

Kohnert, Dirk

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Review Article

New Nationalism and Development in Africa

Dirk Kohnert

Ivor Chipkin, *Do South Africans exist? Nationalism, democracy and the identity of the people*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2007, ISBN 1868144453, 261 pages

Sara Dorman, Daniel Hammett, and Paul Nugent (eds.), *Making Nations, Creating Strangers. States and Citizenship in Africa*. African Social Studies Series, Leiden: Brill, 2007, ISBN 9004157905, 282 pages

Andrew Simpson (ed.), *Language and national identity in Africa*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, ISBN 9780199286751, 448 pages

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Dr. Dirk Kohnert, economist, is deputy director of the Institute of African Affairs at GIGA, German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg, and was editor of *Afrika Spectrum* from 1991 to 2008. Before, he was lecturer in development planning at Bielefeld University; he has a longstanding professional experience as senior development expert in several African countries.

E-mail: <kohnert@giga-hamburg.de>

About fifty years after the independence of most former colonies on the African continent, books on African nationalism again rank high on the agenda of the international academic discussion (cf. Amoah 2007; Chipkin 2007; Dorman, Hammett, and Nugent 2007; Mangu 2006; Nyamnjoh 2006; Simpson 2008). A selection of three recent publications demonstrates the advances made in scholarly analysis in the meantime as well as the wide range of related subjects.¹ The new nationalism in Africa and elsewhere shows remarkable differences both in its roots and its impact, compared with that of the national independence movements of the early 1960s. Contrary to the 'first' nationalism, the 'second' is less prone to include, tending rather to exclude populations; alienation, xenophobia and its political instrumentalisation are its curse. The new nationalism has been shaped decisively by the consequences of globalisation and by the increasing cleavage between the poor and the rich. Nowadays, structures of nationalism and nation-states differ more than in the past. Frequently, the new nationalism is rooted in populist grass-root movements which do not necessarily share the same interest as the ruling class or the state. This makes for its extraordinary political and social ambiguity and brisance.

The book by Ivor Chipkin with the provocative title 'Do South Africans Exist?' triggered a controversial debate even beyond academic circles. Meant as a contribution to political philosophy and critical historicised political science in general, it links current debates on nationalism, nation-building, democratisation and failed states with the historical roots of these deliberations, taking the South African experience as an example. It analyses the history of African nationalist thought in South Africa against the broader context of Nationalism in Africa in general from a multi-disciplinary perspective. Nation-building is perceived by Chipkin as the formation of a political community and its struggle for freedom, justice and democracy with the ultimate end of conquering the commanding heights of state power as the political sovereign. Therefore, nation-building preceded state-building in the opinion of the author. It is understood that the 'national question' is of extraordinary importance, notably for South Africa. The enduring legacy of the racial divide propagated by the Apartheid regime that certainly granted citizenship in a restricted legal juridical sense to most of its subjects, but not necessarily a sense of belonging, let alone equal belonging, to a common nation, is still to be felt. The backlash of this unjust and inhuman policy confronted with the vision of the Freedom Charter that „South Africa belongs to all who live in it“ is the growing controversy on nationalism linked

1 Thanks for valuable comments and suggestions go to Susann Baller and Martin Beck. The responsibility for any fallacies or inaccuracies in the paper remains, of course, with the author.

with racial 'nativism' in post-Apartheid South Africa and elsewhere (cf. Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009). It is certainly not by coincidence that it was the (then deputy) president of this nation, Thabo Mbeki, who pushed the vision of an African Renaissance in search of the reincarnation of an African identity and solidarity even beyond national frontiers. Chipkin, who is well acquainted with both the wealth of French philosophical traditions in political science and with critical theory, draws considerably from publications of Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe or Jürgen Habermas concerning his conceptual framework. This is not by chance, because his book began its life as a PhD thesis at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Cachan, as the author acknowledges right at the beginning (p. viii). One of his major theses, already developed in the first chapter "The Nature of African Nationalism", is that the nation precedes the state because it emerges in and through the nationalist struggle for liberation and state power. In fact, African nationalism profoundly transformed the colonial state. Current notions of „weak-“ or „failed states“ are misleading in the view of Chipkin, who holds with Martin Meredith (2005), Claude Ake and others that it is doubtful whether development or nation-building have ever been on the agenda of African states in the first place (p. 35). This is against the background of a common misconception in political science, as criticised by the author, about hyphenated relations between state and nation, assuming that the state is the subject and the nation its object. Chipkin attempts to put the argument on its feet again, maintaining that it is not the agent (state) which is not up to its task, but the other way round, the degree to which the nation controls the state, that constitutes the measure of nation-building (p. 39). This is directly related to a second major question, the form and content of African nationalism. Certainly, both are of an ambiguous nature, as discussed in detail in the first chapter of the book, oscillating between the struggle for independence, the modernisation project of a bourgeois African elite, and the socialist aspirations of radical liberation fighters like Amílcar Cabral. The content of African nationalism was a major preoccupation of African leaders in the 1960s and 1970s, and the form of African nations was directly related to the pursuit of democracy and freedom. In Chipkin's view, nationalism is a specific form of the democratic imaginary as shown by the South African example, where nationalism opposed the Apartheid system of racial discrimination (i.e. „national oppression“) in the name of national democracy (pp. 11; 198). This is developed in detail in the second and third chapter on „The Democratic Origin of Nations“ (pp. 41-62) and „African Nationalism in South Africa“ (pp. 63-98).

