Nation-State Trajectories in Africa

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A half-century ago, the mounting agitation for independent statehood in sub-Saharan Africa eventually forced colonial regimes to transfer sovereignty to local governments. Overthrowing the colonial order has since proven much easier than replacing it with viable nation-states. In the evocative phrase of Sam Nolutshungu, "out of the debris of failed colonialisms, unitary states and nations were summoned to emerge."[1] In much of Africa, nationhood has lost ground to ethnic and sectional identities. The capacity of states has also been eroded by prolonged fiscal crises, corruption, ethno-clientelist politics, and the autocratic manipulation of democratic transitions.

Anthony Smith has argued that there is an "intricate relationship between state and nation which the misleading omnibus term 'nation-state' is liable to obscure."[2] Many scholars have pondered the likely nature of this relationship in multiethnic African territories. State-nations seemed to be the most appropriate trajectory in which, according to Otto Pflanze, the "idea of nation" develops within "the chrysalis of the state."[3] Such an outcome in Africa implied replicating the dominant West European and North American pattern where "common sovereignty provided common institutions and a common political tradition from which emerged a sense of nationhood which transcended cultural differences."[4] In other words, the new nations would follow the building of states.

However, as most African countries enter their fifth decade of political independence, the state-nation model is not the only one that has been followed. It is important to recognize the actual state/nation models that have been forged. In general, Africa displays what Alfred Cobban terms the "new medievalism" characterized by cultural and political units existing in a multiplicity of forms and combinations.[5] Will the new global order permit Africa to forego emulating the "singular model" of the nation-state?[6] Or would African peoples continue to be severely disadvantaged by the failure to establish the "political kingdom" advocated by independence leader Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana? A sampling of cases demonstrates the persistence of the modernist ideal of the nation-state in Africa despite the medievalist reality of multiple, overlapping political forms.[7]

The Idea of the Nation-State and its Paradoxical Persistence. With the end of colonial rule, the African country that seemed to have the most unobstructed path in consolidating nationhood and statehood was Somalia. Somalis overwhelmingly shared the same language, religion, and cultural practices. After the Somali state collapsed in 1991, the country's clans and sub-clans increasingly assumed the attributes of territorial political organizations.[8] Paradoxically, in the midst of this disintegration, a model "nation-state" has emerged in the former British colony of Somaliland in the north of the territory. Economic development, law and justice, and even a peaceful transition of government leaders in this proto-republic can be favorably compared with governance in most recognized African countries.[9]

Rwanda and Burundi exemplify Smith's concerns about the mirage of the nation-state.[10] Hutu and Tutsi are not divided by language or culture, and intermarriage over several decades has attenuated racial demarcations. Yet these communities remain locked in mortal combat within the same territorial grid. All attempts to reconfigure the state so that it transcends and diffuses conflict between these communities have met with minimal success. Tim Longman has fervently argued that it is the state itself that is responsible for the great suffering of these peoples.[11] Indeed, the conclusion reached by Makau Mutua is no longer an unorthodox view: "peace cannot come to Burundi or neighboring Rwanda unless the Hutu and Tutsi are separated by an international border."[12] He argues that the members of each community regard "the exclusive control of the state as an essential precondition to their survival as a people."

In Burundi, considerable diplomatic and material resources have been invested in designing a power-sharing arrangement that would be backed by a significant South African security presence. Meanwhile, in post-genocide Rwanda, the hegemony of the minority Tutsi is protected by a military establishment that can contend with much larger neighbors. In these tragic countries, the state to nation path has been blocked by historical fears, while the nation to state path is precluded by unyielding opposition within Africa to the redrawing of post-colonial borders.

The African country that has served as the greatest crucible for attempts to configure state and nation is Nigeria. Nigerian scholars regularly debate the country's unresolved "national question" and the "decomposition" of the state.[13] Nige-

ria illustrates what has remained profoundly paradoxical in much of the continent: the tenacity of the nation-state ideal despite the profound failure to realize it.[14] Olusegun Obasanjo, the former military ruler and now elected President of Nigeria, provides a pertinent anecdote. During an attempted coup d' tat in April 1990, Obasanjo listened intently to the radio broadcasts of the putschists. The moment they declared their intention to excise the northernmost states from the federation is when he became convinced that their insurrection would fail.[15] Crawford Young and Thomas Turner have similarly pointed to the surprising strength of the idea of a Zairian/Congolese nation despite the disappearance of a viable state over much of the territory.[16]

There is a powerful attachment within African societies to the idea of the nation-state.

