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This paper is a study of the phenomenon of trans-border ethnic relations and its impact on national integration and citizenship in the countries of West and Central Africa where trans-border ethnic groups exist. Despite the existence of many such groups in these regions, and the numerous problems associated with the continued relations among these groups across their countries of abode, the phenomenon has not been seriously studied, especially as it concerns the identification of members of such groups and how they are viewed by members of other ethnic groups, as citizens of one country or the other. This paper notes that trans-border ethnic solidarity ordinarily presents the relevant African states with two possibilities, namely: enormous benefits accruing from regional integration and cooperation among states harbouring fractions of trans-border ethnic groups; or, debilitating conflicts within and between these states. It is the reality of the latter possibility that this paper examines. The states and the international system are often incapable of containing this phenomenon of trans-border ethnic solidarity and usually respond in hostile ways, ultimately manifesting in citizenship problems. The study shows, however, that what is needed is not conflict but cooperation – within and between states having fractions of a trans-border ethnic group, and within the international system, for the enhancement of national citizenship and development in West and Central Africa.

Keywords citizenship, conflict, national integration, trans-border ethnic solidarity, Tutsi, Mandingo

Introduction

Even with the final pushing of the March 23 (M23) rebels into Ugandan territory in October 2013, it is likely that peace may not fully return to the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in the near future. This latest conflict followed the failure of a peace agreement between the government of the DRC and the rebels of the M23 group in

December 2012. An earlier peace agreement signed in 2002 between the government and the largely Tutsi force of the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) led to the formation of a transitional national government a year later.¹ Then, in 2003, a dissident General Laurent Nkunda left the army and launched a low-level rebellion under the aegis of the National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP), saying that arrangements for the DRC's transition to democracy were flawed and excluded the minority Tutsi community.² This rebellion continued until another peace agreement was implemented in 2009, which resulted in elements from the rebel group being integrated into the Congolese army. But in 2012, the M23 emerged from among former elements of the CNDP, alleging mistreatment in the national army.

The recent routing of the M23 rebels by the DRC government is thus only the latest effort to tackle the long-running conflict in the eastern part of the country. The continuing conflict in the DRC is itself the result of questions regarding citizenship that have afflicted most countries of the Great Lakes region of Central Africa since their respective independence. These questions regarding citizenship have often involved the Tutsi trans-border ethnic group, fractions of which can be found in all the countries in the region. In almost all countries in the Great Lakes region, members of the Tutsi ethnic group have been engaged in citizenship contestations. These contestations have involved the citizenship status of members of the group being denied or doubted in their host countries on account of difficulties in determining their true countries of origin. This article examines the relationship between the existence of trans-border ethnic groups and national citizenship conflicts in Africa.

Background to the trans-border citizenship problem in some states of West and Central Africa

Citizenship refers to membership of a political community.³ It involves a shared set of goals and values, and implies a reciprocal sense of duties and rights. On the one hand, it signifies the obligations that an individual has towards his/her political community and which s/he ought to discharge without compulsion. On the other hand, it indicates the responsibilities that the state or the community has towards all its bona fide members.⁴ Citizenship connects the individual to the state and, through this connection, individuals are in the position to make certain claims on the state and demand obligations from it. Citizenship is thus the foundation of all rights, and its limitation can be considered a direct questioning of an individual or group's status as a member of the political community. It is precisely this questioning and limitation that is at the root of the trans-border citizenship problem in some states of West and Central Africa.

The trans-border citizenship question in these states refers to doubts about where the allegiance of members of the various fractions of trans-border ethnic groups lies. This problem has afflicted countries in West Africa – such as those in the Mano River region, including Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Guinea – as well as countries in Central Africa, specifically those of the Great Lakes region, including Rwanda, the DRC, Uganda and Burundi. Trans-border ethnic groups are those groups whose fractions are indigenous to more than one state. Trans-border ethnic groups abound in Africa, and have existed ever since the beginning of the modern state system in Africa, when these ethnic groups were partitioned across borders by the colonial powers.⁵ The modern state system was introduced into Africa

following the Berlin Conference of 1884–5, at which the major European countries of the time partitioned Africa among them.⁶ As a result, Africa formally became territorially organised along the lines of the European state system, although, as Katzenellenbogen points out, the conference itself did not set any precise territorial boundaries, as actual boundaries were set later in the form of unilateral declarations and bilateral or multilateral agreements, some of which were even ‘based on agreements reached prior to the Conference’.⁷

