

The Importance of Subjectivity in Overcoming Ethnical Conflicts in Africa: a Philosophical Reflection

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Abstract. Africa's widespread problems are well publicized and none receives more attention than that of periodic outbreaks of ethnic violence. Past events in Rwanda, and in the ongoing conflict in Darfur-Sudan, linger in the memory while the outbreak of post-election violence in Kenya is a more recent example of the seemingly endless capacity of Africa to generate ethnic unrest. The problems of Africa have become the subject of intense philosophical debate and reflection in an effort to find a just and sustainable future for the continent. This contribution to the ongoing debate will argue that the root cause of ethnic violence (and indeed many of Africa's other problems) is a lack of subjectivity and that the insights of Søren Kierkegaard, with regard to the role of subjectivity in intersubjective relations, will not only give us a perspective on the origins of these problems, but through education, offer a way forward to a more optimistic *future*.

Keyword: Africa, Kierkegaard, ethnic conflict, subjectivity, philosophy

INTRODUCTION

A close examination of the African culture clearly reveals the fact that selfhood is defined in relation to membership in a larger social group. The group begins with an extended family, extended backward to generations long dead and forward to future generations yet unborn. Samuel Oluoch Imbo in capturing this dimension essential to any understanding of the African way of life states that

the community envisaged in the formation of an African self is an atypically broad one, encompassing the living and also the spirits, the dead, and the unborn. The common world view that forms the framework for self-identity is a shared vision of all these stakeholders (Imbo 141).

Even in contemporary African cities, the individual is not liberated from these bonds. At all times, the individual appears see his/her responsibility as being primarily to the family, clan or ethnic group. Such a relationship between the group and the self, poses a dilemma for the status, well-being and development of the subjectivity of the self. The contention of this article is that this lack of individuation, arising from a communitarian view of society has to a large degree contributed to the conditions precipitating ethnic unrest in Africa.

We will consider the insights offered by Kierkegaard into the importance and nature of subjectivity and relate these to African ethnic conflict before proposing a programme for the development of African subjectivity. An example will be offered of how this process might work to reduce the incidence of ethnic disturbance. However, in order to understand the nature of the problem, three key factors which have underpinned African ethnic conflict require brief examination.

CAUSES OF ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN AFRICA

a. *Competing Identities, Loyalties and Interests*

Ethnic identity refers to a group of people sharing a common ancestry, language, symbol and territory founded on the combined memories of the past and common expectation. For many people ethnic identity stands as a symbol of communal solidarity and security. As John Mbiti observes, ethnic identity, be it in rural or urban areas, remains a powerful force to be reckoned with, although its significance varies depending on prevailing circumstances (Mbiti 102). It is a fluid concept, meaning different things at different times and in different contexts.

From the African perspective these ethnic identities assume a triple history, each one belonging to either the pre-colonial, colonial or post-colonial periods. In the pre-colonial period, ethnic groups were more rural and homogenous and there was less competition between them for the scarce economic resources than is the case today. During the colonial period, small ethnic groups were forced to merge thus creating divided and in a sense, artificial nations (Lonsdale 139). In the post-colonial era we have witnessed ethnic competition for the scarce economic resources and political power, with each ethnic group fighting to have a president (or prime minister) from their group. This, in turn has led to ethno-political competition.

b. *Ethno-Political Competition*

Ethno political competition is connected to a system of patronage by which those in power reward their supporters from their own ethnic group by a manipulation of the apparatus of state. Political struggle is then connected with the desire to gain employment, education and other economic and political advantages. Thus for Aquiline Tarimo: "The competition for the limited economic resources within the state today, to a certain extent, has changed the meaning of ethnic identities" (Tarimo 27). He goes on to say that for many Africans

To give a job to a fellow ethnic member is not nepotism, it is an obligation. For a political leader to choose his closest advisers and bodyguards from the ranks of his own ethnic group is not patronage, it is good common sense. It ensures security, continuity and authority (Tarimo 28).

Thus the seeds of these competing loyalties and interests are contained in Africa's communitarian values. If those values, incongruent in a modern democracy are to be challenged then the development of subjectivity is essential before people and leaders can come to make responsible and moral choices concerning both power and the distribution of scarce resources.

