

The Roots of African Nationalism: A Conceptual and Historiographical Discourse

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Abstract

The literature on African nationalism is replete with conceptual categories that describe the various stages and types of African nationalism and the resistance to colonial rule. Among the foremost scholars on African nationalism are J. Ade Ajayi and Terrence Ranger. The works of these scholars appear to have created a conceptual disagreement on the roots of African nationalism. The article analyzes the nature of this debate with a view to establishing a common ground on the roots of African nationalism.

Keywords: African nationalism; primary resistance, post pacification, nativistic movements, messianic movements

Introduction

In the established literature on African nationalism scholars have devised a number of conceptual categories to describe the various stages and types of African nationalism and resistance to colonial rule. Although there is some measure of agreement on the conceptual categories, scholars hold divergent opinions on their interconnectedness and on whether they can all be classified under the rubric of 'nationalist movements.' This conceptual disagreement has generated a debate in the historiography on the roots of African nationalism. The article analyzes the nature and content of this debate with a view to establishing a common ground for the roots of African nationalism.

The Roots of African Nationalism

In his book, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*, J. S. Coleman presents a representative sample of three categories: primary resistance to the imposition of colonial rule; post-pacification or secondary revolts against specific administrative actions, including nativistic or messianic movements; and modern nationalist movements which struggled for self-government.

Most scholars accept this categorisation; they also agree on the meaning and objective of the third category. On the other hand, they hold divergent opinions on whether the first two categories have any connection with the third category and whether they can in fact be described as 'nationalist movements'. The article analyzes the debate which this conceptual disagreement has generated in the historiography on the roots of African nationalism.

Coleman asserts that the three categories of resistance are all aspects of African nationalism but that, for analytical purposes, primary and secondary resistance could be described as traditional nationalism in contradistinction to modern nationalism. Whereas traditional nationalism was, according to Coleman, 'backward looking' and 'negative' it was as intensely nationalistic as modern nationalism. In any case secondary revolts had utilitarian value for modern nationalism because nationalist leaders could appropriate the issues for their cause.

In their controversial work, *The Partition of Africa*, R. E. Robinson and J. Gallagher place African nationalism in a completely different context. According to the authors, it was African 'proto-nationalism' that lured Europe into Africa and precipitated the continent's partition. African nationalism was, in their view, not the response to the challenges of colonial rule; it was the cause. This is quite unorthodox. The authors' view has been cited to show the range of the debate on the roots of African nationalism. But the scholars whose works represent the two dominant views on the roots of African nationalism are J. F. A. Ade Ajayi and Terrence Ranger.

Ajayi's contribution to the debate, 'Nineteenth Century Origins of Nigerian Nationalism', is in fact a refutation of the link that Coleman establishes between traditional nationalism and modern nationalism as well as his use of the concept 'nationalism' to describe primary resistance. In the author's view, primary resistance was aimed at the retention of the old order while the subsequent nationalist movement was aimed at creating a nation state which could take its place on the basis of equality in the international state system.

From Ajayi's analysis, it is clear that the objective of modern nationalism was completely different from that of primary resistance. A different class of Africans were also involved in the two movements. Primary resistance was led by the traditional ruling elite who struggled against a change in the status quo while modern nationalism was led by a new class of educated Africans with a vision to the future. Ajayi traces the roots of African nationalism to the emergence of this new class.

The educated African was a product of what Ajayi describes as the social 'revolution' initiated by the Christian missions in the nineteenth century. The missionaries introduced European ideas of nation-building; they also educated the Africans who imbibed these ideas. Ajayi emphasizes the fact that the 'revolution' was initiated even before the establishment of colonial rule, specifically, in the

nineteenth century. At the time, the prevailing view, at least in the missionary community, was that direct European control was unlikely.

The missionaries also believed that Christianity could best flourish in Africa if a new social, economic, and political environment similar to the European nation state system could be created on the continent. Practical problems such as the limited number of European missionaries and their high mortality rate in Africa; language and communication barriers, among others, made it obvious that the task of actualising the missionary vision would have to be carried out by Africans themselves. The failed attempts to Christianise Africans in the last two centuries reinforced this view. Thus, for very practical reasons, the missionaries found it necessary to raise a new African middle class who would carry through the 'revolution' they had initiated. The rise of this class of Africans is, in the author's view, the greatest contribution of the missions to African nationalism. Although Ajayi deals with the specific case of Nigeria his analysis is applicable to the whole of tropical Africa. The missions covered the whole of the continent and in spite of their denominational differences, they had the same aspirations and applied the same methods.

The author notes, however, that before the continent was carved up into political units the nationalism of the educated elite lacked a geopolitical focus. Instead, it was racial in content and perspective. The 'African race' was the basis of the new nation which they aspired to create. But their vision of the 'nation' of the African race was not coterminous with the whole continent. It was limited to the part of the continent with which they were familiar. In the case of the educated elite in Nigeria, their notion of the African nation of the future did not go beyond West Africa with which the Sierra Leonian, Cuban, and Brazilian emigrants, who were the first generation of the educated elite in the region, were very familiar. This geographical limitation did not however change the African context of the nationalism of the educated elite. Irrespective of whichever part of tropical Africa they must have found themselves the educated elite espoused an African nationalism.

