

A BRIEF ASSESSMENT OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WAR AND NATION-BUILDING IN AFRICA

Néstor Cerdá

In his book *Peace and War* (1981), Raymond Aron described ‘war’ as “the midwife of nations”.¹ However, we can also argue that it was with the evolution of the concept ‘nation’ that the experience and conduct of warfare during the last two centuries was radically transformed. If we follow this line of argument it is naturally imperative to acquire a clear understanding of what this concept of ‘nation’ actually means. A contemporary definition of this term is, “a body of people marked off by common descent, language, culture or historical tradition, whether or not bound by the defined territorial limits of a state,”² whilst ‘nation-building’ can be described as “the process whereby the inhabitants of a state’s territory come to be loyal citizens of that state”.³ However, both of these definitions are misleading, since they do not reflect the development of the concepts of ‘nation’ and ‘state’. For instance, in 18th Century Germany ‘nation’ was defined as “a united number of *Bürger* [...] who share a body of customs, mores and laws”⁴, while Wilsonian self-determination helped to understand ‘nation’ on ethnic and language terms. Yet despite the semantic differences that resulted from diverse historical contexts, all these definitions have something in common: their European origins. In Europe, the development of ‘nation’ and ‘state’ has run parallel throughout centuries of economic, political, and social transformation. In the 19th colonial territories of the nineteenth century however, this development did not take place, since states in Africa and Asia directly grew out of European power-struggle politics, rather than evolving from native African political dynamics.

The export of political ideologies and definitions such as self-determination and nationalism to these colonies built the foundations for the process of de-colonisation. In these countries, “the formation and establishment of the new state itself as a political entity” did not marry with the “cultural” nation (sharing the same language, religion, tradition, history), which Western Europeans, such as the British French, or Spaniards, partially achieved over centuries.⁵ The impulse to create a nation through the machinery of the state would prove impossible in the new post-colonial states, resulting in almost perpetual inter and intra-state armed conflicts from the moment these states gained their independence.

This essay will look primarily at the African continent in order to show how the phenomenon of war has been a key instrument in African attempts to forge a nation out

¹ Aron, Raymond quoted in Bloom, William (1990), *Personal Identity, National Identity, and International Relations* (Cambridge: CUP), p. 60

² *Chambers English Dictionary* (1996)

³ Bloom, William (1990), *Personal Identity, National Identity, and International Relations* (Cambridge: CUP), p. 55

⁴ Hobsbawm, E. J. (1992), *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: CUP), p. 17

⁵ Bloom, William (1990), p. 55

of each new state. I shall offer a brief exploration of the significance of war in the African modern culture so as to illustrate how the experience of conflict is incorporated into the mythology of each state. The subsequent nation-building in Africa that took place can be divided, this essay argues, into two phases: an initial period in where the sense of being African is created, only to be followed by a second course by which the African sentiment is complicated by attempts to create a nation out of multiple ethnic communities.

During the twentieth century African people have experienced so much armed violence – in the form of civil wars, inter-state wars, ruthless military dictatorships, inter-ethnic clashes, and so forth – that it is impossible to overlook the importance that war has played and continues to play in the formation of social habits and African culture. In predominantly agricultural and peasant societies, academic explanations of national history and other perceived characteristics of the identity cannot be easily spread, and it is the use of oral history to explain the past and the group identity what becomes extremely vital for the psychological cohesion of the group as for its physical survival. In countries such as Somalia, the oral traditions in the form of poems and tales about war memories, such as their fights against the Italians in the late nineteenth century; against Great Britain and her attempts to control the Dervish state in early twentieth century, and the war against Ethiopia in 1977-78, have significantly contributed to the formation of a common identity that despite the failure of the Somali state can be accurately described as some sort of ethno-nation. This ethnic nationalism or “tribalism”, as Somali dictator, Mohamed Siad Barre, noted, “[could] not go hand in hand [with Somali nationalism]”.⁶ However, we should not ignore the fact that it seems that sometimes this tribal nationalism has also contributed to the creation of Somali patriotism, in which “a tradition of struggle and warfare was often maintained and served to inspire in later generations a belief in a common fate”.⁷ This belief seems to have been in evidence during the 1977 Somali attempt to retake the Ethiopian region of Ogaden. As Peterson argued, the Somali Army decided to attack “buoyed by [Soviet] military hardware – and, no doubt, notions of natural superiority”.⁸ In this country the link between war and the evolution of a collective Somali warrior identity is irrefutable, and both tribalism and nationalism seem to coexist in a paradoxical manner, both reassuring and reaffirming each other. Such a paradox is rather beautifully illustrated by a Somali proverb which affirms a hierarchy of allegiances:

Me and my clan against the world;
 Me and my family against my clan;
 Me and my brother against my family;
 Me against my brother.⁹