Sam Nolutshungu wrestles with this conundrum in his study of Chad, a country that has known more years of violent conflict than peace. He explores nuances he believes other analysts have overlooked. Nolutshungu suggests that Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg's distinction between empirical and juridical statehood in Africa fails to take account of the powerful attachment within African societies to the idea of the nation-state. He refers to "the near indestructibility of the idea of the postcolonial state … even when there seemed to be no limit to the disintegration of its material organization and assets."[17] Following Nolutshungu, it seems that the more disabled the African state, the more tenacious the commitment to restore it. Similarly, the more illusory the idea of the nation, the more firmly it is proclaimed. "There seemed to be no argument of experience, of failure and bloody disintegration, [that] could challenge the presumption that the state that had once decreed to exist, ought to continue to exist."[18] This "ought" for Nolutshungu is not just the normative standard of the international system of states, or of continental organizations such as the Organization of African Unity (now African Union), or an aspect of the self-serving ideology of political and bureaucratic elites. The attachment to nation and state, he argues, is steadily "reproduced in the consciousness of the new generations. For that reason, the incapacitation and disintegration of the state pointed inexorably to its actual or attempted reconstitution."[19]

One unfortunate consequence of this paradox is that many African states have been unable to overcome their weak operational capacity. Jeffrey Herbst has demonstrated the difficulty of state consolidation because of the inauspicious design of African territories and diverse demographic patterns.[20] However odd the physical configuration of African countries—such as Gambia's location along the banks of a river inside Senegal—they are treated as if divinely ordained, untouchable by human hands. It took a long war to carve out the state of Eritrea from Ethiopia. A subsequent war between these two countries in 1998, greater in ferocity and in the number of casualties than any other between two

African states, has reinforced the unwillingness to tamper with the nation-state ideal established by colonialism and sanctioned by anti-colonialism. Crawford Young has pointed out how few rebellious movements in Africa are secessionist in nature, or even demand a major reconfiguring of the national territory.[21] Even in Sudan, the main rebel movement—the Sudan People's Liberation Army—has only reluctantly admitted autonomy and independence as goals of its long struggle alongside its persistent demand for changes in the national government in Khartoum and its Islamist policies.[22]

Divergent Trajectories. What are the factors that determine relative successes and failures in building nations and states in Africa? Three factors stand out: the political articulation of ethnicity, the nature of governance, and the representative character of political institutions. Botswana has set the standard within Africa for national harmony, effective governance, and democratic institutions. In Botswana, successful management of the economy can also be added to this list. A great advantage enjoyed by Botswana is the existence of cultural groups that share common structures and practices. These groups essentially constitute "an ethnic core" that, according to Anthony Smith, provides the firmest base for constructing a nation-state.[23] Although Tanzania has been much less successful in its economic pursuits, it has cohered as a nation despite its ethnic pluralism. Among the contributing factors to civil peace have been the social-democratic ideology of its single party and the benign rule of philosopher-politician, Julius Nyerere. Nyerere's successors have been similarly moderate leaders. However, high levels of corruption and a persistently poor economic model have impeded the emergence of a developmental state. Moreover, the increasing provocation of inter-ethnic tensions for political gain, and the falsification of election results in 2000 to maintain control of the island territory of Zanzibar, are tendencies that could fray Tanzania's fragile achievements as a nation and state.[24]

C te d'Ivoire provides a striking example of how the building or dismantling of nations and states depends critically on how a country is governed. During the early post-colonial decades, this West African country was noted for its political stability and economic growth. President Houphou t-Boigny, the dominant political leader for over four decades, adopted an accommodative approach to various sectional groups, including large immigrant communities from neighboring countries, especially Burkina Faso. Despite C te d'Ivoire's weak economic performance during the 1980s, this personalist regime fended off criticism from outside, notably from the French government of François Mitterand, and at home from pro-democracy activists whose confrontations with the government grew increasingly violent.[25] Today, nine years after Houphou t-Boigny's death in December 1993, the key institutions of the Ivoirian state, including the armed forces, are fractured. The Ivoirian nation has also split along religious, regional and ethnic lines primarily as a result of the xenophobic campaigns of Houphou t-Boigny's political successors.

