

NATIONHOOD AND STATEHOOD: THE IMPACT OF A CONFLATED DISCOURSE ON AFRICAN POLITIES AND THEIR NON-DOMINANT ETHNIC GROUPS

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Abstract

It is now conventional to refer to post-colonial African polities as 'nations' or 'nation-states'. However, in this article I argue that the conflation of nationhood and statehood has led to the violation of the rights of non-dominant ethnic groups to meaningful political participation, equitable economic opportunities, ethnic identity, and secession. Thus this conflation leads to an on-going lack of legitimacy in post-colonial African states, thereby exposing them to perpetual neo-colonial domination.

Key words: *nation, state, nation-state, ethnicity, neocolonialism*

Introduction¹⁶

The terms 'nation' and 'nation-state' are frequently used interchangeably in reference to post-colonial African polities. Yet the concept of nation-state sprang up in modern Western Europe, while contemporary African polities have emerged as the result of an arbitrary partitioning of the continent by a few Western European imperial powers towards the close of the nineteenth century. Consequently, most African states are multi-ethnic entities in which a few dominant ethnic groups keep their non-dominant counterparts under persistent oppression and marginalisation, all the while insisting upon an official ethnically blind public policy in the name of 'national unity'. This duplicity has often resulted in inter-ethnic tensions that have sometimes culminated in violent intra-state conflicts. Most regrettably, substantial research in the humanities and social sciences has been carried out on the false assumption that the terms 'nations' and 'nation-states' adequately describe contemporary African polities. By conceding to the misleading

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popular usage of these terms, such scholarship has abdicated its responsibility to serve as society's conceptual clearing house.

Consequently, utilising the critical and analytical tools of philosophic reflection, I seek to answer the following three questions:

- i. What is the genesis of the conflation of nationhood and statehood in post-colonial African states?
- ii. To what extent has the conflation of nationhood and statehood negatively affected inter-ethnic cohesion in post-colonial African states?
- iii. To what extent is the concept of 'nation-state' a tool of Western imperialism in contemporary Africa?

This work falls within the scope of political philosophy. According to Miller (2003: 14-15), the essential task of political philosophers is to take what is assumed to be known about human societies and ways of governance, and then to ask what the best forms of government would be in light of the aims and values that they believe their audiences share. Furthermore, in view of the fact that politics has to do with the interaction among humans in an established social setting, there is a close connection between political philosophy and moral philosophy (Kymlicka 2002: 6).

In what follows, I begin with an historical outline of the conflation of nationhood and statehood. I then investigate the negative impacts this conflation has had on post-colonial African polities. I argue that these negative impacts include the violation of the rights of non-dominant ethnic groups to meaningful political participation, equitable economic opportunities, ethnic identity, and secession, leading to an on-going lack of legitimacy in post-colonial African states, thereby exposing them to perpetual neo-colonial domination.

An historical outline of the conflation of nationhood and statehood

Miscevic (2014: para. 2) notes:

It is traditional . . . to distinguish nations from states – whereas a nation often consists of an ethnic or cultural community, a state is a political entity with a high degree of sovereignty. While many states are nations in some sense, there are many nations which are not fully sovereign states.

The outstanding features of a nation-state are that (i) as nations, they are culturally homogeneous, and (ii) as states, they are sovereign. John Stuart Mill (1890) was thinking of such a polity when he asserted that an army formed

out of a multi-national state has no real loyalty to the state, but only to its leaders, and therefore finds it easy to oppress the citizenry. Thus he concluded that it is most preferable that each state be constituted by a single nationality (Mill 1890: 286-288). While Mill uses the term 'nationality', it is evident that for him this term denotes what we have come to refer to as 'ethnic group'. In fact, reflection on his position leads to the conclusion that he was advocating for the nation-state as the most practicable polity.

There is an apparently clear link between ethnic identity and nationhood. Ghai (2000: 7) asserts that broadly speaking, ethnic groups can be defined by their political aims:

They are content to be called minorities if their aspirations do not extend beyond special linguistic or educational or religious facilities. They proclaim their ethnicity if the goal is some form of autonomy. Further along the line, they may designate themselves 'nation' or 'nationality' if they aim to set up a separate state of their own.

This implies that the notion of nationhood is a conscious creation of a cultural group or a part of that group.

Western scholarship generally regards the cluster of Peace Treaties of Westphalia, signed among various European powers in 1648, as having laid the foundation for the idea of 'national self-determination' and the notion of sovereign states existing side by side (Held 1996: 73-74). Besides this, combining the notion of 'state' with that of 'nation' was a feature of certain movements in modern Western Europe that aspired for culturally homogenous polities, such as those led by Otto von Bismarck and Giuseppe Mazzini for the unification of Germany and Italy respectively.

