

Berman, Bruce J. "Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa"

(abstract)

This paper examines the social construction of African ethnicities from pre-colonial times, colonial rule, the nationalist movement era, and finally the recent period of democratization during neo-liberal reforms. The paradox of efforts over the past twenty years to reinvent democracy in Africa has been that rather than dampening the fires of ethnic conflict, they have often exacerbated them.

The social construction of African ethnicity was and is the outcome of contributions from many hands, European and African. The impact of colonialism on African agrarian communities generated both new cleavages of class, as well as exacerbated existing internal differences of gender, generation and client-hood. Under this setting, ethnicity grew inextricable from state and market.

The repeated efforts to rewrite national constitutions attest to the continuing political energy of nationalism in the popular consciousness. At the same time, the disturbing connection between democratization and civil violence, increasingly expressed in the bitter conflicts of autochthony, reveals the growing ethnicization of nationalism and more narrowly bounded notions of citizenship in Africa.

After a period of democratization, by the end of the 1990s, many governments were receding back into 'semi-democracies' and a reassertion of elite control revealed serious limits of the process. The shallow and narrowly restricted 'democracy' implemented in most countries actually exacerbated ethnic conflicts and reinforced ethnically-driven politics and the political mobilization of ethnic communities. The most intense types of conflicts have focused on the meaning of citizenship and national belonging.