

DECOLONISATION AND THE 'ETHIOPIANISATION' OF AFRICA

*I. M. Lewis **

The explorers dispatched by Prince Henry the Navigator along the African coast to seek a sea-route from Portugal to the Indies brought back reports of a great Christian King who ruled in the far interior. These accounts confirmed earlier rumours of a Christian African country, called Ethiopia, ruled by a monarch named Prester John, to whose court a regular Portuguese embassy was dispatched in 1520. (The name of the reigning Emperor then was Lebna Dengel.)

With its biblical associations, Ethiopia was shown on maps of Africa of this period as a vast Christian Kingdom, including most of Africa south of Egypt and east of Angola. This, of course, was an exaggeration, reflecting ignorance and eurocentric Christian bias. It was actually in the closing decades of the 19th century with imported European arms, that Ethiopia assumed her greatest expansion under the redoubtable Emperor Menelik II. Bearing the name of the founder of the dynasty resulting from the legendary union of the Queen of Ethiopia and King Solomon, Menelik astonished the European colonial powers by defeating an Italian army in 1896 and establishing Ethiopia as a formidable local super-power in the 'Scramble for Africa'. Since Haile

* Professor de Antropologia Social na London School of Economics and Political Science (Universidade de Londres) e Director do International African Institute.

Selassie's deposition in 1974 and the ensuing revolution, Ethiopia is now, of course, a socialist republic — not an empire. However, it retains much of its traditional political anatomy, deriving from its history as an ethnically heterogeneous conquest state.

This is one form of traditional African political organisation. It is not the only traditional African form. By an accident of history, the European partition of sub-Saharan Africa produced similar, ethnically heterogeneous states. Decolonisation left this pluralist type of state as the dominant form in contemporary independent Africa. As I shall endeavour to argue, European colonisation and de-colonisation have thus led to a process which, from the point of view of comparative political anatomy, might aptly be called the '*Ethiopianisation*' of Africa. As I hope will be clear, I do not mean by this that all independent African states share the policies or formal political organisation of the present Ethiopian regime. I refer to a deeper and more basic level of political structure.

To present my argument I shall have to examine the political anatomy of African political units in *pre-colonial* Africa. Before embarking on this, let me say a few words on the terms 'Nation' and 'tribe' since they are also part of African political terminology.

Nations and tribes

As is well-known, especially in relation to the Third World, the terms 'nation' and 'tribe' regularly convey a political judgement, the first usually positive, the second usually negative. 'Nation' is associated with civilization, literacy, progress and development generally; 'tribe', in contrast, has the reverse associations, being intimately linked with parochialism, backwardness and primitiveness.

This is an interesting transformation of the original etymological sense of these two terms. Originally, the Latin *tribus* referred to the three (possibly legendary) founding tribes (Titii, Ramnes and Luceres) whose members were collectively citizens of the Roman city-state. Notwithstanding these impeccable origins and the cachet associated with such expressions as the 'Twelve

Tribes of Israel', in the 18th century and 19th, colonising Europeans applied the word 'tribe' indiscriminately to describe the supposedly 'uncivilized' archaic communities into which the indigenous peoples of Africa, America and parts of Asia were divided before the imperial partition.¹ The term was thus applied to distinctive cultural entities, whose members spoke the same language or dialect, generally occupied a common territory, and might or might not acknowledge the authority of a single chief or political leader and so form a more or less clearly demarcated *political* as well as social *unit*.

While 19th century Europeans rarely dignified the peoples of the 'Dark Continent' with the title 'nation', it is interesting to note that this, as it were suppressed term, should have reappeared in the religious vocabulary of Voodoo² and other similar syncretic Latin American religions where the various gods and spirits, transported with slavery to the new world, are grouped in 'nations'. So, those whom Europeans disparaged as primitive tribes were resurrected as 'nations' (Hausa, Ibo, Guinea, Dahomey, etc.) in this syncretic cosmology.

