Introduction: Understanding Processes of Change in Social Cohesion: Learning from Comparative History

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The social cohesion of multiethnic states is today at risk across the globe. African states have been facing that risk since their independence from colonial rule more than half a century ago. As elsewhere in the world, Africa's histories of division and contest have sown seeds of political, social, and economic instability. However, Africa is not a place; it is a large continent. There are nearly 40 states south of the Sahara. A few are constantly wracked by instability, while the rest of the continent is experiencing considerable economic transformation. Ethnic conflict is not universal in Africa.

This book enquires into the historical roots of sub-Saharan Africa's internal divisions and, with insights from a number of scholarly disciplines, discusses the future prospects for building greater social cohesion. Africa's rich histories of varied social, political, and economic diversity and a brief review of comparative history give us our foundation for arguing that it is possible, but not easy, to grow cohesive futures out of the continent's divided pasts.

We do not ignore the natural temptation of ruling classes to cultivate their core votes in historically constructed fields of ethnic, religious, or regional difference. Our reviews of some of these histories and our case studies of the contemporary relationships between development and social cohesion nonetheless encourage us to look ahead towards more cohesive outcomes. On the basis of these case studies and our interdisciplinary research, we offer modest recommendations for policies and institutions that could foster more cohesive societies in future. We recognise the difficulties that stand in the way of their implementation. Nevertheless, we do not believe it is sufficient simply to try to manage the frictions caused by ethnic diversity, regional inequality, and social conflict.

While this book is primarily about sub-Saharan Africa, the continent is not alone in having to cope with the challenge of building social cohesion within multicultural nations. Even Europe's seemingly cohesive nationhood, products of centuries of warfare, face serious tests from a tide of migrants and refugees, driven by instability and hardship in western Asia and Africa and, more generally, by globalization. Africa has long known the pushes and pulls of globalization. We believe, therefore, that the rest of the world has something to learn from Africa. In more parts and periods of the continent's history than is often realized, one can discern deep traditions and pragmatic social practices that embraced multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic yet neighbourly living. How far that wide experience of an often flourishing plurality has been compromised by colonial and postcolonial oppression is one of our questions. A brief excursion into comparative history also suggests that, to build socially cohesive societies in Africa, such as can be seen in Tanzania in particular, has little instructive precedent elsewhere in the world. First, however, we must clarify what we mean by social cohesion.

I.1 The Concept of Social Cohesion

"Social cohesion" is a complex concept, variously understood from different perspectives. However, we believe that at its heart lies the notion of a society that is greater than and therefore protective of its various parts. Such a society allows its individual members and their several smaller communities of cultural, regional, gendered, or religious belonging to pursue mutually fruitful relationships with confidence. When differences develop in a cohesive society, as is only to be expected, they can also be expected to be resolved openly, amicably and peacefully. Further, "social cohesion", it has been said, "is not only good in itself, as it improves the quality of the societies in which people live, but also because it is likely to help avoid violent conflict with all its attendant ills" (Langer et al., 2017). Despite an increased recognition of the importance of social cohesion for political stability and development, the concept remains poorly researched and understood. This point, we believe, is where this book has something to contribute by separating out the social attributes that, in our understanding, are constitutive of social cohesion.

Following Langer et al. (2017), we argue that social cohesion is founded on the connections between three major elements, each being largely determined by historical and political forces. These elements are identity, equality, and trust, variably linked in different chains of causation. Identity can take many forms and is adaptable to different contexts. Inclusive or plural senses of identity foster social cohesion; conversely, in the absence of such cohesion, identities of exclusion can be exaggerated. Exclusive identities place prime, or even sole, value on their specific, often ethnic, communities, especially in contexts of threat. Where ethnicity is politicized and people see themselves, whether defensively or triumphally, as belonging primarily to a particular group rather than to the nation as a whole, then the cohesion of a society is clearly at risk.

