

Belonging & Citizenship in Africa

Africans define citizenship in terms of ethnicity, not state borders, because neither those borders nor the states that control them serve the needs of Africans.
by Hippolyt A. S. Pul

The creation of the African Union has revived pan-Africanists' dreams of establishing a continental state and a common citizenship out of the continent's disparate populations. But while such unions are forming at the regional level, the continent simultaneously faces a proliferation of violent ethnic and/or religious conflicts, which are tearing its societies apart. From the politico-religious conflicts in Algeria to the battles for political power in Zimbabwe, Africa finds itself embroiled in wars that have effectively redefined belonging and citizenship in very exclusionary terms.

Some analysts have suggested that Africa's arbitrary colonial boundaries explain the continent's conflicts. Others point to the youth of some African states or to the absence of strong, transparent and accountable systems of governance in Africa's postcolonial states. While the wars in Angola and the political turmoil in Zimbabwe can be attributed to the birth pangs of emerging nations, such reasoning does not explain why older states like Liberia and Ethiopia descended into civil war after some 100 years as nation-states. Why is Somalia—the only country on the continent with one ethnic group, one language, and one faith (the majority of Somalis are Muslim)—the home of violent interclan warfare? In sum, why is Africa breaking apart when the rest of the world is forming continental states?

Defining citizenship: a clash of world views?

By definition, citizenship is shared by people who also share the same geopolitical space and, presumably, a common identity and history. As Lance Massey notes, the concept of "...citizenship implies a profound obligation to identify self with other, self as other—to identify with one's community, and hold its interests as dear as one's own (should they conflict),

no matter if that community is a town, city, state, or country."¹ In this view, a citizen's "community" is defined by the borders of his or her nation.

But are these attributes—characteristic of Western notions of citizenship—valid in Africa? Do Africans accept the boundaries of post-colonial states as the defining frontiers of the geopolitical spaces in which they find common citizenship? If identification of self with other is a necessary ingredient for fostering a sense of co-citizenship, why—after years of co-existence and extensive intermarriage—is a sense of separateness eclipsing that of sameness in Africa's political discourse?

Neighbors as strangers or co-citizens

Despite several decades as independent nation-states, most people in African

countries do not consider themselves to be co-citizens with people living within the borders of their home countries. This is because the outline of current African borders was set in 1885 by a group of European leaders meeting in Berlin. Many African countries, which emerged from this 1885 map, remain amalgams of ethnic groups whose distinct political and economic interests reinforce a sense of otherness rather than sameness. The Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire, is the archetypical case in which a population of 43 million people from 120 ethnic groups were brought together in an "unnatural coalition of peoples and places,"² in the words of the Kenyan newspaper *The East African*.

Another root of this sense of otherness is the often unequal status accorded to different groups in the modern African state. For example, in Liberia, Americo-



This 1858 European map shows Africa's political borders before the Berlin Conference.

Michigan State University Library

Liberians, who make up only 5% of the population, have forced an apartheid-like system on indigenous tribes. The Ivorian crisis arises from the fact that one in four of the country's residents were born to economic migrants and, even though some have lived in the country for generations, are still considered foreigners. In some regions of Nigeria, where economic and political migration has been common, there is now some confusion about who belongs and who does not, as selective distinctions are often made between "indigenes" and "non-indigenes" or strangers. While several ethnic groups have migrated to regions like Nasarawa in the last century, some—like the Tiv—are considered strangers or recent settlers, while others—such as the Gwari—are not.³

Paradoxically, this emerging trend of defining citizenship in exclusionary terms runs counter to the expressed values of most African societies. For example, the concepts of "ebusua" (among the Akans in southern Ghana) or "niilu" (among the Dagara of northwest Ghana)—meaning "extended family"—have always defined belonging expansively. Indeed, a Dagara proverb states that, like the vine of the pumpkin, every living person is but a part of one extended root. This sums up the African conception of citizenship or belonging—we are all one and interconnected.

Boundary-less citizenship

This inclusive interpretation of belonging is akin to the legal concept of *jus sanguini* (citizenship defined by blood), which runs

counter to the concept of *jus soli* (citizenship defined by birthplace).⁴ For most communities in Africa, membership in a political community is defined not by birthplace, but by consanguineal relationships and other affinal ties such as marriage, economic relationships and military alliances.

Given this conception of belonging, the boundaries and institutions of the modern state have no relevance for most Africans. This is why a Mossi from Burkina Faso who travels to any part of Ghana is more likely to register his or her presence with a local Mossi chief than he or she is to call on the Burkinabe Embassy in Ghana for anything. A Mossi might simply move from a Mossi community in one country to one in another country and find himself seamlessly integrated into the social structure and accorded all rights available to the indigenes without a second thought. The same phenomenon holds true for other ethnic groups. Hence, territoriality is alien to most ethnic groups in Africa as the defining principle of citizenship. Instead, ethnic citizenship, which ignores national boundaries, tends to take precedence. A person is considered a citizen of a group—according to the group's custom—regardless of the boundaries and generation gaps that may exist between him or her and the group.