The concept 'tribe' which the nineteenth and twentieth century European administrators employed in Africa, was used to designate a range of traditional socio-political units varying enormously in culture, constitution and size. While individual administrators, *especially if they were British*, might admire independent-spirited pastoralists and wild nomadic warriors without kings or chiefs, it was usually found easier to recognise and rule centralised states such as those of the Bakong, BaGanda, Ashanti and the like — even if they had first to be conquered or 'pacified'. Hierarchical political institutions were familiar to the imperial mind and, particularly in the systems of 'indirect rule' invented by the British proconsul, Lord Lugard, could be conveniently accommodated within the over-arching imperial superstructure. The general assumption of hierarchical government encouraged expatriate

¹ Cf. P. H. Gulliver (ed.), *Tradition and Transition in East Africa*, London, 1969, p. 8.

² S. Larose, 'The meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou' in I. M. Lewis (ed.), *Symbols and Sentiments*, London, 1977, pp. 85-116.

European officials to recognise and appoint 'traditional' leaders, even sometimes where they did not actually previously exist. Such innovations, often unrecognised and unintended, had the effect of social engineering, leading to the re-grouping or even creation of entirely novel political units. Thus British colonial rule particularly, often rigidified traditional tribal divisions as well as introducing new ones, although this was not always a direct or deliberate policy. Under the *pax colonica*, whole new ethnic groups sometimes formed, modelling themselves on 'traditional tribes'. The case of the *Nubis*, powerbase of the notorious Field Marshal Amin, is instructive here. Taking its name from the Nuba area of the Sudan, and claiming to speak a distinct language 'Ki-Nubi', this Muslim military caste in Uganda, developed out of a largely Nilotic diaspora (Shilluk, Dinka, Bari and Kakwa, etc.) of soldiery left behind in the area when the Turko-Egyptian regime in the Sudan collapsed.³ British administration in Uganda required a local militia and the Nubis were gradually able to monopolise this crucial role and turn it to their advantage. They were not exactly created ex-nihilo by the European administration for this purpose: rather they saw their opportunity and produced a synthetic ethnic identity to safeguard it. As one anthropologist justly observes: 'Critics have often accused the colonial governments of a deliberated policy of 'divide and rule', and of suppresing wider African loyalties and individual group development. That this was commonly the *effect* of colonial rule is evident, but there is limited evidence to demonstrate that such policy was deliberate throughout and put into practise. The process was more subtle and complex than that. But probably most administrators, of both high and low rank, merely took it for granted that the tribe was a readily identifiable, time-honoured unit, indogenous to African perceptions and activities'.⁴

Anthropologists have been aware of this for a long time. Many indeed have analysed the delicate interplay between European administrators' *stereotypes* of tribal identity and the *reality* of

³ A. Southall, 'Amin's Military Coup in Uganda: Great Man or Historical Inevitability', *Third International Congress of Africanists*, Addis Ababa, 1973.

⁴ P. H. Gulliver, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

the colonial power structure in which tribes and tribalism flourished. To recognise this does not, of course, mean that 'tribal conflicts are explainable primarily by reference to colonial domination'.⁵ The well-informed Soviet Africanist R. N. Ismagilova⁶ provides a more realistic assessment: 'The specific features of African society in our day are often explained simply as the effect of colonialism. That view has led to both foreign political scientists and African politicians having an attitude to the traditional structures and surviving institutions of tribal-clan society that is not always correct. Yet many of these phenomena are strong and exert considerable influence on the social development of African peoples'.

Pre-colonial nations and states

Although it was recognised that different African tribes had different customs and different forms of political organisation, few colonial administrators had the time or specialist training to study systematically the range of types of African polity. It was consequently in the main left to the first generation of modern social anthropologists conducting intensive field-research in the 1930s and 1940s to attempt to chart the spectrum of indigenous African political formations. If there is some truth, and it is certainly limited in the charge that these anthropologists sometimes failed to emphasise the impact of the colonial superstructure, this was largely because they sought as far as possible to recover the *authentic* African traditional structures—untainted by Western influence. Hierarchically organised states such as those of the Kong Zulu, Bemba, Ganda, etc. were displayed in all their complex intricacy. More enigmatic were those uncentralised political formations without chiefs which, at first sight, lacked government in the conventional sense and had no specific political

⁵ M. Godelier, *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology*, Cambridge, 1977, p. 96.