However, the South African example seems to be overstretched when its conclusions become generalised. Beyond any doubt, there exists a con-

tinuing struggle for sovereignty and authenticity by African people which constitutes a major impetus of the national project all over Africa. The sovereign National Conferences in Cotonou, Lomé and other capitals of francophone Africa in the early 1990s, carried by representatives of all politically relevant forces and, by the way, also informed by the history of the French revolution (i.e. the final *Etats Généraux* of French Absolutism), although not mentioned by Chipkin, would have been good examples in this respect. Perhaps he draws too heavily from deconstructivist analyses of the French Revolution to the detriment of more recent examples of African history. All this in the quest for a philosophical foundation for his concept of nationalism, or to be more precise, in search of a concept of national identity, in view of the absence of any common and unifying tradition (of language, culture, religion, race etc.) in the South African case (p. 189). Chipkin's theory of the „democratic limit or boundary“ developed in the concluding chapter in order to delimit the political frontier of belonging (between inclusion and exclusion), embracing his central distinction between „nation qua *populace*“ vs. „nation qua *people*“, derived from Derrida (pp. 200-204) appears to be too idealistic. The modern nation, deduced from the 'history of the national limit', defined in terms of radical pluralism, „the question of democracy qua the question of friendship“ or the revolutionary demand of fraternity (pp. 204-05), are laudable but elusive normative visions. The book deepens the understanding of the eternal philosophical question of belonging, of the historical roots of nationalism and of its specific distinction between „us“ and „them“, whereby the other is perceived as alien and a potential enemy. This might be welcomed as another stimulus to stem the dangerous mix of populism, nativism and millenarian thinking which surfaced in the post-Apartheid period (cf. Mbembe 2006), but its usefulness as an analytical concept is questionable. Set against Anderson's concept of a nation as an imagined, inherently limited and sovereign community (Anderson 1991: 6), recognised hitherto internationally as the major reference, but rejected by Chipkin as „not political enough“ (p. 45), we may ask, how we could convincingly and in sufficient detail analyse the political history of citizenship, its close linkage with globalisation, and recurrent outbursts of xenophobia in South Africa with the methodology provided by him. On the contrary, Chipkin's method and concept might be considered by a not insignificant number of colleagues, notably within political science, as overstretched or even flawed by a certain ideological bias. In this respect, recent publications of Francis Nyamnjoh (2006, 2007), that investigate recent trends in South African nationalism, which were not (have not yet been) considered by Chipkin, seem to me more convincing, in that they offer a more stringent methodological concept of 'glocalisation'. They reveal the contradictions

between 'millennium capitalisms' global rhetoric of open markets (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2000) and societies in an era of increasing closures and exclusions. Nyamnjoh investigates the effects of the new nationalism in South Africa and Botswana at the grassroots, focussing on accelerated mobility enforced by globalisation, and migrants who are „trapped in cosmopolitan spaces in a context where states and their hierarchy of 'privileged' citizens, ethnic minorities and others who straddle border are bound to feel like travellers in permanent transit.“ (Nyamnjoh 2007: 73).

