

What is the Relation Between Nationalism and the 'colonial difference'?

Written by Adam Groves

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ADAM GROVES, JUN 26 2008

Nationalism has been much explored with relation to the decolonisation process. However, there is disagreement as to what role it played and how it functioned. In assessing the relationship between nationalism and colonial difference, this essay will draw on the work of Partha Chatterjee to argue that a distinction might be drawn between political and cultural nationalism. Whilst political nationalism sought to challenge the notion of 'colonial difference' in the outer realm, cultural nationalism sought to maintain it (albeit reformed and reshaped) in the inner realm. This contradictory process continues to have important consequences for Africa today.

In his path-breaking work, 'Imagined Communities', Benedict Anderson aimed to explain the creation and global spread of nationalism. A significant factor in understanding the origins of anti-colonial nationalisms, he asserted, lay in the activities of the native 'bilingual intelligentsias'. They had access to "modern Western culture in the broadest sense, and in particular, to the models of nationalism, nation-ness, and nation-state produced elsewhere in the course of the nineteenth century" (1991: 113). Many of the primary figures in African anti-colonial nationalism, including Kambarage Nyerere of Tanzania and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, spoke the language of their colonial masters and had lived in Europe or North America. Drawing on the knowledge and experiences they gained, these indigenous intelligentsia were able to forge a nationalist consciousness and, having been denied positions of power by the colonial regimes, they became the spokesmen for anti-colonial nationalism.

Yet critics have suggested that Anderson's account denies the colonised world any real agency. Ania Loomba asserts that in accepting the explanation, one accepts that "anti-colonial nationalism is itself made possible and shaped by European political and intellectual history" (2005: 158). It is thus reduced to a 'derivative discourse' which is dependent on the models and language gained from the colonial power. The Subaltern Studies collective, and in particular Partha Chatterjee, have sought to challenge this conception. Chatterjee asks, "If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain 'modular' forms already made available to them by

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Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine?" He concludes that Europe and the Americas must not only have scripted "colonial enlightenment and exploitation", but also the "anti-colonial resistance and post-colonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonised" (1993: 5). Yet Chatterjee "cannot reconcile [Anderson's Euro-centrism] with the evidence of anti-colonial nationalism", for, in many ways, it focussed not on a particular identity—not on derivation—but on the *differences* between western and Asian/African identities (ibid: 5, 216). As such, if we wish to understand anti-colonial nationalisms, we must look not only at what was borrowed from the colonial powers, but also at how 'colonial difference' was maintained and challenged.

In order to achieve this, it is helpful to draw a distinction between nationalism as a political movement (the outer domain) and nationalism as a cultural construct (the inner domain). Whilst the former seeks to challenge the colonial state, the latter enables the colonised subject to create an autonomous personal space. It is this second process where, long before it beings its political struggle, nationalism operates "to fashion a modern project that is nevertheless *not* Western". Chatterjee writes that "if the nation is an imagined community, then this is where it is brought into being" (ibid: 6, emphasis mine). Thus, anti-colonial nationalism often declared its sovereignty over issues such as language, religion, novels, art, schooling and popular culture. Indeed, this was a "fundamental feature of anti-colonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa" (Chatterjee, 2004: 407). Abiola Irele has argued, for example, that for Gold Coast intellectuals such as Joseph Caseley-Hayford and J. B Danquah, "the rhetorical and discursive became, to use Carl von Clausewitz's famous expression, politics by other means" (2001: 52). Indeed, "the literary effort became identified with an ideological project, which often turned out to be coextensive with aggressive militancy" (ibid: 53). Irele observes that parallels can be drawn with cultural nationalism in Nigeria, which reinforces the general application of her observation. Similarly, Akudinobi reports that African filmmakers emerged as "crucial to the formulation, nurturing, and orientation of specific nationalist discourses". This saw "the incorporation of indigenous legends, aesthetics, and philosophical precepts in their works". Akudinobi notes that the memoirs of the former Nigerian Film Corporations are titled "No... Not Hollywood" and asserts that this "unequivocally advocates alternative representational paradigms" (2001). In this way, anti-colonial nationalism has fiercely asserted a *difference* between the cultures of the coloniser and the colonised. In the inner domain, anti-colonial nationalisms sought to maintain notions of 'difference'—reshaped and reformed—in an effort to "resist the sway of the modern institutions of disciplinary power" (Chatterjee, 1993: 75).

Yet simultaneously, in the outer domain, where nationalism functions as a political movement, it has "fought relentlessly to erase the marks of colonial difference" (ibid: 26). The power of the colonial state was premised on "the preservation of the alienness of the ruling group" (ibid: 18). In other words, only by affirming their superiority could colonialists legitimise their activities. This process took a number of forms: race marked an obvious choice in many

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countries and was used to differentiate between those who could participate in governance and civil society. Similarly, language was sometimes the basis for deciding who was allowed freedom of speech. South Africa provides one example where both of these 'colonial differences' were often starkly evident.

Anti-colonial nationalism sought to undermine 'colonial difference' by demonstrating the inherent impossibility of reconciling the conditions of colonial rule with the modern regimes of power which the colonialists sought to construct. These regimes were founded on the justification that, by "making social regulations an aspect of the self-disciplining of normalized individuals, power is made more *productive, effective and humane*" (ibid: 17, emphasis added). Anti-colonial nationalists accepted this notion and argued "not that colonial rule was imposing alien institutions of state on indigenous society but rather that it was restricting and even violating the true principles of modern government" (ibid: 74). Thus, in South Africa, Nelson Mandela and the ANC were able to assert their rights with reference to the norms of enlightened modern states. Similarly, in Algeria, nationalist leader Emir Khalid exposed the tension between French colonialist policies and the modern regime of power it sought to promote by turning "assimilationist rhetoric against the colonial system it was supposed to justify, demanding equal rights for Muslims" (Thomas, 2005: 148). In taking this tack, "the project of nationalist hegemony was, and in its post-colonial phase, continues to be, to institute and ramify the characteristically modern forms of disciplinary power" (Chatterjee, 1993: 74). In many ways then, post-colonial states forged through nationalism have accepted the ideas and practices of colonialism.

The contradictory relationship between nationalism and 'colonial difference' remains important today; it helps us to recognise and understand the fundamental similarities between colonial and postcolonial states, specifically with relation to their techniques of rule (which have emphasised political unity) and the centrality of culture and gender (where women have often been the vessel for maintaining cultural and spiritual purity). As such, this essay has argued that in assessing the relationship between nationalism and colonial difference, it is helpful to distinguish between political and cultural nationalism, so that one might trace a contradictory process which remains of continued importance to this day.

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Written by: Adam Groves
Written at: Oxford University
Written for: Eric Morier-Genoud
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About the author:

Adam Groves has an MSc in Global Governance and Diplomacy from Oxford University and a BSc in International Relations from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. Adam co-founded the website in November 2007.