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LEADING ISSUES IN GENERAL STUDIES: HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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STATE FORMATION IN AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

By state formation we mean the process by which hitherto distinctive and autonomous peoples and cultures were incorporated into a multi-national state to achieve higher levels of mutual trust, cooperation and inter-dependence, shared values, common identity and national consciousness. Therefore, we view state formation not only as a historical process, but also as a matter of degree, something to be achieved in stages. It also follows that at any given time, integration in a plural society is not an all or nothing affair, but a progressive compromise between integration of the whole and autonomy of the parts¹. The process adopted by many African countries to achieve some level of togetherness over the years is the subject of this chapter.

The reason for integration or disintegration may be viewed in the nature, extent, and intensity of the concerned societies' social, economic and political interactions. The history of most societies can be said to revolve round the issue of the widening of the social scale, the progressive integration into larger units as the range of social, economic and political relations are enlarged and the technologies and communication system are improved. Extended families were, in the remote part, integrated into clans, clans into residential communities of villages and village groups, village groups into ethnic and language groups². Some times, ethnic groups grew into kingdoms, kingdoms and various other political units into empires and then into national and multinational states, and so on. At other times, the process could be reversed as intense and unresolved competition within empires and kingdoms could result in secession, fragmentation or disintegration and the process begins again. We would therefore start by exploring the nature of state formation within and among the component peoples and cultures of Africa in pre-colonial period.

STATE FORMATION IN PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

Most traditional cultures in Africa stress the virtues of social and political integration. This is done in various ways; through proverbs and political precepts; through the world view implicit in religious doctrines emphasizing the unbroken chain between the ancestors, the present and future generations; through veneration of ancestors; above all through the body of oral traditions which represent the group memory and the collective view of the shared past. These traditions generally seem to have rated continuity and stability above innovation and change. Even when the traditions are about conflict and competition for power, it is the resolution of the conflict and the consensual view that is reported. Rival factions are portrayed as two

sons of the same fathers and their followers and descendants have maintained cordial relations ever since or at least until the next crisis, division and reconciliation. The traditions, including the variant and conflicting versions, together embody the shared values and aspirations of the group and become part of their common identity. It is not surprising then that the traditions are used to promote the conscious loyalty of individuals and sub-groups to the whole group, and to define their individuality and separate identity.

The origins of most of the component peoples and cultures of Africa is in the obscure past and it is not possible at this stage to demonstrate or even to illustrate how the different polities emerged. Therefore, in spite of the flourishing sources in oral traditions, the actual processes of the formation of early states and kingdoms, clans and village groups, remain in oblivion. What the oral traditions stress clearly are a number of issues vital to the identity, solidarity and economic interest of the group⁴. Usually there is a point of origin to declare identity, and an account of a migration from there to the present location. This might express an actual movement of founding fathers, or at best represent a particular epoch of the history of the group, shared experience in different significant locations, the memory of which serves to strengthen the solidarity of the group. Thus, the traditions are always clear on the title of the group to the land they hold, as the most important single economic resource. Some traditions may expatiate on the particular laws and customs and divinities which are part of the cultural identity of the group⁵.

Some traditions may even stress leadership as an essential integrative factor in the process of state formation. The founding fathers were usually charismatic figures, such as princes, hunters, diviners enjoying special blessings from the divinities or possessing special powers over the physical elements to ensure victory for the new settlements. The coming of such charismatic figures always involved conflict and conquest, the mixing of peoples and integration of cultures. They decide the sites of their new settlements carefully, looking for signs and omens with the help of divinities. If they chose well, the new settlement would be prosperous and grow from natural increase of population and attraction of new settlers. Further expansion may bring them in touch with other neighbours and the necessity for external relations in terms of trade, offence and defence.

The ecology of Africa also encouraged the development of state formation process beyond the boundaries of the political unit. No matter how carefully any charismatic leader might have chosen his site, it was unlikely that it produced all that the settlers needed. Variations in the ecology, nature of the soil and climatic conditions usually encouraged some specialization and need for exchange. In some areas, political units were small as power was decentralized and each village group sought to be politically sovereign. This also encouraged the formation of age-grade associations, cults and secret societies associated with puberty rites and hierarchy of elders, religious centers and oracles that were of significance to a wide region. Larger states and kingdoms even, evolved mechanism for sharing markets, conducting foreign trade, diplomacy and war⁶.

It was this situation that gave birth to various languages. Language was another important factor of state formation in the sense that common languages

suggest a common culture, and a long history of social and political contact. It should be stated that many languages in Africa spread among different ethnic groups. Consequently, new distinct dialects developed. Through contact over several centuries, people speaking the same language developed common cultures, divinities with similar characteristics, common body of historical traditions and similar political systems⁷. It should be stressed that people sharing a common language could be divided into several warring states. Some of these states were successful in establishing political hegemony among smaller peoples outside their linguistic areas. Such was the case of Oyo Yoruba, the Hausa, Ashante, Borgu, Dahomey, Swahili, the Bantus, the Wolofs and others. This was the way language had expanded in the first place and gradually integrating others into a common culture⁸.

