The foundations of ethnicity and some of its current ramifications in Namibia

Professor Johan Malan, of the Department of Anthropology at the University of the North, discusses the impact of ethnicity on the attempts at nation-building in Namibia.*

The significance of ethnicity in Namibia, and in particular its strong post-independence ramifications, coincides with a worldwide resurgence of ethnic allegiance. When a community becomes unstable as a result of changing or disintegrating geo-political structures, economic recession, or for whatever reason, people tend to revert to their groups of origin and take refuge in them against escalating tension, ideological polarization and uncertainties of any other kind in the larger community.

Depending upon the prevailing circumstances in a country or region, two basic movements may take effect: the one is the creation of superstructures in which ethnic groups become submerged in the interest of national or regional unity, while the other constitutes a renewed emphasis on ethnic groupings in the face of dissension and collapsing superstructures. Many examples of the latter kind are to be found in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Isaacs refers to the "present pervasive condition of group fragmentation in all our current politics, post-colonial, post-imperial, post-revolutionary and - in the United States - post-illusionary. This condition amounts in effect to a massive retribalization running sharply counter to all the globalizing effects of modern technology and communications". He adds that most people still live within ethnic structures, and describes the significance of these structures as follows:

It is the refuge to which great masses are retreating and withdrawing in the face of the breakdown or inadequacy of all the larger coherences or systems of power and social organization. To get some better understanding of its tremendous power of survival and persistence, it was necessary ... to sort out and examine the elements of which it is made, to see ... what it is that gives it its extraordinary strength. If this seems elementary, it could be because our past awareness of this phenomenon of basic group identity has clearly not prepared us for the shapes and roles it has assumed in our present affairs.2

Ethnicity and national unity

Countries with an ethnically heterogeneous population find it hard to establish national unity, and many of them are compelled to institute a form of regionalism that allows ethnic groups a significant degree of self-determination. Parsons says: "... the problem of ethnic diversity and the threats it poses to some kind of 'national unity' is a ubiquitous problem in almost all the new nations". Glazer and Moynihan confirm the phenomenon of ethnic conflicts in independent states, but add that despite this problem political boundaries do not easily change:

Since World War II almost every new nation, and they far outnumber the older nations, has come into existence with a number of serious ethnic conflicts waiting, as it were, their turn to be the focus of post-independence political life... Add to this the fact - still given surprisingly little attention - that in a world in which each society becomes ethnically more diverse, we have had, since World War II, a surprisingly strong prejudice against adjusting any boundary, for any reason.... Since 1948 remarkably few international frontiers have been altered, and those that have remain very unstable.4

Manifestations of ethnicity in Namibia

I will now review the extent to which this generally occurring problem of the impeding of the national geo-political identity of a country as a result of internal ethnic divisions, also influences the socio-political scene in Namibia. The territory gained

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its independence on 21 March 1990. After three years of nation-building, aimed at fostering a corporate Namibian identity, several ethnically based claims for kingships and land rights have emerged. The following are among the most important:

- The 18-member Committee for the Restoration of the Kwanjama Kingdom announced that it would install a king for this tribe on 16 October 1993. Owing to disagreement about the successor of King Mandume who died in 1917, the installation was cancelled and the matter is now being investigated.5
- On 6 November 1993, Justus Garoeb was installed as king of the Damaras.6
- San groups claim vast land rights in Namibia, including the Etosha National Park, in order to “go back into the bush to regain independence and self-sufficiency.”7
- The Rehoboth Bastergemeente applied to have their title deeds under the former colonial dispensation restored. The formalizing of land rights is part of a move towards greater self-determination as a distinct cultural group in their own territory.8
- The Herero and Mbanderu expressed their desire to install kings to reign over them. They also demand more land.9
- The Mbuza and Shambyu communities in Kavango are engaged in a tribal land feud.10

Media reaction
The media reaction to the sudden spate of ethnic claims was highly divided and in many respects quite surprising. At the one extreme of the opinions expressed, these phenomena are condemned as they pose a real threat to Namibian unity. At the other extreme, ethnicity and traditional leadership are defended as traditional African institutions that survived the polarized colonial rule in the country. The official recognition of ethnic rights during the colonial era is still regarded as the malevolent manifestations of a policy of divide and rule, but the resurgence of demands for the same rights under the independent Namibian regime is regarded as the legitimate claims of pre-colonial African communities. This ambivalent attitude is clearly expressed by the official newspaper of the Namibian Government. In an editorial of New Era the following analysis of the situation is made:

The question of kings and chiefs has become a controversial issue in Namibia. Since independence, the different local tribes have been in the running for their own chiefs and kings... Conflicting opinions have begun to surface among Namibians about the monarchical institution, its role and that of those who man it. Among others, those opposed to chieftaincy or kingship cite its potential to rekindle tribal fires as a major reason for their rejection. It is also being alleged that having chiefs or kings would lead to the fragmentation of the country. Let us for the record state that traditional authorities, whether you call them chiefs or kings, are rooted in the African culture and society. They represent its very fabric and order. They are an important measure of their civilization and social advancement.

The Mbunza and Shambyu communities in Kavango are engaged in a tribal land feud.10

The opposition press places the responsibility for the ethnic polarization in the country squarely upon the shoulders of the government. According to them, the way in which Swapo rules the country is not instilling confidence among people, hence they seek stability and security within their ethnic groups of origin. The elevation of the political status of these groups is regarded by themselves as an improvement of their functionality and capacity to bargain for more land and other concessions from the central government. Swapo is also accused of nepotism and the strengthening of its own power base; consequently other groups feel threatened and now mobilize themselves around a symbol such as a king in order to safeguard their interests which are being ignored or jeopardized by the Swapo government of Namibia.
No doubt, these elements could be directed towards national development but at the same time, some elements can be conflict-ridden and we will need to guard against them. The concept of ethnicity falls into this category.

