Historicising nationalism in Africa

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Abstract

This paper proposes rethinking nationalism as a political ideology and force in Africa outside the boundaries of the postcolonial African state. It argues against national histories and for histories of the construction of African nationalisms. In analysing the anti-colonial basis of nationalism globally, it argues that the basis for African nationalism is similar to and not distinct from dominant nationalist processes elsewhere. The paper analyses the problematic historiography of African nationalism, arguing that the focus on political outcomes – the independent nation-state – has distorted and distracted from a necessary historical focus on process, best understood as involving competing and contested nationalisms before and after national independence. Having identified a wave of recent literature that analyses such competing nationalisms across the continent, the paper sets out a research agenda for systematic historical analysis of African nationalism.

Introduction

This paper aims to provide a critical review of historical scholarship of African nationalism as it has developed over the past sixty years. Whilst a comprehensive review of the wealth of such scholarship is impossible in the space available, we aim to demonstrate that, until recently, historical analysis of African nationalism was weakened by an overt or tacit acceptance of the African nation-states that mostly came into being at the independence moment of the late 1950s and early 1960s as the framework for analysing the phenomenon of African nationalism in general. In this paper we instead historicise nationalism as a political ideology and political force in Africa outside the boundaries of the postcolonial African state. Building on our own recent scholarship on African nationalisms and those of other scholars, the paper argues against national histories and in favour of histories that analyse the construction of African nationalisms, as opposed to African nation-states. The article argues that historical analysis should not distinguish *a priori* between nationalist sentiments expressed in support of the postcolonial states we now know, and nationalist sentiments expressed for forms of political independence other than the national states as they came to be. To do so, as the study of African nationalism has done until recently, is to make a *post ante* teleological interpretation of the past in the present that obscures the political realities of both past and present. We believe that our proposed approach can make an important contribution to understanding the genealogies of contemporary African politics. Replacing the distinction between nation-as-state vs ethnic/separatist with the idea of competing nationalisms frees analysis from historical outcome, enabling a revealing focus on historical process.

We partially draw in this regard on the influential scholarship of Ellis (2002) and Cooper (1994), who long ago identified the problematic division of African history into periods determined not by lived experience but by political systems. In doing so, we stress the continuities of African nationalist dynamics beyond the state before and after political 'independence': as we shall see, struggles over the form and meaning of nationhood

continued well after the achievement of formal independence. We however depart here from Cooper's study of French West Africa (Cooper 2015). Where Cooper argues that the moment of independence foreclosed federal (and other) alternatives, we stress the continuation of alternative nationalist imaginaries. Indeed, these competing or alternative nationalisms shape African political landscapes today as they did in the past.

African intellectuals and activists have long debated the challenge of asserting or reasserting African national identities in diverse ways that were partly or wholly disconnected from the project of state-building. Pan-Africanist activists across the world sought to claim a non-territorial framework for a global African identity that nonetheless appealed to an idealised sense of 'Africa' as a land of origin, while West African intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century sought to assert liberatory ideas outside the constraining framework of national independence (Falola 2004). Exiled African intellectuals in inter-war London (Mattera 2015) and Paris (Goebel 2015) equally debated the appropriate political form —by no means always national—to best achieve freedom. The relationship between the mass movement for freedom that swept the continent in the post-WWII period, and the politically constrained form of 'decolonisation' in nation-state form that was ultimately achieved, was the focus of fierce political debate among African leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, particularly during the creation of the Organisation of African Unity (Mazrui and Tidy 1984). Whilst this literature is not the subject of our analysis, the sheer fertility of this Africa-centred scholarship is at marked odds with the subsequent development of the dominant state-centric historiography on African nationalism, which is the focus of this article.

We are not of course the first scholars to reflect on the meaning and significance of nationalism in an African context shaped by colonial annexation and the consequent challenge for local political elites of (re-)establishing meaningful forms of national territoriality and identity. This article critically analyses the historiography of African nationalism against the backdrop of the wider historiography of nationalism. Whereas African nationalism, based on supposedly artificial nation-states drawn within colonial borders, is often counterposed to more historically 'natural' or 'logical' European nationalisms, it is here argued that anti-colonialism is the dominant characteristic of nationalism on a global level in the modern era and that African nationalism is therefore an entirely logical expression of the African desire for sovereignty. This was however misunderstood by many analysts of African nationalism

who focused on state-building rather than nationalism and/or conflated the two, thereby discarding the unwanted 'byproducts' of competing nationalisms which were and are as prominent in Africa as they are elsewhere. This misunderstanding reflected the influence on historical analysis of specific influential bodies of works in political science and nation-state-oriented political history.[1] The influence of these mutual misunderstandings are explained through a presentation of the linked histories and historiography of African nationalism from the 1950s until today, which identifies the effects of successive waves of analysis on the understanding of African political history. The article then identifies the contributions of new case studies of contested nationalism that adopt a more considered and historically accurate approach, and concludes by proposing a set of analytical and comparative research questions that, we hope, will open up useful avenues for the future analysis of nationalism in Africa as a whole.

Nation and ethnie, nationalism and ethnicity

Most scholars agree that the four concepts above are strongly interlinked. The debate regarding the distinction between 'nation' and 'ethnic group' or 'ethnie', as Anthony Smith (1986) labelled it, has long divided constructivists who—following the works of Gellner (1983), Anderson (2nd ed. 1991) and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983)—see the nation as an essentially modern phenomenon linked to *inter alia* the rise of widespread literacy, the nation-state and mass political organisation, and perennialists who—influenced by Anthony Smith (1986) and Clifford Geertz (1963)—see modern nations as arising from older cultural or even biological phenomena which have become politicised, enabling their translation into wider societal organisation.