Ghana, C te d'Ivoire's eastern neighbor, has followed a different path. After

the overthrow of independence leader, Kwame Nkrumah, in 1966, the country experienced fifteen years of alternating military and civilian governments. From the end of 1981, Jerry Rawlings oversaw two decades of regime continuity despite many institutional changes, first as head of a military regime until 1992, and then as President of an emergent democracy until 2000. Although Rawlings belonged to a minority ethnic group, the Ewe, he successfully crafted multi-ethnic support for his military regime and then his party, the National Democratic Congress. In brief, the Rawlings era, despite its fierce political struggles, culminated in a Ghana that boasted a revitalized state, disciplined security forces, constitutional institutions, and relative national harmony. Assuming progress can be made in overcoming the country's economic weaknesses, and rent-seeking behavior is kept in check, Ghana can celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in 2007 as a coherent nation and state.[26]

Lastly, with its long experience with representative institutions, Senegal has enabled its citizens to successfully navigate the transition from single-party rule to multi-party democracy. Although the country still contends with a protracted rebellion in the southern Casamance region, the Senegalese nation has enjoyed considerable coherence and continuity. Among the contributing factors are the lingua franca provided by the Wolof language and the support provided by Islamic sufi orders to secular state authority. The post-colonial history of Senegal has been marked by the vigorous resistance of its long-serving government leaders, President L opold S dar Senghor and his successor, Abdou Diouf, to challenges to their political hegemony, while incrementally permitting greater scope for civic and political freedoms. When the transfer of power to the main opposition party led by Abdoulaye Wade finally occurred in 2000, the peaceful nature of this transition mirrored that of Ghana, simultaneously strengthening the state and nation.

Transforming Nationalism via Republicanism. One of the main lessons suggested by this survey coincides with a set of arguments advanced by J r-gen Habermas.[27] Habermas emphasizes the importance of the constitutional state, of republicanism and citizenship rights, in fostering a nation that transcends cultural identities. It is these ingredients of modern states that render them both "self-restraining" and transformative of social relations.[28] For Habermas, a nation mainly conceived in terms of sentiment, history, and culture risks being regarded as an imposition by minority sections of the population. Behind the "façade of cultural homogeneity" could lurk "the oppressive maintenance of a hegemonic majority culture."[29] By contrast, a defining characteristic of the constitutional state is the fostering of a nation that substitutes "the universalism of an egalitarian legal community" for "the particularism of a cultural community bound together by origin and fate."[30] In Habermas' formulation, the constitutional state eventually transforms the nationalism that "was originally the vehicle for its success."[31] The path of republicanism, human rights, and democracy yields "a cosmopolitan understanding of the nation over and against an ethnocentric interpretation of the nation as a pre-political entity."[32]

Habermas' arguments are worth citing at length because they run so counter to

those increasingly prominent in African political and intellectual circles. Profound disappointments with state and nation have shifted the focus of debate towards an ethnic model of political authority. In his classic formulation, Peter Ekeh distinguished two publics in Africa, one civic and the other primordial or communal.[33] The civic public derives historically from the colonial authority and lacks normative force. The communal public persists alongside the civic and is invested with moral authority drawn from traditional structures and practices. In his recent writings, Ekeh has virtually abandoned hope that the national constitutional state proposed by Habermas would be realized in Nigeria. Instead, he contends that Nigerian ethnic communities should assume civic and constitutional responsibilities themselves.[34] According to the scenario Ekeh outlines, political authority would devolve, to the greatest extent possible, from national to sub-national entities. The promotion of sub-national identities as the basis for the reconfiguration of state and nation in Nigeria—an idea that is vigorously contested by the central government—has assumed a malignant form in the ethnic militias that have arisen in parts of the country.[35]

A quarter-century after Ekeh introduced his "two publics" formulation, the contrast has deepened between ethnic and civic conceptions of citizenship.[36] Richard Sklar has described the presence of two "co-existing sources of legitimate political authority" in Africa—one based on the sovereign state and the other on traditional orders—as a major African contribution to constitutional government.[37] An important distinguishing feature among African polities is whether republicanism, constitutionalism, and citizenship rights as defined by Habermas have been deepened or eroded. Siad Barre in Somalia adopted divisive clan politics to defend his authoritarian regime after an early period of both effective and inclusive governance. Juvénal Habyarimana in Rwanda responded to an emergent trans-ethnic civil society by fostering Hutu xenophobia in his bid to overcome democratic challengers at home and Tutsi insurgents on the periphery.[38] Houphouët-Boigny's successors abrogated the citizenship rights of members of the large immigrant communities, and deformed state institutions, such as the judiciary and armed forces, in their struggle to retain or capture power.[39] In the case of Kenya, human rights activist, Gitobu Imanyara, states that "it is a miracle that we have come this far without disintegrating" after, in the words of Bill Berkeley, the deliberate fostering "of ethnicity as an instrument of tyranny" under President Daniel arap Moi.[40]