Nevertheless, while modern Western European states were formed on the narrative of cultural homogeneity and thus referred to as 'nation-states', they were characterised by considerable cultural heterogeneity by virtue of the imprecise nature of inter-state borders. Thus there are Danes in Germany, Germans in France and Italy, and Finns in Sweden. Furthermore, modern European states have ethnic groups that became minorities by virtue of the formation of those polities. These include the Catalans, Basques and Galicians in Spain, the Welsh and Scots in Britain, and the Corsicans in France (Krejci and Velimsky 1981, Bruce 1981).

In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson (2006) argues that nationality or 'nation-ness' and nationalism are cultural artefacts of a particular kind created in Europe towards the end of the eighteenth century as a spontaneous distillation

of a complex ‘crossing’ of discrete historical forces. Once created, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, they became capable of being transplanted to a great variety of social terrains to merge and to be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations (Anderson 2006: 4).

Anderson proposes the following definition of the nation: “it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 2006: 5-6). According to Anderson, the nation is imaginary “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 2006: 6). He goes on to observe that a remarkable degree of confidence is invested in the community in the midst of anonymity, and that this is the hallmark of modern nations (Anderson 2006: 36). Yet this pervasive nation-wide confidence is precisely what is lacking in many multi-ethnic post-colonial African states. In these latter socio-political and historical African contexts, the phenomenon of familiarity that Anderson describes applies to ethnic loyalties rather than to community-feeling pervading whole polities.

Anderson further notes that the First World War brought to an end the age of high dynasticism in Europe. Thus in place of the Congress of Berlin, the League of Nations was created, welcoming non-Europeans as member states. From that time on, the legitimate international norm was the nation-state, so that within the League even the surviving imperial powers came dressed in national costume rather than imperial uniform.

After World War II the nation-state tide reached full flood (Anderson 2006: 113). What is more, Anderson observes that three institutions of power – i.e. the census (with which to ascertain the number of colonial subjects), the map (with which to delineate the borders of the colonial territory), and the museum (with which to re-write history to suit the colonial state) – were central to the nationalist narrative in former colonial territories:

[They] profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion - the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry (Anderson, 2006:163-164).

The three factors highlighted by Anderson (the census, the map, and the museum) made it possible for new identities linked to the colonial territories to emerge (Anderson 2006: 185).

Moreover, Anderson explains that in the West, what made the new communities imaginable was the interaction between a system of production

and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity (Anderson 2006: 42-43). In other words, the convergence of capitalism and print technology upon the lethal diversity of human languages created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the Western-type modern nation (Anderson 2006: 46).

The Euro-Mediterranean monarchies, on their part, realised that in order to avoid being swept away by the wave of popular nationalism, it would be prudent for them to appear to identify with the emergence of the new nation rather than to fight against it (Anderson 2006: 85). From about the middle of the nineteenth century, this led to what Seton-Watson refers to as “official nationalisms” (Seton-Watson 1977: 148; cited in Anderson 2006: 86). According to Anderson, the policy levers of official nationalism in Europe are compulsory state-controlled primary education, state-organised propaganda, official rewriting of history, militarism, and endless affirmations of the identity of dynasty and nation (Anderson 2006: 101). Except for the idea of linking dynasty and ‘nation’, which is impractical in multi-ethnic African polities, all these levers have been manifest in official African nationalism. Leonhard Praeg has highlighted the artificial nature of official nationalism, with its love for the phrase ‘We the people’, thus:

... at the precise moment of founding, when the collective first speaks on behalf of a We, the We does not yet exist. On the contrary, it is only through the iteration of this claim over time – through the continued singing of the national anthem and the celebration of national events and so on – that the We will eventually come into being, so that the collective can start acting, not as if they were a We, but simply as a collective We (Praeg 2014: 149).

To demonstrate the way in which nationalism gave rise to the re-writing of history in the territories formerly colonised by Western powers, Anderson notes:

The late President Sukarno always spoke with complete sincerity of the 350 years of colonialism that his 'Indonesia' had endured, although the very concept 'Indonesia' is a twentieth-century invention, and most of today's Indonesia was only conquered by the Dutch between 1850 and 1910 (Anderson, 2006: 11 n.4).

