

INTERPRETING POLITICAL IDENTITY  
IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE  
A SELF-CATEGORISATION APPROACH



*Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in International Studies at Stellenbosch University*

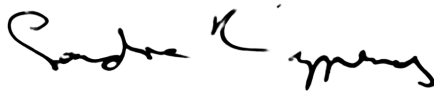
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*March 2010*

## Declaration

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sandra K. [unclear]". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S'.

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## ABSTRACT

*This thesis presents a theoretical explanation of the emergence and mobilisation of a northern regional, political identity in Côte d'Ivoire prior to the civil war which broke out in 2002. Its point of departure is the contradiction between the emerging recognition of a constructivist understanding of ethnic and national political identities, and the prevalent reification of such identities in the literature on the subject. The analysis is based on the conceptual framework of self-categorisation theory, which sees the formation of social identity groups and the organisation of collective action within such groups as an expression of universal social-cognitive processes which influence all social interaction. In this perspective, the politicisation of a northern identity in Côte d'Ivoire can be depicted as an adaptive reaction to the increasing exclusion of a segment of the population from political influence and representation within the Ivoirian state. Although the immediate frame of reference for the analysis is an African civil war, the theoretical framework should be applicable to political identity without being restricted to a particular geographical or historical context.*

## OPSOMMING

*Hierdie tesis bied 'n teoretise verduideliking van die opkoms en mobilisering van die politieke identiteit in noordlike streke van Côte d'Ivoire voor die burger-oorlog, wat in 2002 uitgebreek het. Die vertrekpunt is die teenstrydigheid tussen die opkomende erkenning van 'n konstruktivismiese begrip van etniese en nasional-politieke identiteite. En ook die heersende illustrasies van sulke identiteite in die letterkunde oor die onderwerp. Die analise is gebaseer op 'n konseptuele raamwerk van die self-kategoriserende teorie, wat die vorming wys van sosiale identiteits-groepe van kollektiewe optrede binne sulke groepe as 'n uitdrukking van universele sosiale-kognitiewe prosesse, wat alle sosiale interaksie beïnvloed. In hierdie perspektief kan die politisering van 'n noordelike identiteit in Côte d'Ivoire as 'n aanpasbaar reaksie uitgebeeld word, as gevolg van die toenemende uitsluiting van 'n segment van die bevolking van politieke invloed en verteenwoordiging binne die staat. Alhoewel die onmiddellike verwysingsraam vir die analise 'n African oorlog is, moet die teoretiese raamwerk op politieke identiteit van toepassing wees, sonder die beperkinge van 'n bepaalde geografiese of historiese konteks.*

## PREFACE

This thesis might not have been realised had it not been for the support and assistance of certain people. First and foremost, I therefore have to thank my supervisors: Chrissie Steenkamp, who encouraged me to think critically and to develop my arguments in the early phases of the process, and Gerrie Swart, who made a huge effort reading all my chapters and providing important feedback as the deadline was drawing near.

Moreover, I am in debt to Hans, who very graciously allowed me to take time off work to focus on my writing, to Torbjørn, who saved me in the last minute by taking care of printing and abstract translation, to Rifkatou, who read and gave feedback on my chapters, and to my family and my friends who have long tolerated my absence and my absentmindedness.

The drawn-out process from which this thesis has materialised has involved much hard work and many moments of loneliness and bad conscience. At the same time, it has been both interesting and enjoyable. Especially getting familiar with social psychology has been a refreshing addition to the staple political science literature. Through this process I have striven to trust my own judgement and to think creatively and independently. I have aimed to give a fresh perspective which can inspire constructive thinking. I therefore have the confidence to consider this study my brainchild, which, after all, has a more substantial value than a mark or a degree certificate.

Also deserving recognition for having accompanied are musicians too numerous to mention, writers who make you see the world with new eyes, Oblique Strategies, independent software developers, the sunrise over the Indian ocean, and the northern lights. In order to satisfy my inclination for convoluted workflows, the thesis was written in scrivener and typeset using the X<sub>Y</sub>T<sub>E</sub>X open source typesetting system developed by Jonathan Kew.

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## INTRODUCTION: INVESTIGATING POLITICAL IDENTITY

### I.1 CÔTE D'IVOIRE, IDENTITY AND CONFLICT

The outbreak of civil war in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002 placed the country in company with a series of West African countries which appeared to follow a similar trajectory of post-colonial economic and socio-political collapse from the 1980s onwards. Notable examples of conflicts in the region include Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau and the Casamance region in Senegal. During the 1990s, these and other civil wars earned Africa the dubious honour of being depicted as the most conflict-ridden continent, an image reflected both in the mass media and among academic observers (Gleditsch et al. 2002).

On one account, however, Côte d'Ivoire appears to stand out from the stereotypical image of African conflicts: It did not incorporate an obvious ethnic aspect in the sense that mobilisation did not primarily take place along ethno-linguistic lines. The conspicuous role of ethnic antagonism and the mobilisation of ethnic allegiances for violent, collective action is perhaps the one feature of African conflicts which has received the most attention in later years. Even though its actual significance has been widely contested, the ubiquity of ethnicity in African conflicts seems to have rendered the ethnic conflict something of a paradigm in the field (Jackson 2002; Welsh 1996).

The focus on ethnic political identity in Africa indicates an incongruity in the academic literature on political identity. While authors writing from a eurocentric point of view are concerned with the phenomenon of nationalism and the seemingly relentless propagation of nations and nation states across the globe, this literature has remarkably little to say about Africa. In their perspective, Africa represents more of an anomaly and a failure of modern, civic nationalism (Dunn 2001; Tuastad 2003). On the other side, schol-

ars writing about ethnic identity in conflict tend to reify the nature of ethnicity and do not pay heed to the understanding of the adaptability of social and political identity which is more thoroughly addressed in the literature on nationalism. In Donald Horowitz's words, "Supraethnic identities tend to have a salience in the West that they do not generally have in Asia and Africa" (Horowitz 1985:19). Yet this statement is not problematised. It is simply taken to be a matter of fact.

Although an understanding of political identity as a constructed, adaptable and historically contingent phenomenon is gaining ground, there is still much potential for the integration of such perspectives in rigorous analyses of political identity in African conflicts. In particular, while the development over time of political identities has been addressed by some scholars<sup>1</sup>, it is still a field in which there is still much uncovered ground (Chandra 2001).

In this respect, Côte d'Ivoire poses a challenge. While the rebellion has been justified as the protection of the interests of an aggrieved and marginalised community, this community is not defined primarily in ethnic terms. It is instead defined by a territorial denominator, namely the "North". This is remarkable when considering the fact that the concept of northern Côte d'Ivoire has not existed more than a hundred and fifty years. Still, the idea of being from the north seems to invoke the same uniting force, the same commitment, and the same allegiance from its members as any ethnic or national identity (Akindés 2003; Toungara 2001).

In this thesis I propose a theoretical interpretation of the politicisation of social identity in African conflicts. I will use an explanatory framework taken from the field of social psychology, while drawing insights from a wider array of literature on national and ethnic political identity. I thereafter use the proposed framework to analyse the emergence and development of the northern identity in Côte d'Ivoire as an illustrative example of the applicability and implications of the framework.

I will begin this chapter by giving an overview of the relevant developments in the academic literature on political identity in African countries, which

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<sup>1</sup>See for example Mamdani (1996, 2001, 2002a)

also forms the rationale for the study. Thereafter I will make some statements regarding the meta-theoretical underpinnings of my analysis. This has relevance for the subsequent sections, including an elaboration of the research question, the indication of the theoretical argument, and the selection of method and case. I end the chapter with an outline of the chapter structure of the thesis.

## 1.2 RATIONALE: IDENTITY IN AFRICAN CONFLICTS

The subject of civil wars was for a long time relegated to a secondary position vis-a-vis more conventional international wars in terms of the attention attracted from scholars in the fields of political science and international relations. This situation changed when, in the 1990s a seeming epidemic of intra-state conflicts brought the issue to the headlines of the media and academic publications alike. Although the high number of civil wars in the 1990s was a matter of a gradual increase in the prevalence of such conflicts since 1945 rather than a sudden eruption, the increased awareness of these matters duly reflected their relevance in the fields of international relations and political science (Collier 2002; Fearon and Laitin 2003).

A conventional understanding of these conflicts often reiterated in mass media was the notion that they were caused by long-standing antagonisms between different ethnic and religious groups. This outlook was reinforced by the noticeable multi-ethnic character of close to every African state and the fact that rebel groups often appealed to a discourse of ethnic grievances as a justification for their actions (Collett 2006:614; Fenton 2003:86).

When the horrors of the Rwandan genocide shook the world in 1994, it quickly came to epitomise the *ancient hatreds* hypothesis of African ethnic conflict (Collett 2006:614). Alongside its European parallel of inter-ethnic atrocities in the former Yugoslavia, the Rwandan conflict conveyed an image of irrational brutality and inhumanity, ostensibly proving the futility of peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups within a single state.

This defeatist position on inter-group conflict was consolidated by influential publications such as Samuel Huntington's (1993) primordialist conception

of inter-cultural conflict and Robert Kaplan's (Kaplan 1994) apocalyptic, neo-Malthusian vision of societal collapse, violence and poverty in West Africa. Their effect of such writings was to display an image of inter-group conflict as a pathological feature of ethnically heterogeneous societies, and to cement a perception of Africa as a continent hopelessly mired in intractable conflict.

Although of a more recent date, I interpret Mary Kaldor's argument about "new wars" and "old wars" (Kaldor 2006) as a variation of this line of thought. The distinction she makes between new and old wars serves to reify rather than to explain the role of identity in conflict. By arguing that new wars are "about identity politics in contrast to the geo-political or ideological goals of earlier wars", she essentially drives a wedge between the "irrational" identity-driven third world conflict and the "rational" geo-political Western conflict.

Combined with an excessive focus on the conspicuous presence of ethnic identity in African conflict, such a view thereby contributes to the establishment of a dichotomous view of political identity. While in the West, nationalism is "civic", in Africa, nationalism is "ethnic" and primordial (Fenton 2003:88). As will be discussed in chapter two, the main scholars on the subject of nationalism have indeed little to say about contemporary Africa. This tendency is illustrated by the often exclusive designation of the term "African nationalism" to the anti-colonial movements and their leaders (Chabal 1992:47; Hydén 2006:25; Smith 1983).

In a backlash to this primordialist portrayal of ethnic conflict, a new approach came to prominence at the turn of the century, adopting its methodology from econometrics, most notably found in the work of Paul Collier and his colleagues (Collier 2000; Collier et al. 2003; Collier and Hoeffler 2004), and that of James Fearon (Fearon 2003; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Fearon et al. 2007).

By conducting multivariate regression analyses in which the incidence of civil war onset was used as dependent variable, these analysts investigated the statistical significance of a wide range of factors that were expected to impact on the probability of conflict. The independent variables were grouped into two analytical categories. Some variables indicated *opportunity* in the sense that they facilitated rather than motivated rebellion, in terms of weak

state institutions and the availability of resources that could be extracted to finance rebellions. Other variables were used to indicate *grievances*, including proxy variables for socio-economic inequalities, absence of political rights, and ethnic fractionalisation, a statistic index based on the ethnic heterogeneity of each country.

This distinction was made to scrutinise the common perception that conflict was motivated by collective grievances held by social groups and communities. The primary conclusion reached by these analysts was that the probability of conflict was determined by opportunity rather than grievances, since the variables indicating grievance showed little statistical significance, including the ethnic fractionalisation index (Collier 2000; Collier and Hoeffler 2004)

In line with its underpinnings of methodological individualism, this approach interprets the incidence of civil war as a matter of opportunistic and profit-maximising behaviour by individual economic and political entrepreneurs, rather than legitimate opposition by representatives of aggrieved communities (Cramer 2002). It concurrently disregards the relevance of social and ethnic identity with regards to the occurrence of uprisings and civil war. If Rwanda epitomised the *ancient hatreds* hypothesis, then Sierra Leone became synonymous with the understanding of rebellion as opportunism. What started as a marginal youth uprising in the early 1990s evolved into an exceptionally brutal civil war in which the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) took advantage of the vast Sierra Leonean diamond resources to fund their warfare and enrich themselves, while terrorising and maiming the local population (Abdullah 1998; Richards 1996).

The rather crude interpretation of rebellions as motivated by “greed not grievance” quickly became a focal point of criticism from the academic community. However, it simultaneously had the effect of diverting much of the attention of researchers away from the relevance of social and political group identity to collective action,<sup>2</sup> and instead direct it towards structural

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<sup>2</sup>Notwithstanding this tendency, Weinstein (2005) takes a critical view on the connections between resources and rebel loyalty and identity. Weinstein argues that rebel groups can suffer from a resource curse, similar to that of certain states. According to this argu-

political-economic facets such as the lack of state capacity (Reno 1999), the political economy of conflict and the availability of natural resources (Ballentine and Nitzscke 2003; Ross 2004, 2006; Samset 2002), the regionalisation of conflict (Taylor 2005), or a combination of these (Bøås 2003; Herbst 2004; Humphreys 2005; Jackson 2002). While these are all highly relevant and insightful analyses of the causes of conflict in Africa, their focus on structural aspects of conflict does not allow for a contemplation of the nature of shared social identity and its role in mobilising for oppositional collective action.

More recently, however, there have been renewed efforts to investigate the connection between identity and conflict without dismissing rational or structural explanatory factors. In a notable contribution, Cederman and Girardin (2007) have conducted a statistical analysis of the probability for civil war similar to those mentioned. However, they criticise the use of the ethnic fractionalisation index as a proxy for ethnic conflict, and instead they introduce a new variable to indicate “ethnonationalist exclusiveness”, meaning the extent to which an ethnic minority group has monopolised state power, while majority groups have been excluded. Their argument corresponds to Ernest Gellner’s assertion that “if the rulers of the political unit belong to a nation<sup>3</sup> other than that of the majority of the ruled, this, for nationalists, constitutes a quite outstandingly intolerable breach of political property” (Gellner 1983:1). This perspective is similar to that underlying Langer’s (2005) analysis of the conflict in Côte d’Ivoire, in which the probability of conflict is given by the concurrence of socio-economic inequalities at the mass level and political inequalities at the élite level.

These analyses have two important assumptions in common. Firstly, they both theorise conflict in rationalist, realistic terms, as competition between groups over power or economic resources, and grievances deriving from unequal access to such assets. Secondly, they both assume that social groups are exogenously given, relatively static and discrete entities. In short, they

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ment, rebel groups with access to economic resources tend to attract opportunists, while less endowed rebel groups attract more loyal and committed activist recruits.

<sup>3</sup>See chapter two for a discussion on the conflation of the concepts of nation and ethnicity.

depend on a reification of social groups. This is not to say that these scholars explicitly assume groups to possess these characteristics, but it is nevertheless a required presupposition for a rigid implementation of their theoretical arguments (Cederman and Girardin 2007; Langer 2005).

On the other hand, developments in the research on ethnicity and nationalism show an increasing awareness of the social constructivist nature of such social and political identities. This means they are basically seen as cognitive representations which are shared in a social environment and thus acquire a status of “social reality”. Such an approach implies that, even though social identities may be “real”, they are never temporally fixed or static entities, since their content is contingent on circumstantial conditions (Connor 1994:102; Eriksen 2002:88; Fearon 2003:197; Fenton 2003:86; Turton 1997:79). For example, several writers have commented on the manner in which contemporary ethnic identities have been shaped by colonial and post-colonial policies and political structures.<sup>4</sup>

However, as critiqued by Chandra (2001) and Green (2004), constructivist or circumstantialist understandings of ethnicity have largely failed to penetrate quantitative analyses of ethnic politics. It is this impasse between a conception of social group identities such as ethnicity or nationality as fluid, adaptable categories on the one hand, and the need for theoretically rigid analyses of the role of such identity in conflict which establishes the point of departure for this thesis.

### 1.3 A FEW METATHEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Before embarking on the aims and intentions for this thesis it is necessary to consider a few meta-theoretical aspects regarding the nature of theoretical explanation and interpretation. These considerations will inform the subsequent selection and understanding of crucial elements of the thesis, the research question, the proposed analysis, the case selection and the method

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<sup>4</sup>See for example Collett (2006), Eriksen (2002:88), Mamdani (1996), Mamdani (2002a), Mamdani (2004).

employed. I use the term interpretation deliberately in this respect to indicate my position on the role of theory in the social sciences.

Unlike what is common in the realm of natural sciences, social processes cannot be explained in deterministic terms. Even if one embraces a strictly positivist outlook, deterministic explanation of social phenomena is rendered futile by the virtual infinity of factors which may act as relevant independent variables. Instead, theorisation in the social sciences is always a matter of emphasising the importance of certain identifiable factors on behalf of others, normally in the form of abstract concepts integrated into analytical, theoretical frameworks (Monroe 1997).

All abstract thinking is based on the construction of categories, those mental representations we construct to represent regularities in an otherwise indiscernible flow of perceptual stimuli. Academic theorisation is founded on the same premises as ordinary, everyday abstract thinking, only in a more systematic fashion. Concepts are the building blocks of theory and theoretical models. Concepts are categories with explicitly defined attributes. While categories can be intuitively created and adapted to the often fluctuating environmental stimuli to which the human mind is constantly exposed, concepts are specified in a structured and coherent manner to facilitate the clear and unambiguous communication of abstract arguments. Theoretical models are created by establishing relations of causality between concepts. The typical form of a model includes one dependent variable, a number of independent variables, and a specification of the causal logic which explains how the independent variables impact on the dependent one (Monroe 1997:287).

It follows that all theorisation is a matter of interpretation in the sense that it implies an aspect of creativity on behalf of the observer. Categories, concepts and theories do not emerge organically from the “real world” that surrounds us. They are always constructed, consciously or subconsciously, by the observer, and thereafter applied to our observations of real world phenomena. Moreover, since categories are simplified mental representations of perceived stimuli, all categorisation, and hence all theorisation, necessarily involves an extent of perceptual distortion by disregarding variations that are not apprehended by the concepts used. There can therefore never be any



objective, undistorted narrative or explanation of socio-political processes. It will always be possible to create a new set of concepts to analyse the same phenomenon from a different point of view, possibly yielding new and unexpected insights and conclusions, while disregarding aspects emphasised by other approaches. Furthermore, the employment of particular concepts and analytical frameworks will also be informed by the preconceptions, expectations and pre-established knowledge of the observer (Kincaid 1996).<sup>5</sup>

However, this does not mean that all theoretical interpretations are qualitatively equal. The value of theory must be measured according to its instrumental usefulness, that is, the extent to which it allows us to generate systematic insight about our object of study (Kincaid 1996:xv). In the words of Chabal (1992:8), theorisation has “only one relevant justification, that of explaining historical events and political processes. The validation of political theory lies in its relevance to understanding.”

Conventionally, theories are evaluated with regards to their simplicity and their explanatory power. In those terms, a theory is valuable to the extent that it can explain a wide range of events using a simple, accessible conceptual framework. In this respect, I take a Popperian stance on theory in the sense that good theories are those that manage to better account for reality as we experience it, and that over time, theories with serious shortcomings will dwindle in recognition and influence (Popper 1963). On the other hand, the evaluation of which aspects are important is itself normative in nature and a function of the particular understanding and position held by the observer. The instrumentally usefulness of a theory cannot be determined a priori, but only in relation to its application to particular observations. Therefore, I argue that all theories must necessarily be challenged, and established theoretical conventions especially so, since their shortcomings may be more difficult to expose.

To conclude, I consider explanation and understanding to be a matter of

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<sup>5</sup>This is a theme that has been thoroughly investigated in such fields as hermeneutics and critical theory. Among writers in political science and international relations, perhaps the most prominent critique of this epistemological problem is the one provided by Robert Cox (1987).

interpretation in the sense that it involves the application of abstract concepts to structure and make sense of certain observations. This applies to the immediate and intuitive application of meaning to our surroundings that takes place in everyday affairs as much as to scientific theorisation. On the one hand, there is an independent value in challenging existing theories in order to avoid mindless and dogmatic adherence to particular theoretical perspectives. On the other hand, theories must also be evaluated comparatively with respect to their explanatory qualities.

