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Historical Perspectives of African Nationalism: with Focus on Nigeria



Summary

Political discourse on the concept of nationalism has been widely based on theoretical perspectives from Western European and American societies. Regardless of developments concerning timing and stability, every nation state has some form of nationalism and nationalistic movements. Nationalism in the wider western societies was born out of the exigencies of industrialization and modernization, while in most parts in Africa, it arose from the struggle against the forces of imperialism and colonialism and from the need of determination for self-rule. Theoretical discussions on the subject of nationalism have been divided along the lines of primordialists, perennialists, ethno-symbolists, modernists and constructivists. This paper seeks to analyse African nationalistic struggles from such theoretical perspectives with a focus on Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

The two elements of state and nation are essential to nationalism discourse. Drawing a distinction between these two easily confused fields is essential to understanding nationalism. Nation is defined as an ethnic group, or cultural community shar-

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ing common culture, customs including language. State is an autonomous political group not necessarily based on uniform culture (Lewis, 1993). Drawing from analogies from historians, law historians, and sociologists, cultural and social anthropologist in an attempt to establish the foundational history of the Hungarian state (Kásler, 2017) defines the state as an institutional supreme authority, independent from external powers and enforced on the population of a specific geographical area. The evolving nature in the discourse of nationalism can be seen in ground shifting from one perspective to another by theorists; compare these two definitions of Nation by Smith A. D. Nation is a named human population occupying a historic territory, sharing common myths and memories, a public culture and common laws and customs for all members. Smith (2002) and another he gave in a public lecture a named and self-defined community whose members cultivate common myths, memories, symbols and values, possess and disseminate a distinctive public culture, reside in and identify with a historic homeland and create and disseminate common laws and shared customs. Breuilly (2005) view the change from “all members” to “self-defined” as a shift to nation as elite discourse or elite construct as against nation as a group construct. This position tends to conform to the modernist view of which a Breuilly is one, on the development of nations and nationalism as modern. Modern in the sense of breaking down the old patriarchal structure that existed in Europe prior to industrialization and modernism as we find in the examples of transformation from the ‘alien yoke’ to individual liberty. Identifiable in the English nationalism an affirmation of individual freedom, self-assertion of personality (Kohn, 1965:16) and the shift from the 18th century land based squirearchy in England to the new economic man, the Stock Broker international merchant, nabob the men created by Britain’s expansion as an imperial economic power, where international wealth was no longer tied to land. Ignatieff (1987), also, the common ascription of nations to territory and homeland tend to rob nomadic or transitory nations of their nationhood. Had the Jews not been a nation prior to the resettlement of Jews as a result of the May 1948 proclamation of Israel as a state? The controversy in the classification of the Magyars either as nomads, when viewed against the backdrop of nomadic lifestyles of great nomads of South West Asia, North Africa and the Eurasian Steppe since they have clung to sedentary lifestyle since the capture of the Carpathian Basin (Armstrong, 1982). On the other hand, during their movement from Etelek to the Carpathian basin (Kásler, 2017) they were a nation maybe one on the move at that time.

Territorial identity rose in Western Europe in the early middle ages. The United Nations or other states territorially define a state for international recognition. A more recent development in history according to Kohn (1967) practically *non-existent in Asia and Africa until the middle of twentieth century*, they were at best city-states or empires. He posits that the modern nations-states emerged in the middle of the western revolution of the 17th and 18th century in Holland England and United States of America based upon a new integrating force of group consciousness-Nationalism. Kohn has been criticized for lumping together whole countries that had very different

national trajectory strictly based on their geographical proximity. This is hazardous for the understanding cultural and political developments among countries regardless of how close they are (Dieckhoff–Jaffrelot, 2005).