In the years before colonialism, some states in Africa were heterogeneous in their populations, but these states usually only exercised complete political control over the core areas, and just maintained tributary, and largely loose and symbolic, ties with outlying populations of the polity.⁸ In this pre-colonial political system, power was wielded over people and not necessarily across territories.⁹ At this time, contact and even cultural networks existed between the various peoples making up a kingdom or empire, and even with others outside the polity, but ethnic problems essentially did not develop because the different spheres of society were often the exclusive preserve of particular groups and there were hardly any incentives for competition among the groups. With partition and colonialism, however, Africa adopted the nation-state system where power was exercised over territory. The pre-colonial entities and cultural groups were incorporated into the new territories. Most of the new territories contained a number of these cultural or ethnic groups within them, including some that were coming into contact with each other for the first time. A number of these territories also contained fractions of larger cultural or ethnic groups that were partitioned across territories.

In this new state system, everything lying within the territory of the state was under its legitimate authority. This authority, however, did not extend beyond the borders, and people from the same ethnic group on different sides of the border were supposed to be permanently separated. In most cases, however, the authority of the state did not even extend up to the borders. Within the territory, logistical problems ensured that the borderlands were not properly administered. The result was that people on different sides of the borders often continued to relate to each other almost as they had before the partition. The boundaries therefore existed mostly on paper.¹⁰ In many cases, therefore, partition did not affect the peoples’ feeling of solidarity towards one another.¹¹ Nevertheless, in the main, the colonial borders were accepted by the inheritor African states,¹² and these borders immediately became the basis for the international relations between these states.¹³

After independence, the great majority of the divided peoples continued to act ‘very much as if the frontier lines did not exist’,¹⁴ and the fractions of the groups in the various countries continued to relate with each other across the borders.¹⁵ In this sense, the African border, just like its counterparts elsewhere, has exhibited the ‘contradictions of territoriality’: they are supposed to curb the flow of people across sovereign jurisdictions and represent the limits of similar demographic groups. Yet, people freely criss-cross these boundaries, which often do not even contain different peoples on the different sides.¹⁶ In effect, these boundaries do not just shape, but are also shaped by, what is inside and what is out.¹⁷ It was in the light of this paradox that many African borderlands went on to develop a life of their own – border markets developed and cross-border trade thrived.¹⁸ This border life also involved peculiar interactions at the borderlands, which created practices that then became part of how the border came to be represented by the border people.¹⁹

In many cases, border life had a somewhat shady quality to it, which states could not quite comprehend or come to terms with. Border markets were often perceived as places for exchanging smuggled and contraband goods; and the border areas were seen as places where

national laws were subverted, including boundary mechanisms, currency and citizenship regulations, and anti-smuggling measures.²⁰ In effect, the borderlands often had a certain reputation (perhaps largely unjustified) as areas of illegality, even criminality, which has been observed as a constant source of strained society–state relations.²¹ This negative perception of the borderlands, and the continued relations between fractions of trans-border peoples, soon put a question mark over the true origins and allegiances of members of the groups. For the other citizens of a particular country, it became convenient to cast doubt on the citizenship status of members of such groups. It often became convenient to cast members of trans-border ethnic groups as citizens of any country other than their own.

