Ethnicity as a political resource

Indigenous rights movements in Africa

Michaela Pelican

Three lines of argument have been prominent in the study of ethnicity, depending on the scholarly viewpoint: first, that ethnicity is a collective identity that is based on shared meanings and cultural practices and that engenders a sense of belonging (Geertz 1963); second, that ethnicity is socially constructed and may be used or abused for political purposes (Cohen 1974; Brubaker 2002); and third, that ethnicity emerges from the interplay of different groups and is most pronounced at ethnic boundaries (Barth 1969). All three approaches have their merits, and they have been complemented by a fourth argument – that ethnicity ought to be studied in a historical perspective so as to understand its emergence and transformation over time, as well as the factors that have contributed to it (Comaroff 1995; Lentz 1995).

In this chapter, I will focus on indigeneity as a particular category of ethnicity that over the past decades has gained global relevance and that here serves as an example of ethnicity as a political resource. While indigeneity entails the various aspects of ethnicity outlined above, I argue that its political dimensions – exemplified in the global indigenous rights movement – are its central feature, particularly in the African context.

Unlike ethnic identities that are tied to certain territories and peoples, indigeneity is a rather abstract and relational category. In this regard, it shares similarities with the notion of autochthony, as discussed by Geschiere (2005). Historically, the notion of indigenous peoples emerged in the context of European expansion into the Americas and the Pacific. In the 1960s, it was adopted by the United Nations as a legal mechanism to protect and empower minority groups that had been marginalized on the basis of cultural difference (Niezen 2003; Minde 2008). In this process, it became necessary to

conceptualize 'indigenous peoples' in a way that would be applicable to a variety of historical and regional contexts.

Indigeneity has been a highly contested concept, particularly in Africa and Asia, where indigenous rights movements have only recently gained significance (Hodgson 2002a; Uddin et al. forthc.). Within the past twenty years, many ethnic and minority groups in Africa have laid claim to indigeneity on the basis of their political marginalization and cultural distinctiveness in their country or region of residence. They have drawn inspiration from the United Nations definition of indigenous peoples as a legal category with collective entitlements, and many have linked up with the global indigenous rights movement.

Concurrently, there has been an extensive debate within Africanist anthropology on the analytical usefulness of the concept. Moreover, several African governments have questioned its applicability to the African continent, arguing that all population groups may count as indigenous. With the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 conceptual criticism has abated. While some governments have remained skeptical of ethnicity as a valid basis for differential political and economic treatment, many have made attempts to integrate the indigenous rights discourse into their policies and development programs. This contribution will focus on three case studies, from Botswana, Tanzania, and Cameroon, to outline different uses of indigeneity as a political resource.

CONTROVERSIES OVER INDIGENEITY: ACADEMIC AND POLITICAL DEBATES

In his comprehensive study on the history of the global indigenous rights movement, Niezen (2003; 2010) makes clear the constructed nature of indigeneity; he actually prefers the term 'indigenism', to highlight its character as a political movement. He states that "Indigenous Peoples were first the citizens of an idea before they became members of an international community with distinct rights" (ibid 2010: 135). That is, the term 'indigenous peoples' was initially introduced as a legal category, and only later filled with meaning. Understood primarily as a political notion, the term may refer to different subjects in different historical and regional contexts.

The application of the indigenous rights discourse to the African continent instigated much debate, among both academics and political actors (cp. also Feyissa and Zeleke in this volume). While in the Pacific and the Americas, indigenous activism has a long history and the status of 'first peoples' is

generally uncontested, in Africa the situation is different. Here it is much more problematic and controversial to define which groups may count as 'indigenous', as the African continent looks back on long and complex histories of migration, assimilation, and conquest. Furthermore, as Kopytoff (1987) has demonstrated in his classic essay, African societies tend to reproduce themselves at their internal frontiers, thus continuously creating and re-creating a dichotomy between 'original inhabitants' and 'latecomers' along which political prerogatives are negotiated. This recurrent process does not allow for a permanent and clear-cut distinction of 'first nations' versus 'dominant societies', as implied by the universal notion of indigenous peoples. Accordingly, some anthropologists have criticized the concept of indigenous peoples as inapplicable to the African context, and as promoting an essentialist ideology of culture and identity (e.g., Kuper 2003; 2005). Conversely, others have claimed that these complexities have effectively been reflected in the working definitions of the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the United Nations (UN), which emphasize cultural distinctiveness, political marginalization, and self-identification as fundamental criteria. In their view, the above criticism is not only unjustified, but counterproductive both to the anthropological endeavor and to 'indigenous realities' (e.g., Kenrick/Lewis 2004: 8). A conciliatory approach has been suggested by Barnard (2004; 2006), who questions the validity of 'indigenous peoples' as an anthropological concept, while recognizing its utility as a political and legal tool in the struggle for collective rights. I agree with Barnard, and I contend that at this point – more than ten years after the initial debate – the focus has shifted from debating the validity of the concept to studying the social dynamics of the indigenous rights movement in different parts of Africa.

