

Origins and Concepts of African Nationalism

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• **Abstract:**

It is crucial to explore the diverse definitions, concepts, and origins related to Africa through geographical, ethnic, political, and historical lenses before the onset of modern European colonization and its resultant resistance manifested in armed, political, cultural, and existential struggles. Over four centuries ago, colonial explorers reached the continent's shores, leading to a protracted struggle by Africans against the decaying colonial influence to reclaim freedom, land, and existential rights. Amid Western dominance and fragile internal frameworks, comprehending Africa's historical nuances, including issues of nomenclature, belonging, rights, sovereignty, and liberty, becomes intricate. Each community has a preferred nomenclature, yet they may receive alternative names that could either be unwelcome or even disturbing, diminishing their dignity to the brink of contempt and humiliation. This outcome stems from the continent's history, which over the last five centuries witnessed a downturn, facilitating external invasions, particularly by Europeans. These invasions forged a pervasive stereotypical image of Africa as a land of untapped wealth yet dormant, strong yet divided, incapable of fostering development and change, and emblematic of misery and impoverishment, perennially reliant on external entities for governance. Addressing this paradox with rational solutions is more crucial today than ever before.

Keywords:

African History; European Colonialism; Liberation; National State; Imperialism; Revolutions.

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Introduction

Historians, political scientists, and researchers across various scientific domains frequently employ terms like colonization, settlement, nationalism, tribalism, revolution, resistance, national movement, and decolonization. These terms form the core of historical, political, geographical, and sociological discourse, enriched by numerous adjacent terms in both linguistic and conventional contexts. These concepts, primarily derived from a handful of European languages, have dominated thought, culture, and science from the Enlightenment period to the present, overshadowing local Arab or African intellectual and scientific contributions.

1. Africa: Nomenclature and Origins

The name 'Africa' is so ubiquitously used that its obscure origins or the ambiguity of its chronological emergence and evolution seems implausible. The earliest known reference to 'Africa' in Arabic likely originates from the Islamic conquests in Western Egypt, with a narration from the second Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, mentioning "Africa the divider."

Although this account is considered weak and peculiar, the term gained traction among Arab elites, possibly due to the formidable deserts of Western Egypt and Eastern Libya, which demarcated the regions later known as the East and West, segregating Egypt from the Berber territories to its west. While some attribute the term 'Africa' to Phoenician and later Carthaginian origins, dating back to the Roman occupation, the name initially referred only to the region now known as Tunisia and occasionally extended from Cyrenaica in the east to Tangier in the west.

The Latins referred to the inhabitants of North Africa as 'Afri' during Rome's territorial expansion west of the Nile, encompassing the Egyptians. Broadly, 'Afri' denoted all territories south of the Mediterranean, or ancient Libya.¹ Speculations suggest that the term stems from the Phoenician word 'afar' or 'afar,' meaning dust or desert, reflecting the Phoenicians' trade routes along the southern Mediterranean coast, which later influenced the Carthaginian naming of the region and its people.²

¹ Lewis, C. T., & Short, C. (1879, January 16). Afri. Retrieved September 20, 2023, from <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Afri&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0059> Retrieved February 15, 2024.

² Venter & Neuland. (2005). NEPAD and the African Renaissance. Johannesburg: Richard Havenga and Associates. p 16.

Alternatively, 'Afri' might have originated from a name for an ancient Libyan tribe, precursors to the contemporary Berbers, potentially linking the continent's naming to the Banu Ifran tribes,³ extending from northwest Libya to Algeria and the Marrakesh Kingdom.⁴

Following the Carthaginians' defeat in the Third Punic War in 146 BC, Carthage became the capital of the Roman province, later known as Africa Proconsularis, encompassing parts of modern Libya, Tunisia, and northeastern Algeria. The name 'Africa' persisted through the Islamic conquest and the liberation of the Maghreb from Roman (Eastern Roman Empire) control.⁵

The expansion of Islamic geographic knowledge and exploration⁶ led to the designation of the northern part of Africa as the Maghreb, contrasting with the Mashreq, to include all Islamic territories west of Egypt or sometimes Cyrenaica, embracing regions like Sicily, southern Italy, southwest France, the Iberian Peninsula (Andalusia), the Balearic Islands, and various Mediterranean isles, spanning from the Lower to the Farthest Maghreb and the Western Sudan, integrating into the Islamic geographical lexicon.

