

The formation of nations in Africa

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IN recent years I have concerned myself almost exclusively with the study of the formation of nations in Africa (south of the Sahara).

I would first like to say what I understand by the word "nation".

A generally recognised definition of that word does not yet exist in world science. It is often used in an extremely arbitrary way and its content can be very different. Sometimes the word "nation" is used for a people without considering its level of social development. In that case the words "nation" and "tribe" are used as interchangeable terms. In the literature dealing, for example, with the Zulus at the beginning of the nineteenth century, we find the expressions "Zulu nation" and "Zulu tribe"; the twentieth-century Ashantis are sometimes called a nation, sometimes a tribe. Sometimes the word "nation" is used for the whole population of a given country, without considering whether they speak a common language or different languages.

Webster's *New World Dictionary* gives for the word "nation" the following definition: "1. Stable community of individuals, which has developed in the course of history, having a common territory, an economic life, a culture and a specific language; 2. Population of a territory united under the same government, country, state; 3. (a) People or tribe; (b) tribe of Indians in North America, belonging to a confederation, such as the ten nations; (c) territory of such a tribe."

If we understand that word in such a vague way, the problem of the formation of nations does not even exist: nations have always existed; they have existed everywhere, and as a result there cannot be a problem of the formation of nations. On the contrary, if the word nation has a definite sense the problem exists of how and when are they formed.

It is by no means an argument about words. To give a definition of a "nation" is of vital importance for the peoples. A nation is not an imaginary or mystical concept—it is a very real phenomenon, and as such needs an exact definition, without which it is impossible to understand the national question which plays such an im-

portant part in the life of the peoples of the present time.

Stalin's Definition of a Nation

To study the problem of the formation of nations, I start from the definition given by Stalin as early as 1913. According to this definition a nation represents a definite human community, strictly outlined. Several human communities exist; but not all can be considered as nations. A nation has specific characteristics.

The first criterion or characteristic feature is a common territory. Without a common territory a nation cannot exist. The most vivid example is that of the Jews. Disseminated throughout the world for a number of historical reasons, they did not form a nation. The Jews, living in different countries, did not have in common any political, economic or cultural interests; many have for a long time forgotten their tongue and speak that of the people among whom they live. The Jews who established themselves in Israel do obviously form a nation; but I have not studied this question specially.

The second characteristic is a common tongue. Without a common tongue daily regular relations are not possible between individuals. If they speak different languages and cannot understand each other they are naturally unable to form a nation. The language is the expression of the soul of a people. Everybody loves his own language and prefers to speak it.

From their prolonged common existence within the same territory and their continued relations based on a common language, people acquire customs, habits and a way of life common to all, similar artistic tastes, and a single spiritual and secular culture. Great and small nations differ from each other not only in language but also in culture and psychology. Every nation has its national culture which it loves and respects. This is the third characteristic of a nation.

The fourth is a common economy, i.e. that all parts of a territory inhabited by a particular people are economically linked together. There is a geographical division of labour and a regular

exchange of products, in a word a single national market. A common economy creates links between the people living in the different parts of the country shared by a particular people, and creates the necessity for regular relations between them—which encourage the disappearance of local language differences such as dialects and the development of a single national language with its permanent expression in literature. It is only as the consequence of a common economy that the common characteristics of a spiritual and secular culture can develop. A common economy makes a single unity of the territory of a nation and gives a concrete meaning to territorial unity. It is on this basis that a good understanding of the common political and economic interests of a nation are founded.

Such are briefly the four main or characteristic criteria of a nation. This does not mean that a nation has no other characteristics, but these four are the main and fundamental ones.

If we understand the word nation in this way it becomes clear that a nation can only come into existence under the capitalist system, and that nations are the product of capitalist development.

This means that nations have not always existed; they are born, and are only formed at a definite point in human history. Under the feudal system they did not, and could not, exist. They could not exist because there was neither a common economy nor a national market. Feudal society is characterised by a subsistence, not a profit-making, economy.