This uncertainty around citizenship became an instrument in the hands of the ruling elite and members of other ethnic groups to keep members of trans-border ethnic groups out of contention for power and other valuable resources. In the 1995 presidential election in Cote d'Ivoire, for instance, the erstwhile prime minister Alassane Ouattara was poised to win until he was disqualified on the basis that he was not Ivorian. Ouattara is a Dioula, an ethnic group with fractions in Cote d'Ivoire and other neighbouring countries and has a mother who was a Burkinabe.²² In Rwanda, similarly, the Tutsis who ran into exile after the 1959 revolution were promptly stripped of their citizenship, and subsequently prevented from returning to their homeland,²³ while their lands were expropriated and redistributed.²⁴

The trans-border citizenship question in West and Central Africa is thus a contemporary issue – even if it has a history dating back to the very beginnings of the modern state system in these regions. Clapham has attributed this challenge to the manner in which certain classificatory categories thrown up by colonialism were interpreted by those concerned: 'it was colonialism that created states and threw up ethnic groups in the manner we came to know them'.²⁵ When defined in primordial terms, therefore, it was possible for members of partitioned ethnic groups to see their ethnicity as preceding the state, 'conceptually, if not historically', and thus being deserving of more allegiance than the states in which their fractions lie, hence their continued relations despite the state borders.²⁶ It was under these circumstances that various new African states tried to create unity among their disparate groups. The objective was to engender the integration of the disparate groups into the structures and institutions of the states, otherwise referred to as national integration.

National integration is the process of unifying a polity into a harmonious state. This involves two aspects: first, the elimination of antagonisms dividing society; and second, the development of solidarities among the various groups constituting the state.²⁷ These solidarities enable individuals to accept themselves as citizens of the state to which they belong. The quest for national integration has been a feature of the nation-building project in Africa since independence, and substantial effort and resources have supposedly been invested in this project. In fact, much initial enthusiasm accompanied the independence of many African states in the 1960s. At first it was believed that these states would soon create a new sense of nationhood among their citizens, which would have led to trans-border fractions becoming attached to the state wherein they fell and possibly assuming a distinct identity altogether. National identities could then have become more salient than ethnic identities within a few years of independence.

Unfortunately, the expectations of independence were not realised in many countries of West and Central Africa, including the objectives of the nation-building project – national integration in particular. For those ethnic groups that had kin across borders, the failure of their respective states in the 1970s and 1980s to achieve national integration was impetus for

increased affinity among their fractions. This was compounded in the late 1990s through the 2000s by the further decline of the state apparatus in many West and Central African countries as a result of serious economic downturn and various unsuccessful efforts at structural adjustment,²⁸ which meant that economic needs went unmet and infrastructures and facilities became dilapidated or collapsed.

As a result of the hardships and violent competition for power and available resources that followed, the context changed to one of nervousness in which the state failed to deliver employment, social services and basic security – a situation that leads to nostalgia for the past and creates claims to autochthony, and then practices of inclusion and exclusion.²⁹ The solidarity of trans-border ethnic groups, which hitherto had been benign, now became problematic.

It became convenient for members of different ethnic groups to seek to discredit the others. Some ethnic groups used the fact that trans-border groups were fractured across borders to question their allegiance to the host country and therefore as a reason to exclude them from equal participation in the affairs of the country.

In Cote d'Ivoire, for instance, the collapse of cocoa prices on the world market precipitated structural adjustments. The economic hardship that followed produced a frenzy of xenophobia among autochthonous Ivoirian groups,³⁰ who claimed that many Ivoirians from the north of the country were not citizens, on account of their affinity with kin in other countries. When it became apparent in the run-up to the 2000 general elections that northerners were rooting for the then challenger, Ouattara, many northerners had their citizenship challenged by the authorities.³¹ Similarly, in the DRC, violent attacks and structural limitations on the Tutsi were usually justified on the basis that they were more Rwandan than Congolese.³² This type of attitude has exacerbated citizenship contestations in these countries, and has served to draw into the conflict otherwise moderate elements and kin from outside the state borders.

Trans-border ethnic solidarity and the citizenship question in West and Central African countries

Between 1985 and 1997, the political conflicts within and between countries in the Great Lakes region, particularly Uganda, Rwanda and the DRC, are largely traceable to the Tutsi ethnic group and their quest for citizenship.³³ The Tutsi are indigenous to all these countries, although they are minorities in all of them.

