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Introduction

On December 4, 2000, in Côte d'Ivoire's capital of Abidjan, sixty-year-old Bakary Kaba was gunned down in the presence of his family as he performed the ablutions of foot washing in preparation for prayer.¹ Mr. Kaba was a Muslim, and human rights reports indicated that he was killed at the hands of Christian military police officers who shot him simply because of the Muslim robes he wore. Though tragic, Mr. Kaba's killing was not isolated – it came on the heels of a massacre of fifty-seven Muslims on the outskirts of Abidjan, the burning of churches and mosques throughout the country, and the murder of several prominent priests and imams. Thrown into turmoil by a December 1999 coup, and unhinged once more by failed elections in October 2000, Côte d'Ivoire at the time of Kaba's death found itself in the throes of violence that would ultimately lead to a decade-long civil conflict and that would turn this once proud and united nation into a setting for inter-religious violence, or so it was described.

Mr. Kaba's clothes marked him as a Muslim, but he was not just a Muslim. He identified with the Malinké ethno-linguistic group (or "tribe").² He was an immigrant, having migrated to Côte d'Ivoire years earlier from Guinea in search of stable employment. Though living in

¹ For a summary account of the killing, see U.S. Department of State (2001).

² I refer to ethno-linguistic groups as "ethnic groups" rather than "tribes" due to an association of tribe with backwardness (Southall 1970) and colonial control (Campbell 1997). Ethnic groups and tribes are sometimes used to refer to different levels of community, so I lose some degree of precision. I also realize that my labeling decision introduces the risk of confusion between broad and narrow ethnicity. Throughout the book, where I use "ethno-linguistic group" or "tribe," they are synonymous with "ethnic group."

Abidjan at the time of his death, Mr. Kaba was in many respects a northerner, owing to his kinship ties and previous residence in the north of the country. He was thought to be a supporter of the *Rassemblement des Républicains* (RDR), an opposition political party that would later come to power. Of the many groups that Mr. Kaba represented (Malinké ethnicity, immigrant, Guinean, northerner, RDR supporter), why did his religion doom him? Why, in a country divided along ethno-linguistic as well as religious lines, was this violence defined in Christian-Muslim terms?

In this book, I seek an answer to those questions. Stated more generally, why do Africa's "ethnic" conflicts sometimes emerge along ethno-linguistic lines and sometimes along religious lines? During the Rwandan genocide, majority Hutus launched a 100-day attack against minority Tutsis that left more than 800,000 dead in a shocking case of ethnic violence (Prunier 1995). Yet Rwandans are not only members of the Hutu and Tutsi ethnicities; they are also members of religious groups and other social identities. Why was the Rwandan genocide not a different story of majority Catholics launching an attack against minority Muslims? In Sudan, a north-south civil war was at one period a matter of Arabs fighting black Africans and at another period a matter of Muslims in conflict against non-Muslims (Deng 1995). In Nigeria, conflicts like the Ogoni uprising in the 1990s occurred between ethno-linguistic groups; clashes in Jos and other northern cities in the 2000s occurred between Muslims and Christians; and the 1967-1970 civil war in the Biafra region began as an ethnic group conflict and ended with attention on religion without the participants ever changing. Across Africa, recent violence in the Central African Republic, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Burundi, Chad, and elsewhere has implicated either ethnic or religious actors. Even beyond the African region, conflicts in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Northern Ireland, India, and the Middle East are often viewed through either ethno-linguistic or religious lenses, yet current theories in comparative politics are not equipped to tell us whether there is something about ethnicity and religion that shapes those lines of conflict. I suggest that there is.

The question of why conflicts in Africa are sometimes ethnic and sometimes religious is not an esoteric one. According to Sambanis (2001), fully 73 percent of civil wars worldwide are counted as ethnic/religious in nature; the remaining 27 percent are coded as revolutionary wars, though even then ethnicity or religion is frequently exploited for divisive purposes. Fox (2012) puts the share of religious wars alone at

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62 percent of all conflicts, up from about 30 percent in the 1960s. In the African context, where ethnic and religious identities color much of life's quotidian interactions and many of its social and political divisions, conflicts *not* described in ethnic or religious terms prove to be the exception.

Of course, the notion of ethnic and religious wars can be understood in multiple ways. Toft (2007) makes the distinction between conflicts in which identity is *central* versus those in which it is *peripheral* but nevertheless plays a role simply by virtue of the two sides representing opposing labels.³ Svensson (2007) describes *incompatibility wars*, in which opponents fight over the actual content of identity differences, and *identity wars*, in which other factors drive conflict but the opponents' labels happen to differ. Pearce (2005) calls this an *issue-oriented* division versus an *identity-oriented* division. These distinctions are critically important for determining the cause of conflicts. In this book, my goal is somewhat different: I aim to understand why conflicts, once they have begun, take on one label versus another – a “tribal war,” for example, versus “religious killings.”⁴ This is a question of conflict frames. Sometimes, the cause of a conflict and its frame are closely related; at other times, conflict frames have little to do with the cause of violence itself. In virtually all cases, I argue, the choice of frames is ultimately a political one.

Accounts in the political science literature of how identities such as ethnicity and religion become important follow three distinct paths. First, the now outdated primordialist perspective suggests that certain types of identity (usually the ethno-linguistic group) have greater intrinsic or objective importance than other types and are thus more likely to be at the root of conflict, as groups in close proximity cling to innate differences and deep-seated hatreds (Douglass 1988; Geertz 1973). Second, contemporary instrumentalist and constructivist views instead treat identities as the fluid and situational choices of instrumental actors (Barth 1969; Kasfir 1979; Posner 2004; Young 1976) – in the limit, simply as “interest groups” that form in a strategic effort to accumulate resources (Bates 1983).⁵ In this context, there are frequently no functional differences in

³ These scholars refer specifically to religious conflicts, but the distinctions they make apply equally well to ethnic ones.

⁴ The tribal war citation refers to South Sudan (see *New York Times* 2015); religious killings refers to Nigeria (see *Evening Standard* 2012).