⁶ Peterson, Scott (2001), *Me Against My Brother: At War in Somalia, Sudan, and Rwanda* (New York and London: Routledge), p. 11

⁷ Smith, Anthony D. (1993), “The Ethnic Sources of Nationalism”, *Survival*, Spring 1993, p. 53

⁸ Peterson, Scott (2001), p. 12

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2

The process of nation-building, while influenced by popular culture such as past war stories, has also been shaped by the political experiences that all African colonies experienced during the decolonisation process. The political process leading to the independence of African states can be seen as the first indication of a nascent African nationalism. The politicisation of a pan-African consciousness was largely shaped by a progressively urbanised and educated African élite, which could easily unite fellow countrymen by drawing attention to the abuses inflicted on ‘them’ by European rulers. As Rotberg explained, “[this African educated leadership] accumulated support with ease [since] the African grievances were many and evident [and] racialism was not unknown”.¹⁰ Nevertheless, only by reconciling the rural élite with the tribal element could the political initiative be seized, thereby counterbalancing the stubborn reluctance of white rulers to shift the balance of power. This relationship was made possible predominantly because the obvious differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’, could easily be exploited. This relatively ease in distinguishing ‘them’ (such as skin colour, use of European clothing, or type of occupation), from ‘us’: defenders of ancient tradition, culture, and identity, is what provided a solid base from which to launch and prolong the so-called ‘wars of national liberation’.

This type of war implies that there exists a clearly defined front line between local native forces fighting European occupiers and its native bureaucracy in order to gain independence. However, “the anti-guerrilla movements were usually split; in almost every country there were two or more such groups battling each other even more fiercely than they fought the common enemy; their “mass basis” was in essence tribal rather than national”.¹¹ This meant that in reality many of the forces fighting against the Europeans were no more than irregular troops, who were responsible for inflicting more casualties on their own side than on the Europeans. During the Algerian war of independence from 1954 to 1962 for example, “thousands of Algerians were killed before the FLN [*Front de Libération Nationale*] had defeated its domestic rivals”.¹² The same happened during the 1952-1959 Mau Mau guerrilla movement in Kenya where less than an hundred Europeans were killed while more than 11,000 people of Kikuyu ethnicity died at the hands of the guerrillas. The same trend was seen in conflicts such as those Angola in 1963 and Congo in 1964, where the number of native blacks of other tribes as well as ‘*mestizos*’ and ‘*assimilados*’ suffered most of the rebel violence.¹³ These examples show why we should be careful when using terms such as ‘national liberation’. The struggle for national independence at the time of the fighting had nothing to do with the desire to create a nation that would eventually identify itself with the state: the creation of a state-nationalism whereby citizens of a country see themselves as Algerians, or Kenyans, as opposed to other African citizenships. Nationalism was something the organisers of such rebellious movements did not regard as a first priority, but rather a task to be undertaken once independence was gained.

¹⁰ Rotberg, Robert I. (1966), *The rise of Nationalism in Central Africa* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP), p. 89

¹¹ Laqueur, Walter (1977), *Guerrilla : A historical and critical study* (London. Weidenfeld and Nicolson), p. 311

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 295

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 311

However, it is somehow paradoxical that a proto-nationalism based on pan-Arabism and/or pan-Africanism was used to overcome the fact that “primary identity [had] not extended beyond the ethnic group”.¹⁴ This assertion seems to have worked better in those countries where, despite its multi-ethnic composition, a war was being waged. The experience of war widened the gulf between those who claimed to represent the state and those who claimed to represent the people. Nevertheless, wars of national liberation have always been double-edged. On one side the rebellious groups fight against a common foreign enemy. On the other, they fight amongst themselves mainly for three different reasons: to standardize the ideology behind the struggle, to unify different armed groups, and to destroy any support for the foreigners within the native population. This last point, which could perhaps be described as ‘nation-purification’, can be identified as the first step in the nation-building process.

In almost all violent conflicts in Africa an obvious connection can be made between national liberation and ethnic violence. In some cases this means a reaffirmation of the national differences between locals and European foreigners, which results in a war of independence. In other instances, the creation of a homogenous nation has frequently resulted in the genocide, forced assimilation, or systematic persecution and discrimination of one ethnicity as opposed to the ruling ethnic group. As Connor argued:

Since most of the less developed states contain a number of nations, and since the transfer of primary allegiance from these nations to the state is generally considered the *sine qua non* of successful integration, the true goal is not “nation-building” but “nation-destroying”.¹⁵