In the past some authors have argued that the problem of ethnic unrest is the inheritance of the cultural values and institutions of colonial rule. While this may be true in part, an honest examination of some of the recent ethnic conflicts and violence in Africa, may lead one to the view that the root cause has more to do with Africa's failure to adapt herself meaningfully to the changing conditions of life, especially, the failure to integrate ethnic identities into the structure of democracy in the post independence African nations. This difficulty, as Eze believes, has arisen out of the conflict between what may be called 'modern' Africa and 'traditional' Africa, the difference being the ways in which groups seek political values and progress. In Eze's estimation, political conflict is the failure to resolve this dichotomy and the result has been disillusionment and frustration so precipitating conflict and a turning to intellectual programmes which, while grounded in the past, are inappropriate in a modern democracy. He goes on to say: "I am worried however, that what frequently drives Africans to the past in the hunt for political treasures, is the failure of current modern systems" (Eze 189).

This appeal to the past contains the seeds of its own destruction in that it inappropriately emphasizes pre-colonial ethnic groupings which are divisive in the present and entertain the potential to produce conflict. The consequence has been ethno-political competition, manifested in the manipulation of ethnic identities and loyalties by leaders and by political parties in order to satisfy personal and private interests. This process may be described as the politicisation of ethnic identities (Tarimo 24).

In turn this has led to ethno-political competition, which has been a feature of political life in many African countries since independence, often, degenerating into discrimination and even physical violence resulting in ethnic demarcation and regionalism. In times of trouble, those who are identified as foreigners are almost always forced to go to their ancestral land. Criteria which use such ethnic movements of population alongside such factors as uneven economic development along ethnic lines, suspension or arbitrary application of the rule of law and widespread violation of human rights have raised serious questions relating to the survival of Kenya as a nation state. In a report in 2009 the United States based Fund for Peace marked Kenya as the 14th most likely state to fail (Fund for Peace)

This is the consequence of politics based on ethnicity rather than any of the usual ideologies and principles that hold modern democracies together. Instead of evolving, most of the African democracies have regressed to produce ethnic leaders more intent on leading their people in opposition to their rival communities. Elias Bongmba pointing to the way in which some African governments have on many occasions exploited ethnic divisions in order to reinforce their own positions even, on occasion, at the cost of genocide and civil war, writes: "Many ethnic conflicts in Africa result from the fact that people are eager to assert and protect their own selfhood, but disregard the selfhood of others" (Bongmba 132).

This again points to a lack of subjectivity of the African self and the failure of African society to foster individuation of its citizens. It will need to be addressed before any long-term solutions to ethno-political competition and discrimination may be found. This lack of subjectivity has, to date, tended to favour a model of exclusion founded upon ethnocentrism instead of equal citizenship. Such a model fosters rivalry between ethnic groups in gaining access to resources and the politicization of ethnic identities and it is this phenomenon that we now address.

c. *Politicisation of Ethnic Identities*

Most of the political conflicts found in Africa today involve ethnic groups struggling for control of their region (as in the case of Angola, Nigeria, Sudan and Ethiopia) or the country (e.g., Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia, Kenya and Sierra Leone). Such a phenomenon is not merely the outcome of conservatism, for ethnic groups are also interest groups whose members share a common economic and political interest (Bates 164). People do not kill one another merely because of the ethnic differences. They kill each other when these differences promote unhealthy competition.

Ethnic identities, as Tarimo points out, are not just a mere cultural identity limited to friendships, rituals and marriages. They play a significant role in informal relationships (Tarimo 36). We have seen why many national leaders allocate considerable state resources to their ethnic groups in order to maintain their political influence. Such leaders aim at maximizing their support and their access to resources in competition with rival politicians leading to destructive competition and conflict. This politicisation of ethnic identities appeals to the ethnic solidarity founded upon ties of blood-relationships as a model that can guarantee economic security. This approach appeals to cultural symbols in order to construct a sense of allegiance, which makes it easier to mobilize the people. Cultural slogans are used to arouse emotions of the people in order to make them accept what they do not even fully understand (Tordoff 86).

It is apparent that challenge of integrating cultural and ethnic identities into the political process of democratization is closely related to nation-state, citizenship and common good. My proposal is that this can only effectively be achieved through a genuine cultivation of personal subjectivity in line with the insights into this process offered by the nineteenth century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard.