This does not mean that under the feudal system the exchange of products did not exist at all and that there were no economic relations. No, an exchange of world products, economic relations, existed even under the primitive "commune" system. However, such relations were sporadic and not at all essential. Under the feudal system, economic relations between regions can or need not exist. Their non-existence cannot stop material production. This differs from the capitalist system in that economic relations have now become an essential condition of production.

A "Narodnost"

We usually call the ethnic community living under a slave or feudal system a "narodnost". This word has no real equivalent in the West European languages. "Narodnost" comes from the word "narod" (people). From now on I shall use the word "narodnost".

The narodnost is an ethnical community of individuals who possess a common territory, a common language and a common culture. Unlike a nation, it has no common economy. Moreover the three first characteristics of a narodnost differ

from the corresponding characteristics of a nation. The feudal system is distinguished by the division of the land into small or feudal principalities and, in some cases, by the absence of a central state authority. In the capitalist system national states exist, generally including within their boundaries all the territory inhabited by a particular people.

The existence of regional dialects of a common language is typical of the feudal system. In many cases there is even a single literary language, but by reason of the illiteracy of the majority of the people it is used only by the upper classes while the mass of the people speak various dialects. Under the capitalist system it is only when large-scale economic relations are established along with mass migrations from one district to another, and with the development of education, that the literary language comes to be used by considerable sections of the community, being transformed into a single method of communication, and regional dialects disappear little by little.

The same thing can be said of the common culture; it is only fully developed under capitalism.

Finally the narodnost and the nation have a different class structure. In the first case the feudal lords and their peasants formed the basic classes. In the second case we find the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

In the primitive community there is no nation and no narodnost. The typical form of the ethnic community of the people was the tribe. What difference was there between a tribe and a narodnost?

A tribe is a classless community, while the narodnost is divided into classes. A narodnost forms when the change takes place from classless to class society.

A tribal community is based on blood relations: it is a community of people descended from the same actual or mythical ancestor. A narodnost is a territorial community, which includes people not on the basis of origin but on the basis of living within a given area: their geographical location in other words.

A narodnost grows out of the disintegration of the tribal community, of the mixing and merging of tribes and the emergence of classes. The mixing of tribes leads to the formation of a common language based on one of the tribal languages, while the others become regional dialects and finally disappear from history. The mixing and merging of tribes also lead inevitably to changes in the secular culture and psychology of the people: the tribal characteristics disappear and a single common culture emerges.

All these simultaneous processes have a definite economic basis which undergoes decisive modifications. The merging of the tribes and the transformation of the tribal system into a narodnost are based on the replacement of one form of productive relations by another. It is precisely at this period that the co-operative and mutual-aid relations characteristic of the primitive community system, where classes did not yet exist, are superseded by relations of exploitation, domination and subordination, characteristic of all social and economic class systems.

The period of the formation of antagonistic classes and of the state is also the period when the tribe becomes a narodnost.

There is no precise line of demarcation between feudal society and the commune system. The transformation of the primitive social system into feudalism takes place little by little over a long period. Even when feudal-type relations predominate there are generally some fairly clearly distinguishable survivals of the primitive commune. These survivals are very enduring, and can even be found in capitalist society.

Similarly there is no precise line of demarcation between the tribe and the narodnost. The transformation of the tribe into the narodnost also takes place little by little over a long period.

The survivals of the clan and tribe structure and organisation can subsist for a long time after the formation of the narodnost. At the same time they are but relics, old moulds with a new content. In this case the decisive role is not played by the mould but by the most characteristic and dominating social relations of the period in question.

Stages of Development

To sum up: the ethnic community of the peoples goes through several stages of development: tribe, narodnost, nation.

The passage from one form to another broadly corresponds, but only broadly, to the development of the socio-economic systems: the narodnost is formed during the transformation of the primitive commune system into slavery or feudalism; the nation develops out of the passage from the feudal to the capitalist system.

In taking this interpretation of the term nation as a basis for our study of the ethnic development of the African peoples at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, we easily reach the conclusion that there was not and could not be any nation in Africa at that time. It could not exist because there was no capitalist society.

