Collective Identity and the Construction of Political Markets in Africa

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Introduction

In competitive political markets,1 citizens make political choices that reflect their collective needs; and political actors (parties, state organs, civil society) make choices that maximise their gains in terms of control and influence over the citizens. Political markets could therefore be interpreted to include any situation where exchange of political opportunities between citizens and parties takes place.2 Applying these economic tools to the ongoing political participation debate in Africa leads to the idea of political behaviour based on identity as a key concept for understanding the anthropology of society and politics. In making political decisions, citizens take account of their sociological affinities with political contenders and in return they expect to obtain from elected officials some kind of socio-economic privileges.

In Africa, a sense of people-hood is instrumental to group formation and political expression. Political life is conducted through a complex web of social forces and inter-identity relationships. It is difficult to understand the state in Africa, and consequently to assess its capacity to formulate and implement policy, without probing its social underpinnings. In other words, if government structures furnish the context for official interactions in the public domain, social groups constitute the fundamental stumbling blocks of political action and interchange.3

Most studies of contemporary Africa have emphasized the importance of collective identity in forging the social roots of electoral behaviour and the structure of public institutions. In spite of monopolistic resistance of governments, African peoples have always tried to base their political participation on identity issues such as tribe, ethnicity, race, culture, gender and religion to name but a few. Although African governments have officially succeeded in ignoring the impact of identity on the construction of political behaviour, identity politics has always existed, even

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1 I borrow the concept of “political markets” from Célestin Monga, *The Anthropology of Anger Civil Society and Democracy in Africa* (Célestin Monga and Lynda L Fleck trans, Lynn Rienner, London) 2-4.
though in a form different to what can be captured by the traditional tools of analysis available in political science. For this reason African states themselves are often very different kinds of organisations to those the conventional study of development politics envisages.

In the political evolution of nations and the emergence of identity, patterns of sub-identity survival occur in such a way as to appear to mitigate the growth of political order and the strengthening of national identity. Social interactions between the population and political institutions lack an effective basis and carry the seeds of political instability. An analysis of the stages of nation building and a wider range of collective identity is needed to understand political order and political conflicts. Political participation and voting behaviour are in constant change and are the product of the continuing pressures of social relationships coexisting in the nation. Hostilities may emerge as a result of competition for power, status, and wealth within the political system.

Indeed, it is arguable whether one can speak of a true African politics in the strict sense of the word, for the inconsistencies of state officials in both discourse and action are so heinous that the very existence of their strategy to use identity as a tool for political mobilisation may prove ineffective, irrational and hypothetical. A crossroad of peoples, cultures and civilisations, Africa has a profusion of types of social structures and abounds in identity potentials. Africa represents a mosaic of states whose relations, though complex and diverse, are interconnected. Africa is so original and specific to the construction of development politics that it deserves to be analysed as a whole. Although African countries have undergone separate development experiences, it is the intention of this paper to study African countries holistically. African countries underwent similar colonial experiences and social evolution patterns; these have shaped their political sociology. As a result, most African countries, irrespective of linguistic, religious or cultural heritage, have stunning similarities as far as the market value of collective identity on the political market is concerned.

This paper analyses the role of collective identity from the perspective of political sociology, which is concerned with the structure and dynamics of identity as an imperative source of political behavioural change. It is an attempt to understand a specific aspect of African politics in a theoretically insightful and methodological manner. In doing so, the paper aims to provide a comparative study of the group basis of political decision-making in Africa. It examines these influences by tracking the political patterns of collective identity over time and across African nations.

Proposing an outline of what can be called a sociological construction of internal politics, I will shed some light on the continent’s long tradition of collective political participation. By analysing political participation from a group perspective, I will show that the quest for democratic change in Africa is deeply entrenched and that the ongoing socio-politico failures are the result of collective identity on the construction of citizens’ political behaviour. The history of identity divisions underlies the internal weakness of African states and leaves them vulnerable to internal fragmentation and external penetration.