Ethnicity and Language: Lessons from Botswana

Lydia Nyati Ramahobo
University of Botswana

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between ethnicity and language. It examines the definitions of the two concepts and their practical manifestations. The paper further attempts to address two major questions: Will ethnicity disappear in the modern world? How can Africa manage the current so called 'ethnic conflicts'? The Botswana situation is discussed to exemplify how ethnicity is used by some ethnic groups to dominate others.

Definitions

Scholars around the World have defined ethnicity in different ways. The first dictionary to record the word was the *Oxford English Dictionary* of 1953 (Hutchinson and Smith 1996, introduction). It is a derivative of the word ethnic, which is itself from a Greek word, ethnos, meaning heathen or pagan, until the mid nineteenth century when it gradually referred to racial characteristics (Eriksen 1996, page 28). The current meaning is associated with race, people or culture.

Ethnicity is associated with group solidarity, hence the expression 'ethnic group' and Schermerhorn (1996) states that this group has 'memories of a shared historic past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their people-hood' (p.17). He goes on to say 'examples of such symbolic elements are: kinship patterns, physical contiguity, religious affiliation, language or any combination of these' (p.17). Other authors add more elements such race, food, dress, artefacts, political systems and values (Lehmann 1996, page 116-118, Nash 1996, page 25 Bell 1996, pages 138).

Ethnicity has also been associated with minority groups within larger ones (Schermerhorn 1996) as a form of separateness and this has resulted in the concept of "ethnic minority". This may suggest that dominant groups do not belong to ethnic groups. Another controversial issue with regard to ethnicity has been the concept of primordiality. While others maintain that ethnicity is primordial (Kymlicka,2000) others believe that ethnic cohesions are 'direct and primordial' as well as 'created out of adversary conflicts' (Bell 1996, pages 138), others like Barth (1969, Eller and Coughlan, 1996) follow the constructionist model and believe that ethnicity is a negotiated status, hence fluid, situational and self-ascription, 'a social identification based on the presumption of shared history and a common cultural inheritance' (page 138). There is also evidence that ethnicity has existed from time immemorial and will continue to exist, with some disappearing while new ones emerge. It therefore seems that primodial as well as created ethnicities continue to exist. The elements that define a particular ethnic group may change over time (Royce 1982). For instance, while they may loss their language, they may still practice their religion and carry on with some of their traditions. Nnoli (1989, page 2) also observes that ethnicity does not exist in its pure sense, it is a complex phenomenon, characterised by common consciousness, identity and exclusiveness … and it can alter its form and role in the life of a society'. It evokes the affective variables and creates a strong foundation to rally support in most situations. This is so because ethnicity has many salient elements which are part of a people's daily life, hence important to their well being.

Language is the principal code through which human beings communicate. Each specific code has a unique way of combining sounds, forming words and sentences, and conveying meaning. The study of language therefore consists of these elements known as phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics respectively. Knowing a language is the acquisition of what has become known communicative competence (Hymes 1972), (Savignon, 1983) which consists of linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competencies.

Thus the study of language therefore shifted from the elements of language of phonology and morphology to include its social application to human behaviour. It is clear that conflicts occur due to break down or lack of communication. The above definitions are what one might call objective definitions which may suggest that language is free from political, social and economic ramifications affecting linguistic

affiliation. To the contrary, language policies are made within politically conscious contexts and form the basis for inclusion or exclusion as necessary. Weber (1996, page 36) observes that

'common language and the ritual regulation of life, as determined by shared religious beliefs, everywhere are conducive to feelings of ethnic affinity, especially since the intelligibility of the behaviour of others is the most fundamental presupposition of group formation. He goes on to say that 'groups … can engender sentiments of likeness which will persist even after their demise…. Most directly, such an effect is created by the language group,… which makes mutual understanding possible or easier (page 36). In other words, ethnic affinity is likely to persist if the group members have originated from a linguistic group, suggesting a strong bond between ethnicity and language.

Interaction of language and ethnicity
Language is the DNA of culture and an integral part of ethnic affiliation. It is one of the salient boundary markers between ethnic groups as well as the most overt features of group cohesion. Language is the main instrument for the expression of ethnic identity and the culture of an ethnic group.

Language however, is not ethnicity. As stated above, it is only one of the elements which may be shared by an ethnic group contributing to social cohesion. Some ethnic groups may share a common language, but have different histories, traditions, food, value systems and so on, and view each other as different. This is the case among the Tswana tribes in Botswana (Nyati-Ramahobo, 2000). Some ethnic groups may have a similar language but due to political, social or economic circumstances and issues of insubordination, they may prefer to distance one from the other by emphasising elements on which they differ such as tradition. This is how the Tswana groups, to be discussed below, distanced themselves from tribes such as Babirwa, Batswapong and Bakgalagadi and could not recognise and make them part of the ruling groups at independence.

Race is also an important element of ethnicity. When ethnicity (marked by race and or language) competes with other elements of cohesion such as gender, or class, ethnicity provides a stronger bond to rally support. The case of OJ Simpson became a race issue and not so much a gender issue, forcing OJ to change his legal defence team from a White male lead to a Black male lead team.

