Rethinking the Main Theories of Ethnic Conflict

Afa'anwi Ma'abo Che
Kampala International University (KIU), Uganda

Abstract

Independently, the two main theories of ethnic conflict, primordialism and instrumentalism, cannot satisfactorily explain and predict ethnic conflicts. While primordialists focus on mere 'differences in ethnic identities' as a direct source of ethnic conflict, instrumentalists point to 'grievances/frustration' arising from the politicization of ethnic identities to explain ethnic conflicts. This article propounds an interactive model wherein identity and frustration interrelate to increase insidious group cohesion and propensity to ethnic violence. Burundi's violent ethnic conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi following the assassination of President Melchior Ndadaye in 1993 is reconstructed and depicted as a function of mutually reinforcing primordialist and instrumentalist sentiments.

Keywords: Ethnic Conflict, Ethnic Identity, Primordialism, Instrumentalism, Burundi

Introduction:

Violent conflicts with an ethnic dimension – be they ethno-nationalist conflicts or ethno-political conflicts over resources and political power – are an extensively studied social phenomenon. Academic insight on the problem of ethnicity follows two fundamental lines of thought: one, primordialist and the other, instrumentalist. This article attempts a succinct dichotomization between the two and outlines an ethnic conflict explanatory model wherein there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between 'ethnic identity differences' and 'grievances/frustration', core concepts under primordialism and instrumentalism respectively. To illustrate its utility, the model is applied to explain Burundi's ethnic conflict following the assassination President Malchior Ndadaye in 1993.

Primordialism vs. Instrumentalism:
The Primordiality of Ethnicity:

Primordialists put emphasis on ethnic identities as the 'direct' cause of ethnic conflicts. For them, ethnic violence is an age-old 'natural' phenomenon that is fundamentally rooted on deep, irreconcilable differences in ethnic identities (Esteban et al., 2012). Primordialist reasoning builds on the concept of ethnocentrism which makes 'in-group/out-group' distinctions to explain discriminatory behaviour. Ethnocentrism relates to a predisposition to treat one's own group (the in-group) favourably. Although some scholars like Hammond

and Axelrod (2006, p. 927) strictly restrict themselves to a definition solely focused on in-group favouritism, ethnocentric behaviour is usually paradoxically accompanied by xenophobia; that is, discrimination against out-groups (Harowitz, 1985, p.7). The predilection to behave ethnocentrically is a function of [myths of] 'common blood' (Vanhanen, 1999). For Hammond and Axelrod (2006, p. 926), it is tied to myths of own group virtuousness and superiority. Ethnocentrism breeds in-group hospitality and cooperation on the one hand and hostility and conflict against out-groups on the other. Primordialists build on the concept of ethnocentrism to assert a natural proclivity to ethnic conflicts as a function of differential ethnic identities. Ethnic identities, according to adherents of the primordiality of ethnicity, are not a product of modernity, but are grounded in history and are 'fixed' across time and space; they are passed on genealogically, from generation to generation (Geertz, 1973). Thus, ethnic conflicts are principally a substance of 'ancient antipathies'; not a subjective offshoot of competitive modern politics.

Primordial conceptions of ethnicity are rare among Political Scientists. One exceptional political scholar subscribing to a primordial view of the problem of ethnicity is Tatu Vanhanen. In his 'Domestic Ethnic Conflict and Ethnic Nepotism' (1999), Vanhanen attributes the universality of ethnic conflicts to ethnic nepotism – a concept closely associated with ethnocentrism – defined as a tendency to favour kin over non-kin. Due to man's evolved predisposition to ethnic nepotism, people tend to align themselves along ethnic lines in ideological conflicts (p. 57). Hence the following hypotheses: a) Ethnic interest conflicts arise from ethnic differences; b) The more ethnically divided a society is, the more political and other interest conflicts are channeled into ethnic lines (p. 58). The scholar's thesis suggests that differences in ethnic identities are powerful enough to generate conflicts, as a function of ethnic nepotism. However, in what appears to be a self-acknowledgement of the weakness of his primordialist perspective, Vanhanen (p. 58) avers that a complete relationship between ethnic heterogeneity and conflicts cannot be established. Obviously, this is due to the potency of many other factors (political and socio-economic) underlying ethnic conflicts. Vanhanen's explicit recognition of the explanatory significance of other [intervening] factors mitigates the discrepancy between his identity-essentialist standpoint and instrumentalist thought.