What Anderson observes here rings true of post-colonial African states, where identities such as ‘Zambian’, ‘Ghanaian’, ‘Nigerian’, and

‘Kenyan’ emerged. For example, while the territory now called Kenya was only designated as such in 1920, the Kenya National Museum has propagated a narrative of a Kenyan identity going back several millennia, while advocates of the country’s political independence appropriated the struggles of pre-1920 personalities such as Mekatilili wa Menza¹⁷ and Koitalel arap Samoei¹⁸ as fighters for Kenya’s nationhood. Indeed, the phenomenon of a multitude of people having a sense of community across the territory of a single state is largely a European experience rather than a post-colonial African one, where ethnic loyalties dominate, while the state is viewed as alien.¹⁹

However, Anderson’s account of official nationalism in former colonies in Africa and Asia would have been further enriched by addressing the fact that the post-colonial states inherited the instruments of colonial power, among which are the armed forces, the intelligence, the administration of written laws, taxation, and a monopoly in the allocation of public resources, and continues to use them to oppress and exploit its subjects in the name of promoting the good of the ‘nation’.

The conflation of ‘nationhood’ and ‘statehood’ in post-colonial African polities has been due mainly to the genesis of the Western European nation-state, leading to the assumption that all matters concerning the nation-state could be regarded as both ‘national affairs’ and ‘affairs of state’. As Mazrui (2004: 472) correctly observes:

Outside Africa, nationalism emerged in the course of the development and maturation of the European nation-state. For many European and later African nationalists, no distinction was made between loyalty to the state as a system of authority (vertical allegiance) and loyalty to the nation as a fellowship of community (horizontal allegiance). To most nationalists, one’s own state or nation was entitled to supreme loyalty.

Mazrui further explains that in the history of Europe, nationalism emerged with the decline of two earlier paramount allegiances, namely, the erosion of more localised feudal fiefdoms and the decline of the transnational influence of the Roman Catholic Church. By the eighteenth century, nationalism had become one of the ideological forces of Europe. In Africa,

¹⁷ Mekatilili Wa Menza (Mnyazi wa Menza) was a woman who led the Giriama of the now Kenyan coast region in an uprising against the British colonialists between 1913 and 1914.

¹⁸ Koitalel Arap Samoei (1860-1905) was an *Orkoiyot* (“supreme leader”) of the Nandi of the Rift Valley in present day Kenya. He led his people in resisting British colonial rule.

¹⁹ This is memorably described in Basil Davidson’s *The Black Man’s Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (1992).

de-feudalisation sometimes took the form of detribalisation – to be followed by wider allegiances (Mazrui 2004: 472).

So conflated are nationhood and statehood in Eurocentric political discourse, that analyses and proposals treat expressions denoting nations' properties as synonymous or coextensive with expressions denoting states' characteristics. For example, in his article correctly titled "Organic Theory of the State," Manwaring (1938) discussed convincingly how to reconfigure the United States to make it more future-oriented and focused on statecraft; but in so doing he described matters touching on the American state as 'national affairs' rather than as 'affairs of state'. Consequently, even today while it is conventional to talk about matters touching on society as 'social', those touching on politics as 'political', and those touching on history as 'historical', when it comes to referring to matters concerning the state, the attribution is typically 'national'.

In the African context, the posit that those who agitated for political independence were 'nationalists' was popularised by colonialists in their effort to transpose the conceptual framework of nationalism in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe to address the demands for political independence that were challenging them in Africa. Thus, faced with these demands, colonialists referred to agitators as 'nationalists', and the contested territories as 'nations' (Eleazu 1977: 23). In turn, partly in reaction to the divide-and-rule policies of the colonisers, African liberation movements stressed the unity of peoples struggling against imperialism, going beyond the limited horizons of divisive distinctions such as ethnicity and religion. Consequently, as Amin and Ousselin (1997) argue, the multi-ethnic 'new nation' in sub-Saharan Africa is largely mythical in nature, giving the false impression that the Senegalese, Nigerian or Congolese nationalities, for instance, have eliminated the Wolof, Jula, Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, or Baluba ethnic group identities. Yet in view of their ethnically pluralistic nature, most of these new polities were initially and remain multi-ethnic or multi-national states rather than nation-states.