⁶ R. N. Ismagilova, *Ethnic Problems of the Tropical Africa: Can they be solved*, Moscow, p. 10.

institutions to organise their affairs. Politically uncentralised pastoralists like the *Nuer*⁷ of the southern Sudan challenged the anthropologist to discover how anarchy was averted in such cultures whose constituent political units were so much larger than the small, familistic 'bands' characteristic of hunting and gathering peoples. The English anthropologist Evans-Pritchard was able to demonstrate convincingly how amongst such pastoralists, in the absence of any chiefly or bureaucratic administrative hierarchy, a minimum degree of order could be effectively maintained through the mobilisation of loyalties based on a combination of kinship and neighbourhood. The key lay in the intimate entwining of ties of descent and of locality. In a circle radiating outwards from the level of the village, each local community was identified with a corresponding lineage segment. Hence genealogies were political charters, describing how people came together in unity or divided in hostility according to their closeness in kinship on the model of the Arab proverb: 'Myself against my brother; my brother and I against my cousin; my cousin and I against the outsider'. Political cohesion was expressed in the idiom of kinship, the 'segmentary lineage system' of balanced kinship divisions, corresponding to that of territorial divisions of the ground—villages and groups of villages.

Within this *segmentary* structure, political decisions were made democratically in general assemblies of all the adult men of the community involved, this group expanding and contracting along kinship (and neighbourhood) lines according to the political context. So, in such 'segmentary lineage societies', closely related local groups would temporarily unite against a distant enemy, and dissolve in mutual antagonism when this common threat disappeared. In the absence of chiefs or other official political figures, the strength and limits of such elastic and fluctuating political cohesion could be measured by examining the procedures followed in ventilating and resolving disputes at the various levels of grouping. The point at which the moral duty to resolve conflicts by *peaceful* mediation became completely attenuated marked the limits of the political community. This division of the people or

⁷ E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, Oxford, 1940.

nation, united internally by the ideal of peace and harmony and externally by war, was identified as the 'tribe'. Nuer society thus consisted of a series of independent and mutually hostile political divisions ('tribes'), loosely inter-connected by culture, language, mode of production and diffuse potential sentiments of Pan-Nuer identity.

In the wake of this pioneering discovery, other anthropologists soon found that this system of 'minimal government' based on segmentary lineage organisation was not unique to the Nuer but played a crucial political role in many other traditional African societies as well as elsewhere. This wider recognition of the general currency of what has passed into political science terminology as the '*non-state*'⁸ encouraged anthropologists to devise ever more elaborate and comprehensive political typologies. Political anthropology thus became pre-occupied, some would say obsessed, with the presence or absence of formal political institutions and hierarchy and with isolating variables associated with the transition from 'non-states' to states and vice versa.

This concentration on the presence or absence (qualitatively and quantitatively) of centralised authority (chiefs and kings) deflected attention from the intriguing question of the relationship between political cohesion and cultural identity. Indeed, these Africanist political anthropologists were accused of assuming that *cultural* and *social* boundaries necessarily coincided.⁹ The most obvious exception to this criticism is the famous 'conquest' theory of state-formation according to which states arise from the collision of peoples of different culture, one group gaining political ascendancy over the other and developing a centralised state organisation to maintain control in the face of cultural differences. In endorsing this ancient theory, the British founders of modern political anthropology also suggested the corollary that cultural homogeneity was likely to be associated with uncentralised, segmentary political systems such as that found among the Nuer. Other anthropologists contributed splendidly detailed analyses of the power structure of complex, culturally heterogeneous tradi-

⁸ W. J. MacKenzie, *Politics and Social Science*, Harmondworth, 1967.

⁹ E. R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, London, 1954.

tional states. It is, however, only relatively recently and largely due to the application of the concept 'plural society' to Africa's traditional polities that we can trace the beginnings of a more systematic examination of the relationship between *political* and *cultural identity* in pre-colonial Africa.¹⁰ For J. S. Furnivall¹¹ who coined the term in the ethnically heterogeneous context of Dutch Indonesia (in 1934) the 'plural society' was one of colonial domination with a medley of peoples who 'mix but do not combine'. In the pre-colonial *African* context, we can identify culturally plural states and heterogeneous 'empires' such as Ethiopia, Mali, Songhay, and Dahomey. We can contrast these with *homogeneous* states such as Kongo, Ashanti, Benin, Yoruba and Ganda, while a third category of 'homogenising' states are transitional between the two extremes. There are clearly at least two *possibilities* in the *transitional situation*. One is that what today would be described, as 'nation-building' is in progress, as a dominant caste or ethnic group seeks to consolidate its position by extending its culture in *melting-pot* fashion to embrace the entire population.¹² The other is that the politically dominant group is engaged in the reverse process, of making itself as culturally distinct as possible from those it governs and so transforming power into an ethnic monopoly. Here the trend is towards pluralism, rather than towards ethnic homogeneity.

