CHAPTER ELEVEN

MODELS OF DECOLONIZATION

SOUTH SUDAN: AN OUTLIER IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN NATION-BUILDING?

OLE FRAHM

Sub-Saharan African nationalism and nation-building in the postcolonial period have been characterized by a couple of largely successive developments: (1) state-driven inclusive nationalism opposed to ethnic and tribal distinctiveness; (2) the failure of the official nation-building process to take root in the population and the assertion of ethnic identities and ethnic separatism; (3) the emergence of the politics of belonging and discourses of autochthony. South Sudan as a unique late-comer to independence with hardly any colonial or pre-colonial antecedents as a state or group collective provides a fascinating test case to contrast to the above narrative. Therefore, this paper aims to show that South Sudan in its early post-independence period, effectively in year nine of autonomous rule since the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2005, follows a very idiosyncratic trajectory in terms of devising and struggling with the idea of a national identity and community.

Historical trajectory of African nationalism and nation-building

In order to be able to discuss and evaluate the South Sudanese experience in nation-building, here understood in the literal sense as construction and popularization of a national identity, it is inevitable to seek out the regional, continental and international context of nation-building and national identity construction. Analyzing and assessing

processes of nation-building is an intrinsically comparative endeavor: the idea of nationalism, of a community of people that share both a common culture and destiny while simultaneously being part of the same commonwealth, the same unit of political rule, is a specifically modern concept. What is more, the notion that territory, rule and people ought to be congruous is a distinctly European concept that goes back to the eighteenth century.

The African experience of nation, nationalism and nation-building differs substantially from the archetypical European trajectory, invariably so as almost the entire continent was subjected to colonization by the European powers, which cut short and preempted a sui generis evolution of African kingdoms to modern states. It therefore took until decolonization and the takeover of the colonial state by indigenous nationalist forces for the evolution towards African nation-states to begin its uneven and often eclectic course. After World War II, decolonization in Africa proceeded at an exhilarating pace, driven particularly by the bipolar competition between two at least nominally anti-colonial superpowers, the weakening of France and Britain's global position after the Suez Crisis in 1956 and the contemporaneous independence of Ghana under the inspirational leadership of Kwame Nkrumah who helped spread the pan-African vision across the continent.

What united the continent's highly heterogeneous inhabitants to proclaim themselves Africans was the common experience of subjugation under the yoke of colonialism and as a consequence the common yearning for independence (Mazrui 1963, 89). Pan-African unity was, however, short-lived as the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1964 enshrined the sanctity of colonial borders. Given the state of the international state system, "[h]owever alien the geographical grid of imperial ambition, the logic of struggle compelled nationalist movements to embrace it" (Young 1994, 241). And as Philip Curtin (1966, 149) makes clear, "the aspiration to create a state-nation from virtually nothing was stronger than the desire to base new states on old nations." Characteristic for early postcolonial thinking is Roger Tangri's (1999, 8) categorical statement that "at independence, African countries largely lacked a national identity, partly because colonial policy did much to strengthen ethnic, as opposed to national consciousness, and partly because the countries were too recent in existence to elicit a sense of common nationhood." Moreover, the linguistic heterogeneity of most newborn states in Africa did not allow language to play an equally strong part in uniting citizens as it had in most European nationalisms and thus decreased their chances to "create unique national cultures within their boundaries" (Laitin 2007, 88).

Notwithstanding these less than ideal starting conditions, most African governments initially opted for an inclusive version of nationalism as "unity of the nation as a regulative idea inspired Africa's generation of new political leaders" (Tetzlaff and Jakobeit 2005, 125). By promoting an assimilationist idea of the nation, they thereby strove to place their legitimacy on a broader footing (Bratton and van de Walle 1997, 75). Hence, during the first decade after independence, "it seemed natural that the priority should lie in the projection—the making concrete—of the myth of national unity" (Chabal 2008, 44). John Markakis (1999, 71) actually claims that "[w]hatever it may be elsewhere, nationalism in Africa is the ideology of the state. More precisely, it is the ideology of those who wield state power." In that sense, African state-nationalism is not only a counter-project to imperial strategies of divide-and-rule but a categorical denial of the notion that nationalism emanates from an already existing primordial nation.