For instance, when the current President of Niger, Mamadou Tandja, visited his cousin Ousmane Tandja at the birthplace of his father in Mauritania in February 2004, he received a spontaneous welcome. The journal *Construire l'Afrique*

explained his citizenship as follows: "President Tandja was born in Niger, where his father settled after a long trek that took him through Mali and Chad;...he married in a region...where matriarchy is practiced. As a result, the child 'belongs to the mother,' hence the Niger nationality of President Tandja."⁵

Rather than being ethnocentric and exclusionary, this kind of boundary-less citizenship historically allowed strangers or foreigners to be incorporated through marriage or through assimilation "into the community and state silently [and] unconsciously until they were ideally at least fully fledged members indistinguishable from the majority of the population."⁶ Scholars Roland Cohen and John Middleton consider this way of defining belonging as natural to African social settings,

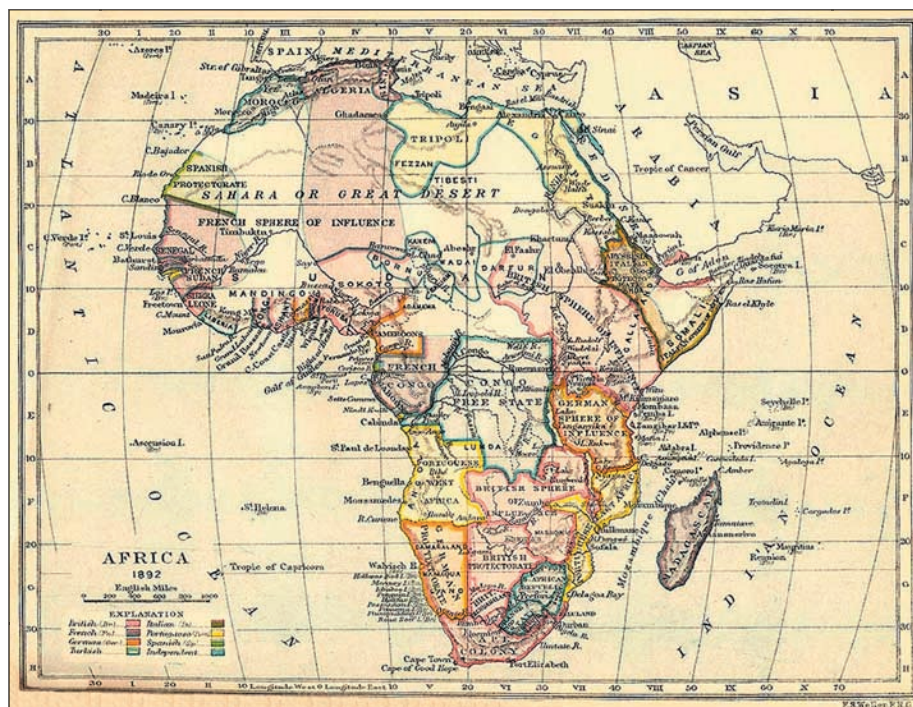
*... in which groups and individuals identified with one or more kinds of cultural traditions are, and always have been, interacting and creating among themselves the bases for new types of groupings that are or will be institutionalized within new or altered forms of social structures as well as new or altered cultural expressions of these relationships.*⁷

In sum, it is this perpetual effort to create spaces for the participation of all in African societies that leads to the strong sense of sameness that transcends the boundaries of the nation-state. In other words, boundaries do not make us citizens; relationships do.

States without citizens

So why is Africa now plagued by xenophobic tendencies that are not only estranging groups of people that may have lived together for centuries but are also pitting them against each other in fierce competition over ethno-political claims to their homelands? What happened to the African tendency and capacity to incorporate and assimilate strangers into co-citizenship? How did we get to Africa's citizen-less states?

Several explanations are possible. First, unlike traditional African political communities in which people had a sense of ownership, the location, *modus operandi* and decision-making structures of modern states have alienated the majority from participation in them. As a result, most post-independence African countries are, in the words of scholar Goran Hyden, "societies without a state." The state, he argues, "sits suspended in 'mid-air' over society and is not an integral mechanism of the day-to-day productive activities of



Some 34 years later (in 1892), Africa's borders had begun to resemble current-day boundaries.

society.”⁸ There is a tremendous disconnect between the state and citizens.

Consequently, African governments seldom consider the views and aspirations of their citizens when managing the affairs of the state. In fact, according to the United Nations Economic Commission for

tries are democratic ones. Unfortunately, the long queues are not enough to signify democratic commitment. People vote for personalities, because of ethnic political patronage, or because a party official has been good to them. Too few vote because a party has good ideas or for programs that would enable them live a dignifying

life. They are not at the polls because the state is “...the individual’s only means of realizing his own best ends, [nor be-

cause] a man could not be a good man unless he were also a good citizen,”¹⁰ as Aristotle and Plato would want us to believe. Because they have no confidence in the transparency or objectivity of the state, they vote for kith and kin in an attempt to satisfy their immediate survival needs.

