

## NATIONALISM IN AFRICA: AN ATTEMPT AT PREDICTION<sup>1</sup>

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The anthropologist, like every other scientist, searches for regularities in his data that can be expressed as hypotheses, which can be confirmed, modified, or rejected through further observations or tests. The propositions that survive are what make possible prediction which should be a goal of anthropology as much as of any other science. Unfortunately, except in experimental situations far removed from reality, socio-cultural phenomena involve so many variables that the isolation of the effect of each is extremely difficult. Consequently, anthropologists are reluctant to predict human behavior, except in the broadest sense.

In this paper I suggest that a good many things can be foretold about the rise and development of nationalism in Africa. The predictions are based upon aspects of acculturation theory, and upon the previous patterns of nationalistic development in other parts of the world. The immediate stimulus to this paper was a statement by Professor M. J. Herskovits to the effect that, to date, African native languages have not become symbols of nationalism, and that in the foreseeable future they are not likely to become so.<sup>2</sup> There is logic behind this argument: in most of the emerging African nations so many distinct idioms are represented that no one language represents a majority. Nevertheless, I suspect time will prove Professor Herskovits wrong. A national language, or at least an "official" language, appears to be one of the cultural imperatives of developing nationalism. There is a relatively limited number of additional imperatives, all symbolic, and it is with these that this paper is concerned. They will be discussed within the framework of the sequence pattern that characterizes the contact between a dominant and a subordinate society. This pattern was outlined by Elkin more than twenty years ago.<sup>3</sup> More recently Margaret Read, speaking of European education in Africa, describes the same series of phenomena in seven stages.<sup>4</sup> In both cases the pattern is essentially the same, and can be outlined briefly as follows:

In the initial phase of contact the subordinate people are antagonistic to changes suggested or imposed by the outsiders, other than in the field of material goods of obvious utility. Adults are fearful of the innovations they realize will come.

Subsequently there is increasing acceptance of the outsider's ways, particularly by the younger generation, and a desire to learn more. This leads to rejection of a great deal of native culture, of scorn for traditional ways, and for disregard of the advice of elders. In Africa traditional songs, dances, and folklore were put aside, and hymns, drill, and school "readers" took their place. As a paramount chief told Dr. Read, "The white teachers taught us to despise our past,"<sup>5</sup> and for a time educated Africans were only too happy to do this. In this phase there is usually strong enthusiasm for the culture of the outsider, and a wish to become like him.

But then it begins to become apparent to the native that, however much he admires western culture, he can never enter fully into it. In this period disillusionment sets in. In some cases depopulation may follow but more often, among primitives, nativistic movements occur. Among the culturally more vigorous (and more numerous) peoples there is a renewed interest in traditional culture; the values inherent in ancient ways are again recognized, and attempts are made to restore and perpetuate them. Read points out how, in African education, those who led the return to an appreciation of traditional elements were usually those who had achieved a high level of educational parity with Europeans. "They had gone furthest in the studies in the dominant culture, they had proved their ability to benefit by them, and they were therefore free from the fear of being held back if they looked back to their own past and their own traditional culture."<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately a subordinate culture must in some manner come to terms with the dominant culture. On the national level in the modern world this means political independence, and a cultural synthesis of western and traditional elements.

What I am doing is reiterating the generally accepted fact that nationalism in its contemporary form can to a surprising degree be equated with nativistic movements among simpler peoples, and that it represents a particular point in time in the series of stages which follow first contact and domination by outside people. Nationalism is a political phenomenon, but it is equally a cultural phenomenon, and if the cultural imperatives cannot be fulfilled, the political prospects are bleak indeed.

Political nationalism, to be successful, must be accompanied by a cultural ideology. Fallers recently has suggested that in Africa "the ideologists of nationalism have two major sources to draw upon: on the one hand, traditional African cultures and on the other, the many and diverse elements of value and belief which may be imported from modern Europe, Asia and America."<sup>7</sup> I would suggest that, for ideological purposes, an emerging nation has only one source upon which to draw: its own culture and its own past. Precisely because they are foreign, elements from Europe, Asia and America can be of no use unless they can be recast and reinterpreted so as to appear to have been a part of the local culture all the time.

Ideologically, a nationalistic movement represents a group of people in search of an ethos. It is a response to the disillusionment that follows recognition that the ways and values of the outsider will not fully serve. There is only one place to which one may turn, and that is inward. When peoples begin to ask, who am I, from whence have I come, and what is my culture, nationalism is well under way.