Yet, in the decades following independence governments generally failed to put the lofty ideals of state-nationalism into practice as popular identification with the state beyond expected benefits was widely lacking. In contrast to the late colonial period when nationalism blossomed due to the visible presence of an easily identifiable "other"—the colonialists—post-independence regimes struggled to define a relevant other and concomitantly struggled to create virulent symbols of national identity (Herbst 1990, 130). The failure of the state to deliver and deserve adherence from its citizens resulted in a resurgence of older forms of loyalty that the nationalist state had sought to suppress. In particular, this meant a surge of ethnic sentiment and ethnic political mobilization whose starting point is arguably the Igbo's declaration of an independent state of Biafra in the 1960s and which continued especially as a tool of electoral mobilization all over the continent. Ethiopia's current pseudo ethno-federalist state structure is only the most overt recognition of the salience of ethnic as opposed to national attachments to political and personal identity.

By the 1990s, the nature of nationalism and identity politics across much of Africa had radically changed yet again as the "new nationalism" (Ake 1996) proved to be remarkably different from that of the early 1960s (Ottaway 1999, 299–300). Contrary to the first nationalism, contemporary "uncivil nationalism" (Berman 1998) shows a tendency to exclude rather than include populations, resulting in xenophobia and alienation (Kohnert 2008). One of the driving forces behind the activation of ethnicity and the politics of belonging lies in the demise of the postcolonial nation-building projects and the high-stakes struggle over state power and resources in the

wake of political openings provided by democratization (Markakis 1999, 73). Conversely, on the local level, interest in autochthony and indigeneity stems from a common search for prosperity and security of tenure amidst underdevelopment and state failure, as competing claims to land encourage the politicization of identity as a means to protect and promote claims to ethnic *terroir* (Bates 2008, 92, 133). Côte d'Ivoire's vicious struggle over *ivoirité* (Marshall-Fratani 2006), South Africa's anti-immigrant riots (Neocosmos 2010), Zimbabwe's *Third Chimurenga* campaign against white farmers and black "aliens" (Mashingaidze 2011) and fights for control in Kivu, Eastern DRC (Jackson 2006), are but four twenty-first century instances where debates about autochthony and indigeneity, i.e. debates about who rightfully belongs to the nation, have turned sour and, indeed, fatal. The confusing and potentially bloody kaleidoscope of citizenship is well-characterized by Nyamnjoh's (2006, 73) depiction of migrants in Southern Africa that are "trapped in cosmopolitan spaces in a context where states and their hierarchy of 'privileged' citizens, ethnic minorities and others who straddle borders are bound to feel like travellers in permanent transit."

South Sudan's historical pedigree

Sudan attained independence from Britain in 1956, almost immediately a rebellion in the South broke out, leading to a drawn out uprising (Anyanya) that culminated in the 1972 Addis Ababa Peace Agreement and the institution of the semi-autonomous Southern Regional Government (SRG). When the SRF was abolished by the dictator Nimeiri in 1983, a new rebellion sprung up which was further spurred by the introduction of sharia laws for the entire country. The rebellion was led by the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) until an internal split in 1991 made the South descend into sectarian fighting in the 1990s, but neither Khartoum nor the SPLM was strong enough to win outright. The beginning of oil exports in 1999 and renewed international interest in the region after 9/11 sparked serious peace negotiations leading to the CPA in 2005 and an independence referendum in 2011, in which more than 98 percent of voters opted for independence. Since independence in July 2011 South Sudan has been struggling to replace the wartime bond of joint struggle against a common enemy (the Khartoum government) with a new positive collective identity.