Indeed, if the leaders of African movements against decolonisation were 'nationalists', this would imply that the arbitrary partition of Africa in Berlin in 1886 and 1890, and the brutal treatment of subjugated African peoples through divide-and-rule policies over seven decades and more, has culminated in the wonderful metamorphosis of the disparate, sometimes conflictual, ethnic groups. It would suggest that each of the colonies has been transformed into a cohesive socio-political entity with a uniform culture, a shared history, and shared aspirations. In my view, these implications border on the absurd. Yet African and Africanist socio-political theorists have

embraced this same nomenclature, tacitly merging the connotations of nation and state, as did the Algerian freedom fighter Franz Fanon when he chose the title “The pitfalls of national consciousness” for the third chapter of his celebrated *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967). One of Fanon’s professed disciples is the renowned Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o, who has celebrated the idea of African nationalism, tracing it from the Diaspora to South Africa’s African National Congress, and then to the rest of the African colonies (wa Thiong’o 2011).

Furthermore, almost two hundred years before the rise of the African de-colonisation movements, the United States of America had already informally patented the term ‘state’. Clearly this encouraged people to refer to the nascent post-colonial African states as ‘nations’. No wonder ‘the United Nations’ – that global political body established by the major Western powers after the Second World War and to which the new African states clamoured to belong – is not called ‘the United States’. Correlatively, its predecessor was called ‘the League of Nations’ rather than ‘the League of States’.

Notably, despite having joined the United Nations, African states continue to talk about their domestic need for ‘national integration’, implying that they have not yet achieved fully fledged ‘nationhood’ (Eleazu 1977: 23-24). Similarly, it is now virtually orthodox to talk of ‘national interest’ rather than ‘state interest’, although it is obvious that the former term occurs in the discursive context of *realpolitik* – i.e. the pragmatic, even amoral, efforts of states to sustain and enhance their influence in the community of autonomous polities.

Many scholars, journalists and politicians use the terms ‘nation’ and ‘state’ interchangeably in reference to modern Western-type autonomous polities. Consequently, we often hear talk of the various African colonies having become ‘nations’ as a synonym for ‘having attained political independence’. It is in this light that D.P. Currie’s edited volume was titled *Federalism and the New Nations of Africa* (1964). It is also in this light that the first presidents of such polities are referred to as the ‘founders’ or ‘founding fathers’ of those ‘nations’. Indeed, it is due to this understanding that such polities came up with their own national anthems, national flags, national coats of arms, national assemblies (parliaments), national holidays, national currencies, national education systems, national dress, and national languages, among others. In Kenya, for example, the way to determine whether or not an institution is part of government is to find out whether or not it has the term ‘National’ in its name, because the state has reserved the term ‘national’ for its institutions. Thus the Kenya Human Rights Commission is a non-governmental organisation (NGO), while the Kenya

National Commission on Human Rights is a constitutional commission. Similarly, the Constitution of Kenya (Republic of Kenya 2010b) makes a distinction between the ‘national government’ and ‘county governments’, whereas it could have more meaningfully designated the former as ‘central government’.

With the advent of political independence in many African states, popular nationalism receded while official nationalism gained momentum, resulting in the perpetual subjugation of non-dominant ethnic groups. In light of this, in what follows I will examine the various deleterious effects of conflating nationhood and statehood, and in particular, its recent and current impacts on non-dominant African ethnic groups.

Violation of the right to meaningful political participation

Over the centuries, majority ethnic groups have sought to obliterate the ethnic identities of their minority counterparts through conquest, assimilation and even elimination (genocide). However, with the spread of democratic thought and the attendant demands for respect for human rights, ethnic minorities in many parts of the world have asserted their right to a communal identity in the political arena. It is this struggle that Charles Taylor (1994) referred to as ‘the politics of recognition’.

In sub-Saharan Africa, large-scale inter-ethnic conflicts within polities can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when the area was arbitrarily partitioned among European imperial powers. One of the consequences of this rapacious act of truncation was the separation of members of specific ethnic groups into two, three, four, or even five different imperial territories, so that a single ethnic group was a majority in one territory and a minority in two, three or four others. At the dawn of political independence, minority ethnic groups easily lost crucial elections in a number of these countries, and consequently saw themselves as trapped in unfavourable political circumstances, and often found it impossible to seek redress except through violent resistance. Such ethnic minorities continue to suffer social and economic injustices, as ethnic majorities successfully use their numerical strength to pass legislation which promotes their own material advantage to the detriment of their minority counterparts.

The plight of ethnic minorities was aggravated, in line with the Western liberal democratic tradition, by the fact that most first generation constitutions in post-colonial African states ignored ethnic and religious diversity, focusing instead on individual rights, and proceeding from the false assumption that the newly formed states would achieve “nationhood” through this ethnically-blind framework (Ihonvbere 2000). Ethnic majorities could

therefore easily silence the complaints of their minority counterparts by insisting that the law only recognises individuals, not ethnic groups, so that public goods needed not be distributed with considerations of equity among ethnic groups in mind.