The partition of the continent by the European powers established the territorial boundaries for the nationalism of the educated elite. The economic, social and political consequences of colonial rule stimulated a new generation of the educated elite into political agitation. The result was the nationalist movement which, along with other forces, led to the mergence of independent African states.

One important feature of the nationalism of the educated elite, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century is, according to the author, their belief that they needed European support and tutelage to establish the future African 'nation'. They therefore supported the missionary effort and in some cases encouraged the imposition of colonial rule. Because of this they have been described in the literature as collaborators.

In his paper, 'Connections between "Primary Resistance" Movements and Modern Mass Nationalism in East and Central Africa', Terrence Ranger acknowledges the role which the so-called collaborators played in the development of African nationalism. However, he maintains that African collaboration was merely one of the factors that shaped the environment of which modern nationalism developed. Two other factors—European initiative and policy, and African resistance—were equally important in the development of African nationalism.

It is necessary to note at this point that Coleman's ideas on African nationalism, referred to above, provide the link between Ajayi's and Ranger's approach to the roots of African nationalism. Both authors challenge Coleman's views. However, whereas Ajayi cannot accept the link which Coleman establishes between traditional and modern nationalism, Ranger's concern relates to Coleman's, as well as Robinson and Gallagher's description of primary resistance movements as 'backward' looking and 'traditional'. But, as I pointed out earlier, it is because Ajayi sees primary resistance movements as attempts to re-establish the status-quo ante that he cannot accept them as constituent parts of African nationalism. It is based on this premise that he traces the roots of African nationalism to the educated elite who looked to the future and thence to the Christian missions who

trained the educated elite. Thus, by challenging Coleman's assertion that primary resistance movements were traditional and backward looking, Ranger, whose work was published in 1968, seven years after Ajayi's, takes the debate back to first principles: the connection between primary resistance and modern nationalism. Through Coleman, Ranger challenges Ajayi's view that no link can be established between primary resistance and modern nationalism. In doing this he provides an alternative approach to the roots of African nationalism.

Ranger asserts that African nationalism developed in three stages: primary resistance, millenarian movements, and modern nationalism. One phenomenon common to the three stages was the attempt at mass mobilisation. The inclusion of the word 'mass' in the title of Ranger's paper is quite instructive. He also asserts that there were 'historic connexions' linking the three stages.

Colonial rule presented African societies, the author informs us, with new challenges which required mass organisation and mass commitment. Resistance and millenarian movements were attempts in this direction, as were the attempts at co-operation and collaboration. Ranger sees the Christian revolution (the basis of Ajayi's thesis) which resulted from an alliance between African collaborators and Christian missions as attempts to solve the perceived weaknesses in the African state system. The author admits that these 'revolutions' were quite important to the development of African nationalism. But he argues that they were too restrictive to be effective agents of mass mobilisation. They also required alien sanctions and long gestation periods which weakened society's sense of community. Consequently, they served as impediments to, rather than agents of mass mobilisation. Because the Christian revolution impeded the attempt at mass mobilisation, one of the author's criteria for assessing a nationalist movement, he concludes that their contribution to the development of African nationalism may in fact have been exaggerated in the literature. Even where the Christian revolutions were able to achieve some level of mass mobilisation, the impetus, the author informs us, came from primary resistance.

Ranger asserts that primary resistance movements were more successful at mass commitment and mass organisation, especially in societies where the resistance was unusually protracted. Such societies were able to draw either on their prophetic traditions or on witchcraft-eradication traditions to bring forth religious leaders who succeeded in mobilising the people for resistance. The author presents several examples of this phenomenon. Two of these would be mentioned here. In the Ndebele-Shona uprising in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) in 1896-7 the priests of the Nwari cult of the Ndebele and the spirit mediums of the Chaminuka-Nehanda hierarchies of the Shona mobilised their followers to co-operate in the rebellion with millenarian promises of immunity from bullets and resurrection to enjoy the benefits of a golden age. In the Maji Maji rebellion in Tanganyika (Tanzania) in 1905, the Kolelo cult coordinated the mobilisation for the rebellion throughout the Rufiji complex and beyond. The cult leaders also used millenarian promises as instruments of mass mobilisation. Under the direction of the cults the uprisings assumed the character of millenarian revolts. Ranger asserts that the methods that the leaders of such revolts employed were quite revolutionary and were not aimed, as scholars like Coleman and Ajayi have assumed, at preserving the 'tribal' past. Instead, the leaders drew from the past to overcome 'tribal' limitations and to bring forth new organisations that could meet the challenges of colonialism. These methods were not different from those which the leaders of the secondary or messianic movements and the later nationalists employed.

