Homogeneity and Democracy: The Effect of Ethnicity on Democratization in Nigeria and Cape Verde

KEVIN G. LORENTZ II

Democracy in Africa is a relatively new concept for the indigenous peoples who, until recently, were subjected to European hegemony. With the rapid decline of the former European world empires following the end of World War Two and the resulting world reconstruction, many African nations found themselves for the first time in modern history independent and completely self-responsible for their own futures. However, this freedom and responsibility have proven to be essentially a goal, a goal that even today has proven remarkably difficult to achieve. Within the plethora of African nations, only a select few, including Cape Verde, have managed to grasp and achieve the democratic ideal of government. Cape Verde is the exception, however, when compared to the vast majority of its neighbors, including Nigeria, which, despite all its economical potential, has still not managed to be ranked among the democracies of the world. So what has made Cape Verde succeed when Nigeria, like so many others, have failed? The answer lies in the concept of ethnicity. Where Nigeria is a collection of several ethnic groups, Cape Verde is resounding ethnically homogenous. This homogeneity has benefited Cape Verde's transition to democracy, whereas Nigeria has been plagued and held back by its various ethnic conflicts. From this comparison of Cape Verde and Nigeria, therefore, the relationship between homogeneity and democracy is apparent: countries that are ethnically homogenous are more likely to be democratic than those countries who are ethnically heterogeneous.

The Question of Ethnicity

Ethnic conflicts are not confined to Africa, but instead are prevalent worldwide (Vanhanen, 1999). The definition for what constitutes an ethnic group does vary and is dependent on how one divides people into such a group, and therefore is unique to each society that creates the division to begin with (Vanhanen, 1999; Smith, 1996, p. 447). In the case of Africa, ethnic lines have been drawn based on such characteristics as race, language, tribe, and religion (Vanhanen, 1999). This division of society into these units, or groups, of people has fostered a feeling of kinship to develop amongst the members (Vanhanen, 1999, p. 57). This kinship has resulted in

Written for Dr. Erik Trump's PS 334 Course
Author's Major: Communication

many African nations becoming fractured to the point that their citizens lack a sense of common national identity, instead choosing to more closely associate themselves with their preferred ethnic denomination. This is comparable in the United States to a person calling herself a Michigander first, an American second. While at first glance this may not seem particularly harmful, as for instance Americans take great pride in their state identification, it becomes an issue when competition between these "families" of people begins to occur in the social and political life of the nation (Vanhanen, 1999, p. 57).

In Africa, ethnic lines have become a dominant force in people's lives, as well as defining the political agenda of entire nations. Democracy in Africa, therefore, "has tended to take the form of competition among [ethnic] communities rather than individuals, parties, and administrative subunits" (Joseph, 1997, p. 366). Instead of Nigerians coming together to decide the nation's problems, individual groups are representing only their views and ignoring the views of the other "nonmembers" of society, all in the name of national governance. The result has been political conflict and instability, which have plagued the transition to democracy for many African nations (Easterly & Levine, 1997; Smith, 1996). The vast majority of these ethnic divisions are vestiges of the late ninetieth and early twentieth century European imperialism, which saw the conquering powers essentially superimpose borders without regard for already predefined ethnic areas (Easterly & Levine, 1997). The result was the infamous "divide and conquer" strategy, in which rival ethnic groups were pitted against each other. The Europeans, after ensuring that hostility between groups would occur, would then move in, "restore" order, and colonize the area and begin its process of authoritarian rule. During this colonial era, the European nations continued to play each group off of each other to ensure that the rivals did not become allies against their European overlords. Thus, any potential threat of collective action was completely and utterly repressed. With the advent of independence following the collapse of European colonialism, these ethnic divisions, held in check by the European armies, boiled over (Easterly & Levine, 1997, p. 1214). The result has been intense political infighting between rival ethnic groups for power over their artificially created European states (Smith, 1996).

Neither Cape Verde nor Nigeria escaped this European colonialism and strategy. Cape Verde was colonized by the Portuguese in 1460 and rapidly became the premier slave trading port for the Portuguese maritime empire and the center of Portuguese colonization efforts on the African continent for the next several centuries (Lobban, 1995). From the onset, however, Portugal incorporated the Cape Verdean islands into the political structure of the mother country, instituting a landed aristocracy loyal to the regime in Lisbon to control and administer the colony (Lobban, 1995). The presence of Portuguese land owners on the island helped to foster the creation of a unique identity for the islanders, as Cape Verdean society today is not descended from the native population (as the islands lacked one), but instead has become a mixed European and African ethnicity, based upon the sexual