In 1961, the Tutsi were removed from power in Rwanda and many of them fled into exile in Uganda and Burundi, where they mostly stayed with their kin. Back home in Rwanda, these exiles were stripped of their citizenship.³⁴ As the numbers of these refugees increased, with the consequent pressures on the host governments, tensions developed in the region. In 1982, Uganda expelled the Tutsi from the country. Many fled to north-eastern Rwanda, where they were crowded into refugee camps. Many others found their way into the then rebel Uganda National Resistance Movement, whose army, the National Resistance Army (NRA), was fighting to unseat President Milton Obote. When the leader of the NRA, Yoweri Museveni, overthrew Obote in January 1986, about a quarter of the 16 000 guerrilla soldiers were Tutsi.³⁵

In the government that resulted from Obote's ousting, the Tutsi played a prominent role, many of them actually occupying some of the highest positions in the country. The NRA government acted to resolve the Tutsi citizenship problem by redefining a citizen as anyone with 10 years of residency in Uganda. This immediately made most Tutsi immigrants Ugandan citizens. However, Tutsi occupying influential positions in the Ugandan government soon began to irritate many autochthonous Ugandans. This sentiment ultimately brought about a crisis that eventually forced the Ugandan Parliament to change the citizenship law again in October 1990, from the 10-year residence requirement to one that required a citizen to show an ancestral connection with the land by proving that at least one grandparent was born in the territory that later became Uganda.³⁶ This now precluded many Tutsi from the country's citizenship. It was against this background that the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) was formed from amongst Rwandan exiles in Uganda, including those who had occupied high positions in the country. In October 1990, the month the new Ugandan citizenship law was enacted, the RPA invaded Rwanda.

The Rwandan crisis thus resulted from the citizenship crisis in Uganda. On 4 July 1994, the RPA finally ousted the incumbent government and installed a Tutsi government – although not before genocide perpetrated by the Hutu and their Rwandan government killed about 800 000 Tutsi and their moderate Hutu sympathisers.³⁷ Many Hutu *genocidaires* fled to the DRC, which forced Rwanda and Uganda to intervene, ultimately leading to the ousting of the Mobutu regime in the DRC.³⁸ The Tutsi factor has remained an issue in DRC politics ever since, with various Tutsi-led rebel groups, including the RCD, the CNDP and the M23, continuing to dominate the eastern part of the country (home to Congolese Tutsis) at various times, and Uganda and Rwanda continuously being accused of sponsoring the groups.³⁹

Ethnic solidarity and citizenship issues have also been at the core of the long-running crises in the Mano River region of West Africa, which includes Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone.⁴⁰ Some of these crises have involved the Maninkankan-speaking people, whose fractions are minorities in all the countries where they live in this region. Known as Dioula in Cote d'Ivoire, Koniyanke and Manya in Guinea, and Mandingo in Liberia, they are all fractions of an historical Mande diaspora.⁴¹ The members have a strong sense of shared history and identity among themselves. Fractions of the ethnic group are embattled, however, in all the above countries on account of the 'Mandingo problem', which refers to the problem of the citizenship and identity of the Maninkankan-speaking populations across the countries of Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea, and their status in the politics and government of these countries.⁴²

In Liberia, the Mandingo problem has remained one of the most contentious political issues. The status of the ethnic group, which has migrated southward into the area over the centuries, has been problematic. For much of Liberia's history, this ethnic group has 'stood at the margins of citizenship'.⁴³ Many Liberians insist that the Mandingo are really Guinean and thus do not deserve the same rights as 'indigenous' Liberians.⁴⁴ This feeling is reinforced by the fact that the Mandingo are predominantly Muslim but often live amongst non-Muslim, indigenous Liberian groups.⁴⁵ This feeling, and the discrimination that has accompanied it over the years, has been at the root of the roles played by the Mandingo in the two wars that have ravaged Liberia in recent times.

In the first war (1989–97), the Mandingo were members of the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO).