Since the 1990s a widespread consensus has been reached, based on Anderson's seminal *Imagined Communities* (2nd ed. 1991), that national identities, like similar identities such as ethnic identities, provide the basis for imagined communities. In this consensus view, the nation is understood as an imagined community that imagines itself as inherently limited and sovereign. The latter part of this Andersonian definition makes the nation a community aspiring to political independence, therewith explicitly linking nation to state. Nationalism as a political ideology, then, is seen as emphasising the need for congruency between the political and the national. The debate between constructivists and perennialists sharpened in ways relevant to the study of African political history in the mid-1990s when Ignatieff (1994), following Kohn (2008 [1944]), stressed the opposition between 'civil' and 'ethnic'

nationalism, presenting the former as enlightened, open, liberal, and inclusive, and the latter as exclusivist, divisive and backward looking. Essentially, 'ethnic nationalism' overwrote the older notion of romantic nationalism, tainting it with the negative connotations that the word ethnic (tribal, barbaric, primordial) commonly entails. This view not only impacted scholarly analysis of nations and ethnic groups and their cohesive ideologies, but influenced policy views as well, reinforcing notions of African (and, for example, southern European) political 'backwardness'. In an attempt to bring constructivist and perennialist views together in a coherent scholarly view, Brubaker (2015: 150) defends the modernist characterisation of nationalism as a form of 'politicised ethnicity' but agrees on the importance of the politicisation of ties that are thought or imagined to be 'natural, prepolitical, or unalterable' and their aggregation into larger blocks to match the scale of modern states. Within this consensus, the distinction between 'civic' or 'ethnic' nationalism is one regarding the form that national imagination takes, with both seeking national political independence.

This broad consensus on the definition of nation and nationalism does not hold for the terms 'ethnic group' and 'ethnicity', especially not in the context of African studies, despite the ever-increasing use of these terms since the 1990s. Keese rightly identifies the confused and confusing meanings of these terms that arise from their various transplantations from one discipline to another, concerned with different parts of the globe, since their successful introduction in the social sciences in the 1950s (Keese 2016). It is not our goal here to engage further in this debate, but we do argue that these terms have been applied in African contexts where 'nation' and 'nationalism' would have been far more appropriate. In our view, and in agreement with Keese, the term 'ethnic group' should be reserved for social polities that are not directly and positively connected to the ideological construct of the 'nation-state'. Ethnicities can exist within the state without political consequences, or they can form a political force inside or outside the state system. They can function within state politics in ways that do not challenge or deny the legitimacy of the nation-state, or—so the common view holds—they can actively oppose the state in what is termed 'ethnic separatism' or 'ethnic nationalism'.

 It is this last characterisation that we most strongly reject. If the ultimate goal implied in nationalist ideology is to create (imagine) a nation that is congruent with the state and its interests, whatever these might be perceived to be, then the term 'ethnicity' is best reserved for the ideology of those socio-political bodies without aspirations to independent statehood.

The differences ascribed to nations and ethnic groups as socio-political entities are hard to observe and so are those between nationalism and ethnicity (more common than the more appropriate term ethnicism) as their cohesive ideologies. Nationalism is only one explicit ideology of socio-political coherence out of many. It has been preceded by other ideologies that kept the political entities preceding the nation together. However, just as those socio-political entities that have survived the rise and dominance of nationalism have been relabelled 'ethnic', so have the ideological forces that kept them together been relabelled 'ethnicity'. These distinctions are political, rather than analytical, as the debates sparked by Ignatieff's distinction between 'civic' and 'ethnic' nationalisms show.

As, from an analytical perspective, the difference between nation and ethnic group, as well as between nationalism and ethnicity, seems impossible to make when it comes to the aspirations to state formation and nation building, we should reject this distinction since it traps historians in teleology. The political significance of such teleologies is to provide *post-facto* legitimacy to official nationalisms out of their contingent political success. As the characteristics of nationalist initiatives that have achieved international recognition also hold for those that existed as coherent political bodies prior to the advent of the nation-state, which reshaped the image of their political community on the national model and which aspired to but failed to achieve independent statehood, it is only external political recognition that ultimately decides which nation is accepted as such. Thus we should analyse the historical political imaginaries that led to the political contestation between groups that should all be understood as nations, competing for the right to form a nation-state.

Nationalism as an anti-imperial force

Much confusion about the role and appropriateness of nationalism and the nation-state on the African continent arises not from empirical observations of African political culture, but from misunderstandings about the history of nationalism and the nation-state in general and in Europe in particular. One example of such misunderstanding will make this point:

> The origins of African nationalism are different from those of European nationalism. Pre-independence Africa did not experience an industrial revolution and class divisions were comparatively weak. African nationalism was anti-colonial nationalism, which lacked deep historical roots and was born out of a

protest movement against European rule and exploitation; it represented also the African's claim to human dignity and the right to self-rule (Tordoff 1984: 76).

In our view, the nation-state should not be understood as a European invention, nor do European nation-states necessarily have longer histories of common identity and belonging than others. If anything, African nation-states have proven more durable than European ones in the past half-century. Whereas the political map of Africa has only been redrawn twice since 1963, the European map has seen about a dozen changes in that period. European nation-states clearly are as invented and as heterogeneous in their origins as their African counterparts. Moreover, as in Africa and elsewhere, most European nation-states had their origins in imperial subjection. Furthermore, we contend that the process of nation formation in Europe, as in Africa, was not uncontested internally, but generated various competing nationalist projects, few of which would become hegemonous within the nation-states to be. Nationalism had its strongest emanations where imperial rule was most resented, in Europe as elsewhere.

It is by now firmly established that nationalism as a political ideology found its origins both in opposition to old empires and the assertion of new ones. Anderson positioned its first developments and successes in North America as an expression of settler discontent in the colonies with British imperial policy and in Creole Latin American societies, disgruntled with their lack of recognition by the Spanish and Portuguese metropolitan elites, and their politically subordinate status in an empire they no longer recognised as theirs (Anderson 1991: 49-68). While Anderson's 'imagined communities' is now common sense, his identification of the nation-state's American (especially Latin American) origins has been criticised or ignored by most historians who still interpret nationalism as arising from the modernist revolution against the *ancien régime* in northwestern Europe.[2] Alongside a number of other scholars working on the world outside Western Europe, we think this focus is flawed. The French revolution with its universalist ideals of liberty and equality had profound consequences for the rise of nationalism elsewhere. Yet, the French revolution was itself far from a French national project.[3] French revolutionaries and their followers thought in terms of a universal civilization to be spread across the globe, not of a bounded national entity. Malešević (2013: 82-83) rightly rejects the common focus on German and Italian unification as prime examples of nationalism, when in fact they were—like Napoleonic France before them—essentially imperial projects, parts of which have been described in terms of internal

colonisation by historians as well as those who experienced it (Dal Lago 2014: 57-72; Klein 2014: 92-108). Todorova (2005) in our view rightly criticizes both the continued positioning of early nationalist developments in Northwestern Europe through allochronic discursive mechanisms of a 'temporal lag', attributed to all regions outside Western Europe, even in the face of evidence to the contrary, and the use of a model of genealogy and transmission describing nationalism as a modular ideology that can be introduced or adapted. Instead, she argues for a synchronous rearrangement of group solidarities in the face of modernity, to be analysed in the *longue durée*. In this vision Eastern Europe is as much involved in the shaping of nationalism as any other area.