THE IMPORTANCE OF REAL DEMOCRACY IN OVERCOMING ETHNIC CONFLICTS

As we have seen, there is a sense in which ethnocentrism is a reversion to the pre-colonial era inappropriately transposed into a post-colonial present. Eze in his assessment of Democracy in present day Africa rejects a straightforward appeal to the past. He goes on to offer his own ideas of what African democracy might look like. Eze differentiates liberation (which he equates with independence) from freedom which is interpreted

as a much wider concept than one person one vote, for as he points out a vote is of little value if nothing ever changes, if people are not listened to and made to feel that they do not count, are marginalized or even vilified. He states that:

I support democracy because it can be for Africa the “other” face of the independence and liberation movements. Democracy under this understanding is quite formal. It is a formal political framework designed to unleash, ‘manage’, and nurture aspiration for, and actual expressions of Freedom (Eze 194).

By freedom he means autonomy, not just liberation. Autonomy is first and foremost, being able to fully accept the responsibility for making one’s own orienting decisions rather than being dictated to or relying on the patronage of others (Eze 194).

To fully grasp the import of what is being argued here we turn to Kierkegaard, in recognition of the fact that what Eze is actually calling for, is no less than a true subjectivity which rejects the objectification of the other while assuming responsibility for one’s own choices and actions thus differentiating the self from the crowd. It is this subjectivity which permits authentic intersubjective relations, for as Eze rightly perceives, the process of building democratic institutions will succeed only, insofar as it starts with each individual subject. Hence, what is required, first and foremost, as Kierkegaard insists, is the development of ‘single individual and responsible subjects’ who can rise above narrow conception of their own identity in terms of clan, tribe or ethnicity in order to understand the common humanity of all. Climacus, who is Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous alter ego in his work the *Postscript*, bases his view of equality upon the concept of the individual human being, each of which has all the marks of humanity. According to Climacus (Kierkegaard), the moral sense requires that we assume that all people possess the essential qualities of humanity. The subjective thinker’s task is to transform himself into an instrument in every way fully expresses this essential humanity. We can say it is this egalitarian inwardness shaping responsible subjectivity that is the first requirement in achieving the freedom that Eze calls autonomy. Eze is correct in identifying the fact that without this individual autonomy there can be no real democracy and no safeguards against the objectification and even demonizing of the other.

THE KIERKEGAARDIAN PHILOSOPHY OF SUBJECTIVITY AND ITS RELEVANCE

We can see that Kierkegaard's concern was with the singular individual, whose interests he prioritized over the universal interpreted as the established orthodoxy. He endeavored to bring the existing being to the point where each he /she is capable of evaluating the prevailing ethical, religious and social standards with the view to determining if these serve the prevailing order or if they are able to guarantee the needs and rights of the "single individual". For Kierkegaard, becoming ethically and religiously responsible is not a matter of adhering to, or fulfilling, the requirements of society with its established mores so much as genuinely responding to the call of the singular other. The most important question for Climacus (Kierkegaard) is one of 'relation': how does the individual relate to the truth, especially, ethical and religious truth? If the individual relates to ethical-religious truth objectively, it becomes for him/her only a universally sanctioned program to be deferred to in all circumstances. This amounts to no more than empty conformism which may border on irresponsibility. However, if the individual relates to truth subjectively by making it an issue for him/her, he/she then critically questions, and examines the efficacy and merits of the prevailing social, cultural, religious and ethical currents.

The crowd mentality plays a significant role in outbreaks of ethnic violence everywhere. For Kierkegaard this mentality poses the most serious threat to personal individuation. He saw the crowd as representing the untruth opposed to the truth of individuation and subjectivity. On every front the crowd attempts to subvert life as an individual self and undermining the task of becoming subjective and thereby precluding a truly human existence. 'If it is allowed to have its way', he argues,

it does away with God and eternity... puts in its place the notion that to be a man is to belong to a race endowed with reason, to belong to it as a specimen, so that the race or species is higher than the individual, which is to say that there are no more individuals but only specimens" (Kierkegaard, *The Point of View* 111).

According to him, the concept of the crowd designates not simply a group of people, an entity, but more fundamentally a mentality, a way of thinking and living. The crowd is a collection of people who relate en

masse to a particular principle or idea without taking a personal stance in relation to it (Kierkegaard, *The Point of View* 92).

