

# BOUNDARIES AND AFRICAN NATIONALISM\*

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National boundaries are assuming critical importance in Africa. My thesis is that emphasis on national boundaries and disputes over them are desirable in the evolution of nationalism on the African continent. This derives from the larger construct that nationalism is an essential political stage in the extension of the rule of law from the clan or tribe to the global level, and it is a prime element in attaining an essential economic stage—what W. W. Rostow terms “the takeoff.”<sup>1</sup> Nationalism is a cohesive force; it could engender the empathy and trust which must exist if individuals and tribes are to pool their talents and invest their resources for mutual benefit by sinking their differences before they sink their newly launched country. A corollary of my thesis is that the emergence of independent states in Africa (and in Asia, to cite the Indian-Goan affair) creates boundary problems of a new magnitude.

It is periodically fashionable to decry boundary issues as anachronistic and nationalism as an inherently evil breeder of war. The critics of African nationalism are usually found in mature nations that have reaped many benefits from nationalism. There was a time when Great Britain and France threatened war over the Fashoda incident, and Americans seeking territorial expansion shouted the ultimatum of “54-40 or fight.” Hypocritical attitudes toward African nationalism will not be discussed, nor will the assumption, which I consider fallacious, that there is a cause and effect relationship between nationalism and dictatorship, although the role of boundaries in a “one party” state will be examined.

In delineating nationalistic attitudes towards boundaries, I am not suggesting that the ontogeny of African nationalism must recapitulate the phylogeny of nationalism developed in Europe. Nationalism as it is developing in Africa has unique qualities; boundaries may play an even greater role in creating a national consciousness there than they did in Europe in the 19th century. Most of the older nationalisms have grown out of the an existent base. In the cases of Meiji Japan and Bismarck Germany, the nationalists had but to rouse an incipient nation to consciousness.<sup>2</sup> This may characterize the nationalism of Nasser's Egypt, the special case of the Jews in the Diaspora, and possibly Algerian nationalism. But it is by no means the pattern of, say, Nigerian nationalism. Sub-Saharan Africa does not fit the traditional mold.

## COLONIAL BOUNDARY MAKING

While it is true that the European map-makers in the decade after 1885 were blithely carving up most of Africa in such a way as to cut

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<sup>1</sup> This theme is not discussed here but is developed at length in a forthcoming book by members of the American Universities Field Staff (edited by K. H. Silvert) concerning the *Strategy and Study of Nationalism*.

<sup>2</sup> As discussed by Rupert Emerson in *From Empire to Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

many tribes in two, the emphasis on this deplorable aspect of European imperialism has obscured an equally important consequence of the scramble for Africa. European colonial powers were creating political units on a far larger scale than had previously existed in most of Africa. In doing so, they broke up the remnants of some ancient and honorable empires, especially in the West African interior, where they completed a process begun by desiccation. The larger state did have what are called "artificial" boundaries. In fact, 74 per cent of the boundaries currently recognized in Africa were set by drawing astronomical or mathematical lines on a map.<sup>2</sup>

African nationalists inside these colonial-created boundaries can occasionally evoke memories of past glories, as in the case of the former British colony, the Gold Coast, taking the name Ghana from a famous empire which lay some 500 miles north of its present borders. But on the whole there is relatively little common tradition for African nationalists to evoke in the nation-building process. If there were, the nationalists would not have, themselves, denounced the boundaries of their new nations as artificial.

Frequent African complaints against the carving up of Africa by European nations without regard to ethnic or historical considerations were a feature of the decade from 1945 to 1955. As an example, one recalls the repeated appeals to the Trusteeship Council on behalf of the million strong Ewe people living in Togoland and the Gold Coast. The boundaries of Togo were artificially created by Germany in the closing years of the 19th century and existed only until 1914 when Togo was divided between France and Great Britain with only a modicum of attention given to tribal lines. Ewe chiefs protested this division of their people in 1919 and after, but it was not until the United Nations came into being that their petitions received any attention. Thus, the General Assembly in 1950 referred to "the great importance of the Ewe problem," and two years later in 1952 formally requested Britain and France to proceed with Togo unification. In 1956 the United Nations allowed British Togoland to be incorporated into Ghana. Despite the fact that an overwhelming majority of the Ewes voted against unification, they were unable to overcome the desire of northern Togoland to join Ghana.

In recent years, prospects of Ewe unification have dwindled even further. In 1958, on the Ghana border, I heard Minister Krebo Edusei threaten a crowd of Ewes who were asking for self-determination, calling them hooligans, and warning them that as a former hooligan himself, he knew how to deal with them. Relations between Togoland and Ghana have been severely strained by reciprocal accusations of assassination plots and border violations. Problems that the European colonial powers failed to resolve have certainly not been resolved by the independent African states.