⁵ Instrumentalism highlights choices made in the self-interest of actors, while constructivism underscores the importance of narratives created for a social group or community (see Stewart 2008). While some scholarship falls distinctly into one or the other camp,

mobilizing according to religion, ethnic group, language, race, or other ascriptive identity types – the particular lines along which ethnic conflict happens to emerge are instead a matter of the relative sizes of groups, institutional factors that favor one group over another, and the manner in which political entrepreneurs exploit those differences to their advantage. Finally, a third set of scholars focusing exclusively on conflict in religious terms prioritizes the characteristics of particular religious groups, suggesting that, for example, the language, organizational structure, history, or tenets of Islam shapes Muslim relations with other religions (Badie 1987; Huntington 1996; Kalyvas 2000; Lewis 1990; Sanneh 1994; Stark 2001; Toft 2007).

The argument that I make lies between these approaches. Like the contemporary constructivist approach, I argue that the salience of ethnicity, religion, or any other social identity is context dependent and that political entrepreneurs make strategic calculations regarding the identity type they wish to politicize. What distinguishes my argument from others in this camp, however, is my view that ethnicity and religion offer different baselines from which those strategic calculations must be made. Like the scholars of religion and politics, I suggest that something is indeed different about religion (and ethnicity) that merits scholarly attention from political scientists. Where my argument differs is in placing emphasis not on the tenets or other characteristics of specific traditions, but rather on the social impact of ethnic and religious identities writ large that inspire different priorities and preferences. These broad differences between ethnicity and religion (among other possible identity choices) affect the calculations of political entrepreneurs, regardless of their particular ethnic or religious stripes.

The central argument in this book is that individuals have multiple identities, each of which evokes distinct preferences. Political entrepreneurs understand this and seek to mobilize supporters in terms of the identities that have the most useful behavioral consequences, vis-à-vis the leader's own strategic goals. They do this by altering the frame of conflict, either exploiting policies that mobilize an optimal identity or mobilizing an identity type to generate support for an optimal policy. In this sense, the argument offers a new explanation for why identities like ethnicity and religion become salient in conflict settings, and thus why fighting occurs along one identity line rather than another: it is not because some

I conflate those camps here to focus on the context-dependent nature of political identities under both accounts.

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identities are innately more important to people (as primordialists might claim) or because certain identity groups possess characteristics that increase the likelihood of conflict (as some scholars of religion and politics may argue). It is also not simply a matter of optimally sized identity coalitions (as constructivists or instrumentalists might suggest), because ethnic and religious divisions sometimes provide no clear numerical advantage. Instead, conflicts become ethnic or religious because those identity types evoke distinct preferences that can be exploited for political ends.

How do ethnicity and religion in Africa differ? Ethnic groups in the region do not have formal behavioral guidelines but instead draw socio-political relevance from narratives of descent and from historical ties to well-defined geographic areas overseen by a chief or traditional authority. Ethnic groups, in this sense, are land-based identities. The impact of world religions in Africa is quite different: they inspire only weak ties to land and instead rely on imported sets of behavioral guidelines to maintain social and political relevance and to serve group members. As a convenient shorthand, I refer to them as rule-based identities. I argue that these features generate *mobilizational differences* – ethnicity inspires preferences for control of the land and local resources, whereas religion inspires preferences for protecting moral lifestyles and voluntarily accepted rules, particularly with transnational influence. Thus, although the instrumental interests of the political entrepreneur remain unchanged, his calculations do not, owing to the fact that his support base(s) will mobilize collectively around different concerns in ethnic versus religious contexts. In this view, the choice of which identity type to politicize is a matter not simply of relative group size but of the precise outcome the political entrepreneur hopes to achieve. Efforts to protect or accumulate local resources are associated with mobilization of the ethnic identity. If, conversely, the political goal calls for developing ties beyond the local land or highlighting matters of moral legitimacy, the political entrepreneur would do best to politicize religion. Applied to contentious political situations, the uniting of mobilizational differences and political goals has strong implications for how we view cases of “ethnic” conflict. In case after case in the African region, the evidence supports this approach.

The value of the argument, however, goes beyond the intellectual exercise of classifying conflicts as ethnic, religious, or otherwise. Understanding why conflicts are seen through an ethnic versus a religious lens generates insights into the sources of aid and alliance available to parties in conflict. It sheds light on the targets of violence and the potential for

retaliation and may also help to predict the severity of conflict. Perhaps most important, distinguishing ethnic from religious conflict frames can put us in a position to better identify strategies for mitigating future tensions between adversaries.

BOUNDARIES OF THE ARGUMENT

I do not intend to explain why conflict begins. Instead, taking political and economic competition over scarce resources as a broader, fundamental cause of conflict,⁶ I ask which labels groups employ when they come into conflict. Why does competition take place along some lines rather than others? Given individual attachments to several identity types, when should we expect ethnicity or religion to be evoked in the course of conflict? Focusing on these questions puts me in position to set aside the myriad moving parts that complicate stories of conflict onset and to do what those arguments do not – account for the mobilizational differences between types of identity that political entrepreneurs can use to their advantage in contentious political circumstances. My goal, then, is to construct a more complete understanding of conflict in Africa by going beyond the question of why conflict emerges to ask why, when groups come into conflict, the same people sometimes fight in the name of “tribe” and sometimes in the name of God. I maintain the view that these labels rarely serve as the cause of conflicts per se, but rather as incredibly powerful tools wielded in the course of conflicts.