It is this twofold apprehension which underlies the analysis presented in this thesis. It is not to be considered a matter of simply finding the answer to a question. It is rather one of proposing an alternative perspective which may provide us with fresh insight and address certain shortcomings of current theoretical conventions. This is further reflected in the considerations pertaining to the research question, analytical framework, case selection and methodology, as dealt with in the subsequent sections.

#### 1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question for this thesis can be stated shortly in the following way: How do social identity groups become politicised? The dependent variable, that is the phenomenon we are trying to explain, is thus the *politicisation of social identity groups*. This formulation contains two elements which need specification, firstly a definition of a social identity group, and secondly one of politicisation.

For a preliminary definition, we can conceive of a social identity group as any collection of individuals with two features: Firstly, members of a particular group must possess one or more characteristics which define or describe the group and which are used as criteria to distinguish members of the in-group from members of other groups (Tajfel 1978a). Secondly, the group identity must be internalised by its members. That is, they must to some extent think of themselves as group members and share a perception that group membership has some social significance. The relationship between these two, between shared social characteristics and internalisation of group

identity will be further investigated and theorised in the third chapter, which deals with the social identity perspective in social psychology.

In the terms of social identity theory, a collection of individuals which fulfils only the first criteria only qualifies as a social category and not a social group. A social category is any collection of people who share some common characteristics but who do not necessarily internalise a common group identity or conceive of themselves in terms of a common group identity. A social *group* is a collection of people who share a social *identity* (Huddy 2001:141; Oakes 2002:812). The politicisation of social identity therefore presupposes the politicisation of a social group. In the following, I will use the term “social group” and “social identity group” interchangeably.

An important point which will be elaborated later but which should be established now is the notion that social groups are fluid and overlapping rather than static and discrete. In this respect it is useful to refer to a distinction between the boundaries and the content or meaning of social groups, similar to Barth’s (1969) theorisation of ethnic identity. Boundaries are delimitations of who belongs to which group, while the content of a group refers to the socially shared understanding of which characteristics are defining of the group in the social context. It follows that there is a correspondence between boundaries and content in the sense that both are determined by the same perceived characteristics.

Next, I conceive of the politicisation of social groups as a process where members of a group organise themselves to act collectively for a common purpose, primarily to promote the interests and security of the group as a whole (Klandermans 2005). I refer to a group which has become politicised as a *political group*. The process of group politicisation is therefore one through which a social group transforms into a political group. Politicisation thus also presupposes the logical, albeit not the chronological, pre-existence of a social group. This means that, since the category “political groups” is a subset of the category “social groups”, a political group must inevitably also be a social group. However, these are not necessarily chronologically distinguishable processes; group formation and group politicisation may well take place simultaneously. This also means that social identity and political identity are

*operationally* rather than *conceptually* distinguished. However, as will become clear in the section on self-categorisation theory in chapter three, the important point is that collective action is logically conditioned on the existence on a common group identity.

The notion of a group organising collectively must also be problematised. This wording does not mean I assume organisation is something that just materialises in an organic fashion from the totality of the member base of a social group. Instead, it should be emphasised that group organisation implies both a top-down and a bottom-up aspect. On the one hand, creating an organisation is a matter of individuals establishing lines of power and decision making authority among themselves. Not all members of a particular social group are necessarily part of the organisation. On the other hand, there are organisations who purport to represent a particular group while in reality lacking the endorsement of the bulk group members.

Therefore, I conceive of such organisation as comprising three necessary elements: Firstly, an organisational body is made up by a number of persons who are part of a social identity group. Secondly, these individuals must be able to function as a political actor by acting collectively. I assume that this requires the internal relationships between these persons to be defined in terms of a hierarchical structure of centralised, collective decision making. Thirdly, this body must be generally perceived by members of the group in question to be legitimate representatives of their common interests as a group.

## 1.5 INDICATION OF ARGUMENT

Since chapters three and five have been dedicated to an elaboration of the theoretical framework and the analysis, I will not give a comprehensive account of these issues at this point. I nevertheless consider it relevant to give a preliminary indication of the main theoretical argument advanced and a brief discussion of its significance.

Making an academic analysis may be thought of, in straightforward terms, as giving an answer to the research question. To be more precise, such an an-

swer is in fact constituted by two distinct elements, an independent variable and a causal mechanism. If we look at a theoretical model as an equation consisting of a dependent variable and one or more independent variables, then the causal mechanism gives an abstract account of the connection between these. As specifying the research question basically means establishing the dependent variable, answering the research question incorporates a specification of both the independent variables and the causal mechanism by which these impact on the dependent variable.

In the analysis given in this thesis, I have chosen to focus precisely on explaining the causal mechanism rather than the precipitating factors in the politicisation of identity in Côte d'Ivoire. The central theme of the analysis is that depersonalisation, the tendency to view people as prototypical representatives of their respective groups, acts as a proxy for political accountability and legitimacy when applied to political leaders.

The theoretical framework used in this thesis comes from the social identity perspective, a theoretical strand of thought within the field of social psychology developed primarily by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (Tajfel 1978a, 1982b; Tajfel and Turner 1986, 2004; Turner 1984; Turner et al. 1987). The social identity perspective is founded on the premise that social identity formation follows the logic of the cognitive process of categorisation, that is the tendency to divide instances of perceptual stimuli into groups based on perceived similarities and dissimilarities. Categories are conceived of as mental representations which serve to structure and make sense of the world. One of the theories constituting the social identity perspective, self-categorisation theory, transfers this logic to the social realm by assuming that we also categorise people, ourselves included, in the same way. Social identity emerges when collections of individuals come to internalise and define themselves in terms of a common social category membership, thereby forming a social group Tajfel (1978a).

The central tenet of self-categorisation theory, which was laid out by Turner and his colleagues (1987), is that such social identity is a prerequisite for collective action. This is explained by reference to the concept of *depersonalisation*, which signifies a perceptual accentuation of similarities between mem-

bers of one group, and differences between members of different groups. In simple terms, depersonalisation means that people, under certain circumstances, tend to see each other as prototypical representatives of their respective groups by disregarding their individual, idiosyncratic characteristics. This holds both for members of one's own group, as well as for members of other groups. The theory posits that a shared group identity further shapes people's ideas of interests, so that they perceive their interests in terms of the group as a whole rather than in individual terms. Depersonalisation therefore acts as a facilitator for collective action by serving to construct a notion of common interest (Turner et al. 1987; Turner and Reynolds 2001).

The curious question which then arises is, when and why do people's self-categories, and thus also their social identities, change? The answer lies in the conception of categorisation as a context-dependent process. Categories are not seen as static entities dissociated from each other and the social context. Instead, categories are being continuously constructed and reconstructed to better account for events taking place in our surroundings. One important point is that categories exist at different levels of abstraction. That is, some categories are more inclusive and themselves contain multiple sub-categories at lower levels of abstraction. Therefore, there will always be many social categories from which new social identity groups may emerge (Turner et al. 1987:43).

The social identity perspective explains changes in self-categorisation in terms of context-dependent variations in *category salience*, meaning the likelihood that a particular category are cognitively activated in a given situation. Category salience is determined by the aptness with which they are able to describe and explain the observed reality. This aptness is described as *category fit*, meaning the congruence between observations and categorisation. Each individual may at any time possess a multitude of potential social identities, ranging from a low to a high level of inclusion, which may be activated at different times. This implies that the factors that impact on salience are in principle made exogenous to the model, since salience is ultimately a function of contextual events (Turner et al. 1987:126-127).

To be true, self-categorisation theory is only a psychological theory of so-

cial identity formation. It is not explicitly a theory about politics or political identity. As discussed earlier, not all social identity groups necessarily become politicised. However, the substance of political identity is essentially the same as that of social identity, since a political group is only differentiated from a social group at the level of political organisation (Huddy 2001).

In order to apply self-categorisation theory to the explanation of political identity, I propose two additions to its conceptual framework. The first of these is an assumption, and the second is a deductive statement. Firstly, I make the assumption that political organisation is a fundamental and universal feature of social relations. It is reasonable to explain the inducement for political organisation in terms of the general and permanent need for coordination in complex societies to provide stability and security for its population.<sup>6</sup> One may prefer to conceive of such inducement in either a realist or social contract theory perspective. However, the point is that these factors do not need to be explicitly theorised and may well be exogenised by adopting the assumption that such inducement exists and is intrinsic to any society of reasonable complexity. In modern societies this normally manifests itself in the establishment of a political community, such as a modern state (Cederman 2002:410; Chabal 1992:38; Gellner 1983:53; Weber 1946).

Secondly, if one considers political organisation to be a particular form of collective action, the principle of depersonalisation also applies to the relationship between leaders and followers within the structure of power. The conceptualisation of political organisation as outlined above entails a hierarchical structure of power with vertical relationships between those who make decisions and those who carry them out. Such a structure necessitates a mechanism of political legitimacy between leaders and followers. This is so because collective decision making depends on the ability or willingness of

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<sup>6</sup>In economic terms, collective action entails substantial administrative costs. In short, this is so because high-level coordination means some people must make and execute decisions, and these people cannot be economically productive at the same time. The more complex the organisation, the more resources are diverted to administration. For example, Gellner notes that the cost of maintaining the social infrastructure of a modern state typically “comes close to one half of the total income of the society” (Gellner 1983:63). It is therefore reasonable to infer that a strong incentive is required for a social group to establish a political organisation.

followers to execute the decisions of their leaders. Those who are supposed to carry out decisions must therefore have some form of incentive to do so. Such an incentive commonly takes the form of a belief that decision makers will make decisions that serve the interests of everyone and not only the leaders themselves. Legitimacy thus also acts as a vehicle for power, since a leader only has power to the extent that others are willing to follow (Hollander 1964:231). The connection between power and legitimacy is at the heart of Lonsdale's discussion of the concept of political accountability: "Accountability is therefore part of the moral calculus of power; it concerns the mutual responsibilities of inequality" (Lonsdale 1986:128).<sup>7</sup>

Legitimacy and power can be construed as a function of a shared conception of interests between leaders and followers. Leaders who are able to project an image of themselves as representative of the interests of their subjects are more likely to be accepted as leaders than those who don't (Haslam et al. 2001; Turner 2005:17). In this perspective, the principle of depersonalisation gives an important clue to how political legitimacy is cognitively and socially constructed. If depersonalisation induces a notion of common interest among members of a social group, then this mechanism should also shape the perception of interests shared by leaders and followers in a political organisation. In the same way that social group formation makes people think of group members as prototypical representatives of their groups, group members become inclined to see their leaders as representative of their interests, given that they share a social identity. Depersonalisation can therefore be said to act as a social-cognitive proxy for political legitimacy and representation. This should explain why it is so commonly assumed that political leaders must be from the same social group as their subjects, whether the social group is conceived of as a nation or otherwise (Gellner 1983:1; Turner and Haslam 2001; Turner 2005).

Conversely, the perceived inability or unwillingness of political leaders to represent or protect the interests of one particular part of their population should logically act as an indicator of lacking fit between perceived reality

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<sup>7</sup>See also Chabal (1992:54) for a discussion of political accountability with relevance for post-colonial Africa.



and social categorisation, thereby increasing the salience of alternative social identities. Remember that social identities are not fixed, but often co-exist in overlapping layers in a fluid social context. There will therefore always be a multitude of social identities which may potentially become salient as a result of contextual developments. A situation where political leaders project themselves as the representatives of only a fraction of their constituency would in turn compel a reconstruction of social identities. People whose interests are not represented would therefore be inclined to rally around alternative conceptions of group identity with different leaders who are seen to be representative of their interests.

It is the conception of how depersonalisation acts as a proxy for political legitimacy which is the crux of the analysis in this thesis. This can also be considered the causal mechanism acting between the independent and dependent variables. Consequently, the independent variables are constituted by the contextual factors which impact on the salience of social categories. Since the focus of the thesis is on the connection between depersonalisation and legitimacy, I have chosen not to elaborately theorise the independent variables. Instead, in the analysis of the development of political identity in Côte d'Ivoire I allude to the importance of the actions and rhetoric of political leaders in altering the common perceptions of whose interests they represent. This is in line with the understanding of identity formation as an adaptive and non-deterministic process dependent on contextual factors emphasised by the social identity perspective.

## 1.6 METHODOLOGY

The method chosen for this thesis is a qualitative design case study using secondary analysis of academic literature. The reason for choosing this design derives from the aim of the thesis, which in turn is informed by two factors, the meta-theoretical perspective outlined earlier, and the necessary limitation in scope imposed on the thesis.

In the natural sciences, empirical material is used for the testing of theories by falsification or corroboration. According to the hypothetico-deductive

model, falsification is the only conclusive answer to be acquired from the application of theory to empirical observations (Popper 1963). In the social sciences, however, falsification cannot be an absolute measure of the adequacy of a theoretical explanation. Because of the practical impossibility to isolate all the possibly relevant variables in social reality, there will always be ambiguities and paradoxes present in any theoretical analysis of real-world events (Waltz 1979). This is the essence of my emphasis of the interpretational nature of social and political analysis.

This is not to say that rigorous analyses cannot be made in the social sciences and that theories cannot be qualitatively evaluated. I am not endorsing a relativistic view of social theory. On the contrary, theories are valued according to the understanding they help us acquire about the world, and not all theories are equal in that respect. What I am arguing is that all theories must constantly be challenged in order to be improved upon or rejected as no longer fruitful. Such improvement and challenge can only take place by the carrying out of comprehensive analyses which expose their weaknesses. In this respect, I agree with Tarrow (1995) that deep and comprehensive political analysis both necessitates and benefits from multifaceted approaches using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

However, giving a comprehensive and independent evaluation of a particular theory is an endeavour far too ambitious for the limited scope of a master thesis. As stated in the rationale, it is the inability of certain studies of group identity in conflict to take into account for the changeable nature of such identity which marks the point of departure for this investigation. In order to address this problem while maintaining a reasonable scope and research economy, I have chosen to propose a particular interpretation which I argue can provide useful understanding. This means that the analysis has had to be limited in two ways.

Firstly, in order to give a comprehensive evaluation of the merits of a theory it is necessary to maintain a broad perspective by including more empirical cases. This is so because theories are abstract and must therefore be able to explain general trends and systematic variations. Instead, I have chosen a single case study, from which generalisation is inherently limited.

The case therefore serves more as an illustrative example than as a gauge for the theory, since one case is not necessarily representative, and other cases may well prove to contradict the theory. Using the empirical material of a case has, nonetheless, a value in the sense it helps us assess the practical implications and applicability of the theory, thereby informing the building of theory itself.

Secondly, the focus of the analysis is on a particular theoretical interpretation, rather than on illuminating every aspect of the case itself. I have therefore chosen to rely on secondary analysis of academic literature as my source of material, to frame the analysis within already established scientific knowledge. If using a single case study means a limitation in breadth, then using secondary analysis can be construed as a limitation in depth. The goal of this study is not to give a comprehensive account of the case, but rather to highlight the abstract understanding of one particular aspect.

## 1.7 CASE SELECTION

As with the choice of method, the justification for case selection also follows from the overall aim and argument of the thesis. As stated, the intention of the case study is not primarily intended to verify a theory in absolute terms. It is rather to inform the development of theory and the generation of hypotheses by serving as an illustrative example of the argument advanced, in a mutually rewarding interaction between theory and case. Thus, I have selected Côte d'Ivoire as a case primarily because it challenges our preconceptions and provokes critical thinking. This is not to say that the case should be selected because it fits and thereby validates the theory without being representative. On the contrary, the theoretical argument advanced is itself nothing more than a proposal for an alternative understanding of the phenomenon under study as well as a critical assessment of established perspectives. Côte d'Ivoire has therefore been chosen as a case precisely because it poses a problem for conventional understandings and inspires a constructive engagement with existing explanations.

At first glance, Côte d'Ivoire shares many characteristics with other African

countries that have experienced civil war. It acquired independence from colonial rule in with a strong, authoritarian leader, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, at the helm. During the first two decades of independence there was a reasonable level of stability and economic development. However, the economic downturn which began in the late 1970s spurred an increasing amount of social unrest and demands for democratisation. During a few tumultuous years in the early 1990s, the country saw both the introduction of multiparty democracy and the death of its long-standing president. In the aftermath of Houphouët-Boigny's demise, a trend of increasing antagonism between different social groups coincided with a high-level political game where central stakeholders within the elite were competing for power and the support of the various constituencies in the country. The rapidly deteriorating situation eventually culminated in a civil war in 2002 (Chirot 2006; Collett 2006).

Thus far, this historical narrative is not so different from those of several other conflict-affected post-colonial African states. An often-reported feature of many African conflicts is the ethno-nationalist identity aspect in the sense of aggrieved and marginalised social groups who supposedly struggle to increase their influence vis-a-vis other groups (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Jackson 2002; Hydén 2006:183). Indeed, the ethno-nationalist struggle seems to have become something of a paradigm in African conflicts, as the majority of them seem to exhibit at least some elements of ethnic mobilisation. Similarly, the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire also displays an aspect of identity in this sense. However, the aspect which sets Côte d'Ivoire apart is the fact that the community is not an ethnic group. It is instead a regional group which itself incorporates several ethnic and language groups (Chappell 1989:676; Chirot 2006:66).

It is precisely this seeming anomaly compared to the typical ethno-nationalist conflict which is the reason for choosing Côte d'Ivoire as the case for this analysis. The ubiquity of ethnicity and ethnic conflict in Africa means that the *ancient hatreds* hypothesis is always near at hand when talking about the civil wars on the continent. The goal of using Côte d'Ivoire as a case in this thesis is therefore to challenge the reification of ethnicity, nationalism and ethno-nationalist conflict.

## 1.8 OUTLINE OF THESIS

In this thesis I will first consult some of the most widely recognised academic literature on socio-political identity. This literature reviewed in the second chapter focuses on the two most prominent forms of political identity, national identity and ethnic identity. I emphasise the conceptual ambiguities present in different conceptualisations of nation and ethnicity, and tries to extract some fundamental insight about the nature of these identities and its relevance for understanding the general

Thereafter, in chapter three I look at the conceptual framework offered by the social identity perspective, and in particular self-categorisation theory, and I discuss how this framework can be extended to help us understand the politicisation of social identity at an abstract level.

In chapter four I recount the historical line of events leading up to the outbreak of civil war in Côte d'Ivoire. As much as this is intended to be an empirical chapter, it is important to be aware of the way in which historical narratives are always shaped by the perspective of the observer. I therefore emphasise the need to justify and explain one's selection of historical facts on the basis of their relevance for understanding the issues at hand.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to the analysis of how the politicisation of the northern identity in Côte d'Ivoire can be understood and explained using the theoretical insights obtained. I discuss how the particular theoretical interpretation offered by self-categorisation theory differs from other, more conventional analytical perspectives on identity in conflict.

Finally, chapter six contains, a summary of the main findings and some considerations regarding the significance and the relevance of the insights obtained from the previous chapters.



## NATION AND ETHNICITY: THE ELUSIVENESS OF ESSENCE

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the issues of ethnic conflict, nationalism (or perhaps rather what appears to be the conspicuous absence of nationalism) and ethnonationalism have long been recurring themes in the literature on conflicts in Africa. The eager follower of international news is familiar with the image of the African ethnic conflict and the problem of cross-ethnic colonial boundaries of African states.

It may nevertheless seem odd and counterintuitive to bring in perspectives on nation and ethnicity when our chosen object of study, the political mobilisation of a regional group in Côte d'Ivoire, does not immediately seem to be connected to these issues. The northern part of Côte d'Ivoire is on the surface neither a nation nor an ethnic group. The conflict, involving a "northern" insurgency against a "southern" government hardly seems to fit the bill of the typical "ethnic conflict", even though the country is highly multi-ethnic, like most African states.

What, then, is the reason for bringing these perspectives into our inquiries about Côte d'Ivoire? The answer is twofold, and contains a theoretical as well as an empirical component. Firstly, it is relevant to the theoretical understanding of political identity. The research question points to the conditions under which social identity becomes politicised. In this regard the scholarship on nationalism and ethno-nationalism is indeed relevant as it is central to the issue of political group identity, and can inform our theoretical understanding of social identity and self-categorisation. Secondly, it is relevant to the case. As our inquiries about Ivoirian history will show, both the issues of nation and of ethnicity have played important parts in the development of

political identity in the country. Having illuminated these issues will be important when we arrive at the application of our theoretical understanding to the Ivoirian context.