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If this review is extended to other countries, such as Benin, Mali, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, it would demonstrate that republican institutionalism has proven to be the most rewarding trajectory for Africa's "unfinished" nations and states.[41] Government leaders in

Senegal and Ghana manipulated state institutions to thwart the political opposition, but they refrained from wholly undermining these institutions thereby facilitating the consolidation of state and nation. The situation in Uganda, by contrast, remains uncertain because the personalist and increasingly autocratic rule of Yoweri Museveni has stymied the emergence of a constitutional state. It is therefore not simply the hegemony of western political ideologies but Africa's experiential record that sustains the claim that the republican and constitutional path is the most efficacious for fostering coherent nations and states. This observation reinforces the desirability of engaging political actors and communities through open and democratic processes.[42]

Although there are a multiplicity of nation-state trajectories that have been tried in Africa, the greatest political progress has occurred in countries that pursued a "more abstract level of social integration in terms of the legal implementation of democratic citizenship."[43] In an earlier study, I remarked that "the failure to establish a stable democratic political order…has deepened Nigeria's predicament as a state and aspirant nation," a contention that applied to several other African countries.[44] The state-nations that appear to point the way to a less turbulent future are those in which the authority of the sovereign state increasingly rests on an edifice of constitutional rights and privileges accessible to all citizens. In a continent in which conflict and misrule are ever prevalent, greater attention should be devoted to learning how the precarious processes of nation and state-building can be simultaneously fostered through the entrenchment of a democratic political order.

NOTES

1 Sam C. Nolutshungu, *Limits of Anarchy: Intervention and State Formation in Chad* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 277.

2 Anthony D. Smith, "State-Making and Nation-Building," in John A. Hall, ed., *States in History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 230.

3 Otto Pflanze, "Nationalism in Europe, 1848-1871," 139. See Philip D. Curtin, "Nationalism in Africa, 1945-1965," *Review of Politics* 28 (1966): 143-153.

4 Pflanze, "Nationalism in Europe," 139.

5 Alfred Cobban, *The Nation State and National Self-Determination* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969).

6 Smith, "State-Making," 230. For a skeptical view of Africa's prospects, see "Still-Born Nationalisms" in Stanislav Andreski, *The African Predicament* (New York: Atherton Press, 1968).

7 According to Jeffrey Herbst, "the nation-state's dominance has become so total that it is often forgotten that its current hegemony is really fairly recent. It was not until the nineteenth century that the postfeudal political entities were converted into national states in Europe." "Global Exchange and the Future of Existing Nation-States," in Wolfgang Danspeckgruber, ed., *The Self-Determination of Peoples: Community, Nation and State in an Interdependent World* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 15.

8 Anna Simons, "Somalia: The Structure of Dissolution," in Leonardo A. Villal n and Phillip A. Huxtable, *The African State at a Critical Juncture: Between Disintegration and Reconfiguration* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 57-73.

9 The Republic of Somaliland is in a position of enjoying empirical statehood while being denied juridical recognition, in contrast to the reverse situation for the majority of African states. For the distinction, see Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, "Why Africa's Weak States Persist," *World Politics*, 35 (1982): 1-24. In October 2002, yet another attempt was made to reconstitute the Somali nation-state in a meeting of representatives of numerous factions in Eldoret, Kenya.

10 Smith, "State-Making," 230.

11 Remarks at the Conference on State, Market and Democracy in Africa, Emory University, November 1998.

12 Makau Mutua, "The Tutsi and Hutu Need a Partition," *The New York Times*, 30 August 2000.

13 The extensive literature on these subjects include Rotimi T. Suberu, Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001); Abubakar Momoh and Said Adejumobi, eds., *The National Question in Nigeria: Comparative Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); and 'Kunle Amuwo, et. al., *Federalism and Political Restructuring in Nigeria*

(Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books, 1998).

14 Nigerian Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, wrestled with this paradox in his passionate critique of the dictatorial regime of General Sani Abacha: *The Open Sore of A Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). See also Crawford Young's review of Soyinka's book, "The Impossible Necessity of Nigeria: A Struggle for Nationhood," *Foreign Affairs* 75 (November/December 1996): 139-142.