In the African countries where more or less developed relations of a feudal type already

existed, the transformation of the tribe into the narodnost was already taking place. There was clearly a narodnost in the case of the Egyptians, Moroccans, Tunisians, Algerians, Yorubas, Ashantis, Bagandas and others. The tribal organisation of these peoples, the Egyptians for example, had already completely disintegrated by this time, although still existing amongst other peoples.

In my book on the Southern Bantus, I made a special study of the development of the forms taken by the ethnic community of the Zulus, Kosas, Basutos and Bechuanas. I made detailed studies of the socio-economic system of the Southern Bantus at the beginning of the century, and submitted my conclusions to the Cambridge International Congress of Orientalists of 1954. I put them in this way: we see a picture of the primitive commune system at the last stage of development; the classical structure still exists but already has lost its first stability; private property exists and there are rich and poor, but without the community having split into antagonistic classes; the control of affairs is concentrated in the hands of wealthy dynastic families, but no state apparatus of coercion as yet exists. We conclude that the Southern Bantus were on the borderline between class and classless society: between a tribe and a narodnost.

The Zulus

I will deal more especially with the formation of the Zulu narodnost in the South African province of Natal. At the beginning of the nineteenth century there were about 100 independent tribes in Natal. There was no Zulu narodnost. There was no common Zulu language, but a multitude of tribal languages divided into two groups, the Tekela and the Ntungwa.

In the 1820's, Chaka, chief of the Zulu tribe, set out to bring all the Natal tribes under his rule.

Chaka's campaigns had an enormous influence on the Natal tribes. After being defeated, many tribes broke up and dispersed in different directions, giving rise to a mass tribal migration. Some disappeared purely and simply from the ethnic range of Natal, while others increased in number by absorbing newcomers from other tribes. The tribal structure being destroyed, the mixing of the tribes led to the formation of the Zulu narodnost. At the same time the old tribal divisions were replaced by a central authority based on armed force. This marked the beginning of the formation of the Zulu state.

"Independent tribes . . . ceased to be independent, the governing families were hounded out or exterminated, all the tribes without distinction were amalgamated and together they could

be called the Zulu nation with Chaka at their head", wrote Bryant (A. T. Bryant: *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal*, p. 233).

In the same way as the Zulu tribe took the lead in the powerful process of unifying the tribes in a single state, so also the Zulu language gradually became the common medium of communication for all the tribes, and supplanted all the other tribal languages. The men of Chaka's army spoke a Zulu language of the Ntungwa group and as this army included adult men from all the tribes the Ntungwa language rapidly spread throughout the vast territory of Natal. According to Bryant the Tekela languages were retained for a certain time by the women but by the 1920's there only remained a few old women who spoke it. (A. T. Bryant: *A Zulu-English Dictionary—Maritzburg 1815*, p. 60).

A long period of determined struggle by the Zulus against Anglo-Boer colonialisation then ensued during which the tribal structures disintegrated still further and the tribes intermixed still more.

At the end of the nineteenth century the Zulu narodnost, united in a common territory, language and culture, was already born in the territory of Natal.

The Kosas, Basutos and Bechuanas underwent a different process of transformation from tribe to narodnost, but nonetheless the process was concluded by the beginning of the twentieth century. This process is generally different for each people, and to give a general picture of the formation of the different narodnosts on the African continent the history of each people would have to be studied individually.

But not all the African people went through this process before the end of the nineteenth century, i.e. before European colonisation. In many regions, far from being any nations there was not even as yet a narodnost. Colonialisation found them at the stage of the primitive community with the characteristics of tribal organisation.

Colonialisation interrupted the natural course of the history of the African peoples and twisted the process of their ethnic development. At the present time it is very difficult to get a full appreciation of the stage of ethnic development reached by the African peoples. One thing only is clear: the process continues. In some regions the tribes are changing into narodnosts and in others existing narodnosts are becoming nations.

