Words don’t hurt. Or do they? David Ehrhardt argues that the ways in which political elites define ethnic identities can have a considerable impact or the ‘real’ social dynamics of ethnic conflict.

by David Ehrhardt

In late September 2011 a curious discussion about the tone of the political debate in the Netherlands kicked off the Dutch parliamentary year. In a widely televised exchange, opposition and cabinet politicians discussed the legitimacy of patronizing language and ridicule in the national parliament. To many commentators, the mayhem of rhetoric and semantics seemed trivial in the midst of global economic crisis and the Eu’s deep financial turmoil. Were the fundamental threats to the Dutch economy not infinitely more important than the rather postmodern concern with the impact of words and rhetoric?

Although the discussion in question was undoubt- edly ill-timed, this article proposes an argument in favour of semantic debates in politics. Building on my doctoral research at the University of Oxford (forthcoming), it argues that the ways in which political elites and institutions define ethnic identities can have a considerable impact on the ‘real’ social dynamics of ethnic conflict. Specifically, the article will show how in two less-similar cities, Kano and Amsterdam, the use of nativist policy languages (around indigeneity and autochtonie, respectively) reinforced competitive relations between their ‘native’ and ‘settler’ groups.

Cosmopolitan Cities and Ethnic Antagonism

The metropolitan area of Kano is Nigeria’s second-largest city, a long-standing economic hub with an estimated population of close to 5 million. As such, the city reflects the social complexity that also characterizes the national polity. Challenged by poverty, oil politics, and deep social divisions, Nigeria is well-known as an endlessly complex mosaic of cross-cutting ties, loyalties, and institutions. Some of the more salient social distinctions in this complex country are ethnic, religious, and regional: dividing the Yoruba from the Igbo and Hausa-Fulani, the Christians from the Muslims, and the northerners from the southerners.

At least two-thirds of Kano’s population is northern, Hausa-Fulani, and Muslim, leaving considerable minorities with other ethnic and religious affiliations. In everyday social life Kano’s majority and minority groups interact regularly, at work, in one of the city’s many markets, or in their neighbourhood. The vast majority of these interactions is peaceful and co-operative. At the same time, over one-fourth of the Hausa-Fulani report to have negative perceptions of southern Nigerian minorities, most notably the Yoruba and the Igbo. Amsterdam, like Kano, has a long historical experience with immigration and diversity, but its identity and the population self-identifies as Dutch, while the main minorities are Dutch-Turkish, Dutch-Moroccan, and Dutch-Surinamese. These ethnic identities compete with a more inclusive sense of Amsterdam citizenship, which has been long been propagated by the municipal government and allows for a sense of belonging in the city without reference to ethnic or religious affiliations.

Irrespective of these inclusive efforts, however, many different explanations have been proposed for these puzzles of identity selection and overlap of ethnic and religious boundaries, characteristic of populations of both cities, only served to reinforce their combined impact in this regard. Moreover, in both cities, the introduction of new forms of ethnic and religious difference coincided with the fading of boundaries among the ‘native’ populations. In Kano, this ‘homogenization’ was exemplified by the regional Northern nationalism and the fading of sectarian conflicts within the Muslim community, while in Amsterdam it comprised the processes of depolarization and unprecedented socio-economic redistribution.

Ethnic antagonism towards certain ethnic groups was thus reported by similar, substantial minority segments of the otherwise cosmopolitan cities of Kano and Amsterdam. How can we explain this observation, especially across such widely divergent contexts? Analytically, I argue that intergroup antagonism is produced in two steps. First, we need to account for the process in which one particular identity boundary (in case ethnicity) is selected and becomes salient in society. Subsequently, we need to explain why (some of) the groups defined by this boundary are viewed negatively. Many different explanations have been proposed for these puzzles of identity selection and the production of antagonism, two of which are relevant in both cases under analysis: cultural difference and horizontal inequality.