Kierkegaard informs us that we are afraid of others because we have learned from a very early age that like animals in a herd, the one thing they cannot forgive, 'the real crime, the one people regard as the worst of all and punish cruelly, is to be not like others' (Kierkegaard, *Journal* no.70). In times of difficulty human nature, being what it is will seek a scapegoat and invariably the scapegoat is one who is different. Thus within the crowd there exists fear, and this fear is the fear of being different in and of itself. Hence, the individuals fear ridicule and rejection, of being cast beyond the pale for not living in conformity to the accepted standards. It is for this reason that during periods of ethnic unrest many people are capable of acts when a member of the crowd that they would never countenance perpetrating in more normal circumstances. Kierkegaard identified the root of the crowd-mentality as deriving from the agonizing fear of rejection for being different, a fear so great that death may appear preferable. This, says Kierkegaard, is the reason why the crowd is such a powerful entity. He goes on to say "the one is so afraid of 'the others' that he does not dare to be an I... Fear of men is dominant" (Kierkegaard 1975, no. 3219 in the references is no book from 1975). In effect we have a tyranny of the Masses and it is this which underpins the psychology of ethnic conflict.

In order to bring about change, is it possible that by drawing on Kierkegaard's ideas of subjective truth and indirect communication a new light may be shed on the key questions raised by such issues that surround ethnic unrest everywhere? Could such a philosophy inform education in the widest sense, from classroom to university seminar; from empowerment seminars to village health initiatives while respecting the positive elements of the African communitarian cultural heritage? The question arises; what form may such a programme take? It is this question that we now address.

EDUCATING FOR SUBJECTIVITY IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

Concerned about the effects that moral relativism was having on the educational process in the USA, Patricia Rohrer offered some thoughts as to what an educational programme embracing the insights offered by the Kierkegaardian conception of subjectivity might bring to the American education of adolescents (ed.uiuc.edu Web). These insights have proved invaluable in describing a similar programme in the African context. But

before we examine what Rohrer has to say we turn to one practical example of the kind of programme that is envisioned.

This example is offered by the Nobel Peace Laureate Wangaari Maathai. Here is her account of one aspect of her work for the *Green Belt Movement* in Africa. Though the movement has succeeded in planting forty million trees in the thirty years since its inception this is not an end in itself, important though this achievement has been but as she herself says GBM empowers people and that simple acts can produce great changes for good. An example of this aspect of the work of GBM is given by *Civic and Environmental Changes Seminars*. One part of the seminar is an exercise termed *The Wrong Bus Syndrome*.

Bus travel in Africa is for most, part of the way of life. Participants are invited to consider the consequences of embarking on the wrong bus and their answers range from having to sleep in the open to harassment by police or strangers. They are also asked to offer reasons for travelling on the wrong bus and again answers are varied ranging from alcohol and arrogance to mental illness. The emphasis then switches to a consideration of the problems confronting their communities. Here the answers are familiar and cover the whole range of issues facing third world countries. In the light of all these problems participants are asked to whether their bus is travelling in the right direction. Seminars are usually unanimous in believing that they are on the wrong bus recognizing that they have been too trusting of their leaders, unwilling to ask questions of leaders from chief to MP's. They recognize their lack of courage in challenging the direction their country and community has been travelling in while some have allowed themselves to be misled by false information, alcohol or drugs. They accept that their communities have become susceptible to any leader offering immediate satisfaction of their perceived needs. In Kierkegaardian terms they have been firmly entrenched in a way of life that lacks any true subjectivity. Yet through the consideration of the 'wrong bus syndrome' something changes. This is the turning point, the either/or moment that may produce a true subjectivity. During the seminar attendees have usually concluded that they have been on the wrong bus moving in the wrong direction and now need to grasp the opportunity to take charge, to disembark and board the right bus moving in the right direction. She continues: 'Getting on the right bus will help them deal eventually with the long set of problems they have listed' (Maathai 170).

Here, we encounter the development of a passion impelling the movement from objectivity to subjectivity, from the helplessness to

positivity and from irresponsibility to the desire to confront the issues participants face and to take responsibility for themselves, and their community's future. We may think of this change in Kierkegaardian terms as the part of a process of self discovery which is no less than a growing of the self in the space that has been created for subjective reflection.