How to Study the Changes

I will now look at the methodology of the investigation of this process which I used as a guide in my work.

The first criterion of a nation is a common territory. That is why a study must start by working out the frontiers of the territory of the emergent nation, which must itself be based on the linguistic classification of the peoples. Here we find an obstacle that is difficult to overcome because there is not yet any unified and universally recognised classification of African languages. Each linguist puts forward his own classification, and I rather think that each seeks to outdo the other in producing a classification as complicated and imposing as possible. Johnston estimates that there are 226 Bantu languages; Van Bulk discovered 518 in the Belgian Congo alone, and it is further estimated that there are 700 or even 800 in the Sudan.

The linguistic map of Africa bears thousands of names indicating different languages. I am not a linguist but an historian, sociologist and anthropologist. It is difficult for me to criticise existing language classifications. I would, however, assure you that the real linguistic map of Africa is simpler than the linguists have tried to suggest. It is true that the linguistic divisions are a fact, and one which no scholar can deny or ignore since it is an irrefutable proof that for most of Africa neither nations nor narodnosts have yet emerged. The linguistic divisions reflect the tribal divisions of the people.

However I am equally certain that the picture of linguistic divisions given by the language specialist derives from their conventional linguistic approach to the work of classifying languages and their ignorance from the historic point of view. The development of languages follows the evolution of the tribal languages, then those of the narodnost and finally of the national languages. At a particular historical stage in the evolution of society the tribal languages become territorial dialects of the language of a particular narodnost, which later becomes the language of a nation. I don't think that the linguists take this important transformation sufficiently into account and continue to consider tribal and territorial dialects as independent languages.

At all events the assistance of linguists is essential in working out the territorial community of the nation. We can say here in general that any serious study of the formation of nations requires the co-operation of various specialists—historians, ethnographers, linguists and economists.

A further difficulty in defining the territorial community of a nation is that colonial frontiers do not correspond to ethnic frontiers. Many peoples, speaking the same language or languages so similar to each other that they can be con-

sidered as dialects, are cut in two by colonial frontiers, and different groups of the same people can be found in different colonies. This artificial division of the colonial frontiers is an especially great obstacle in the way of nations in formation, and especially in the case of neighbouring colonies belonging to different countries pursuing a different policy concerning the development of language and of culture. The most striking example is probably that of the Somalis who live in Somaliland under Italian, French or British domination or in that part which is included in Ethiopia. It is obvious that such a people cannot form a nation as long as the colonial frontiers which cut them into several pieces remain. The fact must not be excluded that the prolonged existence of such frontiers can divide a people into several related nations, i.e. separate nations can emerge in each portion formed by these frontiers. The history of mankind gives examples of a narodnost divided into several nations by reason of peculiar conditions. My own country is one. A long time ago, between the eighth and twelfth centuries approximately, there was a single old Russian narodnost with a common territory, language and culture. Later, different conditions determined by history and external factors in particular saw it divided into three parts, from which emerged three nations: Russia, Byelorussia and the Ukraine. Now each has its own national state.

There is another question in connection with the determination of a common territory. Following their policy of indirect government, the colonial powers keep the divisions into kingdoms, sultanates and chiefdoms. This is a particular form of feudal division which does not divide the common territory as it does not hamper the popular relations or the moving of people from a kingdom or sultanate to another. However, it prevents other criteria of the nation from maturing, and as a result is an obstacle to its formation.

A Common Literary Language

Another characteristic of the nation is the community of language, the existence of a common literary language.

The object of the study of these criteria is to find the lines following which the languages develop, their structure becomes simpler and the tribal languages become territorial dialects.

The language of a narodnost or national language comes into existence when one of the neighbouring tribal languages, for a number of reasons, succeeds in spreading more widely than the others, becoming an inter-tribal language which sup-

plants displaced languages. Through its triumph over the other tongues, this language becomes the literary language.

The course taken by this process is, due to historical conditions, very long, and wholly new in the African countries.