15 These remarks by Obasanjo were made in various public meetings.

16 Crawford Young and Thomas Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

17 Nolutshungu, "Limits to Anarchy," 280.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid, 283.

20 Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

21 Public lecture, Emory University, 2001.

22 Although peace talks now revolve around the conduct of a future referendum in which the peoples of the South would decide between autonomy or independence, John Garang, leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), has throughout two decades of warfare rejected secession as the Movement's primary objective.

23 Smith, "State-making," 256-263.

24 For a discussion of these tensions in Tanzania during the Nyerere era, see Henry Bienen, "The State and Ethnicity: Integrative Formulas in Africa," in Donald Rothchild and Victor A. Olorunsola, *State Versus Ethnic Claims: African Policy Dilemmas* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983), 113-114. Bienen's article, as well as several others in this volume, are still pertinent to the issues being examined here.

25 For an excellent synthesis, see Dwayne Woods, "C te d'Ivoire: The Crisis of Distributive Politics," in *The African State at a Critical Conjuncture*, pp. 213-232.

26 One of the ironies of Africa's post-colonial history concerns the "wager" between the conservative and capitalist Houphou t-Boigny and the radical and socialist Nkrumah as to whose strategy would prevail. For years it appeared that the former had won the wager. Of the factors accounting for the reversal in fortune, none seems more significant than the contrast between Ghana's successful, and C te d'Ivoire's, disastrous transition from authoritarian rule to pluralist democracy after 1989.

27 J rgen Habermas, "The European Nation-State – Its Achievements and Its Limits," in *Gopal Balakrishnan, Mapping the Nation* (New York and London: Verso Books, 1996), 281-294.

28 See Andreas Schedler, et al., *The Self-Restraining State*, (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999); and also Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), especially Chapter 5, "Political Culture."

29 Habermas, "The European Nation-state," 289. A comparative study has now been written of the damaging consequences of "pathological homogenization" by Heather Rae: *State Identities and the Homogenisation of Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). This term refers to strategies to establish state legitimacy and authority "through the creation of an ostensibly unified population." See Rae, 5.

30 Habermas, "European Nation-State," 287.

31 Ibid, 288.

32 Ibid, 287.

33 Peter P. Ekeh, "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17 (1975): 91-112. Ekeh's article is reprinted in Peter Lewis, *Africa: Dilemmas of Development and Change* (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1998), 44-63.

34 Peter P. Ekeh, "Urhobo and the Nigerian Federation: Whither Nigeria?" Internet, http://www.waado.org/Organizations/UNA/GuestLecture_Ekeh.html (Date accessed: October 2001).

35 The Odudua People's Congress in Western Nigeria has fostered ethno-nationalism among the Yoruba. For the activities of the Bakassi Boys in Anambra state in Eastern Nigeria, see Norimitsu Onishi, "Nigerian Militias Wield Power Through Intimidation," *The New York Times*, 6 October 2002, A3.

36 I first heard the notion of "ethnic citizenship" advanced by Kenyan political scientist, Stephen Ndegwa.

37 Richard L. Sklar, "African Polities: The Next Generation," in Richard Joseph, ed., *State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), 175-176.

38 Timothy Longman, "State, Civil Society and Genocide in Rwanda," in *State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa*, 339-358.

39 This development in C te d'Ivoire is part of an unfortunate trend in several African countries. See Jeffrey Herbst's cogent analysis: "The Role of Citizenship Laws in Multiethnic Societies: Evidence from Africa," in *State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa*, 267-283.

40 Bill Berkeley, "An Encore for Chaos?" *Atlantic Monthly* (February 1996), p. 32. See also, *Divide and Rule: State-Sponsored Ethnic Violence in Kenya* (New York: Human Rights Watch/Africa, 1993).

41 This notion derives from Sylvester L. Whitaker, "The Unfinished State of Nigeria," *Worldview* 27 (1984).

42 See Richard Joseph, "War, State-Making and Democracy in Africa," in Mark R. Beissinger and Crawford Young, eds., *Beyond State-Crisis? Postcolonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective* (Baltimore, London and Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 241-262. See also, Julius Ihonvbere, "Towards the New Constitutionalism in Africa", Centre for Democracy and Development, *Occasional Papers* 4 (London 2000).

43 Habermas, "European Nation-state," 286.

44 Richard Joseph, "Autocracy, Violence and Ethnomilitary Rule in Nigeria," in *State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa*, 359.