Turning to Ghana's border with the Ivory Coast we find a different kind of boundary dispute arising from suspected deposits of oil in commercial quantities. As colonial powers, the French and British felt no need to haggle over the specific boundaries of Ghana and the Ivory Coast near

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<sup>2</sup> Calculated by K. M. Barbour in Barbour, K. M. and R. M. Prothero, *Essays in African Population* (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1961).

the Atlantic Ocean; but Houphouët-Boigny and Nkrumah could conceivably lead their nations to the brink of war over this very issue.

The efforts of the Kameruns movement to establish an African nation within the boundaries laid down by ill-informed Germans half a century ago is an extreme example of utilizing the unifying force of European colonial boundaries in building nations from tribes and of reinforcing the image by utilizing the German spelling of Cameroons.

#### EUROPEAN BOUNDARY CONCEPTS APPLIED TO AFRICA

Many African boundaries were criticized by both Africans and Europeans because they did not fit contemporary European experience. In the heyday of geographical environmentalism Ellen Semple laid down the rule that boundaries rank in the following order of importance: racial, cultural, linguistic, and political.<sup>1</sup> These criteria have limited application in Africa today. Many groups in Nigeria have greater racial affinities with peoples outside the country than within it. Also, in Eastern Africa, the distribution of Nilotic and Bantu people has no reflection in the boundaries as they were drawn.

Miss Semple's second criterion, culture, is most noticeable in two contiguous areas (sav Ghana and the Ivory Coast) which manifest the differences between French and the British versions of Western culture. Such differences raise doubts as to the ability of southern Cameroons, with its British colonial background, to coalesce with the former French Cameroons. In the Horn of Africa the British and Italians made less of an impact on the nomadic Somali societies, and fusion should be easier.

The language factor is less important in Africa than it is in Europe or Asia. The language of African nationalists south of the Sahara is either French or English. Tanganyika is the one new nation in this area with a viable African language, namely Ki-Swahili, fortunately not in the debased form used in the eastern Congo and Uganda, or of the Ki settler of Kenya, but sufficiently close to Arabic to allow borrowings. Thus Tanganyika can look forward to being a Swahili-speaking nation, although both Swahili and English will be used in government and understood by its African, Asian, and European legislators. But Tanganyika is the exception and few national boundaries in Africa are also linguistic ones. Thus three of Miss Semple's criteria have little importance in Africa, and the political factor is dominant.

In 1938, Richard Hartshorne concluded from his study of European boundaries that there existed three associations which "clearly do tie regions together."<sup>2</sup> He named the "cultural character of the population"; the "local communications of people and goods but chiefly those concerned with the economic life of the areas"; and, finally, "memories and concepts derived from a common past, that is, historical associations." An attempt to apply these to contemporary Africa merely underlines the disruptive influence of the short period of colonial control. The economic, political, and cultural associations going back many centuries usually have been out-

<sup>1</sup> Semple, Ellen Churchill, *Influences of Geographic Environment* (New York, Henry Holt, 1911).

<sup>2</sup> Colby, C. C. (ed.), *Geographic Aspects of International Relations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), p. 167 ff.

weighed by those initiated in the last five decades. Transportation, crops grown both for local consumption and for export, languages beyond primary school, and the rudimentary vision of nation beyond tribe are intimately bound up with the heritage of colonialism. Hartshorne's "common memories" (or a common colonial past) are a factor in the emergence of the Brazzaville group binding together such diverse countries as Madagascar and Senegal.

If the importance attached to boundaries results from an early stage of nationalism, we need not, therefore, compare Africa today with the Semple and Hartshorne Europe of the last hundred years, but rather use 17th-century Europe for comparative purposes. Conditions then were not unlike those of Africa today. Europe had an essentially bi-class social system and was undergoing the strain of grouping traditional feudalistic units into larger aggregates of new and uncertain loyalties. The 18th century doctrine of natural frontiers had yet to arise, and, as Sir George Clark has pointed out,<sup>6</sup> European frontiers were still "ill defined, indented, economically and politically inconvenient." The European "*frontiere*" were not lines but areas; until quite recently, this was true of many African frontiers and is still true in some places.<sup>7</sup>

Border disputes play an important role in the extension of national consciousness in that vacuum which follows the achievement of independence. New unifying symbols are so desperately needed and the problem of welding tribes into a nation is so pressing in Africa that any issue which symbolizes the new form of political organization—i.e., the nation—has great pragmatic importance.