While the Arabic nomenclature for Africa became widespread due to educational proliferation and the advancement of geographical and historical sciences, predominantly influenced by Western culture for centuries, the term came to represent North Africa west of Egypt.

In contrast, names for "Sub-Saharan Africa" remained obscure or less known. Among these, 'Alkebulan'⁷ stands out as the oldest indigenous name, perhaps signifying "Garden of Eden" or "Mother of Mankind"⁸ (Makumbi, 2023) and was utilized by various African peoples, including the Nubians, Moors, Numidians, Carthaginians, and Ethiopians.⁹

By the end of the 16th century, French geographer André Thévet wrote in 1575 in his work "Cosmographie Universelle" that "the Arabs, Edomites, and Ethiopians used to call it (Africa)

³ **Banu Ifran:** A Berber tribe from the Zenata group according to Ibn Khaldun, who established an emirate independent of the caliphate's rule in the East (757-790 AD), spreading from Libya in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west. There are also many villages and cities named Ifri, Ifran, or Yfran in the Maghreb.

⁴ Kumar, S. (2021). A Handbook of Political Geography. K.K. Publications. p. 148.

⁵ Africa African Africanus Africanus. (2009, January 29). Consultos.com. <http://www.consultos.com> Retrieved September 20, 2023.

⁶ **Al-Idrisi** (493-560 AH/1100-1166 AD), Muhammad ben Muhammad, known as the Sharif, represents the pinnacle of Arab-Islamic and global geographical knowledge of his time and can be considered a reliable source for identifying locations and naming countries.

⁷ **Alkebulan:** The origin of the word Alkebulan in the Arabic language is difficult to pinpoint, likely derived from the root 'qbl' with a kasra on the 'qaf', related to 'qibla' as in Jerusalem and then the Kaaba in Mecca for Muslims. It seems that for Arabs from Egypt to Al-Andalus, the lands facing them towards the East were called Al-Qiblan, a conjecture that requires further research and documentation.

⁸ **Makumbi explained:** "I did lots of research. It seems to be accepted that Alkebulan was what Africa called itself before Europeans arrived." The meanings of Alkebulan have been given as 'Mother of Mankind', 'Garden of Eden' and, from Arabic, 'The ones before'.

⁹ Esq, B. G. (2023, February 13). The History, Facts and How Africa got its current Name, before the Europe colonization. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/alkebulan-the-original-name-african-continent-before-george-esq/> Retrieved February 15, 2024.

Alkebulan, whereas the Indians and Javanese (people of Java Island in Indonesia) named it Besecath, due to the southern winds that blow there more than elsewhere".¹⁰

The term Alkebulan was recurrent in the 17th century geographical and etymological writings of the French and Dutch, with Louis Moréri stating in his "Le grand dictionnaire historique" that "this part of the world is called Africa, named Africa by the Latins, Italians, Spaniards, English, and other European peoples, Ifriqiya by the Turks, Alkebulan by the Arabs, and Besecath by the Indians; the natives call it Africa or Afrika, while the Greeks named it Libya, then Afrika".¹¹ Other names were mentioned by European geographers during the Age of Discovery, compiled by Olfert Dapper in his book "Description of Africa" in 1676.¹²

These terms continued to be used in contemporary periods, especially in literary works like Darrel Dawion's "Affairs Bowlers Heart..." and in artistic expressions such as music and singing within the African unity movement, Parafricanisme. However, the name Africa became predominant after the Portuguese successfully navigated the eastern African coast, crossed the confluence of the Indian and Atlantic oceans, and reached India, initiating a long and devastating conflict against the peoples of East Africa and then India and Southeast Asia.

Subsequently, other European nations, driven by the spirit of modern colonialism and the desire for settlement, turned Africa into a zone of influence, exploitation, occupation, and colonization during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Europe transitioned from a system of imperial states that had governed since Roman times to approximately the French Revolution, after bitter wars and conflicts among European peoples, kings, princes, and emperors.

The concept of the nation-state, based on linguistic or ethnic unity rather than the interests of nobility and ruling families, which transcended ethnic, linguistic, religious, and sectarian boundaries, evolved. Since the 18th century, the spirit of nationalism in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland, and Scandinavia shaped and distinguished nationalism in Europe.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines nationalism simply as the desire of an ethnic, linguistic, or cultural group to form an independent state. This desire is accompanied by a sense of unity and solidarity within national borders and symbols drawn from history, representing the shared destiny of that group. However, this general definition remains imprecise due to the diversity of perspectives and historical contexts, as well as the accumulation of intellectual paradigms that form each nation. For instance, the French view the spread of the French language as the activity domain of French nationalism, while in Germany, nationalism was based on ethnic factors, with

¹⁰ Thévet, 1575, chapitre 1, op. cit.