Concurrent to the academic debate of the 2000s, many African governments have been opposed to the concept of indigenous peoples and their entitlement to land, arguing that all Africans are 'indigenous' and should have equal access to natural resources (Lutz 2007). While the deliberative process at the United Nations had its starting point in 1971, it was only in 2007 that it finally culminated in the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. A critical moment occurred in 2006, when a group of African states (in particular Namibia, Botswana, and Nigeria) took exception to some formulations of the declaration (Oldham/Frank 2008; Pelican 2009). Subsequently, the African UN member states agreed to maintain a united position and issued a draft aide mémoire, specifying their concerns regarding the definition of indigenous peoples, and the issues of self-determination, ownership of land and resources, establishment of distinct political and economic institutions, and national and territorial integrity. Moreover, they stated that for some member

states the declaration might pose fundamental constitutional and political problems, rendering its implementation impossible. Faced with these objections, the African Union and the Global Indigenous Peoples' Caucus engaged in a series of negotiations. Eventually, the African Group agreed on nine amendments to the declaration, two of which addressed the issue of definition and the possible misinterpretation of the right to self-determination. Finally, in September 2007, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the General Assembly with the support of the African group, but with four negative votes from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

As rightly noted by Oldham and Frank (2008), the objections of the African Group take us to the center of the anthropological controversy over the concept of indigenous peoples. As argued by Suzman (2002) and others, the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has been particularly problematic for southern African states, such as Botswana and Namibia, which – as a way of distancing themselves from apartheid politics –excluded the provision for differential treatment of their citizens on the basis of race or ethnicity. Conversely, in countries like Cameroon, where ethnic and regional favoritism have long been vital features of national politics (Bayart 1984; Kofele-Kale 1986), the concept of indigenous peoples is much less problematic. However, the Declaration's implementation has not been without problems both in Cameroon and in other parts of the continent.

DIFFERENT TRAJECTORIES OF INDIGENOUS RIGHTS MOVEMENTS IN AFRICA

To give an idea of the varied experiences and political trajectories of 'indigenous peoples' in Africa, I will outline three case studies: San hunter-gatherers in Botswana, Maasai pastoralists in Tanzania, and Mbororo pastoralists in Cameroon. While basing my elaborations on the Mbororo case on my own research (Pelican 2009; 2010; 2015), I will draw on the extensive works of Maruyama (2003; 2010; 2012) and Hodgson (2002b; 2009; 2011) to analyze the situations of the San and Maasai. For the purpose of comparison, I will not go into the details of each case, but will highlight their characteristics as outlined by each author. I argue that there is no single, coherent indigenous rights movement in Africa, but a variety of movements which are shaped by their divergent national and local contexts.

The San of Botswana: Between international advocacy and local coping strategies

The San of Botswana were among the first African peoples to join the global indigenous rights movement. As Maruyama and others have argued, their participation has largely been stimulated by external actors (Hitchcock 2002; Suzman 2002; Maruyama 2010). Furthermore, while claiming indigenous rights has benefited them in terms of access to land, it has engendered political and social tensions that have motivated many San to withdraw from political activism and to focus on local coping strategies.

The San are known as nomadic hunter-gatherers who live in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Angola. For a long time, they have experienced displacement and impoverishment as a result of various factors, including the intrusion of Bantu-speaking agro-pastoralists, European colonialism, large-scale infrastructural projects, and land concessions to private companies. Today, they count among the most marginalized ethnic groups in southern Africa. A large part of the San population lives in Botswana, in particular the Central Kalahari region. Their case has attracted much public and scholarly attention because of their displacement from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) and their successful court case against the Botswanan government in 2006 (e.g. Hitchcock 2002; Saugestadt 2011).