#### ONE-PARTY NATIONS

The fact that one-party governments have emerged in nearly all the new African states seems to indicate a common conviction held by their citizens that unity is all important. The Sierra Leoneans hold this belief, although their urge toward national unity has led to a coalition government rather than to the imprisonment of the opposition. The frangible structure of new African nations makes the parliamentary expression of a "loyal opposition" a seeming contradiction in terms. The party in power has a thirst for power that is rarely slaked short of the political boundaries of the new nation. The drive toward national unity, despite certain inequities, has made Ghana more than a collection of tribal states under former British suzerainty and into that part of West Africa controlled by the Convention People's Party. If forms of democratic government dear to the West are mishandled in the process of nation-building, at least a majority of the one-party governments do represent the wishes of the greatest number of their people. That tolerance of minority views may be achieved or, at least, some progress made toward that goal once the permanence of the new nation as represented by its boundaries, is patently evident both internally and externally. The evolution of anticolonial movements into "one-party" states in Africa further intensified the need for unifying

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 10, "Frontiers," in Sir George Clark's *The Seventeenth Century*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).

<sup>7</sup> The unsettled nature of Congolese external boundaries is well summarized by Professor S. Reyner of Howard University in the *Duquesne Review*, Spring, 1961.

issues corresponding with the boundaries of the new nation, because of the importance of "interest aggregation" to the highly dissimilar groups coming to power together. As Coleman and Almond have pointed out, "The cohesion of the party is difficult to maintain. In order to avoid divisive issues, decisions are postponed, and policy proposals take the form of diffuse programs selected more for their unifying symbolism than for their effective coping with demands emanating from the society . . ."<sup>8</sup> If the principal integrative forces are 1) one-party government and 2) a consciousness of national boundaries, it may follow that a greater emphasis upon the latter will lessen the pressure for the former.

But this kind of unity was painfully absent in the Congo on Independence Day in July, 1960. Certainly, one reason for the anarchy that followed was a lack of national feeling. Patrice Lumumba was one of the very few politicians with anything like a national vision. The fact that he was a member of a small tribe and came from the least organized part of the Congo, plus the powerful stimulus he received to think in national terms when he attended the All African People's Conference in Ghana in 1958, gave him a national outlook. Just after he became Prime Minister, I asked him whether he was not following the pattern of Belgian colonialism in insisting that the boundaries of the new Congo must coincide exactly with the boundaries as laid down by the Belgians six short decades ago. Despite some annoyance at the question, he made the valid point that he must first unite and develop a nation; then he would think about changing boundaries.

#### COALESCING MOVEMENTS

Now it is true that in focusing the attention of Ghanaians on his attempts to coalesce with other countries, Nkrumah has taken the lead in somewhat contemptuously dismissing the European pattern of nationalism in its over-concern with petty boundary issues. However, I was present at a meeting of Convention Peoples' Party leaders in 1950 when Nkrumah spelled out the need to confine C.P.P. activities to affairs inside Ghana for a period of ten years. While this concern with internal affairs may seem to conform to the old European nationalistic pattern, it also follows the Marxian doctrine that the proletariat in each country must first win the fight with its own bourgeoisie before the unification of Socialist countries can begin.

Subsequently, Nkrumah's spectacular efforts to ignore established boundaries as binding upon newly emergent nations and his attempts to establish links with Guinea and Mali have contributed to his domestic troubles. I view his semi-erasure of the border with Volta as simply an old-fashioned "power politics" move against the Ivory Coast and its hinterland. Nasser's venture in noncontiguous nation-building (the U. A. R.) is further evidence of the inherent difficulties of such an undertaking. As an old saw puts it: Nigeria is that part of Africa served by the Nigerian railway. In truth, Nigeria is part of Africa enclosed by "artificial boundaries." However, now they define an area characterized by a common elite language, integrated systems of transport, agriculture, currency, etc. To

<sup>8</sup> Almond, Gabriel A. and James S. Coleman, *The Politics of Developing Areas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 41.

Nigeria, going through an early stage of nationalism, its boundaries are of tremendous importance in physically defining the limits of extra-tribal loyalty until the time when the concept of nationhood and a sense of empathy among its people take sturdy root.