European empires and monarchies harboured within their borders what Hroch has labelled 'small nations' that in the nineteenth century came to feel colonised in much the same way Asian and African peoples did (Hroch 1985). Two of the first states that came into being in Europe as the result of a nationalist struggle were Greece and Belgium. Greece was internationally recognised in 1832 after a decade of guerrilla warfare against the Ottoman Empire. Greek desire for independence was formulated as a freeing from slavery, in this case both figuratively and literally, and oppression by foreign rule. The foreignness of that rule was largely expressed in religious terms—Christianity against Islam—but freedom from it was decidedly formulated as national sovereignty. Greece could have been bigger, or joined by Romania, or preceded by Serbia for that matter, if it wasn't for the active suppression of political revolts of any kind, including national ones, by the Concert of Europe. As Todorova (2005: 143) puts it, the Holy Alliance condemned nationalism as a revolutionary virus. The one other revolt the Concert of Europe did not manage to suppress led to the birth of Belgium in the wake of the July uprisings of 1830. Like Greek nationalism, Belgian nationalism was born out of political subjugation within the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, experienced as colonisation. As one nationalist newspaper, the *Courrier des Pays-Bas*, put it in 1829: 'Belgium is a better exploitable colony than Java'.[4]

Internal colonialism and competing nationalisms

National unification is a process in which regional differences and specific local cultures are replaced with a homogenous national identity, not only in discourse, but also in lived practice. Regional dialects, religious customs, and local laws and lore become syncretised into nation-wide languages, religions, codes of law and national traditions. This process comes with various degrees of coercion, depending on how broad a variety of regional difference and

opposition to the proposed nation needs to be overcome. In *Peasants into Frenchmen*, Weber (1976: 486) described this process of national homogenization for the French peasantry. Formulating this process in the then dominant discourse of modernisation, Weber nevertheless likened this process, in passing, to colonialism. Hechter (1974) pronounced this comparison even more strongly for what he called the 'Celtic fringe' in Great Britain, and indeed the similarities with African examples of nation building are clear. But only recently has this observation been addressed on a larger comparative scale for the construction of various European national identities and polities (Healy and Dal Lago 2014). Such political homogenisations were most often based on one or two dominant regional constellations and in Europe as elsewhere these local hegemonies within the nation-to-be could be, were, and in some cases still are contested. Competing nationalisms continued to be articulated in a variety of forms, which have ultimately found expression and gained significant political purchase. The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s is too obvious an example not to mention here, but the case of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1992 demonstrated that the political conflict arising from competing nationalisms could be resolved voluntarily and peacefully. The assertion of 'minority rights' and 'regional autonomy' are two ways in which competitive nationalisms continued to make themselves felt in the European body politic, again in violent (e.g. Basque Country, Northern Ireland) non-violent (e.g. Scotland, Flanders) and indeed both (e.g. Catalonia) forms. All such contestations assert their legitimacy and have been shaped by historical change, both older and more recent.

Thus, while some European nation-states today were originally conceived of as empires (France, Germany, Spain, Portugal), many more European national states came into existence by achieving independence from imperial states or composite kingdoms in, broadly, three large waves: in the mid nineteenth century (Belgium, Luxemburg, Greece, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria); the early twentieth century (Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, Finland, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Ireland, and Norway, among others); and the late twentieth century (Czechia, Slovakia, the former Soviet Republics in Europe and the former Yugoslav states). Others had to reformulate themselves from empires or composite kingdoms into national states (Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, Austria, Turkey, the Netherlands, Sweden and Russia).[5] Most European nation-states thus have their origins in the desire for political independence of a heterogeneous group of peoples with nothing more in common than their colonial subjugation to an imperial state and only occasionally a common history as an independent polity prior to their national sovereign existence. These heterogeneous groups

of European peoples then had to imagine their national identity as coherent. This was a slow, contingent, ever-incomplete process, during which some national projects fell apart in composite elements (Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia), and others only survived by continuous adaptation of their national constitution (Spain, Belgium and the UK).

These anti-imperial and anti-colonial origins of nationalism, and its capacity to provide a common identity to people where none existed previously, made it an excellent and highly appropriate ideological tool for African anti-colonial movements. The contestation of national projects as they gain shape during and after national independence seems to be an integral part of the national political process as well, but one that has until recently been diligently neglected by Africanist historians. Having established that competing nationalism is a widespread phenomenon, indeed one common in the multiple instances of anti-colonial nationalism, this article now analyses how such competing nationalisms have been understood in African studies.

The rise of nationalism in Africa

Nationalism is an anti-colonial ideology that imagines a nation to be a political community that by right should be politically sovereign and independent from rule by others. In this respect, nations were being created in the African political imagination long before the independence of colonial territories became a feasible political project. The growing Atlantic and Mediterranean networks of exchange from the eighteenth century onwards meant that Africans, like all other peoples, engaged with global intellectual ideas in relation to their own political concepts, and considered their relevance to their societies before and after colonial conquest (Bayly 2004; Gelvin and Green 2013). Most colonial-era nationalist imaginings were, like those in Europe and elsewhere, shaped by local political power holders who were part of the system of foreign rule: intellectuals, school teachers, military men, bureaucrats, local dignitaries, who imagined the possibility of sovereignty, but initially in keeping existing structures of power internal to the state intact (Goebel 2015; Manela 2007). In Africa, indigenous elites likewise gave shape to the desire for political sovereignty, often but by no means always within the structure of the already existing colonial state.

From the 1940s onwards, such elites—in the context of rapid socio-economic change and an international system increasingly based on universal nation-statehood and mass political participation—reimagined themselves national identities in order to pursue their political

goals. Some did so within the existing state structure, while others, often within the same colony, sought to redraw existing and create new boundaries—geographical and ideational—to frame their national imaginaries (Cooper 2014). The late colonial period was one of fertile political imagination, in which debates about societal organisation, moral norms, and collective identities became enmeshed in complex ways with the anti-colonial movement.