¹¹ Moreri, L. (1674). The Great Historical Dictionary: or The Curious Mix of Sacred and Profane History. Lyon Paris: Girin and Bartholomy Revier. p. 151.

¹² Dapper, O. (1686). Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche Gewesten. Amsterdam: Chez Wolfgang, Waesberge, Boom, & Van Someren. p. 2.

the Greater German state being the area of Germanic ethnicity's presence, even beyond the borders of other nationalities.

Due to the variety and distinction characterizing the evolution of the concept of nationalism in Europe, many states that emerged from the dissolution of great powers (empires) were more unique, leading to the formation of national states, some multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic, and others with much homogeneity, which applies to most Arab countries that emerged from the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and liberation from colonial domination, forming national states with diverse ethnicities, languages, sects, and sometimes a lot of homogeneity.

Throughout its extensive history, Africa experienced governance by major states and sultanates encompassing numerous peoples and tribes across vast geographies, with ancient Egypt as a notable example. Other significant entities included the Kingdom of Kush in Nubia, the Axumite Kingdom (Ethiopia), the Ghana Empire with its capital Kumbi Saleh, the Songhai Empire with its capital Gao, and the Mali Empire with its capitals Niani and Kangaba.

Contemporary studies suggest that, before the arrival of European colonizers, Africa comprised around 176 political entities with various governance forms, including monarchies, emirates, sultanates, caliphates, and federations.¹³, (List of predecessors of sovereign states in Africa, 2024) in addition to isolated tribal systems.

These political entities often transcended tribal conglomerations and their internal organizations, typically encompassing multiple tribes of diverse languages, ethnicities, and religions. Most rulers in the north, west, and eastern coasts were Muslims, while the Christians established their kingdoms in the central east (Ethiopia, Eritrea), and paganism prevailed in the far south of the continent.

Many regions and peoples remained outside the dominion of major kingdoms, emirates, and federations for extended periods, sometimes spanning thousands of years, mirroring the inherent nature of states to rise, strengthen, dominate, weaken, fall, renew, and either grow again or vanish entirely.

European propaganda, shaped during the Crusades and flourishing with the grand colonial movement initiated by the geographical explorations of Portugal and Spain, successfully forged a stereotypical image of Africa laden with negatives and devoid of civilizational achievements. This image remains dominant and influential in contemporary thought and perceptions globally, including among Africans.

¹³ **Political Systems in Africa:** Excluding the northern region from Egypt to Marrakech, Africa's history recorded many sovereign systems. Monarchies were the most widespread and ancient, like the Kingdom of Axum or Ethiopia (100-940 AD), and the Kingdom of Kongo (1390-1940 AD). Sultanates were also numerous, including the Sultanate of Adal (1415-1577 AD) and the Sultanate of Wadai (1501-1912 AD). There were emirates such as the Emirate of Harar (1647-1887 AD) and the Emirate of Zabarmawa (1860-1897 AD). Additionally, some political systems declared caliphates in Africa, distinct from the Fatimid and Almohad caliphates, with notable ones being the Sokoto Caliphate (1804–1903 AD) and the Tukulor Caliphate Al-khilafat al-tijania (1852–1893).

The expulsion of Muslims from Andalusia and the emergence of Henry the Navigator (1394-1460), who was not a sailor but prepared all the material and human conditions making Portugal a leader in exploring worlds previously unknown to Europeans, led to the formation of a Christian colonial empire encircling the old world from Tangier along the west African coast to the meeting point of the Atlantic and Indian oceans, eastwards across Africa to Southwest Asia, India, and parts of the East Indies, as well as extensive regions of South America, including Brazil.

By 1414, the Portuguese strategy to circumvent Africa and reach Southeast Asia became clearer, with the necessary material, scientific, and technical conditions in place, and the idea of this grand adventure becoming widespread, supported by a papal strategy and overseen by the Portuguese kingdom.

Portugal's long-term objectives were to control the trade routes to and from China via India, bypass Islamic territories, and break the Italian monopoly on high-value global trade. Thus, Portugal established vital and essential stations for the long journeys to the Far East rather than large colonies in Africa.

