

# **Unfair Distribution of Resources in Africa: What Should Be Done about the Ethnicity Factor?**

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**Abstract:** The article examines the role of ethnic favoritism in maldistribution of national resources in Kenya and discusses two broad proposals for attacking such corruption. Evidence drawn from research in Kenya disproves the view of Chabal and Daloz, who argue that Africans prefer to distribute goods according to ethnic ties, and shows that frustration with the lack of alternatives to such a system, rather than enthusiasm for it, drives cooperation with corrupt maldistribution. One solution to the problem is to decentralize government so that resources are retained locally. A second solution is to attack the culture of appropriation and push for a fair evaluation of needs and the equitable distribution of national resources to where they are needed most. Drawing on the ideas of Hannah Arendt, the article proposes a modified federalism where government is small enough to enlist the help and support of locals but powerful enough to provide funds to impoverished sectors of the country.

## **Introduction**

This paper<sup>1</sup> depicts a common way African governments misuse resources: by letting ethnicities sway distribution decisions. Some analysts endorse accepting the situation as simply how Africans choose to govern themselves (Chabal and Daloz 1999). However, interviews conducted in Kenya brought to light two popular—and conflicting—alternatives: either taking people’s ethnic allegiances as is, and devising a federal state based on ethnic regions; or continuing to discourage ethnic identification with a view to promoting state-wide unity. After posing the two views as a central dilemma, I will next ask whether more academic debate about pluralistic/multicultural societies—debates fueled by Hannah Arendt, Iris Young, Justin Ekennia, and recent studies in social psychology—can shed light on that dilemma. Finally, I will propose a solution that rejects ethnic federalism, encourages non-ethnic political organizations, and tentatively endorses non-ethnic federalism.

## **The Problem: Misuse of Common Resources**

In his book *Africa in Chaos*, George Ayittey (1998) dramatically describes the problems of post-colonial African politics. His representative “Vampire African State” is “totally divorced from the people, perceived by those running it as a vehicle not to serve but to fleece the people. . . . In effect, it is a ‘state’ that has been hijacked by gangsters, crooks, and scoundrels” (1998, 150–51). Governments everywhere, via the

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national budget, face contentious questions of how to distribute resources fairly. In one common scenario, governments find clever ways to further enrich the “haves” at the expense of the “have nots.” Such a system is the major problem in Africa, according to Basil Davidson and Segun Gbadegesin, among others. Davidson (1992) argues that colonial powers in Africa began a system in which rural farmers, underpaid for produce, essentially subsidized new urban centers. The newly independent African countries merely adopted this system of rural impoverishment, thus providing their cities with electricity, running water, transportation, education, and other superior goods and services. Cohen and Adhiambo (1989) note that rural families in contemporary Kenya face such under-compensation for small-farm production that they are largely dependent upon cash supplied by their better paid city-dwelling family members. In this context, the power of city-based politicians to direct government funds to one ethnic group rather than another greatly influences the level of poverty or affluence of any rural area.

Davidson is frustrated that no viable political alternative has emerged that would empower rural people at the expense of urban affluence, since most politicians inherit the urban bias. However, the rural/urban divide is only one factor in inequitable distribution. Resource division along ethnic lines, which enables the ruling party’s ethnic group to get the lion’s share of national resources, calls for investigation.

Davidson explains that much of today’s so-called “tribalism” is actually a misnomer. If “tribalism” means each tribe having a set of common interests championed by its representatives, this is not in itself so bad, for it is like nationalism on a small scale. But what actually evolved instead of tribalism is “clientalism,” Davidson’s preferred term to describe the “dogfight for the spoils of political power” (1992, 207). Davidson (1992, 207) quotes Chris Allen’s account of clientalist politics: “politicians at regional and national level gained and reproduced the support of local leaders by allocating to them state resources over which these politicians had influence or control.” According to Davidson, people fall back on kinship ties for self-defense when they can’t depend upon protection by the State. Davidson traces a growth spurt in such political arrangements to Africa’s slave-trading years. Then, the State often failed to protect people from enslavement. As this state grew increasingly predatory, kinship systems were strengthened as a defense (1992, 225–28). To this day, the same dynamic remains at play. Davidson finds this reliance on kinship understandable, but still wrong-headed and short-sighted. He makes a compelling case that politics by kinship has been a bad solution to Africans’ admittedly dire problems of survival.

What Davidson calls “clientalism,” Angelique Haugerud (1995) calls “patronage.” Patronage, a practice halfway between coercion and affection, involves “the diversion of state or public resources into private hands,” with kinship and clanship as important factors. While temporary frictions occur between the various factions vying for power and material wealth, none considers angrily challenging the system itself. Faction leaders, all similar in class background, are unlikely to pose ideological challenges to practices of forging “instrumental ties” based on “calculations of material advantage.” Most dissent from the ruling party is assuaged by practices of patronage, and

multipartism remains a middle-class movement. Politics therefore continues as a “recirculation of elites” (1995, 35, 37, 46–47).

Segun Gbadegesin (1991, 183–87) is frustrated that an elite class in Nigeria has successfully masqueraded as being “of the people.” Ethnic divisions, he argues, camouflage the class divide in African states. Politicians rely on their ethnic constituencies, and those who gain power distribute the government’s largesse to their own ethnic group first, thus gaining a loyal ethnic bloc. Gbadegesin finds this emphasis on shared culture and ethnicity between rich and poor group members both misleading and manipulative. According to him, Nigerians must wake up to their abuse by ethnic elites and join forces along class lines to depose a corrupt ruling class.