As a result of the contingent processes of decolonisation some of these national identities then became 'official nationalisms', imagined by those political elites who envisioned the existing colonies to become independent states in the context of African decolonization. Other such nationally re-imagined older identities did not make it to official status. The particular victories of some nationalisms over their competitors was not the result of the (re-)emergence of a unifying national identity among the 'masses' of reawakened nations but of political negotiations, the more or less successful campaigning by nationalist leaders, the social capital of specific movements, and so forth. Yet the highly contingent, contested nature of late-colonial nationalism was little understood by contemporaneous analysts. Likewise, colonial officials and the most successful nationalists had a shared vested interest in presenting these movements as inherently representative of an emergent nation and invested in the optimistic notion that new states would succeed in making nations from above (Mazrui and Tidy 1984).

The rise of nationalism in Africa analysed

The study of African nationalism was initiated in the 1950s not by historians but by political scientists, whose contemporaneous analysis of movements for self-rule was influenced by a then hegemonic belief in nationalism as an inherently effective expression of popular will and a high modernist optimism in the capacity of nation-states to enable political organisation and achieve 'development'. Social scientists nonetheless critically analysed the relationship between nationalism and the wider societies in which they developed. Hodgkin (1956: 25) noted that the term

> African nationalism ... tends to conceal the 'mixed-up' character of African political movements... Most of these various types of organisation possessed links, formal or informal, with one another. Many of them were not concerned, overtly or primarily, with achieving national independence or stimulating a sense of...nationhood.

In practice, as Hodgkin understood, nationalism provided a framework for the articulation of diverse societal aims and aspirations, bound up with but not reducible to the possibilities for change associated with nationalist identification and the capacity of nation-states. Coleman (1954) however focused on self-consciously nationalist organisation and distinguished this from socio-economic activism that challenged colonial policies without explicitly demanding independence. In general, Coleman's approach proved more influential: because of the focus on the acquisition of nation-statehood in most writing on African political change, the historicisation of nationalist processes and the study of their construction was deemed essentially parochial to the primary aim of achieving indigenous control of the new state. Although the discipline of political science subsequently developed more nuanced perspectives on African nationalism—the analysis of which is, as stated, beyond the scope of this article—these early frameworks have, we believe, proven to be foundational and disproportionately influential on historical analysis of African nationalism.

As one element of this focus, there was a tendency to delegitimize the political identities developed by African political actors during the colonial period. These were characterised and thus delegitimised, not only as 'tribal'—a term of political abuse in the early independence period—but also as 'invented' by colonial officials (Ranger 1983; Vail 1989). As demonstrated in Castoriadis' (1975) and Anderson's (1991) seminal works, it is clear that, in Africa as elsewhere, national identities are imagined, as are other, similar identities such as the tribe or the religious community. Ranger's (1993) post-Anderson revisiting of the 'invention of tradition' confirmed for historians the primacy of imagination in the construction of African identities. Later analysts came to understand that such identities had in fact involved a substantial degree of African agency in the reconstruction of identities as a way of relating to colonial state authority, in ways that those authorities barely grasped (Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Spear 2003). More recently, Peterson (2012) has shown the ways in which such identities were, in the late colonial period, continually reimagined and deployed across East Africa for a range of morally informed but inherently political purposes – political not in the sense that they focused on central state control, but in the sense that they were the basis for local political identity, culture and a sense of belonging that we, unlike Peterson, believe is most usefully termed 'national', rather than 'ethnic'. Indeed, African historians—particularly those outside the academy—have been far more willing than their western counterparts to apply the term 'national' in their texts, designed as they were to mobilise history to make claims about the present. The presentation of military resistance

against colonial conquest as 'national' and its leaders as 'national heroes' is the most common example of such writing.[6] Skinner (2013) and Skinner and Yayoh (forthcoming, 2018) have provided particularly insightful analyses of Ewe nationalist historians and their understanding of political change as a central element of claims—advanced at local, national and global levels—to national legitimacy.

Writing nationalist histories of Africa

Despite the dominant role of political scientists in documenting nationalist movements, historians were by no means absent from processes of knowledge production in decolonising and newly independent Africa; indeed, a generation of historians played a vital legitimising role in providing usable pasts for the dozens of new nation-states under construction (Ranger 1976). This boom period for a new Africanist historiography initiated a wealth of research into pre-colonial and early colonial history, furnishing a new and politically valuable narrative of African-oriented societal progress involving *inter alia* the construction of pre-colonial Weberian states, a normative pattern of African 'national' resistance to colonial rule, and—implicitly—the inexorable coming together of diverse peoples to make nation-states in which they could all belong. There was in this period a tacit alliance between historians and new African leaders with a vested interest in producing histories that uncritically pointed to a future that the latter controlled: the presentation of African peoples as nationally unified was, it was widely felt, necessary for the transition to self-government. These histories, some of which were in fact written by political scientists, commonly culminated with chapters with titles such as 'The Growth of a Nation' (Roberts 1976: 195-223), 'Independence and the New Republic' (Austin 1970: 363-421), 'The Triumph of Nationalism' (Rotberg 1965: 303-316) or 'Vers l'indépendance et l'unité' (Niane and Suret-Canale 1961: 201-206). This can be seen in retrospect to have been an exceptionally successful politico-intellectual project: a fertile period of research and publishing produced a canon of nationalist historiography that bequeathed to subsequent generations a set of inherently teleological national histories that provided the framework for future analysts of Africa.