Ethnicity and colonialism
Ottaway (1999, page 300) observed that human beings belong to natural and apolitical groups. In Europe, the political nation state was founded on the natural group, which was relatively ethnically homogenous and the nation state became the model for a modern state to be established even in the colonies. To achieve these ethnically homogenous states in heterogeneous African, the process of assimilation was found to be the most effective. This involved
1. Making boundaries which were heterogeneous
2. Putting in place policies to foster assimilation
3. Selecting one numerical minority ethnic group to dominate, rule over and assimilate the rest of the groups.
4. Creating the term 'tribe' to mean this artificial and ethnically heterogeneous entity marked by territory or polity.

Weber (1996) also discusses the concept of tribe as a polity but also acknowledges that such polities soon 'adopt the whole symbolism of blood relations' (page 39), among those who have been selected to rule the tribally constituted nation state. In other words, this blood relation among members of the polity begins to manifests itself among the individual tribal groups that make up the polity. Eventually, each tribe begins to make boundaries marking its ethnicity within the nation state.

This process was the successful creation of fertile ground for conflict in Africa, which was important for the continued exploitation of the new nation states. In colonies where the groups spoke the same language and shared most ethnic traits, the colonisers used other elements to divide them. The Hutu and Tutsi's were divided on the basis of one being cattle headers (minority Tutsi) and the other were agriculturalists (majority Hutu). Belgium assigned the former to positions of power in the colonial government 'This creation of privileges between two artificially created groups led to political competition and eventually to

genocide' (Barth 1969, introduction). Thus the colonisers created heterogeneity when there was none and caused conflict where it was remote.

The case of Botswana

During colonial rule, the British chose the numerically weak Tswana speaking Bangwato ethnic group to rule over others. The Bangwato then co-opted their blood relatives, other Tswana speaking tribes, the Bakwena, Bangwaketsi, Bakgatla, Batawana, Barolong Batlokwa and Balete to join them and form the clan of ruling tribes in eight districts as demarcated by the British. These tribes ruled over and suppressed the languages and cultures of 37 tribes which made up 65% of the population.

Some of the ruling tribes were small and yet ruled over large tribes. One Resident Commissioner, Mr. Rey found this situation unpleasant and ordered that the 1936 population and Housing census should include ethnic affiliation so he could justify self rule of numerically strong ethnic groups. Rey had observed that 'They (meaning the Bangwato) rule over a sub-tribe the Bakalaka who are in fact a much better people than the Bangwato … hard workers, and wealthy (quoted in Bennett 2002, page 9). Bennett (2002) also noted that Rey was 'also interested in attacking the power of the Batawana rulers in Ngamiland of whom he had low opinion' (page 10). The census indicated that the Wayeyi (and not the ruling Batawana) were the largest group in Ngamiland, and the Bakalaka (and not the ruling Bangwato) were the most numerous in the Central district. His recommendations to give autonomy to the Bakalaka and Wayeyi were however, rejected by the British government (Ashton, 1937).

The necessary laws to foster domination and assimilation were put in place. The Tribal Territories Act of 1933 demarcated the land and each of these eight tribes became the sovereign of the land. The territories or reserves were given the ethnic name of each tribe. The Chieftainship Act of 1933 also defined the terms tribe as the eight Tswana speaking tribes listed above and it defined the word chief as the chiefs of those tribes. It further defined the term territory as eight territories belonging to the eight tribes. Sections 77 to 79 of the Constitution formed the House of Chiefs and admitted only the chiefs of the eight Tswana speaking tribes. These laws provided political and economic privileges and supremacy to the minority Tswana and subjected their languages and cultures to endangerment through practices of exclusion from the public domain.

Bennett (2002) argues that 'the Constitution does not, formally recognise any ethnicities but provides that the eight chiefs who had the status of Paramount in the colonial era enjoy ex-officio membership of the House of chiefs. That is, the tribes recognised are polities and not ethnic groups'(page 11).

Bennett's suggestion that the term tribe means polity and not ethnic groups is rightfully based on the model devised by colonial powers to create European-like nation states. However, Bennett is quick to acknowledge the fact that recognition 'does advantage the Tswana at the expense of others since the eight major chiefs are all Tswana, but the Constitution recognises them as heads of polities, not as ethnic representatives' (page 11). This argument is weak for many reasons for present day Africa where ethnic identities have persisted.
1. To assume that the word tribe which is understood by local people as the same thing as ethnic group would mean polity just because it is now in the Constitution and defined as such by the coloniser is to undermine the sentiments attached to ethnic identity. Further, to assume that the ethnic names of the eight tribes (Bangwato, etc) would shift meaning from being names of ethnic groups to polities just because they now appear in the constitution also defies logic.

2. The process of recognising 'formally' is done by providing certain rights and privileges through the law. All the three laws accord group rights to land, representation in the house of Chiefs and only their language and culture are permitted on national media, education and the all other social domains. All these rights are denied of the tribes that are not mentioned in the Constitution. Thus mentioning and according rights is the formal way of recognising. If they were being recognised only as heads of polities, it would be difficult to explain why the people belonging to other ethnic groups should be denied such rights in practice.