In this respect, this literature will serve both as an object of critique and as a point of departure for a better interpretation of the issues at hand. As any student of the subjects of nationalism and ethnicity will recognise, the main concepts of the field are suffused with conceptual ambiguity, despite their prominence and popularity as objects of research the past two decades. Nevertheless it must be stated that in ambiguity there is always scope for the constructive and analytical mind to find some useful insight. Instead of exhausting the various aspects present in the literature, I choose to focus my attention on a few central themes and paradoxes which will help enlighten our understanding of our subject. I intend to allow these themes to serve as early conceptual guiding lines from which we can move towards a more refined conceptual framework. My intention is therefore not to define the concepts of nation and ethnicity as such. It is rather to deduct conceptual cues that will guide our understanding of the general subject of political identity.

I begin the chapter with an investigation of its two central concepts, the *nation* and the *ethnie*.<sup>1</sup> A juxtaposition of these two concepts illuminates the difficulty involved in giving either an unambiguous, a priori definition. Instead, I argue that we are better served interpreting both of them as historical contingencies. That is not to say that they should not be considered part of reality, but that we need to understand their content within a particular social and historical context. I thereafter move on to a discussion of the subject of nationalism, which marks the relevance of these concepts to the issue of politicisation of identity.

The primary finding of the chapter is the observation that, while *nationalism* and *ethnonationalism* are being referred to as sui generis social phenomena, their similarities reveal to us that it may be more fruitful to look beyond the reified categories of *nation* and *ethnie* for the socio-political mechanisms at

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<sup>1</sup>I choose to follow Smith (1986), in his choice of the term *ethnie* to denote what is commonly called an *ethnic group*.



work under the surface. Consequently, I argue that the concerned literature holds insights which will enhance our understanding of the politicisation of social identity, but that these are better interpreted within the framework of social categorisation theory.

## 2.2 THE NATION

### 2.2.1 Nation and state

As an introductory consideration on the concept of the nation, I find it necessary to engage with a particular terminological conflation often made, implicitly or explicitly, namely that between the nation and the state. Although the state is also a concept the content of which is subject to much academic debate, it is better for our purposes not to get too entangled in the ambiguities and controversies surrounding the definition of what the state is and thus lose perspective. Instead, in order to make a clear analytical distinction between the concepts of state and nation it will suffice to consider Weber's simple but classic definitions. Whereas the state is a territorial-political unit, an organisation which according to Weber enjoys a monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a given territory, the nation is a "community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state of its own" (Weber 1946:176). Gellner provides his own modification of the former: "The 'state' is that set of institutions specifically concerned with the enforcement of order" (Gellner 1983:4). As mentioned, these definitions are far from uncontroversial, but they serve to illustrate the most important aspects of the state and the nation. Notably, the state is an *organisation*, or *set of institutions*, while the nation is a *community of sentiment*. It remains a fact, however, the terms nation and state are frequently conflated in both academic and non-academic contexts (Connor 1994:93).

It must be noted, however, that there is an important and recurrent conceptual linkage between the nation and the state. However, this linkage is dealt with in different terms depending on the point of view of the observer, and there is clearly a lack of consensus on its importance and nature.

For a makeshift categorisation, there are three main perspectives on the state-nation connection. Firstly, authors such as Smith (1986, 1991) and Connor (1994:212) define the nation strictly in cultural or ethnic terms, which means that a nation does not depend on state or aspirations in that direction to be recognised as a nation.

Secondly, in line with Weber's line of thought, the nation can be conceived of as a community which *aspires* to nationhood. In most cases, this view would be most easily reconciled with an ethnic conception of the nation, but it opens the possibility that a nation may be incongruent with an ethnic group.

The third perspective is that advanced by Gellner (1983) and Anderson (1983), namely that the nation is a historical contingency and can only be understood within the framework of modern, industrial society. This is an argument I will come back to later, but in essence it turns Weber's conceptualisation upside-down. Instead of nations forming states, nations are themselves dependent variables, being formed by states as well as other socio-political conditions.

### 2.2.2 Nation as a psychological community

The second conflation, that between nation and ethnicity, is more difficult to solve, and I argue that it has serious consequences for our understanding of any issue related to these terms. To penetrate deeper into this subject, it is necessary to take a closer look at the relevant literature.

Weber's view of the nation as a community of sentiment gives us an important cue as it harmonises with Benedict Anderson's (1983) seminal conceptualisation of the nation as an imagined community. Quickly summarised, Anderson's account of the rise of nationalism emphasises the role of print capitalism in evoking a new imagination of linguistic communities which cut across the contemporary political map of Europe. The combination of book printing and the printers' search for expanding markets precipitated a vernacularisation and diffusion of printed literature. That is, in order to reach wider audiences, printers began publishing literature in languages other than

Latin, which until then was the only European literary language of consideration. As more people could access printed literature in their own vernacular tongues, the awareness of a larger linguistic community began taking shape in the minds of the readers. In Anderson's words, "they gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that only those hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged" (Anderson 1983:47). This was thus the beginning of a process in which linguistic groups began perceiving themselves as communities, eventually culminating in the nations of today.

In Anderson's view, what marks the nation apart from earlier forms of communities is its wide span, often including millions of individuals, which inevitably means that each person belonging to one nation will never have the possibility of having a personal, face-to-face relationship with every other member of the nation. Therefore, the nation as a community exists primarily in the psychological realm, that is, in the imagination of its members. A shared language is the primary medium through which such an imagination becomes possible. In a similar vein, Connor (1994) emphasises the psychological nature of the nation as he defines it as "a psychological bond that joins a people and differentiates it, in the subconscious conviction of its members, from all other people in a most vital way" (Connor 1994:92).

### 2.2.3 Horizontality and boundaries

Another important aspect of the nation which is recurrent in the literature is its conception as a *horizontal* community. Horizontality in this respect does not imply a notion of socio-economic egalitarianism, but rather contains a perception that the affinity of individuals to a nation is a matter of mutually shared rights and duties (Anderson 1983:41). The nation "represented the common interest against particular interests, the common good against privilege (Hobsbawm 1990:20). Consequently, the nation must therefore contain a political component, since it entails a political allegiance of the individual to the collective. In Hobsbawm's words, the nation "was the body of citizens whose collective sovereignty constituted them a state which was

their political expression. For [...] the element of citizenship and mass participation or choice was never absent from it” (Hobsbawm 1990:19).

This can be related to Gellner’s concept of *social entropy* (Gellner 1983:63). According to Gellner’s line of thought, entropy alludes to a state of societal fluidity in which individuals no longer represent their interests qua individuals nor those of any sub-societal factions. Instead, individuals represent the nation, conceived in abstract terms as the totality of the political community, or alternatively particular formal positions within the bureaucracy. Consequently, individuals are substitutable in the societal matrix. Gellner argues that the sheer complexity of the division of labour in modern, industrial societies necessitates such a sense of loyalty to the nation, as the only force which can connect the individual with the internally random, fluid, mass society (Gellner 1983:64). This point therefore connects the previously mentioned points about the nation and the state, and the nation as a psychological community. This connection of the political and the psychological has further relevance to the understanding of nationalism, which will be dealt with in a later section.

An additional point to notice is that, in Anderson’s conceptualisation, horizontality also implies limitation, a notion which emerges logically from the nature of the imagined community. In the process of realising through a shared language that one belongs to a community of completely unknown people, the individual also realises that not everyone else belongs to this community. In short, the community, linguistically conceived and imagined, is inherently limited to the boundaries of that particular language. Beyond those boundaries there must therefore be other, similarly imagined communities.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Anderson’s conceptualisation therefore also implies a community of communities, within which some communities may be more powerful than others, yet which is still essentially horizontal because the latter share the fundamental attributes of being internally horizontal, spatially delimited, imagined communities (Anderson 1983:49).

## 2.3 THE ETHNIE

### 2.3.1 Culture, kinship, community

Having demonstrated some of the problematic definitional issues of the nation, one may expect to encounter fewer ambiguities when embarking on the issue of the ethnic group. But alas, ethnicity also happens to be a concept mired in ambiguity and controversy. I have chosen to follow (Smith 1986) in using the term *ethnie* to denote what is commonly called an ethnic group.

I will take as a tentative point of departure the notion of an *ethnie* as a “cultural community based on a common belief in real or putative descent” (Cederman 2002:411), onto which we can subsequently peg our conceptual considerations. This conceptualisation captures most of the primary factors that most people associate with *ethnie*. To make a quick analysis, this conception contains four main elements. The first element is a common cultural aspect of the group. The second is that that *ethnie* are communities. I will avoid a lengthy discussion on the definition of a community at this point, but it alludes at the very least to a mutual recognition of common-ness and possibly also to some form of intra-group social or political organisation or structure. The third element is that of group membership being determined by descent, and the last one concerns the ontology of the group, meaning that these characteristics are not necessarily absolute requirements, but they need at least be thought to be real.<sup>3</sup> Although using both the words belief and putative may be a bit of a redundancy, at least the message comes across clearly. This element is in accordance with Weber’s definition of ethnic groups as “human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent” (Weber 1961:306).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>In Connor’s terms, “it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists. Ethnic membership (*Gemeinsamkeit*) differs from the kinship group precisely by being a presumed identity” (Connor 1994:102).

<sup>4</sup>Interestingly, in the same passage, Weber also holds that an ethnic group is not a community, but “facilitates and promotes all types of community relationships (Weber 1961:306).

### 2.3.2 Primordialism and constructivism

One particular categorisation of the academic positions on ethnicity which must be commented on is the distinction between what are often called the primordialist and the constructivist understandings of ethnicity. To be clear, this distinction does not do much justice to the much more nuanced and complex reflections of most actual scholarly positions. It can still serve a purpose, however, as a useful reference point for further investigation of these concepts. By considering these two conflicting approaches more as simplified ideal types, one can think of the various relevant positions as located along a continuum between the extremes.

The stereotypical recount of the primordialist position is that ethnic groups are clearly distinguishable, temporally stable, mutually exclusive social and cultural categories. Of particular importance in this regard is the notion that an ethnic group has a clear delimitation or criteria for membership, and that its cultural content remains stable over a long period of time (Fearon 2003:197; Connor 1994:103). Contrasted to this is a constructivist approach, which typically sees ethnic groups as social constructions which are contingent on idiosyncratic social and historic conditions, and therefore fundamentally adaptable and ambiguous categories (Chandra 2001; Fenton 2003:2).

However, this distinction also contains a paradox regarding the treatment of ethnicity in the literature. On the one hand, many writers seem to adhere to a moderate variation of constructivist thought, and few serious scholars explicitly defend a strictly primordialist understanding of ethnicity. The reason for this is partly that what is commonly referred to as “primordialism” in ethnicity studies is in reality more of a straw man than a seriously proposed and defended school of thought. Fenton (2003:86) demonstrates how the original meaning of the term “primordial”, as it was used by those writers who initially coined and developed it in relation to ethnicity, over time has been distorted and misinterpreted. On the other hand, however, many analyses of ethnic identity in conflict reflect underlying primordialist assumptions. The reason is often a problem of finding an operational definition of an ethnic

groups which does not reify them as static, essential entities.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, it is noticeable that the primordialist-constructivist duality permeates most conceptions of ethnicity presented in the literature. On the one hand, most definitions contain reference to primordial membership criteria based on kinship or descent, and to a number of cultural markers such as a common language. On the other hand, there is an important cognitive dimension to these criteria and to the very idea of the *ethnie* itself. Even the descent criteria is not absolute, as it is in some cases possible to transcend ethnic categories where these are, for instance, related to class membership (Eriksen 2002:52). Similarly, Fearon (2003:201) provides a good overview of the many different and sometimes conflicting characteristics which may be connected to *ethnies*, and he illustrates efficiently the difficulties and near-impossibilities one encounters when trying to carve out a universally operationalisable definition. In short, the duality between the essential or primordial on the one hand, and the cognitive or constructed on the other, is present in close to every academic conceptualisation of ethnicity.

## 2.4 NATION AND ETHNICITY: CONCEPTUAL CONFUSION

### 2.4.1 Ontological overlaps

Now, having had a look at the concepts of nation and ethnicity, we see that they are both types of social groups which have certain things in common. Importantly, they are both seen as communities with psychological underpinnings. The lingering question must inevitably be, what is the essential difference between a nation and an *ethnie*? Our short introductions to the concepts have not offered any obvious answer. However, a deeper probing of the literature will seem to yield more confusion rather than clarification.

While some groups can be both nations and *ethnies*, there are both nations which are not evidently *ethnies*, and *ethnies* which are not nations. Consequently, the respective abstract definitions of *ethnie* and nation cannot be

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<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Cederman and Girardin (2007), Langer (2005), or the discussion on operationalising ethnicity in Fearon (2003).

identical. However, the problem is that scholars cannot agree on how to define these two concepts. There is consequently no settled fundamental distinguishing feature, even though everybody seems to agree that there must be a difference.

Leaving the conceptual challenges of ethnicity aside, the main problem seems to be that a nation can be defined on two very different premises. The first perspective is the view that a nation is intrinsically connected to the emergence of the modern state (Hobsbawm 1990:19). This idea of the *civic nation*, which is not founded on lineage or culture, but on rational-legal citizenship rights in a modern state (Fenton 2003:88; Smith 1986:153; Smith 1991:40), reverberates Weber's aforementioned state-centric conception of the nation. According to Anderson's line of thought, a nation is primarily a state-spanning community, which may or may not correspond to a kinship (ethnic) group. While early, *popular nationalisms* had an obvious ethno-linguistic aspect, later forms of nationalism, notably *official nationalisms* have in many cases been completely disconnected from associations to kinship. This kind of nationalism-imposed-from-above is thought to be the instrumental device of political leaders seeking to strengthen their position in a world where nationalism has become the primary guiding principle for political legitimacy (Anderson 1983:83; Gellner 1983:57). In this perspective, a nation may or may not correspond to an ethnic group, but it must by necessity have a state or aspire to statehood.

However, several scholars tacitly or openly premise that a nation is based on such criteria as descent or kinship, effectively equating nation with ethnic. Gellner seems to contradict himself by equating nation with ethnic when he states that "nationalism [...] requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones" (1983:2), and that the "number (of potential nations) is probably much, much larger than that of possible viable states" (1983:2). In a similar vein, Connor points out such characteristics of nation-hood as "a subconscious belief in the group's separate origin and evolution" (1994:93), and a "feeling of common blood lineage" (1994:94). He strengthens his perspective by asserting that most "states each contain more than one nation, and sometimes hundreds" (1994:98). Smith (1986) argues that while a nation



is distinguished from an ethnies by incorporating a civic citizenship component, a nation emerges from an ethnies and does not need to aspire to statehood. In other words, his conception of the nation is drawn close to that of the ethnies, while disregarding the connection to the modern state.

#### 2.4.2 Nation and ethnicity as contingencies

As we have seen, the nation seems to be torn between the territorial-political community of the modern state and the (putative) kinship-community of the ethnies. Furthermore, the definition of the ethnies is itself far from clear cut. Our main paradox is thus that while we have no such thing as an absolute set of criteria to classify the nation and the ethnies as abstract categories, we nevertheless have a clear perception that these concepts are not identical.

I argue that one approach which can help us reconcile these paradoxes is to abandon the search for the elusive ontological essence of nation and ethnies, and allow ourselves to consider them not as absolute, a priori abstract concepts but as social contingencies. By this I mean that they are contingent on particular sets of social and historical circumstances, and they must be understood and interpreted within the framework of these. Such circumstances include not only the evolution of the general socio-political environment through history, but importantly also the discourses we make about historical developments and their socially constructed meanings.

This perspective finds ample support in the literature. The nation should not be taken to be a universal or natural category, but is a *sui generis* social phenomenon which is intrinsic to the evolution of the modern state system. It has emerged from “conditions [which] do not define the human situation as such, but merely its industrial variant” (Gellner 1983:55), namely “a particular kind of territorial state [...] in the context of a particular stage of technological and economic development” (Hobsbawm 1990:10). Anderson emphasises that nationalism, once conceived, became a model to be pursued in an instrumental fashion by political actors with different goals. Thus, the meaning of the nation takes different forms under different circumstances and is not the same today as at its conception. It is epitomised by the claim

that “nations can be defined only in terms of the age of nationalism” (Gellner 1983:55). The value of the concept of the nation lies therefore in its relevance to the analysis of the relationship between political legitimacy and the evolution of macro-level socio-economic and political conditions through history, in Europe and elsewhere. Importantly, this perspective rejects any teleological causality. The current European state system, containing its tailor-suited set of “nation-states” moulded from the pre-modern complex cultural patchworks, is no more the inevitable end-point of history than the multi-ethnic post-colonial states. “In fact, nations, like states, are a contingency, and not a universal necessity. Neither nations nor states exist at all times and in all circumstances” (Gellner 1983:6).

This line of thought may be most easily accessible with respect to the nation, whereas it may seem more counterintuitive when applied to ethnicity, perhaps partly because of our ingrained perceptions of *ethnie* as primordial or natural social entities. I argue, however, that it is equally applicable to the subject of ethnicity, and it is in fact largely related to the circumstantialist perspective of ethnicity. This means that our definition of a group as an *ethnie* is suffused with our socio-political and historical position. Fearon (2003:197) effectively demonstrates the problem by referring to the difficulties in adequately coding ethnic groups for quantitative studies. He concludes that it is not possible to generate a perfect index of ethnic groups for the simple reason that the meaning of ethnicity differs from place to place.<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, even in those contexts where we assume the meaning and content of ethnicity is stable and established, this is most often not the case. African “ethnic groups” are just as much the outcome of particular historical developments as the European “nations”, which points to the flexibility of *ethnie* as social categories (Chandra 2001; Eriksen 2002:88; Turton 1997:79).

Fredrik Barth (1969, 1981) advances a conceptualisation of ethnicity which emphasises its relational and interpretative characteristics through processes of boundary creation and maintenance. Group identities are thereby defined primarily in terms of who is and who is not a member. In this view, groups are

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<sup>6</sup>See also Chandra (2001) and Green (2004) for a discussion on the incorporation of constructivist aspects in quantitative research on ethnicity and ethnic politics.

not discontinuous entities, but interdependent, mutually constitutive categories. That is, in order for an ethnic group to identify as one, it must be contrasted to another group which is seen as different (Eriksen 2002:10; 12). This evokes Anderson's explanation of the rise of nationalism partly as a result of the widening awareness that people belonged to a linguistic community, and that, beyond this community, there were other communities.

## 2.5 NATIONALISM AND ETHNONATIONALISM

Having concentrated on the meaning of the concepts of nation and ethnies, it is important not to forget that these have particular relevance in relation to the study of collective political action. The main point in this respect is the concept of nationalism and its subspecies ethnonationalism.

In common usage, nationalism refers to two things, on the one hand an *abstract ideological principle*, and on the other a *political sentiment*. In the first sense, nationalism is, in Gellner's oft-quoted words, "a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent" (1983:1). In the second sense, it is "the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of this principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment" (1983:1).

It should be emphasised that it is the latter sense which is most commonly associated with the term nationalism, while the study of nationalism as an abstract principle is primarily an academic exercise. It is also the sentiment of common-ness and its strong influence on political action which is relevant for the topic of this thesis.

Gellner's quote reveals to us two elements of uncertainty which are typically inherent in most conceptualisations of nationalism, and which deserve some close consideration. First, it is evident that Gellner's first definition of nationalism hinges on the preceding definitions of the nation and the state. If the *nation* is taken to be identical to the *ethnie*, then one can aptly refer to this as *ethnonationalism*. However, as we have seen, the substance of a nation can also be otherwise defined. If one accepts that not all nations are necessarily ethnies, then it follows that there can also be nationalisms which are not

necessarily of an ethnic nature. Some very problematic aspects enter view if we, for example, hold Gellner's definition of nationalism together with Weber's definition of a nation. What we end up with is a simple tautology, a principle which holds that state-inclined social groups should have their own state.