In 1994, ULIMO split along ethnic lines and the Mandingo aligned themselves with ULIMO-K, the faction created by Alhaj Kromah, a fellow Mandingo, and which fought for Mandingo rights. In the second war (1999–2003), the Mandingo were part of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), led by Sekou Damateh Conneh, a Mandingo. In both wars, the Mandingo fought for the right to be accepted as Liberians and to participate fully in the politics and government of Liberia. While the war lasted, there was tension between Liberia and neighbouring Guinea, with the former accusing the latter of supporting the rebellion militarily, saying this was ‘tantamount to a declaration of war’.⁴⁶ Now that the wars are over, a major challenge to Liberia remains the issue of Mandingo citizenship and how to assure the members of this ethnic group that they will not be left out of the political process in the country.⁴⁷

Trans-border citizenship conflicts and the state system in West and Central Africa

The phenomenon of trans-border ethnic solidarity presents the African state with dual possibilities. Borders can simultaneously pose problems and provide opportunities for the borderland communities.⁴⁸ As observed by Keese, violence between ethnic groups is a complex problem in sub-Saharan Africa; however, ethnic balancing can make for harmonious politics and is a crucial factor for stability in African states.⁴⁹ The phenomenon of trans-border ethnic solidarity thus has potential for cooperation and development on the continent. Asiwaju, drawing from European experience since 1945, argues that the intercourse of the border peoples in Africa offers much in terms of regional integration, elimination of border conflicts and the attainment of trans-border cooperation in planning, development and problem-solving. The borderlands, for instance, could become the arena for disease control, ensuring that human and animal diseases do not spread across countries.⁵⁰

Border communities could also be at the forefront of efforts at integration by serving as places for shared competences and facilities that would then help ease the pressures on any one country. Drawing from their study of the Horn of Africa, Feyissa and Hoehne argue that the borders, by separating political and economic spaces, provide opportunities for the formation of informal economies and the establishment of beneficial connections, networks and alliances among people on the different sides. The borders also provide opportunities for uncontrolled labour migration, and enable the people of the borderlands to extract a number of political resources as well as rights from the states on either side of the divides. Borders also help hitherto low-status borderlanders to improve their social identity by offering them new ascriptions. In many other situations, the borderland people could benefit from the ‘refugee industry’ in terms of opportunities for better education offered by aid agencies, trading opportunities and wider communication and new transportation routes.⁵¹

On the other hand, trans-border ethnic solidarity also poses enormous potential for causing conflict.⁵² In fact, the existence of trans-border citizenship conflicts in parts of Africa is an indication that the state system has not been able to fully tap the positive potential of the trans-border ethnic reality. This form of conflict immediately exposes the fragility of many states in Africa,⁵³ and their lack of capacity for resolving citizenship questions within their territories.

Trans-border citizenship problems in West and Central Africa also manifest as resource conflicts. These conflicts mainly revolve around who gets (or does not get) the benefits accruing from the economic resources of the state. However, even though most of the conflicts in these countries have manifested as resource conflicts or conflicts over political power, in reality there are multiple factors. In fact, in some of the cases, resources (for instance in the DRC) or political power (for instance in Cote d'Ivoire) were secondary and manifested only because of governance failures in the countries. In both cases, trans-border ethnicity became an issue in the conflicts only in the struggle for the various ethnic groups to gain an advantage. In Cote d'Ivoire, for instance, it was the attempt by incumbent President Konan Bedie to remain at the helm despite Alassane Ouattara's challenge that ultimately produced the citizenship problem.⁵⁴

It is in this struggle for advantage in a conflict that the affinity of a trans-border group becomes a factor for other ethnic groups, who try to preclude members of the trans-border group from accessing the economic and political benefits and privileges at stake. Even when trans-border ethnic issues are not the primary cause of a conflict, citizenship contestations can assume great importance in a conflict and therefore will need to be resolved in their own right. Unfortunately, the tendency among many West and Central Africa states has been to treat conflicts as if they were caused by one factor. Once they focus on whatever factor they consider as the primary or single cause of conflict, the states have then ignored many other factors that may have contributed to the conflict or have arisen during the course of the conflict.