Importantly however, the study of nation-state making itself did not fall within the purview of historians but of political scientists, who were at that time generally concerned not with the historical basis of national identity but rather with the capacity of new nation-states to govern, broadcast authority and deliver services. Thus, the widespread expression of dissenting voices within nationalism to the states under construction and the articulation of alternative

nationalisms was not the subject either of historians concerned with the deeper past, or of political scientists focused on those presently in control of the state. Through a process of terminological re-ordering, what might have been considered—in the late-colonial period—competing visions for national identity were, at the moment of independence, reconstituted as 'regional' divisions: the key question, both for African rulers and political scientists, was national unity, defined by and in relation to the new state and those who controlled it. To the extent that they were studied, such 'regionalist' groupings were often dismissed as historically backward or irrelevant 'tribal' movements that had no place in the nation-state project (Apter 1955; Schachter-Morgenthau 1964; Tordoff 1984; Zolberg 1966). 'Ethnic' or 'regional' politics, it was sometimes accepted, was modern or 'non-traditional' in its form, but never 'national' and always implicitly negative. See for example Austin on Ghana: '*Competing local interests of many kinds, more often than not ethnic or 'tribal' in character, put forward claims on the central government ... The effect was pervasively and continuously disruptive.*' (Austin 1970: 17)

Such analyses mirrored and uncritically accepted the notion that top-down state-led national unity was vital for African progress and that challenges to such unity were inherently dangerous. Indeed, it appeared for many years that the flourishing of disputed claims to nation-states was merely a cart-track turning off the statist superhighway. It should be noted that post-colonial states, notwithstanding the initial demands of post-colonial leaders that their subjects 'choose' between their 'tribal' and 'national' identities, generally made few demands on those subjects that would necessitate such a choice. The relative ineffectiveness of most secessionist or irredentist initiatives, and the acceptance by the Organisation of African Unity that colonial borders would provide the basis for nation-state boundaries, was understood as a sign both of Africa's adoption of the nation-state and the absolute need for it do so.

The perceived decline and 'failure' of the African nation-state
By the 1970s however, optimism regarding the capacity of African states to build nations from above had dissipated. Economic stagnation and decline, political repression and internal conflict were the key characteristics of what came to be seen as the failure of African nation-states. This failure manifested on occasion in overt conflict that can now be understood as reflecting the limited purchase of the dominant nationalism, for example in the Biafran war, the Sudanese civil war or the post-1975 Angolan conflict. In other places, the inability or refusal of state elites to deliver on developmental promises or respond to periodic crises

refuelled partly dormant competing nationalisms that had been suppressed or initially withered in the wake of independence: the resurgence of Tuareg nationalism in the context of failed drought relief by the Malian state (Lecocq 2010) or the growing nationalist challenges to the Ethiopian state (Weise 1994) can be understood in this regard, as can the ongoing expression of 'ethno-regional' opposition to Mobutuism in Zaire (de Villers with Omasombo 1997). Such challenges gathered pace with the onset of global recession from the mid-1970s and the debt crisis of the 1980s.

The surge of interest in African expressions of nationalism, outlined above, declined commensurate with the rising notion of 'state failure' on the continent. Attempts to explain such problems, still largely in the hands of social scientists, focused on the 'state' rather than the 'nation'. It is still generally believed that official national identities in Africa are weak. This reasoning, we think, is based on both 'methodological nationalism'—the obfuscation of state and nation in an emic nationalist perspective—and the perception of the African state as 'weak'. National identity is wrongly perceived to be inherently bound to the sovereign state. Where states are weak, it is reasoned, national identities will be weak too. In this reasoning, and not without some teleological and ideological projection, it is accepted that Africans imagined national identities on the basis of the colonial territories they were living in, which gave a cohesive force to the struggles for independence. Once independence was reached, and once the demise of the African state set in, national identities also lost importance. In many cases, so it was argued, the demise of the state came about through 'ethnic' conflicts that weakened national identities and national coherence.

We think this reasoning is flawed for two reasons. First, it overstates the direct connection between state capacity and national identity. Setting aside the inherent weakness of the notion 'weak state', African states (like other states) allocate finite resources to specific policies, and (again, like other states) tend not to spend abundant material resources in the construction of national identities as they are inherently political cultures, and not political economies. Nations are largely discursive creations that can come about with few physical resources. In many African states, including those perceived to be 'at the brink of collapse' such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, citizens express strong nationalist sentiments, regardless of the workings of the state or their appreciations thereof. Second, it was mistaken to label all internal conflicts over state legitimacy as 'ethnic conflict'. In many cases, these were unequal struggles between competing national imaginaries, a competition in which the prize was the

privilege to define what was the 'nation' and what was 'ethnic'. It should be stressed however that the outcome of this competition was commonly inconclusive. Yet this should not blind us to the extent of oppositional expressions, even in those places where one strand of nationalism was clearly dominant. In addition, the articulation of such aspirations did not cease to be expressed in nationalistic ways once national independence was achieved and, when nation-states failed to fulfil those aspirations, altnerative national imaginaries often provided vehicles for expressing criticism of and disillusionment with incumbent rulers.

Because they largely accepted the endorsement by nationalist historians of newly independent nations as rooted in a meaningful pre-colonial and colonial history, political scientists tended not to identify the inherent weaknesses and continuing challenges to the formulation of nationhood in many of the states they studied. Herbst (2000) identified the limited capacity of the state to broadcast authority to its margins. Bayart (1993) asserted the extraverted nature of African statehood, while Bates (1981) argued that states were responsive only to an urban elite. The class nature of state elites was determined and the complicity of foreign powers in the neo-colonial exploitation of the continent identified. It was easy to see conflicts such as those in Ethiopia or Angola solely through the lens of the Cold War or, in southern Africa, reflecting the still ongoing transition from colonialism to independent rule (Brzezinski 1963; Gleijeses 2002). Nationalist movements themselves contributed to this misunderstanding by adopting the nomenclature of the global East-West struggle in their efforts to secure military or economic support, and by asserting themselves as the government-in-waiting of their not-yet-liberated nations (Kennes and Larmer 2016; Westad 2005). More generally and in keeping with the problematizing of Africa via reference to supposed European norms, states were diagnosed as weak and dysfunctional according to Weberian criteria, either because they were 'extraverted' and alienated from indigenous political praxis, or because they had been infected by such praxis in a variety of forms involving ethnically-based political affiliation, corruption and/or patrimonialism (Bayart 1986, 1993; Bayart, Ellis, Hibou 1999; Chabal 2009; Chabal and Daloz 1999, 2006; Mbembe 2000).

The problematic dual transition to multi-party democracy and economic liberalisation in much of Africa in the early 1990s re-fuelled some competing nationalisms that had become quiescent, and brought some that had not to a conclusion. Multi-partyism and the relative easing of authoritarianism permitted the open articulation of alternative political futures where they had previously been denied space. The effect of this opening varied enormously.