The problem of definition becomes obvious when looking at the difference between those scholars writing about ethnicity and those writing about nationalism. If one's focus is on ethnicity, such as Horowitz (1985), then it is easy to take the primacy of ethnic ties for granted. Horowitz argues forcefully that ethnic ties have an extraordinary sway over the political allegiances of individuals. While this may be true in practice, it is important not to short-circuit the logical relationship by assuming this to be an *inherent* characteristic of ethnicity. Similarly, Anderson connects the same kind of political allegiance with the modern state-spanning community referred to as a civic nation, seemingly dismissing other forms of identity groups as obsolescent socio-political anomalies. We are thus able to spot a paradox in Anderson's position. On the one hand, he emphasises the contingent nature of the nation as part of a social reality which has emerged from particular historical circumstances. On the other hand, his one-sided focus on this particular social group as the preeminent object of people's political allegiances, seems to imply a sort of historical teleology. The way he portrays the modern, Western-modelled nation as the natural historical endpoint of political identity is similar to what Mahmood Mamdani has critiqued as a "history by analogy" (1996:9). In this view, the respective positions of Horowitz and Anderson share a fundamental weakness which ultimately renders them incompatible with each other. What these authors have in common is their insistence that one particular kind of social group conceived in their own terms has the potential to trump all other political loyalties.

To be fair, they do make concessions with regards to the socially circumstantial nature of these groups, but nevertheless fail to let this impact on their arguments. For example, Horowitz concedes that there is variation in the prevalence and strength of ethnic ties in different parts of the world, and that these are less salient in the West than elsewhere. He attributes this

variation to the presence of an “overarching level of identity” in the West (Horowitz 1985:18). However, he fails to problematise this observation and merely states it as a matter of fact. Indeed, he even seems to be on the track of a more analytical understanding of political identity when he states that “the underlying phenomenon of group identity is at bottom the same” (Horowitz 1985:21), yet does not follow the lead of this important piece of insight.

In short, by keeping too narrow a field of view when studying a particular category of political identity, it is easy to descend to a reification of one’s chosen concepts and accept the primacy of one’s chosen category. This is not to claim that choosing more adequate categories is a straight-forward task, by no means. A too wide view will most often end up equally ambiguous and ultimately futile. Good concepts are not measured simply by their scope or level of abstraction, but by their explanatory power, their ability to provide useful insight and understanding. To illustrate, if we try to abstract away from these conceptual difficulties and use more general concepts, we can tentatively reformulate Gellner’s nationalist principle as one which holds that a *self-perceived social group* should be congruent with a *sovereign territorial-political unit*. Obviously, this is too vague to be altogether satisfactory for our purposes. Not only is the conceptual essence of the nation in doubt, but, importantly the very relationship between the group and political authority is also left untouched.

This brings us to a paradox which is inherent in the concept of nationalism, whether we think of it as a principle or as a sentiment. While we can define the ontological substance of nation and state in whatever manner we choose, we are still left with the curious question of the *rationale* for nationalism.

If we consider “social constructions” to be a form of mental representations, then the term will easily bring forth an image of something rather ambiguous or insubstantial. If we accept that nations are “historically novel, emerging, changing and, even today, far from universal entities” (Hobsbawm 1990:6), the inevitable question is: How do we then explain the remarkable emotional strength of nationalist sentiment or the significant influence of the nationalist principle in world politics? When we have demonstrated the difficulty in defining these groups, how can they have such a strong moral

and emotional sway over people's attitudes and actions?

After all, in today's world this principle is often rigorously defended, and not only by self-proclaimed nationalists. The logic of nationalism has an ethical tinge which reverberates strongly in the discourse of national self-determination, and the moral outcry deriving from obvious violations of its principle intuitively appear understandable and justified.

I suggest we begin looking for a cue to a better understanding by revisiting Gellner's aforementioned nationalist principle. As much as it is on its own one of the most widely cited definitions of nationalism, I would like to add the following clarifying elaboration from a little further down the same page:

"In brief, nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones, and, in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state [...] should not separate the power-holders from the rest" (Gellner 1983:1).

Importantly, Gellner divides the populace of a state into two distinct categories, the power-holders and the population. The relationship between these two is moreover a matter of *political legitimacy*. According to the nationalist principle, legitimacy is derived from these two groups of people, the people who constitute the central political authority of a state and the general population of that same state being from the same nation, however you choose to define the latter. This is understandable in terms of what I referred to earlier as horizontality and social entropy. As we remember, the nation is often conceived of as a *horizontal* community, which entails a particular form of equality between group members, and fluidity of social relations. As individuals are seen to represent the group, they also become internally substitutable with one another.

Naturally, this concept of horizontality is an abstraction of some contrivance. It may seem implausible to assume that individuals share so-called "interests" and are "internally substitutable" on the basis of a common language or even more dubiously, a purported kinship relationship which may be a complete social invention. Nevertheless, if we do accept the assumption that members of a nation share a psychological and emotional attachment to the collective, if we see the group as a unitary whole where the individual's

interests are ultimately equivalent to the common good of the group, the question of justification for the nationalist principle finds an answer, albeit an abstract one. In short, if those individuals who belong to your group automatically share your interests, and their loyalty therefore is to the group as a whole, then it does not matter who is the ruler and who is the ruled, because they define their interests in the same terms. If we also accept that political power is a matter of accountability, representativity and legitimacy between rulers and ruled, it makes sense to delineate your sovereign political entity in such a way that its boundaries correspond to those of your group. Legitimacy thus conceived is therefore a matter of representation, and it concerns the very foundation of political leadership and political power. However, this is still ultimately dependent on a conception of a nation as a collection of individuals whose primary allegiance lies with the common interest of the group.

## 2.6 SUMMARY

The main intention of this chapter has been to investigate the various conceptions of political identity found in the literature on nationalism and ethnicity. There are several recurring themes in the literature which gives a valuable understanding of how these concepts are interrelated. These can be summed up in two paradoxes:

The first paradox lies in the way several authors stress the need to understand such identities as contingent on their social and historical context, while at the same time seemingly reifying their substance as static and universal. The latter point can be illustrated with a reference to Donald Horowitz, who puts a strong emphasis on the “permeative propensities of ethnic affiliations” (1985:7) and the “ubiquitous character of ethnic conflict” (1985:5) as something intrinsic to human societies. At the same time, in a less prominent passage he describes the development of ethnic identity as a social-psychological process shaped by its historical context (1985:68). However, this does not seem to open his perspective to include an understanding of social group identities which are not necessarily ethnic in substance. These

paradoxes form the point of departure for the next chapter, which looks into the literature on social identity theory and self-categorisation theory.

The second is that belonging to a national or ethnic group implies a strong emotional attachment to the group on the part of its individual members. This attachment is central to all theories of nationalism and ethnonationalism. As a logical extension from this point, this attachment is commonly associated with a political allegiance to the group, so that there is a connection between political organisation and social group membership. However, in the perspective of the literature on nationalism and ethnicity, this attachment of the individual to the group is given as an *assumption*. We still lack a *causal explanation* accounting for the existence such attachment. The need to address these paradoxes forms a point of departure for the next chapter, which looks into the cognitive psychology of self-categorisation theory and its explanation of social group phenomena.



## THE SOCIAL IDENTITY PERSPECTIVE

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Having investigated the perspective of nationalism and ethnonationalism in understanding the nature of social groups, it should be clear that the challenges we have encountered justifiably call for a fresh perspective on these issues. As we have seen, when putting a label on a particular type of group, such as a nation or an ethnic group, and try to define the essence of this group, it is difficult to resist the inclination to see this group as a natural or primordial part of social reality. At the same time we are aware that such labels are merely abstract concepts the content of which is subject to change depending on the circumstances. In short, they are social contingencies.

Nevertheless, there are some intriguing peculiarities recurrent in the thinking and writing about social groups which prompts us not to disregard this perspective completely. First of all there is an obvious link between these forms of social group and political organisation, be it in the form of nation states or inter-ethnic political conflict. Second, there is an emphasis on the psychological bonds between individuals and such groups as nations and ethnic groups, which act as a compelling emotional incitement for collective action. Third, there are several allusions to an element of social abstraction in the sense that individuals are in some cases perceived more as representatives of their group rather than as unique individuals.

I therefore argue that we need to find a way to conceptualise such group formations theoretically without falling into the trap of defining the group in a manner which restricts our scope to a particular set of socio-historical circumstances. Such restrictions indicate theoretical weakness, since good theories should be able to explain a wider range of phenomena with a reduced set of abstract concepts.

This challenge may seem insurmountable at times, and in one sense it is. In the abstraction away from the concrete and tangible, from the idiosyncratic details of observed reality, some aspects will always be lost. There are, ultimately, no perfect theories in social sciences. A theory is merely an interpretation, a set of simplified, abstract ideas to help us structure our understanding of our environment. As such, a scientific theory is no more than the systematic elaboration of the fundamental cognitive functions of our minds.

Still, making an explanation more abstract does not necessarily mean making it less substantial. As mentioned, a good theory is able to account for a wide range of instances with a relatively simple set of concepts. I therefore suggest we have a look at an alternative perspective of the social group with its roots in the field of social psychology, namely that of the *social identity perspective*, which was proposed by Henri Tajfel and his colleagues to connect the cognitive function of categorisation to the development of social groups. This approach has the advantage of not being contextually defined, but an attempt at explaining social behaviour based on universal psychological factors. Given that its assertions are correct, its applicability is therefore not constrained to a particular social or historical context. The need for such an approach in the case of Côte d'Ivoire can be justified on the grounds that the conflict has unfolded between groups which are neither ethnies nor nations. Nonetheless, I also argue that this view of group politicisation can further inform our understanding of nationalism and ethno-nationalism.

The social identity perspective incorporates two distinct but related theories, social identity theory and self-categorisation theory. Social identity theory was developed from a series of experiments which seemingly indicated that a simple categorisation of individuals into groups was a sufficient factor for inducing ethnocentric behaviour and in-group bias, that is, behaviour favouring one's own group and discriminating against other groups. Self-categorisation theory expands on the cognitive aspects of social identity theory by accounting for how individuals associate with groups and how this facilitates collective action.

In this chapter I will elaborate on the aspects of these theories which are relevant for the analysis of Côte d'Ivoire. The focus will be on self-

categorisation theory and understanding its relation with collective action. Thereafter I will discuss the political implications of the insights provided by the theory and its relevance to understanding political conflict and the politicisation of identity. As I will show, self-categorisation theory provides a conceptual framework which explains in theoretical terms how social groups organise for collective action. This theoretical explanation is applicable to a case such as Côte d'Ivoire, and it also resonates with many of the motifs found in the literature on nationalism and ethnicity.

### 3.2 THE SOCIAL IDENTITY PERSPECTIVE

The two mentioned theories incorporated in the strand of thought referred to by Turner and Reynolds (2001) as *the social identity perspective*, are both the result of a common body of research on social group formation. As they share a common meta-theoretical foundation they are not competing or opposing theories, but they nevertheless focus on different variables and therefore provide diverging perspectives. While social identity theory explains intergroup relations in a setting where groups are already established, self-categorisation theory focuses on the relationship between individuals and groups, the cognitive foundation for group formation and the consequences this has for collective action and cooperation.

Social identity theory was primarily developed by Henri Tajfel as an effort to systematise and generalise insights unfolding through years of studying intergroup behaviour. Central to the development of social identity theory is what has been called the *minimal group paradigm*. Following a period during which there was an ongoing debate about the factors under which group antagonism and conflict emerges, Tajfel set out to isolate the minimal conditions under which in-group favouritism could take place. The result was a series of experiments with groups of participants who had no connection to each other whatsoever. The participants were to play a game of distributing points to other players, a purely abstract "reward". They were moreover randomly assigned to groups, which were in essence nothing more than a common label. Through these experiments, Tajfel and his colleagues managed to

demonstrate that merely being categorised in a completely haphazard manner could induce in-group bias and competitive behaviour. This realisation was called the minimal group paradigm, a “minimal group” being an artificially created category of individuals with no substantive common characteristics besides their ascribed label (Billig and Tajfel 1973; Tajfel 1970; Tajfel et al. 1971).

The basic theoretical tenet explaining these observations was the notion of social categorisation as a cognitive process. In short, “Perception involves an act of categorization” (Bruner 1957:108). The process of categorisation, which human beings apply to their immediate surroundings to make sense of the world in which they find themselves, also accounts for the social categorisation of people into groups. Categorisation helps people understand their surroundings by attributing similarity, difference and causality to objects at an abstract level. Similarly, social categorisation is a tool to classify and make sense of one’s social environment. It serves as a guide for social action, and it provides the individual with an understanding of her or his place in the social system (Huddy 2001:132; Oakes 2001:3; Tajfel and Turner 2004:59; Turner and Haslam 2001:28).

The term cognition refers to particular functional aspects of information processing by the human mind. In social sciences, the term is often associated with *cognitive schema theory*. Schemata are abstract mental structures that people use for the interpretation and understanding of perceptual stimuli. Schemata can be likened to simplified images or templates according to which new information is categorised and organised. Their main purpose is to increase the capacity for information management by reducing the degree of mental processing required to make sense of the massive amounts of perceptual input the human mind is exposed to. Typically, cognitive schemata are also associated with a certain degree of perceptual distortion emanating from the process of simplification of information. In common usage, the term cognition normally refers to a perspective which challenges the strictly abstract assumptions of rational choice theory by focusing on the manner in which people perceive and interpret their environments (Monroe et al. 2000:423; Monroe 2001; Turner and Reynolds 2001:136).

In the ideal typical minimal group paradigm, all circumstantial factors have been eliminated so that social categorisation acts as the sole independent variable. The popularised recount of its findings is that the mere presence of social categorisation acts as a sufficient condition for ethnocentric behaviour. This is, however, a misrepresentation of the original theoretical work of Tajfel and his colleagues. On the contrary, they assumed a theoretical distinction between a social category and a social group, and they reasoned that group formation presupposes an identification with and internalisation of the social category as a self-definition by its members. Social categorisation, therefore, does not on its own *explain* in-group bias causally. Nor does it account for all inter-group competition and hostility. After all, most groups are able to live peacefully together most of the time. Their main concern was, consequently, to explore the factors necessary for such identification and internalisation. The preliminary interpretation of the results seen in the inter-group paradigm was that participants, faced with an intrinsically meaningless situation, used the ascribed categories to infuse the experimental interaction with meaning (Oakes 2002:811; Tajfel 1982a:491-492).

Tajfel thereafter developed social identity theory as an explanatory framework to understand the mechanisms of categorisation-induced ethnocentric behaviour. The term social identity refers to that component of an individual's self-concept which is based on social group membership (Monroe et al. 2000:421; Hogg and Vaughan 2007:471; Turner et al. 1987:29). The theory puts forward the assumptions that individuals have a need for positive self-esteem or self-evaluation and that social categories are assumed to have value assessments associated with them. These assessments are based on social comparison along relevant group characteristics.

The inclination to enhance one's self-esteem therefore carries over into the sphere of inter-group relations, in which people strive to maintain a *positive social identity* (Tajfel and Turner 2004:60). The means by which a positive social identity is to be obtained included a range of strategies which were based on the premise of making favourable comparisons of one's in-group to relevant out-groups. The first strategy, *social mobility*, is an individual-level strategy and implies the passing of an individual group member from

a low-status to a higher-status group. The second, *social creativity*, looks to increase group status by modifying the way groups are evaluated. Assuming that groups are differentiated with respect to an array of different characteristics, group members will try to accentuate dimensions along which the group will be more positively evaluated. The last strategy, *social competition*, involves collective action undertaken by the group to change the social structure which places them in a subordinate position.

The shared beliefs and understandings of group members about the larger social context determines the choice of strategies available to them. In particular, the viability of social competition as a strategy depends on the perception of the social structure of inter-group status differences as either legitimate and stable or illegitimate and unstable. Under the latter circumstances, social groups are more likely to engage in social competition through collective action to improve their relative group status (Hogg and Vaughan 2007:326-333; Huddy 2001:133; Kreidie and Monroe 2002:9; Monroe et al. 2000:434 Turner and Reynolds 2001:134).

### 3.3 SELF-CATEGORISATION THEORY

The theoretical framework labeled self-categorisation theory was developed by John Turner and his colleagues (1987) as an expansion of social identity theory. The primary goal of self-categorisation theory in relation to social identity theory is to provide a cognitive account for how individuals relate to identity groups. As noticed earlier, the interpretation of the minimal group paradigm offered by social identity theory is that a simple *categorisation* of individuals may, under certain circumstances, provide the basis for social group formation. That is, a social group is a collection of individuals who identify with the group and act collectively to enhance the status of the group vis-a-vis other groups. The main focus of social identity theory is on how the motivational influence of the need for positive self-evaluation induces varying forms of strategies to improve the relative standing of self-perceived groups. However, the theory does not elaborate on the cognitive mechanism by which the *category* turns into a *social group*. This is rather exogenised as an underlying

assumption, and the theory instead takes social groups as given entities. In reality, however, cross-cutting and overlapping social categories are created in countless ways and on different levels, and not every categorisation becomes the basis for inter-group competition or hostility. In a review of social identity theory, Leonie Huddy (2001:137) requests an account of how social categories turn into identities which become so important that they motivate coordinated, collective, political action. This is, basically, the focus of self-categorisation theory.

In this perspective, the latter may be seen as logically preceding social identity theory, providing part of the theoretical foundation upon which the latter is based, although chronologically they emerged in the opposite sequence. However, I argue that self-categorisation theory also opens up for a wider array of hypotheses about inter-group relations precisely because it provides an account of the underlying logic of cognitive self-categorisation. Whereas social identity theory deals with a quite specific and restricted set of social processes, self-categorisation theory may also facilitate the inclusion of an analysis of the *political* aspects of power, legitimacy and leadership in understanding inter-group relations.

### 3.3.1 Self-categorisation

Self-categorisation theory builds on the work of Jerome Bruner (1957) on how categorisation is intrinsic to all cognitive processing of perceptual information, and applies this understanding of the categorisation process to social reality. In short, categorisation implies seeing some things as similar and others as different, and therefore depends on a comparative evaluation of perceptual stimuli. Moreover, cognitive categories exist at different levels of abstraction, so that different categories at one level belong to a common, more inclusive, category at a higher level of abstraction. For example, an apple and an orange belong to two different categories which we call *apples* and *oranges*. At the same time, they both belong to the higher-level category *fruits*. Importantly, in order for two objects to be classified as belonging to different categories, they must first be part of a common category of a higher order.

The perception of difference is essentially a comparative evaluation, which necessitates a certain level of common-ness at some level of inclusiveness for it to be possible to make a comparison between them in the first place (Tajfel 1978b:62; Turner et al. 1987:44).

The basic principle according to which categorisation takes place is that of *meta-contrast*. This principle implies that in a particular perceptual setting, a collection of objects is more likely to be classified as belonging to the same category if the perceived difference between them is smaller than the difference between that group and other, relevant object. Implicitly, categorisation is a relational process. The classification of two objects as a category depends on the perceived similarities and differences with other, psychologically relevant stimuli in the given environment (Turner et al. 1987:47). Interestingly, Horowitz (1985:68) refers to exactly this process of contrasting perceptual stimuli as a foundation for group formation, even though his focus is exclusively on ethnic identity.

Correspondingly, social categorisation or categorisation of people into social categories follows the same logic as for objects. Importantly, this logic also applies to the *self*. Self-categorisation is therefore a cognitive account of the self in a social frame of reference. Put simply, self-categorisation means perceiving oneself to be similar to certain people while being different from other people. Correspondingly, self-categories are also hierarchical, so that one may belong to many more or less inclusive categories at once, at different levels of abstraction. To complicate matters, self-categories are not just linearly hierarchical, but they are often also multidirectionally cross-cutting, depending on the defining characteristics according to which categorisation takes place.

As people may identify with different social categories, turning them into social groups, at different times and in different contexts, the theory also outlines which factors determine which categories are more likely to become social groups. As self-categorisation theory explicitly incorporates a contextual perspective, this means that there is a functional relationship between the process of social categorisation and the social context within which it occurs (Haslam et al. 1992; Oakes 2001).