The history of Europe between 1789 and 1945 adjudged synonymous with the growth and development of modern nations (Baycroft, 1998). This is not to say that nations and nationalism were developed in this periods, what was new was the concept of modern state as it is known today. Prior to this period historic scholars and social philosophers were more concerned about the merits and defects of nationalism (Smith, 1998). The concept of “nationalism” was viewed from two fronts. The first is the attitude and the other is action. Attitudes is attributable to feeling of a group loyalty that members of a nation or state have when they are concerned about their national identity. The actions that members of a nation-state apply when there is a perceived enemy that threatens the existence of the group (Druckman, 1994) or when seeking to achieve self-determination engendering what the Italians under Mussolini called *egoism* of nationalism.

Nationalism (Gellner, 1983) is the sense of political togetherness that people feel part of a “we” group as against the “they” group. This distinction of “them” and “us” can produce an ideology or movement that can be antithetical and produce actions that is maniac in nature (Negedu–Atabor, 2015). Nationalistic sentiment as a movement is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment (Gellner, 1983). The dismissal of pre-linguistic man as meaningless by Gottfried Herder 1744-1803 is appropriate he says that only language makes man human and it can only be learnt in a community other characteristics of community are shared customs and traditions. This position is synonymous to Kedourie (1994) when he viewed the whole to be prior to and more important than the part, that the part cannot exist on their own without the coherent and ordered whole. Consequently, the freedom of the individual lies in identifying himself with the whole (Ozkirimli, 2010). Nations have always existed regardless of how primitive they had been.

PRE-COLONIAL SYSTEMS OF ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA

The history of nations and nationalism in Africa as in other climes predates her struggle for self-rule, before the intrusion of the British into the geographical space that is present day Nigeria.¹ The country then was made up of several groups, which were already operating, similar to the modern day definition of state. According to Smith (1998) a state is representative of a group of individuals possessing common and distinctive elements of culture, unified economic system, citizenship rights or all members having a sentiment of solidarity arising out of common experiences and occupying a common territory. Passports, social security number and identity cards did not define citizenship then, but by survival and protectionism. According to Charles Willy an American sociologist, the state was a war machine in this statement accredited to him *state make war and war make states* (Tilly, 1993). Men

are dependent upon to fight in wars that keep the states intact they therefore are derivative of the right to its citizenship, but this citizenship is not devoid of class or hierarchy in these societies.

The various ethnic and cultural groups that make up the country Nigeria existed as autonomous political entities. These entities had their own political systems, social and religious values distinct from one another, described by Sir Hugh Clifford the Governor General of Nigeria 1923-1956, as a collection of independent Native States, separated from one another by great distances, by differences of history and traditions and by ethnological, racial, tribal, political, social and religious barriers (Omu, 1998). This narrative was evident in the larger groups of the Hausa-Fulani kingdom, Yoruba kingdom, Igbo kingdom, Benin kingdom, Nupe kingdom. and nations from its definition as a large body of people united by common descent, history, culture and language, inhabiting a particular territory as epitomized by the several minority groups like the Idomas, Tivs, Ijaws, Urhobos, Itsekiris, Ibibios.

Osadolor (2001) bemoans the difficulty among scholars in reaching a consensus on the definition of state even at various conferences focused at reaching an acceptable definition; choosing the definition of state by Zartman (1995) who posits that a State is the authoritative political institution that is sovereign over a recognized territory. Focusing on the three functions of the state spelt out by the definition, which is sovereign authority, accepted source of identity and the arena of politics the state as an institution tangible organization of decision making and identity and security guarantor within the populated territory. He cites Iliffe (1995) who points to the slow development of states in the West African rain forest when compared its Savanna counterpart when early Europeans to Africa first described them, most were adjudged stateless but he points to the Benin Kingdom as a state. Believed to have originated as a religious centre, but transformed into a state conquering other microstates around it and subjecting them to its authority (Iliffe, 1995).²