Ethnicity is one of the most misunderstood and misused concepts. Its scope may be that pertaining to race, tribes, minorities or specified racial, linguistic, etc., groups. Whatever the scope of this word, most nations realise that ethnic distinctions... provide diversity to national ethos, and at the same time have in them a dormant seed of discord, disharmony and tragedy. History has witnessed the tragedy on all the continents through all the ages. Even today, ethnicity has torn asunder Yugoslavia in what must be the bloodiest civil war since World War II. Ethnic civil wars continue to take their toll in Georgia and many other republics after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Similar conflicts can be seen in the Middle East.... Here, in Africa too, we have had to... many problems emanating from playing up ethnicity....

Mr Geingob openly expressed his dismay and disappointment at the dividing of the Namibian nation by the rise of ethnicity:

Regrettably, there is evidence today that there are centrifugal forces at play in our country that work towards tearing the nation apart. They are dividing people along ethnic lines. See, for instance, how the so-called kings are being imposed upon the various population groups by some vested interests. These vested interests know well that where there are kings, there have to be kingdoms, and where there are kingdoms there have to be territories, and where there is territory, there are boundaries, and where there are boundaries there is the imperative to protect them, if need be, by force.

Despite all these problems, the desirability of ethnic allegiance wasn’t ruled out entirely. In his speech, the Prime Minister clearly tried to accommodate a controlled and scaled-down version of ethnicity on condition that it is always superseded by the ultimate objective of a Namibian identity for all the country’s inhabitants:

Don’t misunderstand me, I realise that tribalism is a world-wide phenomenon... all of us need a sense of belonging, the need to belong to a local community. This, however, does not mean that we need kingdoms. What we need is a sense of belonging in the social and cultural context. With this focus, the need to belong to a culture is not in contradiction with the need to belong to a nation. Thus, you can be a Herero and Namibian, or Owambo and Namibian, or Nama and Namibian. I myself am proud to be Damara and Namibian. Conflicts arise only when these two concepts become incompatible.... For too long we have thought of ourselves as Hereros, Namas, Afrikaners, Germans, Owambos. We must now start to think of ourselves also as Namibians. This emphasis needs to be brought in at political and economic levels. Unless we begin to think in this way we could reduce the political and economic life of this nation to chaos.... This requires that we have a national identity which supersedes all other identities. In this sense, therefore, we need to ensure that ethnicity is never allowed to be played up to replace national identity as the most important identity.

The whole issue of traditional leadership in Namibia is not yet finally resolved. Mr Geingob said that in due course legislation will be drafted to deal with the question of traditional authority.

Opinions of academics

Prof Joshua Bernard Forrest of the University of Vermont was invited to attend the conference on ethnicity. He indicated that ethnic mobilization is a logical point of convergence for people, and warned that the government oppression of ethnicity may lead to violent outbursts. He suggests that traditional leaders should be consulted and involved in the process of nation-building. Andrew Murray, a sociologist of the University of Namibia, cautioned against a one-sided approach by imposing only Western development models on Namibia. Cognizance should also be taken of the characteristics and needs of the Namibian society, he felt. The economist, Mr Nelson Murangi, drew attention to the fact that ethnic differences are emphasized during difficult economic times. According to him the government should, therefore, address the economic problems of the country if it wishes to avert ethnic divisions.

Feasibility of ethnic studies

From this review it is quite obvious that ethnicity is a fact and a force to be reckoned with. Objective research within the theoretical framework of cultural anthropology and other social sciences should be conducted unabated in order to cast new light on this dynamic field of study. Cultures have the capacity to change when they are exposed to acculturative influences. In order for the members of a group to survive under drastically changing conditions, culture change is indeed a necessity. The need for change certainly does not suggest that ethnicity has become redundant and that people should be detached from their traditional cultures and become globalized by being introduced to a vaguely defined and eclectic world culture. Processes of modernization should be set in motion within the constituent cultural groupings of a community.

In an ethnically heterogeneous country like Namibia, the objective of nation-building must be well calculated and well executed. If it is pursued at the expense of ethnic institutions, this policy may soon find itself on a collision course with the leadership structures and vested interests of the traditional groupings it wishes to supersede. If, however, a geo-political nationalism is fostered with the concurrent advancing of the interests of its constituent ethnic groups, harmony between the two forms of identity may well be achieved. This course of action presupposes a clear approach towards regionalism, thereby creating suitable structures for the safeguarding and development of the ethos, language and life-style of every cultural group. In this way the various groups do not have to feel threatened, but instead should be more likely to accept the challenge to fulfill a complementary development role vis-à-vis other groups in promoting national interests outside their own local interests.

Notes and references

3 T Parsons, "Some theoretical considerations on the nature and trends of change of ethnicity", in N Glazer and D P Moynihan (eds), op cit, p 81.


8 “Sensation judgement opens road for Basters”, *The Windhoek Advertiser* (Windhoek), 23 October 1993, p. 8.


11 “Traditional institutions should be safeguarded”, *New Era* (Windhoek), 30 September to 6 October 1993, p. 10.

12 *Die Republikein* (Windhoek), 30 September 1993, p. 4.


16 *Die Republikein* (Windhoek), 19 September 1993, p. 5.