In Europe, the term ‘nation-destroying’ has widely been understood in cultural terms, because “no culture can live if it is not endowed with a sovereign state exclusively its own.”¹⁶ This is why European nationalisms always argued that the assimilation of different cultures into a single one, which will ultimately define the nation-state, means the destruction of these cultures. However, in countries such as Nigeria, Rwanda and Congo (Zaire), ‘nation-destroying’ has had more literal implications. Genocidal attacks such as that of the Nigerian government against the Christian Ibo during the Biafran War (1967-1970) during which approximately one million Ibos died, or the 850,000 Tutsis killed during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, seem to demonstrate tendencies to solve ethnic disputes by the physical annihilation of one of the communities. This extreme inter-ethnic violence, as Connor notes, became the common type of warfare in Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Congo (Zaire), Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan, Zanzibar, Uganda and Zambia, and as Edward Feit argued, even in times of relatively peace the conduct of African politics still focused in “the

¹⁴Connor, Walker (1972), "Nation-building or nation-destroying", *World politics*, No. 24, p. 353

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 336

¹⁶ Kedourie, Elie (1993), *Nationalism*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 112

continuation of tribal warfare by other means”.¹⁷ The spilling over of ethnic rivalries into politics was made more likely by the absolute control of one determinate group over the state’s armed force instruments. However, in most of these countries the power structures were organised along a network of local powers along ethnic lines. This in turn caused severe friction between the state prerogative in the use of coercion, and that of the traditional organisation of the non-urban societies. This dichotomy then characterises the period following the independence of these states, shifting relationships from what Thomas Scheff terms the ‘Us-Them’ equation towards the “I-we balance”.¹⁸

The ‘I-We’ theory ponders the individuality of any given human being and the defining characteristics of a homogeneous group of people. It is true that this theory appears at its most effective when applied to developed societies, since individualism is most obvious due to the high concentration of population in urban areas. However, it also provides an interesting picture when translated into mainly agricultural societies. In these societies the survival of any individual fully depends on his/her group, a factor that becomes vital in the context of war. With the eruption of modern armed violence, this ethnocentrism, or “the practice of viewing all matters from the standpoint of one’s group”¹⁹, is elevated to a level never experienced before. In such a situation, war definitely helps to reinforce the sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group. This is best illustrated when analysing African inter-state wars, in which ethnicity has proved to be the ideal justification for the naked aggression of one state against another. This has been especially true when – as has been the case on many occasions – the motive for border incursions and attacks upon another state was to be found inside the aggressor country itself, such as the movement of Tutsis guerrillas from Uganda into Rwanda in 1990, and later from Rwanda into Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 1997.

From a strictly academic point of view, assessing the relationship between armed confrontation and its effect on the creation of an almost “tangible” psychological national identity, is only meaningful if we explore that relationship in particular regions rather than on a global basis. In countries such as Eritrea, the experience of war, either internal war between different factions within the mainly Muslim Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), between the ELF and the more multi-ethnic Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), or against the foreign Ethiopian enemy, in the opinion of Markakis, did indeed contribute to the formation of “a genuinely national Eritrean consciousness”.²⁰ However, at the other side of the continent, we find armed conflicts like those in Sierra Leone and Liberia, have evolved into struggles to control diamond and drugs industries. In these countries, the non-combatant population has been indiscriminately targeted, and the employment of children as soldiers (at least 6,000 in Liberia) has become a

¹⁷ Edward Feit, quoted in Connor (1972), p. 353, n. 65

¹⁸ Scheff, Thomas J. (2000), *Bloody Revenge: Emotions, Nationalism and War* (Lincoln, NE.: Backinprint.com), p. 58

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59

²⁰ Markakis, John (1989), “Nationalities and the state in Ethiopia”, *Third World Quarterly*, No. 10-4, p. 143

daily practice. Such complications seem to strengthen the opinion that in these failed states, such as Liberia, Rwanda, Somalia, or the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the process of nation-building cannot be achieved. However, no matter how well argued these interpretations are, they have significant flaws. For example, in his article on Eritrea, Markakis seems to confuse loyalty to the EPLF and its land-reform promise with the emergence of the Eritrean nation. In West Africa, although war has been conducted in the most miserable and inhumane way possible, it is perfectly reasonable to argue that enormous human loss also contributed to the creation (or strengthening) of national identities such as those of the German in the Great War or the Jewish and Russians (including all those who lived in other parts rather than Russian Republic) in World War Two. If “one of the self-appointed tasks of nationalists is to turn ethnic categories into ethnic communities, and ethnic communities into ethnic nations”²¹, we can firmly state that ‘war’ does encourage this process. The fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the collapse of the USSR, or the disintegration of Yugoslavia, do not mean that a national consciousness in each country has been diminished but rather that the “I-We-Us-Them” equation has evolved, and this evolution will eventually lead to the variants becoming uniform. A process to which Africa is not alien to.

²¹ Smith, Anthony D. (1993), p. 52