Being opposed to the South African apartheid system, Botswana early on adopted the ideal of a non-racial democracy. The Tswana language and culture were promoted as the national norm, and socio-economic disparity (rather than ethnic difference) was defined as the prime criterion for development measures. In the 1970s, the Remote Area Development Program was introduced to provide special support to marginalized minorities, including the San. It encouraged them to adopt a sedentary lifestyle and thus to integrate into mainstream society. In 1986, the government decided to relocate the remaining San residents of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve so as to ensure the protection of its fauna and flora, and to provide them with infrastructural and social services in the nearby government-planned settlements.

Around the same period, the indigenous rights movement began to gain traction in Africa. International NGOs, such as the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) and Survival International, became interested in the situation of the San and encouraged them to form their own local and national NGOs. In contrast to the Botswanan government, they emphasized the aspect of cultural uniqueness, and portrayed the San as an 'indigenous people' at the verge of disappearance if no longer allowed to practice a hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

By 2002 some 3,000 people had been relocated. The government decided to stop providing services in the CKGR, such as water and medical care, and to prevent former residents from returning to the game reserve. In response, local and international NGOs rallied in support of the displaced San and eventually filed a case against the government with the Botswana High Court. After a long process, the High Court passed its ruling in December 2006, stating that the government had illegally evicted the San from their ancestral lands and that the San families listed as complainants should be allowed to return to the CKGR.

The ruling was celebrated by the global indigenous rights movement as a victory for the San. However, research by Maruyama (2010; 2012) shows that its implementation caused unforeseen challenges. Instead of resolving the problem, international intervention contributed to unduly politicizing the matter and confronting the San with the choice of either 'tradition' or 'development' – a binary choice that for many was neither desirable nor practicable. Moreover, as the government was not obliged to provide services to residents in the CKGR, many San were unable to return. Finally, Maruyama noticed frictions within the San community over who was entitled or able to return, thus contributing to incipient socio-economic differentiation. As a result, many San were frustrated with their situation and felt that their fate had largely been defined by external actors, whether the Botswanan government or international NGOs. They gradually redrew from the indigenous rights movement and focused on local coping strategies. While living in government settlements, many San have established nearby bush residences as a strategy to utilize both the social services provided by the development program and the natural resources found in the bush. Moreover, they have developed new forms of mobility and exchange relations that connect settlement and bush, and that contribute to converting both the CKGR and the resettlement site into livable environments (ibid 2003; 2012).

The Maasai of Tanzania: From indigenous rights to pastoralist livelihoods

In Tanzania, it is Maasai pastoralists and Hadza hunter-gatherers who have engaged in the indigenous rights movement since the late 1980s. Here I focus on the Maasai, who have experienced a long history of cultural, economic and political marginalization. They live in the country's arid and semi-arid northeast, an area largely neglected by the government. As Hodgson (2002b) argues, Maasai involvement in the indigenous rights movement should be seen against the background of Tanzania's turn toward democracy and neoliberal economy. On the one hand, it opened up new opportunities for Maasai and others to

organize themselves collectively and to partake in the country's political and economic development. On the other, it exposed them to heightened competition over natural resources and attempts at land appropriation by the state and international investors. Hodgson (2011: 157) describes Maasai political activism of the past twenty years as shifting from discourses of 'indigenous rights' to those of 'pastoralist livelihoods'. In her view, this shift reflects the need for individuals and NGOs to reposition themselves in response to government pressure and changing national and international development frameworks.

In 1989 the Maasai activist Moringe ole Parkipuny participated in the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations in Geneva, Switzerland. He was one of the few educated and politically well-placed Maasai in Tanzania, and the first African to address the UN Working Group. Together with other Maasai men, he then formed the non-governmental Maasai organization KIPOC (Korongoro Integrated People Oriented to Conservation). Around the same period, a second Maasai NGO emerged. By declaring Maasai pastoralists an 'indigenous people', both organizations aimed to secure international as well as national recognition of Maasai cultural and political rights and, most importantly, their access to land. In the subsequent years, two umbrella organizations were created to represent the interests of not only Maasai but also other pastoralist and hunter-gatherer groups, all of whom considered themselves 'indigenous' and 'marginalized peoples'. Yet, driven by donor agendas and the need to secure their own survival, these organizations gradually distanced themselves from their grassroots constituencies. Moreover, they faced rivalries with government institutions who felt sidelined by the NGOs and the international donors (ibid 2002b; 2011: 137–144).