Chabal and Daloz (1999, 7, 14–16) amply document this phenomenon which the authors cited above deplore. However, they think it’s too simplistic to portray the situation as merely the rich preying upon the poor. Rich African elites, they explain, do not act like other ruling classes. Rather than socialize with each other, they maintain extensive ethnic ties, and favor people much poorer than themselves in their own ethnic groups. When they build mansions, they often do so in their home area, where such ostentation wins admiration from their ethnic affines, now vicariously proud of their local boy made good. In fact, if a politician did not believe in self-indulgence, and “came home” at modest expense, his ethnic supporters would be greatly disappointed (1999, 40–43, 52–54).

Chabal and Daloz argue that this constant popular pressure toward ostentation often motivates corrupt practices. Unlike Gbadegesin, Davidson, and others who see the poor as victims of rapacious rulers, Chabal and Daloz assert that poor African people have consistently gotten the rulers they wanted or, indeed, insisted upon. To receive government resources, however meager, won by their ethnic champion, is how African people prefer to share the social pie (1999, 32–43). The idea of a transparent and accountable sharing based on laws of fairness (whether viewed as need or equality), is too impersonal, and definitely not the preferred mode.

Resource distribution is decided not merely on ethnic lines, but also by party affiliation. However, these two criteria often overlap, as many political parties follow ethnic divisions. Barkan and Ng’ethe (1998, 43) argue that a Kenyan election is actually a series of one-party races in different regions, rather than a truly multipart contest. All five major opposition candidates for Presidency won from 47 to 78 percent of their total votes from their home provinces. As Angelique Haugerud (1995, 26, 38–39) explains, in Kenya many voters believe that national resource allocation is tied to multipartism. Government officials sometimes made this explicit. For example, in 1993, one KANU cabinet minister declared that the government would deny natural resources it controlled to opposition-dominated areas of the country, while rewarding regions loyal to KANU. Other charges were more speculative. Haugerud gives examples of water shortages interpreted as punishments for leaving KANU, and civil service job cuts plausibly linked to party affiliation. While maldistribution of resources was clearly a problem in a one-party state, simply introducing multipart politics has not solved it, but merely created suspense about *which* ethnic group will gain power and enrich itself.

### **Perhaps There Is No Problem?**

How can this misuse of public resources be stopped? Several solutions have been proposed. But one recent book insists that there is no need for a solution. Chabal and Daloz surmise that many countries in sub-Saharan Africa have chosen to organize themselves along these lines of patronage, and are satisfied with the way things work at present. While donors, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and foreign businesses may be dismayed by practices that stifle African economies and make business success improbable, that is due to their clashing value systems. A typical regional African politician, Chabal and Daloz argue, is satisfied if the only development project in his home area depends wholly on his approval, preferring such total dependence on himself even to multiple development projects that, while arguably benefiting more people in the region, would entail diluting his control. Wishing to maintain complete control, politicians actually prefer the corrupt scenarios which make such manipulation possible, and resist all attempts of reform (1999, 1, 9, 14, 132, 152, 155, 162).

Chabal and Daloz seem to suggest that African voices speaking out against graft and corruption are insincere, feigning indignation merely to maintain credibility with their donors. The proof of sincerity, they seem to say, is in the practice. Since African practices do not depart from their patrimonial arrangement, complaints about suffering under it are not to be taken seriously. In fact, to insist that Africans give up patrimonial relations is to practice cultural imperialism by forcing a foreign value system upon Africans (1999, 16, 46, 135, 144–47).

When Chabal and Daloz suggest accepting clientalism so as to avoid cultural imperialism, this seems a tolerant approach, but it actually sells Africans short. Firstly, it is wrong to consider clientalism the “African way.” Clientalist practices gained force in a specific historical context, during colonial times, when people could no longer rely on the state to act fairly. It is dubious to equate contemporary clientalist practices with African tradition. In fact, Chabal and Daloz avoid doing so. Instead they argue that today’s Africans have devised practices which, drawing somewhat on African tradition, are nonetheless designed as modern solutions for modern problems. Even this insight, however, overlooks the fact that patrimonial practices are far from universally embraced. Some make practical compromises with the procedure, and others, gravely dissatisfied and wanting to change the situation, often are thwarted only by their relative powerlessness. Not all African critics of clientalism can be dismissed as dupes of “Western” values.

### **Introduction to Interviews: Methodology**

Many Kenyans, parting company with Chabal and Daloz, are not happy with the patrimonial status quo. Some seek to go “all the way” with ethnic separatism, to protect themselves from exploitation of a government which to them represents other ethnic groups; others crave a *lived* unity to supplant the familiar rhetorical kind, de-emphasizing ethnicity or overcoming it with conscious commitment to the larger group. This section draws primarily on views of Kenyans interviewed originally in the

context of an ongoing “sage philosophy” project begun by the late Professor H. Odera Oruka. Odera Oruka (1991) hoped that Kenyan society could profit by hearing the voices of its wise people, who had been largely marginalized by academia. He wanted academically trained philosophers to dialog with the sages, and then critically assess the insights shared in the interviews.<sup>2</sup> Odera Oruka hoped that by publishing written texts based on these oral interviews, Kenyan academics would launch a new philosophical literature, not merely derived from Euro-American models, which grappled with African issues.