It follows that policies conducive to social cohesion must aim to weaken exclusive identities and strengthen inclusive ones. This point is where our second element, equality, comes in. While the presence of severe income and wealth inequalities is generally bad for the cohesiveness of a society, social cohesion is particularly under threat where there are marked disparities between identity-based groups or so-called horizontal inequalities (Stewart, 2008). Severe horizontal inequalities are almost bound to sharpen ethnic consciousness, and grievances are likely to fester among members of disadvantaged groups, creating resentment against not only those who are better off but also, very probably, against the incumbent government or indeed the state itself. At the same time, the richer communities will use all the means at their disposal to preserve, or even increase, their privilege. Inequality is, therefore, not only damaging in itself, but may also contribute towards destroying the third element, trust – whether between individuals or between identity groups and, in consequence, between large sections of the population and their government. The more widely and deeply people trust other persons, people from other ethnic groups and their common public institutions, the more cohesive their society is likely to be.

All this may seem rather obvious, but it is a useful framework to think about social cohesion, not least because these strong interconnections suggest that, where social cohesion is lacking, the politics of creating it will not be easy. Each of these three elements will react against the other elements. For example, building trust between groups

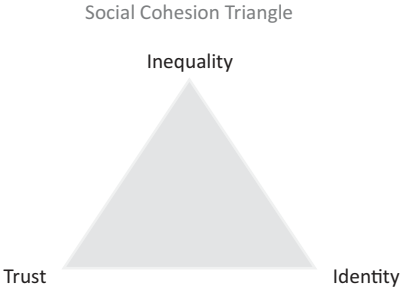

Figure I.1 Social cohesion and its building blocks
Source: Langer et al. (2017: 327).

will be difficult when their history has made group identities inward-looking and strong. Africa's economic history, in particular, has generated severe horizontal inequalities that tend to sharpen resentful perceptions of more successful regions, generally the territory of some other, often proudly different, ethnic group (Chapter 1). There is no simple causal chain here but, rather, a mutually reinforcing set of factors that increase or decrease social cohesion and that are, therefore, difficult to break by political intervention. We can think of the elements of social cohesion as a triangle of mutually dependent building blocks, and triangles are notoriously resilient figures, resistant to reconfiguration.[1]

I.2 Social Cohesion in Comparative History

How, then, can history's triangles of social division, lacking in sufficiently inclusive identities and mutual trust, or tolerable inequalities, be reconfigured? Outside observers have too often regretted that African nations fall short of the democratic standards and economic productivity that encourage social cohesion in most European nations and a few Asian and Latin American states. It is true that some countries enjoy enviable levels of social cohesion based on democratic practice and a high regard for human rights reliably protected in law. But, whether one looks at Europe, Asia, or the Americas, these relatively cohesive societies are the products of violently divisive pasts – of dynastic wars, civil wars, revolutions, or class conflict between owners

[1] This is elaborated in Langer et al. (2017).

and workers. For many of them, too, any experience of colonial subjection is in their distant past, quite unlike Africa's more recent ordeal. If, then, one looks at comparative history, one can only conclude that, if Africans so wish, they will have to build social cohesion in their own more deliberate way, as some African countries are already doing.

Not so long ago, in May 2000, the cover story of London's influential weekly *The Economist* called Africa a "hopeless continent" on which the rest of the world "might just give up", It did not accuse Africans of racial incompetence but blamed, instead, a triple alliance of tribalism, dictatorship, and corruption – all being the fruit of Africa's divided histories (Lonsdale, 2002). In 2000, there seemed to be much truth in that generalisation. There is much less now. Many Africans have long tried to tackle their problems, as *The Economist* has acknowledged in a more recent issue with its cover entitled "A Hopeful Continent", African societies, after all, are not normally at war with each other. What Africans have been learning in how to foster social cohesion from their divided pasts may, therefore, help others to resolve the tensions in what more and more Westerners feel is their own dangerously diverse present. It has often been argued in the West that Africans should learn more of the political arts as practised in the West. It seems to us that it is time to ask what the West – because so many of its peoples see multilingual, multicultural diversity as an entirely new threat – might, to the contrary, learn from Africa.

To ask that question productively it is as well to remember that popular memory can be short and that the West, no less than Africa, has in fact always faced conflicts of cultural and religious diversity as well as social and regional inequality. Politically destabilising migrations, conquests, culture conflicts, and regional disparities are nothing new in Europe. In the past, European kingdoms and their republican successors had to reach (always provisional) solutions to the challenges that human and geographical diversity presented for the creation and maintenance of relatively cohesive societies, to recall our triangular model, that can solve differences by constructive argument rather than disruptive violence. The Kikuyu of Kenya, and doubtless other African peoples, have an apt proverb to illustrate the virtues of such openly argumentative cohesion: "He who is defeated by a club can always return to an argument; he who is defeated by argument never returns."