Cultural Difference

In terms of cultural diversity, both Kano and Amsterdam have been subject to relatively recent and substantial flows of immigrants with distinct ethnic and religious backgrounds. In Kano, this process began with the amalgamation of northern and southern Nigeria under British colonial rule and has continued up to this day, even in the desperate Nigerian economic climate. Amsterdam experienced its most recent demographic upheaval in the decades following the Second World War, when a brief period of out-migration was succeeded by large-scale immigration from the (former) colonies and various Mediterranean countries. Although neither city was new to the effects of immigration, it is intuitive to argue that the new, and highly visible, forms of ethnic and religious difference increased the societal importance of ethnic and religious identities. The strong overlap of ethnic and religious boundaries, characteristic of populations of both cities, only served to reinforce their combined impact in this regard. Moreover, in both cities, the introduction of new forms of ethnic and religious difference coincided with the fading of boundaries among the ‘native’ populations. In Kano, this ‘homogenization’ was exemplified by the regional Northern nationalism and the fading of sectarian conflicts within the Muslim community, while in Amsterdam it comprised the processes of depolarization and unprecedented socio-economic redistribution.

Immigration and increasing diversity can thus help to explain the rising salience of ethnicity in the two cities. However, immigration did not only bring new ethnic divisions into Kano and Amsterdam, but also new political ideologies, class relations, urban-rural divisions, and other forms of social difference. Why did ethnic differences eclipse these other divisions? And why did the rising salience of ethnicity also lead to increased ethnic antagonism? The rise of cultural difference per se cannot account for either the selection of ethnic difference or the antagonism directed at some ethnic minorities at the exclusion of others.

Horizontal Inequality

Explaining ethnic antagonism in Kano and Amsterdam, therefore, requires more than a...
reference to increasing diversity or cultural difference. Cultural difference alone cannot account fully for the salience of ethnic identities or the negative perceptions of particular communities. To this end, it is useful to consider the material relations that characterize the two cities, in the same way as through Stewart’s (2008) theory of horizontal inequalities. Building on notions of realistic conflict theory (Sherif and Sherif 1969) and relative deprivation (Gurr and Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Center of International Studies, 1970) it argues, in brief, that intergroup conflict is likely to occur in situations of consistent political or socio-economic inequalities between the groups in question.

Kano and Amsterdam both offer evidence to support the interaction between horizontal inequality and antagonism. The specific direction of the inequalities, however, differs between the two cities. In Kano, the least-liked minorities (the Yoruba and the Igbo) have consistently been wealthier and better educated than the majority community. Especially considering the city's context of persistent economic crisis, this horizontal inequality has long constituted a grievance among the city's majority community, the Hausa-Fulani. In Amsterdam, in contrast, the least-liked minorities (the Dutch-Moroccans and Dutch-Antilleans) have consistently had a lower socio-economic status than the Dutch majority and some of the other minorities. In the Dutch context of welfare state, the relative deprivation of these minorities has become a grievance to many of the other, wealthier, ethnic communities. Horizontal inequality is thus, in both cities, part of the explanation of the negative perceptions towards certain minority communities. It helps to understand the salience of identity boundaries between highly unequal groups and also points towards some of the grievances that cause negative intergroup perceptions.

Two analytical puzzles remain related to explaining both identity selection and negative perceptions. First, the precise selection of some ethnic minorities over others, which are in similarly unequal positions, remains unexplained if we only consider horizontal inequalities. Second, while the directions of their inequalities are inverted, most of the antagonism in Kano and Amsterdam is directed at minorities rather than at the majority.