The major obstacle in the path of the creation of a single national literary language derives from the fact that the "official" language of the country is the language of the metropolitan country, English, French etc., and not the vernacular tongue. This is the language used for communication between people of different tribes speaking various tribal languages. This is the language of all gatherings, newspapers, radio stations etc. Scientific and fictional works by African authors are written in this language. An African wishing to make his way in the world beyond the confines of his tribe must firstly know the official language.

There are a good number of other difficulties confronting the formation of a national language. One is the ignorance of the mass of the people and thus the absence of a need for a literary language. A further difficulty derives from the feudal divisions which I have described earlier based on tribal particularism, the rights of the oldest tribesmen, an excessive devotion to local factors and sometimes a suspicion of anything concerning other tribes.

All these reasons show that the diversity of languages is of no value, since it holds up the development of a single national language based on one of the tribal languages.

Can a metropolitan language become a national language? Theoretically one cannot exclude such a possibility. Several English- or French-speaking nations can emerge. This does not contradict the interpretation of the term nation which I have put forward. Every nation must have a language common to all its members, but there is no reason why every nation should speak a different language.

The theoretical possibility therefore exists of the African nations being formed on the basis of European languages. This is, however, no more than a possibility which can scarcely become a reality.

As I have already said language is the mirror of the soul of a people. It is only in his mother tongue that man can fully express his real self. Language is an aspect of the culture of each people. Even the most perfect translation is no more than an imperfect copy of the original.

It is quite natural that the people should zealously conserve the right to speak their mother tongue.

I have dealt so far with the difficulties in the way of the development of African languages. There are, however, numerous other circumstances which help this development. In the first place there is the growth of the towns and the concentration therein of people belonging to many different tribes. A mass movement in search of urban employment influences the development of the languages by bringing them in contact and by mutually enriching their vocabulary and lessening the phonetic divergences.

In the last few years one has seen a growing interest amongst African intellectuals in linguistic problems. Associations for the development of African languages have been established. In some regions the question of standardising the writing of related languages has already been discussed. All this shows the extent of the national awareness, which reflects the objective process of national formation in the minds of the people.

Community of Culture

The third criterion of a nation is community of culture. The African peoples have created their own original culture for centuries—music and dance, songs and stories, sculpture and painting—their own clothes, buildings etc. The cultural heritage of past centuries is great and remarkable. This heritage represents a very rich store-house for the formation of national cultures.

Colonialisation has brought together in Africa two very different cultures—African culture and European culture. In some ways European culture was more advanced than the African. The Africans have assimilated something of this culture, and they should not reject the good elements which it contains.

However, this has come about in conditions wholly unfavourable to the development of African culture, which has been pushed into the background. Certain forms of African art and, in particular, certain artisan occupations have been forgotten and allowed to perish, while others have been adapted to European taste.

At the present time there are three different opinions amongst African intellectuals concerning the future paths of the development of African culture. Some would like to make European culture the basis of African national culture and forget the cultural heritage of the people. They describe themselves as progressive although to tell the truth I see nothing very progressive in it. Others would like to develop traditional African culture and assimilate nothing of European culture. This group calls itself traditionalist. Finally, the third group which describes itself

as neo-traditionalist proposes to establish a national culture on the basis of a reasonable combination of elements from both African and European cultures, taking the traditional African culture as a basis.

This reminds me of the controversy around the Russian national culture in the nineteenth century. One section of the Russian intelligentsia considered the original Russian culture as backward and almost barbarian—preferring even to speak French rather than Russian. They suggested importing Western culture and their representatives were called “zapadniki” (Westerners) as a result. Another part of the Russian intelligentsia praised everything which was originally Russian and Slav in general, including the backward aspects of Russian culture of the time. They suggested closing the door against Western influence and constructing a wall separating the country from the rest of the world. This group called themselves the “Slavyonophiles”. The Russian people did not take either of these two ways. It built its national culture on the basis of its cultural heritage, and took from the West what it considered worth while.

The national culture of the African peoples is developing in incomparably more difficult conditions, especially in the countries where a policy of artificial assimilation is in vogue. There the peoples have to defend their right to a free development of their culture.