The psychological activation of self-categories depends on a factor called *category salience*, which refers to the likeliness that a particular category will become influential for social perception and behaviour in a given situation. Salience is a function of two factors, *category fit* and *perceiver readiness*. The latter is basically an individual-level factor, meaning the propensity of the individual perceiver to activate certain categories, based on her or his idiosyncratic qualities. Since perceiver readiness only has relevance for individual-level analyses, it is not relevant for systemic or societal explanations of social identity.<sup>1</sup> Fit, on the other hand, means the extent to which the content of a category meaningfully represents the perceived reality in a given situation. Fit is partly given by the aforementioned principle of meta-contrast, but it also includes a normative aspect in the sense that it takes into account the meaning of the defining attributes of categories.

### 3.3.2 Depersonalisation and group formation

As noticed earlier, the difference between a social *category* and a social *group* was already emphasised in the work of Tajfel in relation to the minimal group experiments. The basic insight of the minimal group paradigm, and, subsequently, one of the main assumptions of social identity theory, was the notion that social categorisation is the foundation for social group phenomena such as ethnocentric behaviour, in-group favouritism and cooperation. It presupposes that the relationship between social categorisation and psychological group formation is that the latter takes place when several individuals come to share a perception of themselves as members of a social category. The objective of self-categorisation theory is to account for how this shift comes about (Oakes 2002:812; Turner and Reynolds 2001:134).

The basic cognitive process through which social group formation takes place is that of *depersonalisation*. The grouping of objects into categories based on their relative differences and similarities is only the first step in the categorisation process. The next step is just as important, and entails

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<sup>1</sup>Perceiver readiness is often substituted with a factor referred to as accessibility. These are simply two terms which denote the same meaning (Turner et al. 1994:455).

the *perceptual accentuation* of the defining characteristics of categories. To be more specific, when a particular categorisation increases in salience, we tend to accentuate both the similarities between objects belonging to the same category on the relevant defining characteristics as well as the differences between objects belonging to different categories. This accentuation of category boundaries is the primary component of the “perceptual distortion” caused by cognitive processes. From the perspective of cognitive schema theory, this happens because the human mind is better equipped to relate to abstract categories delineated by a simplified set of characteristics than to process the full bombardment of perceptive stimuli we are constantly exposed to. Consequently, we tend to over-emphasise those characteristics of an object which define the object in terms the categories to it belongs (Monroe et al. 2000:434-435; Turner et al. 1987:50).

The concept of depersonalisation is basically the transfer of this logic to the social realm. As particular self-categorisations become salient, people tend to perceptually accentuate intra-group similarities and inter-group differences on the psychologically relevant dimensions. This process therefore also implies a *functional contradiction* or “functional antagonism” (Turner et al. 1987:49) between the salience of self-categorisations at different levels of abstraction. As one given categorisation becomes more salient, the perceived boundaries at that level of abstraction become perceptually reinforced, thus suppressing competing perspectives on which categorisations are seen as more relevant.

If, for example, in a given setting, religious categories increase in salience, then this will suppress the salience of other categorisations which do not correlate with the former, such as language, ethnicity or nationality. Logically, this functional contradiction also applies to the relationship between the salience of personal and social identity, so that when a particular social identity gains in salience, personal identity declines. From the perspective of self-categorisation this is conceived of this as a continuum between personal and social identity, where the self-concept of an individual is always situated along the axis between the two. The result of the increased salience of a particular category is therefore a depersonalisation of identity, as peo-

ple conceive of themselves more as representatives of their group, or “interchangeable exemplars of a social category” (Turner et al. 1987:50), than as unique individuals.

### 3.3.3 In-group favouritism

According to self-categorisation theory, the primary outcome of the process of depersonalisation is the emergence of ethnocentric attitudes and behaviour, or in-group favouritism, among group members. The theory provides an abstract, causal explanation of these phenomena in terms of *prototypicality*. In essence, the argument hinges on the assumption that prototypicality, or representativeness of a particular category, is the main vehicle for positive evaluation and self-evaluation (Hogg and Vaughan 2007:319).

Among a collection of objects belonging to a category, an object will be evaluated positively to the extent that it resembles a *prototypical instance* of a category member, according to the defining characteristics. That is, objects which are seen to represent the true essence of the category obtain positive evaluation. Similarly, a category is evaluated positively to the extent that it is representative of the next, higher-level inclusive category of which it is part. It follows that group cohesion, the mutual positive evaluation of members of a group, increases proportionally with perceived in-group similarity among members, which in turn is a function of category salience (Turner et al. 1987:57).

This argument may at first sight seem flimsy and overly abstract. Turner and his colleagues (1987:59) admit that the attribution of positive value to self-categories is something that may need further investigation, but they still hold that most positive self-category evaluation can be conceptualised in terms of category representativeness at some level of abstraction.

I argue that to explain some of the characteristics of in-group behaviour such as collective action and political organisation, it is possible to bypass this argument and still attain a satisfactory theoretical explanation. On the other hand, I find that it is useful to lay out the essence of the argument, as it will become relevant as a point of reference when looking at our case study

later on.

#### 3.3.4 Cooperation and collective action

Whereas the explanation of in-group favouritism depends on the notion of prototypicality as the source of positive evaluation, an explanation for in-group cooperation and collective action can be deduced directly from the concept of depersonalisation. The line of thought is fairly straight-forward. Depersonalisation entails the perceptive simplification and accentuation of group members' attributes along the relevant category dimensions, so that the salience of a particular self-category increases the perceived similarities between members of the category. As the self is depersonalised and equated with the group, self-interest is, correspondingly, equated with group identity. In short, a shared notion of common interest flows directly from perceived group identity, as a component of perceived similarity. Common group interests is thereby assumed to be the foundation for such phenomena as altruism and empathy. Consequently, the factors which induce category salience also enhance the prospects for cooperation and collective action based on perceived common interest within a group (Turner et al. 1987:65).

Notably, this is where the difference between the cognitive approach of self-categorisation theory and theories building on methodological individualism becomes evident. The strictly abstract assumptions underlying rational choice theory conceive of social phenomena as comprising the aggregated actions of rational-calculative, interest maximising individuals. Correspondingly, it sees common interest simply as the positive convergence of individual interest. From common interest, group formation may arise. By contrast, self-categorisation theory does not reject rationality, but it reverses the direction of causality. The so-called perceptual distortions of social cognition allow categorisation to be the catalyst of group formation, whereby the perception of common interest follows from the process of depersonalisation.

This is not to say that cognition is "irrational" in any way. As mentioned, cognitive simplification works to make the management of information more efficient and less costly, freeing mental capacity to deal with a large amount

of perceptual input. Moreover, cognition is not only a means for efficiency, but crucially also for interpretation. As human beings, our perception of reality is represented by the collection of stimuli we perceive. Categorisation is the cognitive tool we use to interpret and make sense of these stimuli. The mechanism through which this happens the emphasis of intra-category similarities and inter-category differences. When similar stimuli are classified as a category, we are able to transfer experiences with one instance from that category to other instances. Naturally, these categories do not exist independent of our cognition, but the meaning and causality we attribute to these categories is what makes us able to interact meaningfully with our environments (Oakes 2001).

### 3.4 IDENTITY AND POLITICAL ORGANISATION

#### 3.4.1 Social versus realistic competition

Coming from the field of social psychology, social identity theory and self-categorisation theory are not explicitly political theories, but rather general theories about social interaction. They nonetheless have bearing also on the understanding of political processes, as they address group phenomena such as inter-group conflict. One already mentioned explanation for such conflict is found within the framework of social identity theory, namely *social competition* (Tajfel and Turner 2004:61). The social competition hypothesis is derived directly from the assumption that people seek positive self-evaluation through their social identity. In social competition, people compete to increase their relative social status by means of collective action. For an identity group which is placed lower than other group in a status hierarchy, social competition is likely to become a viable strategy to achieve a more positive social identity under certain conditions. These include, firstly, that the structure of inter-group status differences must be perceived as being illegitimate and unstable. Secondly, other strategies, such as social mobility and social creativity, must be seen as costly or unfeasible (Hogg and Vaughan 2007).

This view of conflict emanating from relative status differences between

groups can be recognised in the writings of both Gellner (1983:67-68) and Horowitz (1985:166). However, the weakness of this hypothesis is that it presupposes an established inter-group status hierarchy and depends on self-evaluation as a motivational factor. This is given by social identity theory's focus on inter-group processes. It necessitates a view of groups as given entities, which is to say that this hypothesis is incompatible with an understanding of groups boundaries as subject to change. For this reason, Tajfel and Turner (2004) distinguish between *social competition* and *realistic competition*. While the former is solely a matter of improving the relative status of one's group vis-à-vis other groups on the basis of intergroup comparisons, the latter requires "realistic" factors which are given exogenously, such as group goals or interests (Tajfel and Turner 2004:61; Turner and Reynolds 2001:146).

The acceptance, and even dependence, of exogenous realistic factors is consistent with the context-dependent approach of self-categorisation theory, the notion that "one cannot explain human social conflict through social psychology alone" (Turner and Reynolds 2001:146).

#### 3.4.2 Depersonalisation, representation, and power

In order to provide an alternative understanding of the relationship between identity and conflict, let us briefly consider some aspects of political organisation. The establishing centralised decision making structures for the coordination of societies is a central motif in political science. As Gellner (1983:53) notes, "Mankind has always been organized in groups, of all kinds of shapes and sizes". Political organisation is in essence the outcome of human beings structuring their relations and coordinating their actions to attain goals that would otherwise be unattainable. The inherent and perpetual necessity of such coordination in complex societies implies the creation of permanent structures of power in the form of a political community (Chabal 1992:38; Hydén 2006:50).

In order for coordination to be efficient in an organisation, there must be a centralised, hierarchical decision making structure. A group that aims to act collectively must also make collective decisions. What is more, each individ-

ual in a group cannot make her or his own decisions. Instead, decisions must be made centrally, and then carried out by non-decision makers. That is, an organisation consists of leaders and followers (Hogg and Terry 2000:128). In large organisations this structure normally takes the form of a multilayered, concentric hierarchy. The ability to make decisions constitutes social power. However, power is never unilateral but always reciprocal. In essence, one's power always depends on the willingness of others to carry out one's decisions (Hydén 2006:50; Lonsdale 1986:127; Turner 2005:3).

We can thus conceptualise, like Turner (2005), power as a function of social influence, that is, the extent to which others are willing to carry out one's orders. Instead of power being a prerequisite for organisation, power is inherent in, and derived from, the existence of an organisation (Turner 2005:11). In this perspective, the insights of self-categorisation theory become highly relevant for the functioning of political organisation.

Recall from self-categorisation that depersonalisation is the outcome of the increased salience of a social self-categorisation. Depersonalisation implies the prototypical representation of individual group members. That is, when a particular social identity become salient, its members tend to over-emphasise the similarities between members within groups, as well as the differences between individuals who belong to different groups. Self-categorisation "cognitively assimilates self to the ingroup prototype and, thus, depersonalises self-conception" (Hogg and Terry 2000:123). This cognitive assimilation of individuals to group stereotypes is the foundation upon which social phenomena such as in-group sympathy, trust, cohesion, diffusion of norms are produced.

These psychological effects of depersonalisation consequently facilitate more tangible, behavioural results in terms of cooperation and collective action within the contextually salient group (Hogg and Terry 2000:123). In short, depersonalisation transforms group members' individual interest and behaviour into collective interest and behaviour as people "perceive and act in terms of a shared, collective conception of self" (Turner and Haslam 2001:32).

This logic can also be transferred to the realm of political organisation, if it is conceived of as a structure of hierarchical authority between lead-

ers and followers. Turner (2005:17) conceptualises authority as the acceptance by a group “that a person, role or group has the right to [...] express their collective will and short-circuit what might be futile, divisive and time-consuming arguments about what is the right course of action”. According to self-categorisation theory, the increased salience of a particular group identity will promote the prototypical representation of all group members, which also applies to the relationship between political leaders and their followers. The ability of group leaders to be seen to share the collective interests of the totality of the group is an important component of their position as leaders vis-à-vis their followers. Leaders must therefore “manifest a loyalty to the needs and aspirations of group members [...] in ways that are accessible to view because such evidences of good faith and sincere interest serve to elicit greater acceptance of influence” (Hollander 1964:231). In straightforward terms, depersonalisation can be said to act as a cognitive proxy for political legitimacy.

This notion of power as a function of the perception of leaders as prototypical representatives of their groups is a widely recurring motif in the literature on nationalism. It is, essentially, the assumption underlying Gellner's (1983:1) conception of the principle of nationalism, that political rulers must be from the same nation as the ruled. Likewise, John Stuart Mill made a clear connection between nationality and representative government. In his view, a nation was constituted by people united by “common sympathies [...] which make them co-operate with each other more willingly than with other people, desire to be under the same government, and desire that it should be government by themselves [...] exclusively” (Mill 1910:359-360). As we see, Mill associates nationality with *common sympathies* which induce *co-operation* and thereby *representative government*.

### 3.5 SUMMARY

Through a review of the social identity perspective and self-categorisation theory, this chapter has focused on a cognitive understanding of social identity and social groups. The main insight to be derived from this theoretical



perspective is that the formation of social identity groups and the organisation of collective action within such groups is a universal feature of social interaction.

People possess multiple social identities which become activated as a function of contextual factors. The increased salience of one particular identity is accompanied by the suppression of alternative identities. As identities grow in salience, group members are increasingly perceived as prototypical representatives of their groups. This process of depersonalisation is the main factor accounting for collective action, by transforming group members' perceptions of shared interests. Depersonalisation thereby also serves to construct an image of leaders as representative of the collective interests of their contextually relevant groups. Depersonalisation can therefore be conceived of as a cognitive proxy for representation, which bestows legitimacy on political leaders.

In a similar vein, Chabal and Daloz (1999:55) state that "representation in Africa is necessarily communal or collective. The legitimacy of the representative is thus a function of the extent to which s(he) embodies the identities and characteristics of the community. It means, inevitably, that a representative must be a member of that community."

Although Chabal and Daloz thereby effectively illustrate my point, I also oppose the perspective that this is an *inherent* feature of African societies. It may be a *prominent* feature of African societies, but such inferences easily amount to cultural relativism and reification of contextually dependent variables. Instead, I argue, in line with self-categorisation theory, that the connection between perceived representation and identity is a universal feature of social-psychological relations, regardless of time and place. The challenge for researchers is therefore rather to explain when and how social group identities gain salience and thus become influential factors in the mobilisation for collective action.

In the next chapter I will give an historical overview of the developments of identities in Côte d'Ivoire. This overview forms the empirical foundation for an analysis of the emergence and politicisation of the northern Ivoirian identity.



## CÔTE D'IVOIRE: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION: THE CASE FOR HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Providing the historical background for a case always presents a two-sided problem. On the one side, it is important to situate the case study in its historical socio-economic circumstances to obtain a good understanding of the subject. On the other hand, there is a danger in exaggerating the amount of historical details beyond what serves the purpose of a particular study. Especially for the academic researcher having spent much time and effort on studying her case, it can be tempting to indulge in details which are eventually irrelevant or stretching the lines too far back in history, as one feels it contributes to bringing out nuance in the subject. This is firstly a problem because one wastes valuable paper real estate, particularly if one intends to publish the research in a journal. More severely though, in analytical writing in general, an abundance of detail may be more distracting than enlightening and actually obscure the message one tries to get across. It is therefore important to always be careful in one's selection of historical background material. The main guiding line must always be to focus on those historical developments which contribute to the explanation of the subject matter, and the selection of historical information must be justified on these grounds.

In this case, the subject matter concerns the development over time of group identity in Côte d'Ivoire. The question is how far back one needs to look in order to account for such identity development. The answer must be a matter of which factors are needed for the understanding of the subject matter. In line with the perspective of self-categorisation theory, I conceive of group identities as fluid and subject to change, and such change must be understood on the background the socio-political context within which it occurs. Therefore, it is crucial that I account for the socio-political factors

which I assume to be the main independent variables in the shaping of political identity.

My departure or expansion from self-categorisation theory concerns the particularities of *political identity* as compared to other forms of social identity. I conceive of political identity as a subset of social identity, with the particular characteristics that political identities are those group identities which form the basis for coordinated, political collective action. Likewise, the mechanisms driving the formation of social identity and political identity are in principle the same, but I assume politicising factors are explicitly political in nature. To make an analytical simplification I identify the primary independent variable influencing the development of political identity to be the structure of political legitimacy, conceived as the relationship between the leaders and the citizens in any given political community in terms of the way political leaders are perceived to represent certain segments of that community. Such perceptions of representativity may emerge from general socio-economic and political processes and from the actions of the political leaders themselves.

The main focus of this thesis is on the politicisation of the northern group identity. I argue that this politicisation took place primarily during the 1990s, but that the northern Ivoirians evolved as a social identity from the time of colonisation by the French. Looking all the way back to the late 19th century may seem irrelevant to the explanation of events mainly taking place in the 1990s. I therefore begin this chapter by discussing the historical frame for understanding the evolution of political identity in Côte d'Ivoire in order to justify my historical focus and my selection of historical material. The remainder of the chapter is used to account for the socio-economic and political factors that precipitated these developments. I distinguish between two main periods in the evolution and politicisation of the northern Ivoirian group identity: One period where northern-ness emerged as a social identity under colonial and post-colonial rule, and one period where this social identity became politicised during the 1990s.

## 4.2 FRAMING IDENTITY IN IVOIRIAN HISTORY

The group of military officers who initiated the uprising in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002 claimed to be the representatives of the Ivoirian population hailing from the north of the country. Whether their claim was credible or not, the social group identity labeled the *northern Ivoirian*, around which a range of ethnic groups converged, was the explicit alibi for the rebellion (Nordås 2007:2).

The fact that this group is defined by a geographical criterion, being constituted by inhabitants from northern Côte d'Ivoire, gives us an important cue to understanding the development over time of social identities. Obviously, before the French colonisers drew the borders of their new colony on the map and formally annexed it in 1893, none of its indigenous inhabitants would be thinking of themselves as “northern” or “southern” Ivoirians (Chappell 1989:697). Did they think of themselves in ethnic terms, as belonging to this tribe or that tribe? This is certainly the way the European mind has been taught to think of the inhabitants of pre-colonial Africa. However, as mentioned before, there are many indications that many of today's ethnic labels are as much a product of colonisation as an objective description of a pre-existing condition (Turton 1997:79; Collett 2006; Mamdani 1996; Horowitz 1985:149).

I look at the *emergence of a social identity* and the *politicisation of that identity* as two processes which can be analytically distinguished. However, the underlying theoretical mechanisms explaining these processes are both based on the insights of self-categorisation theory. I argue that the main subject of this thesis, the politicisation of the northern Ivoirian identity, was a process taking place primarily from the year 1990 onwards. That is, this is the time period during which *northern* became a banner under which a coordinated movement could gather to organise their resistance against what was seen as an unrepresentative and illegitimate regime. However, the *emergence* of the northern identity preceded its politicisation by many decades.

According to the view that identity formation is a function of contextual factors, I argue that political structure and processes are the main determi-

nant of the politicisation of identity in a given setting. Correspondingly, the milestones in the emergence and development of the northern Ivoirian identity coincide with the most profound political turning points in the country's history. Evidently, the event of colonisation was the first of these milestones in terms of marking the beginning of a new political paradigm. One may easily draw the conclusion that the event of decolonisation was of similar magnitude as a political turning point. However, I argue, in line with Robert Jackson (1990), that decolonisation was a less profound revolution than what is commonly assumed. In most cases, it can more aptly be described as a continuation of the colonial structure only with a change of leadership and legal status as sovereign (Akindés 2004:8; Jackson 1990:22; Mamdani 1996).

Therefore, I identify three main turning points in the political history of Côte d'Ivoire and in the development of political identity in the country, of which the first is the time of colonisation by the French. The second turning point is marked by three events: The introduction of multiparty elections in 1990, the death of long-standing president Félix Houphouët-Boigny in 1993, and the subsequent elections in 1995. The 1990 elections initiated the decade during which the northern identity would become politicised to the point that a civil war broke out in 2002. Note that my analysis only extends to the outbreak of the war. The thesis is not about the conflict per se, but solely about understanding the politicisation of identity preceding the war itself.