In the early 2000s, the political climate changed and Maasai NGOs were faced with government disapproval. Similar to many African countries, the Tanzanian state was critical of the UN notion of indigenous peoples, and responded unfavorably to Maasai claims to indigeneity and entitlement to land and resources. In consequence, several organizations re-oriented their focus from the international to the national arena. Moreover, they adopted a more pragmatic approach, forgoing political opposition for collaboration with government institutions. They reframed their political struggles, shifting from the use of the language of 'indigenous rights' to that of 'pastoralist livelihoods', and participated in drafting Tanzania's second poverty reduction strategy and the new National Livestock Policy.

In reassessing the effects of Maasai political activism on the lives of Maasai pastoralists, Hodgson (2011: 181–209) comes to a rather disappointing conclusion. While few individuals have benefited, poverty is still a fact, and the

privatization of land is an ongoing issue. At the same, she recognizes that, taking into account the government's enduring neglect of Maasai pastoralists, their organizations faced an enormous challenge in promoting pastoralists' rights and development. Evidently, they could not meet the latter's expectations, and have made limited contributions to reducing the structural inequalities that impact on pastoralists' lives. Furthermore, Hodgson (ibid: 8) draws attention to recent policy changes in the international development establishment which no longer channel funds via NGOs but through government institutions instead. She concludes that despite the global emphasis on civil society and international law, the nation state has retained its position as a crucial player in shaping the realities and development of its populace.

The Mbororo of Cameroon: From 'latecomers' to an 'indigenous people'

The Mbororo are cattle pastoralists who, coming from northern Nigeria, settled in Cameroon in the course of the 19th and 20th century. In this chapter, I focus on the Mbororo in the country's Anglophone northwest who have been at the forefront of Mbororo engagement in the global indigenous rights movement. I argue that while Mbororo identification as 'indigenous' has helped them to strengthen their position within the nation state, it has also engendered disagreement about the meaning of indigeneity both among different population groups and within Mbororo society.

Like Tanzania, Cameroon underwent a democratic transition in the early 1990s which gave room to the formation of ethnic and regional elite associations. At the time, the Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association (MBOSCUDA) was created, and soon became the most effective organ of Mbororo self-representation to the state and international development organizations. Among its primary activities were programs aimed at Mbororo children's education, women's socio-economic empowerment, and the lobbying for Mbororo political and legal entitlements (Duni et al. 2009). In the mid-2000s MBOSCUDA expanded its advocacy work and actively engaged in the global indigenous rights movement. However, their claims to indigeneity have been ambiguous, as they collide with local conceptions of autochthony (Pelican 2008; 2009).

In Cameroon – as in other parts of Western Africa – notions of indigeneity, autochthony, 'firstcomers', and 'natives' have a long history, and frame local conceptions of political hierarchy and legal entitlement (Bayart et al. 2001; Geschiere 2009). In northwest Cameroon, it is local Grassfields societies that consider themselves 'natives' and 'guardians of the land', as they have settled in

the region for several hundred years. Conversely, Mbororo pastoralists arrived only in the early 20th century, and thus have been regarded as 'strangers' and 'latecomers' with limited rights to land and landed resources. On the national level, discourses of autochthony became highlighted in the context of Cameroon's democratization. As stipulated in the country's revised constitution of 1996, priority is given to the protection of the rights of minorities and indigenous populations. In this national political framework, 'indigenous populations' is meant to refer to local groups that consider themselves 'firstcomers', 'natives' or 'autochthones'. It is different from the UN and ILO conception of indigenous peoples, which prioritizes the criteria of self-identification, historical or contemporary experience of marginalization, and cultural difference from the majority population (ILO 1989; Daes 1996).

As confirmed by Tchoumba (2006) in his ILO pilot study on Cameroon, Mbororo pastoralists, as well as Baka and Bagyeli hunter-gatherers of southern and southeastern Cameroon (also known as Pygmies), do fulfil the ILO and UN criteria, and thus may be considered indigenous peoples of Cameroon. Conversely, the Cameroonian government has never officially endorsed the two groups' classification as 'indigenous peoples', but operates with the notion of 'marginal populations'. This complexity of concepts with family resemblance but different political and legal implications has resulted in the puzzling situation in which the Mbororo internationally qualify as an 'indigenous people', while in the local and national contexts they are seen as 'latecomers', 'allochthones', or 'marginalized minority'. We thus have a situation in which international and local interpretations of indigeneity are irreconcilable, and engender new potential for competition and conflict. This has been reflected, for example, in a crisis over leadership in Sabga, one of the most influential Mbororo settlements in northwest Cameroon, in which UN bodies were called in to endorse Mbororo entitlement to self-organization (Pelican 2010). At the same time, critical voices emerged among members of the economically progressive Mbororo elite, who viewed the classification of Mbororo as 'indigenous' as inaptly suggestive of Mbororo backwardness and poverty (ibid 2013).