The frame, or identity lens through which political activity is seen, is determined by several factors. First, the *actors* involved in a conflict – including political entrepreneurs, violence “specialists,” and community members on both sides – announce themselves as members of an ethnic group, religion, or other social group. Second, the *targets* of violence in civil conflicts affect the lens through which that conflict is seen. The burning of churches and mosques, the murder of priests and imams, and the killing of religiously sacred animals (e.g., cows in Hindu regions) shape conflict as religious; attacking party headquarters frames conflict in political party terms; upsetting traditional shrines, destroying crops farmed by an agriculturalist ethnic group, or killing animals associated with a pastoralist group marks a conflict as “tribal.” Third, the *rhetoric*

⁶ Competition over resources underlies explanations rooted in both opportunity (Collier and Hoeffler 2004) and grievances (Gurr 1970). For summaries of the literature on conflict cause, see Brubaker (2004, chapter 4) and Blattman and Miguel (2010).

used by actors in a conflict to make demands and incite participation contributes to the framing of conflict as ethnic, religious, or other. When, for example, an opposition political figure makes the public announcement that he is not permitted to take part in elections because he is a Muslim (an example described in Chapter 6), the conflict is more likely to take on a religious tone. Finally, the *reporting* of incidents during conflict influences the lens through which that conflict is seen. Paul Brass (1997) uses the example of a dispute over a young girl, coincidentally between Muslims and Hindus, as an illustration of the power and danger that reports can have on the frame of ethnic or communal conflict. To those affected by conflict, however, the frame is not simply a choice of labels but often a deeply felt cause for which to raise arms.

Why should we care about the frame of Africa's conflicts? As the example from Brass illustrates, frames can be notoriously fickle and subject to manipulation (e.g., from a state press interested in cultivating an outcome or image favorable to the government). That is not to say, however, that the frame does not matter; Brass's very point is that how a conflict is viewed has important consequences for how it proceeds. First, there is the matter of targets: Mr. Kaba in Côte d'Ivoire may not have been gunned down in front of his family had the Ivoirian conflict not taken on a religious frame. Second, some evidence suggests that the frame of conflicts – as religious, ethnic, or otherwise – has consequences for the outcomes and severity of violence. Wilkinson (1999) suggests, based on data from India, that conflicts over religion tend to be more violent; Fox (2004) presents cross-national data over a fifty-year period to demonstrate that wars in the name of religion are both longer and bloodier than non-religious wars. Sambanis (2001) notes an association between ethnic and religious conflicts and a lack of democracy. There are thus reasons to suspect that the frame of conflict – shaped by the actors involved, the targets, the rhetoric, and the reporting – affects the longer term trajectories of those conflicts. My objective is to explain why that frame is sometimes ethnic and sometimes religious.

Even in cases where the roots of a conflict appear obvious – say, in the imposition of Islamic Shari'a law for criminal matters in northern Nigeria – we should still ask why elites chose the particular strategy they did to mobilize supporters. In that instance, what is often described as a political power grab (Mu'azzam and Ibrahim 2000) could have targeted Hausa-Igbo ethnic divisions instead. Why might political leaders push a policy like Shari'a law if it divides society? The answer I propose is that doing so alters the salience of identity types in systematically useful ways.

Insofar as identity types have unique effects on individuals, political entrepreneurs can filter those individual-level preferences through their own strategic goals to achieve different ends.

To develop this argument, I focus on ethnicity and religion in Africa, for the following reason. The project begins with the fairly pedestrian view that something changes for individuals when they are placed in different identity contexts. To test that hunch, I sought an environment where multiple social identities are equally strong and potentially politically salient. In sub-Saharan Africa, ethnicity and religion are appropriate foils: over 90 percent of respondents to surveys in the region indicate that religion is important in their lives, and the same surveys indicate that the ethno-linguistic identity is the primary form of self-identification.⁷ Together, religion and one's ethnic group are the most common social identity responses to the question, "how do you identify yourself first and foremost?" There is also a history of conflict in the region that has emerged along both ethnic and religious lines, generating sufficient variation in the outcome of interest to allow for the construction of a causal argument linking the mobilizational differences of identities to the lens through which conflict is seen. At the same time, Africa can be taken as a harder context in which to demonstrate mobilizational differences between ethnicity and religion, precisely because both are such central aspects of most individuals' lives, and they are often difficult to separate. Thus, to the extent that mobilizational differences do appear in the African context, I will have chosen a conservative environment in which to make the case that those differences affect political choice over the identity frames of conflict.

The argument is not intended as a universal explanation of all identity conflict. Different theories may be needed to explain the role of nationalism, class, or other identity types in conflict situations. Furthermore, as I develop in Chapter 2, ethnicity and religion should take on different meanings across distinct geographic regions. The categorization of religion as inspiring weak ties to land but strong commitments to rules, for example, may be accurate at the geographic peripheries of world religious communities, but less so at their geographic cores. Though Islam had spread across Africa by the tenth century, and Christianity had established pockets by the fifteenth century, their widespread impact is in many

⁷ See data from Rounds 1 and 2 of the Afrobarometer public opinion surveys, in which questions regarding primary modes of self-identification were asked. Data available at www.afrobarometer.org/data.html.

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respects quite recent, having advanced significantly only during the 1800s (Clarke 1982). Attachments to land in Africa had by this point taken on different meaning, under traditional structures of authority. Religion as an identity type in the Middle East, by contrast, where sacred sites unite religious rules with territory and nationalism, should be expected to evoke a different set of concerns. Similarly, in Africa, where little congruence exists between ethnic boundaries and national borders, ethnic identity may function very differently from that in Japan, where ethnicity, land, and national political identity converge. What I present in this book is an argument that mobilizational differences exist across identity types, and that these differences help to explain why certain identities become salient in cases of African conflict. I make the case by focusing on two identity types – ethnicity and religion – that are especially important in this particular setting. Identities will serve different functions in other settings, but by understanding ethnicity and religion in one important context, we might gain improved insight into their roles in other contexts.⁸

The principal subject of this book is the communal and civil conflicts, past and present, that so frequently take on ethnic or religious frames in Africa. Of late, observers have devoted special attention to the recent wave of religious-motivated terrorist attacks in the region (see Munson 2016 as an example). Those cases of violence occupy a separate analytical class, often more galvanizing to Western audiences but also much smaller in scope, so they are not a central focus of the book. Nevertheless, insofar as terrorist group leaders may have incentives to mobilize support in the same way that political elites mobilize collective action during communal conflict, some lessons from this argument may be applied to religious terrorism in Africa, as I aim to demonstrate with an application to Boko Haram in the concluding chapter.

