

LANGUAGE, ETHNICITY AND POPULATION

I

It may seem difficult at first sight to understand exactly the relationship between the three terms: 'language', 'ethnicity', and 'population' in a conference of the African Studies Association at which the focus is primarily on the third. We are, of course, used to some doubts about the precise application of the first two in African circumstances. For example, as far as 'language' is concerned, even a simple list (let alone a classification) of linguistic units leads to hoary problems of 'language' versus 'dialect', 'cluster', 'family' and the like, or to discussions of criteria of 'genetic' or 'typological' or other sorts. With 'tribe' or 'ethnicity', discussion turns on the overlap with 'race', 'culture', or 'language' itself (however ultimately delineated). We are less used to doubts about the third term - 'population'. As is common in human studies, we confuse different ideas. Thus we imagine that population is a reality, 'infrastructural' to the other two. Population measures have all the earmarks of objectivity and, for many, the reality of the term 'population' is itself an expression of the various indices used by demographers: birth, death, fertility, and nuptiality rates, and enumerations and samplings of various kinds.

Yet what is a population? What is, in each case, the unit to which the demographic measures relate? In a study of the Bakweri of Cameroon, some years ago, for example, a central question began to emerge. Were the Bakweri a declining population? Now the Bakweri tend to think that those of their number who live in modern centres are not quite 'real' Bakweri. The Bakweri picture of themselves made a clear distinction between those inside their village fences (leading a 'Bakweri way of life' as it were) and those outside them. The modern centres (par excellence outside the fence) were ethnically mixed, cosmopolitan, un-Bakweri. There was a sense then in which if the rural heartland was losing population the Bakweri were also declining in toto. The definition of the target population as rural, in an area notorious for a vast 'multitribal' migration to an adjacent plantation industry, moved the question of Bakweri 'decline' out of the realm of demography into that of ideas. For the rural population was not, as it stood, a self-perpetuating population. Demographically it was marked by 'distorted' age-structures and sex ratios - and probably fertility patterns too.²

This did not prevent us from usefully wearing out a demographic armoury on the mensurational aspects of the problem, and learning a great deal of value thereby. The most valuable lesson was that in the discussion of the dynamics of a population, your unit - 'the population' - is not merely subject to a statistical determination on the part of the observer, it is dependent on the subjective definition of that population by the human beings concerned. Over time, therefore, population series are continually affected by changing definitions on the

part of both the measurers and the measured. This factor has received less general emphasis than it deserves, in part because of the dogmatic, even ideological, definitions of populations that accompanied the development of the nineteenth and twentieth century nation states.

II

In Africa, the assumption that ethnicities were entities of the type that would yield a 'population', has always been too easily made, in both linguistic and biological studies. For that reason the figures for 'tribal' membership and for language-speakers are really even more difficult to evaluate than we usually suspect them to be. The extreme N.W. corner of the Bantu-speaking area (I adhere for the present to the boundary according to Guthrie 1948) illustrates this problem with remarkable clarity. We are presented with some two dozen entities, usually called 'tribes', but which also form the elements of the linguistic classification of the area. These entities are marked by very small individual populations - from 300 or less to about 30,000, with 6,000 or so being the mode. They are surrounded by 'groups' of quite another scale - Efik, Ekoi, Bamileke, and so on. What are we to make of discrepancies of this sort? We are in a difficult area of analysis, which belongs to a field of wider interest than our more limited regional concerns. The classification of human groups will exhibit features common to the classifying of all phenomena. Some part of the question of the particular scale of the N.W. Bantu ethnicities lies in the criteria of the Bantu classification itself - determined, if you like, in armchairs in Europe.

First, then, the scholars. It is easy to start with the recognition that the tribal and linguistic classifications were not independently arrived at. Even so, in what sense is it true that the speakers of Nigerian 'Ekoid' languages are more linguistically homogeneous than the West Cameroon group of Bantu speakers? We may answer this in different ways, but we should note that any scholarly or scientific classification occupies a specific taxonomic space. Its confines are to some extent coercive and they must be taken into account when problems of relationship within the space are being examined.