Consequently, we are dealing with two distinct periods of identity development, as delineated by the three turning points. My perspective can be broadly outlined as follows: The northern identity emerged as a *social identity* from the political and socio-economic conditions during the colonial and post-colonial periods in Côte d'Ivoire. This social identity was further transformed into a *political identity* as a result of the rapid and profound socio-political changes during the 1990s.

### 4.3 IDENTITY FORMATION UNDER COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL RULE

#### 4.3.1 The ethnic composition at colonisation

When the French colonisers arrived in the territory which would later become Côte d'Ivoire, they conducted a survey of the “tribes” in that territory, identifying more than sixty different ethnic groups of various sizes. As I have mentioned before, the inclination of European colonisers to count their subject peoples and categorise them according to ethnic or language characteristics is highly dubious. In many cases, socio-political constellations were highly fluid, and groups would fork or merge through processes of migration and intermarriage. Consequently, the categorisations imposed by the colonising powers would often reify, if not create, social groups in a rather haphazard manner (Mamdani 1996:183). Chappell (1989) describes the pre-colonial social environment of Côte d'Ivoire as a *frontier*, alluding to the multifaceted processes of social interaction taking place at the conjunction of different communities. However, he also concedes that, although a simplification, the colonial “counting” of the groups in the area still “coincide with Ivoirian perceptions of themselves” (Chappell 1989:676).

Most of these groups migrated from neighbouring areas over the past centuries, ranging from the tenth to the nineteenth century. For this reason, most of the ethnic groups still retain linguistic and kinship ties with groups across today's state boundaries. The large number of ethnic groups can be classified as belonging to one of four main linguistic families: Akan speakers in the south east and centre, of which the Baoulé is the largest ethnic group, Krou speakers in the south west, of which Bété is the largest group, southern Mandé and northern Mandé speakers in the west and north west, and Gur or Voltaic speakers in the north. The groups which have later become labeled “northern” include mostly the northern Mandé and the Voltaic speakers (Chappell 1989:676; Chirot 2006:66; Toungara 2001:64-65). There is also a corresponding religious division, with Islam being widespread in the north, and Christianity in the south. In addition, many groups practice traditional

religions, and these are interspersed over most of the territory (Nordås 2007). However, Toungara (2001:65) emphasises the fact that the idea of a ethnographically homogenous “Great North” obscures the actual heterogeneity of the region.

#### 4.3.2 The political dominance of the Baoulé

I identify two primary factors which were crucial in the development of regional-ethnic social identities in Côte d'Ivoire during the colonial and post-colonial periods. These take the shape of two parallel processes in the respective realms of politics and economy, which essentially served to establish the Baoulé ethnic group as a de facto political and economic aristocracy vis-à-vis other groups in the country (Akindés 2004:13). The first factor is the early integration and continuing dominance of the Baoulé in positions of power, and the second is the large-scale labour migration taking place across the country and from neighbouring countries.

The Baoulé are part of the Akan language family and inhabited at the time of colonisation the central to south-eastern area of the territory. Chappell (1989) explains how the Baoulé already from their relatively recent arrival in the area in the nineteenth century established themselves as a dynamic force at the frontier between three broad civilisations. Through trade and migration they developed a sense of opportunism, pragmatism, innovation and flexibility in their interaction with other people.

According to Kirwin (2006:45), the Baoulé were more easily assimilated into the French colonial administrative structure, which allowed them to enter the colonial administration at a relatively early stage compared to other groups. A pattern thus emerged of Baoulé dominance in the colonial administration, which later carried over to the post-colonial political system.

Accordingly, the first president after decolonisation was the heir of a local Baoulé chief from the central town of Yamoussoukrou, Félix Houphouët-Boigny. A medical practitioner and a cocoa plantation owner, Houphouët-Boigny rose to prominence as the founder of a trade union to protect the rights of African farmers during the colonial period. Houphouët-Boigny also



founded what was to become the post-colonial ruling party, the *Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire* (PDCI), in 1946. The party had originally emerged from a community united by economic interest. It was in principle strictly pan-ethnic, and Houphouët-Boigny always vigorously pursued a policy of national inclusiveness to avoid any political mobilisation on the basis of ethnicity. Nevertheless, it remains a fact that the PDCI was characterised by a de facto Baoulé dominance throughout the post-colonial period (Collett 2006:618; Kirwin 2006:46; Langer 2005:31; Woods 1994:467).

#### 4.3.3 The economy of migration

The second factor precipitating the development of regional-ethnic social identity during the colonial, and later the post-colonial, period, was the introduction of a plantation economy in the southern tropical forests and the ensuing pattern of labour migration. Beginning in the 1930s, the southern parts of the country, and in particular the south east, saw rapid economic development in the form of commercial farming. As with their access to administrative positions, the Baoulé also benefited disproportionately from the opportunities arising from the new plantation economy initiated by the French colonialists, being among the first indigenous people to be allowed to start their own plantations (Akindés 2004:8).

Since there was generally a great need for labour on the plantations, and since the southern tropical forests were sparsely populated, the plantation economy precipitated a large influx of labour migrants, predominantly from the northern parts of the country as well as from neighbouring countries, notably Mali and Upper Volta (later Burkina Faso). The recruitment of northern and immigrant labour was initiated already under French colonial rule, but it was encouraged and intensified after independence. Houphouët-Boigny actively pursued a policy of immigration to supply labour to the plantation economy, which was the main engine of economic growth in the country up to the 1980s. As long as land was abundant, many northern labourers were also allowed to set up their own farms in the area. With time, immigrant labourers and their descendants constituted approximately a quarter of the

population settled in the country (Akindés 2004:9).

As land became more scarce in the south east, government-supported plantation owners, mainly of Baoulé and northern origin, began moving westwards to clear more forest land for larger plantations. The south western tropical forests were inhabited by people who have come to be labeled as *Bété*. The expansion of the plantation economy into the south east by immigrants of Baoulé, northern and foreign origins sparked resentment among the comparatively disadvantaged indigenous *Bété* population, who began demonstrating their discontent by launching attacks on the plantations. At the same time, the northern parts of the country did not have plantations and were accordingly underdeveloped vis-à-vis the south. This was the main reason why so many people from the north migrated to the south to find work. Although some northerners were economically successful as plantation owners, their position was for the most part that of cheap labour (Chappell 1989:684; Collett 2006:616; Crook 1997:222; Toungara 2001:65; Woods 2004:236).

Collett (2006) argues that even though there existed ethnic groups on the territory prior to colonisation, these identities developed and became consolidated in colonial and post-colonial times. The collective identity of the *Bété*, who are today considered an ethnic group, was non-existent prior to, and emerged as a result of, the perceived Baoulé/northern agricultural colonisation of their land. The same goes for regional identities, such as that of the northerners, which was consolidated by the converging economic position of people from the north in the Ivoirian economy.

#### 4.3.4 Political stability under Houphouët-Boigny

The period during which Côte d'Ivoire was under the rule of Houphouët-Boigny was marked by a remarkable stability. There were low levels of social tension and conflict, and for a long time a high level of economic growth. In a region troubled with poverty and instability, these factors turned Côte d'Ivoire into an attractive destination for migratory workers from neighbouring countries. However, from the 1980s and throughout the 1990s the country, like so many others on the continent, experienced an accelerating

economic crisis accompanied by austere structural adjustment programmes (Akindés 2000; Akindés 2001:5; Yéré 2007:51).

The social stability which prevailed during the first two decades of independence may seem paradoxical when considering the manner in which all other groups than the Baoulé were relegated to a position as second- or third-rate citizens. In particular, two large groups had a subordinate position during this period, namely the northerners, and the Bété from the south-west of the country (Akindés 2004:14). This strictly hierarchical structuring of inter-group relations may intuitively appear to be a contributing factor for inter-group conflict. However, Akindés (2004) argues that this group hierarchy was actually an intrinsic part of the manner in which Houphouët-Boigny managed to retain his superior and unchallenged position. In essence, this was done through a strategy referred to as the “paternalistic management of social diversity” (Akindés 2004:12), which served to justify and legitimate the rule of Houphouët-Boigny and the socio-political structure of inter-group relations. Central to this strategy was the construction of a myth of Baoulé aristocracy at the top of an inclusive Ivoirian nation. This way, Houphouët-Boigny could legitimise his rule being the leader of the ruling class rather than the leader of one ethnic group among many. In order to manifest his position as legitimate leader, this strategy was accompanied by exhibitions of dedication to serve the interests of everyone, also the disenfranchised groups. This was accomplished by co-opting and making symbolic concessions to minorities and disenfranchised groups in terms of government efforts to promote economic development in poorer regions, especially in the north. A curious outcome of this practice was a strong alliance between the northerners and the Baoulé, which lasted for as long as Houphouët-Boigny was in power (Akindés 2004:18; Langer 2005:30; Toungara 1990 Woods 1994:473).

#### 4.4 THE DISINTEGRATION OF NATIONAL UNITY

##### 4.4.1 Multipartyism and political fragmentation

As the economic boom turned to stagnation and decline in the 1980s, internal and international pressure for political reform eventually saw Houphouët-Boigny accede to arranging multiparty elections. The first elections, held in 1990, were won by the PDCI in a landslide victory. The only serious opposition was the *Front Populaire Ivoirien* (FPI) led by Laurent Gbagbo. Although the FPI tried to present itself as a party representative of the interests of the whole country, it appealed mostly to the Bété population in the south west. In these areas, decades of immigration by plantation-owners and workers of Baoulé, northern and foreign origin had generated resentment among the indigenous population against the central government. The main campaign strategy of the FPI was to engage in an ethnic discourse by accusing the PDCI of promoting the interests of Baoulé and northerners, a strategy which eventually backlashed as it effectively projected the FPI themselves as an ethno-regional party. At this point, Houphouët-Boigny was still considered the “father of the nation” (Crook 1997:220) and the PDCI retained their image as the only party with broad, country-wide support (Crook 1997:222).

After Houphouët's death in 1993, the presidency was taken over by the Speaker of the Parliament, Henri Konan Bédié. Also of Baoulé heritage, Bédié was not able to muster the same kind of popularity and legitimacy as Houphouët-Boigny. As the 1995 elections were approaching he found himself facing both a declining popularity with the people and a significant challenge for the presidency from within the PDCI. Alassane Dramane Ouattara was a technocratically inclined economist who served as prime minister under Houphouët-Boigny during the last years of his presidency. With a background as an international civil servant, Ouattara did not really have a political base in the country. His tenure as prime minister was characterised by anti-corruption policies, a strong focus on financial austerity, and the implementation of structural adjustment programmes (Crook 1997:223).

As Ouattara became a serious contender to Bédié's candidature for pres-

idency, he gathered the support of a group of reformist technocrats from within the PDCI. At the accession to power by Bédié, Ouattara resigned as prime ministers, and within a few months a split emerged in the party. A pro-Ouattara faction broke away from the PDCI to form the *Rassemblement des Républicains* (RDR). Importantly, even though Ouattara himself was not part of the group, having left the country to serve as an IMF civil servant, the RPR openly declared their allegiance to him. The response of the Bédié-dominated PDCI was to denounce the new opposition party as a sectarian group based on regional-ethnic and religious allegiances. The rationale behind this rather outrageous claim was the fact that Ouattara himself was a Muslim and a northerner (Chirot 2006:68; Crook 1997:225).

#### 4.4.2 Ivoirité: Houphouëtism reversed

As the new elections planned for 1995 were drawing closer, Bédié initiated two measures to secure the re-election of the PDCI to parliament and, in particular, of himself as president. These two measures, one rhetorical in nature and the other legal, were essentially part of a strategy of exclusionary nationalism to attack the perceived political base of the RDR.

The first step of this strategy was the invention of the concept of *Ivoirité*, an re-conceptualisation of Ivoirian nationality which intentionally vilified the high numbers of immigrants in the country to capitalise on the popular grievances induced by the sapped economy. According to Collett (2006:625), the intention was to deflect accusations that the PDCI was an ethnic party, while at the same time attacking the ethno-regional bases of the opposition.

The second step of the nationalist strategy was the introduction of a new electoral law which restricted the right to vote and to run for election according to a strict set of criteria for Ivoirian citizenship. Not only were non-nationals excluded from voting, but candidates for parliamentary and presidential elections were also required to prove that they themselves as well as both parents were Ivoirian by birth. Moreover, a candidate could not have taken any other citizenship. In effect, this new law had the effect of excluding many Ivoirians simply because they could not produce such evi-

dence confirming their nationality, which disproportionately affected people of northern origin. Consequently, many northerners were classified as “foreigners” and stripped of their citizenship and voting rights. It also prevented the main opposition candidate, Ouattara, from running for president, since there were uncertainties as to the origin of his parents, and since he had, for some time, been travelling on a Burkinabé passport (Dozon 2000:51; Toun-gara 2001:67).

The response of the opposition was an alliance between the FPI and the RDR, the Front Républicain (FR). Their common demand was the withdrawal of the new electoral code, or a boycott of the upcoming elections.<sup>1</sup> As Crook (1997) notes, the RDR did not initially have an ethno-regional profile or agenda, although they may have been perceived that way. Their intentions were to support the candidacy of Ouattara for ideological reasons. However, with the decision to team up with the FPI, the RDR were “drawn into the politics of ethno-regional coalition building” (Crook 1997:229). They consequently began engaging in a regional rhetoric, accusing the PDCI of being a pro-Baoulé party discriminating against northerners and Muslim immigrants alike. As a consequence, there was an increased conflation of the concepts of northerner and foreigner in the public discourse.

#### 4.4.3 The descent into conflict

The 1995 elections were thus boycotted by the opposition, leaving Bédié with a tainted victory and a severely and increasingly curbed popular legitimacy. In total therefore, the three main political actors, the PDCI, the FPI and the RDR, all ended up the same way: While initially intending to broaden their political bases, the political high-level struggle left them all looking like ethno-regional parties with sectarian intentions (Crook 1997:238).

During the next seven years Côte d'Ivoire would see two more transitions of power of dubious legitimacy. There is much to be said about these devel-

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<sup>1</sup>Ironically, this meant the FPI and their leader Laurent Gbagbo were attacking the xenophobic character of the law, which was itself an undisguised instance of plagiarism of their own former anti-foreign stance. Naturally, this was all for strategic purposes, as Gbagbo himself would later perpetuate the same electoral code and re-adopt the rhetoric of Ivoirité.

opments, but as the most important points have already been introduced, I will restrict myself to giving a brief recount of those events that are relevant for our analysis.

Over the next few years, the Bédié regime became increasingly corrupt and repressive, which particularly affected the northern population (Dozon 2000:46). The political exclusion of northerners based on doubtful citizenship continued, and northerners were purged from the civil service (Toungara 2001:68). Then, in 1999 a former general by the name of Robert Guëi assumed power in a bloodless coup d'état. With promises to end corruption, arrange free and fair elections, and reintegrate the northerners into the political system, the coup was welcomed by the population. However, not many months passed before Guëi's real intentions were exposed. His halo quickly faded as he cracked down on opposition, refused to abolish the controversial electoral code, and excluded most of the candidates for the upcoming presidential elections in the year 2000 (Dozon 2000:53).

This time the only significant opposition candidate left in the race was Laurent Gbagbo, who attracted a large number of voters who were dissatisfied with the status quo. As the results indicated Gbagbo had indeed won the election, helped by a low turnout, Guëi tried to disband the electoral commission in last desperate but unsuccessful attempt to hold on to power. Violent protests eventually forced him to flee the country, enabling Gbagbo to seize power.

Finally, the Gbagbo presidency proved little different from those of his predecessors. Not only did he prove to be another nepotistic and authoritarian leader overtly resisting democratic reform. By adopting the rhetoric of Ivoirité and upholding the exclusionary electoral code, he moreover contributed to the continuation and aggravation of the north-south divide in the country. Northerners were purged from the army, the police, the civil service, and replaced with PDCI supporters (Chirot 2006; Collett 2006; Kirwin 2006; Langer 2005).

#### 4.5 SUMMARY

In this chapter I have reviewed the historical development of the northern identity in Côte d'Ivoire, with a particular focus on the period from the demise of Houphouët-Boigny to the onset of the civil war. I argue that, analytically, the introduction of Ivoirité marks the most fundamental watershed in the development of the northern identity in the country. Ivoirité altered the situation of the northerners from one in which they were included, albeit in a subordinate position, to one in which they were no longer represented at the level of the government.

Throughout the period from Houphouët-Boigny's demise to the onset of the civil war, the main structure with regards to political legitimacy largely remained the same, as epitomised by the gradual diffusion and increased legitimacy of the concept and political doctrine of *Ivoirité*. Northerners were systematically excluded from formal political influence. There was a political discourse of nationality and nationalism which increasingly conflated foreign with northern, thus implicitly emphasised the superiority of the southern groups and delegitimising the north as being less Ivoirian (Collett 2006; Dozon 2000).

Consequently, people from the north became over time amalgamated in their demands for justice, their sense of common fate in northern-ness gradually consolidated. Their rallying point became Ouattara and the RDR, which in return became a de facto party for the interests of the northerners (although having originally emerged as a strictly technocratic opposition party from within the ranks of the PDCI). Even the old rivalry between the Bété and the Baoulé subsided to give way to a new-found common identity of Southern Ivoirians (Collett 2006:627).

As national leadership changed, first through a coup d'état by Robert Guëi in 1999, and later the seizure of power by Laurent Gbagbo after a flawed election, these two strategies to stifle the influence of the northerners have remained in place, in spite of repeated promises by these leaders to open up for fair and legitimate elections.

In the next chapter I will discuss how the events in Côte d'Ivoire can be



analysed and interpreted in the light of self-categorisation theory. This is where I synthesise and distill the insights, concepts and historical facts derived from the previous chapters.



## ANALYSIS: A SELF-CATEGORISATION VIEW OF IVOIRIAN POLITICAL IDENTITY

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

When Côte d'Ivoire plunged into civil war in 2002, it appeared to most observers to be only the next step in a series of disintegrating African states. In many of these cases, the conflict lines incorporated aspects of ethnic identity in more or less obvious manifestations. Most western people have become accustomed to regarding the world as divided into a certain number of “nations” with their corresponding “nation states”. Even to scholars studying the dissemination of nationalism and nation states across the globe, the African condition with its apparent fragility or non-existence of national unity seems a perplexing anomaly. This point is illustrated by the fact that the most common academic use of the term “African nationalism” is with reference to the anti-colonial opposition leaders and movements, who in most cases ended up as the first leaders of the new post-colonial African states (Chabal 1992:47; Hydén 2006:25; Smith 1983).

In effect, the apparent predominance of ethnic identity has served to render the studies of nationalism largely irrelevant to the contemporary African political reality, as demonstrated by the absence of African examples in most of the literature on nationalism. At the same time, an exclusive focus on ethnicity as the only relevant political identity in Africa is also problematic. As demonstrated in the introductory chapter, many analyses of ethnic identity in conflict have been flawed in two ways. There is a tendency to rely, either, on methodological individualism, or on a reified concept of ethnicity (Cramer 2002; Green 2004). Both approaches have the consequence of distorting and misrepresenting the role of collective identity in the political mobilisation for collective action.

Moreover, as was discussed in the second chapter, the categories of nationality and ethnicity are themselves inherently problematic and ambiguous. This makes rigorous analyses of these issues problematic. At the same time, there are many recurring motifs in the literature on nation and ethnicity which are reflected in the social identity perspective. These include, importantly, the attachment of the individual to the group and the significance of a shared identity to the organisation of collective action.

I therefore argue that in order to understand the role of identity in conflict, one must abstract away from the situation-specific categories of nation and ethnicity, and instead investigate how social identities on all levels are formed and become political actors. In this perspective, the case of Côte d'Ivoire actually presents itself as an opportunity for alternative understandings. This is so precisely because a social group which was arguably neither an *ethnie* nor a nation displayed behaviour which is commonly associated with nationalism or ethnic conflict. This case therefore offers a fresh perspective and allows us to transcend the confines of conventional patterns of thought.