Nationalism is not a relict of the past but very much alive; it even outperforms state-building in Africa. The civil strife which affected Africa in the aftermath of the second wind of change in the 1990s showed „the persistence of an affective attachment to a territorial nationality even when the state institutions are derelict. [...] states may entirely collapse without disappearing as nations from the social imaginary“, as Crawford Young rightly observes in his theoretical contribution to a reader edited by Sara Dorman, Daniel Hammett, and Paul Nugent (2007: 241). Depending on the mode of calculation, up to a third of incumbent presidents had been replaced by the 'democratic renewal' of the early 1990s. At the same time, the introduction of liberalisation and formal democratic structures, as promoted by the international donor community, characterised by privatisation, multi-party politics and electoral competition, „raised the stakes on citizenship“ (Young 2007: 258-259). This also changed the rules of the game in power politics, by giving a premium to the politics of belonging, notably the political instrumentalisation of ethnicity, religion and regional affiliation. It soon became clear that the consent of both – the national political elite and the international donor community – with formal democratisation instead of substantive democracy encouraged factional polity and the recourse to organised political violence in cases of discontent, which could easily lead to coups, riots or outright civil war (cf. the examples of Ivory Coast, Guinea-Bissau or Kenya). In many countries this resulted in inadequate development perspectives for the poor which were – if at all – only marginally better than those of former authoritarian regimes (cf. Bodea and Elbadawi 2008). Thus, high flying hopes, of national and international stakeholders alike, that the end of Cold War politics would reduce the likelihood of proxy wars (e.g. Rwanda in the DR Congo) and the proliferation of arms in Africa were dashed. As the editors of this reader rightly conclude in their introduction (part one: citizenship, nation and Africa), there existed a common link in the new violent conflicts which accompanied the 'decade of democratization' e.g. in the Great Lakes region and in Western Africa (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire): these conflicts were „about battles over state-formation (and re-formation), as well as the morphology of the nation. Identity politics has

played its part, but what is often missed is that the conflict has also turned on contested nationalisms, shaped over divergent readings of history.“ (p. 21). The papers included in the following four chapters were derived from a conference held at the University of Edinburgh in 2004 which focused on the construction of nationhood and citizenship in relation to state-building and the delimitation of borders (p. ix). Part two analyses the ongoing struggle of identities and belonging, as illustrated by the example of the Ivorian crisis (R. Marshall-Fratani) and the politics of citizenship in the Democratic Republic of Congo (G. Nzongola-Ntalaja). Chapter three concentrates on the questions of ‘Land and Belonging’, with case studies from Northwest Cameroon (S. Hickey), Zimbabwe (B. Rutherford) and South Africa (D. James). Chapter four focuses on ‘Nations building boundaries’, illustrated by case studies on language and citizenship in Anglophone Cameroon (N. Fru Awasom) and the question of race and nationalism in Tanzanian schools (N. Bertz) or in Zimbabwean politics (B. Raftopoulos). In the fifth chapter Neville Alexander draws the lessons learned from the post-Apartheid regime in South Africa concerning nation-building, whereas Will Reno deals with African rebels and the citizenship question. A final article by Crawford Young takes up and deepens some of the major theoretical questions already discussed in the introduction by the editors. Certainly, „whatever their limits, African nationalisms have evolved well beyond their roots in anti-colonial revolts“ (p. 262), the case studies included in this reader demonstrate this beyond doubt.

All in all, *Making Nations, Creating Strangers* provides a well informed up-to-date overview of the current scholarly discussion of the various and complex processes of nation-building and the creation of national identities in Africa, written by renowned experts in their field of study. It shows at the same time how to overcome the blinkers of uni-disciplinary approaches in analysing the dialectical interplay between the hierarchy of multiple individual and collective identities in current African development (cf. Neville Alexander’s contribution on the state of nation-building in post-Apartheid South Africa in this reader, pp. 203-204). Yet, a consistent conceptual framework, bridging the divide between the disciplines and linking the local and regional aspects of African nationalism to its global structures, let alone the link between nationalism and development, is yet to be developed. (cf. Kohnert 2008). Forthcoming readers on nationalism and state building in Africa should consider for example how far the inspiring theses of Saskia Sassen (2006, 2000) on the paradoxes of the ‘national’, neatly incorporated in the spatialities and temporalities of the global, are applicable to Africa too; this would probably lead beyond the conventional notion of the nation-state

as a kind of unidimensional conceptual container, an assumption which history has failed to confirm.

Language plays a decisive role in nation building in Africa, a fact which has often been both underestimated by politicians and under researched by political science, despite lip-service to honour indigenous cultures. The reader on *Language and national identity in Africa*, edited by Andrew Simpson, linguistic professor from the University of Southern California, who had already compiled a similar reader on *Language and national identity in Asia* one year before (published in 2007), serves to correct this view. The contributions are mostly written by authors from Africa (15 out of 22) and provide a representative account of the major subjects and issues at stake. An impressive collection of 16 detailed country case studies from all over Africa, including two samples from the Maghreb (Egypt and Morocco) completes this picture. Eight case studies deal with Anglophone, five with Francophone countries of sub-Saharan Africa; unfortunately, Lusophone African countries were left out. This is all the more regrettable as there exist structural and other systematic differences in the relationship between both the (post-) colonial language policy in the development of national identities and the treatment of indigenous languages within the different hemispheres of the ex-colonial powers. Indeed, included in the case-study of Cameroon, were the differences between English and French language policies that play a major role in the formation of competing national identities (cf. chap. 11), already pointing in this direction. Apparently most newly independent African states continued the specific inherited colonial area language policies that showed different degrees of tolerance vis à vis indigenous languages (cf. Mazrui and Mazrui 1998; Bokamba 1995: 16).