DEFINING CONCEPTS

To this point, I have used quotation marks in referencing the broad concept of “ethnicity” or “ethnic politics,” as distinct from ethno-linguistic

⁸ This claim may run counter to patterns of globalization, which might suggest either an increasing universality of religious and ethnic meaning or the absence of any behavioral patterns in religion and ethnicity at all. Yet, so long as some regional specificity in identity types remains, space exists for arguments that both explain patterns in one context and shed light on distinctions with other contexts. See Cox (2010) for a description of religious globalization.

(or “tribe”) groups in Africa. The term *ethnic* requires special attention, as its complications serve in some sense as the very purpose of this study. In contemporary political science, the trend for many has not been to address religious or ethnic group conflict as problems in their own right. Instead, competition between all forms of ascriptive identity types – language, ethno-linguistic, racial, religious, and so on – is treated under an umbrella definition of “ethnic politics.” Here, for example, are working definitions of “ethnicity” culled from some of the leading studies in comparative politics:

Birbir (2007: 610): “Ethnicity is self-identification around . . . language, race, or location. Other characteristics such as religion and culture qualify as well.”

Chandra (2004: 2): “I take the term ‘ethnic group’ to refer to the nominal members of an ascriptive category such as race, language, caste, tribe, or religion.”

Horowitz (1985: 53): “Ethnicity easily embraces groups differentiated by color, language, and religion; it covers tribes, races, nationalities, and castes.”

Kasfir (1979: 365): “The concept of ethnicity . . . may be fundamentally ethnic, class, religious or – it is worth stressing – a combination of these identities.”

Posner (2005: 14): “Linguistic, tribal, and religious communities . . . are all ‘ethnic options.’”

Rothchild (1997: 3): “Ethnic groups – formed along ethnic, racial, religious, regional, or class lines – have distinct origins and appeals, but they share common features . . .”

As several of these definitions reveal, there is unfortunate ambiguity between the umbrella definition of ethnicity and a more constricted use of the term. The semantic confusion has not gone unnoticed – Varshney (2002: 4) notes that ethno-linguistic traits count as “narrow” ethnicity, while other ascriptive groupings form the foundation of “broader” ethnic politics. Brubaker (2004: 136) also acknowledges the problem of “ethnic ambiguity” in reference to the use of the same term to describe both narrow, descent-based communities and broad, cultural groups (which include all of the identity types mentioned above – religion, race, region, caste, etc.).

There is, nevertheless, a straightforward rationale for the umbrella definition of ethnicity: preferences and behaviors across all identity types are assumed to be constant. Thus, the calculus of political entrepreneurs

need not include information about the characteristics of different identity types per se (or about the different outcomes those identity options might elicit), but only about the general characteristics of identity groups as groups, such as their size. There is no room for differential affect across identity types in these arguments, nor for a psychological pull that might be stronger under some identity types than others, nor for unique, non-material benefits that might accrue to group members under certain types of identity. One umbrella term works because political entrepreneurs can expect their support bases to pursue group-level advantages in the same way, regardless of whether contests occur in the name of their ethnicity, in the name of their religion, or in the name of any other social identity type. In other words, according to proponents of the broad definition of ethnicity, a group is simply a group. Differences between specific identity types within that conception of ethnicity are treated as a black box.

My aim is to get inside that black box, to understand whether specific types of identity elicit distinct preferences that can then be exploited differentially to serve precise political aims. The case for doing so – for treating ethnicity and religion as distinct political forces – hinges on whether there are theoretical grounds on which to expect behavior in the name of ethnicity to differ from behavior in the name of religion. To adopt an argument structure proposed by Helmke and Levitsky (2004) in reference to formal and informal institutions, if ethnic politics (EP) with ethnicity as its focus generates preferences similar to ethnic politics centered on religion, there would be no need to move beyond the umbrella definition of ethnic politics:

$$EP_E = EP_R = X$$

However, if political appeals to ethnicity and religion have distinct consequences for mass preferences and behaviors, a case for treating ethnic politics as distinct from religious politics is strengthened:

$$\begin{aligned} EP_E &= X \\ EP_R &= Y \end{aligned}$$

In the latter case, relying on an umbrella understanding of ethnic politics has clear limits: it prohibits us from differentiating between ethnic politics (narrowly defined) and religious politics. Thus, for two reasons – both to overcome the semantic confusion surrounding “ethnicity” and to facilitate the substantive disaggregation of identity types and their effects, I refer to broad categories of “ethnicity” as *identity types*. They are the social categories that have potential political

salience: religion, ethno-linguistic groups, race, language, caste, region, and so on; what Sacks (1992) would call *identity categories*, and what Posner (2005) refers to as *ethnic cleavages*. Within each identity type are any number of social *groups*: Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews; Dioula, Fulani, and Yoruba; blacks and whites. I reserve the label of *ethnic* for the narrower conception, Africa's ethno-linguistic groups.

A fuller description of ethnic groups takes place in Chapter 2. In short, I use the term to refer to social groups whose members typically share a story of common descent, a language, and lifestyle norms (e.g., marriage and burial traditions). However, both in the construction of theory and in the empirical evidence that I gather, I leave it to the individual to determine the ethnic group to which he or she belongs and the boundaries of that group. Some may label themselves part of what are considered agglomerations of several clans or smaller ethnic groups; others may consider their ethnic group to be a subset of the larger ethno-linguistic grouping. For the purpose of this introductory chapter, I simply note the common identification of people in sub-Saharan Africa along ethnic lines, and the perceived importance of this identification for political issues. Hence, ethnicity counts as one of the handful of identity types along which political leaders in Africa can mobilize supporters, making Hutu, Yoruba, Dioula, and Kikuyu relevant in ways that, for example, tall, short, thin, and obese are not.