Nevertheless, despite what were officially ‘ethnicity-blind’ constitutional orders, the politicisation of ethnicity in many African countries quickly became one of the most intractable problems in post-colonial African states (Mute 1998). It is therefore extremely difficult for the very small ethnic groups to win elections. The Kenyan situation graphically illustrates this fact. The official but highly contested number of Kenyan ethnic groups is forty-two (Republic of Kenya 2010a). Despite the fact that no single Kenyan ethnic group is large enough to enjoy long term dominance of the country’s politics on its own, minority-majority ethnic conflicts persist throughout the country. This is due to the fact that the larger ethnic groups form alliances that give them the advantage of majority status, as was the case in the coalition between the Kikuyu and the Luo in the Kenya African National Union (KANU) on the eve of independence in 1963, and again during the transition elections of 2002 in the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), as well as in the coalition between the Kikuyu and the Kalenjin in the run-up to the 2013 elections. On the other hand, the very small ethnic groups do not have the leverage to negotiate to be part of the ethnic coalition enjoying majority status. The Ilchamus of Baringo Central in Kenya’s Rift Valley, who have been consistently marginalised by the majority Turgen in their constituency, are a case in point (High Court of Kenya 2006).

As a result of the marginalisation of ethnic groups on the basis of their numerical or economic disadvantages, a number of African countries – among them Sudan, Nigeria, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo – have witnessed ethnically inspired civil wars. Others, among them Kenya, have so far barely escaped large-scale inter-ethnic bloodbaths. Furthermore, the return of multiparty forms of government in many of these countries has seen the formation of political parties which coalesce mainly along ethnic lines (Widner 1997:65-66), so that the minority ethnic groups continue to be discontented with their lot in the unfolding scenarios of electoral politics.

Violation of the right to equitable economic opportunities

The situation just described is aggravated by the fact that in the post-colonial state, political power gives its holders disproportionate access to resources such as land, public jobs, and business opportunities, so that the lack of political power often results in the lack of these other social goods. The tragic case of the systematic dispossession of the Ogiek (‘Dorobo’), a hunter-gatherer Kenyan ethnic minority in the Rift Valley, highlights the

crucial role of politics in the economic status of an ethnic group (Kamau 2000). Consequently, the quest for political power is often perceived as a desperate struggle for survival. The nexus between political power and economic opportunity was once memorably articulated by Kenya's former President Daniel arap Moi, when he urged ethnic groups in the opposition to shift to the ruling party side, or else they would not get government-funded development projects in their regions, but would instead always be told that they would get such projects 'when funds become available'.

Furthermore, during the era of single party rule, African states combined the free trade policies of Western countries with the centralist political framework of the former communist countries to produce an oppressive monstrosity that perpetuated the subjugation of those ethnic groups that did not have a grasp of state power: this is what Hellsten (2009) refers to as Afro-libertarianism. By the time multiparty politics was re-introduced in the early 1990s, many ethnic groups were so economically and politically disadvantaged that it was relatively easy for the financially well-endowed single-party rulers to retain power in the guise of winning 'free and fair' multiparty elections.

A report of Kenya's National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC), released in early April 2011, graphically depicts the way in which access to political power may influence an ethnic group's economic prospects. The report was based on an analysis of the Integrated Personnel and Payroll Data System for March 2010 against the population census report of 2009, as well as other official documents. According to the report, over fifty per cent of Kenya's ethnic groups were only marginally represented in the Civil Service – the country's largest employer. Furthermore, only twenty out of over forty listed Kenyan ethnic groups were statistically visible in the Civil Service. Some twenty-three ethnic groups had less than one per cent presence in the Civil Service. In addition, the five most numerous ethnic groups (Kikuyu, Kalenjin, Luhya, Kamba and Luo) occupied nearly seventy per cent of all government jobs. The Kikuyu led the pack with 22.3 per cent of all civil service jobs, followed by the Kalenjin (16.7 per cent), Luhya (11.3 per cent), Kamba (9.7 per cent) and Luo (9.0 per cent). Two communities alone, the Kikuyu and the Kalenjin, who had exclusively held the country's presidency since independence in 1963, had a combined presence of almost forty per cent of civil service jobs (see Barasa 2011).