The military innovativeness of the Benin Kingdom is evident from the over 10,000-kilometer earth boundary built round the city to protect it from invaders, existing until date. Oba Ewuare carried out these structuring, this organized system of administration was what the Portuguese met when they arrived in 1486 the sculptural works, wealth, and sophistication of the palace deeply impressed the European visitors. Osadolor (2001) also points us to the military might of the ancient Benin kingdom, the military tactics and the armoury could only have been possible under an organized state. These accounts put a hole in the Kohn's theory that there were no nation states in Asia and Africa. Iliffe also points to the Igbo peoples in today's Nigeria as stateless in ancient times based on the accounts of the Europeans description. This position may not be far from preconceptions that a state ought to have a single stool of leadership, but the Igbos operated a completely decentralized system where there were no recognized single stool of authority but all representatives of families at the village square jointly reached decisions bothering on the state. They organized their lives based on this system that is close to the operational structure of democracy as it is today, fitting perfectly with its modus

operandi. With shared responsibilities among age grades and titled chiefs seeing to the day-to-day administration of the community. In line with the position of Busia (1962) who avers that majority of pre-colonial states were stable, decentralized, and allowed for citizen's participation in the political process. These various groups were governed by self-developed administrative styles, which differed from place to place. Described by Oyovbaire (1983) as kingdoms, empires, city-states, chiefdoms, caliphate and village republics. While the Hausa-Fulani of the core north had a predominantly central system of government based on Islamic law, as the Emir or Sultan had sweeping powers. The Yoruba kingdom operated a semi central system in the sense that the Oba who is though the centre of authority was subject to checks and balances by the Oyomisi (elders' council) or the Ifa priest. The reference to native states by the Governor General could also mean definition of ethnic communities by Smith (1998) of which he classifies as a named human community with shared ancestry, myth, histories and cultures having affiliation with a particular territory and a sense of solidarity, cultural affinities as against kinship. These ethnic primordial nations maybe true of some of the groups but not all of the groups that make up today's Nigeria. The Benin kingdom for example comprised of various ethnic groups who either by conquest or voluntarily for the reason of protection were content to be associated to the great kingdom meeting up with demands of tributes and taxes required of them as being part of the kingdom. Iliffe (1995) captures the nature of nationalism at this time with the reference to threat of retaliation, each state or quasi state is conscious of the possibility of an invasion by another. Primordial in nature, which Lawson (2005) depicts the nations as robust quality of longevity, relatedness constancy, and emotional attachment with respect to a particular group and all the elements of shared language, customs, religion and artefacts. Regardless of time and space where there is a nation or state there, is nationalism with an identification of *them* and *us* manifested in either feeling or action? Kohn's submission that there were no states in Africa prior to European invasion is questionable when viewed from the perspective of the accounts of administration by the European invaders. What took place was an obstruction of internal process of state formation because of the European invasion, which left trails of corruption and political instability (Tangie, 2006).

COLONIALISM AND THE EFFECTS AND CHANGES ON THE NATION(S)

Slave trade preceded colonialism. A thriving business that took place from the 15th to 19th century. Several accounts on the conduct of slave trade (Law, 1995; Ojo, 2008; Wariboko 1998), reveals an established relationship between African leader/elite traders and their European counterpart. The accounts by Wariboko (1998) showed a dependence on the European traders and British consul for support in the internal political intrigues of power struggle between William Dappa Pebble Perekunle the VI and Chief Madu in Bonny kingdom. Law (1995) reference to Hopkins theory that the abolition of slave trade and the reduction in lewd lucre that followed, brought about

political strife and civil wars that disrupted the export trade in palm oil and other raw materials for the European industries provoked the annexation of the Yorubaland and subsequently led to the partitioning of Africa. The internal wrangling made the various nations vulnerable to Europeans who equipped with knowledge of the African nation having traded with them for four centuries agreed among them in the Berlin conference of 1884/85 convened by Ottoman Von Bismarck on the partitioning of Africa (Eluwa et al., 1996). This change of approach from trading to exploitation was not without resistance.