The first interview drawn upon here is from an advocate of ethnic federalism, Winston Ogola Adhiambo of Kisumu, the founder and President of the Federal Party of Kenya.<sup>3</sup> Adhiambo is a retired fisheries officer; like many elderly Kenyan retirees, he has gone back to his home area and dedicated himself to improving community life by sharing reflections distilled from a lifetime of observing his society. Offering an opposing view is Chaungo Barasa, a water engineer by training who met Oruka at university and became interested in Oruka’s sage philosophy project. Barasa has interviewed many elders in his Bukusu community who are reputed to be wise. Both Barasa and Ali Mwitani Masero were included in Odera Oruka’s original book as sages; Barasa and I further interviewed Masero about the topic of ethnic divisions. Both Barasa and Masero criticize ethnic federalism and prefer an assimilationist model. I will explore the pros and cons of these models philosophically.

### **Winston Ogola Adhiambo and Ethnic Federalism**

Adhiambo’s (1998) statements in support of ethnic federalism can be roughly summarized in three points. First, ethnic divisions are natural, and so gain popular support and cooperation easily. Second, the current ethnic strife in Kenya stems from conflict among different ethnicities in a unitary government. Thirdly, the federalist model will most successfully contain politicians’ rapacious nature. Maurice Nyamanga Amutabi of the Development Studies department at Moi University echoes these ideas, which suggests that Oruka’s inclination to bridge the gap between community thinkers and academia is not that far-fetched.

Adhiambo argues that ethnic groupings are natural, making people readily at home with and committed to their group. People are used to ethnic rule, or “tribalism” as he calls it. Historical animosities make it difficult for such groups to accept the rule of other groups. He states that God created, and continues to approve of, federalism along ethnic lines. Adhiambo cites the Biblical Tower of Babel story as proof that God intended humans to speak different languages, have different cultures, and live separately.

Many scholars would dispute Adhiambo’s claims that ethnic identities are natural. Indeed, ethnic identities tend to harden during a crisis and soften at other times, suggesting that exclusive ethnic loyalty is not natural and unavoidable. Ethnicities have even been partly manufactured and reified by colonialism. Consider, for example, how the British creation of “Maasailand” and “Kikuyuland” in Kenya exacerbated latent tensions between two groups which had, before British

interference, lived rather symbiotically with each other, intermarrying and even “adopting” persons from the other group without requirements of heredity or shared history, etc. (Spear and Waller 1993). Adhiambo may be right that people convinced of ethnicity’s naturalness tend to desire ethnic separatism, but this in itself is not a convincing argument for filling that desire.

Adhiambo attempts to rehabilitate “tribalism,” an idea now in disfavor. Advocating government along ethnic lines, he feels he must argue that “tribalism” is not such a bad idea. If God has created and blessed tribalism, he argues, the term should not be understood pejoratively. But it’s clear that in everyday usage, the term “tribalism” has a pejorative meaning, since it often means not merely people’s innocent preference for associating with their own ethnic group, and preserving their own language and culture, but suggests one ethnic group’s attack on another, sometimes instigated by politicians. Adhiambo decries the sorry effects of “tribal clashes,” yet insists that tribalism (ethnic groups remaining in their own separate political groups) does not necessarily result in such clashes. While critical of Moi and KANU, Adhiambo at one point defended Moi. He said:

Some people want to say Moi is the one who has brought tribalism, what type of tribalism? Moi was born and found tribalism was created long time ago. It was there already. I don’t think there is anybody who is going to eliminate all these things which have been there for long including tribalism (1998).

While Adhiambo alludes to the possibility of several meanings for “tribalism,” he equivocates by claiming that Moi “found” tribalism (in the morally neutral sense), although his critics think that Moi “brought tribalism” in the negative sense. Court investigations of the tribal clashes in 1992 (Rift Valley, with 1,500 casualties) and again in 1997 (Likoni, Coast Province, with 65 dead) make it increasingly clear that President Moi and KANU had a role in instigating them. As Barkan and Ng’ethe (1998, 37) report: “As in 1992, regime hard-liners were behind the attacks, a fact underscored by orders to the army not to intervene.” Evidence suggests that some provincial administrators encouraged people in their communities to take up arms and drive out Kenyans from other ethnic groups, offering the expelled people’s land as incentive (Haugerud 1995, 38–39). In December, 2001, ethnic clashes between Pokomo and Orma ethnic groups in Tana River District as well as clashes between Luo renters and Nubian landlords in the Kibera slums of Nairobi show that ethnic strife is still rampant in Kenya, with some insisting that politicians exacerbated already tense situations by their inflammatory public comments (Muninzwa 2001). These examples show that it is unhelpful to argue that tribalism has always been with us. It blurs a point that Adhiambo himself will want to make: some political situations encourage ethnic strife more than others.

We should ask whether ethnic loyalty causes governmental wrongdoing, or is rather one of its symptoms. As Rob Nixon (1994) argues in the case of South Africa, many crises popularly misunderstood as ethnic clashes are really political. He notes that imposing discrete ethnic identities was the mark of the divide-and-rule apartheid and/or colonial governments of the past. He argues that:

Ethnic difference is not the wellspring of “ethnic violence,” which flows instead from (among other things) historical efforts to impose categorical ethnic identities. Thus a symptom of the violence—the defensive production of brittle ethnicities—is readily misconstrued as its cause . . . Studies by Shula Marks, Lauren Segal, Mike Morris, and Doug Hindson suggest that any limited, reactive retreat into ethnicity must be viewed alongside the effects of chaotic urbanization, epidemic unemployment, economic recession, generational conflict, the legacy of migrant labor, and the attendant crises of masculinity (1994, 235, 244).