Violation of the right to ethnic identity

The political and economic marginalisation of non-dominant ethnic groups is aggravated by the fact that leaders of post-colonial African states often disregard the right of ethnic minorities to group identity in the name of

“national unity”. In this regard, Zambia’s Kenneth Kaunda was associated with the motto ‘One people, one nation’. Similarly, Kenya’s Daniel arap Moi frequently advised his audience to inform anyone who inquired about their ethnicity that they were Kenyans. Uganda’s Yoweri Museveni has written that ethnic identity is one of the key inhibitors to socio-economic transformation (Museveni 1997). Tanzanian courts have systematically declined to recognise indigenous groups as minorities vulnerable to discrimination in socio-economic improvement schemes (Peter 2007). All this is despite the fact that cultural group identity is an essential component of the sense of self-respect. By *identity* we refer to both a person’s own conception as well as other people’s understanding of his or her defining characteristics as a human being. A crucial aspect of an individual’s identity formation is communication, both overt and implicit, from other people about how he or she is perceived. Consequently, as Taylor (1994: 25) noted, people as individuals or in groups can suffer real damage if those surrounding them mirror back to them a demeaning picture of themselves, imprisoning them in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being.

The urgent need to acknowledge the inextricable link between politics and cultural group identity cannot be gainsaid. Walzer (1983: 314) observed that one of the criteria by which human beings can be said to be equal is the fact of their being creators of culture. This implies the imperative for mutual respect among people from diverse cultures. Similarly, Kymlicka (1995: 126) noted that our capacity to form, revise and act upon a conception of the good is intimately tied to our membership in a societal culture, since the scope of individual choice and agency is determined by the range of options passed down to us through our culture. Furthermore, what is called ‘common citizenship’ in a liberal democratic multi-ethnic state, where citizens’ ethnicities are officially ignored, in fact involves supporting the culture of the majority ethnic groups (Taylor 1994: 43, Kymlicka 1995: 110-111). For example, in Western countries, the languages of the majorities constitute the official languages of the schools, courts and legislatures. This is a significant inequality; and if not addressed, it becomes a serious injustice (Kymlicka 1995: 109, 183).

In light of the considerations collated in the previous two paragraphs, it is regrettable that some of the names of post-colonial African states – Democratic Republic of Congo, Botswana, Lesotho and Uganda, for example – clearly indicate the violation of the identities of the non-dominant ethnic groups in those states. For example, the name ‘Uganda’ is taken from the name of the most dominant ethnic group in that country – the Ganda. This results in a constant difficulty in communication when a Ugandan citizen, speaking in Kiswahili or another Bantu language, wishes to communicate that

he or she is a Ugandan (Kiswahili *Mganda*) but not from the Ganda ethnic group, which would also be rendered in Kiswahili as *Mganda*. Thus if such a citizen wishes to use Kiswahili to identify themselves as belonging to the Republic but not to the Ganda ethnic group, he or she would have to say '*Mimi ni Mganda: natoka Uganda ingawa mimi sitoki kwa jamii ya Baganda*' (I am a Ugandan; I come from Uganda, but I do not come from the Ganda community). The shorter but less communicative sentence would have been '*Mimi ni Mganda ingawa mimi sii Mganda*' (I am a Ugandan: I come from Uganda, but not from the Ganda community); but the appearance of *Mganda* twice in the sentence, the first in reference to Ugandan citizenship, the second in reference to membership in the Ganda ethnic group, would sound patently contradictory. Such a citizen could be forgiven for feeling that the Ugandan state treats members of the Ganda community in a preferential manner, contrary to the doctrine that all citizens are equal before the law. Similar muddles arise for citizens of other countries mentioned here.

Indeed, the idea of an ethnically-blind common citizenship almost inevitably results in the marginalisation of some ethnic groups. Thus when the indigenous peoples of North America (the so-called 'red Indians') were accorded United States citizenship (often against their will), they became a numerical minority within the larger body of citizens, rather than a separate, self-governing people (Kymlicka 1995: 184). Similarly, numerous African ethnic groups endure a minority status chiefly because of the domination of ethnic majorities in the formation of post-colonial states masquerading as 'nations'. In their pre-colonial existence, each of these groups constituted a body politik in its own right, with minimal minority-majority conflicts incurred internally by the group.

When ethnic consciousness is ignored or castigated in the name of 'nation-building', resentment develops among those who value their ethnic identities. In this regard, Narang (2002: 2696) observed:

People invariably retain an attachment to their own ethnic group and the community in which they were brought up. There is an interdependence between the individual and collective processes of identity formation. Thus individuals expect to recognise themselves in public institutions. They expect some consistency between their private identities and the symbolic contents upheld by public authorities, embedded in the social institutions, and celebrated in public events. Otherwise, individuals feel like social strangers, they feel that the society is not their society.

