

GENESES OF POLITICAL STATES IN NORTHERN AFRICA

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A hundred years ago Africa was not yet completely discovered. Yet the fate of Africa particularly south of the Sahara was being formulated during this last century. Expeditions of discovery, missionary activities, colonialism and imperial interests, all shared in the formation of present African states.

Confining ourselves to Northern Africa, we are presented at once with two genetically different types of states ; old sedentary states and new nomadic or semi-nomadic evolving ones. This classification coincides with the major ethnic division of the continent into Semitic-Hamitic peoples in the east and north and the Sudano-Negritic peoples south of the Sahara. Nevertheless, regions of contact showed more or less affinities to both types of states.

There are some common ideas about African states. Some ascertain that most African nations do not have long histories as nationalities and that their nationalities have been created in the crucible times of a revolutionary struggle against a colonial power. (1) They also believe that the unity of the nations was forged in the fight against an external enemy (2).

The present writer claims that nationalities were not new and imported concepts in Africa. On the contrary African nationalities were in active evolution just before they were cruelly aborted by colonial powers. Nevertheless their geneses remained dormant until it was high time for them to emerge though in new shapes.

Archeological and anthropological studies have shown that African peoples in pre-colonial period had grown political entities of some sort and were in fact in their way of forming nation-states by their own initiative.

This paper will put the emphasis on West Africa for many reasons. First, there is a certain homogeneity, ethnic and cultural, in West Africa.

Second, the newly created states, in many respects sprang in the moulds of previous ones. It is therefore necessary to assess the validity of state formation in political geographical terms.

This may reveal constant deeply rooted factors and variable less valid ones in the structure of these states.

Northern Africa is a vast territory comprising more than half of the continent. To point out major geographical divisions one is at once faced with a Mediterranean littoral with a mountainous hinterland in North Africa and desert shoreline east of Tunisia separated from the savannah and woodland country in the south by a huge belt of almost rainless desert, the Sahara. This division gives the impression that the Mediterranean littoral was quite separated from tropical grass and forest Africa. This seeming obstacle is cut through in the East by the River Nile and was eventually crossed in the west by early caravans. To begin with the River Nile in Eastern Africa is the most prominent natural phenomenon which cut through the desert belt and link the equatorial plateau and Ethiopia where it gets its water with the Mediterranean shores where it flows. Needless to say that the early civilization of Egypt and its very existence as Herodotus said is the gift of the Nile. The land of Egypt was built up many millenia ago by the silt of Ethiopia ; thus filling up the elongated gulf of the Mediterranean with rich silt. The Egyptian civilization is the flower of African soil.

In return the Egyptian civilization penetrated into the sub-Saharan region upstream the Nile. The extent of Egyptian culture influence cannot be exaggerated. In fact the cultural relations between Egypt and the rest of Africa began long ago in the pre-historic times. The African Neolithic in Shahenab and Badari were similar (3). Before the Sahara became completely desiccated in the 6th millenium B.C. traffic was active between Fayoum, Kharga, the Nile Valley in Egypt across the desert to the grass corridor south of the Sahara. (4) Evidence continues to be collected about cultural diffusion up the Nile and across the desert.

The fruit of these relations was the emergence of Kush (IX—xth cent. B.C.), which eventually became a secondary source of Egyptian influence in Africa (5). Kush was a true African state, bearing all characteristics of grassland states.

The ancient times were concluded in Northern Africa with the complete formation of the Egyptian state with its historic frontiers, Garga in the east, Syrenaica in the west and Nubia in the south. These however were

not border lines, but frontier regions, the Delata and the Lower Nile valley up to the 1st cataract being the core of the state.

Ethiopia emerged in the first centuries of our era as a Semito-Hamitic state, extending its borders to the Red-Sea on one side and to the lower Blue-Nile on the other, but the core of the state remained the plateau, a strong hold and a refuge. Ethiopia however, had strong relations with south Arabia and strong religious affiliations with the Coptic church of Egypt. Ethiopia had always been a symbol of political freedom and independence (6).

