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The Varieties of Nationalism in Africa

SARA RICH DORMAN

Nationalism in Africa is often dismissed as artificial—not reflecting “real” nations, or, more cynically, organized by political elites solely to achieve and maintain power. Because of this presumed artificiality of national ties, at independence new states were seen as unlikely to survive, and cases of state collapse have been interpreted as proof that cynicism was merited. Yet nationalism continues to be politically important in Africa, perhaps more than ever. It reverberates through elections, civil wars, and interstate wars, as well as literature, music, and theater. Although linked in complex ways to state forms, it is also contested. And it is in this contestation and reframing of national identity that we see nationalism’s significance.

Resurgent Nationalism
Eighth in a series

The resilience of nationalism in Africa has gone hand in hand with the resilience of states. Despite their artificiality, Africa’s borders have proved remarkably durable since decolonization—there have been few border changes and even fewer conflicts over borders. African conflicts have tended to be struggles for control of the state, not attempts to fragment states or create new ones. Where borders have changed in response to demands for national self-determination—as in Eritrea, Namibia, and South Sudan—the result has been to return them to pre–World War I parameters. The tenacity of these arbitrary lines drawn on a map reveals a sense of attachment to national identities, but also the pragmatic realpolitik of Africa’s leaders.

Since the end of the Cold War, national identity and nationalism have been most often expressed in terms of citizenship. The emergence of conflicts over citizenship across the continent—in Cameroon, Congo, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and many more countries—suggests that citizenship has become a defining characteristic of African politics. But these national identity and citizenship claims are often portrayed as instrumental—suggesting not just that they are manipulated by elites, but also that they are not real. While identity—whether ethnic, national, or other—is surely fluid and mutable, suggesting that it is unreal raises far more questions than it answers.

In Africa’s young states, nationalism, citizenship, ethnicity, and borders often overlap in complex ways, and the political implications can be difficult to decipher. Survey data tell us that countries with high levels of ethnic diversity, like Tanzania, also experience strong national identification, whereas Somalia, with a dominant linguistic and ethnic group, has undergone Africa’s most prolonged state collapse. The idea that politics in Africa is driven by ethnicity is simplistic.

We now understand ethnicity as a much more complex phenomenon, radically transformed by the experiences of colonialism and postcolonial politics. Ethnicity is not primordial and unchanging. But this should not be mistaken for suggesting that it doesn’t matter. Trust in traditional leaders is still strong across the continent—even, or perhaps especially, when “modern” political institutions are struggling. People’s ties to their villages and homes remain strong, and political party organization is to a large extent regionally based, although there are strong historical and institutional reasons for this.

Africa is a vast continent, and patterns of state formation have varied dramatically, leading to equally significant variations in approaches to citizenship and in the manifestations of nationalism. This means not that nationalism is more real in some places than others, but that it generates

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different types of behavior and significance in different political contexts. In order to make sense of identity politics, we need to consider the nature of the states to which citizens claim allegiance and which seek to foster nationalism.

INSISTING ON UNITY

Why has there been a tendency to assume that African nations and nationalism are not real? In part, this is predicated on the mistaken belief that European states are monolingual nation-states. Most of them actually are multiethnic creations, containing great diversity, that were welded into modern states only in recent centuries. The best known example is the expansion of the French administrative state into every *département*, but the same is true of modern Germany and Italy as well, not to mention the settler states created in the Americas. Despite having undergone these relatively recent transformations, somehow the Europe of the mid-twentieth century believed its own myth of homogeneous nation-states, and saw Africa's states as incapable of real nationhood. Yet in Africa—as in Europe, the Americas, and beyond—multiple languages, ethnicities, and other identities generated complex ties of belonging, obligation, and authority, including but not limited to nationalism.

Notwithstanding these complex origins, the narratives of nationalism that emerged in the twentieth century during African struggles for independence and nonracial elections emphasized unity and maintained a singular focus on self-determination. To some extent these narratives were modeled on romanticized ideals of nationalism, but they were also part of a defensive strategy: "If you're not with us, you're against us." This was most common where nationalists were subject to infiltration and destabilization by opponents of their movements. In settler states like Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Mozambique, settlers sought to frame independence struggles in terms of competing nationalist narratives. While white settler narratives of "taming" the land and "civilizing" the people were valorized, black nationalists were depicted as misguided at best, and evil at worst. Attempts to divide and conquer made nationalists deeply untrusting of splinter groups and plural voices.