It has taken centuries of warfare, with weapons more deadly than clubs, for Europe to accept the wisdom of this African proverb. To appreciate this point, one needs to think more about the historical construction of modern European states, for in our triangular model of social cohesion – of trust, identity, and equality – the role of state-building is central. Without trustworthy public institutions, whether legislative, judicial, or executive, social trust is impossible. If the law is corrupted, self-help, the ultimate expression of exclusive identity, becomes the first recourse in settling disputes. In the same way, arbitrary rule, reliant on surveillance rather than consent, inevitably creates a fearful mistrust between neighbours. Confidence in the same shared public institutions, on the other hand, may well generate a sense of common identity, equality of citizenship under an impartial law, mutual trust, and, in sum, what we have called social cohesion.

But how was the West's relatively high degree of trust, inclusive identity, and equality before the law – none perfect and all dependent on constant vigilance – achieved in the struggles of Europe's past? The answer is not one that anybody would wish on Africa. For in the past half millennium, Europe's political foundations were dug in blood by religious and dynastic warfare. By the eighteenth century CE the military–fiscal state was a common phenomenon, demanding ever more from its subjects in blood and treasure. This forced them, in reaction, to struggle to be recognised as citizens, with a voice to which governments must respond. They were helped by a parallel process in which print capitalism and growing literacy gave access to mass-produced vernacular bibles that told how a prototype nation, the children of Israel, could overcome conquest and unjust rule. An often-turbulent dialectic between state-building for the purpose of external military competition and the emergence of discursive, potentially subversive, internal public spheres saw a growing identity between state and nation. Central to this process for the stronger European states in the nineteenth century was compulsory education in a standardised national language and conscription into a national army, both in the name of national defence and international competitiveness.

So, peoples were educated for war, for industrial efficiency, and, through their own struggles, for political participation. The almost inevitable consequence, so our hindsight suggests, was the ghastly carnage of the twentieth century's two intra-European civil wars that became world wars, thanks to the geographical range of Europe's empires. They produced blood and destruction across the world, not

least in Africa. But they also produced, in Europe, alert citizenries, all – including rich and poor, women and men –– now equipped with the franchise, a tool of peaceful social argument, of more inclusive identity and wider trust, even an increase in material equality. Some identity struggles persisted even then, and violently, as in Northern Ireland or the Basque region of Spain. But how terrible was the price that this relative national cohesion had cost, including not only the carnage of world wars, but also the loss of historically rich group identities, languages, and cultures as the price of national integration?

One can find other global examples of large-scale state-making by warfare in the history of successive Chinese dynasties, the Mughals in India, or the several Muslim caliphates of West Asia (the Middle East from another perspective) and Mediterranean Africa. In a historical contrast of great importance for national integration and social cohesion, sub-Saharan Africa's past saw few such state-building histories, and its longest-lived state, Ethiopia, was more of a confederation of regional baronies than a unified monarchy. The nineteenth-century *jihadi* cavalry states of the Western Sudan, the forest kingdom of Asante, lakeside Buganda, and the pastoral Zulu kingdom were all relatively short lived, owing to the coming of European colonial conquest. They have nonetheless shown a remarkable afterlife in their sense of cultural identity in the larger postcolonial states of Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, or South Africa within which they are now enclosed. But nobody would propose further war as the way to future social cohesion in Africa.

Industrialisation, to turn to a related argument drawn from comparative history, accompanied and intensified the wars of the West. Naval dockyards were the first large-scale factories, and the officers who commanded navies and armies were among the first technically qualified professionals. Britain's industrial revolution gave it a strategic advantage, accordingly; steamships and trains were good at transporting troops. Other nations industrialised to compete. But industry – and this is another point of contrast with Africa – also created new, centralised, forms of social belonging, as regionally dispersed peasantries came to town and discarded their provincial dialects and customs to join in the urban, socially cohesive possibilities of collective action as a working class.