However, over time, competition from the Dutch, British, and French led the Portuguese to focus on certain areas as permanent settlements, such as Guinea-Bissau, the Cape Verde Islands, Equatorial Guinea, São Tomé and Príncipe, Angola, and Mozambique, besides many colonies lost along the African coasts, including Ceuta in far-western Morocco, and numerous pockets and stations across the western and eastern coasts of Africa.

Cape of Good Hope was occupied by Portugal in 1488 under the sailor Vasco da Gama, followed by the Dutch establishing a larger provisioning station there in 1652. The British then seized the station in 1795, which eventually became part of the Union of South Africa in 1910. Over time, the areas under full European control expanded across the continent.

2. Africa under Colonialism

This ambiguous special legal status often tied to the geopolitical dynamics of the colonizing state in Africa and elsewhere, prompted colonial countries to seek legal statuses that would allow them to retain land under their domestic laws and within international norms and customs. Thus, political and legal terms such as occupation, settlement, protection, mandate, and trusteeship emerged.

In Arabic, the term for colonization encompasses most of these phenomena, possibly translating the English or French word 'Colonialism.' Key terms in the modern and contemporary political lexicon that study and clarify this phenomenon include:

2.1. Exploration:

Originally a scientific process where new areas and regions, possibly inhabited but not included in the known natural geography or mentioned in the geographic literature, maps, and travel

writings available to explorers or perhaps all of humanity, are discovered through terrestrial or maritime journeys.

Exploration is the first stage of colonization and can evolve into other phenomena like invasion and occupation. The Age of Discovery or Age of Exploration (1401-1789) emerged due to technological and scientific advancements and political conditions, leading Europeans to establish colonies and settlements abroad, adopting European culture, thought, religion, and language.

The exploration of Africa began with the Portuguese, who managed to occupy the coasts of Morocco, then West Africa, circling the southernmost point and heading northeast, taking over many areas in East Africa and near the Arabian Peninsula and Persia, eventually reaching India and moving eastward.

1.2. Conquest:

A military operation launched by a political power or non-organized entities to dominate lands or population centers for purposes of plunder, punishment, political or religious expansion, or cultural reasons. Europeans invaded most of Africa, starting from the northern coasts to West and then East Africa, eventually penetrating and subjugating the continent with advanced military forces and equipment.

1.3. Occupation:

A military operation with political decisions following the invasion of a region or country, possibly sovereign, leading to the maintenance of the area or land with its human, urban, and natural resources under the authority of the invading force. The process is typically violent and armed, lasting for a specific period before it ceases or remains and is termed occupied territories, or it may possibly transform into settled land.

1.4. Colonialism:

It's challenging to pinpoint a definition that precisely matches this term, but commonly, colonialism derives from the root 'to live long,' implying the settlement and civilization of land. This contrasts with what occurred under European colonialism, where Europeans settled in taken lands and destroyed the indigenous urban structures. The French distinguish between 'Colonisation,' as the phenomenon of colonization, and '*Colonialisme*,' a political, cultural ideological school glorifying colonization. This concept became entrenched post the Berlin Conference in 1884.

1.5. Settler colonialism:

Defined as the migration process to originally uninhabited areas, settling there to establish a new homeland, which then becomes the original homeland for descendants. When European migration due to wars, conflicts, famines, and epidemics led to the discovery of populated lands, the process turned into wars of settlement, altering demographic structures and causing genocide and ethnic cleansing.

In Arabic, the prefix 'is' (إس) implies seeking the origin of something, hence 'settlement' means seeking a new homeland to become original. In English, besides 'Colonialism,' there is 'Settlement' or 'Settler colonialism,' and in French, '*Colonie de Peuplement*,' translating to 'settler colonialism' in Arabic. Examples of settlement in Africa include Algeria and the area now known as the Republic of South Africa.

2. The Case of Africa

The African continent experienced all these acts from exploration, conquest, occupation, to settlement, protection, trusteeship, and mandate. Some lands were called occupied territories, others protected areas or under trusteeship, and yet others were termed overseas territories or colonies, integral parts of the European colonizing state. Alongside were protectorates established through agreements and treaty signings between the colonial powers and weaker states, maintaining local authority and institutions.

By the early 20th century, almost all of Africa became European colonies under previously established legal frameworks, with some cases still legally undefined and disputed due to the conflict between colonial powers in Europe and the exchange of colonized areas among them. Often, ownership transfer (originally usurped) between defeated Germany and victorious France, and among France, Britain, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Britain, is discussed.