The political formation of North Africa was influenced by two distinct elements : Mediterranean and Berber or indigenous elements. The Libyans, Numidians and other Berber nations had always withdrawn into their mountainous refuge, leaving the littoral to Phoenician, Greek, Roman or Vandal brief and successive occupations. This however came to an end when after long struggle with the Arab conquerors they submitted to new conditions and shared lively in the formation of political entities under the aegis of Islam, not only in their own country but also across Gibraltar in Spain and across the desert in the country of the Sudan (7).

The Berbers had long and nearly uninterrupted relations with the Savannah belt and West Africa. Perhaps the desert Berbers coined the term Ghana or Ghinia which means the black or Ethiopians in their language. The Sahara had for long been regarded as a barrier. In fact it has been more of a link between the Mediterranean and the tropical parts of Africa. It was more hospitable and well inhabited up to the Neolithic times (8). When desiccation was complete about the fifth millennium B.C. both the animal and human populations of the Sahara either migrated to the south or sought refuge in the many scattered oases of the desert. It is thought that the Negroid race itself evolved in the southern part of the Sahara, an evidence of Asselar finds near Tembectu (9). Most of this race migrated south in the Mesolithic and after with the receding water supply and so it was that the savannah came to be the country of the black or Bilad al-Sudan who abandoned their ancient Sahara sites and settled in the grasslands bordering the desert (10).

By the first millennium A.D. the dominant desert nomads had emerged as the Tuareg-fair skinned Berbers whose military skill and toughness enabled them of wresting a livelihood from the slender resources of their land. (11) Like other herdsmen in the old world the Berber nomads engaged themselves in two activities ; trading and raiding. Their marginal existence made them

in the same time the natural foe and the dependent of the savannah people. They usually graze the moisture regions, escort caravans across their homeland and eventually from time to time, when successive seasons of dry weather occur, raid the savannah country, conquer it, settle on its fringe, form a dynasty and at last become assimilated in the indigenous population. This is the pulse of Africa, akin to the pulse of Asia which was described by E. Huntington

Hence, the desert nomads were bound up in a vast rhythm of history with peoples who lived to the south and to the north of them. Ibn Khaldoun in the fifteenth century made this rhythm of human migration the theme of his history (12). The beduins encroached on the Mediterranean or the savannah settled areas, dominated and formed the new successive state. It can be added to this that when the settled area was organized under a strong central regime, it extended further into the desert and the nomadic people were forced to pay tribute to the strong power. These inter-relationships between the sand and the sown-like other akin relations in central Asia-marked the history of northern Africa west of the Nile Valley until the era of European colonization.

The main commodities carried by caravan routes during the first centuries A.D. were salt and gold. Gold came in profusion from Wangara region in upper Volta, Modern Guinea and Mali, between the confluences of the Niger, Senegal and Faleme rivers. It was located where salt caravans from the north assembled and hence the celebrated silent trade took place. Salt was mined in Taghaza, a village far off in the Northern desert. Thus caravan routes were well established across the desert from Sijilmasa, Taghazea to Sanhaja country and Timbuktu and Gao, and from Tripoli through Fezzan to Kano and Lake Chad. More caravan routes were established especially after Arab conquest of North Africa and introducing the camel on a large scale (13).

This favoured the rise of trade centres and town dwellers communities. Trade cities lined the southern fringe of the desert thus creating desert ports busy in trade and cosmopolitan population. The geography of the Savannah region made it a natural corridor free from any obstacle, a sea of grassland where movement cannot be easier, a melting place where ideas, institutions and blood strains could meet, fuse and strengthen one another.

At many places and times tribes have merged to form peoples ; and peoples have grown into nations some nations founded empires and empires have broken up again to form smaller units. This process shows a number

of patterns which seem to recur, and which to a limited extent seem to be comparable among different regions, periods and cultures. The process of Social mobilization and of nation building have recurrent phenomena in history. What uniformities can we find in the growth of nations in West Africa and the Sabannah belt ? In this area nearly every state or ruling lineage had a traditional ancestor who came from the desert or the north, fought some enemy of the people, killed it and established his rule. This is a reflection of the relations between the desert nomads and the Sudanese settlers. The Sudanic corridor had a power of absorbing outside influences, assimilating it and sudanizing it ultimately. This happened once and again from the Senegal in the west to the Funj kingdom on the Bule Nile in the east. This process had the one virtue that it kept Sudanic states alert and alive prevented staggness, which caused the downfall of non-Sudanic states on the Nubian reach of the Nile (14).

