PART I

1

Introduction

On December 4, 2000, in Côte d'Ivoire's capital of Abidjan, sixty-year-old Bakary Kaba was gunned down in the presence of his family as he performed the ablutions of foot washing in preparation for prayer.[1] Mr. Kaba was a Muslim, and human rights reports indicated that he was killed at the hands of Christian military police officers who shot him simply because of the Muslim robes he wore. Though tragic, Mr. Kaba's killing was not isolated – it came on the heels of a massacre of fifty-seven Muslims on the outskirts of Abidjan, the burning of churches and mosques throughout the country, and the murder of several prominent priests and imams. Thrown into turmoil by a December 1999 coup, and unhinged once more by failed elections in October 2000, Côte d'Ivoire at the time of Kaba's death found itself in the throes of violence that would ultimately lead to a decade-long civil conflict and that would turn this once proud and united nation into a setting for inter-religious violence, or so it was described.

Mr. Kaba's clothes marked him as a Muslim, but he was not just a Muslim. He identified with the Malinké ethno-linguistic group (or "tribe").[2] He was an immigrant, having migrated to Côte d'Ivoire years earlier from Guinea in search of stable employment. Though living in

[1] For a summary account of the killing, see U.S. Department of State (2001).

[2] I refer to ethno-linguistic groups as "ethnic groups" rather than "tribes" due to an association of tribe with backwardness (Southall 1970) and colonial control (Campbell 1997). Ethnic groups and tribes are sometimes used to refer to different levels of community, so I lose some degree of precision. I also realize that my labeling decision introduces the risk of confusion between broad and narrow ethnicity. Throughout the book, where I use "ethno-linguistic group" or "tribe," they are synonymous with "ethnic group."

Abidjan at the time of his death, Mr. Kaba was in many respects a northerner, owing to his kinship ties and previous residence in the north of the country. He was thought to be a supporter of the Rassemblement des Républicans (RDR), an opposition political party that would later come to power. Of the many groups that Mr. Kaba represented (Malinké ethnicity, immigrant, Guinean, northerner, RDR supporter), why did his religion doom him? Why, in a country divided along ethno-linguistic as well as religious lines, was this violence defined in Christian-Muslim terms?

In this book, I seek an answer to those questions. Stated more generally, why do Africa's "ethnic" conflicts sometimes emerge along ethno-linguistic lines and sometimes along religious lines? During the Rwandan genocide, majority Hutus launched a 100-day attack against minority Tutsis that left more than 800,000 dead in a shocking case of ethnic violence (Prunier 1995). Yet Rwandans are not only members of the Hutu and Tutsi ethnicities; they are also members of religious groups and other social identities. Why was the Rwandan genocide not a different story of majority Catholics launching an attack against minority Muslims? In Sudan, a north–south civil war was at one period a matter of Arabs fighting black Africans and at another period a matter of Muslims in conflict against non-Muslims (Deng 1995). In Nigeria, conflicts like the Ogoni uprising in the 1990s occurred between ethno-linguistic groups; clashes in Jos and other northern cities in the 2000s occurred between Muslims and Christians; and the 1967–1970 civil war in the Biafra region began as an ethnic group conflict and ended with attention on religion without the participants ever changing. Across Africa, recent violence in the Central African Republic, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Burundi, Chad, and elsewhere has implicated either ethnic or religious actors. Even beyond the African region, conflicts in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Northern Ireland, India, and the Middle East are often viewed through either ethno-linguistic or religious lenses, yet current theories in comparative politics are not equipped to tell us whether there is something about ethnicity and religion that shapes those lines of conflict. I suggest that there is.

The question of why conflicts in Africa are sometimes ethnic and sometimes religious is not an esoteric one. According to Sambanis (2001), fully 73 percent of civil wars worldwide are counted as ethnic/religious in nature; the remaining 27 percent are coded as revolutionary wars, though even then ethnicity or religion is frequently exploited for divisive purposes. Fox (2012) puts the share of religious wars alone at

62 percent of all conflicts, up from about 30 percent in the 1960s. In the African context, where ethnic and religious identities color much of life's quotidian interactions and many of its social and political divisions, conflicts *not* described in ethnic or religious terms prove to be the exception.

Of course, the notion of ethnic and religious wars can be understood in multiple ways. Toft (2007) makes the distinction between conflicts in which identity is *central* versus those in which it is *peripheral* but nevertheless plays a role simply by virtue of the two sides representing opposing labels.[3] Svensson (2007) describes *incompatibility wars*, in which opponents fight over the actual content of identity differences, and *identity wars*, in which other factors drive conflict but the opponents' labels happen to differ. Pearce (2005) calls this an *issue-oriented* division versus an *identity-oriented* division. These distinctions are critically important for determining the cause of conflicts. In this book, my goal is somewhat different: I aim to understand why conflicts, once they have begun, take on one label versus another – a "tribal war," for example, versus "religious killings."[4] This is a question of conflict frames. Sometimes, the cause of a conflict and its frame are closely related; at other times, conflict frames have little to do with the cause of violence itself. In virtually all cases, I argue, the choice of frames is ultimately a political one.