The conventional units which make up the taxonomy of the Bantu languages are defined, on the face of it, by fairly clearly determinable criteria (e.g. Guthrie 1948). The N.W. Bantu entities belong, of course, to this taxonomy. If these criteria are strictly applied we shall not be surprised that the taxonomic space of the Bantu classification does not correspond with that independently set up for the W. African languages, since the latter notoriously depends on a much less rigorous set (even a mixture) of criteria, and belongs on a different plane of analysis from that which is feasible in Bantu studies (Ardener 1971: 218-19).

Secondly, the 'people'. We have to consider here the nature of self-classification or self-identification. For the 'people' themselves play the part of theoreticians in this field. Here we touch on the close match of the classifying process with the workings of language itself. It has frequently been noted that the Bantu languages have 'overdetermined', as it were, precisely along the axis of classification. The smallest differentiation of humanity can immediately be linguistically labelled, with a ba-form, homologous with that used for the largest ethnic entities. The Bantu taxonomy is continuously self-amending.

In the interaction between insider and outsider, the Bantuizing tendency has aided the differentiation and discrimination of units. The multiplication of 'separate' Bantu languages was even an overt aim of nineteenth century scholars. For the N.W. Bantu area, it is a fact that many of the divisions now in existence lean on classifications in which the scholar-turned-administrator or the administrator-turned-scholar (German, British and French) played a not insignificant part. There was a feedback to the people, so easily achieved from interpreters and others, to confuse the matter further. After all, one of the more inaccessible 'populations' of the zone is quite content to be called, and to call itself, 'Ngolo-Batanga', a hyphenated form which owes its existence to classifying for the convenience of scholars and foreigners - thus joining the select but expanding company in which are found 'Anglo-Saxon', 'Serbo-Croat' and some others.

The Bantuizing tendency itself belongs to that well-documented domain of structure in which language and reality are intermingled. It is also something of a special case of the more complex phenomenon of 'taxonomic scale'. This is underlined when we consider the neighbouring Ekoi case. The intervention of British-style, ethnically minded, Native Administrations had given by the 'thirties of this century a local reality to general classifications whose autochthonous basis was originally limited and contradictory. The search for one Ekoi ethnicity, rather than a series of ethnicities, must be brought into relation with the particular scale of the main elements of the southern Nigerian ethnic space. Dominated as it was by the entities labelled Yoruba, Edo, Ibo and Ibibio, it became virtually determined that 'Ekoi' would be set up homologically with these - despite the possibility of establishing several Ekoi 'tribes' (Talbot 1926, Crabb 1965).

The effect of two essentially different taxonomic spaces in this zone upon tribal divisions can be seen in the usage of the German and British administrations. The former, 'Bantuizing' in tendency, used three 'ethnic' names to divide up the relatively small Ekoi-speaking area which overlapped into its territory. On the other hand, when West Cameroon came under British administrators, some of the latter (e.g. Talbot), being more at home on the Nigerian scale, classified the whole 'Bantu' group together, for population purposes. This did not become general, but the ethnic 'diversity' of the area always remained a source of classifying malaise to them.

In the colonial period, then, the scale of the units in the prevailing ethnic taxonomies was far from uniform. The accepted scale was, in a sense, a result of arbitration between the foreigners and the politically important groups. The Yoruba and Bini kingdoms set the scale for Southern Nigeria, but this was itself set in some ways by the imperial scale of the Fulani-conquered north. It should not be forgotten that the still unsuccessful search for Ekoi unity was preceded by the Ibo case, the successful outcome of whose progress from label to population was not self-evident. It is by continuous series of such contrasts and oppositions (to which, I repeat, both foreigners and Africans contributed) that many (and in principle all) populations have defined themselves.

Much of the discomfort of West Cameroonians in the Federation of Nigeria derived from the discrepancy between their 'Bantuizing' taxonomic scale and that of the Federation as a whole. This led to the paradox, noted at the time, of the growth of a new 'Kamerun' ethnicity of Nigerian scale, covering this 'artificial' political unit - which actually, despite its internal diversity, was, while the taxonomic constraints existed, one of the most homogeneous-looking of the units of the Federation. The Bantuizing scale of the new Cameroon state clearly suits West Cameroon better at present. The West Cameroon area nevertheless still preserves elements of the newer and broader 'ethnicity' generated by the Nigerian phase of their experience (Ardener 1967: 293-99).