Resistance in the various territories set the stage for nationalist movement in Nigeria as with other parts of Africa. Some accounts of this resistance was the Benin expedition of 1897, when the Benin monarch Oba Ovoranmwun resisted attempts to forcefully make him sign a treaty bequeathing his kingdom to the British crown. He therefore placed an embargo on the Benin River, which disrupted trading activities of the British. Another resistance was the Ijebu war of 1892, which was the result of the king Awujah's blockade of the trading route to Lagos, which was at this time a colony. The Aniocha war against the British Royal Niger company 1883–1914 and the resistance by King Jaja of Opobo against the British attempts at having direct access to the hinterland palm oil markets (Ubaku et al., 2014). The conquering of these various nations due to more sophisticated firepower gave Britain the ground to establish the various administrative units. These disparate, autonomous, heterogeneous and sub national groups were merged together in 1914 and named Nigeria this gave birth to the Nigerian nation. This formation drives home the definition of nation by Benedict Anderson that says, it is an imagined political community both inherently limited and sovereign. Imagined because even members of the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them (Anderson, 2006). Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness it invent nations where they do not exist (Gellner, 1964).

Colonialism is the exertion of political control by one powerful nation over a weaker nation (Aderibigbe, 2006). It refers to the establishment and maintenance of foreign rule over a set of people for getting maximum economic benefit by the colonizing power (Fadeiye, 2005). Colonialism had its roots in the greed that European countries exhibited towards Africa's untapped natural resources (Mapuva–Chari, 2010). Colonialism implies formal political control involving territorial annexation and loss of sovereignty. The nature of governance applied by the British in most parts of the country, the system of indirect rule gave the African leaders a false feeling of being in charge or part of the leadership process, when in reality the shots were called by the colonial masters. This was responsible for the delayed nationalistic consciousness especially in the north where indirect rule was successful. Colonial expansionism is economic in aim, monopolistic in orientation, political in justification and military in method. The relationship between the colonizing country and the colonized is asymmetrical. It is that of dependency that favours the occupying nation to the detriment of the occupied territory. Colonization becomes the process of acquisition and maintenance of territory (Adeyeri–Adejuwon, 2012).

IMPERIALISM, PAN-AFRICANISM AND NATIONALISM

African nationalistic thought of independence has two major trends: Pan-Africanism and anti-imperialism. Pan-Africanism resulted from the abolition of slave trade that had been practiced for over four centuries. Its abolition was in most parts inspired by the same divisions that led to the civil war in America. The industrially more advanced North, where slaves were no longer needed as a result of technical development, became a threat to the Southern states, which had previously dominated federal legislature for more than half a century, and had an economy still heavily dependent on slavery. Although slavery was not the primary reason for the war, slaves were the direct beneficiaries, as the war led to the abolition of slave trade. The racism and discrimination against black people that followed the abolition and the struggles thereafter gave rise to Pan-Africanism. This gives credence to the proposition that the painful transition to modernism laid the foundation for the birth of nationalism (Smith, 1998). In the words of by Dr Shepperson a complicated Atlantic triangle of influences between the new world, Europe and Africa (Legum, 1965). In 1919, Dr Du Bois wrote: "...the African movement mean to us what the Zionist movement meant to the Jews, the centralization of race efforts and the recognition of racial fount." While African nationalism was, by definition, an antithesis of European imperialism, which resulted from intensive rivalries brought about by the partitioning of Africa, seen as a source of raw materials, in the 1800s for markets and spheres of influence (James, 1995). By the end of the 19th century, 90 percent of Africa was in the hands of the European imperialists. This colonialism brought about revolts in most parts. The desire for self-determination gave birth to African nationalist struggles. The 19th and 20th century saw the development of diaspora in Pan-Africanism among Afro-Americans and Afro-Caribbean like Henry Sylvester Williams, George Padmore, W.E.B Du Bois, C. L. James and others. The Pan-Africanist thought was based on a cultural and racial issue with the main demand being equality and non-discrimination. The 1923 manifesto, for instance, proclaimed "In fine, we ask that black people, be treated as men" (Legum, 1965:29).

The 1944 meeting of welfare students, and other movements based in Britain led to the establishment of the Pan-African Federation and to the organization of the famous fifth Pan-African congress in Manchester in 1945, with over 200 delegates – of trade unions, political parties and other organizations – in attendance, including Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya. They demanded autonomy and independence for several African countries and communities (Shivji, 2009).

