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Explaining African State 'failure': Does the State Make the Nation or the Nation Make the State?

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ADAM GROVES, JUN 23 2008

In seeking to explain 'tribalism' and 'state failure' in Africa, academics often point towards the misalignment of the nation and the state: either the post-colonial state has failed to make the nation, or nations have descended into 'tribalism' in the process of carving out a state. What is common in these two presumptions, is that all African nations or states have the power to make their counterpart; by extension, the 'failure' of such processes is rarely problematised beyond domestic politics and historical references to the impact of colonialism. This essay will first discuss primordialist and constructivist perspectives on state- and nation-building, before highlighting the role which external factors have in defining the relationship between states and nations in contemporary Africa.

The 'failure' of African states and the demise of territorial nationalism should come as no great surprise if one subscribes to 'primordialist' or 'ethno-symbolist' theories. For thinkers such as Anthony Smith and John Armstrong, nations have their roots in a cultural basis of "cohesive power, historic primacy, symbols, myths, memories and values" which have persisted through time (Smith, 1991: 52). When colonial administrations drew African borders which suited their own purposes —and which often divided, subsumed or assumed indigenous identities—they left a devastating legacy. Post-colonial states such as Burundi, Rwanda, Nigeria and Kenya spanned a mosaic of ethnic groups which provided little cultural basis for a united nation; simultaneously, ethnic groups spanned the post-colonial states. Nationalist leaders therefore had great difficulty maintaining the discursive energies mobilised during the struggle for independence because their territorial nationalism was inauthentic; it was not underpinned by a culturally-united ethnic community, but by a myriad of ethnic communities. In this context, efforts at 'nation building' were vulnerable to cooptation by ethnic groups as they competed to access state patronage. Leaders struggled to define homogenous, 'legible' identities through centrally planned administrative policies – in Tanzania, for example, Julius Nyerere attempted to move all rural inhabitants into villages as he sought to create a 'modern state'. However, such policies proved futile and often damaging (Scott, 1998). For thinkers such as Smith and Armstrong, whilst a culturally-underpinned nation might build a successful state, a state faces great difficulties if it is not underpinned by

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an authentic nation. President of Mozambique, Samora Michael, summed up a popular conclusion when he declared that “for the nation [and, one might presume by extension, the state] to live the tribe must die” (in Mamdani, 1996).

Constructivist thinkers reject the notion that successful contemporary nations are defined by persistent ‘ethnic cores’. Instead, they assert that both ethnicity and nationality are, in large part, imagined. Thinkers such as Lonsdale and Ranger insist that efforts to explain contemporary political events with reference to the misalignment of ‘ancient tribal identities’ with modern states are ill conceived. There is nothing inevitable about ethnic competition. Indeed, drawing on the case of Kenya, Lonsdale (1994) has shown that far from being historically-rooted entities which have always existed, ‘tribes’—and dynamics of ethnic competition—were largely a *response* to the new institutions and rules imposed by the colonial powers. Identities—ethnic and national—have been imagined. For Bayart, “the ways in which Africans have adopted the territorial frameworks handed down by the colonising powers is one of the salient characteristics of the continent’s recent history. The imported state was immediately taken over by autochthonous peoples” because it represented the obvious (and often only) means by which to access colonial power structures (2005: 31). The ‘formation’ and mobilisation of ethnic identities thus represented a strategy by which to gain access to the state’s resources.

Primordialist and constructivist theorists agree that African post-colonial states have failed to ‘make’ nations. Primordialists contend that this is because it represents an impossible task without culturally united ethnic cores (nations can make states, but states cannot make nations). In contrast, constructivists dismiss the notion of ‘identity-related divinities’ and assert that ethnic communities in contemporary Africa were formed in large part as a *response* to the legacy of colonialism. However, these identities have frequently been mobilised in their competitive form; political tribalism. For constructivists then, states can make nations, and nations can make states, but the leaders of post-colonial states have often manipulated nations and nations have often sought to exploit the resources available in post-colonial states.

The constructivist critique is a convincing one, yet by focussing on the question at hand, we risk missing important external dynamics which contribute to relations between states and nations. Reigning international imperatives demand that a state system of some form exists (Jackson, 1990). The work of the international financial institutions, international organisations and international NGOs presumes a state framework. Meanwhile growing international connectedness and systemic pressures—such as the need to engage in international diplomacy and economic negotiations, sovereignty claims, UN membership and bureaucratic requirements—compel some form of state-based identification. These ‘external’ factors demand that states (no matter how weak they might be) are sustained.

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Yet simultaneously, these same institutions may subvert states' efforts at nation-building. For example, the Ogoni movement in Nigeria—led by Ken Saro-Wiwa's MOSOP—successfully appealed to “formidably encompassing agents of surveillance” such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International in its efforts to challenge the Nigerian state (cf. Ferguson, 2006: 111). Watts (2003: 20) writes that “MOSOP's claims were territorial as a basis for an Ogoni state, and as a way of securing ‘their oil’”. The emergence of a global civil society means that processes of nation-building are no longer necessarily reserved within the national (or even nationalist) domain. A more recent—and similarly illuminating case—saw international observers and the mass media playing an important role in the Luo ethnic group's contestation of the 2007 elections in Kenya.

The postcolonial struggle to ‘make’ nations in Africa is frequently examined with relation to questions of ‘state failure’ and ethnic tensions. This essay has considered the formative relationship between states and nations by considering primordialist and constructivist perspectives. It has argued that the constructivist analysis is convincing: there is nothing inevitable about post-colonial states' failure to ‘make’ nations. However, by remaining within the confines of this debate, we are liable to miss the importance of external factors which are often instrumental in shaping the contradictory relationship between states and nations in contemporary Africa. The current debate is thus largely blind to processes through which African states seek to reorganise themselves in response to external interventions, and instead perpetuates analyses which view African societies in terms of their “lacks, absences, failings and problems” (Ferguson, 2006).

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