Aristotle (2009) noted that a state is a community of interests based on the family. The West has largely abandoned this piece of Aristotelian common sense, and post-colonial African polities have often followed suit. Yet among the African masses, the deep sense of kinship, with all it implies, is one of the strongest forces governing social life. As Mbiti (1969: 104) put it,

[A]lmost all the concepts connected with human relationship can be understood and interpreted through the kinship system. This it is which largely governs the behaviour, thinking and whole life of the individual in the society of which he is a member.

Consequently, it is inconsistent for post-colonial African states to profess support for marriage and the family, while castigating loyalty to ethnic groups which are seen by the vast proportion of their populations as constituting their extended families. Just as it is admirable for one to accept and experience some degree of pride in one's ancestors, so it is desirable to draw strength from association with an ethnic group whose traditions enrich one's life (Okondo 1964: 37, Hunt and Walker 1974: 442). Thus the opinion leaders and educators in post-colonial African polities would do well to embrace the fact that they are citizens of multi-ethnic states and to work towards managing their internal cultural diversity, instead of continuing to delude themselves that they belong to 'nations' or 'nation-states'.

Violation of the right to secession

Due to the incessant marginalisation of non-dominant ethnic groups in post-colonial African states, some of them aspire for secession - the breaking away of a community and its land from an established state to form a new state or to join another state (Bartkus 1999: 3). The desire for secession by many non-dominant ethnic groups around the world is triggered or fuelled by violations of such fundamental rights as due process, freedom from discrimination, and personal liberty and security (Castellino 1999: 404-405). However, states that claim to be democratic often violently thwart secessionist bids, as was the case in the 1960s unsuccessful secession of Katanga from Congo Kinshasa, the botched bid by Kenyan Somalis to join the Somali Republic, the 1960s Biafran war unsuccessfully waged by the Igbo of Nigeria, and the successful secessionist war of Eritrea in the 1990s (Islam 1985, Boehme 2005, Nwankwo and Ifejika 1969, Collis 1970, Okpaku (ed.) 1972).

One of the key concepts in discussions of the right to secession is *national self-determination*. Although this term is attributed to the former American president Woodrow Wilson, the phrase never actually appeared in the text of his 1918 speeches widely associated with it (Knight 1985: 255).

Instead, the principle was first mentioned two years before in a 1916 memorandum from the British Foreign Office concerning post-war peace conditions, where it was stated that an essential condition of peace would be to give full recognition to peoples' 'national aspirations' (George 1939: 11-12). According to the Paris Peace Accord of 1919, the 'peoples' entitled to exercise their right to self-determination were ethnic groups which had become nationally mobilised, as numerous states were carved out of the ruins of the Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires along broadly ethnic lines (Moore 1998: 3).

As Bartkus (1999: 113) noted, the principle of self-determination not only electrified popular idealism in 1919; it retains power today as its repercussions after decolonisation reverberate around the world, pervading the consciousness of numerous subjected communities. However, whereas self-determination in the Wilsonian period was conceived of as the political independence of ethnic communities, the current understanding of the principle in the community of independent states under the United Nations umbrella is that it no longer applies to 'peoples' as they embrace specific ethnic group identities. Instead, the principle has been elaborated in the so-called 'international law'²⁰ of the post-World War II period to make clear that the 'peoples' in question are individuals aggregated into multi-ethnic territories under colonial rule.

It is such collectives of 'peoples' who are now misleadingly considered to be 'nations' when they attain political independence; hence the name 'United Nations' for the global umbrella organisation. Thus self-determination is now widely conceived in 'international law' as the "right of the majority within an accepted political unit to exercise power," whereby boundaries have been drawn without regard for the linguistic or cultural composition of the state (Moore 1998: 3).

As such, current so-called 'international law' does not recognise the right of non-dominant ethnic groups to secede, on the grounds that such recognition would unleash separatist forces that would in turn threaten 'international order', as groups within groups attempt to seize power and form their own sovereign states (Castellino 1999: 392).

In sum, the prevailing view in the community of independent states is that the rights of non-dominant ethnic groups ought to be protected, but not at

²⁰ Since I reject the casual use of the term 'nation' in reference to ethnically plural post-colonial African polities, I must qualify my use of the phrase 'international law', as it is the law made by the global community of independent states, most of which are not nations, but rather multi-ethnic states.

the expense of state sovereignty (Gurr 1993: 161-162). The community fears that the institution of sovereignty as the cornerstone of ‘international order’ may be devalued through a multiplication of sovereign states (Coppieters 2003: 272).

