



Ethnicity and the long-term perspective

The African experience

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If the interested reader had a subject to choose that might be regarded as most discussed whenever the international public focuses on the African continent, ethnic conflict would score very high. Debates on poverty and on development in sub-Saharan Africa have partly lost their attraction, particularly because economic improvement has stagnated for decades in many African countries. Ethnic strife is more recent as a subject of broad discussions. The newly won sad prominence of this topic is easily explained by the fact that mass murder under the cover of ethnic conflict has claimed extreme numbers of victims. Violence between ethnic groups is held responsible for the death of some 3 million persons in the last 15 years, if we combine the (conservative) estimates for Central Africa and Sudan. The brutal results of inter-community bloodshed in those regions are particularly severe even in comparison with the atrocities committed in other inter-state or civil wars, including those in the Balkans and in the Middle East. Concepts of group identities have also played an important role in the explanation of violence in those latter two regions of conflict. However, those struggles were rarely labelled as exclusively 'ethnic' conflicts, although commentators used the concept of 'ethnic cleansing'.¹ The experiences of the region of the Great Lakes and of Darfur have been so extreme that they easily overshadowed all similar developments outside of Africa.²

Ethnicity, as a factor of political and group relations in sub-Saharan Africa, is thus omnipresent in contemporary media coverage. Apart from the spectacular cases mentioned above, conflict has occurred in many, if not in a majority of post-colonial African states. These conflicts frequently involved groups calling themselves and being called 'ethnic groups'. If we regard the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, the results of group tension in the colonial and post-colonial periods have been divergent but in many circumstances its effects were significant. In some states, this even led to mass murder, and to so-called 'ethnic cleansing', but we also have to consider more sporadic outbreaks of violence, attempts of one group to oust the other from political power, and other similar tendencies.