The position of minority-peoples in a zone of 'large populations' is thus more complicated than it seems. I wish to bring out of the discussion so far these points, as they relate to the African situation. I think they have more general validity.

- (1) The ethnic classification is a reflex of self-identification.
- (2) Onomastic (or naming) propensities are closely involved in this, and thus have more than a purely linguistic interest.
- (3) Identification by others is an important feature in the establishment of self-identification.
- (4) The taxonomic space in which self-identification occurs is of over-riding importance.
- (5) The effect of foreign classification, 'scientific' and lay, is far from neutral in the establishment of such a space.

III

'Tribes are not permanent crystalline structures, belonging to one "stage" of historical or social development ... the process of self-classification never ceases'.⁴ There is a true sense in which the human populations ascribed to some of these entities do not therefore represent demographic units with purely demographic pasts or futures.

Take an entity such as the Kole, one of the labelled units on the border of the Bantu and Efik linguistic domains. This was ascribed a population in 1953 of hundreds. The Kole, or some of them, speak a dialect of Duala, and are traditionally offshoots of the latter people, who live some 100 miles down the coast. Something corresponding to the Kole entity has been attested for a hundred and thirty years, and on some interpretations of the evidence it could be two hundred, even three hundred years old.⁵ This small population always seems to be on the brink of extinction. What is meant by the demographic continuity of populations of this sort? Do we assume they are all the rump remnants of larger groups in the past? For various reasons, the evidence for ethno-linguistic continuity on this coast tends to suggest the opposite - that we are dealing with populations bumping along in exiguous numbers over fifty or a hundred or even several hundred years. With populations of millions, extrapolations back and forward in time using demographic indices may not generate truth, but they contain plausibility. With small hunting and gathering bands an ecological balance is at least a hypothesis (although Douglas, 1966, has called it into question). The populations of the type to which I refer are not at this elementary technological level. In the Kole case, it may well be that the whole dynamic of the 'population' is linguistic or sociolinguistic.

The Kole environmental interest is a border interest - between the Efik and Duala trading zones. The 'Kole' coast probably always had a mixed population. Kole may have always used a trading dialect, whose structure may reflect several neighbouring Bantu languages. Kole as identifiable people under that label were probably those members of the commercial group who maintained some connexions with the Duala and perhaps with the intervening Isubu. The category Kole may have been filled according to different criteria at different times. Perhaps sometimes, the Kole were mostly Efik. Perhaps sometimes the Kole speech was learnt by all in the zone. Perhaps sometimes it was spoken by nobody of social importance. In all these coastal areas the expansion and contraction of slave or client communities, and their relationship to their masters and hosts, must also be born in mind. In a case like this the dynamics of a 'population' with a certain label over the centuries are not the dynamics of cohorts, and of fertility or mortality rates. They are the dynamics of an economic, social, and linguistic situation.

Who, or what, however, determines the preservation of the classification itself? We can easily hypothesize a situation in which everyone can point to a Kole, but no one calls himself

Kole. Labels of this sort are fixed to what may be termed 'hollow categories'. In the actual case, the Efik no doubt maintained the category of 'border coastal Bantu people' without much concern for the exact constituents of the category. The Bantu-speaking Duala, Isubu, and others might equally maintain the category of 'those like us, nearest the Efik.' I suspect that the Kole were in part a hollow category, like this. They were fixed as an 'ethnic group' in the British administrative system. No wonder many were puzzled by the tiny number of 'linguistic' Kole among a welter of Efik and other migrants. No wonder too that linguistic Kole itself was so hard to pin down, a language of aberrant idiolects. Perhaps it had never been any different?

In order to summarize the population characteristics of a hollow category we may express the matter so: since the category is filled according to non-demographic criteria the population's survival or extinction, growth or decline, age-structure or fertility, are not determined in demographic space.