#### SUB-NATIONAL MOVEMENTS

Although political movements of a truly national nature (that is extending to the boundaries of a political unit) have been relatively rare in Africa until this decade, we have seen various sub-national movements. Most of these involve tribal groups. It is not coincidence that two of the most marked movements in Africa are associated with the Baganda and Hausa peoples, both of which came under strong Lugardian influence. At the southern end of the continent one speaks of the Zulu nation but the Zulu word for nation, *umhlobo*, has more of a social than political connotation. In South Africa, where Afrikaner nationalism is the ruling force, *ons nasie* means Africaners and, rarely, colored Afrikaners. But it is extremely difficult for these tribal ethnic nationalisms to maintain themselves in a vigorous, mature form within wider political boundaries. Plans for Bantustans in South Africa are a partial recognition of these difficulties. In the last five years, however, Afrikaner nationalism has begun to mature rapidly. The most marked indication of this is a shift in the area of the most intense loyalty to the concept of Afrikaner nationalism from the upper class to the lower class. Because the lower class is more numerous, this shift means greater voting strength for *Die Nasionale Party*, but the disaffection of Afrikaner leaders in the church, universities and business is particularly marked. The broader concept of nationalism is, in part, a reflection of a three-class social system. The same phenomenon is beginning to characterize Kiganda society. Baganda college graduates consider Uganda their nation and rarely confine their loyalty to Buganda alone.

On the other hand, when tribal boundaries coincide with country boundaries, such as in Swaziland, the coincidence contributes to the continued dominance of traditional tribal rulers over the young educated elite.

I am not unaware that the nationalistic sentiment that can fuse tribes into nations can be used at times as an excuse for brutality. It was painfully evident to me in Abidjan in 1958 that a nation was being born. The indigenous people of the Ivory Coast did not want foreigners filling many of the best jobs in their civil service and controlling much of the retail trade in their capital. The 1958 rioters murdered, raped, and pillaged for almost a week and succeeded in driving more than 7,000 foreigners from their capital. The fact that these foreigners were all French-speaking Africans, from Togo, Dahomey, Guinea, and Senegal made no difference. The people of the Ivory Coast were united regardless of tribe. They had a sense of nation. It was not enough to be an African from West Africa; the Africans had to be a member of a tribe (any tribe) which resided inside the boundaries of the Ivory Coast.

#### EXTRA-NATIONAL LOYALTIES AND SELF-DETERMINATION

The disaffection of the Bakongo tribe—the principal tribe in the Leopoldville area—with the idea of a Congo nation contained by Belgian-drawn boundaries underlay the inability to arouse a Congolese unity and loyalty

at a critical juncture. For years the Bakongo political party, the Abako, had diluted the image of a free and united Congo with the image of a Bakongo nation rising out of the mists of the 14th century when the tribal boundaries embraced much of what is now Brazzaville Congo and Northern Angola. This ambivalence pervaded Bakongo thinking from Joseph Kasavubu on down. Loyalty and discipline might have been forged on a national basis, but the bonds among the various groupings were exceedingly tenuous. With its failure the Congo had to endure anarchy and disintegration. One may think of the Katanga, but its Belgian-drawn boundaries no longer define the limits of loyalty to President Tshombe. Tens of thousands of its Balubas in a state of civil war are evidence of this.

The whole principle of self-determination has become clouded in Africa. Great Britain adheres to it in allowing the southern Cameroons and northern Cameroons to be separated and has tacitly supported Katanga separation from the Congo. But Britain opposes self-determination for Buganda. The United Nations, the United States, and African politicians have been equally inconsistent. There is a strong feeling among African nationalists that Africa must avoid Balkanization, which would weaken Africa's voice politically and impede economic development. Putting aside the new and powerful role of the African nations in the General Assembly, this belief of African nationalists is a valid one. How rapidly is it possible to move from tribe to nation and from a nation whose boundaries were defined in colonial times to wider Pan-African boundaries? We have mentioned the failure of the Egyptian-Syrian experiment, the difficulties of Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, not to mention the continuing tensions in the Rhodesian Federation. In today's Africa it is extremely unlikely that what few nation-building blocks there are will be pushed over to accommodate a new building pattern such as the Bakongo desire.

In conclusion, boundaries have great importance during the early stages of nationalism, and in the case of the independent African states they may make an enormous contribution to their achievement of nationhood. In the process of nation-building they may replace cultural and even economic factors which are only weakly operative in Africa. Because nations are valuable political and economic devices, Africa needs them. But if nations are pasted together heedlessly, such a union could easily come unstuck under pressure. Thus, it should be admitted, that whether or not Pan Africanism is desirable, it is more difficult to attain in a rigid form than some African optimists have believed. Finally, because nationalism has been a worthwhile stage in the West, it behooves Westerners to view the unfolding of African nationalism and what may seem like anachronistic boundary disputes with a large measure of tolerance. If Africa is to be politically stable and the living standards of its people are to be raised, nation-building is a necessary concomitant, and the modern nation must have strong boundaries before it can think of diluting their importance.