It is thus that some states have initially ignored the trans-border ethnic citizenship dimensions of their conflicts. Eventually, all the issues, including the trans-border ethnicity issue, assume vicious, mutually reinforcing relationships with each other, and the subsequent attempts to resolve the conflict become increasingly difficult. This is why many of the citizenship problems in these countries seem virtually intractable, such as the situation in Central Africa, which has so far defied several peace pacts. This was also the situation in Cote d'Ivoire, where virtually all peace agreements between 2002 and 2007 failed. The emphasis in all these cases was on the primary issues, or trigger factors, that caused the conflicts, while ignoring the other, underlying factors of conflict – especially the trans-border ethnic dimensions that arose during the course of the conflicts.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has shown that the citizenship problems afflicting some states of West and Central Africa are manifestations of many factors. First, trans-border citizenship problems in these states emanate from the perception that members of trans-border ethnic groups are not loyal to their countries of origin, a feeling that arises because of the relations between fractions of these groups across borders. It is necessary for this perception to be dispelled by the states hosting these fractions by establishing, at all times, the status of persons living within their territories. This will make it impossible for any one member of a group to pass himself or herself off as a citizen of another country at the same time, something other ethnic groups resent because of the competitive advantages it confers on the trans-border peoples in their particular countries.

The status of citizens can be established through periodic, dependable census exercises. Currently, census records in most of these countries are far from dependable and the countries must therefore ensure that they collect the necessary data on their citizens. There is always the possibility of dual registrations in any such exercise, and because of this, it is necessary that the various states hosting these trans-border ethnic groups cooperate in the collation of their census figures and citizenship records. Peace agreements involving countries where citizenship problems have degenerated into conflict could be made to include provisions on accurate census taking and collation of citizenship data, which could be undertaken simultaneously across the countries to avoid dual or multiple registrations. Such data, once collated, must be shared between the states, such that the status of every person in any one of the countries is known at all times, and all cross-border movements and the activities of people can be easily monitored and properly directed or redirected.

Furthermore, the states that have fractions of trans-border ethnic groups must cooperate to simplify the boundary function of their common borders and ensure that these boundaries do not serve only as lines of exclusion, which makes them prone to subversion by members of trans-border ethnic groups. In this regard, protocols on the free movement of persons – bilateral and multilateral – could be formulated between these countries, especially in the Great Lakes region where such protocols do not currently exist. In West Africa, where the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has such provisions, there could be additional elaborations for the purposes of the trans-border peoples. In addition, the incessant closures of borders by the countries hosting fractions of trans-border ethnic groups must be discouraged in favour of more specific and targeted approaches to crisis management and conflict resolution.

This paper also found that the citizenship problems afflicting some states of West and Central Africa often manifest as violent competition for a fair share of resources among the different peoples constituting the states. This competition is, in the main, a result of the widespread poverty that abounds in the states. For these conflicts to abate, the states must move beyond the conditions that precipitate this violent competition.

Ironically, the borderlands of West and Central Africa, where these trans-border ethnic groups live, can provide the lead in the effort to create wealth. Up to the present, many border areas in these regions have remained wide, unpatrolled expanses of land. The contiguous states can now move to transform these areas into viable zones for agricultural or industrial ventures, depending on the available natural resources, and the products will have ready markets in the respective countries. For those border areas that cannot support agriculture or industry, Free Trade Zones can be established, as well as other friendly border programmes. The activities generated from these recommended programmes can serve to shift the focus of the trans-border peoples towards productivity, while their consequent (relative) prosperity will help to engender in them a new sense of worth and nationalism. Specially designed Frontier Local Governments can be constituted on the different sides of the borders to drive the new initiatives and ensure that the benefits are not mismanaged and the potential opportunities are not squandered.

On a similar note, this paper has shown that issues of power also lie at the heart of trans-border citizenship problems in some states of West and Central Africa. Citizenship problems as a consequence of conflict over political power can be traced to governance failures in the respective states, especially the tendency for zero-sum politics. Politics in these states must therefore include consociational arrangements, involving multi-party democracy that provides

expressly for coalition governments after each periodic election. This way, parties representing the various groups will be involved at every level of politics and government. Other consociational provisions must also be built into the democratic practice and government of these states, including those that will make for consensus decision-making, to enable all groups to participate equitably in all matters involving their members. In this way, states would be able to mobilise the total energies and cooperation of their citizens towards the achievement of broad developmental goals.

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Notes

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