3. The 2005 review of the Constitution still maintained the mentioning of these ethnic groups as the formal way of continued recognition. The suggestion to rename districts with tribally neutral names was rejected since the Tswana knew very well that removing their ethnic names from the constitution, would mean non-recognition of both their ethnicities and leadership and a removal of all other rights.

4. Assimilation of the non-Tswana into Tswana while desired and in fact, was the main goal for the laws, it was not assumed to be automatic. Section 18 of the Chieftainship Act (in the proposed new Bill it is section 16) provided for non-Tswana tribes to apply for membership into the Tswana tribes. While no applications have been made this provision acknowledged that putting in place assimilation laws alone may not automatically result in incorporation, hence the option to apply for membership.

5. Exclusivity of the laws is also evident in practice. For instance, it was argued during the national debate that only the Tswana chiefs sought for protection and as a result, they need to continue with exclusive rights the non-Tswana argue for (Radio Botswana, May 2002).

6. In several of his speeches, the first President referred to non-Tswana ethnic groups as ' smaller tribal units' which need to be absorbed into larger tribal organisation, and may retain 'a small measure of tribal identity'(quoted in Carter and Morgan 1980, pages 291-292). Obviously he was not only referring to polities of larger tribes under which small tribes need to be ruled but also as ethnic groups which need to assimilate into Tswana ethnic groups. He was also cautious enough to see the need for these 'small tribes' to retain their 'ethnic identities. There is clearly interlocking meanings of territoriality marked by ethnicity as well. The new sections of the Constitution brought together the concepts of ethnicity, land and leadership through chieftaincy and preserved the right to exercise these to the Tswana.

7. The High Court ruling on the Wayeyi case acknowledged that the Constitution was discriminatory but could not be annulled as provisions of a constitution could not be said to contravene others of the same constitution. The Chieftainship Act was also annulled as the provisions of Section 2 of the Chieftainship Act in defining 'tribe' and 'chief' in terms that exclude the Wayeyi and other tribes and ethnic groups(Misca 377/99 page 60). In this sense 'tribe' is the same as ethnic group because 'tribe' here could not refer to those who led the polities since they are not discriminated against.

The three laws embedded a colonial language policy with the concept of tribe and chieftaincy and wrapped it within all other cultural rights and reserved them for the Tswana. This was in conformity with the European concept of a homogeneous, monolingual and mono-cultural nation state. Currently, government reports portray Botswana as a ethnically homogenous state (Infoplease) simply because Setswana is now widely spoken while other languages are suppressed. The question is, has a monolingual and monocultural nation state been created with success?

Ethnic identity
A study by Batibo and Smieja (2005) indicated that ethnic identities have not gone away, in fact have strengthened since the national debate on the Constitution which began in 2000. Another study by RETENG (2004) conducted in eight schools in Maun (Ngamiland district) further indicated that while many children may have shifted to speaking Setswana, they still identified themselves with their respective ethnic groups (Wayeyi, Mbukushu, Herero, and Kalanga). The children also preferred multilingual community radio stations and believed that their culture is important to be preserved and celebrated on the public sphere.

The model to select and highlight one ethnic group to represent the rest of the others in the polity has made it difficult for ethnic identities to disappear, but rather stronger and non-fluid. This is simply because attention of one ethnic group to its culture called attention of all to their own.

After the review of the Constitution many voices came out stating that the discrimination along ethnic lines has not been addressed. While the government believes there is room for continued suppression and assimilation processes, ethnic identities will take time to disappear and agitation is most likely to continue. It is possible that should the government not address the situation on the ground after failing to address it in the laws, political processes may take the lead in resolving the issue and tensions are most likely to rise.

Ethnic Tensions

As capitalism takes its roots around the world, ethnic tensions continue to dominate the news. Competition for political power to control resources shall continue to result in ethnicity being the strong basis to rally support, hence its persistence.

What can Africa do to curb ethnic tension? There is need to review colonial laws which were meant to create mono lingual states as it was the case in Europe. The world today, including Europe is no longer mono cultural and the need to continue immolating old Europe is no longer necessary. Africa needs to acknowledge diversity and celebrate it. It needs to utilise its diverse cultures to generate wealth, create jobs and alleviate poverty. There is need for a paradigm shift on the idea of unity which should not be equated to uniformity. Power sharing as a conflict resolution strategy can benefit Africa and not perpetual leadership of one ethnic group. With globalisation, the world is getting more multi cultural and it is therefore important to open up not just to external cultures but also within.

African cultures are rich and contribute to the bio-diversity. Language loss constitutes loss of irreplaceable knowledge and human intelligence. Efforts to eradicate cultural diversity have been too expensive, with minimal and imaginary successes. There is therefore no need to continue to invest in them.

Conclusion

All human belong to some ethnic group. Ethnic identities can change due to political and other factors. Language is one of the most salient features marking ethnic boundaries among groups and the strongest due to the importance of communication. Ethnicity is most likely to persist with humanity for some time. Africa can manage ethnic conflict by celebrating diversity and turning ethnicity as a resource.

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