In many countries, it legitimized the expression of national identities in organised electoral politics which were, however, commonly labelled as 'ethnic'. In a small number of cases where secessionist conflict had occured previously it enabled its legitimation, as with the independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia in 1993, which provided an example for others to follow. The survival of UNITA's nationalist challenge to MPLA rule in Angola proved that this had not simply been a Cold War phenomenon as previously thought (Pearce 2015). Throughout the 1990s, East and Central African states harboured and armed regionalist or irredentist movements as a way of undermining or threatening their neighbours, movements over which they had only limited control (Lemarchand 2009; Reyntjens 2009). As Mobutu's grip on Zaire's outlying regions weakened, his opportunistic encouragement of regional conflicts refuelled latent but unresolved contests over what it meant to be 'Zairian/Congolese' (de Villers with Omasombo 1997).

However, as already indicated, the continuing inability or unwillingness of many social scientists to question or interrogate the role of nationalism in social or military conflict led to the characterisation of virtually all such conflicts as 'ethnic'. Similarly, in more peaceful contexts, new multi-party political systems were quickly occupied by new parties perceived as inherently 'ethnic', with party competition rooted in ethnic coalition-building (Bratton and van de Walle 1994; Cowan and Laakso 2002; Joseph 1999; Posner 2005). The shift of the social sciences towards econometric methodology and economistic theory in the early 2000s, especially in the US, removed analysis even further from a critical perspective on non-state political actors as these approaches axiomatically excluded non-economistic explanations of socio-political dynamics.[7] Thus, despite the empirical evidence to the contrary, the hegemony of the nationalist imaginary effectively increased. As for historians of Africa, they generally refocused from larger-scale analyses into specialisation on one nation-state or locality, so that both they and political scientists conducted research within the geographical and conceptual boundaries of those states. In the absence of new, more considered national histories, the established framework that counterposed nation-states to non-state 'ethnicities' or 'economies' continued—with few exceptions—to be read uncritically, leading most researchers to accept at face value the claims to nationhood of the problematic nation-states they studied.

Histories of nationalism in Africa

However, by the 1990s historians of Africa had turned their attention to the study of the late-colonial and post-colonial period. Their initial focus was not generally the political history of independent nations, but—in keeping with wider historiographical trends—the social history of the continent, in a wave of research partly enabled by the democratic opening of the period. Myriad tudies of rural communities, urban intellectuals, labour relations, patterns of migration, gender dynamics and development projects not only shed new light on the history of societal relations and political culture in Africa, but also provided the building blocks for a new, more critical approach to nationalism. Schmidt's ground-breaking study (2005) exploring 'top-down' versus 'bottom-up' Guinean nationalism helpfully identified how a singular nationalist campaign could simultaneously encompass elite, westernised and/or technocratic aspects, alongside more subaltern expressions rooted in indigenous culture. Cooper's study of the role of labour movements in late colonial Africa (2008) demonstrated that nationalist parties were far from hegemonic in imagining what independent Africa would look like. Cooper argued that the full extent and significance of late-colonial popular mobilisation was lost in the resultant teleology:

> It is tempting to read the history of the period from 1945 to 1960 as the inevitable triumph of nationalism and to see each social movement taking place within a colony – be it by peasants, by women, by workers, or by religious groups – as another piece to be integrated into the coming together of a nation. What is lost in such a reading are the ways in which different groups within colonies mobilized for concrete ends ... Whether such efforts fed into the attempts of nationalist parties to build anti-colonial coalitions needs to be investigated, not assumed (Cooper 1997: 406).

Similarly, Chafer remarked that, while negotiating with France, '*African political leaders [...] were constantly forced to look over their shoulders, fearing initially communist influence and, later in the 1950s, the spread of radical nationalist ideas*' (Chafer 2002: 4).

Nonetheless, these studies of late-colonial Africa tended to assume that such contestation was curtailed at the point of independence. In contrast, Geiger's (1997) study of the role of women in Tanganyika's nationalist movement not only showed that they had a particular vision for independence but also demonstrated the post-independence conflicts that resulted from unresolved gender-related tensions within the nationalist movement. These and other studies

were significant advances in historicising and disaggregating African nationalism. As Schmidt demonstrated, dominant nationalisms achieved their success in part because of successful positioning, but also because of particularly effective campaign strategies that both mobilised mass support and were externally perceived as doing so. Such studies still however tended to take as their key frame of reference and end point the 'official nationalism' of the political parties that came to dominate post-independent states: the journey to nationhood had been problematized, but the final destination remained the same.

New histories of competing nationalisms in Africa

However, a growing number of scholars, including ourselves, have identified the fallacy of African national unity before and after independence. As part of a wider literature that historicises and problematises the process—rather than the moment—of nationalism, alongside related processes and concepts including 'decolonisation', 'sovereignty' and 'state-building' throughout the (post-)colonised world, Africanist historians have demonstrated the potency of competing nationalisms and their centrality to late colonial and post-colonial societies. Allman's hugely significant study of late colonial Ashanti (1993) revealed the complexities of political life in Kumasi in the 1950s, leading to the creation of an Ashanti nationalism that demanded a federal Ghanaian state. For East Africa, Glassman (2000; 2004) analysed the political processes in which racial and national imaginations were fused in an attempt by the Zanzibari political elite to maintain independence *from* Tanganyika in 1964, These articles were followed by Giblin and Maddox's edited volume (2005), in which senior historians of Tanzania revisited local-expressions of nationalism. More recently, Brennan (2012), like Glassman, has demonstrated how racial divisions permeated and problematized Tanganyikan nationalism before and after independence, while Hunter (2015) has shown how the meaning of 'citizenship' was hotly debated by the writers and readers of Swahili language newspapers. For Kenya, MacArthur (2016) has revealed how mapping was used, both to impose and contest the dominant national imaginary of Kenya and to challenge the borders of the new Kenyan nation-state, notions that continue to inform Somali challenges to Kenyan sovereignty today. Branch (2011) has built on earlier analyses of Mau Mau to demonstrate how the unresolved tensions at the heart of Kenyan nationalism fuel contemporary conflict within Kenya and between Kenya and its neighbours. For West Africa, Lecocq (2010) has analysed forms of nationalist contestations of the Malian hegemonic nation-state project, while Skinner (2015) has shown how Ewe people invested in their distinctive status as a people of a UN trust territory, deploying their high literacy rates in the articulation of a