A unified program addressing these societal problems would better quell ethnic violence than an ethnic approach that slights the underlying social ills.

Interestingly, Adhiambo pairs his emphasis on the “naturalness” and historical omnipresence of animosity with an insistence, bordering on defensiveness, that peace has always reigned in ethnically defined communities that contained ethnic minorities. Maurice Amutabi agrees, and puts forward his own version of the seeming contradiction. Amutabi asserts that federalism is the “cure” for tribalism. For democracy to succeed in Africa, “ethnic and regional parochialisms have to be eliminated,” and “this can best be done in a federal state.” The states or regions in the federal set-up will be “based on ethnic similarities” and because of this, “animosities will be reduced.” But how will sorting people into discrete ethnic political units reduce animosity? Amutabi responds with an example: “When Igboland was divided into many regions under different governors, Igbo nationalism appeared more heightened rather than checked” (1996, 186). According to this logic, uniting an ethnic group would lessen nationalism.

Amutabi continues with a catalog of current social ills that would disappear under a federalism drawn up along ethnic lines. Today, politicians fuel parochial interests. However, “the politicians will not be able to evoke ethnic feelings in federal states.” This is presumably because the regional units would exclude ethnic diversity. Today, certain community members are threatened with violence because they are called anti-government. But “such suspicions and threats will end as with federalism one will be dealing with members of his ethnicity” (1996, 186).

I dare say that this ethnic federalism sounds too good to be true. Will all problems disappear, just because all the people one dislikes (members of the rival ethnicity) disappear? The problems here are multiple. Amutabi’s scenarios presume (1) territories inhabited by only one ethnicity; (2) absence of tension between ethnic groups in neighboring territories; and (3) no major problems within each regional unit, because people of the same ethnicity will get along. As he states, “There is less strife and conflict among people who share a past, language, aspirations . . .” (1996, 180). However, Amutabi does not stipulate ethnic purity in regional units; he himself notes that cosmopolitanism is overtaking contemporary Africa, and “federal entities will therefore allow multiple citizenship.” What this means is hard to tell. Does it mean that a Luo can have Luhiya citizenship? And if so, will it be due to relocation, or due to holding multiple ethnicities at once (perhaps through intermarriage)? Amutabi, like Adhiambo, asserts on the one hand that people of different ethnicities will never get

along (necessitating ethnic federalism), but then, that different ethnicities will get along fine in the new ethnic federalist setup.

The presumption that endows ethnic units with internal harmony may be a bit rash. Messay Kebede (2001), a philosopher from Ethiopia, is critical of the new ethnic federalist setup there. He found that each largely autonomous ethnic political unit is dominated by a few politicians who claimed to speak for the whole ethnic group, making intragroup freedom of speech and plurality of voices almost impossible. Although each unit was supposedly free from meddling by rival ethnic groups, they instead fell prey to the self-proclaimed ethnic spokespersons, so that any group "harmony" was harshly imposed. Mahmood Mamdani (1996), in his thoughtful expose of ethnicity and tribalism as colonial inheritances, found that whenever colonial rulers created ethnic-based political units, group harmony was the first casualty, killed by the struggle to rule the ethnic unit. Similarly, the infighting splitting Somalia at clan level testifies that ethnic similarity is no sure gage of unity. To simply presume that ethnic strife dissipates as ethnic autonomy increases is a dangerous mistake.

Further, Amutabi argues, in a manner parallel to Adhiambo, that the Kenyan people seek mutual accord and only fight under the instigation of greedy politicians (1996, 184). So what must one do with the greedy politicians, to stop them from wreaking havoc? The answer is to let each one become president of his or her small regional unit. National government should meet rarely and temporarily to solve issues of common interest. But will this really solve the politician problem? Will the politicians involved really be satisfied? Adhiambo thinks so; he argues that there should be forty-four presidents in Kenya, since presently each ethnicity wants one of its own to be President.

Adhiambo and Amutabi explain that politicians' chief motive is to enrich themselves. However, if the federal government thwarted this lust for riches, why would politicians be satisfied? And why would the people rest content with a local president, who can just return what they themselves have raised, when a national president can divert to their benefit the country's resources as a whole?

Charles Adesina Olutayo (2001) vividly illustrates this contradiction. He argues that the Yoruba community is unhappy to be ruled by Nigeria's government since the Hausa in the north appropriate Yoruba resources which they feel should stay in their own community. But in discussion after his paper, the following point arose: if the Yoruba could limit use of their resources to their own community, would they be happy if the Ogoni people also limited use of their territory's oil to their own group? Not surprisingly, the Yoruba would then prefer that Ogoni oil be used by 'the nation,' meaning, in part, by themselves. Must not ethnic-based federalism result in a similar contradiction or double standard?

While the federalist idea might seem to give the politicians what they want, it could amount to the proverbial "giving a dog a rubber bone." If dogs' or politicians' "nature" (or habits) remains unchanged, they will still be dangerous. Rather than chuckling at having successfully disarmed greedy politicians through federalism, one had better educate the people, clearly expose the faults of clientalism and establish



safeguards to thwart corruption and favoritism. No political system can circumvent the need to change the moral culture of politics.

