on the struggle for power shift and insinuations linking his death to the state powers, refused to allow the governor entry into the venue of the ceremony. Notable individuals, like Prince Olusola Akanmode who is among the supporters of the struggle for power shift, had to intervene to break the impasse (see *Confluence Mirror*, October 15, 2006, 3).

A worrisome development relates to the impact this has had on intragroup solidarity and coherence. Through divide-and-rule tactics and ethnopatrimonial incorporation, the Igalas have been able to penetrate the "others." The penetration has also fueled intragroup conflicts, with heavy tolls on such identities. For example, the house of Philip Salawu in Okene was torched to punish him for remaining in Idris government, with little or nothing to show for it in terms of dividends of democracy for the Ebiras. Among the Okun, the power stay-power shift dichotomy has been very potent and underscores the violent relations between the Kabba (Owe) and the Bunu people of Kabba-Bunu local government area of the state. Today, the only thing that unites the people seems to be the simple fact that they belong to the same local council, but they hardly agree on any political issues, particularly since the assassination of Philip Olorunnipa, a very prominent figure in the Bunu struggle for self-autonomy and chairman of the Independent State Electoral Commission (ISEC) (see Omotola 2007). Olorunnipa's death precipitated an unprecedented violence in the local government and continues to shape the political processes in the locality. In that rash of violence, several houses and cars were razed, including choice properties of Architect Stephen Olorunfemi, the local strongman, and many people on both sides were hurt. Indeed, it resulted in a total breakdown of law and order, which led to the imposition of curfew on the locality amid tight security for over a month. During this period, fundamental human rights especially the freedom of movement were severely curtailed.

What exists in Kogi State is a situation whereby interethnic identity crisis reinforces intraethnic conflicts and vice versa. By interethnic identity crisis we mean the struggle by competing ethnic identities in the state to outdo one another in the struggle for power, which has most often been a potent source of violent conflicts in the state. The most notable impact of this (especially on the out-group—that is, the Ebira and Okun currently out of power) is the schism that has come to grip them, which has severely undermined their solidarity and strength. Not unexpectedly, however, this trend eventually affected the election campaign in the state's 2007 general elections. As it turned out, electoral mobilization and supports were ethnically driven, and electoral violence ethnicized. The reason is that each group saw the 2007 elections as crucial to its struggle. For the Igalas, it offered another opportunity to demonstrate their “superiority” over “others” in the state. For the “others” it represented the last card in their struggle for power shift and access to the “state cake.” In the struggle, due process was discarded and substituted by the rule by law, as against the rule of law. During the 2007 general elections, particularly the gubernatorial election in the state, the spate of electoral violence and corruption was unprecedented. The elections were marred by widespread irregularities, including the use of guns, cutlasses, and other instrument of violence and force. In the process, several voters were killed, injured, assaulted, and/or disenfranchised. The worst thing was the fact that the violence was ethnicized. However, the power-stay camp seemed to gain the upper hand because of the power of incumbency that enabled them to take advantage of state resources—including the military, police, and the treasury—to destabilize the opposition. In the state, the election result was eventually nullified by the election petition tribunal, calling for a rerun, a decision upheld by the appeal court. But in the rerun, the PDP government was returned, meaning that the agitators for power shift lived to fight another day.

CONCLUSION: DEMOCRATIZATION AND IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION

This paper has explored the linkages between democratization, identity transformation, and ethnic conflicts. More specifically, it has explored the ways in which ethnic identity, a social institution, is embedded in democratization (a political process) on the one hand, and how their relationship reinforces ethnic conflicts, on the other. In establishing

these linkages, we have drawn insights from the democratization process in Kogi State, Nigeria, under the fledgling fourth Republic.

The democratization processes, due largely to its tendencies to limit the reach of social justice, fairness, and equity, have resulted in the transformation of ethnic identities in the state. Such a construction may take diverse forms, which can either be positive or not. With respect to our case study, the negative dimensions have been prevalent through the rise and proliferation of ethnic-based newspapers and magazines, as well as media coverage and press conferences organized along such cleavages. More important, the ethnic identity card seems to be a major consideration in the allocation of value-resources. It is thus an instrument of reward and punishment, depending on where one stands on the major divides in the democratization process.

The study has also shown that forces of identity, particularly ethnicity, can generate both trust and mistrust within a given ethnic group and between it and another. For example, the struggle for power shift has heightened the level of generalized trust and mistrust among the Okuns and Ebiras. It has also, more than ever before, boosted the level of trust between the Okuns and the Ebiras in their joint efforts to capture state power. Yet, it has also heightened mistrust among the Okuns, epitomized by unprecedented intra-Okun polarization and conflicts, as well as between the Okuns and Igala (see Omotola 2006e). The cohabitation of the “good” and the “bad” in identity, particularly under democratization, had created the dilemma of balance—an equilibrium where the good can neutralize the bad. But, as our analysis has shown, this is often difficult to define and achieve. The result is rising ethnic tension and conflict, as the Kogi State experience amply demonstrates. It is in this sense that the politics of identity and identity transformation under democratization does have ramifications for conflicts. And often, the democratization processes may not have clearly defined methods of addressing such conflicts. Not even the resort to power-sharing devices, such as the federal character principle, a constitutional principle that seeks to give protection to every segment of the state in terms of representation in government establishments, has done anything to fundamentally resolve the problem. In this case, it is doubtful whether achieving a power shift would mark an end to identity politics and begin transformation under the democratization process. Rather, it may mark the dawn of another era of identity politics.

In the end, it seems that identity, particularly ethnicity, will continue to be a powerful force in the democratization process, especially in the developing and plural societies. Its impacts will, however, be considerably influenced by the quality of the democratization processes. This can be measured in terms of the degree of institutionalization of the basic institutions and processes that define a democratic regime. Such institutions and processes include political parties, civil-society organizations, mass media, electoral management body, and the presence of democrats, those who are equipped to manage these institutions according to democratic ideals. The perversion of these institutions and processes in Nigeria in general and Kogi State in particular, accounts for the increasing ethnic conflicts in the state. This has had serious consequences not only for the democratization process but also for the developmental drives of the state. To avert possible democratic breakdowns such may precipitate, there is an urgent need for an equitable system of power balancing among competing ethnicities. A viable path to this is to institutionalize a mutually agreed principle of power rotation on a one-term (four-year) basis among the various groups in a given political entity. Such a system may provide a sense of belonging and ownership to all, especially within a plural and complex setting as Kogi State.

As we have illustrated, the bases of the transformation of identity, particularly ethnicity, and their attendant woes are essentially due to marginalization in the politics and policy processes of the state. In this process, a particular group—the Igala—has been empowered, having been the holder of power since inception, while the others—Okun and Ebira—have been disempowered in all ramifications. To leave things as they are to the invisible hands of democracy to continue to determine who holds power in the state may not be in the general interest of the state. The reason is that to do so amounts to bequeathing the state to the Igalas as their inheritance, given their numerical strength. As long as this is the case, ethnic identities will continue to be manipulated by the others with potential for violent conflict as has so far been the case. It is against this background that the idea of power rotation is important, where each senatorial district in the state will hold power for a single term of four years on a rotational basis. However, this should not be interpreted to mean that ethnicity alone constitutes the only viable force of identity susceptible to manipulation in the state. Other powerful bases of political organization and mobilization include political parties, religious groups, and gender and interest

groups. They are, however, not as compelling as ethnic identity. Be that as it may, whatever power-sharing devices adopted must be those that accommodate all competing bases of identity and political organizations in the state. ❀

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