

.K. Subbo (2005) **Ethnic Integration and the Challenge of Nationhood: The Case of Kenya**

National Integration remains a big challenge in Kenya as the recent ethnic conflicts that rocked different parts of the country in the recent past may testify. This is not the first time Kenya as a nation has experienced the same problem. In 1992, for example, with the advent of multi-party politics, the country was gripped by ethnic tension and violence that resulted in the loss of lives and property in some parts of the country. Fourteen years later the problem of ethnic conflicts keeps recurring if the recent conflicts in Maai Mahiu, and Mandera and Trans Nzoia are anything to go by. This shows that all peace loving Kenyans and indeed people of goodwill should do everything possible to promote ethnic harmony in Kenya.

Kenya like many other African nations is a land of diverse ethnic communities, with 42 ethnic groups each with a distinct culture such as language, marriage practices, economic modes of production and dressing patterns. These values are not particularly distinctive of African societies as a people. The values need to be exploited for the purpose of enhancing social solidarity among the Kenyan people.

Kenya as a people have gained international recognition as a nation that is by and large peaceful. Kenya has hosted many refugees who have migrated from their countries due to ethnic conflicts. We can proudly testify that as Kenyans we hosted many Ugandan refugees and those from Rwanda and Burundi following the genocide that gripped Rwanda in 1994 after the death of both presidents of both nations. The recent peace accords signed between the Sudan peoples liberation movement and the Islamic Government in Khartoum, and the formation of the Government of Somali in Nairobi, Kenya is yet another manifestation of the peace efforts that Kenyan people have made to ensure peace in the East African region, the continent of Africa and the world as a whole.

These achievements serve to show that Kenya has the potential to solve any emerging problems related to ethnic tension and conflicts. All that may be needed is for Kenyans to realize their potential and tap it for their own benefit. Kenyans ought to realize that tolerance, patience and dialogue are important elements for mutual co-existence. Similarly, the rule of law, equity and justice, respect of each other's customs and traditions, so long as those cultural values do not interfere with the freedoms of others are equally necessary values for co-existence. Kenyans must realize that no sustainable human development may be achieved in a hostile environment. Peace and harmony are absolutely necessary for the creation of an enabling environment for sustainable development.

Hopefully, Kenyans have learnt enough lessons from countries such as Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, Liberia, and Sudan among others, which have all experienced ethnic conflicts that have resulted into massive loss of lives and property. It has been observed that when people fail to engage in dialogue as a method of discussion and when they fail to practice justice particularly in

all the allocation and distribution of resources, be it land, education, and water resources, among others, it becomes difficult to avoid animosity, tension and violence. These conflicts result in displacement of many people from their homes thus making it difficult for them to involve themselves in development activities. Data collected by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees indicates that by 1999 there were 11.7 million refugees globally and almost 4 million internally displaced people (UN-Habitat 2002:92). The report identified dialogue as one of the fastest means for resolving ethnic tensions and conflicts.

It is also recognized that consensus building is one of the most widespread methods in African societies for the resolution of conflicts. Ethnic conflicts may also be a manifestation of the breakdown of law and order. Usually when the ordinary citizens lose trust in the law enforcement agents they may manifest this loss of confidence by taking the law into their hands, a situation that creates a conducive environment for the proliferation of ethnic conflicts. A recent study by (UN-Habitat 2002:6) observes that ‘reporting levels to the police are low because victims do not believe that the police can assist them in dealing with the matter-either because there seems to be no chance for them resolving the crime, or because they do not believe that the police are competent enough to help them... central to improving levels of reporting to the police will be improving public perceptions of police integrity.

The fastest means for resolving ethnic tension is for Governments to practice justice in the distribution of resources and to apply the law without any form of discrimination whatsoever to both the minority and the dominant ethnic communities. Ensure that there are no illegal firearms in the hands of unlicensed civilians. It should be recognized that for diverse ethnic groups to continue living in harmony, they need to respect each other’s cultural values. For instance, the agricultural communities should recognize the values of the pastoralists. Similarly, pastoral communities should recognize the values of agriculturalists. In order for the various ethnic groups to co-exist in Kenya they need to understand the customs of one another: Leslie White (1954:214) points out that all human social life is conducted in terms of anticipations, expectations and predictions. Orderly social life would be quite impossible without the ability to make realistic predictions. Distinctive communities that live in the same area must endeavour to understand and appreciate the customs of their neighbours as much as possible. White (1959:215) observes that custom is a powerful and effective means of social integration and regulation. It is a means, of effecting regularity, uniformity, order and continuity in social systems. It is therefore, a powerful means of promoting social solidarity...by serving as stimulus to arouse, and as a medium to express group loyalty and allegiance.

Ethnic conflicts have afflicted many African countries before and after the achievement of political independence. This indeed is a problem that every African country should examine with a view of coming up with a permanent solution. David Lamb (1983:106) points out that the OAU (African Union) has encouraged and indirectly contributed to bloodshed in Africa, by remaining silent when atrocities are committed in some countries in the name of non-interference in the internal affairs of individual African countries. For instance, in 1994, 800,000 (plus)

deaths occurred in Rwanda due to ethnic conflict. (See Daily Nation, April 10, 2005). The African Union may need to form a special committee or force that deals with human rights record of all African countries, to avoid a situation whereby the human rights are violated during ethnic tensions and conflicts. Africa is a land of diverse cultures with 2000 ethnic communities each with its own specific language or dialect. It is therefore not easy for these groups to live together in harmony when they do not respect each other's cultural values. This gives the leaders a big challenge of maintaining peace among the diverse ethnic communities. The leaders need to know that peace can be maintained only when they apply the law equally among all groups and when they distribute the available resources equitably. David Lamb (1983:xiv) observes that it is hard to explain the African situation because of the fact that this is a continent where hundreds of thousands of people have been killed for no other reason than they belonged to the wrong tribe. It is therefore recommended that everything human possible needs to be done to bring to end the ethnic tensions and conflicts in Africa. This may be realized when as all of us endeavours to promote peace from whatever situation we find ourselves in. Peace is an important element for social solidarity, and business of earning a livelihood is made easier whenever there is social solidarity Hull (1980:182) points out that regional ethnic conflicts or civil wars presented the African Union with many problems. A major obstacle to development of nationhood is the diversity of ideologies and political organizations of many ethnic groups. These diversities should be viewed positively as factors that contribute to the enrichment of the entire nation if they have to be transformed into forces of nation building.

Paper published by the University of Nairobi Anthropology Students Association "The Anthropologist".