specific Togoland nationalism. This alternative Togoland political imaginary persists to this day on Ghana's eastern border. Further down the coast Terreta (2014) has demonstrated the interaction between local and transnational anti-colonial ideas among Cameroonian nationalists organised in the *Union des populations du Cameroun* (UPC). In Central Africa, Ranger, the pioneer of Zimbabwe's nationalist history, sought (2004) to distinguish between the ruling ZANU-PF's 'patriotic history' and what he sought to claim was a legitimate 'national history'. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009a) has historicised the contingent development of Zimbabwean national identity, shaped since independence in the image of the ruling ZANU-PF. In analysing the national history of the Ndebele, he has demonstrated the continuing centrality of this '*...rich history that constitutes a resource that reinforces their memories and sense of a particularistic identity and distinctive nation within a predominantly Shona speaking nation.*' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni: 2009b, iii). For Angola, Pearce (2015) has shown how contrasting visions of nationhood underwrote the competing political projects of the MPLA and UNITA, in which the former used its authority to define the nation via the state and delegitimise its opponents through the prism of ethnicity, while Larmer, finally, has explored how similar forms of contestation play out in largely peaceful circumstances in Zambia (2011) and more violently in the DR Congo (Kennes and Larmer 2016).

Taken together, this body of work has begun to provide a history of alternative nationalisms in Africa. It has developed new methods of analysis, and started to rethink the language of nation-state vs ethnicity in favour of a range of alternatives focused on national imaginaries. Building on the considerable achievements of these country-specific studies, we tentatively propose a framework which we hope will be useful for the future analysis of nationalist histories in Africa that places the experience of the continent where it belongs: in the mainstream of nationalist historiography.

To begin with, it is evidently necessary to reject the independence myth of national unity and instead identify the complexities that underlie national politics in any African state. It is vital to distinguish between nationalist feeling on the one hand, and nationalist political organisation on the other, while appreciating and analysing the variety of relationships that have existed between the two. It is therefore imperative, in line with the affective turn, to regard nationalism not merely or even mainly as a realist exercise in political power-seeking, but as a process intimately bound up with morally constituted concerns about the nature of society and how to live a good life. Nationalist imaginaries of this type can usefully be

explored in relation to other socio-political formations such as ethnic, religious or regional identities with which they are inevitably bound.

Following this, it is necessary to identify and analyse the particular elements from which particular national imaginaries are made—elements including but not limited to religious, cultural, legal, or indeed ethnic—as well as their perceived origins and the transformations they undergo in becoming national. As important is the study of the socio-political dynamics through which these elements are reconstituted in specific nationalisms, and the power relations that decide which potential elements from which parts of the nation-to-be are included and the extent to which this is a deliberate or assumed process. Understanding these dynamics helps explain the differential outcomes of nationalisms, that either enables a person or society to be both Tuareg and Malian, Lozi and Zambian, or fails to do so, and in the latter case leads to an experience of national integration as internal colonialism.

Although we here advocate discarding the *a priori* labeling of particular political expressions and movements as 'ethnic', 'tribal', or 'regional', it cannot be denied that many competing or alternative nationalist expressions have had spatially localised centres of activity, often peripheral to the colonial and post-colonial state centre. It is therefore all the more important for historians to work with local archives, which in our experience contain vital material, especially for the post-independence period. This is not an easy task as many local archives are in a state of disrepair, function ineffectively and/or are difficult to access. Following the insights of Peterson and Macola (2009), such local archive material can nonetheless be placed at the centre of analysis together with the writings and other forms of self-expression of nationalist movements and their 'homespun historians'. Recent works on localised post-colonial histories which focus on social issues cited above, and those that make use of local and entirely extraneous archives—for example those of locally active international NGOs and of diplomatic missions—should take alternative nationalist expressions into account when existent, as these are intimately linked to these same socio-economic concerns they study, as our own work has shown (Kennes & Larmer 2016; Lecocq 2010),

For both official and alternative or competing nationalisms, it is necessary to examine the internal dynamics and debates within specific nationalist movements. Moving beyond the study of leadership and organisational structures, the relationships between different constituencies and the debates that informed those movements are central to understanding

the changing dynamics, ideas and contestations within and between nationalist organisations. Generational, educational and gender differences, as well as economic factors, of course shape nationalist trajectories, but nonetheless remain understudied in African contexts.

Similarly, the dynamics of nationalism are affected by the actions and capacity of states, imperial, colonial and post-colonial. Newly independent states engaged in nation-building both to broadcast their power and reinforce the rudimentary structures they inherited, often using the same coercive methods of their colonial predecessors. Subsequently however, many 'gatekeeper' or 'extraverted' states did little or nothing to promote national belonging beyond accusing their political opponents of sedition – it is often the populace, or sections of it, that frames their criticism of the state in patriotic terms via the idea of suffering (Bayart 1993; Kohl and Schroven 2014; Mbembe 2004; Trouillot 1990). So far, analysis of such dynamics has largely been carried out from the perspective of the state, neglecting the role of the nation. We propose the inverse.

Clearly, this is not a research agenda focused on the exceptional i.e. successful separatist movements or examples of particularly violent and apparently dysfunctional nationalisms. It is rather necessary to study African nationalisms—official, dominant, alternative and everything else—in their entirety, encompassing more pacifist and, within the nation-state framework, legitimate forms, alongside more violent and/or separatist instances. However, in exploring all such forms under the rubric of competing nationalisms, we may usefully consider whether these are in practice best analysed as distinct types. This is relevant when we consider largely passive nationalisms that may, in particular historical periods, take more violent or separatist forms: what leads to such changes? Similarly, distinguishing overt irredentism from other forms of cross-border nationalism is important, but it may be useful to consider the complex interplay between states and non-state political, social and military movements that may be supported by one state in making nationalist claims upon the territory of another. Shifting the focus from state-centric analysis of such instances to cross-border nationalists may shed helpful light on the uneasy hosting of such movements and enable their own nationalist claims to be better understood.

