

**Ethnicity in Africa: Towards a Positive Approach**, by Hameso Y. Seyoum  
London: TSC Publications. 1997. 120 pp.

Despite its resilient reality, ethnicity and "tribalism" have not received adequate scholarly commentary in academic discourses in Africa. Nonetheless, Africa still remains a continent dotted with conflicts of various forms, often with ethnic overtones. The result has had a devastating impact on the political and socio-economic development of the continent. In the book under review, Hameso Seyoum attempts a systematic analysis of ethnicity in Africa since the pre-colonial period arguing that emerging nation states must directly confront the issue of ethnicity, irrespective of its negative connotations, in order to realise their development agendas. The author is very clear that Africa cannot afford to treat ethnicity as a side issue or wish it away, because it will continue to remain a factor that plagues the continent.

The book is divided into five chapters plus the conclusion. Chapter one provides a detailed overview of most of the issues raised in the book. Seyoum rightly argues that the immediate post-colonial African state made nation building incumbent upon erasing ethnicity and, as a result, real nations were superseded by non-nations and their histories, cultures and languages were regarded as tribal, backward, and therefore, irrelevant to development. The fact that nations were formed on the basis of ethnicity passed unheard. Developmentalists and political practitioners saw ethnicity as inimical to modern statehood and explosive to national unity. However, despite these attempts, ethnicity has remained apparent and substantially relevant. It even continues to exist beyond African "forests" and precisely in Europe and elsewhere. The author thus dismisses the modernisation and Marxian conceptions of ethnicity as inadequate and argues for the adoption of an African perspective that treats ethnicity as a form of African identity. To prove his case, Seyoum provides nine case studies (Nigeria, Zaire, Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda and Burundi) and demonstrates that these countries have suffered decades of misrule and conflicts due to an inadequate understanding of ethnicity and the management of ethnic relations.

In Chapter Five, which is the most critical aspect of the book, the author examines the positive aspects of ethnicity. He observes that properly guided, politicised ethnicity can serve various objectives, such as mobilising resources to do away with oppressive rule and assisting in economic development. In countries like Ethiopia, Liberia, and Somalia, ethnicity has proved a potent weapon for sorting out the vagaries of personal rule although not without lamentable repercussions. According to the author postcolonial African states must cautiously respond to ethnic demands by equitably distributing national resources in order to ensure economic and social justice. He warns that states which tend to ignore or fail to accommodate ethnic claims are almost certainly doomed to political instability and perhaps collapse.

This book makes a substantial contribution to the positive understanding of ethnicity. However, it has minimal but glaring setbacks resulting from too brief of an analysis of several critical issues. For example, the section on the African perspective to understanding ethnicity is too brief to be clearly understood and rather one may wonder what exactly the author meant when likening ethnicity to African identity at a time when the whole concept of "African Identity" is

being re-examined. The same applies to the external environment of ethnicity. One may ask to what extent structural adjustment programmes have exacerbated the salience and resilience of ethnicity in Africa? The case studies are too brief, particularly the case of Sudan. These are some of the weakest aspects of an otherwise excellent book. Despite these weaknesses, the book does justice to any reader with an interest on the topic of ethnicity in Africa. It measures up favourably with the vast literature emerging on the subject.

Samwel Ong'wen Okuro  
*Maseno University, Kenya*