Accounts in the political science literature of how identities such as ethnicity and religion become important follow three distinct paths. First, the now outdated primordialist perspective suggests that certain types of identity (usually the ethno-linguistic group) have greater intrinsic or objective importance than other types and are thus more likely to be at the root of conflict, as groups in close proximity cling to innate differences and deep-seated hatreds (Douglass 1988; Geertz 1973). Second, contemporary instrumentalist and constructivist views instead treat identities as the fluid and situational choices of instrumental actors (Barth 1969; Kasfir 1979; Posner 2004; Young 1976) – in the limit, simply as "interest groups" that form in a strategic effort to accumulate resources (Bates 1983).[5] In this context, there are frequently no functional differences in

[3] These scholars refer specifically to religious conflicts, but the distinctions they make apply equally well to ethnic ones.

[4] The tribal war citation refers to South Sudan (see *New York Times* 2015); religious killings refers to Nigeria (see *Evening Standard* 2012).

[5] Instrumentalism highlights choices made in the self-interest of actors, while constructivism underscores the importance of narratives created for a social group or community (see Stewart 2008). While some scholarship falls distinctly into one or the other camp,

mobilizing according to religion, ethnic group, language, race, or other ascriptive identity types – the particular lines along which ethnic conflict happens to emerge are instead a matter of the relative sizes of groups, institutional factors that favor one group over another, and the manner in which political entrepreneurs exploit those differences to their advantage. Finally, a third set of scholars focusing exclusively on conflict in religious terms prioritizes the characteristics of particular religious groups, suggesting that, for example, the language, organizational structure, history, or tenets of Islam shapes Muslim relations with other religions (Badie 1987; Huntington 1996; Kalyvas 2000; Lewis 1990; Sanneh 1994; Stark 2001; Toft 2007).

The argument that I make lies between these approaches. Like the contemporary constructivist approach, I argue that the salience of ethnicity, religion, or any other social identity is context dependent and that political entrepreneurs make strategic calculations regarding the identity type they wish to politicize. What distinguishes my argument from others in this camp, however, is my view that ethnicity and religion offer different baselines from which those strategic calculations must be made. Like the scholars of religion and politics, I suggest that something is indeed different about religion (and ethnicity) that merits scholarly attention from political scientists. Where my argument differs is in placing emphasis not on the tenets or other characteristics of specific traditions, but rather on the social impact of ethnic and religious identities writ large that inspire different priorities and preferences. These broad differences between ethnicity and religion (among other possible identity choices) affect the calculations of political entrepreneurs, regardless of their particular ethnic or religious stripes.

The central argument in this book is that individuals have multiple identities, each of which evokes distinct preferences. Political entrepreneurs understand this and seek to mobilize supporters in terms of the identities that have the most useful behavioral consequences, vis-à-vis the leader's own strategic goals. They do this by altering the frame of conflict, either exploiting policies that mobilize an optimal identity or mobilizing an identity type to generate support for an optimal policy. In this sense, the argument offers a new explanation for why identities like ethnicity and religion become salient in conflict settings, and thus why fighting occurs along one identity line rather than another: it is not because some

I conflate those camps here to focus on the context-dependent nature of political identities under both accounts.

identities are innately more important to people (as primordialists might claim) or because certain identity groups possess characteristics that increase the likelihood of conflict (as some scholars of religion and politics may argue). It is also not simply a matter of optimally sized identity coalitions (as constructivists or instrumentalists might suggest), because ethnic and religious divisions sometimes provide no clear numerical advantage. Instead, conflicts become ethnic or religious because those identity types evoke distinct preferences that can be exploited for political ends.