The Sudanic corridor witnessed the shift of national power form one centre to the other. Each centre had previously a coherent population of a certain lineage who had already shifted from subsistence agriculture to exchange economies. This change of economy provided for material wealth and military power. The seat of the new ruling power had always been a town of considerable growth, in this case a focus of caravan trades which secured both increasing ties of social mobility, communication and multiple economic change between the town — or the capital — and other caravan termini, and between town and country.

Each state in West Africa while secured in walled cities kept control over basis communication lines linking important rivers, towns and trade routes in a flow of transport, travel and migration. The Senegal and Upper Niger rivers each in turn were controlled by successive states. This grid of communication helped to facilitate the growth of state in West Africa.

The successive states of West Africa however had common characterists. They all had no clearly defined borders. In fact the idea of a clean-cut border-lines of states is quite a newly advent of the modern European mind. Previously, nearly everywhere in the world ; states were separated from each other by broad no-man's land called frontier areas. The extent to which a state stretched from its cores depended on the strength of the potentiate. If the chief of the state is strong enough, he could seize a wider area, if weakness creeps in, the borders of the state shrink. This had a similarity with other steppe states of the Mongol-Tartar origin in central Asia before the Russian conquest. One reason for this is lack of physical features to

help delimit the state. Another reason lies in the homogeneity of environment and people, who find no difficulty in changing loyalt from one chief to the other, who after all is of the same racial affinity.

Islam in west Africa marked a turning point in its history. Under the urge of the new faith more powrful states arose under the organization of more zealous potentate of mixed Berber and Negroid blood. They had the zeal for apreading Islam to the Negroid forest area and their states took advantage of Islamic law and jurisdithion to lay the foundations of strong states. They had regular relations with Islamic centre in Rabat, Querawan, Tripoli, Cairo and further relations with Mecca, Medina, Damacus and Baghdad.

Thus Sudanic peoples not only attained nationhood but succeeded in establishing nation-states. They needed time, as was allowed other nations to strengthen their structure and elaborate other governmental requirements. However this was denied for them at the advent of European colonial powers.

NOTES

1. For practical appreciation of the growth of African states Vide Church, H. in the Changing World, ed. East, G. & Moodie, A. E. London 1956, Chapter XXX and XXXI.
2. *Op. Cit.*
3. Vide, Arkell, A.J. Early Khartoum, London, Oxford University Press, 1949 ; Shaheinab: an Account of the excavation of a neolithic occupation site, London. Oxfor, University Press, 1953 ; Clark, J.D. The problem of Neolithic Culture in Subsaharean Africa pp. 600-621 in Background to Evolution in Africa, ed. by Walter W. Bishop & J. Desmond Clark, the University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London, 1967.
4. *Op. Cit.* also, ride, Cornevin, R. Histoire des peuples de l'Afrique Noire, Berger-levrault, Paris, 1963, pp 87-133, & 190-165.
5. DAVIDSON, B. Old Africa Rediscovered, 1959.
6. Cf. JONES, A.H.M. & MONROE, E.A, History of Ethiopia, 1935.
7. Cf. GAUTIE&, E.F. Le Passe de L'Afrique du Nord, les siecles olbscurs, 2me. edn. 1952, Also Ibn Khaldun, Histoire des Berbers, 3 vols. tr. de slane (Paris, P. Gautier, 1925.
8. Vide note 3 above, and Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Rome beyond the Imperial frontiers, Penguin, 1954 and Bovill, EW. Caravan of the Old Sahara, 1933 ; The Golden Trade of the Moore, 1958.
9. Howells, W. Mankind in the making, London, 1959, pp. 313-317.
10. *Ibid.*
11. MURDOCK, G.P. Africa, Its Peoples and their Culture History, New-York, 1959, pp. III ff.
12. Ibn Khaldun, *Op. Cit.*
13. Note 8.
14. Cf, July, R.W.A. History of the African Peoples, London, 1970, pp. 50 ff.