Evidence of ethnic identities being constructed or manipulated should not undermine the use of the narrow ethnic group as a politically relevant identity type in contemporary studies. Many, such as the Ashanti in present-day Ghana, the Zulu in present-day South Africa, and the Wolof in present-day Senegal, existed as well-organized kingdoms long before colonial intrusion, and the geographic and definitional boundaries of those groups have changed little over time. Furthermore, the fact that narrow ethnic groups have been combined, adjusted, and wholly invented should not be taken as an indication that contemporary Africans do not feel a deep-seated or innate attachment to their own narrow ethnic identity; many – and, judging by statistics from nationally representative surveys, most – actually do (see Afrobarometer Round 1, 2001). Even in cases where a particular ethnic group was the result of social construction in some time period $t = 1$, at a future time period $t = 2$ its members may nevertheless perceive of their own ethnic identity as deep-seated and blood born, a phenomenon Brubaker (2004: 38) refers to as “self-sameness over time.” Thus, despite historical tinkering with what ethnic groups are and

where their boundaries begin and end, it is impossible to overlook their relevance in contemporary political Africa.

The concept of religion also deserves mention at the outset. Broadly speaking, religion is the term for a cluster of beliefs, shared by a group of individuals, that includes a story of human origin, explanations for the unknown, and a set of behavioral guidelines for attaining a favorable personal outcome, such as salvation (Weber 1922; Zinnbauer 1997). In this book, I focus on the political role of world religions in Africa – that is, Islam and Christianity, which account for almost 90 percent of the region’s inhabitants.⁹ The principal alternative to these religions in the region is African traditional religion, which I incorporate for comparative purposes at times in the study but otherwise treat as a distinct type of identity, based on the relevant features of (world) religion that I elucidate in Chapter 2. As is the case in the context of ethnicity, it is not necessary that I make judgments about what is or is not a religious group or religious beliefs. Theologians may take issue, but to know the answers to those questions as they pertain to this study, I need only to rely on the self-categorizations and stated views of religious group members and believers. Finally, because the primary focus of this project is on the distinctions between ethnicity and religion that contribute to the broader frames of conflict as either “tribal” or “religious,” I focus little on the particularities of specific ethnic or religious groups. Nevertheless, where these distinctions are empirically insightful or helpful in addressing alternative explanations for the findings I present, I share them.

ASSUMPTIONS

To argue that political entrepreneurs have the ability to manipulate individual-level preferences by prioritizing different identity types implies, first and foremost, that individuals have multiple social identities whose salience can vary. This is particularly true in cases of overlapping identity types, where one’s ethnic identity tends to reveal his or her religious identity and vice versa. The assumption of malleable identity salience rests at the heart of this project.

That identities are flexible and context dependent is now a matter of convention among social scientists: Southall (1970) explains that one can choose to be a Luyia, a Kenyan, or an African, none of which existed as

⁹ For religious data, see the World Christian Database (2016).

political labels before the late 1800s; Crawford Young calls identity “fluid and ... constantly in flux” (1976: 98); several others demonstrate how political conditions affect the salience of one identity type versus another (Chandra 2004; Eifert, Miguel, and Posner 2010; Laitin 1986). Yet it is important to note a complexity in the notion of malleable identities. Changing *across* identity types is a simple affair, explaining a reprioritization among a set of potential options (Brubaker 2004; Chandra 2006; Posner 2005). To take a simple example, one may be Catholic on Sunday, a political scientist on Monday, and Irish on St. Patrick’s Day. Changing groups *within* one identity type is a different matter. To alter one’s racial self-definition, for instance, may be exceedingly complicated, and so, in most cases, is changing ethnic groups (setting aside the social construction of new ethnic identities, which would typically affect individuals only over a generation or more). Changing groups within the identity of religion can be quite easy as a *de jure* matter – requiring little more than a personal attestation – but potentially quite difficult in the face of social constraints. Regional, national, and political party identities can be altered fairly straightforwardly (though perhaps not without expense), whereas identities within certain types of physical characteristics (height, eye color) cannot.

My argument applies to changes *across* identity types. The set of choices is potentially innumerable – as the psychologist William James wrote in the late nineteenth century, a person “has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of people about whose opinion he cares” (1890 [1950]: 294). Practically speaking, however, the list is constrained to a handful of identity types that inspire collective action. Horowitz limits that list to five factors: race, religion, caste, ethno-linguistic group, and region. Critical, of course, to the potential salience of any identity type is the presence of an “other.” As social identity theorists have noted, social recognition of one’s own group is determined with reference to specific other groups (Tajfel and Turner 1986: 16), such that, for example, being of the Yoruba ethnicity in Nigeria has meaning only with knowledge of the existence of Hausa, Igbo, or other ethnic groups. In this study, I am particularly interested in changes that enhance ethnic or religious salience, from whatever baseline individuals begin.

Coupled with the notion of malleable identities are some propositions regarding human behavior. Individuals seek utility in both material and non-material forms, from formal and informal sources; they desire resources from the state, but they are also pulled by concerns over self-worth, lifestyle, kin, and their place in the world. To overlook those

sources of utility is to ignore, for example, the sociopolitical importance of bloodlines, ancestors, and traditional chiefs and to discount the widespread practice of self-flagellation among some Shiite Muslims in the Arab world and Opus Dei Catholics in the United States, the asceticism that some Buddhists believe alleviates suffering, and the practice of tithing among some Christian traditions that is repaid only in an afterlife. Attachments to ethnic and religious identities, in short, alter utility functions by introducing important non-material interests. Our theories might more accurately describe collective human behavior, then, if we find ways to incorporate these interests as a function of different identity contexts.