Thus, similarly to the San and Maasai cases, the Sabga crisis initiated a phase of disenchantment with the indigenous rights discourse. It occasioned the reorientation of Mbororo activists away from overt criticism towards a more pragmatic approach and their collaboration with governmental institutions. Yet, in contrast to Botswana and Tanzania, the Cameroonian government has integrated the indigenous rights discourse in its developmental agenda, albeit under the heading of 'marginal populations'. Thus, Mbororo organizations continue to employ the indigenous rights discourse, while at the same time

seeking to engage with government officials. As I have argued elsewhere (ibid), Mbororo have diversified (rather than shifted) their socio-political strategies by integrating advocacy at various international, national, and local levels. That is, they participate in the yearly meetings of the UN Permanent Forum of Indigenous Issues, submit reports to the Human Rights Council, circulate critical information via social media networks, and collaborate with government representatives on development programs. Even though the Cameroonian government has not fully subscribed to the concept of indigenous peoples, or to its legal implementation, the indigenous rights discourse has retained its place in the national and international political domain.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The three cases have in common that San, Maasai, and Mbororo have been able to use indigeneity as a political resource. Conversely, there are also counter-examples of groups who either did not want to or were unable to convincingly argue for their right to be recognized as an 'indigenous people'. Furthermore, these movements went through various phases; from expectation and success to disillusionment and pragmatism. As part of this process, they adopted changing and alternative strategies to deal with the adverse consequences of their claims and to improve their situation. Yet while in the Mbororo case indigeneity has remained a viable category of identification, the Maasai in Tanzania were obliged to shift from an indigenous rights discourse to a pastoralist livelihood discourse. Meanwhile the San in Botswana have largely withdrawn from the political sphere and have concentrated on coping strategies at the local level.

Relevant factors shaping the different outcomes of the three indigenous rights movements include the groups' historical and economic situations within their national frameworks, such as divergent levels of poverty, historical discrimination, and national integration. Here it is noteworthy that, while all three groups have experienced considerable degrees of social and political marginalization, they differ in terms of economic strength, with implications for their respective political leverage. That is, the San and Maasai have experienced relative poverty as a result of historical, ecological and political factors, which does not apply to the same degree to the Mbororo in Cameroon. Moreover, San and Maasai have been exposed to powerful competitors over land and natural resources (state enterprises as well as national and international investors) whose contribution to the countries' overall economic development has been rated higher than the groups' 'traditional' livelihoods. Here as well, the situation is

somewhat different for the Mbororo in Cameroon, who also face competition, but on a much smaller scale.

A second relevant factor affecting the indigenous movements' outcomes concerns the divergent approaches of the specific national governments in relation to indigenous and minority rights discourses. Here it is important to distinguish between governments that promote a multicultural vision of their nation (e.g. Cameroon), and those that promote national identity over regional or ethnic identities and that prefer to provide differential treatment on the basis of economic rather than cultural differences (e.g. Botswana, Tanzania).

In this view, the use of indigeneity as a political resource has proven most effective and lasting in the Cameroonian case. At the same time, it has engendered disagreement within the Mbororo community over the cultural and social appropriateness of identifying as an 'indigenous people'.

CONCLUSION

In concluding this chapter, I wish to return to my initial argument that indigeneity is a particular category of ethnicity that thrives on its political dimensions. As the three case studies indicate, there has been a waxing and waning of indigenous rights movements in Africa. For many, identifying as an 'indigenous people' has primarily been a political strategy to substantiate legal claims and gain access to development. In this regard, Africa differs from other parts of the world, such as the Americas and the Pacific, where indigenous identities have a much longer and more tangible history, and where indigeneity has also been a source of shared meaning and belonging (cp. Clifford 2013). I therefore believe that it is the abstract and discursive character of indigeneity that constitutes both its strength and its weakness when it is employed as a globally applicable category.

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