NIGERIAN NATIONALIST ENDEAVOURS

Making use of religious animosities, the British policy reinforced differences and deepened the gap between the various groups that make Nigeria. The regional administrative system promoted by the colonialists made sure that people were divided along ethnic and regional lines. Some policies simply could not be implemented in

some regions. Taxation, for example, was alien to most parts in the south of the country and stirred up a number of revolts (Warri, 1927; Aba women's riot, 1929) (cf. Oduwobi, 2011).

One of the revelations of the nationalist movement was that the education provided for the Nigerian population served the single purpose of facilitating administration for the colonial masters, as they could not recruit sufficient labour otherwise. This is similar to the start of public education in Europe, which had been a privilege of the elite prior to industrialization and urbanization according to Tom Nain's pathology of Modern developmental history. The Nigerians – predominantly from the south-western and south-eastern areas, who had the opportunity to travel to Europe for further studies had first-hand experiences with Pan-African activists like Marcus Garvey and W.E.B Dubois, key proponents of the movements demanding the emancipation of Africa. The West African Students' Union was founded in London in 1925. The initial focus was not based on patriotism towards Nigeria as a country, but on assertive ethnic consciousness, especially with the Igbos and Yoruba. They began the agitation for self-rule.

The church also provided platforms for the nationalist movement, as European missionaries were racists and tried to prevent African leadership in the church. This led Nigerian clergies to develop denominations independent of European missionaries and these new pulpits provided avenues for the free expression of a criticism of the colonial rule. The urban phenomenon of ethnic kinship organization was also instrumental in the awakening nationalism; and led to the formation of major ethnic group unions like the Egbe Omo Oduduwa and the Igbo Federal Union. Others included non-political associations like the Nigerian Union of Teachers, the Nigerian Law Association and the Nigerian Produce Traders' Association led by Obafemi Awolowo. The youth and student groups, consisting of intellectuals and professionals, were more politically conscious and stood in the vanguard of nationalism. In 1922 Nigerian representatives were elected to the legislative council, and this provided politically conscious Nigerians with a specific platform. Hubert Macaulay, publisher of the Lagos Daily News aroused political awareness in Nigerians and acted as leader of the Nigerian National Democratic Party, an ascendancy of the National Youth Congress. He co-founded the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons, the first Nationalist Party in Nigeria with Nnamdi Azikiwe, and united the heterogeneous ethnic groups in a solid bloc. Hubert Macaulay became the first leader and Azikiwe was the secretary.

Nigerians' participation in the Second World War was also instrumental in the struggle when they fought alongside other British soldiers. The trade unions, advocating Marxist views, played a significant role in the fight for self-government.

Somewhat late, with permission from the emir the Northern Hausa-Fulani established the Northern People's Congress in the 1940s, led by Tafawa Balewa. Obafemi Awolowo created the Action Group in 1951.

For the purpose of self-government, the disparate groups were able to put their differences aside and come together to achieve independence in line with Anderson's position that every successful revolution defines itself in national terms (Anderson, 2006), and Nigeria was able to achieve independence in 1960.

CONCLUSION

African political development was seriously undermined for a long time, partly because of its dependence on oral tradition to pass information from generation to generation. Nevertheless, accounts by the first Europeans who met Africans show that Africa did have its own forms of administration before the European invasion. The argument that Europe exported civilization to Africa is unethical in the opinion of theorists like Wallenstein (1961) who sees European invasion as a clog in the wheel of Africa's political development, aborted in the wake of European invasion.

Gottfried Herder said that the concept of a pre-linguistic man is wrong, as it is language that makes man human. Wherever there existed a human community, they differentiate the 'we' group from 'them', and wherever this existed there has always been some form of nationalism.

NOTES

- ¹ Emergence of Nigerian Nationalism <http://countrystudies.us/nigeria/20.htm>.
- ² Drawing of Benin city made by an English officer in 1897 of Benin Empire, Wikipedia the%20free%20encyclopedia.html

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