It was this experience that shaped narratives of "official" nationalism, making them univocal and blind to distinctions of gender, status, and class. We now know that these accounts, which sought to obliterate the different experiences and expectations of women and regional, ethnic, and ideological variations, do not tell the full story either of colonialism or of the nationalism that emerged in response to it.

These narratives also channeled demands from the United Nations and other international bodies that opted to recognize only one legitimate representative national organization from each country. Whether this was intended to make life easier for themselves, or because they believed that nationalism had to be unitary (especially if it was to successfully face the challenges of ruling an independent state), is a moot point. The end result was a pattern of nationalism that reified unity and contributed to the creation of dominant and often intolerant ruling parties, even when it meant rewriting history or turning a blind eye to diversity. This is the nationalism that shaped nation-building programs in many postcolonial states.

WINNER TAKES ALL

In presuming African states and nationalism to be artificial or somehow less real than European variants, we attribute too much agency to the Europeans who carved out African states, and fail to recognize the role played in their formation by Africans both before and after the colonial period. But we cannot ignore the pressures that shaped nationalism, and how it came to be used. The univocal nationalisms served ruling parties well, at least in the short term. Unity became the buzzword of independent states buffeted by the pressures of the Cold War and fluctuating international markets.

In newly independent Zimbabwe, everyone, including teachers, churches, trades unionists, whites, and coloreds (the term for people of mixed race), was called on to "march in unity." The appeal to unity came naturally in a state still under attack from apartheid South Africa and ruled by a party that had emerged from deep factional strife. Yet it also framed and perpetuated a set of political strategies and norms of citizenship.

Nation-building became a narrowly conceived project that sought to dominate the available political space, squeezing out competing voices. As Aristide Zolberg, the eminent scholar of Francophone West Africa's early nation-building, pointed out, Africa's ruling "single parties" were not in fact *partis uniques* but *partis unifiés*—unified parties that brought together many disparate tendencies. The unity gospel was dominant pre-

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cisely because unity was so fragile, but seemed so essential, in political environments where the winner took all.

The leaders of the new states aspired to the creation of what the British social scientist Michael Billig has called banal nationalism—expressed in national anthems, stamps, renaming streets, and building monuments. One of the more intriguing aspects of this is how lackadaisical such efforts often were. Although some cities and streets were renamed in the months after independence, in many countries the process dragged on for decades. Zimbabwe's streets retained the names of many colonial heroes until the late 1980s, while in South Africa renaming dragged on well into the twenty-first century. But in both countries there were complaints that renaming tended to favor the ruling party and ignore the legacy of other nationalist leaders. Memorials to the liberation wars were also greeted with suspicion. Too often they were foreign-built, inaccessible to the public, and deeply hierarchical. In Zimbabwe, decisions as to where veterans were buried depended on whether they were judged to have been national, provincial, or local heroes—a process prone to favoritism and elitism.

The instrumental manipulation of national identity is fueled by desperate strategies for survival on the part of politicians.

Likewise, history curricula in schools, museums, and galleries have been observed to favor the ruling party and exclude national heroes whose stories do not fit the party line. An onslaught of this type of activity in Zimbabwe after the ruling party lost a constitutional referendum in 2000 was dubbed "patriotic history" by the British historian Terence Ranger. And in many cases, grandiose memorials have generated much controversy and perhaps sparked counter-narratives. One such example is the $27 million African Renaissance Monument in Dakar, erected by Senegal's President Abdoulaye Wade in 2010, though he sought to frame it as a celebration of pan-Africanism rather than nationalism.

Defining citizenship

Just as the official narratives of nationalist movements tended to exclude those who had been sidelined in factional struggles or challenged ideological orthodoxy, so nation-building often constructed a particular narrative and norm of citizenship. In most accounts, this is interpreted as a narrowly instrumental approach: By setting out criteria that define citizenship and eligibility to vote and contest elections, ruling parties have sought to prolong their stay in power.

In Zambia, this strategy took form in a constitutional amendment that was first used to deny former President Kenneth Kaunda the right to contest the 1996 presidential election, on the basis that his parents had been born in what is now Malawi. Then the tables were turned on the author of the amendment, Frederick Chiluba, who was born in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo and found his own presidential eligibility challenged. In Zimbabwe, similar legal strategies were used to disenfranchise large groups—stripping the vote and citizenship from many lifelong white residents, as well as the sizable population whose parents or grandparents had migrated from Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia.