Simmons, in describing the creole culture of coastal Peru, has in fact given us a very good description of a nationalistic group in search of its ethos. He speaks of a "cultural outlook" to which the members of the group are oriented. "The essence of this outlook," he says, "is its explicit affirmation of the uniqueness and originality of the [in Peru] mestizo culture."<sup>8</sup> In the case of an emerging African nation the essence of the outlook is the uniqueness and originality of African culture or cultures. One searches for a

"spirit," a "way of life," or a collective "soul." What is necessary is that the emergent culture and its personality be marked by a peculiar identity and integrity all its own. In Peru "Criollismo is the mestizo's answer to the painful question of who and what he is, his assertion that his 'way of life,' is a positive creation of his own rather than a casual European-indigenous mixture."<sup>9</sup> I believe that Simmons' model for Peruvian creole culture serves very well as a model for an understanding of the cultural side of all nationalistic movements.

Identification of a way of life as peculiarly one's own, and as a positive creation of the local group--an essential for successful nationalism--is accomplished by symbolic means. These symbols must have a high degree of visibility, and they must stem or be thought to stem from the traditional culture. They are focal points around which people rally, both to be convinced of and to reaffirm their faith in the vitality and uniqueness of their own culture. A good deal has been made of the fact that in Africa, unlike Asia, the relative lack of past civilization places an extra handicap on the development of cultural nationalism. This is, it seems to me, at most a very temporary handicap. The important thing is not so much the quality of past civilization as it is the ability to believe in a past civilization. While it is true that you cannot have a nation without ancestors, there are few problems involved in creating the necessary ancestors.

It is interesting to note that the symbols of nationalism that reappear time after time, in Latin America, in Africa, in India and in southeast Asia have very little to do with the real presence or absence of past high civilizations. They are pretty much the same from one country to the next, an indication of the fact that their utility is more a matter of their form than of specific histories. Without attempting a definitive list, I suggest the important ones fall in the following categories:

1). Language. Nothing can be more uniquely one's own than verbal and written communication not shared with other nations. Not only is it a symbol of an ethos, but it is the vehicle by which this ethos is built and described and spread. The attempt to develop a national language usually is based on emotion rather than logic. In the face of the obvious utility of English in the Philippines, India, and Ireland, the emphasis on Tagalog, Hindi, and Gaelic is little short of ludicrous, and in the first two countries at least more problems will be created than will be solved. Nevertheless, when a vigorous local language prevails, even though spoken by a minority of the population, the odds are very good that it will be raised to the status of a national tongue. It is hard to believe that in Africa, as certain tribal groups attain political preëminence, they will not also attempt to impose their idiom on their countrymen in the same fashion that Tagalog and Hindi are being used in the Philippines and India, often over the protests of speakers of other languages.

2). Dietary patterns. The emotional attitudes expressed in food habits can scarcely be over emphasized. Like politics and sex, this is a subject of high sensitivity. The role of food in establishing the solidarity of the group, and in the reaffirmation of friendship bonds, is too well known to anthropologists to need reiteration. It is not surprising, therefore,

that food and drink, and the mode of taking them, invariably become one of the basic symbols around which a national ethos is built. Whether it is a Thanksgiving turkey in the United States, the festive turkey mole of Mexico, the use of hot peppers in Peru, or the drinking of palm wine in West Africa, the symbolism is constant. The mode of eating likewise is important. Since the fork, as diffused in the modern world, is of European origin, we can expect rejection of the knife-fork-spoon pattern of the western table on ceremonial occasions in favor of whatever local eating patterns are traditional. In Mexico this means a generous supply of tortillas in lieu of table implements; in Arab countries it means dipping into a common bowl with the fingers; in India it means sitting on carpets and cushions on the ground, outdoors, under awnings. I do not know the corresponding forms in African countries, but they must exist, and they will become increasingly important as expressions of the national ethos.

3). Costume. This, too, has the necessary qualifications of high visibility and cultural uniqueness. Hodgkin points out how, increasingly in Africa "educated Africans abandon shorts and shirts and return to traditional clothes--for parties and ceremonies, if not for everyday use."<sup>10</sup> Gandhi's emphasis on homespuns and the dhoti reflect the same feeling, as does the Mexican's ceremonial use of charro costume, with broad-brimmed hat and Saltillo serape.

4). Fiesta celebrations. A whole series of interrelated traits, such as music, dance, and recreation patterns--not to mention food and costume--appear here. In Peru the highly stylized song and dance form, the marinera, and the vals criollo, the European waltz recast in creole mold may be noted. In Mexico the mariachi orchestra and the huapango are the music-dance symbols of national culture. In Spain it is the flamenco dancer, and in Scotland the bagpipe. Poor is the country which cannot express its uniqueness in music and dance. These patterns already exist in Africa, and it may be expected they will become increasingly well known in the western world as nationalism continues its development. The anthropologist might hazard a guess that drumming, in particular, will take on an extra value in Africa.