How do ethnicity and religion in Africa differ? Ethnic groups in the region do not have formal behavioral guidelines but instead draw socio-political relevance from narratives of descent and from historical ties to well-defined geographic areas overseen by a chief or traditional authority. Ethnic groups, in this sense, are land-based identities. The impact of world religions in Africa is quite different: they inspire only weak ties to land and instead rely on imported sets of behavioral guidelines to maintain social and political relevance and to serve group members. As a convenient shorthand, I refer to them as rule-based identities. I argue that these features generate *mobilizational differences* – ethnicity inspires preferences for control of the land and local resources, whereas religion inspires preferences for protecting moral lifestyles and voluntarily accepted rules, particularly with transnational influence. Thus, although the instrumental interests of the political entrepreneur remain unchanged, his calculations do not, owing to the fact that his support base(s) will mobilize collectively around different concerns in ethnic versus religious contexts. In this view, the choice of which identity type to politicize is a matter not simply of relative group size but of the precise outcome the political entrepreneur hopes to achieve. Efforts to protect or accumulate local resources are associated with mobilization of the ethnic identity. If, conversely, the political goal calls for developing ties beyond the local land or highlighting matters of moral legitimacy, the political entrepreneur would do best to politicize religion. Applied to contentious political situations, the uniting of mobilizational differences and political goals has strong implications for how we view cases of "ethnic" conflict. In case after case in the African region, the evidence supports this approach.

The value of the argument, however, goes beyond the intellectual exercise of classifying conflicts as ethnic, religious, or otherwise. Understanding why conflicts are seen through an ethnic versus a religious lens generates insights into the sources of aid and alliance available to parties in conflict. It sheds light on the targets of violence and the potential for

retaliation and may also help to predict the severity of conflict. Perhaps most important, distinguishing ethnic from religious conflict frames can put us in a position to better identify strategies for mitigating future tensions between adversaries.

BOUNDARIES OF THE ARGUMENT

I do not intend to explain why conflict begins. Instead, taking political and economic competition over scarce resources as a broader, fundamental cause of conflict,[6] I ask which labels groups employ when they come into conflict. Why does competition take place along some lines rather than others? Given individual attachments to several identity types, when should we expect ethnicity or religion to be evoked in the course of conflict? Focusing on these questions puts me in position to set aside the myriad moving parts that complicate stories of conflict onset and to do what those arguments do not – account for the mobilizational differences between types of identity that political entrepreneurs can use to their advantage in contentious political circumstances. My goal, then, is to construct a more complete understanding of conflict in Africa by going beyond the question of why conflict emerges to ask why, when groups come into conflict, the same people sometimes fight in the name of "tribe" and sometimes in the name of God. I maintain the view that these labels rarely serve as the cause of conflicts per se, but rather as incredibly powerful tools wielded in the course of conflicts.

The frame, or identity lens through which political activity is seen, is determined by several factors. First, the *actors* involved in a conflict – including political entrepreneurs, violence "specialists," and community members on both sides – announce themselves as members of an ethnic group, religion, or other social group. Second, the *targets* of violence in civil conflicts affect the lens through which that conflict is seen. The burning of churches and mosques, the murder of priests and imams, and the killing of religiously sacred animals (e.g., cows in Hindu regions) shape conflict as religious; attacking party headquarters frames conflict in political party terms; upsetting traditional shrines, destroying crops farmed by an agriculturalist ethnic group, or killing animals associated with a pastoralist group marks a conflict as "tribal." Third, the *rhetoric*

[6] Competition over resources underlies explanations rooted in both opportunity (Collier and Hoeffler 2004) and grievances (Gurr 1970). For summaries of the literature on conflict cause, see Brubaker (2004, chapter 4) and Blattman and Miguel (2010).

used by actors in a conflict to make demands and incite participation contributes to the framing of conflict as ethnic, religious, or other. When, for example, an opposition political figure makes the public announcement that he is not permitted to take part in elections because he is a Muslim (an example described in Chapter 6), the conflict is more likely to take on a religious tone. Finally, the *reporting* of incidents during conflict influences the lens through which that conflict is seen. Paul Brass (1997) uses the example of a dispute over a young girl, coincidentally between Muslims and Hindus, as an illustration of the power and danger that reports can have on the frame of ethnic or communal conflict. To those affected by conflict, however, the frame is not simply a choice of labels but often a deeply felt cause for which to raise arms.

Why should we care about the frame of Africa's conflicts? As the example from Brass illustrates, frames can be notoriously fickle and subject to manipulation (e.g., from a state press interested in cultivating an outcome or image favorable to the government). That is not to say, however, that the frame does not matter; Brass's very point is that how a conflict is viewed has important consequences for how it proceeds. First, there is the matter of targets: Mr. Kaba in Côte d'Ivoire may not have been gunned down in front of his family had the Ivoirian conflict not taken on a religious frame. Second, some evidence suggests that the frame of conflicts – as religious, ethnic, or otherwise – has consequences for the outcomes and severity of violence. Wilkinson (1999) suggests, based on data from India, that conflicts over religion tend to be more violent; Fox (2004) presents cross-national data over a fifty-year period to demonstrate that wars in the name of religion are both longer and bloodier than non-religious wars. Sambanis (2001) notes an association between ethnic and religious conflicts and a lack of democracy. There are thus reasons to suspect that the frame of conflict – shaped by the actors involved, the targets, the rhetoric, and the reporting – affects the longer term trajectories of those conflicts. My objective is to explain why that frame is sometimes ethnic and sometimes religious.