The Instrumentalist Understanding of Ethnicity:

The direct effect of collective ethnic identity is debunked by scholars who subscribe to an instrumentalist view of ethnic conflicts. For instrumentalists, the effect of ethnic identity is indirect; not direct: Ethnic conflicts arise only when ethnic identities are politicized to generate political and socio-economic advantages for an ethnic group at the cost of depriving or neglecting other ethnies. Accordingly, instrumentalists point to factors other than ethnic identity to explain ethnic conflicts and civil conflicts in general. These include, security concerns (Posen, 1993); competition and inequality (Gurr 1994); greed (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004) and more generally, discontent. Differences in identity alone are not a satisfactory explanation for ethnic conflicts. After all, instrumentalist reasoning conceives

ethnic identity as 'malleable', meaning it is, subject to social construction and adaptation to changing circumstances.

The flexibility of identity latently undercuts the permanency of ancient antipathies. Far from being a natural, permanent and universal phenomenon, instrumentalists regard ethnic conflict as a product of human action subject to temporal and geographical variation. As such, instrumentalists are circumspect about making sweeping-statements on ethnic conflicts. Nevertheless, they agree that ethnic conflicts are not reducible to ethnic loyalties. 'Even in the most severely divided society, there are also other issues…Everywhere, there exists buyers and sellers, officials and citizens, co-workers, and members of professions; all of these roles are to some degree independent of the ethnic origin of their incumbents' (Horowitz, 1985, p. 7). So, 'by itself, ethnicity is not a cause of violent conflict' (Lake & Rothchild, 1998, p. 7). It only becomes a source of violence when subjected to political manipulation.

Of all the above-mentioned theses on the issue of ethnicity, Posen's (1993) essay, 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict', is possibly the least cogent and least widely applicable. To elaborate, a critical review is in order. Posen jettisons primordial accounts of ethnic conflicts for an instrumentalist one that incorporates remarkable acumen from a central concept in Realist World Politics – the 'security dilemma'. According to the author, ethnic groups responsible for their own security exist in a condition of anarchy. As such, they perceive out-group cohesion threatening. To counter perceived threats, each ethnie 'arms' itself militarily and ideologically, thereby unwittingly creating a general situation of insecurity.

But Posen's 'domestic security dilemma thesis' is not irrefutable. Beyond the author's Eastern European illustrative cases – particularly that pertaining to antagonistic Serb-Croat relations following the disintegration of Yugoslavia (p. 35) – ethnic groups seldom exist as sovereign entities. Typically, they exist as component elements of larger political units (such as empires in the imperial era and states in the contemporary era). As constituent members of the state, their security is virtually the state's exclusive responsibility. Accordingly, ethnic groups are less likely to embark on self-securitization except perhaps in resistance to 'internal colonialism'. But even when ethnic groups in sovereign states resort to militarization, there tends to be a sharp imbalance in state and ethnic capabilities. Going by the same Realist theoretical framework employed by Posen, it is to be expected that an asymmetry in military potentials will avert violent confrontations as the ethnie would be wary of disproportionate aggression from the state – the relatively stronger opponent.

However, Realism, as portrayed by some Africanists, is incompatible with African realities (Dunn & Shaw, 2001). In much of the so-called 'Third World', particularly with regards to sub-Saharan Africa, ethno-political conflicts are less about military capabilities and more about the unaccommodating/repressive character of political regimes. Tensions arising from ethnic grievances tend to escalate when government fails to offer a 'listening ear' to those grievances. The absence of strong institutions to accommodate and redress

ethnic grievances renders recourse to force inevitable. Genocide in Rwanda and ethno-nationalist violence preceding the disintegration of Sudan are arguably the outcome of weak institutions and repressive government behavior. Secessionist violence in Cameroon suggests Southern Cameroons' nationalist ideologues may have jettisoned their long-standing pacific slogan ('the force of argument') for a more bellicose one ('the argument of force') in response to government repression. The disproportion between sophisticated state military weaponry on the one hand and unarmed or rudimentarily armed ethnies on the other is hardly a disincentive for violent rebellion by the latter. Ethno-political violence within instrumentalist thought is more a product of ethnic frustration than it is of a 'security dilemma'.