A close congener of the hollow category is the entity maintained by continuous replenishment from a home area. Thus the ethnic map of Cameroon contains stable, growing or declining concentrations of Ibo, Bamileke, Hausa (and the like) which are demographically not necessarily self-perpetuating. This type of unit is familiar now in Africa, as well as in most of the urbanized world. Such concentrations were, however, also known in the past. Nomadic groups such as the Fulani, or economically-defined groups such as the Aro among the Ibo, and others elsewhere shared some of the features of such continuously concentrated but demographically unstable groups.

Their close connexion with hollow categories lies in their tendency to become hollow. Thus the supposed Bali settlers on the Cameroon Plateau are now, in their main settlement, an entity which under close examination turns out to look like a representative sample of all of their neighbours. Their present dominant language is a kind of average Cameroon Bantoid. In Northern Cameroon the category 'Fulbe' has become 'hollow' in this way. In various places and times the categories 'Norman', 'Pict', 'Jew', 'Gypsy', 'Irishman', and many others may have become, or be becoming hollow - a mere smile surviving from the vanished Cheshire cat. Thus not only can a hollow category become a 'population', a 'population' can become a hollow category. Indeed, this process need never stop: the category may become a population again. Certain peculiar features in the supposed continuity of certain ethnic, even 'national', groups may well be elucidated in this way.

It is essential to make this effort to separate the concept of 'population' from those of language and ethnicity. In the past the separation has been urged in biological terms. A biological population, it has been pointed out, may not coincide in its history with the affiliations of its language or of its culture. I am not repeating this truth, or truism. For we are not able to be so confident about the concept of a biological population. We are concerned with continuities whose processes are only in part biological. Fulbe, Jews and (as we

know) Britons are created by definition as much as by procreation. We are dealing with 'structures' of a clearly recognized type whose transformations may be documented in statistics, but whose dynamics lie outside the field of statistical extrapolation. I have made this assertion of principle without the important modifications and qualifications in order to highlight its importance in African studies. We may, in the West or in the global context, avert our eyes from these contradictions. Our largest units of human classification have reached such a scale that population dynamics now form the tail that violently wags the human dog. This is not so even with smaller Western units or subunits. It was rarely so with African ethnicities.

IV

I have kept these remarks brief. I have not alluded more than sketchily to the topographical, ecological, economic and political elements which enter into identification and self-identification. Ultimately, among the things that society 'is' or 'is like', it 'is' or 'is like' identification. The entities set up may be based upon divisions in empirical reality, or may be set up on reality by the structuring processes of the human mind in society. In such statements 'reality' is, however, frequently only a compendium of 'positivistic' measures and approximations. We experience the structures themselves as reality: they generate events, not merely our experience of events. Anthropologists would argue I think that this process is analogous to language, } But all agree that language acquires a position of critical empirical importance in its study.

possibly subsuming language, rather than a process of language.

For population studies, the most impressive advances have occurred in the study of entities of a macrodemographic scale to which statistical and mensurational indices are central. Nevertheless, changes in these indices come back to the differentiation of entities ('minorities', 'classes', 'sects', 'ideologies') within the mass population which redefine, or restructure population 'behaviour' and thus, the population. This differentiating process is of exactly the kind which in our more parochial field of interest is associated with the waxing and waning of 'ethnicities' and the like. I have used only two or three elementary formulations ('the taxonomic space', 'taxonomic scale' and 'hollow category'), but the basic approach is a small part of recent movements which restore scientific validity to the mentalistic framework within which human societies shape and create events. Thereby, population studies themselves may be given back some of the intuitive life and colour that their subject matter deserves.

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Notes

1. This was the introductory paper to the Session on 'Language, Ethnicity and Population' (Co-Chairman Dr. D. Dalby) at the Birmingham Conference on 'The Population Factor in African Studies' of the African Studies Association, 11th - 14th September, 1972.
2. See Ardener 1962, 1972a.
3. To distinguish them from the distant Batanga of the South Cameroon coast.
4. Ardener, 1967: 298.
5. Under the name of 'Romby' - Ardener 1968, 1972b.

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