Bringing citizens back

One way in which African states can reclaim their citizens is to establish political and economic legitimacy by enabling citizens to meet their own needs rather than depend on hand-outs from ethnic elites and/or party functionaries. To do this, states must create a level playing field for citizens of all ethnicities and establish transparent decision-making processes so citizens see less need to resort to ethnic and political clientelism to meet their basic needs. Citizen participation must go beyond the rituals of the ballot box. Issues-based electoral campaigns must replace personality-based ones.


To meet these goals, public policy agendas must be set from the bottom up, not the top down, as has too often been the case. In addition, communities must be educated to understand that (1) they, as citizens, have rights; (2) the state has an obligation to uphold those rights; (3) they are entitled to receive certain things from the government; and (4) their communities have a duty to claim what they have a right to through active civic engagement beyond the ballot box.

But the longer term project to unite citizens and state demands the deconstruction of contemporary national boundaries that have been used to maintain crony dictatorships in most states. This project requires that the boundaries of the Berlin conference follow the example of the Berlin wall and crumble into rubble in order to give way to the free movement of Africa’s people to places where they find belong-

ing. The people of Niger spoke for the rest of the ordinary people of Africa when they rebuffed President Tandja’s political opponents, who challenged his nationality when he announced his candidacy for the Presidency of Niger. As *Construire l’Afrique* reports:

*Curiously, in Niger, where ethnic conflict is fairly strong, the population has not followed the defenders of this cause, denounced as working against the development of Niger and Africa towards integration and unity.*¹¹

That rebuff is a sentinel call from ordinary people, the voting public of Niger, for the dismantling of boundaries and the redefinition of citizenship in Africa. As *Construire l’Afrique* concluded:

*President Tandja’s visit to his family of origin has been seen as a strong message of open-mindedness and tolerance for Africans and, most importantly, for leaders to remember that, in Africa, borders are artificial.*¹² 

Hippolyt A. S. Pul is Deputy Regional Director for Program Quality for West and Central Africa Regions for Catholic Relief Services.

Notes

- 1 Lance Massey, “On the Origin of Citizenship in Education: Isocrates, Rhetoric, and Kairos,” *Journal of Public Affairs* (1997).
- 2 *The East African* (no. 1431, Dec. 30, 1999), 10.
- 3 Alhaji Abdullahi Adamu (Executive Governor of Nasarawa State), “Ethnic Conflicts in Nigeria,” published 27 January 2002 and available at www.abdullahiadamu.com/speeches/2ethnic.htm.
- 4 Olivier Devaux and André Cabanis, “The Evolution from ‘Subject’ to ‘Citizen’ in France from the High Middle Ages to the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century” in *Citizenship and Identity: International Perspectives*, a working paper from the Clarke Center at Dickenson College, translated by Catherine Beaudry and Shana Hecht.
- 5 «D’origine mauritanienne, le Président du Niger rend visite à ses parents.» *Construire L’Afrique*, 112 (1er au 29 Février, 2004), 3. Translated by DAL staff.
- 6 Roland Cohen and John Middleton (eds.), *From Tribe to Nation in Africa: Studies in Incorporation Processes* (Chandler Publishing Company: Scranton, PA, 1970), 6.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 8 Göran Hydén, *No Shortcuts to Progress: African Development Management in Perspective* (Heinemann: London, 1983), 7.
- 9 UNECA, *Rural Progress XIII* (1994), 9.
- 10 C. F. Strong, *Modern Political Constitutions*, revised edition (Sidwick & Jackson, London, 1977), 14-15.
- 11 «D’origine mauritanienne...» *Construire L’Afrique*, 112 (1er au 29 Février, 2004), 3. Translated by DAL staff.
- 12 *Ibid.*

Why is Africa breaking apart when the rest of the world is forming continental states?

Africa (UNECA), there is an “...almost total absence of any upward flow of opinions, ideas, needs, knowledge from the periphery to the policy and decision-making apparatus at the centre.” Unfortunately, the UNECA continued, “When representative institutions exist they assemble the ideas and positions of politicians, not communities.”⁹

Second, in Africa the state has lost its moral legitimacy because (1) it cannot provide for the basic needs of the people and (2) it has failed to guarantee their basic rights. To the majority of citizens, the state is no more than a tax machine, reaping where it has not sown. Many citizens see the African state as an external entity that should be shunned. Unless, of course, a citizen has access to state resources, in which case the state is an entity to be exploited. This common view explains the acquiescence of the majority in the unbridled corruption and graft that drain the continent of its economic resources.

Third, the failure of the state to provide a level playing field for all ethnic groups has led people to emphasize ethnic over national citizenship as they struggle for some control of the modern state (an argument William Zartman has made). One result, in states that hold democratic elections, has been the predominance of ethnic patronage and clientelism in electoral processes. Another result has been the emergence of ethnic power brokers—neither accountable to the state nor elected by the people—whose activities may not always be in the best interests of the state or the people for whom they speak.

Conclusion and recommendations

If active citizenship was measured by election turnout, most African countries could boast of highly committed citizens ready to defy rain and wind to ensure their coun-