I agree with the contention of constructivist theories of nationalism that the most important aspect of national identity formation is the *act* of constructing the memory of a common past rather than the actual existence

of the past (Hobsbawm 1983). However, you generally need some nucleus of shared past experiences and symbols for a concept of identity to win acceptance and persevere against competing influences and loyalties. South Sudan is in the unenviable position not to have a readily available nucleus of national memory and identity that all or most of its citizens know of, acknowledge and endorse. At no point in history did the present-day territories of the world's newest state form a united body politic, nor were they inhabited by a homogenous people. While the Zande, for instance, possessed a sophisticated hierarchical state structure in pre-colonial times, the reach and expansion of its realm never came close to covering the present-day state (Evans-Pritchard 1963). Other ethnic groups like the Dinka and Nuer (the two largest ethnic groups) were and are acephalous societies with a dispersed horizontal structure of authority (Beswick 1994, 178). Moreover, none of these ethnic groups is either large or strong enough to dominate historical memory to the exclusion of other minor ethnic groups. Hence, for present-day lawmakers and proponents of South Sudanese nationalism, it is virtually impossible to find a credible precedent to refer to.

Furthermore, South Sudan in contrast to European nationalism but akin to other African states does not possess a common language except for Juba Arabic, a colloquial form of Arabic which is officially shunned, while only a minority is fluent in English, the official language. A national literature also does not exist as the most popular medium of artistic expression and historical narrative are songs but these differ from tribe to tribe and are thus not national in character. Finally, even though Christianity is today the majority religion, the experience of being subjected to violent proselytization campaigns by the religious fundamentalist regime in Khartoum has convinced Juba to opt for strict secularism. Hence, in Jok Madut Jok's (2011, 2) words, "South Sudan is only slightly more than a geographical expression. … The main glue that binds the country's multiple ethnicities together is the history of their struggle for freedom and collective opposition to the north."

Narratives of South Sudanese nationalism

South Sudanese experience with official nationalism in the former Sudan had been almost universally negative. The political imbalance of power led to "a hegemonic attempt of the 'Arab' north to impose its political, economic and social identity upon the whole state of Sudan" (Rycx 1991, 142–43), as the Northern elite espoused an exclusive, discriminatory, racist and forcibly homogeneous idea of the nation utterly

incongruous with the empirical reality of a highly diverse and plural country and society. The extreme violence that many Southern Sudanese were confronted with throughout Sudan's post-independence period "deepened the identity cleavage between the two parts of the country and strengthened the image of northerners as colonialists in national garb" (Deng 1995, 136).

In present-day South Sudan, the government and the entire state structure are dominated by the SPLM, whose only real domestic challengers are rebel militias and lack of capacity. Far from being a monolithic bloc, however, the party is fragmented into different regional, ethnic and other groupings and is itself a coalition rather than a unified actor (ICG 2011:13). Debates over nationalism and nation-building have received quite a prominent place in South Sudan's public sphere, arguably not in spite of but because of the high levels of need in almost all fields of governance: a common sense of national belonging is counted upon as glue for the struggling newborn state.

The national narrative as put forward by the state and its representatives is essentially twofold. On the one hand, the long war that came to an end in 2005 is presented as a glorious feat of liberation from Northern/Arab oppression. In this context, the SPLA lays claim to the lion's share of glory even though the party's official line up until the referendum had been to strive for a reformed but united "New Sudan" (Garang 1992). There is obviously not little self-interest involved considering that the government's upper echelons are overwhelmingly made up of former rebel soldiers. Clearly visible forms of memorialization are public monuments that commemorate the war and the many that have died in its course; for instance a giant statue of John Garang that was unveiled on Independence Day in 2011. In addition, the color red in the national flag represents the martyrs' blood, while one of the national anthem's three stanzas as well as a public holiday (July 30=the day of John Garang's death in a helicopter accident in 2005) are entirely devoted to the fallen soldiers' memory.

On the other hand, speeches and opinion pieces portray multiculturalism that takes into account the country's ethnic, cultural and religious diversity as the basis and essence of South Sudan's national ideal. Thus, the SPLM Manifesto (2008:14) states that unless the existing diversity is recognized, building a genuine nation-state will be impossible as it would embolden "the local elite and power seekers, masquerading as nationalists, to seize and retain political power, and then proceed to pillage and render the people of their so-called nation-state destitute." The Manifesto and other appeals are, however, much less precise when it

comes to the positive content of unity-in-diversity (El-Battahani 2007) and how it is supposed to be represented, respected and integrated into both the state structure and the national identity. The flipside to this inclusive discourse is that *tribalism*, i.e. ethnic nepotism, is denounced on every occasion, in particular by members of one of the smaller of the country's sixty-plus ethnic groups.