Ranger asserts further that similarity of methods was not the only link between primary and secondary resistance on the one hand and modern nationalism. The three stages were also connected in various ways. Some of these connections were direct; others were symbolic. For instance, the messianic movements often used the heroes of the primary resistance to mobilise and recruit members. The Mumbo cult among the Gusii people of Kenya had been founded in 1913 by one Onyango Dunde who, like the biblical Jonah, claimed to have been swallowed up by a sea-serpent in lake Victoria and later regurgitated. The cult was anti-European and anti-missionary, advocating a rejection of European ideals and a return to the African way of life. Dunde and his followers adopted the Gusii leaders who

led the primary resistance against the British as cult heroes and symbols. The cult used the prestige and authority of these venerated leaders to organise a multi-ethnic and anti-British movement.

Similarly, the Dini Ya Msambwa cult of Elijah Masinde in the western district of Kenya called for wider African unity and used the symbols of the primary resistance to organise its followers. The Christian independent church movements also found the symbols of primary resistance useful instruments for mass mobilisation. The Nazarite Church in Zululand drew inspiration from the Bambata uprising of 1906. The Church linked itself to the uprising through the five sons of Messen Qwaba, one of the foremost leaders of the revolt. Among the Shona, Mathew Zwinde's Church of the White Bird, established in 1916, linked itself to the Ndebele-Shona revolt of 1896-7 by proclaiming the Shona who died in the war as its saints and martyrs.

Like the leaders of the secondary movements, modern nationalists also appealed to the memories of the primary resistance in an attempt to create mass enthusiasm for the nationalist course. The Tanganyika African National Union, TANU, presented itself as the successor to the Maji Maji movement. Nationalist in Southern Rhodesia called their war against the Ian Smith regime 'Chimurenga' the very name which the Shona gave the 1896 rebellion. In this way primary resistance became a fountain of inspiration for the nationalist struggle for independence.

Thus, by using mass mobilisation as a common denominator, Ranger succeeds in establishing a link between primary resistance and modern nationalism. Both movements, as well as the messianic movements, employed similar methods in their attempts to achieve an increase in social scale.

It is pertinent to ask, at this juncture, whether the attempts to increase the social scale were directed at the same objective. Did the architects of the resistance movements, and the modern nationalists have the same visions and the same objectives?

If by nationalism we mean the desire to create a nation-state which would take its place among the community of nations, it is difficult, as Ajayi makes clear, to describe the leaders of the resistance as 'nationalists'. The resistance leaders were, to use Ajayi's expression, 'patriots' defending their polities against external invasion while modern nationalists aspired to bring forth new nation-states. Even if, at the end of the struggle, what the nationalists got were 'states' and not 'nations' or 'nation-states' they at least had a nationalist vision which the resistance leaders did not have.

Moreover Ranger's approach does not really lead us to the roots of African nationalism. To be sure, primary and secondary resistance movements exhibited some of the characteristics of a nationalist movement, that is, they tried to build multi-ethnic organisations and they were efforts at mass mobilisation. But did they initiate the nationalist idea? Were they infused with the ideals and aspirations of nationalism? Did they contribute to the emergence of a class of Africans who later led the nationalist struggle for independence? Ranger does not provide answers to these questions. He addresses the question 'how' and ignores the important and crucial question aspect of 'content'.

Interestingly, almost two decades after tracing the roots of African nationalism to the resistance movements Ranger turned round to reject this thesis. In his paper, 'Religious Movements and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa', published in 1986 he admits that the connection he established between millenarian and nationalist movements were indeed very tenuous. He agrees that the nationalist and religious movements were simultaneous rather than sequential with little or no connections between them; that the messianic movements did not spawn any important nationalist movement. By debunking his earlier thesis tracing the roots of African nationalism to the resistance movements Ranger by implication affirms Ajayi's position, and therefore, resolves the debate in the latter's favour.

Conclusion

Ranger's affirmation of Ajayi's position appears to have resolved the conceptual and historiographical debate on the roots of African nationalism. Ajayi's thesis, however, raises an epistemological question: do we know what we know through ideas or experience? In the context of African nationalism, did Africans become nationalistic because they first got ideas of nationalism from the missionaries, or did the actual experience of the struggle against colonial rule invoke nationalism?

The Platonic view that ideas are real in themselves and have a previous existence independent of experience can be used to justify Ajayi's thesis. On the other hand, one can hardly dispute the claim that only experience can translate ideas into objective reality. Even if, as Ajayi claims, the nationalist idea was introduced into Africa before the partition, it remained essentially an abstract concept and was sustained by racial consciousness.

Educated Africans absorbed the ideas on the erroneous belief that Europeans would help them to realise the nationalist objective. But experience soon demonstrated that this was false. The missionaries' sense of racial superiority, their collaboration with colonial officials and the social, economic and cultural alienation which Africans suffered under colonial rule literally opened the eyes of the educated elite to the objective reality of colonial rule. It was the colonial experience which tempered their idealism with realism and brought it down to the level of political consciousness and nationalist agitation. If Christian missions implanted the idea it was the colonial experience which provided the foundation and the tradition for the nationalist movement. Modern nationalism did not draw inspiration from missionary idealism. The inspiration came from the people's experience.

In the final analysis Ajayi traces the roots of African nationalism to an external, non-African source while Ranger anchors it in the people's tradition. Perhaps an amalgam of the two approaches would represent a more balanced view of the roots of African nationalism.

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