Adhiambo (1998) is convinced that each geographic region has ample natural resources to feed its residents, and that poverty is due only to political expropriation of local resources by other, more powerful ethnic groups. By ensuring that communities keep their resources, the current national government can solve its problems. This seems a partial, not a complete solution. While unfair expropriation of resources is surely a worldwide problem, it is delusory to imagine that every region has all the resources it needs. Some impoverished areas clearly need a larger government's redistributive powers.

Adhiambo hints at another possible source of contemporary problems. Today's centralized government grants the President too many powers, reminding him of a similar unjust feature of British rule. Local government, in his federalist model, serves to restore the feeling of government being one's own, expressing community freedom and not submission to others. If politics means *local* politics, one can participate—and protect oneself against expropriation.

Historically, many people have argued the advantages of local government and of federalism, but not necessarily of local government along ethnic lines. For example, Hannah Arendt strongly opposed the idea of ethnicities having their own governments. Arendt notes that nation-states were created with the task of “the protection of all inhabitants in its territory no matter what their nationality,” but this impartial and fair treatment did not last; instead, the “nation” conquered the “state,” as national (ethnic) consciousness overwhelmed common interest and took control of the state machinery (1951/1979, 230). Young-Bruehl (1982, 222–33), in her biography of Hannah Arendt, describes how Arendt stunned the Jewish intellectual community by insisting that the state of Israel should not be a Jewish state. She recalled the Nazi evils too vividly to advocate tying government to ethnicity, religion, or race (Young-Bruehl 1982, 222–33). Yet Arendt strongly advocated federalism as a promising remedy for the defects of a remote, centralized government where people ceased to feel adequately represented (1965, 165–69). So we may rightly ask Adhiambo, why should local governmental units reflect ethnic lines? Federalism, in a *non-ethnic* form, will be revisited in the conclusion.

### **Chaungo Barasa: Rejecting Tribalism, Advocating Unity**

Chaungo Barasa is Project Manager of the Water and Sanitation department in the Dadaab refugee camp for CARE-International of Kenya. Also an active public intellectual, he addressed the “tribalism” issue in a paper presented at a symposium held at University of Nairobi (1999). Barasa insists that “tribalism” is neither something that was “always there,” nor primarily a product of popular attitudes (a view that Adhiambo seems to hold), but rather, a mindset orchestrated by elites, who use the people to fight their battles. Therefore, tribalism will disappear when elites are held accountable for their actions. As Barasa notes, a Kenyan ethnic community may be diverse in religion, including many converts to different Christian denominations.

Especially because many marry outside their clan, blood lineage may be quite mixed, and so an unlikely basis of ethnic identity. Also, ethnic members might move to town, severing their tie to a specific region; their children, having lost touch with their ethnic region and “mother tongue,” would still maintain their ethnic identity. Reverting to exclusive ethnic territories would be reverting to the past. Barasa therefore thinks the factor determining ethnic identity should instead be a common heritage. Such a view emphasizes the rapidity of change in Kenya and rejects the static view of ethnic identity, while still asserting continuity between past and present. Barasa remains concerned that people identify themselves by asserting that they are NOT their neighbors, who are different from themselves. It is the “antagonism” aspect of tribal identity that Barasa finds dangerous.

Barasa and Adhiambo agree on one issue: the Kenyan national government has been maldistributing resources. Barasa (1999) proposes a solution to this problem. First, he thinks that tribalists often end up “distrusting the State” because they witness this maldistribution, and ascribe it to other tribes running the government. So, they equate the state with other tribes. The State, given an opportunity and a duty to dispel this suspicion, instead reinforces it by its unfair actions. The tribalist’s suspicion of the State itself is understandable but mistaken: unjust elites are really to blame. Self-seekers posing as ethnic advocates, they have abused the state’s role as guardian of the common good. The solution is not to divide the state, but to insist on accountability and transparency, and so restore the people’s faith in the government. The governing elites, however, for their own gain, reinforce tribalism and notions of “us and “them” by drawing political boundaries which balkanize tribes, clans, and families into districts, divisions, locations, and sublocations. State agents also provoke violence by raising fears about the “multiparty” enemy next door.

Barasa insists that Africans, and Kenyans, must free themselves from the bad government of the last three decades. But how? Barasa himself supports Orengo, an opposition MP challenging the corruption of the Moi government. Embracing a unity of purpose grounded in political liberty and diversity, Barasa cannot in conscience view KANU, the cause of so much division in Kenya, as representing unity. He admires Museveni’s no-party politics in Uganda because it espouses pluralistic values, and sees it as a promising effort toward a much-needed national unity. Kenya could use a similar emphasis on true unity, fairness, and accountability,<sup>4</sup> so he turns to multiparty politics, not that his ethnic group may reap the spoils of power, but in search of a party that *really* believes its rhetoric of unity and fairness.

Kwame Gyekye of Ghana (1997) also reflects upon ethnic strife and corruption in Africa. According to him, neither lack of values nor the wrong values are the trouble, since politicians repeatedly mouth the right words concerning accountability and fairness. For Gyekye, the problem of corruption is due to a lack of will power, a failure to act according to one’s professed values. He insists that laws could never make a person act morally; instead, corrupt acts stem from “the moral incapacity not only of public officials but also of other members of the society to commit themselves to behavior that will not harm the public or common welfare” (1997, 216). Barasa

shares Gyekye's frustration, and both emphasize change of structure less than change of attitude and discipline.