Critique of Primordialist and Instrumentalist Interpretations: Towards an Interactive Model:

In retrospect, primordialism centrally emphasizes: (1) the direct effect of time-honored collective ethnic identities; and (2) historical depth and global breath (permanence and ubiquity) of ethnic conflicts. Conversely, instrumentalism highlights: (1) the fluidity and indirect effect of ethnic identities; and (2) temporal and spatial variation in the dynamics of ethnic conflicts as a function of proximate factors. On separate grounds, neither line of thought provides a wholly satisfactory account of ethnic conflicts. Viewing loyalties to ethnic identities as a direct source of conflicts is an oversimplification of the problem of ethnicity. If identities are primordially related to conflicts, then as Gurr (1994, p. 348) suggests, an explanation is needed for geographical and temporal variations in the occurrence, number and intensity of ethnic conflicts. A surge in the volume of ethnically mobilized conflicts – occurring mainly in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe – in the last few decades begs for explication from primordialists. Focus on proximate factors enables instrumentalists to easily account for variance in the dynamics of ethnic conflicts. However, instrumentalism is not without a challenge: if ethnicity is malleable and ethnic conflicts arise from human political action, then a rational explanation is required of why ethnically channeled political interests have been more hazardous lately than they were in the distant past. More generally, 'an explanation is needed…why appeals to interests defined in ethnic terms are instrumentally more effective now than they were several decades ago' (Gurr, 1994, p. 348).

Group Cohesion: A Symbiotic Link between Primordialist and Instrumentalist Thought:

The dichotomy between primordialism and instrumentalism appears obsolete vis-à-vis received wisdom on political violence. According to cogent research findings, three linked factors (common identity – frustration – opportunity) are vital for the onset of group violence (Ellingsen, 2000, pp. 229–230). Ellingsen plausibly, depicts frustration as the direct outcome of 'relative deprivation' and it is amplified by repression. Deprivation/grievance/repression breeds frustration which in turn occasions rebellion. But the relationship between the latter two is not straight forward. In fact, one scholar has averred that frustration is 'insufficient' to create rebellion while another opined it is

'unnecessary' (Gurr & Tilly, cited by Ellingsen, 2000, 230). Unquestionably, it takes a moment of opportunity for frustration to induce aggression. Opportunities potentially arise from periods of out-group weakness or in-group strength.

Strikingly, the above linked triad becomes fragmented or disjointed when focus is on ethnic conflicts. While Primordialists lay emphasis on [ethnic] identity, instrumentalists accentuate grievances/frustration arising from the politicization of ethnicity. The following paragraphs aim to show an interconnection between these juxtaposed standpoints in a 'model' wherein identity and grievance interrelate to increase insidious group cohesion, with democratization presenting a 'golden opportunity' for large scale ethnic violence. To illustrate the model's utility, genocidal violence in Burundi following the assassination of that country's first democratically elected president in 1993 is reconstructed and projected as a product of ethnic cohesion induced by mutually reinforcing genealogical and instrumentalist sentiments.

(A) Frustration Yields Ethnic Cohesion (Instrumentalism Reinforces Primordialism):

According to instrumentalist thought, ethnic domination/discrimination/exclusion yields ethnic frustration. Frustration triggers rebellion. However, in-between are neglected salient forces operating to increase cohesion and a crystallization of the identity of the oppressed ethnie. As crucial as familial interactions are for the formation of ethnic identity (Umana-Taylor, Bhanot, & Shin, 2006), so are they for the dissemination of an ideology of hate against the oppressing ethnie. In addition to [informal] familial interactions, 'formal' hate propaganda may also be developed and propagated via print and air media and through ethnic political parties. Formal and informal interactions increase 'ethnic bonding' thereby instrumentally crystallizing the group's identity and facilitating mobilization for collective action to end or reverse discrimination. Without cohesion, frustration is less likely to cause severe and sustained large-scale rebellion. Thus, vis-à-vis ethnic rebellion, the primordiality of identity is bolstered by the instrumentality of frustration-driven cohesion.

The potential for such grievances against the out-group to yield internal cohesion is conditional on pre-existing ethno-political polarization. This condition stresses a distinction between 'heterogeneity' and 'polarization', with the latter having a stronger and more direct influence on internal cohesion and mobilization for violence. Ethno-political polarization is a product of politicized ethnicity and is more perilous than heterogeneity. Heterogeneity is crucial but is not a sufficient condition for ethnic conflicts. Ethnic groups must be polarized for heterogeneity to occasion violent conflict. Polarization provides a 'sufficient' condition for violent conflict. The greater danger posed by polarization relative to heterogeneity is recognized by Collier and Hoeffler (1998, p. 571) thus:

> *Highly fractionalized societies are no more prone to war than highly homogeneous ones. The danger of civil war [only] arises when the society is polarized into [at least] two groups…Polarized societies have around a 50% higher probability of civil war than either homogeneous or highly fractionalised societies.*

When ethnicity is exploited for political purposes, ethnies become polarized as ethnic boundaries metamorphose to ethno-political divisions. In ethno-political systems, ethnic groups consider political power key to ethnic domination. Bitter sentiments caused by out-group domination serve as a source of in-group solidarity and underpin participation in ethnic violence. To further hurt the out-group, especially where post-violence inquiries are conducted to identify and punish master-minders, survivors may formulate, manipulate or conceal evidence to incriminate adversarial group members and exonerate own-group belligerents. Participation in violence, evidence-fabrication, manipulation and suppression are all functions of an interaction between loyalties to ethnic identity and instrumentally imposed grievances.

