The Logic of Ethnic and Religious Conflict in Africa

This book explains why conflicts in Africa are sometimes ethnic and sometimes religious, and why a conflict might change from ethnic to religious even as the opponents remain fixed. Conflicts in the region are often viewed as either "tribal" or "Muslim–Christian," seemingly rooted in deep-seated ethnic or religious hatreds. Yet, as this book explains, those labels emerge as a function of political mobilization. It argues that ethnicity and religion inspire distinct passions among individuals, and that political leaders exploit those passions to achieve their own strategic goals when the institutions of the state break down. To support this argument, the book relies on a novel experiment conducted in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana to demonstrate that individual preferences change in ethnic and religious contexts. It then uses case illustrations from Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Sudan to highlight the strategic choices of leaders that ultimately shape the frames of conflict.

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For Phyllis and Michael McCauley
and to the memory of James B. Reilly

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Abbreviations

AFRISTAT	L'Observatoire Economique et Statistique d'Afrique Subsaharienne
AG	Action Group, a political party in Nigeria
ASWAJ	Ahlu Sunnah wal Jama'aah, a Muslim group
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CONSORT	Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials
DIAL	Développement, Institutions et Mondialisation
FMG	Federal Military Government, the government regime in Nigeria
FN	Forces Nouvelles, a rebel group in Côte d'Ivoire
FPI	Front Populaire Ivoirien, a political party in Côte d'Ivoire
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MPCI	Mouvement Patriotique de Côte d'Ivoire, a rebel group in Côte d'Ivoire
NCNC	National Convention of Nigerian Citizens, a political party in Nigeria
NIF	National Islamic Front, a religious-political organization in Sudan
NPC	Northern People's Congress, a political party in Nigeria
OIC	Organization of the Islamic Conference
PDCI	Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire, a political party in Côte d'Ivoire

RDR	Rassemblement des Républicains, a political party in Côte d'Ivoire
RNC	Royal Niger Company, a colonial-era commercial enterprise in Nigeria
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SUTVA	Stable Unit Treatment Value Assumption
WCC	World Council of Churches

Preface and Acknowledgments

My introduction to sociopolitical life in sub-Saharan Africa came as a high school teacher in Pama, a small village tucked in the southeastern corner of Burkina Faso. In Pama, my closest friends were a Muslim, a Catholic, a Protestant, and a traditional religionist, each of a different ethnic group. Together, we rarely missed an ethnic or religious feast in the village, and as teachers and civil servants, we delighted in the lessons of Gulmanché and Mossi elders. By virtue of the atypical mixing that happened to define the population there, many events were open to all, diverse, and rich in laughter, teasing, and celebration. That experience stood in stark contrast, however, to the news that unfolded around us in the early 2000s. I followed stories of ethnic violence over oil reserves and of religious violence over Shari'a law in Nigeria. I watched as migrants described alternately as Muslims, northerners, and Dioula flooded back to Burkina to escape violence in neighboring Côte d'Ivoire. I struggled to understand the Ituri conflict between ethnic groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the expanding Islamic insurgency in parts of Mali, Niger, and elsewhere. Trying to square my own experience of inter-group harmony with these nearby episodes of ethnic and religious strife, I asked more questions than anyone could have been expected to answer for me.

Later, as a Ph.D. student at UCLA, I used that taste of identity group relationships in Africa as the basis for my studies. I sought to understand why ethnicity and religion sometimes serve as the foundations of peace and sometimes as the sparks of violence. Returning frequently to West Africa, I was particularly struck by a puzzle that emerged from the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire. By all accounts, the conflict began as a result of tensions

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related to immigrant rights and control of resources. Yet, some who described the conflict and its early foundations referenced hatreds and discrimination between ethnicities, the southern Akan groups and the northern Malinké, in particular. Others, by contrast, saw religious hatreds between Christians and Muslims, particularly as the conflict progressed. How could a conflict having nothing to do with ethnic or religious substance per se come to be labeled in those identity terms? Why would a conflict perceived at one stage as "tribal" later come to be seen as a fight in the name of God? This book constitutes an effort to answer those questions.

That the identity frames of the Ivoirian conflict could change suggested to me a choice, either in the labels that key players employed or in the policies and strategies they used to evoke one identity type or the other. This, of course, is far from unique to Africa: from U.S. presidential campaigns to European responses in the face of refugee crises, political elites frequently mobilize support with pointed messages or targeted policies, the outcome of which is often a perception of political contest-ation through sharp and divisive identity lenses. In addition to the stra-tegic choices of elites, however, I also recognized – perhaps from those feasts in Pama – that ethnicity and religion seem to affect people in different ways. Put in one or the other of those settings, we seem to want different things, to favor different priorities, and to associate differently. My reading of the ethnic politics literature in political science suggested that, too often, this second feature – the constitutive differences in ethni-city and religion that affect individuals in unique ways – was missing. Thus, you will find as you read the book that my theoretical explanation for the emergence of conflict frames in Africa brings together the strategic choices of elites and the passions and preferences of individuals in ethnic versus religious contexts.

The research for this book required help and support from countless sources; needless to say, I incurred many debts along the way. I want to first acknowledge the Ivoirians, Ghanaians, Burkinabé, and Nigerians who shared their time and stories. In some instances, they did so even as the political institutions around them failed and their own sense of personal comfort and security was anything but certain. As survey respondents, participants in experiments, focus group discussants, and interview subjects, they gave me a better understanding of the logic of ethnic and religious conflict in Africa. I am deeply indebted to them.

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