For in spite of the euphoria that accompanied independence in July 2011, disillusionment and disenchantment with the state has already set in. In the face of grave underdevelopment, lack of infrastructure and a state that fails to deliver services to most of its citizens, ethnically based rebellions and inter-ethnic cattle raids have been on the increase. While mutual raiding has been an integral part of life in South Sudan for centuries, ethnic hatred has been added to the purely economic motivations and raiding has become more violent in turn. Amnesty International (2013, 12–13), for instance, reports how the killing of six Dinka farm workers in Farajallah in December 2012 sparked a wave of ethnic violence in Wau, with Dinka attacking non-Dinka quarters as police officers joined in the fighting based on their ethnic loyalties instead of separating the sides. The ethnicization of politics is also driven by politicians eager to establish a power base by either playing on ethnic animosities (Schomerus and Allen 2010, 20). Therefore, political disagreements and resource competition are frequently articulated in the language of ethnicity. An outgrowth is that each cabinet appointment is immediately scrutinized less for the appointee's competence but for his or her ethnic and regional origins.

In the same vein, discourses of autochthony have entered South Sudan in the wake of autonomy and independence. The South Sudanese Land Act of 2009 grants land rights primarily to communities. Since millions of South Sudanese were either internally displaced or had to flee the country altogether, the question of rightful access to land has become extremely contentious. According to this logic of collective as opposed to individual belonging, most returnees were adamant to return to a particular place in Southern Sudan, their place of origin, which was tied up with the ability to legitimately access resources, most notably land (Hovil 2010, 19–20). At the same time, in a dispute over land increasingly present are (pseudo)historical narratives that highlight that their group had been there first (Rolandsen 2009, 23). The claim to "have been here first" takes on an even more combative meaning when it becomes embroiled with claims that those who actively fought in the war should enjoy privileges over those who did not (LeRiche and Arnold 2012, 229). Thus, returnees from the North, typically the Greater Khartoum area, are occasionally called

jalaba (Sommers and Schwartz 2011, 6–7), a pejorative term for Northern Arabs. In addition, South Sudanese national identity is asserted in rising levels of xenophobia and acts of violence against foreign nationals, especially petty merchants and taxi drivers from Uganda, Eritrea and Kenya who are accused of stealing jobs and profits from South Sudanese in an eerie echo of similar slogans emanating from right-wing parties across Europe, North America and Australia.

Conclusion

As this overview of developments in South Sudan has shown, South Sudan in its current state of development does not stick to the chronological blueprint of its African antecedents. Instead, South Sudan combines all three trends of postcolonial African nationalism and national identity construction (inclusive state nationalism, ethnic resurgence, discourses of autochthony) and exhibits elements of each in its official policies, public discourses and observable actions on the ground parallel to each other.

Bibliography

Ake, Claude. 1996. *Democracy and Development in Africa*. Washington D. C.: Brookings Institution.

Amnesty International. 2013. *South Sudan: Civil Unrest and State Repression. Human rights violations in Wau, Western Bahr el Ghazal state*. London: Amnesty International Publications.

Bates, Robert H. 2008. *When Things Fell Apart: State Failure in Late-Century Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Berman, Bruce J. 1998. "Ethnicity, Patronage, and the African State: The Politics of Uncivil Nationalism." *African Affairs* 97:305–41.

Beswick, Stephanie. 1994. "Islam and the Dinka of the Southern Sudan from the pre-colonial period to independence (1956)." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 29(3/4):172–85.

Bratton, Michael, and Nicolas van de Walle. 1997. *Democratic Experiments in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chabal, Patrick. 2008. "Imagined Modernities: community, nation and state in postcolonial Africa." In *Comunidades Imaginadas: Nação e Naciolismo em África*, edited by Luis Reis Torgal, Fernado Tavares Pimenta and Julião Soares Sousa. Coimbra: University of Coimbra.