A detailed and well informed introduction by the editor himself, gives an up-to-date overview of the history and modern challenges to the interface between language and nation building, characterised by questions of the prestige and self-empowerment of the political elite on the one hand, and the worries of disregarded minorities on the other. In fact, most governments of the newly independent states opted in the 1960s for a simple continuation of colonial language policies for a variety of reasons (pp. 4-16). In general, the rule „one nation, many languages“ was accepted in theory but not put into practice in guaranteeing every language speaker the same economic, social, cultural and political rights within the nation building exercise. Selected African languages were often referred to as „national languages“ in a rather symbolical form only, even if enshrined in the constitution. The general reasons are all well known, foremost the multilingual heritage of the former colonies (contrary to the relatively homogeneous national language base of 19th and 20th century Europe), the perceived „impartiality“ of the

colonial language as a brace to hold an ethnically mixed population together, technical or economic problems of representing local languages, and last but not least the quest of the African elite for jobs in the public service and the participation in the modern comforts of Western societies, which could mostly only be acquired with a sufficient knowledge of English, French or Portuguese. In a few cases, the same applied also to dominant indigenous languages, like Amharic in Ethiopia or Hausa in Northern Nigeria (pp. 8-10). Nevertheless, it is often overlooked that on average only an estimated 30 per cent of the population e.g. in West African countries can speak and understand the ex-colonial language (p. 9). During five decades of post-colonial rule, Pidgin or similar creolised varieties of European languages developed gradually as another substitute, contributing to national identity as well (namely in Anglo- and Lusophone Africa), next to indigenous forms of the colonial language, like Nigerian and Ghanaian English (chap. 8 and 10), or Cameroonian and Senegalese French (chap. 5 and 11; p. 11).

Due to lack of space, the „rocky road to nation building“ (subtitle of the final chapter on South Africa) cannot be followed up in more detail for every country treated in this volume. Suffice it to mention at least one example which, although less known, may be of more general importance than the individual case in which it was analysed. It concerns the analysis of gender issues, which is conspicuously absent in the other books reviewed, although it might be of utmost relevance, e.g. concerning the interplay of the development of human rights, democratisation and nation-building. The example in question applies to the interaction of gender, language and prestige distribution with its repercussions on nation-building in Morocco. Here the superior position of men in the patriarchal society was also linguistically consolidated by their control of Standard Arabic, thereby creating different language loyalties between male and female citizens which, although unifying the male political elite, could endanger national unity in the long run (p. 14 and chap. 3). In fact, language and gender planning have been closely related, because a minimum competence in one of the official European languages was considered as essential for active participation in public affairs, which discriminated against the African poor in general and women in particular, notably in the countryside.

Other examples, not included in the book, are nevertheless worth mentioning, even if they should be regarded as exceptions that prove the rule: the heritage of multilingualism and of the delimitation of national frontiers in dire disregard of cultural loyalties apparently does not apply to all African countries south of the Sahara. Rwanda for example existed as an essentially monolingual kingdom already in pre-colonial times. Nevertheless Kinyarwanda (Rwanda) is only one of three official languages in Rwanda besides

French and English (the latter since 1996), and language issues are still a highly contested instrument of rival political elites in their fight for primacy (cf. Mamdani 2002: 189, 266; Morus 2000). Another important issue, treated in Simpson's reader only marginally (if at all), is the relationship between language, nationalism and oral history. Histories of contemporary Africa rely to a much greater part on oral communications than in industrialised Western societies (cf. Finnegan 2007; Mazrui and Mazrui 1998; Tonkin 1992). However, mostly they are not narrated in the official language, but in the vernacular (i.e. local language), which enlarges the scope for the social construction of history in general, and for the construction of imagined national identities in particular. This applies also to nationalist historiography, or to 'patriotic history' as it was called by the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe that used it to drive home its biased version of nationalist Zimbabwean revolutionary tradition (cf. Ranger 2004). All in all the findings presented in this book underline the undeniably strong relationship between language identities, citizenship formation and national identification. Regrettably, most contributions remain on the safe side by reasoning within their proper academic discipline. A true interdisciplinary approach is missing, except for some references in the introduction. Last but not least the publishers (OUP) should be praised because they made the integral book accessible and searchable online via google-books. This comes near to Open Access solutions which are increasingly popular in the international academic community; it is particularly important because they also make relevant current publications available to hitherto disfavoured universities and students in Africa. Francis Bacon's famous maxim 'knowledge is power' (*scientia potentia est*) in a sense applies in this case too: the global sharing of knowledge also contributes to democratisation and authentic nationalism based on a free and sovereign people, at least in Chipkin's vision.