5). Archaeology and folklore. These aspects of anthropology, more than social studies, play an enormously significant role in the development of nationalism. Archaeology is the device by which a nation may know its past greatness; it is particularly useful for nations with short historical periods. Grahame Clark points out the relationship between nationalism and archaeology when he speaks of the latter's ability to foster sentiments needful to the stability and existence of society. Archaeology "multiplies and strengthens the links which bind us to the past, and provides innumerable material symbols of social development through the ages, symbols all the more effective because visible and tangible."<sup>11</sup> Generally with the development of nationalistic feelings, governments put increasing amounts of money into museums, and into archaeological excavations and the restoration of prehistoric and historic monuments.

Folklore studies have a similar value in bringing back the past folk-life to contemporary peoples. The study of folklore not only supplies needed information on other symbols such as music, dance, costume, and popular art, but it also, in an almost mystic sense, affords people insight into their

collective souls. Generally if we look at the dates of the founding of national and regional folklore societies, we find that they correspond in surprising degree with an upsurge in nationalistic feelings.

6). Art forms. A national art, particularly one based on motifs stemming from traditional popular arts, is an important nationalistic symbol. This has already become one of the important symbols in Africa, and it can be expected that its value will continue to grow. Western recognition of the artistic quality of African woodcarving and bronze working places a special premium on the development of these activities.

7). Humor. Simmons lists belief in a profound sense of humor characterized by "a quick and brilliant mentality, a facile creative talent," as one of the important elements in the Peruvian creole's picture of himself.<sup>12</sup> In Mexico a similar phenomenon exists, personified by the wit and picaresque temperament of Cantinflas. The nature and forms of national humors have received little attention from anthropologists. Nevertheless, I suspect that every country believes its jokes cannot be fully appreciated by foreigners, and that its humor is more sophisticated and subtle than that of any other nation. I recall reading nothing of African wit and humor, but it is reasonable to assume it will become an increasingly important symbol of local nationalities.

8). Folk medicine. The nationalistic implications of this subject are little explored. There are, however, indications that traditional medical practices will be increasingly dignified with the stamp of approval of local scientifically trained physicians. Already we read that Communist Chinese doctors have rediscovered merit in the ancient acupuncture, and in a recent mimeographed paper a western-trained Vietnamese physician discusses the traditional medicine of his country as a different but in no way inferior way of treating the sick.<sup>13</sup> I do not know what specific forms this will take in Africa, but it seems probable that scientific medicine will have to accommodate in some degree to nationalistically-inspired competition from folk practices.

Other nationalistic symbols which for lack of time I do not discuss are religion and sports. Warfare is a puzzling item. Professor Herskovits, in the aforementioned seminar, suggested that Africans are basically peaceful as compared to Europeans. Yet, in view of the militaristic activities of at least some tribes in pre-European periods, it is hard to believe that a resurgence of militarism will not occur in much of the continent. After all, national virility and masculinity are better expressed in military power than in any other way, and it does not seem likely that Africans will prove more immune to this virus than are the citizens of many other countries. This prediction is not based on the assumption that all peoples are by nature warlike; it is based on the probability that the past military exploits of many African groups will prove irresistible to them as sources for nationalistic symbols.

To summarize, I suggest that nationalism can be looked upon as a cultural manifestation characteristic of a recognizable point on a time continuum of contact between peoples, and that its forms follow a near-universal pattern that is not contingent, in broad outline, upon local cultural expressions and

past histories. Nationalism expresses itself culturally as the search for an ethos, a unique mystic form which comes to be symbolized by means of a limited number of elements of high visibility which serve as rallying points for national ardor. To the extent that the symbols discussed here have not already appeared in Africa, I predict that they will appear, and those that are present will take on added significance.

#### ENDNOTES

- (1) Read at Fourth Annual Meeting of the Kroeber Anthropological Society, Berkeley, May 21, 1960.
- (2) Seminar on Africa, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, March 23, 1960.
- (3) A. P. Elkin, "The reaction of primitive races to the white man's culture: a study in culture-contact," The Hibbert Journal 35:537-545, 1936-37.
- (4) Margaret Read, "Cultural contacts in education," in Education and Social Change in Tropical Areas. Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., London, Edinburgh, Paris, Melbourne, Toronto, New York, pp. 96-111, 1955.
- (5) Ibid., p. 108.
- (6) Ibid., p. 110.
- (7) L. A. Fallers, "Ideology and culture in Uganda nationalism," mimeographed paper, April 29, 1959.
- (8) Ozzie G. Simmons, "The criollo outlook in the mestizo culture of coastal Peru," American Anthropologist 57:107-117, 1955.
- (9) Ibid., p. 109.
- (10) Thomas Hodgkin, Nationalism in colonial Africa. Frederick Muller Ltd., London, 1956, p. 175.
- (11) Grahame Clark, Archaeology and society. Second Edition, Revised. Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1947, p. 191.
- (12) Ibid., p. 110.
- (13) Dang Ngoc Trong. "Traditional Vietnamese Medicine," mimeographed, [ca. 1954].