Westerners commonly use the term 'Nationalism' in their political and historical vocabulary, which is not easily expressed in Arabic as وطنية (patriotism) or قومية (nationalism), and even تحررية (liberation), which might convey the concept more precisely. Despite this, the term (nationalism) or (national movements) is agreed upon to describe the liberation movements that opposed European colonization and demanded the severance of political and legal ties between colonized lands outside Europe and the colonizing European nations.

Western political thought researchers start from the premise that the nation-state (Etat-Nation, Nation State) was a revolution against the imperial state (Etat Empire) or the grand monarchy, and other ancient state forms, especially in France. This can be illustrated in the following excerpt: "The distinction between the state and the nation varies from country to country; there are two processes for creating a nation-state...

In some countries (such as France, for example), the concept of the nation emerged first, followed by the state, and later national sentiment developed... In other cases (such as Switzerland, Germany, and Italy), the nation was not formed on homogeneity but on self-recognition, especially in the case of an 'ethnic or civic nation,' and the desire to live together appears before the state's birth".¹⁴

¹⁴ Pastoureau, M. (2014). A Symbolic History of the Middle Ages "From Coats of Arms to Flags". Éditions du Seuil, coll. "Points".

In the Anglo-Saxon perspective, the concept of the nation-state is based on the idea that "the nation-state is a political unit where the state and nation are identical. It is a more precise concept than 'state,' because the state does not require a dominant ethnic group... The nation, in the common ethnic sense, may include diasporas or refugees living outside the nation-state; some states in this sense do not have a state where this ethnic origin predominates.

The nation-state is simply a large sovereign political state with an administrative system. A nation-state may contrast with: a multinational state, where no single ethnic group dominates; a city-state; an empire consisting of many countries; and a confederal union, where there is a union or association of sovereign states, and there is the federal state".¹⁵

The difference between contemporary Arab perceptions of the national state and the national movement and Western perceptions is due to the fact that national states formed in the Arab world were not based on nationalism or ethnic majority, but rather on the strength of ruling dynasties and their ability to subdue ethnic, sectarian, and linguistic variations, harnessing them to serve the caliphate, sultanate, or emirate. Arab countries and most African states belonged to broader nationalities than their geographical borders, thus advocating the strengthening of the national state before achieving the desired national unity.

The great kingdoms that ruled Africa before colonization, whether Muslim, Christian, or pagan, were interconnected due to the strength of the ruling dynasty and its ability to diminish tribal, linguistic, ethnic, and religious differences internally, strengthening state ideology and entrenching the concept of justice in privileges for each side or group.

Whenever this balance was disrupted, the state would disintegrate, divide, and vanish, or a stronger dynasty would emerge to replace it. With the penetration of modern European colonialism, systematic fragmentation of these entities occurred in most cases and randomly in others, complicating the reconstruction of the state post-occupation as most entered into internal and border conflicts.

3. Conclusion

After 5 centuries of fight and struggle for existence and freedom, unfortunately, Africa is still misunderstood and often misrepresented in global conversations, whether in the work of scholars of the continent, specialists in African affairs, or even in journalists' and aid workers' reports. All tend to see Africa as exceptional and different, and the continent's central role in the making of modernity almost disappears from mainstream world history, which prioritises Eurocentrism and focuses on issues such as the discovery of the New World, the development of the scientific method, and the spread of European philosophies.

Africa's confrontation with the Portuguese marked the beginning of a pivotal point in modern history from the late 15th century to the 20th century. The gold and slave trade fuelled European interest in Africa and led to the creation of the slave plantation system that was the cornerstone of

¹⁵ Cederman, L.-E. (1997). *Emergent Actors in World Politics: How States and Nations Develop and Dissolve*. Princeton University Press. p 19.

European wealth and global inequalities. Africa also stands outside of time, as it is the only continent where historians can only summarise its history in three eras: A long pre-colonial era, a relatively short colonial era, and the current post-colonial era. As a result, African history is centred around the European conquest of a large part of the continent. This understanding of the African past is not comparable to Europe, whose history is divided into a large number of eras such as antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance..., and no one dares to reduce the history of Europe to the colonial era. Africa, on the other hand, is a land that has been forgotten by time and appears in history only through its confrontation with Europe unfortunately!

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