Finally, to revert to Ivor Chipkin's initial question: yes, South Africans do exist, they are very much alive indeed and prone to the negative challenges of nationalism too. In this respect, the sweeping generalisation of Ali A. Mazrui that the linguistic state of affairs in Africa is due to „the failure of African people to be nationalistic enough in linguistic terms“, combined with his provocative demand for a linguistic counter-offensive in favour of African languages being established as truly national or even transnational cultures (Mazrui and Mazrui 1998: 1), could have ambiguous consequences.

Again the South African example is illustrative. The rainbow nation, a model for successful integration and reconciliation policy for the whole of Africa, recently denoted the worst outbreaks of xenophobic violence directed against African migrants for decades. In May 2008 Over 60 migrants from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Nigeria, were burnt or clubbed

to death within two weeks of their arrival in the townships of Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. The unrest spread rapidly to seven of the nine provinces of South Africa. In the aftermath further migrants were killed and some 670 migrants injured according to UNHCR estimates. More than 100,000 had to flee, others were deported (cf. Mbembe 2008; Kohnert 2008). The so-called *amakwerekwere*, as the South African persecutors labelled their prey, were often identified by assumed language differences: similar to nationalism, xenophobia does not necessarily rely on a rational basis. It is rather felt emotionally than recognised according to rational choice criteria (cf. Heitmeyer 1991). Often the 'stranger' is identified by the more or less vague supposition that he does not speak the same language or does not share the same culture and custom. Thus, according to official estimates, about one third of the deadly xenophobic attacks in South Africa in May 2008 were directed against fellow 'local citizens' who were mistaken by the mob as foreign migrants, because they could not respond in Zulu or Xhosa².

Though the problem of xenophobia in South Africa is nothing new. South Africans exhibit levels of intolerance and hostility vis à vis strangers that are hardly to be found in any other country of the world according to the Xenophobia Survey made by the Southern African Migration Project in 2006. These xenophobic attitudes are more pronounced amongst whites than amid blacks and stronger in the midst of the poor and working class, as well as the wealthy, than the middle class (SAMP 2008: 1, 5). National pride and the segregation of strangers have been intimately related since colonial times. On the global scale of national pride South Africa is to be found in the first ranks behind the USA (cf. Kersting 2007: 279-80; Smith and Kim 2006: 129). However, xenophobic violence has escalated dramatically since the end of the Apartheid regime, despite the anti-discrimination passages in the post-Apartheid constitution (cf. Nyamnjoh 2006; Crush 2001). The theologically inspired philosophy of *Ubuntu*, i.e. the language of multiculturalism, propagating a cultural nationalism aiming at a (pan) African group solidarity, represented another extreme. It may have even promoted xenophobia in the long run in a dialectic process (cf. Marx 2002). By its idealistic visions and its disguising actually existing class barriers it contributed later on to the great disillusion of the poor and marginalised who participated in the witch-hunt of migrants. South Africa's power elite talks much about 'affirmative action', meant to redress the social and economic inequality of the past. But in reality it does next to nothing, based on the unity of class and race as its structural determinants, to correct the basic inequality of power, income and wealth; although redressing these fundamental inequalities would be a precondition of sustainable nation-building (cf. Alexander's

2 Cf. 'Locals killed in S-Africa attacks', BBC-news Africa, June 13, 2008.

contribution on South Africa's nation-building process in the reader of Dorman, Hammett, and Nugent 2007: 217). Could it be that after all Chipkin's concept of nationalism based on 'the people' in pursuit of justice and democracy is not so far fetched as it seemed to be? At least Achille Mbembe (2001) and other exponents of post-colonial approaches caution against the dangers of a „cultural nationalism“, which is still deeply engrained in the illusionist intellectual traditions of the African elite of the 1960s and 1970s, and mirrored by the African Renaissance policy as promoted by Thabo Mbeki in the late 1990s (on the ensuing 'Mbembe-Zeleza-Debate', cf. Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009; Mbembe 2001; Zeleza 2003). Violent xenophobic excesses like in South Africa may be the herald of similar tendencies in other parts of Africa and beyond (cf. Kohnert 2008).

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