Religion deserves mentioning as a special integrative factor. The traditional Africa Religions were non-evangelistic. They were integral parts of the culture that adopted and spread them along with the language and other manifestations of culture. Through their reputation, they spread over wide areas. Ifa system of divination, Arochukwu oracles, Osanobua and Bori among others built linkages without barriers.

Islam, when it came, served as an important factor of state formation. As a religion, it is also a way of life, a system of education and a body of ideas, a source of art and aesthetics and so on. The spread of Islam and its acceptance meant the spread of common culture in the growing observance of the five basic tenets of the religion⁹. Before colonialism, the integrative effect of Islam was felt more in external relations. Islam promoted external commercial and intellectual relations, and helped to link the intellectual elite of the Muslim communities. Reformist Islam in the Sokoto caliphate, Tukolor, Futa Jallon, Borno and the Bambara States made Islam a factor both in internal cohesion and continued external relations as well as providing a battle cry for expansion. Similarly, Christianity when it came also established a few bridgeheads in some parts of Africa. However, its period of serious expansion was in the colonial period in different regions of Africa. The world religions drew their followers into common culture, but equally urged them to remain combative and exclusive. As each believer was integrated, he was in the same manner alienated from his age-long neighbours who refused to accept his acquired religion¹⁰.

COLONIALISM AND STATE FORMATION PROCESS IN AFRICA

The colonial influence on the political development in Africa started with the main European countries sharing Africa among themselves. Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Belgium, Italy and Spain each established its own area of influence and got the others to recognize their boundaries. These areas of influence later became colonies and protectorates through the use of force, because Africans resisted the attempts of Europeans to take over their inherited territories. Africans were defeated because they had inferior weapons and also because in most places neighbouring states and peoples failed to unite against the European threat. African resistance lasted up to 1930s in some places.

The unforgettable effect of colonialism, therefore, was that the African

kingdoms, empires and peoples lost their freedom. Some African empires, in fact, as in parts of French West Africa, were totally destroyed. In all the colonised states, it was the European colonial authority that decided how the people would be governed, how their society would be ordered, the size of the state and how their economic resources were exploited¹¹.

COLONIAL STATE FORMATION

The colonial administrations gave each colony or protectorate common national boundaries, name, capital city, central administration, official language and even institutions. With these actions, they laid the foundation of the modern states of Africa. This is one of the most important developments that resulted from European domination of Africa. However, we should not over-rate the successful attempt of Europeans in the creation of large centralised states with organized organs of administration, judiciaries, civil services and armies¹². This is because, although by nineteenth century, some African societies could be described as "Stateless" societies, there existed large kingdoms and empires on the continent such as Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Kanem Borno and old Oyo. When the European invaders came in the nineteenth century, they clashed with many large powerful states, such as the Sokoto caliphate, the Tukulor Empire, the Ashante kingdom, the Madinka Empire, and the Benin kingdom in West Africa. The Europeans, as stated above, only came to destroy these traditional states and built new artificial states called colonies or protectorates in some places. They ignored boundaries of the old states. The new states were collection of peoples and old states, or fragments of these, brought together within the same boundaries¹³.

Before a country artificially created in this way could develop internal unity, before its various people could begin to feel a common loyalty to their new country, much would need to be done. However, they gave these new African states new common institutions, which forced the peoples to accept common activities. This laid the foundations for the growth of new common loyalties and gradually, each country developed its own "nationalism" above the smaller nationalism of its component peoples. It should be stressed that the colonialists' policies were not consciously aimed at encouraging national unity and loyalty in any of their colonies, although the general attitude of some might have tended to do so. For example, the French regarded the people in their colonies as Dahomeans, or Togolese or Senegalese, rather than as Ewe, Fon, Madinka or Bambara. The British on the other hand tended to regard their African subjects as Yoruba, or Hausa or Kikuyu, rather than as Nigerians or Kenyans. Loyalty to the ethnic group or to the old states, therefore, tended to survive more strongly in British than in the French colonies. The colonial policies deliberately prevented the growth of national unity as it happened in the Portuguese colonies at the beginning of 1960s. The Portuguese promoted disunity and even hostilities among the people of their colonies to weaken the freedom fighters. In the early 1950s when Britain was confronted with armed revolt in Kenya, the British encouraged rivalries among the peoples of Kenya to weaken the revolt. Probably in most colonies in the last years of the independence struggle, the colonial powers tactfully encouraged disunity or took advantage of existing signs of

disunity to hold longer on to their colonies or to obtain independence agreements favourable to themselves. These tactics of divide and rule worsened the problems of national unity¹⁵.

As said earlier, the way the colonial boundaries were fixed did not follow the old boundaries between African states and peoples. For example, the Ewes were split between Ghana and Togoland and the Yoruba between Nigeria and Benin. These boundaries were merely artificial, without foundation in the geography or history of Africa. These made the inhabitants of newly created states not to pay serious attention to their new country. Peoples divided between two neighbouring colonies continually wish to be reunited, and border conflicts between neighbouring African countries were common after independence¹⁶.

CONCLUSION

We have been able to reveal that the peoples of Africa evolved systems that bounded them together through formation of Empires, kingdoms and even smaller cohesive societies before the imposition of European colonialism. This was disregarded by the Europeans, and who then institutionalized new states, social norms and rule of law. This created problems because of disregard for tradition. Consequently, the process of state formation in Africa has been one of continuity and change.

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