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**Ethnic conflict in Africa: The case of Uganda**

**By**

**Akiiki D. Kabagarama, Ph.D.**

Ethnic conflict in Uganda is very complex. It is often based on differences between large cultural systems or ethnicities which have different tribes within them. Uganda, a country of 26 million people has around fifty tribes. Conflict is also fueled by religious differences and scarce resources such as land for cultivating and cattle-grazing.

Although some measure of ethnic and tribal conflict existed in Uganda prior to contact with the outside world, it intensified with the arrival of foreigners. Slavery was a major contributing factor to inter-tribal conflict and so was colonization that followed the Scramble for Africa of 1884. The British came in as the imperial East African Company in 1890. The kingdoms of Buganda, Bunyoro, Tooro, Busoga and Ankole were prominent then. Following the 1900 agreement with the kingdom of Buganda, a Uganda Protectorate was set up, introducing indirect rule.

Buganda became the favored ally of the British. They collected taxes and recruited labor from other tribes. The Baganda forced their culture on some tribes and occasionally tried to conquer them. The British rewarded Buganda chiefs with land (Mailo) that was measured in miles. This action, taken by the British created major conflict between the Baganda and other tribes.

The British recruited the tall, athletic northern men into the army. These descend from the Nubians who are very different from southern Ugandans both in looks and cultural customs. While the northerners joined the army, southerners (Bantu ethnicity) obtained education. These divisions still exist today.

Some Ugandan men were recruited to fight on the British side during the Second World War. Those who went to fight often faced racism and discrimination. They resented being away from their families, fighting for causes that were not their own. This was also a time of global unrest with the Civil Rights Movement growing strong in the U.S.A. Some Ugandan groups, especially the Baganda, started rebelling against the British.

In preparation for Independence, three parties emerged: UPC (Uganda People’s Congress—mainly Protestant, headed Milton Obote, a northerner from the Langi tribe; DP (Democratic Party), led by Ben Kiwanuka, a Catholic from the Baganda tribe; and “Kabakka Yekka”-----“The King Only” in support of the king of Buganda.

I witnessed the ethnic-tribal-regional-gender-religious tension in my own home during preparation for Independence. My mother, a Catholic school teacher supported UPC, a party headed by Milton Obote, a Protestant from the north and of the Langi tribe. Her action made her a target of intense criticism and often verbal attack. Fellow Catholics saw her as betraying her religion. Close associates from her Batooro tribe wondered why she supported a northerner. Both men and women did not welcome her involvement in politics because it was considered to be men’s business.

When Ben Kiwanuka won the first elections, the British, not wanting to leave the country in the hands of a Catholic declared the elections null and void and changed the rules. UPC made an alliance with Kabakka Yekka. On top of it all, Milton Obote took a bride from Buganda which was a very unusual alliance. Uganda became independent on October 9, 1962 with Milton Obote becoming the first Prime Minister and the king of Buganda the President.

I still remember the songs, dances and marches of independence. The jubilation was short-lived, though. Soon after the elections, conflict arose between the President and the Prime Minister. Milton Obote abolished the kingdoms and turned the country into a Republic in 1967. This action angered many of the traditional royalists, particularly those from Buganda. Armed struggle issued between the king’s army and that of the national government. For the first time in my life, I heard gun shots. After being defeated, the king of Buganda was forced to flee to Britain where he later died in exile.

In 1971, Obote’s leader of the army Idi Amin toppled the government. A Muslim by faith, he was from a small minority northern tribe, the Kakwa. Milton Obote took refuge in Tanzania, under President Julius Nyerere. A guerilla movement against Idi Amin was started by Yoweri Museven, a university graduate from the Ankole tribe of western Uganda. During Idi Amin’s rule of eight years, many suspected traitors lost their lives. Some were executed by firing squad in broad day light for all to see. Even Ben Kiwanuka lost his life during this time.

Backed primarily by Tanzania’s armed forces, Yoweri Museveni and his army removed Idi Amin from power in 1979. A series of conflicts followed in which old conflicts re-surfaced. Several leaders, including Milton Obote ruled Uganda for short periods of time. With each change, more lives were lost. Finally, the current President, Yoweri Museveni, took the presidency in 1986. His efforts at reconciliation include the return to Uganda of Buganda’s king’s body for burial. He also re-instituted kingdoms. With limited political power, they are cultural symbols.

Lately, there has been an emergence of guerilla warfare that is politically-motivated, organized around religion, ethnicity and regionalism. Lakwena and her cousin Kony have been a source of unrest in northern Uganda for several decades. Although their motive is unclear, they have utilized Christian symbols and language such as “The Lord’s Army” to commit acts of brutality against the local people.

Even though conflict often erupts on the Ugandan soil, as is true in other parts of Africa, foreigners are usually part and parcel of the problem. Whether for political ideology, search for resources such as oil, diamonds or uranium, foreign powers supply weapons and play one group against another. A small tribal disagreement often grows into a major conflict or war when the fire is ignited by foreign weaponry and propaganda. Often those who intervene as arbitrators fail at the job due to a lack of understanding of the cultures involved in the conflict.

Solutions to conflict in Uganda and in all Africa have to be initiated and led by the Africans themselves. Well-wishers and helpers from other cultures can help from the periphery, without being the key players in designing terms of agreement. African worldview is very different from that of the West. As the popular saying goes; “If you want to know how a shoe fits, ask the one who wears it; not the one who made it.”

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