These comparative studies by anthropologists of pre-colonial African political structures tend to follow the 19th century English radical political philosopher, John Stuart Mill, in seeing a connexion between *cultural homogeneity* and *democracy* on the one hand, and *cultural pluralism*, hierarchy and autocracy on the other. However, this is obviously not necessarily the case since, as we have just seen, some centralised and far from demo-

¹⁰ L. Kuper and M. G. Smith (eds.), *Pluralism in Africa*, Berkeley, 1971. See also J. F. A. Ajayi, 'A Survey of the Cultural and Political Regions of Africa at the beginning of the 19th Century', in J. C. Anene and G. Brown, *Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries*.

¹¹ J. S. Furnivall, *Netherlands India: Study of Plural Economy*, Cambridge, 1934.

¹² R. Cohen and J. Middleton (eds.), *From Tribe to Nation in Africa*, Pennsylvania, 1970.

cratic societies possess a homogeneous common culture, e. g. the Kongo. Indeed *democracy* and *despotism* flourish in *both* culturally *homogeneous* and *heterogeneous* societies.¹³ Thus the association of *pluralism* with *despotism* which derives originally from Furnivall's work in Indonesia seems accidental. In fact, I would suggest that, over the last decade, the term 'pluralism' has acquired an increasingly favourable connotation — suggesting harmonious tolerance of a variety of life-styles. Thus it is probably significant that South Africa has recently adopted the idiom of 'pluralism' (to the extent of restyling its former Minister of Bantu Affairs, Minister of Plural Affairs) in its quest for more favourable publicity for its modified 'new version' of *apartheid*.

My concern here, however, is not to attempt to assess the currency of democratic political structures in Africa before the imperial partition of the continent. All I seek to demonstrate is the co-existence, both in *hierarchical* state systems like the Kongo and Ganda and in *uncentralised* polities like the Nuer or Somali or Tonga culturally *homogeneous* as well as *heterogeneous* political formations. Thus the pre-colonial 'map of Africa' included true (cultural homogeneous) nation-states, 'non-states' nations, and pluralistic heterogeneous Hapsburg-empire style states like Ethiopia. Particularly in view of homogenising trends, it would, I believe, serve little purpose to speculate on the relative preponderance of culturally *homogeneous* or culturally *heterogeneous* political formations in pre-colonial Africa. I have simply sought to demonstrate that here 'traditional' Africa enjoyed a mixed political economy.

Colonial and post-colonial Africa

It is a remarkable irony that the European powers who partitioned Africa in the late 19th century when the idea of the nation-state was paramount, should have created in Africa a whole series of Hapsburg-style states, comprising a medley of peoples

¹³ P. L. van der Berghe, 'Pluralism and the Polity', in Kuper & Smith (eds.), *Pluralism in Africa*, pp. 67-84.

and ethnic groups lumped together within frontiers which paid no respect to traditional cultural contours. This general process of 'balkanisation' in which divisions of the same people were parcelled out amongst different Colonial territories is well-illustrated by the fate of the BaKongo. Even more extreme is the case of the Somali who were fragmented into five parts: one (in Jibuti) under the French, one (the Ogaden) under Ethiopia, another (Somalia) under the Italians, and two under British rule (British Somaliland and the Northern-frontier district of Kenya). This is no doubt an extreme case, but it illustrates the general process which gave an entirely new complexion to sub-Saharan Africa. Pluralism was in the ascendant and the pluralist Hapsburg style states which had formerly represented *one* style of African polity became the prevailing mode for the whole continent (especially south of the Sahara).