(B) Cohesion Yields Frustration:

Group cohesion is a major indicator of an ethnie's 'offensive military potential' (Posen, 1993, p. 29) Thus, grievance-borne solidarity among members of the marginalised ethnie is likely to be perceived threatening by the politically dominant ethnie. Perceived threats constitute a source of frustration for the governing group. To counter threats posed by out-group cohesion, elites of the dominant group may resort to 'pacific assimilation'; 'divide and rule' or violent suppression. Since dominant ethnies in polarized systems generally strive to maintain ethnic supremacy, there is a real dangerous proclivity to respond to perceived external threats with violent repression. Collective ethnic identity (accentuated by primordialists) is crystallised by group cohesion. If [external] cohesion is actually a veritable source of [internal] frustration, then the 'instrumentality of frustration' (in generating ethnic conflicts) can be said to be symbiotically linked to 'primordial identities'. Together, (A) and (B) reveal an interdependent relationship between core concepts in primordialism (Collective identity) and instrumentalism (grievance/frustration). To the extent that these concepts are concerned, the two lines of thought are not mutually exclusive.

Burundi: An Empirical Application of the Model:

Democratic uprisings across Africa in the early 1990s took the form of mass ethnic violence in some of the continent's polarized states. The wind of change came along as an opportunity to challenge the political supremacy of hitherto dominant ethnies. In Burundi and neighbouring Rwanda, the intensity and magnitude of ethnic rebellion was unprecedented in African history. In fact both countries have been described as 'textbook cases' on ethnic violence (Uvin, 1999, p. 253). The case of Burundi is typically representative of the dynamics and perilous consequences of democratising with politicised ethnicity. This justifies focus on Burundi to illustrate the 'interactive model' outlined above. While some scholars advance primordialist accounts of the carnage in Burundi, others approach it from an instrumentalist standpoint. The present section attempts a reconstruction of the conflict with a view to analytically illustrate how both interpretations are interdependent.

Linking Primordialist and Instrumentalist Accounts of Burundi's Ethnic Conflict:

Violence following the political assassination of President Melchior Ndadaye in 1993 has been explained along separate primordialist and instrumentalist lines of thought. This dichotomy problematically breaks an otherwise logical [identity – frustration – opportunity] explanatory model that offers a 'holistic' understanding political conflict. Ndikumana's (1998) 'Institutional Failure and Ethnic Conflicts in Burundi' and Uvin's (1999) 'Ethnicity and Power in Burundi and Rwanda' constitute, respectively, classical representations of instrumentalist and genealogical/primordialist interpretations of Burundi's thirteen year ethnically-charged civil conflict. The former, an Economist, attributes the conflict to the monopolization of state power by [Tutsi] ethnic elites: 'Because key institutions such as the military, the judiciary and the education system are controlled by ethnic and regional entities, the population feels alienated and disappointed…'(p.31).

The 'privatisation' or domination of state institutions by Tutsi elites occasioned a divorce between the state and its majoritarian Hutu citizenry. Due to this disconnect, the Burundian government was unwilling and or unable to deliver 'public goods' to the expectation of its population. Owing to the ethnic exclusionary nature of Burundi's government, a patronage system emerged, wherein state institutions were used to generate private wealth for Tutsi elites and to protect their selfish interests. As such, the people felt deprived of 'public benefits' that accrue from state citizenship. In instrumentalist terms, relative deprivation leads to frustration and frustration leads to rebellion. By implication therefore, instrumentalism is at the heart of Ndikumana's understanding of Burundi's ethnic crisis.

Conversely, Uvin (1999) projects the genealogical dimension of the war by highlighting the role of 'mutual fear' (of Hutu – Tutsi identities) in the build up to the post-assassination massacres. Past antipathies escalating to violence in 1965 and 1972 'crystallized Hutu and Tutsi identities and created a climate of permanent mutual fear' (p.258). Affection for these collective identities motivated ethnic violence in 1993 in response to fear of repression and extermination. Hutus feared repression whilst the Tutsi power-holding minority feared extermination. The primordiality of ethnic affection and mutual fear associated with past bloodbaths is evidenced by the statements of two Hutu observers (quoted by Lemarchand, 1994, xiv): One, a clergyman, reported – ''When [W]e told them not to spill blood, [T]hey said 'Look, since 1972 it is [O]ur blood that's being spilled! Now [W]e hear that president Ndadaye has been killed. If [T]hey did that, that means that [W]e are next…'' The other affirmed – ''Back in 1972 [T]hey got [U]s, but this time [T]hey wont!...''