Often linked to the pressures of economic and political liberalization, exclusionary discourses emphasizing indigeneity as a basis for national identity similarly came to the fore during political struggles in Ivory Coast and Cameroon, among others. It has always been easy for politicians to blame troubles on "foreigners," and migrants have served as scapegoats across the world. But in these cases, the question of who is foreign proved quite problematic.

In Ivory Coast, postcolonial development strategies had encouraged migration from neighboring northern countries. These immigrants—mostly Muslim—were targeted by exclusionary campaigns of *ivoirité*. But this raised the specter that northern Ivoirians, also Muslim and sharing ethnic ties with their neighbors, themselves might not be fully Ivoirian. The intense political struggle over citizenship, whipped up by media and politicians in ways reminiscent of the attacks on Rwanda's Tutsis during the 1994 genocide, led to civil war. Here, as in Congo, what Columbia University's Mahmood Mamdani calls the "invention of the *indigène*" drives a dynamic in which accidents of birth and colonial boundaries generate a violent and intolerant politics.

Keys to the gates

The instrumental manipulation of national identity is fueled by desperate strategies for survival on the part of politicians. Most conflicts

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in Africa have been struggles over control of the destiny of a country rather than attempts at secession. In Sudan, wracked by civil conflict even before independence, insurgent forces spoke of creating a "new Sudan," not South Sudan. Their goal for many years was to transform the state, not to divide a nation. There are pragmatic as well as ideological reasons for this.

The international system's strong distaste for secessionist movements has long been held accountable for this pattern, but the nature of the postcolonial state in Africa also shapes the political logic. For the most part, Africa's modern states resemble what the historian Frederick Cooper calls "gatekeeper states." Their institutions and infrastructure are designed to extract revenue from trade. So states have tended to use indirect taxation as their main source of revenue, rather than seeking to extract it through income or sales taxes.

Gatekeeper states prove amenable to patrimonial structures and rent-seeking. They are a key element in the winner-takes-all behavior that has typified multiparty politics in Africa. But gatekeeper states also encourage marginalized groups to seek control of the nation, rather than try to carve out newly autonomous territories. Thus, political logic—reinforced by the international system and regional norms—dictates that territorial stability trumps fragmentation in most cases.

For this reason, nationalism in much of Africa continues to manifest itself in a struggle for control of the state where political institutions are unable to accommodate pressures for representation. In countries with fragile accords or permanent minorities, groups that have been alienated or excluded may feel forced to fight for inclusion in the state. It is far less common in Africa for nationalism to be expressed as a conflict between two states, or in demands for secession. Only in one region do we see this pattern: in the Horn of Africa, where nationalism acts very differently.

War in the Horn

In the Horn, borders were not drawn randomly on the map by colonial explorers, agglomerating precolonial identities. Instead, we see the influence of indigenous state formation. The Abyssinian Kingdom and the Mahdi's Sudan expanded into new territory and modernized in response to colonial penetration. The persistence of Sudan and Ethiopia, even as Eritrea was colonized by the Italians and Somalia divided among the French, British, Italians, and Ethiopians, generated a different statehood dynamic.

As Ruth Iyob of the University of Missouri at Saint Louis notes, these states have always faced each other, not outward, in their behavior. In the Horn, borders are far more salient markers of statehood and nationhood than elsewhere in Africa, even though both have been repeatedly challenged internally and externally. It is only in the Horn that African states have repeatedly gone to war with each other over territorial claims and national pride.

Ethiopia and Somalia have twice come into formal conflict, and Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a (still not fully resolved) war between 1998 and 2000. The Horn is also a region marked by secession, with the successful cases of Eritrea and South Sudan, and the equally successful, but still not internationally recognized, case of Somaliland. Nationalism is a powerful force in these states, enabling the mobilization of soldiers, money, and moral support.

In contrast to memorialization that elevated some individuals over others, Eritrea's national monuments have been more egalitarian, in keeping with the approach that sustained its epic 30-year struggle for independence: A giant sandal in a traffic circle in central Asmara commemorates the simple footgear of the soldiers. And the cemeteries that commemorate martyrs are modest as well—no one fighter is singled out for greatness. Yet this does not mean that nationalism is any less contested than in other regions—here, too, we see nationalist movements with complicated histories and valorizing myths that continue to be fought over internally and externally.