Even in cases where the roots of a conflict appear obvious – say, in the imposition of Islamic Shari'a law for criminal matters in northern Nigeria – we should still ask why elites chose the particular strategy they did to mobilize supporters. In that instance, what is often described as a political power grab (Mu'azzam and Ibrahim 2000) could have targeted Hausa-Igbo ethnic divisions instead. Why might political leaders push a policy like Shari'a law if it divides society? The answer I propose is that doing so alters the salience of identity types in systematically useful ways.

Insofar as identity types have unique effects on individuals, political entrepreneurs can filter those individual-level preferences through their own strategic goals to achieve different ends.

To develop this argument, I focus on ethnicity and religion in Africa, for the following reason. The project begins with the fairly pedestrian view that something changes for individuals when they are placed in different identity contexts. To test that hunch, I sought an environment where multiple social identities are equally strong and potentially politically salient. In sub-Saharan Africa, ethnicity and religion are appropriate foils: over 90 percent of respondents to surveys in the region indicate that religion is important in their lives, and the same surveys indicate that the ethno-linguistic identity is the primary form of self-identification.[7] Together, religion and one's ethnic group are the most common social identity responses to the question, "how do you identify yourself first and foremost?" There is also a history of conflict in the region that has emerged along both ethnic and religious lines, generating sufficient variation in the outcome of interest to allow for the construction of a causal argument linking the mobilizational differences of identities to the lens through which conflict is seen. At the same time, Africa can be taken as a harder context in which to demonstrate mobilizational differences between ethnicity and religion, precisely because both are such central aspects of most individuals' lives, and they are often difficult to separate. Thus, to the extent that mobilizational differences do appear in the African context, I will have chosen a conservative environment in which to make the case that those differences affect political choice over the identity frames of conflict.

The argument is not intended as a universal explanation of all identity conflict. Different theories may be needed to explain the role of nationalism, class, or other identity types in conflict situations. Furthermore, as I develop in Chapter 2, ethnicity and religion should take on different meanings across distinct geographic regions. The categorization of religion as inspiring weak ties to land but strong commitments to rules, for example, may be accurate at the geographic peripheries of world religious communities, but less so at their geographic cores. Though Islam had spread across Africa by the tenth century, and Christianity had established pockets by the fifteenth century, their widespread impact is in many

[7] See data from Rounds 1 and 2 of the Afrobarometer public opinion surveys, in which questions regarding primary modes of self-identification were asked. Data available at www.afrobarometer.org/data.html.

respects quite recent, having advanced significantly only during the 1800s (Clarke 1982). Attachments to land in Africa had by this point taken on different meaning, under traditional structures of authority. Religion as an identity type in the Middle East, by contrast, where sacred sites unite religious rules with territory and nationalism, should be expected to evoke a different set of concerns. Similarly, in Africa, where little congruence exists between ethnic boundaries and national borders, ethnic identity may function very differently from that in Japan, where ethnicity, land, and national political identity converge. What I present in this book is an argument that mobilizational differences exist across identity types, and that these differences help to explain why certain identities become salient in cases of African conflict. I make the case by focusing on two identity types – ethnicity and religion – that are especially important in this particular setting. Identities will serve different functions in other settings, but by understanding ethnicity and religion in one important context, we might gain improved insight into their roles in other contexts.[8]

The principal subject of this book is the communal and civil conflicts, past and present, that so frequently take on ethnic or religious frames in Africa. Of late, observers have devoted special attention to the recent wave of religious-motivated terrorist attacks in the region (see Munson 2016 as an example). Those cases of violence occupy a separate analytical class, often more galvanizing to Western audiences but also much smaller in scope, so they are not a central focus of the book. Nevertheless, insofar as terrorist group leaders may have incentives to mobilize support in the same way that political elites mobilize collective action during communal conflict, some lessons from this argument may be applied to religious terrorism in Africa, as I aim to demonstrate with an application to Boko Haram in the concluding chapter.

DEFINING CONCEPTS

To this point, I have used quotation marks in referencing the broad concept of "ethnicity" or "ethnic politics," as distinct from ethno-linguistic

[8] This claim may run counter to patterns of globalization, which might suggest either an increasing universality of religious and ethnic meaning or the absence of any behavioral patterns in religion and ethnicity at all. Yet, so long as some regional specificity in identity types remains, space exists for arguments that both explain patterns in one context and shed light on distinctions with other contexts. See Cox (2010) for a description of religious globalization.