My argument is not in contradiction to the rational, instrumentalist logic that underpins many contemporary studies of political behavior. Those arguments explain political choices as efforts to maximize individual utility, given a set of exogenous, fixed preferences. The maximization of individual utility is also the centerpiece of political behavior in my argument, only with two caveats. First, I test empirically what those preferences actually are, in ethnic versus religious contexts. Demonstrating that ethnicity and religion evoke different sets of preferred actions underscores the consequences of mobilizing groups along different identity lines. Thus, whereas the extant constructivist literature has shown convincingly that identities can change, the contribution of this study is to explain how that matters. Second, I make room in the theory for those non-material benefits that can accrue differently under the guises of ethnicity and religion, in the form of righteousness, salvation, honor, blood ties, and so on. In this sense, I am adding an additional motivating factor to studies of ethnic politics that rely only on group size as the explanation for competition over resources.

The argument requires additional assumptions about political entrepreneurs and their incentives. First, political entrepreneurs may be formal office holders or opposition figures, but they need not be: in Rwanda, the voices of the Milles Collines radio program who instigated violence, as well as the Hutu military leaders who organized that violence, may be considered political leaders. In the ongoing war against terrorists, actors such as Osama bin Laden and the leadership of groups such as Boko Haram, the self-proclaimed Islamic State, and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb would certainly qualify as political entrepreneurs, despite the fact that their efforts to mobilize collective action do not occur through formal political channels. I assume that the broad goal of political entrepreneurs is to gain and maintain political power and that their calculations are purely instrumental in pursuit of this broad goal. In other words,

political entrepreneurs are not subject to the same non-material, psychological incentives that can motivate the masses. Finally, I assume that political entrepreneurs are knowledgeable about the incentives and preferences of individuals. Whether that knowledge results from a rational choice assumption of perfect information or a process of successful learning, it is this assumption that allows elites to exploit the community-wide salience of identity types in pursuit of their own favored outcomes when institutions break down and conflict reigns.

Given these assumptions, we might expect the strategic calculus of a political entrepreneur to incorporate the following concerns. First, what do ethnicity, religion, race, or other identity types mean to individuals? By asking this question, the political entrepreneur begins an exploration of the preferences that mobilizing one identity type over another might elicit among followers. Second, what are the political entrepreneur's own political interests? Does she see an opportunity to take the reins of political power, or the potential for wealth accumulation by seizing territory? Would her standing improve if social policies could be changed, or might she benefit from increased international attention on her supporters? This question, coupled with the preferences that different identities elicit, forms the basis of political choice. Third, what identity types are plausible sources of cleavage in the region, and might any of several identity types be exploited? Do those identity types overlap, leaving the political entrepreneur with the same support bases irrespective of the identity card she plays? Finally, given individual-level preferences in different contexts, the entrepreneur's own political interests, and the opportunity to manipulate the frame of ongoing tensions, what tactics might leadership employ to ensure that followers act collectively? The goal would be to mobilize supporters to act in committed defense of their identity group, in such a way that their support strengthens the political entrepreneur's own probability of political success. These questions serve as the foundation for specific hypotheses presented later in the book.

By drawing together the utility calculations of both elites and masses, this study follows Kalyvas (2006) in problematizing a relationship for which one side is often assumed away. Studies that demonstrate why rebels engage in conflict or why communities support a violent movement teach us much about mass interests (see Weinstein 2007). Likewise, scholarship that explores why leaders take their troops to battle or refrain from doing so reveals important lessons about elite decision-making (Huth 1988). The subject of this study – why conflicts become ethnic or religious – differs in the sense that the story can be completed only by

considering the interests of both elites and masses, as well as the interactions between them. Doing so complicates the argument, but also creates an opportunity to explain cases in which coalition size alone yields no apparent political advantage.

It would be naïve, of course, to suggest that the size of support coalitions does not matter in the course of conflict. Certainly, such a calculation is the first consideration of both instrumental elites and their rational supporters, and, consistent with my argument, it may well be the motivation for political leaders to mobilize the identity groups that they do. But what motivates the entrepreneur's mobilization decision when the identity groups to which she might appeal are not of clearly different sizes? Understanding the behavioral differences that identity types elicit allows me to construct an answer to that question. Ethnic attachments to land and religious attachments to geographically unbounded rules may work in tandem with size advantages where ethnicity and religion offer different-sized coalitions. Where the same cast of supporters constitutes a leader's ethnic coalition and her religious coalition, however, an argument rooted solely in group size is ill-equipped to explain why one or the other becomes the focus of conflict. An argument rooted in the mobilizational differences of ethnicity and religion is equipped to explain both circumstances.

The same logic could be applied beyond the context of conflict, to vote shares or the provision of public goods, for example. The study is particularly well suited, however, to explain choices that elites face in conflict settings, outside formal political channels. In these contexts, formal institutions break down and create an open space with exceedingly high stakes. To apply the concept of mobilizational differences in these settings is thus to wrestle with perhaps the paramount concern of inter-group competition: why individuals in certain situations are exceedingly devoted to their identity groups, and why the result is often the most profound, violent type of inter-group discord.

My approach represents a departure from the "group is a group" study of ethnic politics and may thus be met with skepticism by some readers. Five objections may be raised. The first is that one cannot construct systematic theories of social science on a foundation of impossible-to-measure, non-material preferences associated with different identity types. Not only are those attachments too arbitrary and amorphous to explain the aggregate behavior of groups in any meaningful way, the objection would go, but they also matter little for the choices that people make in sociopolitical settings, where material and power

incentives rule. But this concern should not dissuade us from exploration. It is an empirical question, after all, as to whether or not systematic differences exist in the preferences evoked by ethnicity, religion, or any other identity type. Those differences may complicate our theoretical understanding of ethnic politics, but they do not adulterate it; on the contrary, if differences across identity types exist, our theories will be stronger to the extent that we find ways to incorporate those differences. Several scholars have made efforts to do so: Crawford Young (1976) notes that, in addition to being a social identity, religion uniquely offers a world view. David Laitin (2000) shows that religious groups differ from language groups in that they have shorter transition periods. Grim and Finke (2007: 653) explicitly state that “we need to recognize that religion and ethnicity are separate concepts.” How these and other evaluations matter for our understanding of conflict in Africa requires further exploration, which is the goal of this project.