Fifteen years ago Ellis (2002) convincingly rejected the standard periodisation in contemporary African history and it will already be clear that we regard such a rejection as necessary for understanding the histories of nationalisms. Whilst the importance of the

independence moment in the study of nationalism cannot be denied, it is a moment that, rather than functioning as a taken-for-granted boundary between historical periods, needs to be studied to understand the impact of this ceasura actually had on various African political imaginations and actions. As one element of this, it is necessary to explain how local intellectuals and nationalist leaders operated ideationally across such periods, by studying their construction of national imaginaries: how did they historicise their claims in relation to change in the more recent or deeper past? What resources did they use to make and broadcast their claims? Most importantly however: how can we gauge the extent of receptivity among wider populations to such claims?

As well as a greater emphasis on comparative analysis of nationalisms within Africa, it is fruitful and entirely possible to compare these to examples from elsewhere, as they are in no respect qualitatively distinct from those of Europe, South Asia or anywhere else. Comparing specific emanations across continents will not only shed light on particular African nationalisms, but will enrich the wider study of nationalism and help better understand its expressions outside that continent.

Conclusions

This article, in arguing for a sustained and rigorous historicisation of nationalism in Africa, seeks above all to assist historians of Africa to better analyse the ways in which Africans formulated—and still formulate—socio-political identities that arose in their attempts to achieve 'political independence' from colonial domination, but which failed in many respects to gain the freedom and liberation that most believed was their ultimate goal. It is our conviction that the distortions and problems that arose in earlier generations of analysis of nationalist movements and nation-states, which we have here tried to explain, have vitiated the clear analysis of the lived experience of nationalism, failing then to capture—among other things—its profound limitation as the basis of effective statehood and its enduring potency as the basis for collective and contested identities.

We have therefore recommended the use of a lexicon of nationalism—official, alternative, contested and so forth—rather than a terminology of ethnicity vs nation-statehood, not for semantic reasons, but as a better toolkit for making sense of what is an admittedly complex set of phenomena. In doing so we seek to place Africa into the mainstream of anti-colonial nationalism, demonstrating that the supposed artificialities, weaknesses and contradictions of

African nationalism are entirely characteristic of nationalism as a global phenomenon. Seen from this perspective, nationalism is as created, imagined and successful in Africa as it is elsewhere. We refuse to believe that there is some inherent difference in the imaginative capacities in the political field between Africans and the inhabitants of other parts of the globe.

Having drawn on recent works that historicise nationalism in important and revealing ways, we have advanced a framework that, we hope, will help achieve an understanding of African nationalisms in a comparative context within the continent and beyond. We however do so tentatively, recognising that our initial efforts in this regard are best treated as a 'work in progress', for which we invite criticism, elaboration and revision.

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[1] It should however be noted that this is not a study of the development of political scientific analysis of African nationalism, a subject which lies well beyond the scope of this paper.

[2] Some studies contemporary to Anderson's second edition confirm the 17th - 18th century origins of creole nationalisms in Latin America, such as D.A. Brading's *The First America. The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots and the Liberal State 1492–1866* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). However, many historians of Latin America were taken aback by his assertions. Since then, Anderson's work has been as influential on the study of Latin American nationalism as it has been elsewhere, leading to constructive criticism of his assertions in the last two decades. The current position seems to be that his analysis of the Creole elite as nationalist pioneers was incorrect, but that the wars of independence did generate both republican and nationalist ideals and feelings. Miller, Nicola. 2006. 'The Historiography of nationalism and national identity in Latin America.' *Nations and Nationalism* 12 (2): 201-221. The concensus on early Latin American nationalism and nation building place these developments as co-temporal with those on the Eurasian continent, when related to newer insights in the developments there discussed below. Nevertheless, the criticism Latin Americanists developed on Anderson's assertions in the 2000s does not absolve Europeanist historians and sociologists of nationalism in general from ignoring his statements, or nationalism in Latin America for that matter, when he made them.

[3] The rapid spread of French revolutionary ideas is testament to their universalist rather than nationalist character, making their greatest immediate impact on France's main colony, Haïti. This uprising itself has been misunderstood as a nationalist movement: James, C.L.R.. 1938, 2001. *The Black Jacobins*. London: Penguin.

[4] *Courrier des Pays-Bas*, 29 September 1829. Cited in, Witte, Els, Jean-Pierre Nandrin, Eliane Gubin, and Gita Deneckere, eds. 2005. *Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België I 1830-1905*. Tielt: Lannoo, 60.

[5] The view of the USSR as an empire in continuation of Tsarist Russia is now widely accepted, but it is also known that the USSR instrumentalised, subsumed and de-politizised national and ethnic sentiments in its state structures. While some national sentiments within the USSR predate its foundation, the post-Soviet nation-states needed to re-imagine their 'official' national identities, while facing competing nationalist claims from various 'smaller' nations. The similarities with African post-colonial state-building and nationalisms are striking. Torbakov, Igor. 2011. 'History, Memory and National Identity: Understanding the Politics of History and Memory Wars in Post-Soviet Lands.' *Demokratizatsiya* 3 (Summer 2011): 208-232; Kuznetsov, Alexander. 2011. 'The Meltdown of the Russian Federation in the Early 1990s: Nationalist Myth-Building and the Urals Republic Project.' *Demokratizatsiya* 1 (Winter 2011): 23-36.

[6] Examples of such writing include: Yaovi Tchtici, Toussaint and Bellarmin Coffi Codo (eds.) 2009. *Dàdá Gbè hèn àzìn..., un héros des résistances africaines à la pénétration coloniale au 19ème siècle.* Cotonou: Les Editions Ablodè; Glélé, Maurice Ahanzano. 1974. *Le Danxomẹ : du pouvoir Aja à la nation Fon.* Paris: Nubia; Fofana, Ibrahima Khalil. 1998. *L'Almami Samori Touré, empereur : récit historique*. Paris: Présence africaine; Anonymous (ed.). 2000, 2. ed. Centenaire du souvenir : 'Almami Samori Touré 1898-1998'. Conakry: Editions universitaires.

[7] In particular, Collier, Paul and Hoeffler, Anke. 2004. 'Greed and Grievance in Civil War'. Oxford Economic Papers No 24: 563-595, and the subsequent greed vs grievance debate; and Acemoğlu, Daron, Johnson, Simon and Robinson, James. 2001. 'The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation'. *The American Economic Review.* 91 (5): 1369-1401' and the subsequent debate regarding the role of institutions in development.