Legitimacy deficit leading to perpetual neo-colonial domination

The half-hearted insistence on an ethnically blind polity in the name of nation-building, coupled with majoritarian democracy, has resulted in a situation in which sizable portions of the populations of many African countries are intensely loyal to their ethnic groups, while considering their post-colonial central state apparatus to be an alien imposition – a framework of governance to be exploited financially by those who have political power and to be resisted vigorously by those without it. In Kenya, for example, one manifestation of the serious disconnect between the state and its subjects is to be found in the Turkana homeland in the north-west of the country. This is an area neglected by both the Jomo Kenyatta and Moi regimes (1963-1978 and 1978-2002, respectively), with the Kibaki and Uhuru Kenyatta regimes (2002-2013 and 2013 to date, respectively) taking a keen interest in it only due to the recent discovery of substantial fossil oil and water resources there. When a Turkana is travelling to Nairobi, the country’s capital, his or her kinsfolk say that he or she is ‘going to Kenya’, indicating that they do not see themselves as living in Kenya, nor do they see themselves as Kenyans.

Following Praeg (2014: 148 ff.), I take the view that the post-colonial African state, often erroneously referred to as a ‘nation’ or even ‘nation-state’ in line with the Western liberal democratic conflation of nationhood and statehood, is the product of violence on at least two counts. Firstly, it is the successor of the colonial state which was founded through foreign invasion, outright robbery and other gruesome violations of the rights of native populations. Secondly, the African masses were not given a free hand to determine the form of their newly liberated polities. Instead, through the elitist constitutional conferences on the eve of political independence, they were subtly directed by the colonisers to accept polities created in the image of the Western modern state. This left them vulnerable to perpetual Western domination. It is therefore no wonder that Western powers send their agents to advise post-colonial African states about running their domestic affairs, and send observers during general elections to such states, while hosting no reciprocal advisers and observers from the African polities. Similarly, Western powers play major mediating and funding roles in the numerous African intra-state conflicts occasioned by the ‘nation-state’ narrative, thereby having ample opportunities to manipulate the politics of these states to the West’s own advantage. Post-colonial African states thus constitute part

of the infrastructure of on-going neo-colonial domination, augmenting the economic, social and educational conduits of Western hegemony. As Mazrui (2004: 474) observed, “[t]he most difficult moral category to assess is one in which armed struggle against imperialism turns out to be more advantageous to the imperial power than to the freedom fighter.”

Conclusion

In view of the foregoing reflections, I close by responding briefly to the three questions posed at the beginning of this article:

i. *What is the genesis of the contemporary conflation of nationhood and statehood in post-colonial African states?* This conflation originated in Western Europe, where nationalism replaced monarchic and ecclesiastical power, and was transferred to Africa through Western colonialism and neo-colonialism. African nationalism was also influenced by the distinct way in which colonialism used the census, the map and the museum to develop a narrative of African nation-states in total disregard of the ethnic diversity in most of the colonial territories.

ii. *To what extent has the conflation of nationhood and statehood negatively affected inter-ethnic cohesion in post-colonial African states?* It has to a great extent harmed contemporary African non-dominant ethnic groups by serving as a catalyst for the violation of their rights to meaningful political participation, to equitable economic opportunities, to ethnic identity, and to just secession.

iii. *To what extent is the concept of ‘nation-state’ a tool of Western imperialism in contemporary Africa?* The hegemonic effect of this nomenclature is evident to a great extent, arguably due to its facilitative role in the violation of the rights of non-dominant ethnic groups described above. These sustained infractions of the rights of such groups result in the perpetual lack of legitimacy for post-colonial African states, leading to their instability and vulnerability to neo-colonial manipulation and domination.

In his celebrated essay, “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell (1946) observed that “political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.” He continued:

Political language, and with modifications this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists, is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. (Orwell [1946] 2002: 7).

In my view, Orwell's is an accurate description of the rampant references to post-colonial African polities as 'nations' or 'nation-states', the consequence of which is to inhibit a candid discourse addressing ways to promote the individual and corporate rights of all the inhabitants of these polities. Thus more than half a century has been lost to political discourse whose key terms are shrouded in vagueness, ambiguity or outright error. Instead of talk about post-colonial African polities as 'nations' or 'nation-states', it would have been more productive to speak of them as multi-ethnic states, thereby encouraging deliberation on ways to promote inter-ethnic justice, with a view to fostering stability in these polities. It is my hope that this article will make a modest contribution to the turning of the tide towards a more productive discourse in years to come.

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