According to the second objection, my argument essentializes ethnicity and religion, imposing fixed characteristics, and thus perhaps outcomes, to a changing world. There is far too much evidence of religion associated with both violence and peace – think of the use of Buddhism as a tool for conflict in Myanmar and healing in Cambodia, for example – and the same could be said for ethnic group labels. Imposing distinctions would thus represent a reversion to primordialist thinking. In this book, I take pains to stress that the elements of distinction may change over time and place, but in a given political context, some ethnic and religious norms must persist, on average, so that it makes sense to speak of Punjab as distinct from Hindu, or Roman as distinct from Catholic. For Laitin (2000), it is the transition period; in this argument, it is a foundation of land versus a foundation of rules. These features, I argue, shape human behavior and preferences in predictable ways in given contexts; the differential outcomes we see are then explained by the political exploitation of ethnic groups and religion for instrumental purposes.

Quite apart from concerns of essentialism, a third potential objection is that my argument fails to account for clear historical patterns that make *certain* religious or ethnic groups more prone to conflict and violence. In other words, I may not be essentializing enough when it comes to distinctions between particular religious and ethnic groups. In the last several years, acts of terrorism perpetuated by radical groups in the name of Islam have for some observers distinguished Islam *per se* from other world religions (Bar 2004). Similarly, ethnic groups such as

the Lobi of Burkina Faso and the Zulu of South Africa are often labeled “warrior tribes” (Mazrui 1975), having developed violent defenses against marauding neighbor groups. In this project, I do not deny that different behavioral patterns exist among specific ethnic and religious groups, but I raise two arguments in defense of tabling those distinctions in favor of the meta distinctions between ethnicity and religion. First, it is well documented that the norms, behavioral patterns, and even specific teachings of religions and ethnic groups vary over time and place. Islam has undergone substantial changes over time and across regions (Zubaida 1993), and Crusades supported by the Catholic hierarchy during the eleventh century are not in keeping with the teachings of Catholicism today (O’Brien 1994, chapter 17). So I do not wish to stamp any particular ethnic group or religion with present-day perceptions or exigencies. Second, despite those changes in what it means to be Muslim, Catholic, Lobi, or Zulu, I argue that some basic commonalities can be used to describe ethnic groups and world religions in Africa, the former rooted in perceived inheritances of land and the latter in sets of geographically unbounded moral guidelines. Incorporating this claim into the way we frame conflict will represent a contribution to the social science literature, so I constrain the focus of this research agenda to the broader distinction.

Fourth, some may object to my argument on the grounds that its empirical outcomes cannot be distinguished from those of more straightforward explanations relying solely on the relative size of groups. In Rwanda, the Hutus may have been prompted to consider their attachments to land, but they were also a larger group desiring the reins of political power. Thus calculations in coalition size can sometimes explain much of the story. While this is true, an argument that recognizes identity-specific preferences may be in closer keeping with actual human behavior. Furthermore, what political elites desire is sometimes not a neat political calculation of head counts but an opportunity to mobilize supporters collectively during conflict, particularly when group sizes do not provide a clear advantage. My argument accounts for how that can happen.

Finally, some readers will note that this study entails little close analysis of the formal institutions of the state, which typically occupy a central place in political studies. That choice is by design, given the objective of explaining the role of ethnicity and religion in conflict settings. Conflict implies by necessity at least some degree of institutional breakdown, along with the opportunity for political outsiders to counter the state’s monopoly on violence (see Blattman and Miguel 2010); as

such, a focus on sides in conflict rather than on formal institutions should prove fruitful. Furthermore, ethnic and religious groups constitute key *informal* political institutions that shape outcomes in ways often as important as the more formal rules of politics (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). Finally, the concept of conflict frames has most relevance to the elites who mobilize and the masses who follow. Those actors may or may not function within the constraints of formal political institutions, but their interactions are nevertheless a matter of central political importance.

METHODS AND RESEARCH

I use two principal methods in the construction of my argument. First, to explain the preferences of individuals in a systematic manner, I rely on a randomized experiment conducted in the field. Druckman et al. (2011) note that experiments constitute an improvement over observational data due to the exogenous variation – which is both randomly assigned and clearly understood – in the explanatory variable of interest (in this case, the subject's primary identity: religion or ethnicity). More important, because essentially all individuals in Africa have both ethnic and religious identities, I had little choice but to employ experimental techniques to tease out the effects of each. Observational studies could control for specific ethnic and religious group membership and for degrees of commitment to each, but they would provide little leverage in distinguishing between behaviors based on ethnic commitments and those based on religious commitments. In particular, I am interested in testing the effects of ethnic and religious contexts on the political preferences that individual Africans hold. To do that, I administered ethnic and religious treatments and measured their effects (against each other and a control group) among hundreds of participants, most often in their homes. This is admittedly messier than a laboratory experiment would be. The advantage, however, as Gerber and Green (2000) argue, is that experiments conducted in naturalistic settings actually tell us something about causal relationships in the real world. For this reason, a growing list of studies rely on experiments conducted in the field, particularly in Africa (Blattman and Annan 2016; Dunning and Harrison 2010; Habyarimana et al. 2007; McCauley 2014; McClendon 2014; Michelitch 2015; Wantchekon 2003). Experiments often can tell only half the story – about an effect, not necessarily the mechanism explaining why that effect occurs – but they still take us much closer to the production of clear causal inferences that rests at the heart of scientific exploration.

Second, to understand the complex dynamics that shape conflict as ethnic in some circumstances and religious in others, I rely on recent historical case studies of conflict in the African region. There are things that case studies will never be able to tell us, such as the proportion of variance across cases that is explained by the included set of variables. But there are also important sociopolitical questions that can be answered only by tracing processes closely in a handful of cases. One reason is the complex causal progression that leads to the frame of conflict as either ethnic or religious; it unites different levels of analysis and evolves in sometimes obtuse ways as political incentives shift. In this study's cases, I take pains to demonstrate the predominant frame of conflicts through their actors, targets, rhetoric, and reporting, while also explaining why those frames emerged. That such steps are required, and that the answers I present may still be subject to debate, is an indication of the complexity of the research question. To rely on brute classifications of variables and outcomes in order to force the relatively small set of cases into a quantitative model may thus do more harm than good with respect to finding empirical answers.