Ali Mwitani Masero (1998) embraces an approach like Gyekye's. A traditional healer and community mediator active in running his community's local mosque in Malaha, Kimilili, Western Province, he explained (in an interview with Barasa and I) that jealousy arises from perceptions of favoritism, unfairness, and maldistribution of resources. Masero advocates a change in attitude, not in governmental structures. Since ethnic identity in contemporary Kenya is changing and fluid, governmental delineation of territories along ethnic lines would be difficult. Rather, one should, on both interpersonal and community levels, embrace the ideals of impartial fairness. Masero cites supporting examples from his own life, like his fair treatment of his two wives, which vastly reduced jealousy between them. As a mediator in local conflicts, he realizes that most disputing parties reluctantly shift from focus on their own gain or loss to a larger perspective of fairness, but insists his success as counselor hinges on persuading others to take a more impartial view. Weakening Chabal and Daloz's claim that Africans prefer personalized favoritism, Masero shows that some wise Africans have spurned the false gains of a self-centered worldview to achieve lasting resolutions to conflict.

Masero envisions a "melting pot" Kenya where ethnic identity takes a back seat to national identity, and perhaps in the future, to regional or pan-African identity. Neither Masero nor Barasa voice regret over local languages dying from disuse; to thinkers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986), the Kenyan novelist who writes in his local language simply to keep it alive, their apathy must seem blamable. But clinging to one's local language is just as arguably an attempt to reinforce narrow ethnic self-centeredness as it is a valid reassertion of local power against the hegemony. Barasa and Masero together counsel foregoing the feeling of security that comes with narrow allegiances based on ethnic and family ties. Will people be willing to do so? Bear in mind that Masero and Barasa do not advocate an impersonal attitude toward others; both actively serve their communities and those in need. They ask only that care be pushed beyond the borders of ethnic difference.

Another article which Barasa (2002) recently published stresses "cultural family livelihood security." While family livelihood security is much discussed in the NGO circles he frequents, the emphasis has been on physical survival, taking into account political and economic needs, but often ignoring cultural ones. Discouraging reversion to former narrow ethnic identities, Barasa wants the emerging multi-ethnic Kenyan middle class to purposefully reflect on the culture they would like to develop among themselves. This emerging middle class should take seriously its responsibility to build a better Kenya by forging a unique Kenyan identity that will neither ape Western models of success nor splinter along outdated ethnic lines. Kenyans must carefully preserve aspects of their traditions that help to meet new challenges, not slavishly and futilely idolize their past.

### **Challenges of Distribution in a Pluralistic Society**

Ending interethnic struggle and violence demands multifaceted solutions. For example, it is too simplistic to ask political actors to forget their ethnic identities and take up a “disinterested” view “from nowhere.” While identifying with one’s ethnic group poses a clear detriment to politics when each group hopes to grab national power and ensure its own thriving at the expense of other groups, a public arena where citizens ignore their own and others’ ethnic identities defies imagination. As Justin Ekennia (1996) of Nigeria explains, we cannot abstract ourselves, hide behind a Rawlsian “veil of ignorance,” and make political decisions as if we were unaware of being an Ibo, a Yoruba, or a Hausa, for example. Here, the real challenge involves rejecting political decisions based on self-gain, if that self-gain harms the overall cause of justice. Ekennia insists that political actors overcome the unjust bias favoring their own community’s flourishing, even to others’ detriment, and develop a concern for the whole. If diverse groups are to cooperate, we must identify and analyze both the commonalities and the conflicts between the groups. Ekennia also sees mutual forgiveness and reconciliation as vital in promoting peace between antagonistic ethnic groups. To forgive, he says, is to change one’s image of the wrongdoer. Ekennia here conceptualizes an “active past” that, through reinterpretation and new understanding, can shape possibilities for action today.

Ekennia’s ideas parallel two of Hannah Arendt’s important themes. First, as Beiner (1982, 42–44) explains, Arendt champions Kant’s notion of “enlarged mentality” (described in his *Critique of Judgment*), which entails seeing a situation from others’ perspectives. Such perspectives are best gained in pluralistic dialogue with others. This approach, avoiding Rawls’ characteristic problems, begins and ends with concrete individuals in their contexts, who need not abstract from everything meaningful to themselves and others, but rather from an exclusive preoccupation with their own perspective and interest. Second, Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958, 236–243) assigns a crucial role to forgiveness in politics. Without forgiveness, she argues, politics would be stuck in an endless rut of action and counteraction. Forgiveness helps give birth to something new and unpredictable in politics. Perhaps, therefore, forgiveness could offer Africa an antidote to ethnic strife. Certainly South Africa, through its Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Frost 1998; Krog 1999) is presently experimenting with the political role of forgiveness.

Arendt condemns self-interest in the political realm. Especially in her later works, she replaced her earlier emphasis on “glory” as a political motivation with a new stress on what she calls “disinterest.” Her strongest criticisms targeted those who used the political realm to further private interests. Arendt hails the disinterested as those “motivated by compassion or by a passion for justice.” Some of her highest praise goes to the “disinterested” Vietnam protestors, themselves exempt from the draft, who protested and burned their draft cards anyway, in solidarity with others (1972, 125–26). Now why does Arendt call this attitude “disinterest” instead of “common interest” or “interest of the whole”? She feels these latter terms are dangerous, and do not convey the precise meaning she wants. Her aversion to the selflessness implied in “common interest” may derive from her exposure to Nazi and Fascist rhetoric, which spoke of subsuming one’s individuality and becoming one of a large mass of people.