Anyone studying the cultural community of a nation in formation encounters complex problems. Culture itself is a complex and many-sided phenomenon. It includes everything that is created by the hand of man as well as his brain. National culture includes many local characteristics. These local peculiarities exist even in the culture of old nations formed a long time ago. They have their origin in the local characteristics of the economic activities and the geographical situation and are therefore inevitable. It is natural they take an important place in the culture of nations in formation.

The tasks connected with the study of the process of formation of the cultural communities of the African nations are particularly complicated by reason of the specific conditions in which these nations are formed. The task of the scholar consists essentially in the necessity to isolate from the immense variety of forms taken by the culture of a particular people those which have already become the property of the whole people and which have lost their local character. This task includes determining what forms of the European cultures are already firmly rooted in the customs and awareness of the people, and

which are only a temporary and superficial part-time of a part of the population.

Here I am touching on a critical question. Is it possible to speak of the existence of a national culture if there is no more or less developed literature in the national language and if there is not as yet any graphic art, music or professional theatre? I do not think that is possible. The absence of these expressions of culture shows that the national culture is not yet in existence. There is a popular culture and a folklore. There are the materials which will serve to build a national culture. But the culture itself does not yet exist.

Only literature (novels and poetry etc.) and its more or less wide popularity amongst the masses completes the process of formation of a national language as the main expression of the national culture. Only the creation of professional art gives the national culture its perfection of form, its specific colouring and its truly national characteristics. If we try to estimate the level of development of the African on this criterion, we will have to recognise that the national culture of a good many of the African peoples is still at a certain stage of its development in spite of all the richness of its cultural heritage.

The Economic Community

Let us look now at the methodological considerations in connection with the last criterion of the nation, the economic community. The economic community of a nation comes into existence at the same time as a national market makes its appearance; if there is no national market there is no nation. In consequence study of this criterion comes back to the study of the national market. It is a purely economic problem. The main conditions needed for the formation of a national market are the geographical division of labour and the existence of developed exchanges on a profit basis within a capitalist mode of production.

Even a superficial knowledge of the economy of the African countries will show the presence of these conditions although not everywhere developed to the same extent. For example, capitalist exchanges in the African world are still relatively few and in some regions are still only at their beginning.

To my knowledge it can be said that the question of the formation of the national market is still completely unexplored. I do not know of any

books devoted to this question. We know what is produced and where it is produced. We know what products and in what quantities are exported abroad. We know fairly well the foreign economic bonds but we know nothing practically of internal economic exchanges. It is to be hoped that economists will eventually study these internal relations.

As sparse as our information may be we can say that most of the African countries have no national market as yet or at the most they are only beginning to have one. To determine the degree of development of the national market it is necessary first to find the answers to two questions: 1. What part of the production is sold, i.e. what part takes the form of productive links giving rise to profit? 2. What part goes to the internal market and what part is exported? The economists of U.N.O. have made approximate calculations for some countries and I will mention the book *The Enlargement of Exchange Economy in Tropical Africa, 1957*. From these calculations one can see that in certain countries a considerable part of production is already transformed into profit, but it is mainly exported abroad. This is one of the characteristics of colonial economy. The colonies have become suppliers of raw materials for the metropolitan countries. This fact holds back the formation of a national internal market and thus hinders the development of the process of the formation of a nation.

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The formation of the nations is accompanied by the development of national consciousness of belonging to the same people, and an awareness of national interest. Where nations have already taken shape each person is aware of belonging to a nation and is proud of it. The feeling of national pride is one of the deepest human feelings; an insult to national dignity is always taken as a personal insult.

The study of the process of national formation should include the study of national consciousness. One should point out how the consciousness of belonging to a tribe is replaced by the feeling of belonging to a larger ethnic community; how the people realise themselves to what nation and people they belong, how strong is the feeling of national dignity etc. But this is essentially a special and scientific problem which calls for special methods which I have no room to explain here.