In this chapter I aim to provide an analysis of the politicisation of the northern Ivoirian identity during the period leading up to the outbreak of civil war in 2002 from the perspective of self-categorisation theory. The intention is to synthesise and distill the theoretical and empirical insights gathered in the foregoing chapters. I argue that the conceptual framework provided by the social identity perspective has significant explanatory advantages over approaches which reify the essence of social identity, ethnic or otherwise.

Firstly it allows for a non-essentialist understanding of group identities, that is one which is not limited to specific defining attributes, such as ethnicity or nationality. Instead, these are conceived of as variations of a common category called social identities. Secondly it does not necessitate an assumption that social groups are static and discrete entities, but it is able to account for variations in the salience and relevance of multiple overlapping layers of identity for political mobilisation. Thirdly, even though the framework is built on a psychological understanding of social categorisation, this interpretation does not rely on psychological factors as the only explanatory variables.

This opens the possibility of including “realistic” factors located in the realms of economy and political power. In fact, the theory explicitly states that psychology alone cannot explain the processes of social group formation, but depends instead on the presence of contextual, motivational factors (Turner et al. 1994:458). The objective of using self-categorisation theory is to show how identity formation and politicisation are adaptive, cognitive processes, which are shaped by the reality of the social and historical context, and which should be taken into account in analyses of social identity in conflict.

In this chapter I will first look at how the development of the northern identity from the time of colonisation can be explained by using the conceptual framework of self-categorisation theory. Thereafter, the greater part of the chapter is dedicated to a discussion of the politicisation of the northern identity between the death of Houphouët-Boigny in 1993 to the outbreak of war in 2002. The gist of the argument advanced is that the introduction of the politics of *Ivrité* marked a watershed in the conception of the Ivoirian nation. The shift from patriarchal, inclusive Houphouëtism to exclusive, horizontal *Ivrité* meant that a large group of people who were earlier subsumed into the nation now found themselves excluded from it. This altered the level at which political identity was conceived. As the Ivoirian identity declined, the regional identity grew became salient, meaning northerners became more likely to act collectively on behalf of their shared identity.

## 5.2 THE EMERGENCE OF REGIONAL IDENTITY

The insight derived from the social identity perspective is that social identities can be conceived of as multiple self-categorisations which co-exist at different levels of abstraction. One individual always has many social identities, based on the various self-perceived social categories one belongs to. In Côte d’Ivoire, like any society, there was such a multitude of social identities at different levels and of different social meaning. Of particular political importance were the national, the regional and the ethnic identities, representing different levels of inclusiveness.

In principle, any of these identity groups could have become politicised to

organise a coordinated resistance to the central government of the country. However, only two notable opposition movements based on particular social groups emerged: The ethnic Bété opposition with the FPI and Laurent Gbagbo at its centre, and the regional northern opposition for whom the RDR and Alassane Ouattara were the rallying points.<sup>1</sup> The main difference between the two is the fact that FPI presented their opposition within the legal framework of the state by campaigning for elections, while the northern resistance eventually challenged the very constitutional legitimacy of the Ivoirian state in the form of an armed rebellion.

Although the presence of a social identity group is a prerequisite for the organisation and mobilisation of collective action (Bernstein 2005:59), the view the formation of social identities depends on social categorisation implies that group formation and politicisation may take place simultaneously. This is so because a social identity may emerge from any perceived characteristic shared by a group of people. A sense of shared insecurity or predicament which necessitates collective action may therefore both an identity forming and politicising factor. Nevertheless, I argue that the northern Ivoirian identity was established as a social identity prior to its politicisation. The social identity perspective first provides us with an understanding of the processes shaping social identities.

Naturally, the northern Ivoirian identity could not have existed in people's minds prior to colonisation, since the notion of the *north* as an entity must logically be defined in relation to the concept of Côte d'Ivoire as a territorial unit. Self-categorisation theory puts forward the principle of meta-contrast as the main underlying principle for cognitive category formation. In a social setting, the meta-contrast principle implies that in a collection of people are likely to be categorised as an entity if the average perceived differences between the individuals in the group are smaller than the average differences between the collection as a whole and other groups. Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup>As Crook (1997:235-237) notes, the only remaining opposition candidate for the 1995 elections was Francis Wodié from the Parti Ivoirien des Travailleurs (PIT), who campaigned on a social democratic platform. In spite of the fact that the party's campaign was serious and well-executed, they ended up with less than five percent of the total vote, a result Crook attributes to the party's lack of a "local or ethno-regional power base" (Crook 1997:237).

the context-dependent nature of the theory also means that the normative content of the categories and its relevance within the social context must be taken into account (Turner et al. 1987:47; Turner et al. 1994:456). This means that any perceived characteristics shared between a group of people may give rise to the formation of a social category, if those characteristics are seen as relevant in the given context.

This view can explain the emergence of the northern identity from colonisation until the death of Houphouët-Boigny. The colonial authority established Côte d'Ivoire as a social and political frame of reference for its inhabitants. Within the political and economic framework of the colony and later the independent state, two conspicuous characteristics contributed to distinguish the northern part of the country and the northern population from other regions and groups. Firstly, the accelerated economic development of the south-east and centre over the northern parts of the country contributed to the awareness of a north-south development gap, constructing an image of the north as poor and underdeveloped as compared to the relatively prosperous southern regions. This image was entrenched by the easier access of southerners to education and public services, and their concomitant dominance in the public sector and government (Collett 2006:620).

Secondly, as the plantation economy prompted a large-scale migration of labour from the north to the south, this brought both southerners and northerners into closer contact with each other. This would normally widen the totality perceptive stimuli available to each individual, meaning that people would be exposed to a more diverse social environment. If the internal differences between people from the north on relevant dimensions were perceived to be smaller than the perceived differences between northerners and southerners, then the meta-contrast principle predicts that a social category for northerners will take form in people's minds and be diffused and corroborated through their practices and discourses.

While the inhabitants of the north hailed from different language groups with many internal cultural differences, they were to a large extent perceived as a single group of migrant labourers, not only by the inhabitants of the south, but also as an emergent collective self-concept among the people of

northern origin living in the south. Apart from simply being from the north, several other characteristics such as occupations, languages, family names and religion would increase the perceived intra-group similarities and inter-group differences. Northerners most often occupied a particular position in the Ivoirian economy as migrant farm labour although occasionally also as farm owners. Their position in the social status hierarchy was thus below that of the Baoulé yet above the Bété indigenous to the south west. Moreover, many northerners are also Muslims, although not exclusively so, while the majority of the southerners are Christians. Even though the northerners did not represent a single language group, the fact that they spoke languages different from those in the south would also enhance the image of a unified group in the eyes of the southerners. This tendency of people in the south to perceive all northerners as a single group can be illustrated by reference to the widespread use of the derogatory term “Dioula”, originally a family name in the Kong Manding dialect, as a common designation for migrant workers from the north (Akindés 2003:13; Akindés 2004:14; Kirwin 2006:49; Nordås 2007).

A further conflation of group identities taking place through the same process was that between the northern Ivoirians and the foreigners. As immigrants from Mali and Burkina Faso often shared important characteristics with the northerners, such as languages, names, religion, and the fact that they were migrant labourers coming to the south of Côte d'Ivoire to work at plantations, they were subsumed under the “Dioula” label with the northerners (Akindés 2004:30; Collett 2006:625). In essence, these factors contributed to an polarised conception of the northerners as aliens and non-Ivoirians, accompanied by increasing hostility towards both northerners and foreigners among southern Ivoirians (Akindés 2003:13). Démbélé (2002:152-153) notes how this process unfolded in practice through the creation of ghettos in southern cities, where people were grouped not only according to ethnicity, but also to “cultural proximity”, meaning that different groups from the north would be grouped together, as well as together with Malian and Burkinabe immigrants.



### 5.3 TRANSFORMING IVOIRIAN IDENTITIES

#### 5.3.1 Community and legitimacy

While the meta-contrast principle can explain how a common identity of the north emerged from the pattern of uneven development and labour migration, it does not account for the politicisation of this identity and the mobilisation for an armed uprising. In order to explain this it is necessary to look back to the conceptualisation of representation as shared social identity between rulers and followers.

To reiterate, the cognitive process of depersonalisation entails the perceptual accentuation of intra-group similarities and inter-group differences, whereby intra-group members are seen more as prototypical representatives for a collective conception of self. This process also transforms people's individual perceptions of interest to collective group interest. By the same logic, depersonalisation affects the relationship between political leaders and followers. A perception of shared interest between leaders and followers effectively vests legitimacy in the leadership of decision makers, as it means they will make decisions for the common interest of the group (Turner and Haslam 2001; Turner 2005). In short, shared social identity works as a proxy for political representation and hence also for political legitimacy.

According to this logic, a political community will remain stable as long as there exists an inclusive, community-encompassing sense of social identity to convey an image of the representation of all its citizens by its leaders. There may well be a large number of intra-community social groups which do not become politicised as long as they are seen to be represented at the most inclusive level of the community. Importantly, each social group does not need to be represented directly, as long as they belong to a wider identity group at a higher level of inclusivity. In short, the crucial point is that leaders of the given community must be perceived to represent all its citizens (Hollander 1964:231). This can be conceived of as a fit between political structure and social identity structure. As a community consists of a centralised decision making agency, normally in the form of a government, the

purpose of which is to make collective decisions in the collective interest of the whole community. In a modern, democratic state, the interests of the community are typically protected by equal citizenship rights. The focus of self-categorisation theory on the need for a collective identity for collective action predicts that such identity is also critical to the functioning and legitimacy of a political community. However, if the political leaders are seen as representative only for a fraction of the population, then there must be a risk that the inclusive social identity will disintegrate. Those social groups who are not seen to be represented are thereby likely to organise for collective, political action.

### 5.3.2 Context and causality

In Côte d'Ivoire, I argue that the politicisation of the northern identity group was a function of a decline in political legitimacy that followed a paradigmatic shift in the conception of the Ivoirian nation in the 1990s. This shift can be represented as the difference between *Houphouëtism* and *Ivoirité*, or the meaning of the Ivoirian nation as conceived by Houphouët-Boigny and Bédié respectively (Akindés 2004:17).

According to the contextual perspective which is inherent in both social identity theory and self-categorisation theory, the processes of social categorisation and group formation depend on the context of social reality within which they occur. In other words, psychological factors alone do not account for fluctuations in social categorisation. On the contrary, the latter occur as a function of real and tangible events and developments. In short, there is a “functional relationship between categorization and its context” (Turner et al. 1987:127).

In line with this view, the direction of causality leading to the politicisation of identity can be specified as the following chain of factors: Context, salience, legitimacy, politicisation. Each factor depends on the previous one. A change of contextual factors may bring about a sequence of re-adaptations in the other factors. In other terms, real political practices impact on the perceived relevance and salience of different social identities, making cer-

tain social identity groups more salient than others. When different social identities and categories increase or decrease in salience, this impacts on the perceived legitimacy of political leaders, since leaders are seen to be representative of the relevant social identity groups they are part of. Social groups who are no longer seen to be represented by delegitimised political leaders liable to become politicised to defend their interests.

In the case of Côte d'Ivoire, these factors can be represented in the following way: The move from *Houphouëtism* to *Ivoirité* represents the contextual independent variable. This move indicated a perceived exclusion of both foreigners and northerners from the conception of the Ivoirian nation, as manifested in the practices of influential political actors. Consequently, this practice increased the salience of the northern sub-national identity groups vis-a-vis that of the inclusive conception of the nation. Although the men in power, Bédié, Guëi and Gbagbo, may have wanted to present themselves as leaders for the whole population, their actions and rhetoric of *Ivoirité* indicated an inadequate *fit* between reality and categorisation. These leaders thus forfeited their perceived accountability and legitimacy among citizens of the north, and it was this decline in legitimacy which prompted the politicisation of the northerners.

### 5.3.3 Houphouëtism and Ivoirité

As noted, the northern identity began emerging already under colonial rule, and it was clearly present during the rule of Houphouët-Boigny. However, it did not emerge as a politically relevant identity until the 1990s. In fact, under the rule of Houphouët-Boigny, Côte d'Ivoire remained remarkably stable seemingly despite its social diversity and the authoritarian character of the political system. Yet, neither the northern group nor any of the ethnic groups in the country mobilised for armed rebellion during this period, even though they were relatively marginalised both economically and politically.

Francis Akindés (2004) explains this seeming paradox with reference to a set of policies referred to as *Houphouëtism* or *the Houphouët-Boigny compromise* (Akindés 2004:7). Alongside policies of economic openness and political

patronage, the compromise included a paternalistic management of social diversity. In essence, this meant that Houphouët-Boigny worked to maintain a conception of the Ivoirian nation in inclusive terms, while maintaining a normative group hierarchy to legitimise Baoulé dominance. This may at first seem like a self-contradiction in the sense that one would expect the maintenance of internal group boundaries to undermine inclusive nationalism.

In fact, in the Ivoirian case, the hierarchical ordering of groups was used to legitimise Houphouët-Boigny's rule. The three most notable groups were ordered with the Bété of the south west at the bottom, the northern, or *Dioula* in the middle, and the Baoulé at the top, all groups making up the totality of the Ivoirian nation. By reconstructing the Baoulé as a natural aristocracy, Houphouët-Boigny was able to legitimise their dominance in the political and administrative system as representative of the nation. In effect, he used an ethnocentric strategy to stabilise the social diversity of the country, quite to the contrary of what one would expect (Akindés 2004:12-16).

Akindés (2003:13) notes that Houphouëtism "gives preference to the individual rather than to the citizen" (Kodjo 1996:82). Although this phrase may seem puzzling, it is a good illustration of the openness and liberal political practices of Houphouët-Boigny in terms of economic development and immigration. It means, effectively, that the benefits of participating in the Ivoirian economy were not a privilege based on ethnicity or birthright. This is the meaning of the inclusive concept of the Ivoirian nation. As long as Houphouët-Boigny could project himself as a benign authoritarian, the "Father of the Nation" (Almås 2007:11) at the top of the Baoulé-dominated hierarchy, everyone was included, and everyone's interests were taken care of.

To consolidate this stability, Houphouët-Boigny was careful to demonstrate his commitment to the Ivoirian nation by making concessions to the various regions and social groups. In the comparatively underdeveloped north he invested money in infrastructure and he provided migrant northerners in the south with favourable conditions to establish their own farms. As part of the policy of economic openness, immigrant labourers residing in the country were also given the right to vote. In total, these efforts amounted to a Baoulé-northern alliance which secured widespread support for Houphouët-

Boigny's presidency among both northerners and immigrants during his lifetime (Collett 2006:623).

When, in the run-up to the 1995 elections, Bédié initiated his strategy of Ivoirité to secure the electoral success of the PDCI and himself, this marked a profound paradigm shift in the foundation for political legitimacy. Houphouëtism and Ivoirité are labels used to describe different arrays of political practices and rhetorics, but they also reflect two opposing conceptions of the Ivoirian nation. Houphouëtism entailed an inclusive and informal conception of nationhood with permeable boundaries, so that even immigrants were given citizenship rights such as the right to vote. Social diversity was maintained, but in the form of an internal hierarchy of groups in which everyone's rights, interests and security were provided for as constituting parts of the Ivoirian nation, but only a few had a mythical entitlement to rule. Houphouët-Boigny avoided giving a cultural definition of Ivoirian-ness, and instead relied on a strategy of cooptation and patronage of local community leaders to suppress the polarising effects of ethno-nationalist politics (Marshall-Fratani 2006; Riehl 2007:33). This means that Houphouëtism, which was both hierarchical and inclusive, was actually the opposite of Anderson's conception of the nation as a horizontal, limited community.

By contrast, Ivoirité on the other hand signalled a new understanding of the nation, projecting an image of the Ivoirian nation which was both exclusionary and sharp-edged in the sense that it made a clear delineation between who were to be considered true Ivoirians in a manner which entailed real, tangible political consequences for those who were not included in the nation. Whereas Houphouëtism was hierarchical, open and inclusive, Ivoirité was horizontal and limited. Firstly, Ivoirité excluded the immigrant labour force from the partial citizenship rights they had acquired under Houphouët-Boigny. This was no insignificant measure, as this group constituted approximately a quarter of the Ivoirian population at the time (Collett 2006:625; Langer 2005:30). Secondly, the stringent legal requirements put on people for the retainment of full citizenship rights in practice also turned a large number of Ivoirian northerners into *de jure* foreigners by stripping them of their right to vote and other citizenship rights.

The rhetoric of Ivoirité reflected this blending of the northern and foreign identities which was already present in the public discourse by producing an image of Ivoirian-ness which was implicitly southern and anti-northern. Particularly in the second conception of Ivoirité under Guëi, doubt was made explicit over the authenticity of the belonging of the northerners in the Ivoirian nation (Akindés 2003:13).

Taken together, the political practices and rhetorics of Ivoirité excluded both foreigners as well as many northerners from political influence. However, I argue that the most important aspect of this exclusion was not the practical realities per se. More importantly was the image they conveyed of an Ivoirian nation in which certain groups could not count themselves a legitimate component, and of a political leadership which projected themselves as promoters of the interests of specific groups at the cost of other groups.

From the point of view of self-categorisation theory, this represents a shift of level at which social groups are politicised. Houphouëtism allowed for the coexistence of a multitude of social groups by emphasising the inclusiveness of the Ivoirian nation. The construction of the nation thereby conveyed the message the security and interests of all sub-societal groups and individuals were protected at the most inclusive relevant level of social abstraction within the political community. This can be conceived as a particular self-category, the inclusive Ivoirian nation, which remained salient vis-à-vis other, alternative social identities at the political level, during Houphouët-Boigny's rule. Since salience is a matter of fit between perceived reality and categories, this stability must have been a consequence of real and visible practices which substantiated the relevant categorisation.

Accordingly, Houphouët-Boigny consolidated his vision of the inclusive Ivoirian nation by political practices aimed to display his representativeness of the totality of society by making visible and significant concessions to disadvantaged groups and regions. Such measures included the cooptation of local, regional and ethnic leaders via the indirect distribution of resources, positions and patronage, while at the same time suppressing all overt manifestations of ethnic mobilisation (Woods 1994).

This means that Houphouët-Boigny made a conscious effort to project

himself as an Ivoirian leader rather than an ethnic leader. True, the ethnic dimension was not altogether absent from the political stage. The Baoulé remained a privileged group in the social context, but the meaning of ethnicity was reconstructed not as opposing groups competing for resources or power, but as a mythically legitimised hierarchy of status and leadership within a unified social group. In short, the inclusive Ivoirian nation prevailed as the relevant social group, within which the Baoulé were the natural leaders. At the top of the hierarchy, Houphouët-Boigny was the promoter and protector of *all* Ivoirians, also those at the bottom of the ladder.

In this perspective, the introduction of Ivoirité triggered the disintegration of the inclusive and unitary vision of the nation, which in turn precipitated the politicisation of that group which was not represented, namely the northerners. In the terms of self-categorisation theory, this process is a matter of the decline of social group identity at one level of abstraction, and the rise of identities at a lower, less inclusive level.

According to my argument that depersonalisation acts as a proxy for political legitimacy, this disintegration impacted on the legitimacy of Bédié. As much as he may have intended to present himself as a “father of the nation” like his predecessor, his political actions effectively displayed him as the representative of sub-national group interests, delegitimising his rule in the eyes of the estranged foreign and northern population groups.

To begin with, this was a process taking place primarily at the high level of national politics. However, over the years following the 1995 elections, during the subsequent presidencies of Bédié, Guëi and Gbagbo, it was being gradually disseminated throughout society. From recurring purges of northerners in the public sectors to the increased harassment of the local population in the north by police officers, this process brought the delegitimation of the government down to the level of everyday social interaction (Akindés 2004:29; Kirwin 2006:48). Thus, Ivoirité moved from abstract construction to practical manifestation, altering the social reality from which social identities are being moulded.

#### 5.4 CHALLENGING THEORETICAL CONVENTIONS

As noted before, the cognitive perspective of self-categorisation theory directly contradicts primordialist assumptions of ethno-national conflict. However, the present analysis of the may be challenged from a different theoretical strand of thought, namely the family of rationalist or rational choice theories in social sciences. After all, the explanation provided emphasises the relevance of real political practices as independent, contextual factors. Would it not be reasonable to simplify the argument by omitting identity as a factor and instead construe group politicisation as an individually rational response to the exclusion from political influence?