Mussolini (1963, 425–26) favored subsuming the individual under “the State,” which “accepts the individual only in so far as his interests coincide with those of the State, which stands for the conscience and the universal will of man.” Arendt also criticizes Marx’s argument that all politics is based on interest. She thinks that Marx misread many revolutionary leaders’ “disinterestedness” (in other words, their commitment to the common good carefully understood) by using phrases such as “the ultimate interest of human history,” since he could only conceive politics motivated by interest. Arendt wants to totally move away from interest politics. That’s why concepts like justice, which Arendt rarely uses explicitly, best captures her idea (Arendt, 1972, 126; Pitkin, 1981).

Applied here, Arendt’s emphasis on disinterested politics flashes a scathing light on the self-interested African elites who loot public coffers for private ends. It also upbraids ethnic groups who grab government funds for themselves regardless of other groups’ needs. Does her theory end up being more elitist than the elites, condemning all parties equally, sparing perhaps a few saints or philosopher-kings, who alone transcend their own self-interest?

A recent psychological study argues that people are often motivated by concerns for fairness, even when the results would harm self-interest. For example, a public sector workplace study done by Huo, Smith, Tyler, and Lind in 1996 (cited in Tyler et al., 1997, 258–60) showed that two groups of workers, which they described as “biculturalist” (able to identify both with their subgroup identity, whether racial or ethnic, etc., *and* the larger organization for which they worked) and “assimilated” (with no pronounced local subgroup identification but high identification with the workplace) consistently described employer-worker relations by appealing to notions of fairness. In contrast, those workers fitting the profile of “separatist” (having high subgroup identification but low superordinate identification with their place of employment) consistently analyzed relations between employer and workers in terms of self-interest. In other words, separatists praised actions that benefited the workers themselves, whether fair or not. These psychological studies show that upholding fairness regardless of self-benefit is not an attribute of angels or philosopher-kings, but a widely held attribute among those who identified themselves with the larger group.

While Huo et al.’s study emphasized the workplace, its insights seem relevant to our topic of federalism. While those touting more autonomous regional government speak passionately about the injustices their group is suffering, they may have their own group’s self-interest, rather than fairness, at heart. The same Yoruba person who detests the Hausa appropriation of Yoruba resources can support Yoruba appropriation of Ogoni resources. Considering the havoc subgroup self-interest wreaks in Africa and elsewhere, people would benefit by embracing fairness and eschewing self-interested politics. Since biculturalists in Huo et al.’s study seem just as concerned with fairness as are assimilationists, this indicates that assimilation, that is, denying one’s subgroup identification, is unnecessary to pursue fairness. The assimilationist model which Masero points to might be an unfortunate side effect of globalization rather than progress, as long as biculturalism and multilingualism are viable options. The solution

should thus preserve and nurture local cultural identity without making people feel such identity must compete with, or detract from, national identity.

Many African traditional governance systems favor consensus over “majority rule.” It remains a question whether such systems would be examples of disinterested politics, or if they instead are examples of “the common good” in a negative sense, as Arendt feared was the case in the French Revolution. In consensus politics, interest groups should not rest content that they can outvote the competition; rather, they should listen to, and accommodate, all members of the community. The Akan symbol of a two-headed crocodile with just one stomach reflects the insight that, at heart, all of our interests are the same. Such consensual political systems, described by Kwame Gyekye (1992, 248) and Kwasi Wiredu (1997, 306), are the subject of another of my articles (2002a). Could Arendt’s fear of political actors being swallowed up by those dictating the “common good” be assuaged by scenes of patiently “hearing out” at least some dissenting views? Most practices of consensus fall short of the ideal, by according certain actors (like women and young people) less than perfect respect. Gyekye (1997, 35–76) argues that the African emphasis on the common good is not meant to replace individual identity and responsibility as Arendt fears in the fascist case.

Political theorists have accused advocates of disinterest politics of proposing an unattainable, or undesirable, state. Feminists have argued that good social relations require engagement and sympathy rather than detachment. Iris Young (1990) criticizes detachment as an impossible ideal which can mask hierarchies and dominant groups’ interests. For example, being dispassionate about the plight of the landless, homeless, or hungry aids those well-favored by the status quo. Young explains that in the United States the enlightenment ideal of universal citizenship in a rational public realm excludes people who are associated with the body and feelings, such as women, blacks, Jews, and American Indians. Instead, the disembodied mind, which can abstract from all particularities of a situation, is praised.

Young criticizes the desirability of an “impartial” subject, a presumed prerequisite for Arendt’s disinterested politics. Young argues that impartiality reduces the plurality of moral subjects to one subjectivity, so while proposing to accommodate a plurality of views, one ends up creating a monolog. “Because it already takes all perspectives into account, the impartial subject need acknowledge no subjects other than itself to whose interests, opinions, and desires it must attend” (1990, 101). If this were so, it would be good cautionary advice to Arendt, whose entire goal is to have a plurality of voices engage each other. Young faults Arendt and Kant’s approach for depending on imagination rather than encounter. Imaginative empathy is better than close mindedness, but is still open to dangers of projection and presumption. Young cautions that subjects are not opaque to one another, and full empathy is impossible. Nevertheless, concrete encounters with others are necessary in our moral reasoning (1990, 105). If Young is right, it would be important for Arendt to have political actors acknowledge their own position and perspective while they strive to understand the perspectives of others.