Curtin, Philip D. 1966. "Nationalism in Africa, 1945–1965." *The Review of Politics* 28 (2):143–53.

Deng, Francis. 1995. *War of Visions: Conflict and Identities in the Sudan*. Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution.

El-Battahani, Atta. 2007. "Tunnel Vision or Kaleidoscope: Competing Concepts on Sudan Identity and National Integration." *African Journal of Conflict Resolution* 7(2):37–61.

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1963. "The Zande State." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 93(1):134–54.

Garang, John. 1992. *The Call for Democracy in Sudan*. London: Kegan Paul International.

Herbst, Jeffrey. 1990. "War and the State in Africa." *International Security* 14(4):117–39.

Hobsbawm, Eric J. 1983. "Introduction: Inventing Traditions." In *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, 1–14. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hovil, Lucy. 2010. "Hoping for peace, afraid of war: the dilemmas of repatriation and belonging on the borders of Uganda and South Sudan." *New Issues in Refugee Research* Report 196.

International Crisis Group. 2011. *Politics and Transition in the New South Sudan*. Africa Report 172.

Jackson, Stephen. 2006. "Sons of Which Soil? The Language and Politics of Autochthony in Eastern D.R. Congo." *African Studies Review* 49(2):95–123.

Jok, Jok Madut. 2011. *Diversity, Unity, and Nation Building in South Sudan*. United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 287.

Kohnert, Dirk. 2008. "Entfremdung und Ausgrenzung: Afrikas neuer Nationalismus in Zeiten der Globalisierung." *Sociologus* 58(2):197–222.

Laitin, David D. 2007. *Nations, States, and Violence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

LeRiche, Matthew, and Matthew B. Arnold. 2012. *South Sudan: From Revolution to Independence*. London: Hurst.

Markakis, John. 1999. "Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Horn of Africa." In *Ethnicity and Nationalism in Africa: Constructivist Reflections and Contemporary Politics*, edited by Paris Yeros. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Marshall-Fratani, Ruth. 2006. "The war of 'who is who': autochthony, nationalism and citizenship in the Ivorian crisis." *African Studies Review* 49(2):9–43.

Mashingaidze, Terence M. 2011. "What Blacks, Which Africans and in Whose Zimbabwe? Pan-Africanism, Race and the Politics of Belonging in Postcolonial Zimbabwe." In *Redemptive or Grotesque Nationalism? Rethinking Contemporary Politics in Zimbabwe*, edited

by Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and James Muzondidya. Bern: Peter Lang.

Mazrui, Ali. 1963. "On the Concept of 'We Are All Africans'." *The American Political Science Review* 57(1):88–97.

Neocosmos, Michael. 2010. *From 'Foreign Natives' to 'Native Foreigners'. Explaining Xenophobia in Post-Apartheid South Africa-Citizenship and Nationalism, Identity and Politics*. Dakar: CODESRIA.

Nyamnjoh, Francis B. 2006. *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa*. Dakar: Codesria Books.

Ottaway, Marina. 1999. "Ethnic Politics in Africa: Change and Continuity." In *State, Conflict, and Democracy in Africa*, edited by Richard Joseph. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

Rolandsen, Øystein H. 2009. *Land, Security and Peace Building in the Southern Sudan*. Oslo: PRIO.

Rycx, Jean Francois. 1991. "The Islamisation of law as a political stake in Sudan." In *Sudan after Nimeiri*, edited by Peter Woodward. London: Routledge.

Schomerus, Mareike, and Tim Allen. 2010. *Southern Sudan at Odds with Itself: Dynamics of Conflict and Predicaments of Peace*. London: DESTIN.

Sommers, Marc, and Stephanie Schwartz. 2011. "Dowry and Division: Youth and State Building in South Sudan." *United States Institute of Peace Special Report* 295.

SPLM. 2008. *The SPLM Manifesto*.

Tangri, Roger. 1999. *The Politics of Patronage in Africa: parastatals, privatization and private enterprise*. Oxford: James Currey.

Tetzlaff, Rainer, and Cord Jakobeit. 2005. *Das nachkoloniale Afrika*. Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Young, Crawford. 1994. *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.