Field research for the study was conducted in the West African states of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, with additional interviews and archival work in Nigeria. The testing of individual-level political preferences in ethno-linguistic versus religious contexts could, of course, be done almost anywhere in the world. Why here, in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana?

The book project began as an effort to understand why religion became a caustic divider during the Ivoirian conflict, despite the fact that the conflict itself had nothing to do with religion. I explain the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire more fully in Chapter 6, but a brief description here will provide helpful context for the chapters that follow. Ethnic and religious divisions had been kept largely at bay in Côte d'Ivoire through decades of economic growth and redistribution, but that all changed in the mid-1990s: with resources becoming increasingly scarce and a presidential race looming, leaders of the incumbent, southern-based political party introduced a policy known as *Ivoirité*, or Ivoirianness, which created advantages for those perceived as pure or native Ivoirians, at the expense of those who immigrated later – and who also happened to be largely Muslim and of northern ethnicities such as the Senoufo and Malinké. Overt ethno-national discrimination followed, limiting rights and opportunities for those perceived as not pure Ivoirians. When a northern presidential candidate – the current president eventually installed in 2011, Alassane Ouattara – was

excluded from running and discrimination seeped into the military, a rebellion coupled with widespread popular backlash divided the country into north and south, and the decade-long conflict was under way. The puzzle came in the shift from ethno-national divisions to a religious frame: while no substantive religious concerns were ever presented as a source of dispute, the targets, actors, rhetoric, and reporting soon focused on Christian–Muslim differences. As observers note, “a high level of religious violence” ensued (Vüllers 2011: 19). The goal of the research, then, is to understand that puzzle and others like it across Africa, where ethnic and religious conflict frames emerge and change, despite the conflicts themselves not being about ethnicity or religion *per se*.

Ghana offers an appropriate alternative context from which to gather individual-level data. First, Ghanaians are equally committed to their ethnic and religious identities. Second, as I demonstrate in Chapter 3, both countries have predominantly Muslim populations in the north and predominantly Christian populations in the south, as well as ethnic divisions that follow similar lines. By basing the empirical study of individual preferences along this divide, I put myself in a position to vary the ethnic and religious contexts within each country. Most important, the national political contexts differ significantly: whereas Côte d’Ivoire suffered through a decade of recent conflict, Ghana stands out as one of the region’s few peaceful and stable democracies. Missing from Ghana is the institutional breakdown and widespread violence that led to identity exploitation in neighboring Côte d’Ivoire.

In short, the study design allows me to account for alternative explanations. Had the data for this project been collected only in a Muslim area, for example, the findings would be subject to the criticism that what I am labeling a “religious effect” is really just a “Muslim effect.” Had they been collected only in an Akan ethnic region, they could be construed as an “Akan effect” rather than an “ethnic effect.” And had I limited the research to Côte d’Ivoire, the effects of ethnicity and religion on individual preferences could be lost in the claim that Côte d’Ivoire is simply peculiar because of the conflict. Instead, using a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-national study design, I am able to distinguish the effects of ethnicity and religion *per se* from the effects of the conflict in Côte d’Ivoire. I then leverage the case of Côte d’Ivoire later in the book to provide evidence of the interplay between ethnic and religious preferences and elite mobilization tactics. Other cases from Sudan’s protracted civil wars and Nigeria’s Biafran War reinforce my claim that patterns in

ethnic and religious conflict frames – even within the same conflict, and even when the cast of supporters remains constant – can be explained systematically.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

The book comprises two main parts. Part I (Chapters 1–4) is devoted to distinguishing between ethnicity and religion, insofar as they shape individual-level behaviors and preferences. In Chapter 2, I develop the first theoretical component of the argument. I begin by describing communities in Africa to elucidate features of ethno-linguistic versus religious identities in the region, and I then present a model to link these features to the utility functions of individuals in either ethnic or religious contexts. Chapter 3 presents findings from the experiment conducted in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana in which I randomly and artificially evoked either the ethnic or the religious identity among subjects and then evaluated their political preferences. The data suggest distinct preferences in ethnic and religious contexts, which I link to the land-based nature of ethnic groups and the rule-based nature of religion in the region. In Chapter 4, I explore the implications and the external validity of the experiment, using “real-world” data drawn from followers of an Ashanti ethnic group association, a Charismatic-Pentecostal Christian group, and a *Wahhabi* Muslim group, as well as from bi-ethnics.

In Part II (Chapters 5–8), I construct an explanation for how those differences in identity types are exploited by political leaders, thus shaping African conflicts as either religious or ethnic. Chapter 5 develops the second theoretical component of the argument. Given that ethnicity and religion generate different preferred actions, how do elites make use of that information to serve political ends during conflict? Those choices, I will show, are strategic ones that build on the preferences that ethnicity and religion inspire. In Chapter 6, I explain how the argument fits the recent, decade-long conflict in Côte d'Ivoire. I begin the chapter by explaining the incentives of elites following a power vacuum that emerged in the 1990s, and I document how, as those incentives changed, the actors, targets, rhetoric, and reporting of the conflict shifted from ethnic to religious. Chapters 7 and 8 trace similar processes in the civil wars in Sudan and in Nigeria's Biafran War.

Chapter 9 is the concluding chapter in which I consider the implications of the argument for how we might understand two other cases of conflict with ethnic or religious frames: the Rwandan genocide and the

ongoing Boko Haram Islamic insurgency in Northern Nigeria. The chapter also considers the practical consequences of conflict frames, including the possibility that frames can alter the duration and intensity of conflict, and it explores what the study of “ethnic politics” gains by incorporating a recognition of mobilizational differences between identity types.