While ethnic groups should not be unduly favored, Young wisely cautions that one should not presume that a mathematically even distribution is most fair, or that an obliteration of ethnic identity is required in order to ensure uniformity of distribution. Young makes it clear that equal treatment often means taking into account the special needs of groups, giving them the extra support they need so that they will not be disadvantaged by their special situation. Sieglinde Adler (2001) argues that Europe has often solved the problem of ethnic tensions internal to the state by federal means. For example, in Germany sixteen smaller ethnic-based territories are incorporated into a larger, non-ethnic state unit. But she cautions that such organizations, where they work, are always accompanied by strong minority treaties to protect the rights of minority ethnic groups. Such treaties do not have the goal of denigrating the group as unwelcome “foreigners” or elevating them as special. Any special rights and protections they receive are meant to restore a basic equality that would otherwise be eroded by the dominant ethnic group if there were not these special protections. Minority treaties fit Young’s paradigm of creating special rights or unequal distribution as part of the overall long-term goal of equal treatment. My one concern, which mirrors Arendt’s, is that minority treaties in ethnic-based federal units often reinforce the idea that the unit actually belongs to the majority ethnic group, with the minority merely tolerated. To avoid this possible problem, strong minority rights should remind citizens that in fact, the state belongs to all and exists to ensure the rights of all.

A federal model, whether based on ethnic or geographical units, should not mean, as Adhiambo and Amutabi suggest, the economic independence of these units from the larger nation-state. While negotiation should settle the exact level of independence in each federal setup, the ideal federal government would get sufficient resources and redistributive powers to provide for the neediest areas. Young rightly cautions us that failure to address diversity needs virtually assures that powerful politicians’ constituents, not needy areas, carve up available resources. Eldoret, a small central Kenyan town lucky enough to be near the President’s hometown, boasts an international airport; its remote location virtually guarantees that it handles a mere fraction of the air traffic for which it was designed (Farria 2001). An accountable federal government would fund large services like airports in a way that guaranteed their use by the many who need them.

## **Conclusion**

In their views, Adhiambo and Amutabi sanguinely imagine an unreformed people and its politicians rendered harmless by a new political setup, while never challenging their mindset and motivations. Because their proposed solution sidesteps the challenge of encouraging people to rise above narrow self-interest, I find it shortsighted. Barasa and Arendt’s approach, which stresses changing the culture of politics, and challenging people to replace narrow self-interest with the larger community’s welfare as a political motive, promises more lasting fruits—provided their disinterested fairness is tempered by the sensitivity to difference seen in Ekennia and Young.

However, politicians everywhere have undeniably tended to be greedy, self-interested, and shortsighted. So, it is utopian to expect pious self-examination and a change of heart from politicians. Democracy entails a series of checks and balances that limit the harm politicians can produce. They can be voted out of office, or stopped by another branch of government. However, hobbling politicians too severely can, contrary to one's intentions, deny them the power and resources needed to do good. Adhiambo and Amutabi's strict parochialism defines politicians' duties so narrowly that they are powerless to do good on a national scale. We must therefore address attitude and structural reform at the same time.

How to best divide up Africa into working political units certainly remains a challenge. Many observers agree that the present borders between states are arbitrary. Davidson (1992, 202–03) notes that today's borders cut through former trade zones, and were shaped by chances of colonial conquest. Certainly arbitrary units can't be the answer; but the other extreme, "natural" units based on ethnicity, invites a hornet's nest of problems. However, recalling how oppressive Adhiambo found the large colonial power he knew as a youth, we should prefer a federalism where government is small enough for people to participate and be heard. Perhaps the best solution is to draw boundaries that make regional and geographic sense. Then, internally, these units must foster the notion that all persons belong equally to the political unit, and all voices must be heard. In other words, no internal "nation" must overwhelm or claim the "state," which must defend all its citizens. Smaller-scale government may be more responsive to people and provide citizens with more of an experience of their own political power. However, as Arendt (1965, 168–69, 277–78) clarifies, federalism does not mean merely local government to the detriment of higher levels; rather, it means that local government does not evaporate when the higher levels are added on. Each level of the federal structure accomplishes duties appropriate to its level.

I consider it important that people clearly grasp the distinction between ethnicity and citizenship. Ethnicity, when not manipulated by politicians for selfish gain, is an important aspect of our identity and helps to give meaning to our lives. We need not discard it; we need only guard it from unfair appropriation. The sages in this paper have probed the causes of strife in their communities, and they have also proposed solutions. We academics, like our fellow members of the larger political community, would do well to study their solutions, and on certain points, heed their advice.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was published in a volume of conference proceedings entitled *Ethnicity in an Age of Globalization*, eds: D. Carabine and L. Ssemusu, UMU Studies in Contemporary Africa, volume 5, Nkozi, Uganda: Uganda Martyrs University Press, 2002. I would like to acknowledge the support of the J. William Fulbright Foundation for providing a visiting scholar position at University of Nairobi (1998–2000), during which time research for this article was done. Thanks also to Lenore Langsdorf and Patrick Walker for help in editing.
2. Regarding the question of who is a sage, see my article (Presbey 1997). Regarding possible problems of sage methodology, see Presbey 2002b.
3. I acknowledge the help of my former colleague, Humphrey J. Ojwang of the Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi, in the selection of Adhiambo for an interview on this topic, and the arrangements made in Kisumu to complete the interview. I also acknowledge the assistance of Robert Vincent Okungu during the interview.



4. Pointing to Museveni as a shining example of unitary government is a controversial stance. Nelson Kasfir (2000) argues that Uganda is wracked by regional conflicts, and that the unity provided by Museveni's NRM government is due more to power and control, rather than popular support.

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