Both instrumentalist and primordialist perspectives are credible but are not mutually exclusive. There is an interconnection between the two. Over the colonial and postcolonial periods, 'deprivation' and 'mutual fear' have interacted to increase insidious cohesion among Hutus and among Tutsis. Antagonism between these collective identities only emerged as a function of 'divide et impera' Belgian colonial policies, and was sustained by military rule after independence. The agony of political and socio-economic discrimination

suffered by Hutus increased a sense of 'togetherness' among Hutus, thus crystallising a Hutu identity which prior to colonialism was loosely associated with subsistence farming.

Deprivation was therefore instrumental to Hutu solidarity and underpinned mobilisation along ethnic lines following the assassination of Ndadaye. As Hutu frustration intensified, Tutsi in-group affection increased. Prior to the assassination, Tutsi power-holders, whether in the military, judiciary or presidency, were always concerned about the odds of losing political power to Hutus. This contributed to anti-Hutu sentiments within Tutsi power circles in particular and among Tutsis in general. Anti-Hutu sentiments were usually disseminated via formal and informal channels, including the use of tracts like the 'Seven Rules of Tutsi Conduct' which explicitly ostracized Hutus (Lemarchand 1994, xvii). Like deprivation, mutual fear borne of past antipathies played a key role in generating cohesion among Hutus and among Tutsis. Following the assassination, memories of past massacres resurfaced and in-group solidarity was of the essence to counter out-group threats. Swift mobilization for violence by Hutus and counter violence by Tutsis could not have happened without significant levels of cohesion within the two camps.

Summarily, a complex interaction between deprivation and mutual fear increased ethnic cohesion. This interaction provides a symbolic connection between instrumentalist and genealogical accounts of Burundi's thirteen-year ethnic conflict. In line with this connection, any measures developed by the current Burundian government to solve the country's ethnic problems ought to address both genealogical and constructivist dimensions of Hutu – Tutsi antagonism. Accordingly, national reconciliation programmes should not be restricted to 'preaching' ethnic tolerance, but should also be broadened to investigate, identify and punish perpetrators of ethnic discrimination. This would ease the ethnic healing process and deter acts of impunity in the future.

References:

1. Collier, P., and Hoeffler, A. (1998). On Economic Causes of Civil War, *Oxford Economic Papers*, 50 (4), pp. 563 – 573.
2. Collier, P., and Hoeffler, A. (2004). Greed and Grievance in Civil War, *Oxford Economic Papers*, 56 (4), pp. 563 – 595.
3. Dunn, K., and Shaw, T. (eds). (2001). *Africa's Challenge to International Relations Theory*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
4. Ellingsen, T. (2000). Colourful Community or Ethnic Witches' Brew? Multiethnicity and Domestic Conflict During and After the Cold War, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 44 (2), pp. 228 – 249.
5. Esteban, J., Mayoral, L., and Ray, D. (2012). Ethnicity and Conflict: An Empirical Study, *American Economic Review*, 102(4), pp. 1310 – 1342.
6. Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books.
7. Gurr, R. (1994). Peoples Against States: Ethnopolitical Conflict and the Changing World System, *International Studies Quarterly,* 38 (3), pp. 347 – 377.

8. Hammond, R., and Axelrod, R. (2006). The Evolution of Ethnocentrism, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 50 (6), pp. 926 – 936.

9. Horowitz, D. (1985). *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, California: University of California Press.

10. Lake, D., and Rothchild, D. (eds). (1998). *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion and Escalation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

11. Lemarchand, R. (1994). *Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide*, Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press.

12. Ndikumana, L. (1998). Institutional Failure and Ethnic Conflicts in Burundi, *African Studies Review*, 41 (1), pp. 29 – 47.

13. Posen, B. (1993). The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict, *Survival*, 35 (1), pp. 27 – 47.

14. Umana-Taylor, A., Bhanot, R., and Shin, N. (2006). Ethnic Identity Formation during Adolescence: The Critical Role of Families, *Journal of Family Issues*, 27 (3), pp. 390 – 414.

15. Uvin, P. (1999). Ethnicity and Power in Burundi and Rwanda: Different Paths to Mass Violence, *Comparative Politics*, 31 (3), pp. 253 – 271.

16. Vanhanen, T. (1999). Domestic Ethnic Conflict and Ethnic Nepotism: A Comparative Analysis, *Journal of Peace Research*, 36 (1), pp. 55 – 73.