**Nativism**

One way to resolve these puzzles, I argue in my dissertation, is found in the political context of the two cities. More specifically, I argue that we need to look at the ways in which political discourses and institutions historically have interacted with cultural diversity and horizontal inequality to produce ethnic identities and interethnic relations. In essence, political discourses and institutions are based on sets of social categories, differentiating, for example, citizens from illegal immigrants, the unemployed from the formally employed, or ‘natives’ from ‘non-indigenous’. Such categories allow political authorities to simplify the complexity of social reality and identify ‘target populations’ for their policy interventions. In most cases there is some connection between the policy categories and ‘real’ and meaningful social identities, such as ethnicity, religion, or class.

Cultural diversity and horizontal inequality, as highlighted above, are major determinants of the multiple ‘real’ identities and divisions that characterize a society. Their relative salience and specific meanings remain to be constantly (re)defined by the individuals and groups that use these identities to understand their social reality. It is in this process of everyday identity construction that policy categories, through political discourses and institutions, can have a significant impact.


In Kano, nativism and its corresponding ethnic labels were first used by the British colonial government in the early 20th century, mainly to control the anticipated negative fallout of increased non-Muslim immigration into the city. Non-Muslim immigrants were legally obliged to reside within a local neighborhood outside the city walls. This nativist logic was carried into the independence era through the concept of ‘indigene ship’, the primordial identification at the heart of Nigeria’s ethnic power-sharing mechanisms. Nativism was thus, somewhat paradoxically, introduced to preserve social peace and has, at the federal level of the state, contributed to political stability and unity. At the local level in Kano, however, it has fed into the existing divisions between the ‘native’ Hausa-Fulani and the ‘non-indigenous’ Yoruba and Igbo communities and legitimised the antagonism from the poor ‘native’ community towards these two ‘over-privileged settlers’. In Amsterdam, similarly, nativism was introduced as part of national policies to support immigrant emancipation. It has its roots in the multicultural notion of ‘ethnic minorities’, but only found its full expression in the 1990s concept of the non-Western allochtoon. This term explicitly connected primordial ethnic nationalism to prevalent notions of the ‘unsocietal’ classes and the rising criticism of Islam. Through its ubiquitous use in bureaucratic and colloquial language, Dutch ethnicity became salient and hierarchical, positioning the native autochthon and those with Western allochtoon origins above the ‘problematic’ non-Western communities. Policy categories thus fed into ‘real’ divisions that were created by increasing diversity and horizontal inequality – but they selectively emphasised particular boundaries, such as those around the Dutch and Turkish and Dutch-Moroccan communities, and infused them with an inherent sense of hierarchy.

**Diversity, inequality, and Language**

Policy categories, and specifically those defined on the basis of nativist principles, therefore converged with ‘real’ divisions of a cultural, religious, and socio-economic nature to produce the ethnic antagonism observed in Kano and Amsterdam. Immigration increased the ethnic and religious diversity of the two cities, thus introducing new forms of potential social division. Perhaps the visibility of ethnic and religious divisions helps to explain some of their salience; but diversity alone cannot explain the antagonism directed at some of the cities’ minorities. Horizontal inequalities help to understand the grievances behind this antagonism, but again fail to account fully for the specific selection of stigmatised minorities – the Yoruba and Igbo in Kano and the Dutch-Moroccans in Amsterdam.

The historical impact of the nativism in political discourse and institutions can help to fill some of the gaps left by diversity- and inequality-oriented explanations. Its impact on prevalent understandings of ethnicity underlines the hierarchy inherent in this division, positioning those with a claim to a ‘native’ status above those who claim to belong elsewhere. This hierarchy helps to explain the one-sided antagonism directed at ‘settler’ minorities: these minorities simply do not belong in the cities in the same way as the ‘natives’ do. As such, their claim to either wealth (Kano) or state support (Amsterdam) is inherently limited and the horizontal inequalities in both cities can be construed, by the ‘natives’, as a legitimate grievances against the ‘settlers’. While policy language did thus not create forms of difference and inequality, its impact on salient understandings of identity and belonging can help to explain why certain differences and inequalities become a source of antagonism, while others do not.

David Ehrhardt: A matter of hearts.

**Bibliography**