The example of *The Wrong Bus Syndrome* illustrates what we seek to demonstrate, that, for Kierkegaard, it is incumbent on the seeker of wisdom to strive to attain an understanding of the particulars of his/her existence, not only of his/her daily life, but of existence in the wider sense. This seeker can only live life fully, can only relate to the other authentically, and can only begin to grapple with the big issues facing her community by trying to understand the questions that most passionately concern him/her. In Kierkegaard's terms, this is a matter of looking inward that is, becoming subjective. In Kierkegaard's conception of the search for the subjective truth passion is a requirement; for the individual's subjective truth makes an absolute claim upon him/her. The passionate engagement with this truth, and the possibilities it offers is what gives meaning to life. Our example also demonstrates that despite a communitarian culture this process is by no means foreign to African thinking where the opportunity for such reflection is permitted.

Subjectivity for Kierkegaard is an ongoing dialectic between the finite and the infinite, the present reality and future possibilities which may be appropriated by the individual. The subjective thinker is continually striving, but to interpret this as a continual failure to achieve the goal is to misunderstand the task. Each individual has the infinite within himself/herself and existence is the very act of becoming. The demand placed on the subjective thinker is to face that challenge and so find his/her life transformed by the possibilities offered by the infinite, life is a process of becoming and the present moment is always one of now, but not yet.

This aspect of possibility offers an ongoing dialectic that may inform both group dynamics and curricular approach (ed.uiuc.edu Web). All learners are concerned with the same task of seeking wisdom, struggling with the demands of existence and the uncertainty of living along with the feelings of aloneness and uncertainty that this engenders. Each is struggling with his/her own subjective truth that only they can respond to and yet, at the same time struggling to communicate this with others. This struggle will give birth to empathy, understanding and compassion for other learners pursuing their own quest. It will be apparent that this educational programme is not primarily concerned with the *content* of what is taught for

content will be culturally appropriate and appropriate to the circumstances. What it *is* deeply concerned with, is the *way* in which it is taught through the use of open ended questions. Kierkegaard argues that my relation to others, to cultural beliefs, to public norms and normative discourses hinges upon my self-relation. The theory of indirect communication claims that the relation of a subject to others is never a facile, direct cognitive mediation of alter (other) and self (Kierkegaard *Concluding* 74). Though never realized outside of a particular mode of relating to others and a specific view of my world, critical self-knowledge is acquired indirectly and not through direct and immediate reflection upon my situation. The ability both to adopt a critical view of my world and to listen or relate sincerely to others requires that I undertake the life of self-analysis and questioning in order to overcome my own naïveté about my personal motives. I must counter my own capacity for evil and my own entanglement in despair and sin before I can address the world critically (Kierkegaard *The Concept* 31; *Concluding* 242).

In creating the opportunity for subjective reflection it may be expected that by disclosing to the individual previously unrecognized possibilities the individual may become involved in a passionate pursuit of becoming so engendering hope. By engaging in subjective reflection I may become a truly free and liberated individual, rising above the crowd and its dictates and I learn to relate to the other as a person. If sufficient individuals are freed to do the same true democracy becomes a real possibility and ethnic conflict a thing of the past.

CONCLUSION

We have seen how ethnic conflict in Africa has a number of underlying causes but at root we identify a lack of subjectivity as the common denominator between them. Ethnic conflict is dependent upon the crowd mentality which gives rise to a fear of the other. The crowd may be understood as undifferentiated individuals, lacking a personal subjectivity and who seek identity by referring to group norms and values in an uncritical way. These norms demand the objectification of those who are outside the group and it is this objectification which validates acts of violence against outsiders. We have considered how poverty and scarcity of resources have resulted in an appeal to outmoded, pre-independence racial groupings with a subsequent conflict in loyalties and interests. These have been reflected in ethno-political competition and the politicization of

ethnic identities. All of these factors have encouraged a lack of differentiation and a discouraged individuation giving rise to a crowd mentality that has demanded the objectification of outsiders. Inevitably these conflicts have, on occasion, spilt over into riots, civil war and even ethnic cleansing.

In arguing that it is this lack of subjectivity that is at the root of the problem we have also proposed that the solution is informed by the insights regarding subjectivity offered by Kierkegaard. This solution offers an approach to education in the widest sense that permits the space for reflection and an encouragement to reflect subjectively with the aim of allowing the development of moral, independent, reflective individuals, who are free to exercise choice and unafraid to question and evaluate the worth of group social values and norms and to work for change where this is warranted. This will permit both the emergence of a truly democratic society where, rather than the objectification of the other, those who are seen as in some way different may be engaged in a genuine intersubjective dialogue. In such a society there would be little room and no need for ethnic conflict and violence.

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