To be fair, such an analysis would be feasible in many cases of group conflict. However, the problem of using such an analytical framework arises when one asks for which social groups constitute actors in a social system. A rational choice or realist theory is typically expressed as a system of individual agents whose decisions are guided by formal incentives deducted from either specified actor characteristics or structural constraints, or both (Monroe 1997:282).

In order for such an analytical framework to be applicable to the observed reality, it needs to specify which entities constitute actors in the system. One way to do this is to assume that only individual persons are relevant actors, and that individuals act according to the principles of rational choice. This approach amounts to reductionism by not accounting for the social aspect of collective action (Cramer 2002:1854). One is therefore forced to explain all social phenomena in terms of aggregated individual behaviour. A different approach is to specify particular social entities as political actors by assumption, such as states, organisations or ethnic groups. One can thereby transfer the logic of rational choice to the level of the actors one considers as relevant. The problematic aspect of this approach is precisely that these actors must be determined by assumption, unless one provides a theory for how social organisations constitute actors, which logically implies abandoning the principles of methodological individualism. In the case of Côte d'Ivoire, a conception of the northerners as a social and political actor would have to be



based on either assumption of theory.

This evokes the puzzling challenge encountered in chapter two, which looked at the literature on nationalism and ethno-nationalism. One conclusion informed by the reviewed literature was the notion that both ethnic and nations are most usefully conceived of as contingent on social context and historical process.

As much as the scholars writing on these subjects should be commended for their insightful contributions to the field, there is a curious and recurrent paradox in the way their chosen objects of study are treated simultaneously as contextual constructions and as exogenously given objects with fixed, inherent attributes. Although the latter point may not be explicitly stated, it is clearly inherent in their assertions of the near-universal permeativeness of either ethnic or national bonds of affection. The consequence is a reification of social and political actors which does not allow an understanding of social group formation as a continuous process.

Langer (2005) provides such an explanation of the conflict of Côte d'Ivoire based on the presence of simultaneous horizontal inequalities at the élite and mass levels. The primary underlying assumptions are that each social group is represented by an élite in the political system and that grievances in the form of socio-economic and political inequalities are a main catalyst for conflict. The line of causality is that when there are both political inequalities between élite factions and socio-economic inequalities between groups at the same time, it is easier for élites to mobilise support from their respective support bases at the mass level.

A similar understanding is reflected in the work of Cederman and Girardin (2007) who employ a quantitative analysis to investigate the connection between ethnically exclusive control over state power and ethno-nationalist conflict.<sup>2</sup> Their work is intended to refute the widespread use of the ethno-linguistic fractionalisation index and other measures of ethnic division or unity within a state as a proxy for the probability of ethnic conflict. Numerous quantitative studies using regression analyses have shown that eth-

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<sup>2</sup>For a critique of Cederman and Girardin's analysis, see Fearon et al. (2007).

nic fractionalisation within a state is not statistically correlated with the incidence of civil war.<sup>3</sup>

The assumption that a simple co-existence of different ethnic groups is a cause of conflict rests on a very crude form of primordialism sometimes referred to as the *ancient hatreds* hypothesis (Collett 2006:614). The use of ethno-linguistic fractionalisation as an independent variable in statistical analyses therefore may only serve to validate an *ancient hatreds* understanding of ethno-nationalist conflict. This means that, although the aforementioned quantitative studies are meant to reject the relevance of ethnic identity in conflict, they simultaneously rely on exactly those primordial assumptions which they seek to repudiate.

In response to this, Cederman and Girardin instead propose a statistical measure of ethnic exclusion, assuming that ethnic groups either have a share in state power or are excluded from it. The main hypothesis, which is also supported by the statistical results, is that the probability of conflict is a function of the extent to which demographically important ethnic groups are excluded from state power. The bigger the excluded groups, the more likely will challenge the groups in power.

While the gist of the arguments of both Langer and Cederman and Girardin may look similar to the one proposed in this thesis, there remains a crucial difference. Langer's framework explicitly makes the assumption that groups must be static in order for the causal logic to make sense. In his own words, "If group boundaries are highly fluid and change frequently, the measurement of horizontal inequalities not only becomes very difficult, but, more importantly, the measurement actually becomes conceptually useless" (Langer 2005:27). This also applies to the analysis of Cederman and Girardin. They explicitly deal only with ethnic groups, which inhibits the relevance of the analysis to a case such as Côte d'Ivoire, where conflict erupts between multi-ethnic regional groups. Furthermore, the quantification of ethnic groups in this way is preconditioned on a conception of groups as static. It is therefore impossible to take into account the formation of social

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<sup>3</sup>See for example Collier (2000); Collier et al. (2003); Collier and Hoeffler (2004); Fearon (2003); Fearon and Laitin (2003).

and political groups as a function of the contextual socio-political developments.

In line with Collett (2006) I argue that the essentialist assumptions underlying these frameworks in principle amount to a form of primordialism in the way groups are conceived as static, discrete and essential entities. Not only will any explanatory framework which assumes groups in this way preclude an analytical understanding of changes in group identities, there is also no space to account for the simultaneous existence of multiple identities at different levels of inclusiveness.

By contrast, the self-categorisation approach allows for an understanding of social groups not only as fluid and changing, but as existing at different levels of abstraction. It thereby enables us not to be restricted to a particular, essentialist conception of “ethnicity” but rather to see ethnic, national and regional identities as variations of the same phenomenon. The case of Côte d’Ivoire efficiently exposes the inadequacies of primordialist assumptions when applied to ethno-regional conflict. First of all, and most evidently, the main protagonists between whom conflict has taken place in Côte d’Ivoire are not *ethnie* by any common definition of the term. Moreover, a static and discrete group concept would have difficulties accounting for the curious stability under the rule of Houphouët-Boigny. After all, the northerners, were even then to a large degree excluded from power.

True, northerners and other minority groups were represented in the civil service, the armed forces and other public sectors. Still, this does not alter the fact that under PDCI rule, power was undeniably in the hands of the Baoulé, albeit not exclusively so. In contrast to perceiving groups as static and discrete, self-categorisation theory allows us to think of the condition under Houphouëtism as a field of competing visions for which are the politically relevant identity groups. Houphouët-Boigny managed to avoid national disintegration and politicisation of minorities by convincingly upholding an image of the inclusive Ivoirian nation through rhetoric and political practices of making symbolical concessions to disadvantaged groups (Woods 1994:473). This does not mean that the Ivoirian identity is less real or less substantial than the northern identity or the Baoulé identity. They are simply variations

of social identity which are moulded by the real socio-economic and political environment within which they are situated.

The latter point can be pertinently illustrated by reference to a more recent coalescence of ethnic identities into an emergent *southern* regional identity as a reaction precipitated by the politicisation of the northerners and the subsequent civil war. In Moya Collett's words, "the relevance of the old rivalry between Bété and Baoulé was lost and identification as pure southern Ivoirians became paramount" (Collett 2006:627).

## 5.5 SUMMARY

In this chapter I have attempted to connect the understanding provided by the social identity perspective of how social identities emerge and become politicised to the case of the northern identity in Côte d'Ivoire.

Firstly, the emergence of the northern identity has involved an amalgamation of several ethnic groups. This process can be explained using the concept of meta-contrast, which indicates that social categorisation is based on the perceived similarities and differences in the full range of perceptual stimuli available to the observer. The unequal development between the north and the south, and the large-scale migration of northern workers to southern plantations, implied that many people from the north found themselves in a similar position. They were furthermore often perceived as a homogenous group by the indigenous inhabitants in the south. These factors can explain the increasing fusion of a northern social identity.

Secondly, the politicisation of the northern identity can be explained by reference to the connection between political legitimacy and social identity. The inclusive, yet authoritarian, conception of the Ivoirian nation which prevailed under Houphouët-Boigny conferred legitimacy on the regime and the status quo. By contrast, the exclusive concept of Ivoirité marked an abrupt departure from the Houphouëtist vision. With citizenship rights based on autochtony, a large part of the population found themselves excluded from being represented by the Ivoirian state. This in turn altered the salience of the Ivoirian and the northern identities, so that as the former diminished,

the latter increased.

The next chapter concludes the study by presenting the main findings and insights obtained. I briefly discuss the weaknesses of the analysis and its value for further research on the topic of politicisation of identity.



## CONCLUSIONS

### 6.1 A BRIEF RECAPITULATION

The main purpose of this thesis has been to investigate the role of social identity in the mobilisation for collective political action in a setting of conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa. The point of departure has been the academic debate over how to understand the prevalence of ethnic conflict and the corresponding lack of national identity in African countries. Although the later years have seen a growing consensus that ethnic and national identities should be understood as historically contingent social constructions, there is still a noticeable tendency to reify, if not ignore, the importance and role of identity issues in conflict (Chandra 2001; Green 2004).

I have therefore set out to address this impasse by proposing a specific theoretical explanation for how social identity groups become politicised and mobilise for collective action. My intention has been to disconnect social identity from reified notions of ethnicity and nation, by using a conceptual framework which abstracts away from the particularities of given historical context. The objective has been to explain rather than to assume the attachment of individuals to social groups, and the importance of such groups for political mobilisation. This is not to say that contextual factors are insignificant. While they are made exogenous to the theoretical model itself, one should be careful to take them into account when applying the model to a case study.

The main findings of this study of Côte d'Ivoire are, that identities other than ethnicity become politicised in Africa. These should receive more attention given that they appear to revoke some of the conventional wisdom on the connection between ethnicity and conflict. I have shown that these identities may emerge from any contextually relevant characteristics, and that

their politicisation is a normal, adaptive process in which people act collectively to protect their interests.

The argument offered shows that the politicisation of identity can be understood as a universal, rational and adaptive process which is shaped by the logic of cognitive psychology on the other. The meaning I attribute to the word rational in this respect differs from the individual rationality commonly referred to in economic theory or rational choice theory (Monroe 1997). By rational and adaptive I refer to the acknowledgement that identity politicisation is a process that responds to tangible real-world events and must be understood in relation with realistic factors such as political power and security. Politicisation of identity does not take place in a political vacuum. However, the meaning of such factors is mediated by the cognitive mechanism of categorisation, which has repercussions for how we should understand political processes. To quote Mahmood Mamdani, "it is the link between identity and power that allows us to understand how cultural identities are translated into political identities" (Mamdani 2002b:7).

## 6.2 CONNECTING THE DOTS

According to self-categorisation theory, social identities are constituted by socially shared self-categories. We construct self-categories based on perceived similarities between people, to structure and understand the social system, and to account for our own position within it. Since self-categories are abstractions, they are ordered hierarchically, from the least inclusive level, the individual, up to the level of human kind and beyond. Each individual therefore has multiple potential self-categories which co-exist at different levels of abstractions.

Correspondingly, any society will contain an almost innumerable amount of potential social identities as new self-categories are continuously constructed, shared and internalised by various groups of people. Self-categories and social identities are therefore not perpetual, but they may be activated at different times according to the specific circumstances we find ourselves in. The salience of a particular self-category, that is the likeliness that it will be



activated at a given time, increases with the extent to which that category adequately represents the perceptual stimuli we are exposed to. In other words, a category becomes salient to the extent that it is able to make sense of a given situation. Salience is therefore, essentially, a function of contextual factors.

The principle which connects self-categorisation to collective identity and thus makes it relevant for political analysis is that of depersonalisation. This principle denotes the inclination to perceive people in terms of their social group memberships and thereby de-emphasise their individual differences. It further implies that people tend to define their interests in group terms rather than in individual terms. As a consequence, depersonalisation facilitates such phenomena as social trust, cooperation and collective action (Turner et al. 1987:65).

Although self-categorisation theory does not speak explicitly about political processes, the principle of depersonalisation can be extended to account for the propensity of social groups to organise politically. Given that depersonalisation induces a perception of common interest within a social group, it will also have the effect of bestowing legitimacy on those who make decisions in a hierarchical structure of authority. Since these effects depend on the presence of a social identity, they are also correlated with the salience of the category in question. This means that as one group identity gains in salience, organisation within that group will become more likely. Conversely, in group identities that decrease in salience, political leaders are prone to lose legitimacy (Hollander 1964:231).

The only thing needed to account for the politicisation of identity is a motivational factor for acting collectively. Such motivation can be conceived of in rational terms as challenges or problems which cannot be solved through individual action, but only by acting collectively. As Gellner has noted, "Mankind has always been organized in groups, of all kinds of shapes and sizes" (Gellner 1983:53). By making the assumption that the need for political organisation is intrinsic to complex societies, we are able to explain the politicisation of one particular identity group in terms of a shift in the level at which identity is politicised. This means that the politicisation of identity

does not take place in a vacuum but is closely related to the presence and relevance of other political identities. This is in line with the view of self-categorisation that there is a functional antagonism between the salience of self-categorisations at different levels of abstraction. When one level gains in salience among a group of people, another must necessarily decline.

The notion that social identities are a way of defining one's self in collective terms, and the implication this has for collective action and political organisation, is also reflected in much of the literature on nationalism and ethnicity. Connor (1994:98) uses the term "extension of self" to describe the pervasive forms of nationalism found in Germany and Japan prior to the second world war. The analogy of the family is used by both Horowitz and Connor; "emotional rather than rational conviction [...] which can give to nations a psychological dimension approximating that of an extended family" (Connor 1994:94). Similarly, Horowitz gives a pinpoint expression of the connection between the idea of social group as an extension of self and the compelling emotional strength of identity-based communal ties: "Kinship ties, in short, facilitate ethnic political organisation [because] within group boundaries, there is something of ourselves in each other" (Horowitz 1985:64).

The conception of depersonalisation as the prototypical representation of group members and its significance for collective political action is further emphasised by Gellner's concept of social entropy and Anderson's concept of horizontal, imagined communities. Reflecting Anderson's perspective, Smith (1986:170) depicts the nation as "a homogenous body of individuals, who are generalized equals or 'citizens', and whose connections are impersonal but fraternal. That is to say, individuals in a nation are essentially substitutable."

The events leading up to the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire serve as an illustration of this process. In Côte d'Ivoire there were many social identity groups at different levels of inclusiveness. At the highest level there was the conception of the inclusive Ivoirian nation under Houphouët-Boigny. Below this there were regional sub-national groups, and below these there were ethnic groups. Interestingly, and seemingly challenging the conventional view on

the primacy of ethnic ties in African countries, it was a regional group which became politicised and mobilised for a resistance to the government.

Instead of simply being seen as an anomaly, this process should be explained using a theoretical framework which gives a systematic account of the relevant factors. In essence, the analysis of the politicisation of the northern regional identity in Côte d'Ivoire can be summed up as a shift from one level of constructing one's political identity to another. Self-categorisation theory asserts that there is a functional antagonism between the salience of categories at different levels of abstraction. Correspondingly, the emergence of the northern identity as a basis for the organisation of political opposition was intrinsically connected to the decrease of the inclusive conception of the Ivoirian nation. During Houphouët-Boigny's rule, the northern identity existed as a self-category, but it did not become politically prominent because of the president's efforts to demonstrate the inclusive nature of the Ivoirian nation. However, the actions and rhetoric of Ivoirité indicated that the political leaders were no longer willing to protect the interests of the northern Ivoirians. This implied a decrease in perceptual fit between the Ivoirian nation and the perceived realities of northerners being excluded from citizenship rights and political influence. Instead, these realities were much better accounted for by the construction of the northern Ivoirians as a subjugated group. Therefore, the erosion of government legitimacy among the northern inhabitants was accompanied by a *decrease* in salience of the Ivoirian nation as a social identity, and an *increase* in salience of the northern social identity. This shift in salience from one level to another, combined with the general need for people to organise themselves politically to protect their interests, meant that a rebellion by northern military leaders could gain legitimacy by capitalising on the collective predicament faced by northern Ivoirians.

In short, the main insight of this thesis is that people have multiple identities, the activation of which is a function of contextual events. When a particular identity becomes salient, other identities are typically suppressed. The activation of an identity also implies the tendency for people to organise for collective action based on group membership. The higher the salience, the stronger the tendency to perceive group members in prototypical terms.

Importantly, this conception of identity is not restricted to ethnicity, but it is also able to encompass an understanding of ethnicity. The ubiquity of ethnic conflict in Africa can accordingly be conceived as a persisting salience of ethnic identity, which is caused by social and political processes on the continent. A good illustration is offered by Mamdani (1996), who explains how the colonial and the post-colonial administrative structures tended to reify and consolidate ethnic identities which earlier possessed a more fluid and adaptable properties.

### 6.3 SIGNIFICANCE AND WEAKNESSES

As I have emphasised earlier, the view that this study is to be considered an interpretation, by which I mean that it is a proposal for a particular theoretical perspective and an argument for how this can yield useful insight when applied to an empirical case. It is a matter of illustrating rather than rigorous testing of the proposed theory. A constructive approach to spur imaginative thinking, rather than a postulate set in stone.

This reasoning flows partly from my meta-theoretical position on the value of research in the social sciences and the non-deterministic nature of social phenomena. It is partly also given by a limitation in scope which is reasonable given the constraints on time and resources imposed on a master thesis. This implies that the main weakness of the study lies in its depth of analysis. A more comprehensive study would allow for more depth in terms of empirical detail, rigorous testing of hypotheses, independent collection of primary data, or a wider scope of comparison between cases. This weakness is exacerbated by a relatively small amount of academic studies on the case of Côte d'Ivoire.

In practice, this lack of depth is most obviously manifested in a reliance on academic literature for the analysis. This is a practically convenient approach when resources are limited, but it also puts constraints on the study. The advantage is that one can rely on knowledge which has been subject to the assessment of established and recognised scholars. The disadvantage is that it is difficult to truly disassemble and transcend their perspectives.

There will always have to be a trade-off between empirical detail and analytical abstraction in any study. The argument presented in this thesis is rather abstract, but I have considered it beneficial to apply the theory to a case as an illustration of its applicability.

For these reasons, I will abstain from making claims that are too bold with regards to the conclusions that can be attained. The research question of this study asked for how social identities become politicised. The analysis gives an answer to this question, and I argue that the answer is adequate and justifiable. However, it is far from the only answer, nor should it be considered a final answer. Therefore, I intend this argument to be a starting point for further inquiries on the complex connections between social identity and collective, political action, rather than a self-contained analysis.

With regards to the applicability of the theory, I have explicitly intended to give an argument which is universal and abstract rather than context-dependent. This is further emphasised by the opening for using exogenous, contextual factors when applying the theory to empirical material. The extension of the analytical framework proposed here to other cases is therefore essential to the value of this study. One of the intentions has been that this approach should inform our understanding of both ethnic and national identities, as well as other forms of social identity.

Nonetheless, the most accessible scope for comparison would be that of other ethno-nationalist conflicts in Africa. This was the point of departure for the investigation which I have carried out, and it is the immediate frame of reference for the case I have used. In a similar vein to this study, Mamdani (2002a,b, 2004) has made several elaborate analyses of the developments of ethno-political identities in the Great Lakes region and their connection with the numerous armed conflicts in the area. Interestingly, although he does not take into account the social identity perspective, many of the conclusions and perspectives are analogous to the ones in this study. Mamdani also focuses on how the historical development of collective identities has been shaped by political processes. In particular he emphasises the question of citizenship rights and political representation of groups within so-called nation states as a strong determinant in the shaping of political identities.

A particular interest of mine which has informed the choice of case in this study has been the politicisation of group identities which do not have an obvious defining character, such as ethnicity or religion. One such case that should provide an interesting comparison with the case of Côte d'Ivoire is the Anglophone-Francophone conflict in Cameroon. Although it has not evolved into violence, it is nonetheless a matter of conflict involving regional political identity.

To sum up, this thesis is built on the notion that understanding is a process of continuously constructing and reconstructing abstract categories and applying them to the observations we make. As abstraction necessarily entails a certain amount of simplification and distortion, abstract explanation will always be imperfect. This perspective is reflected both in the meta-theoretical underpinnings and the theoretical framework of the thesis. Accordingly, I consider the true value of the research process which has brought about this thesis to be in the synthesis of insights from various sources, and the transcendence of conventional understandings. Only by keeping a non-dogmatic, creative and critical posture is it possible to find new perspectives to old problems.

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