It was perhaps fortunate for African nationalists although this can hardly have been foreseen, that the European powers who thus enshrined pluralism as the dominant political strain in the continent, referred to their colonial subjects as 'tribes' rather than 'nations'. Thus, in the struggle to achieve independence from the European colonisers, African political leaders appealed to the transcendent 'nationalism' which colonisation kindled amongst subject populations irrespective of their tribal identity. Tribalism which had developed considerably under the *pax colonica*, particularly in urban contexts where competition for resources and power was acute, was inevitably cast in the role of a negative atavistic force impeding the growth of national solidarity. 'Tribalism' like 'nationalism' in common with other forms of group identity is notoriously reactive. So in pluralistic African colonies, 'tribalism' developed in much the same way and with almost all the same characteristics as 'nationalism' in 19th century Europe.¹⁴ In Angola, Mozambique and elsewhere such divisive, particularistic forces had to be thrust into the background in the urgent nationalist campaign to gain independence.

¹⁴ J. Argyle, 'European nationalism and African Tribalism', in P. H. Gulliver (ed.), *Tradition and Transition in East Africa*, 1969, pp. 41-58.

The achievement of independence by Europe's ex-colonies perpetuated the pluralist multi-ethnic state or 'state-nation' whose virtual monopoly is readily seen by contrast with the few exceptions: Botswana, Lesotho, Somalia. Whereas metropolitan connexions had helped to differentiate African states in the colonial period, in the post-colonial era, there were fewer distinguishing features and states tended to become identified with their heads of state. The other obvious basis of demarcation lay in the boundaries separating one state from another. So the colonial boundaries which balkanised Africa and provided the foundation for its modern independent states, are today appropriately enough the subject of what amounts to religious veneration. This I refer to as 'frontier fetishism'.

To conclude, I have argued here that there are two pre-colonial styles of African polity, one based on ethnic identity, the other culturally pluralist. In the widest African perspective, both can claim equal legitimacy and 'authenticity'. Colonisation and decolonisation, however, have changed this traditional pattern in favour of pluralism. This process might be called the 'Ethiopianisation' of Africa, making it not inappropriate that the Organisation of African Unity should have its headquarters in Addis Ababa. The price of the monopoly held by this form of 'state-nation' (rather than 'nation-state') is the inevitable boost it gives to its internal erstwhile 'tribal', but now increasingly canonised as 'national', divisions. Confounding all the highly artificial and tendentious distinctions drawn by political sociologists and others, 'tribes' have literally become 'nations' (or 'nationalities') almost overnight. Nowhere in Africa is this better understood than in contemporary Ethiopia. The pervasive force of such inter-active cultural identity is testimony to the universal appeal of ethnic nationalism which for better or worse celebrates the myth of the naturally created and ideally autonomous community with its special claim to a unique heritage.

Resumo

DESCOLONIZAÇÃO E «ETIOPIZAÇÃO» DA ÁFRICA

Desde a Idade Média, a Europa sabia vagamente da existência de um remoto império cristão em África, a Etiópia do Preste João. Nos primeiros mapas europeus de África, uma grande parte desse continente era, pois, designada por «Etiópia». Hoje em dia, a sede da Organização de Unidade Africana situa-se na capital da Etiópia, Addis Abeba.

Estudos recentes de antropólogos sociais, historiadores e outros cientistas mostram que, antes da partilha de África pelos europeus, existiam aí, basicamente, *dois* tipos de unidade política: o estado tribal, pluralista e culturalmente heterogéneo, do qual a Etiópia tradicional constituía um exemplo supremo, e os estados culturalmente homogéneos, tais como os dos Ashanti, Buganda e Zulu. A colonização europeia de África conduziu por vezes à emergência de novas unidades étnicas. Mas o efeito geral da «balcanização» europeia foi o de produzir um conjunto novo de estados pluralistas e multi-étnicos. A independência e a descolonização da África perpetuaram esse processo, mantendo o «Mapa Colonial de África» virtualmente inalterado. Assim, a maioria dos Novos Estados Africanos é pluralista e conforme ao modelo etíope multi-étnico, que representa *uma* das formas tradicionais africanas de unidade política. A outra forma, culturalmente homogénea, igualmente «autêntica» em termos de História da África, encontra-se hoje sub-representada a nível de estado. Permanece, contudo, latente no interior dos estados pluralistas e fomenta, nalguns casos, ligações inter-estados que encorajam uma visão pan-africanista mais alargada. A predominância pós-colonial do estado pluralista, do «estilo Habsburg», contribui para a elucidação tanto da importância atribuída, em toda a África, à «construção nacional», como do apego às fronteiras na definição de uma identidade nacional que resulta numa espécie de «fetichismo de fronteira».