The modern Western state, born in war, prepared for war, and for that reason all the more fearful of the internal social conflicts bred by inequality, had to protect its legitimacy and internal peace by

increasing expenditure on social protection for the poor. This aimed to recreate that sense of a moral economy of reciprocal responsibility, of social trust, however unequal, between capitalist owner and worker, rich and poor that had once existed, at least in folk memory, between master and servant, farmer and tenant, in the pre-industrial age that had gone (Polanyi, 1944). The nationally connected economies that were created by industry also gave people, even the poor, an incentive to be a part of the national society, their only hope for social mobility out of misery. But this long European dialectic of increasing social cohesion through successive attempts by ever stronger states to mitigate class conflict has little relevance for Africa, with its limited industrialization and lack of historically strong states.

Africa in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has certainly experienced the urbanisation of nineteenth-century Europe, but not the industrialisation that might create both a national economy and a national argument about the unequal social entitlements associated with class difference that Europe has known. Most Africans remain largely self-employed primary producers; many others are self-employed in the informal sector in the growing cities. The infrastructure connecting people across a country is also often weak. Within many countries, their regions' specialised primary producers supply external markets at least as often as they promote national unity by trading with each other. Ethnic identities are often built on regional identities that thrive on whatever economic specialisation is encouraged by their natural environment. Cocoa, cotton, or coffee all need different ecological conditions and produce different social and market relations; regions too dry for such crops or too distant from a railway may have only migrant labour to export, an experience that can produce its own tight-knit identities of survival.

If European history, with its growing national arguments about the socially divisive costs of war and industry, is therefore irrelevant to Africa, what about more recent East Asian history? Might this offer to Africa's future a model of state-led industrialisation for export, with its parallel potential for enlarging more inclusive national identities? Again, the model seems scarcely relevant. East Asia's industrialisation, from Japan's in the past to China's in the present, was achieved on the shoulders of often long histories of monarchical state-building and its social disciplines, together with national education systems and intensive agricultures able to feed rapidly growing towns. Africa's past has

by contrast been largely one of ecologically rather than politically efficient productive systems, based on local peasant freedoms and shifting cultivation. African states, therefore, with their very different pasts, and as even later industrialisers than East Asia, would find it difficult to initiate and sustain a similar economic revolution. Even the continent's existing extractive industries will not be easily detached from global supply chains, particularly those linked to China, for the purpose of building, downstream, a manufacturing industry of their own. Globalization makes new industrial start-ups ever more difficult.

We conclude, therefore, that sub-Saharan African countries must chart and make their own path towards greater social cohesion. Comparative history, we suggest, offers no useful models for either state-sponsored or class-contested social cohesion. True, the continent's present states were also created by wars. But those were colonial conquests, small wars apart from the Italian conquest of Ethiopia in 1935 or the earlier Anglo–South African wars, and with few Africans trained in new solidarities to fight them. Although some still-independent African kingdoms imported large quantities of firearms in the late nineteenth century, their wars of resistance to conquest were soon over; they created few new loyalties from below. From above, the new colonial conquest states were alien, not national; they ruled over division and, unlike their own European imperial powers at home, had no interest in national integration before their final years. Nor, in general, apart from white-settled southern Africa, did national liberation require more than brief mobilisations of political solidarity. Neither colonial states nor, therefore, their postcolonial successors, depended for survival on the creation of the social and economic sinews that dynastic or international competition had previously demanded of states elsewhere in the world.

Therefore, given sub-Saharan Africa's historic singularity– with its lack of a long history of state-building, the absence of integrated national economies, its religious plurality, its many ethnic communities, and, today, the fastest population growth in world history – the continent's statesmen and women face extraordinary demands on their political imagination, authority, and integrity. They have no useful leaders to follow, neither a Cromwell, Washington, nor Robespierre; neither a Stalin nor Mao Dzedong; nor even the more attractive figure of Pandit Nehru, given his political assets in India's relatively sophisticated industry and large middle classes in 1947.

Africa's leaders, now and in the future, are and will be, pioneers, setting out from very particular pasts and building on what are often quite substantial achievements since independence, for what can only be unexplored futures.