Beyond Instrumentality

Given the weight of evidence suggesting that nationalism has become a technique of governance wielded by successful politicians in Africa, it could seem naive to suggest that there may be something more to it. But once we understand the factors that have constrained nationalism on the continent, we discover that its expression is not limited to instrumental approaches.

In looking beyond instrumentality, we see different strategies of nation-building and national identity in African states. The banal nationalism of flags and stamps is matched with attempts to shape behavior and citizenship. In post-liberation states this often means linking citizenship to contribution to "the struggle." In Guinea-Bissau

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and Mozambique, citizenship was extended to all who fought for their freedom. In other countries, ex-fighters are held up as models to the youth. We can see the use of curricula, national service, and other state institutions not simply as attempts to put parties and leaders on a pedestal, but as ways of transmitting the values of the struggle to younger generations.

In Rwanda, citizens are expected to attend new national celebrations, contribute to development funds, and meet production targets. All of these requirements are aimed at shaping the way in which proper Rwandans live and behave. In Eritrea, citizenship was extended beyond its borders, but so were the obligations of belonging to the nation—taxes are collected from the diaspora, and national service is presented as a way of emulating and reproducing the sacrifices made during the long struggle for liberation.

Less obviously but possibly more importantly, nation-building also occurs from the bottom up. Subaltern struggles to articulate national identity are characteristic of the contested and multi-vocal nature of nationalism in Africa. Memoirs and academic studies of the "original" nationalist movements are part of a trend of rediscovering these narratives and emphasizing their complexity, partialness, and diversity. So are music, dance, novels, poetry, community museums, national cuisines, national dress, and fashion shows. Of course, not all in the cultural sphere would necessarily define themselves as contributing to nation-building. Sometimes they are co-opted but they can also be subversive, challenging official nationalism and creating new narratives.

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Diasporas provide a fertile ground for nationalism in African states, both by returning for festivals and celebrations, and by popularizing such commemorations—not to mention the home country's food and music—abroad. But diasporas are not just uncritical recipients of state-driven national projects. They may harbor dissidents and alternative narratives.

With few exceptions, African states have been wary of dual citizenship. Former settler states, in particular, see it as a way for old enemies to maintain their exit strategies—a sign of their failure to totally commit to the new state. But as diasporas contribute financially they are also in a position to make demands. Perhaps the most notable trend in recent years, documented by Bronwen Manby's scholarship on citizenship law, is the increased willingness of states to rewrite constitutions and legislation to permit dual citizenship. Here we see diasporas influencing ideas of what it means to be a loyal citizen.

But redefining the nation is also happening in more public ways. In Kenya, it took until 2006 for public pressure to succeed in erecting a statue commemorating the radical anticolonial Mau Mau movement, though other memorials had been built to honor nationalist leaders. As in many other states, the official narrative of the nation's founding had elided contributions from outside the ruling party, but the statue of Mau Mau leader Dedan Kimathi, as well as a new memorial to the victims of torture and mistreatment perpetrated by the colonial regime (funded by the British government as part of a legal settlement), begins to redress that. In Burkina Faso, there are long-standing demands for a proper memorial at the grave of the popular President Thomas Sankara, overthrown and killed in a 1987 coup led by Blaise Compaoré, who retained power until late 2014.

In South Africa, statues of Cecil Rhodes, the Victorian-era mining magnate and colonial administrator, became the target of protest and vilification in early 2015. Students at the University of Cape Town seized on the statue of Rhodes on campus as a symbol of the failure of the institution—and indeed, the nation—to fully transform itself decades after the end of apartheid. These students—and their supporters in the faculty and beyond—are demanding that their institutions and the public face of the state resemble the nation. In linking the statue to the limited promotion opportunities for black faculty members, they are also making claims about the nation they inhabit and expressing their aspirations for change.

These are moments that catch the public eye, just as moments of sporting glory spill over in national rejoicing. But they remind us that nationalism in Africa is not simply orchestrated by politicians. It is a complex and multi-vocal force that has been deeply shaped by international influences and pent-up domestic pressures, yet continues to articulate demands and visions for the future. ■

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