I.3 The Argument of this Book

Africa is a continent where, according to opinion surveys, interpersonal and political trust is more limited than elsewhere; its ethnic identities can seem to be exclusive, often touched only lightly by the more inclusive, plural, or situational identities that are more commonplace elsewhere; and its gendered, regional, and social inequalities can be stark. Of course, none of these generalisations is universally true. If they were, then Africa might indeed approximate the *Economist*'s hopeless continent. It is not – and the three sections into which this book is divided in their several ways show why this is so.

The five case studies of past and present that set the scene in Section I, are studies, above all, of changes in identity, trust, and inequalities, not of rigid and unyielding division. The seven chapters in Section II offer reasoned ideas for policies and institutions that are designed to encourage social cohesion. However, because they are in conflict with the political interest of incumbent elites whose power has been built on division, these ideas will be hard to put into sustained political practice. In Section III, which ties the book together, the first chapter shows how urgent and varied are the various areas of social and economic policy that can build on cross-cutting, inclusive, identities – of gender, class, and age – that animate all civil relations throughout Africa. Whether the policies and institutions discussed in Section II are introduced and sustained depends in large part on whether these nonsectarian identities can be persuaded to become active, inclusive and powerful political constituencies.

To turn then to Section I, Lonsdale's chapter on Kenya (Chapter 1) and Mustapha's on Nigeria (Chapter 2) well illustrate the political contingency of ethnic loyalties and their historical variability. No imaginable future can, therefore, be declared impossible, a conclusion that is reinforced by the reading of the common citizenship that has emerged in Tanzania, as analysed by Ndulu, Mbowe, and Hunter (Chapter 3). The post-Apartheid South African story, as told by Hino, Leibbrandt, Ratimose, Shifa, and Soudien (Chapter 4), further

reinforces this theme. The identities of race and ethnic groups became more mutually inclusive with the birth of a democratic nation, but have turned more exclusive again, partly because of an increase in inequality between racial and ethnic groups whose relations are historically difficult and partly because of growing social inequality within them. The first chapters rely, implicitly, on the understanding that all group identities are to some extent fluid and mixed, not easily classified or measurable. The last chapter in Section I, by Berman and Takahashi, thus dismisses the Ethnolinguistic Fractionalisation Index as a basis for an analysis of Africa's situation. Berman and Takahashi place ethnic conflict in Africa in a global context and argue that such conflict is not the source of the crisis, "but a response to the impact of globalization on historic vertical and horizontal cleavages and a growing threat to social cohesion" (Chapter 5). The solution to ethnic conflict must therefore be found in part of "a global approach to achieving greater equity and security for the populations of all nations".

Section II explores different aspects of our approach to those futures. Stewart starts us off by showing that there is no necessary conflict between individual, social, or regional equality and economic growth because a more equal distribution will tend to improve public services more widely and, with them, social cohesion and political peace (Chapter 6). Ranis makes a similar case for the deconcentration and devolution of executive state power, the competition for the exclusive enjoyment of which is often held responsible for many of Africa's interethnic conflicts (Chapter 7). Amanor then discusses sub-Saharan Africa's perhaps most fundamental challenge: the reform of its many intricate systems of land tenure. If property rights are rationalised for greater productivity, many relations of trust stand to be destroyed, and many identities threatened (Chapter 8). Educational reform would be equally complex and controversial. Kramon and Posner show how closely unequal access to education can be related to the regional partisanship of power (Chapter 9); and Kuppens and Langer's proposals for multicultural education would challenge some current patterns of power. Given past histories of inequality and its conflicts, the teaching of history must be a matter of deep controversy (Chapter 10). But Rassool shows us just how vital the rememorialisation of past injustice is if subjected people are to recover their trust in the state and emerge from a hurt and resentful identity (Chapter 11). Mustapha's second contribution to the book is unblinking in its discussion of

how difficult greater social cohesion will be to build, even where the political will exists (Chapter 12).

Section III nonetheless rounds the discussion up on a cautiously hopeful note. Aryeetey and de-Graft Aikins remind us just how varied Africa's many interest groups and identities can be, how rapidly urban and religious contexts are creating new and possibly less manipulable, more critical, publics (Chapter 13). In the last chapter, Langer and Lonsdale draw out the main conclusions emerging from the different contributions to this book and reflect on the way forward in terms of policy and reforms to establish more cohesive futures in Africa.

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