

African Nationalism: Two Different Intellectual Perspectives

Susanna Iacona Salafia

Fatih University, Comparative Literature PhD course
Istanbul, Turkey

African Nationalism was a multifaceted political movement that has had different origins, developments and outgoings considering the complexity of cultures, religions, natural environments and ethnicities of this immense continent. It's of course inappropriate to talk about "African Nationalism", as an identical and common phenomenon that brought to the independence from Colonialism in each state. As for Nationalism in Europe, it had its own specificity in at least the main big areas of North, West, East and South of Africa. According to Miroslav Hroch's theory¹(1996,78) on European nationalism, the nation-building process is a part of a wider plan of transformation of a society in a comparative framework. In the European nationalism, intellectuals played an important and decisive role, they "invented "nationalism" but only with certain preexistent conditions such as:

- A memory of some common past or «destiny»
- Linguistic and cultural ties
- The conception of «equality» of all the members of the national community, the birth of a civil society.

The process of nation-building, could be interrupted and is neither pre-ordained nor irreversible²(Hroch,1996,79) [1]. "Now the 'nation is not, of course, an eternal category, but was the product of a long and complicated process of historical development in Europe. For our purposes, let us define it at the outset as a large social group integrated not by one but by a combination of several kinds of objective relationships (economic, political, linguistic, cultural, religious, geographical, historical), and their subjective reflection in collective consciousness. Many of these ties could be mutually substitutable - some playing a particularly important role in one nation-building process, and no more than a subsidiary part in others". (Hroch, 1996, p. 79) [1]

After this brief Hrochian premise, this paper wants to talk about the complex phenomenon of nationalism in Africa but limiting the perspective from the works of two

contrastive scholars, "Nationalism in Asia and Africa"(1972) by Elie Kedourie and "Globoletics"(2013) by Ngugi Wa Thiong'O. The former scholar disappeared in 1992 ; the latter is still living. They are two scholars deeply different who live in so distant place and time.

1. THE AFRICAN NATIONALISM IN KEDOURIE'S VIEW

Elie Kedourie is an important British historian of the Middle East. Born in Bagdad, he is also an Iraqi-Jewish. Even though a conservative in his political views, he can be defined as an "anti-orthodoxy" scholar, against many mainstream thesis: he tried to dismantle and deconstruct many commonplaces and universally accepted views, especially in the field of nationalism conception of the previous century. He was an anti-marxist from a philosophical point of view and a "rightist" scholar. His 1970's works are the very the first voice in the critics of traditional nationalism which many contemporary anti-nationalist thesis stem from , such as for example, 1983 "The Invention of Tradition"³ by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Rangers.

In his 150 pages long introduction to the collection of essays, by different writers, "Nationalism in Asia and Africa", which he was also editor of, Kedourie, generally speaking, argues that nationalism doctrine(men naturally divided in nations according to their language, customs, culture, according to the 19th century European philosophical view) can be shown to be either mistaken or misguided, since national characteristics are extremely difficult to ascertain. He draws the main points of the Nationalism in China with the story of Taiping movement and the founders of the Heaven Kingdom in South China that lasted eleven years; the nationalism in India with the role of Ghandi. Lastly but not the least, he deals also with African Nationalism focussing on the characters of Nkrumah, first president of Ghana and Kenyatta , president of Kenya.

African Nationalism appears after WWII and was born within the Pan-Africanism movements , during the two wars, in Europe and North America. H.J Du Bois, a black American scholar, was one of the leading spirit of the

¹ Hroch, M. (1996). From National Movement to the Fully-formed Nation: The Nation-building Process in Europe," in Balakrishnan, Gopal, ed. Mapping the Nation. New York and London: Verso.

² Hroch, M. (1996). From National Movement to the Fully-formed Nation: The Nation-building Process in Europe," in Balakrishnan, Gopal, ed. Mapping the Nation. New York and London: Verso

³ Hobsbawm, Eric; Ranger, Terence O. "The Invention of Tradition", 1992, Cambridge(UK):Cambridge University Press.

African nationalism. There was the first Pan African congress in 1919 in Paris and the 5th congress of Manchester in 1945 but, according to the historian Kedourie, there isn't any records of contact with the real black society in Africa. Kenyatta and Nkrumah were both members of the Manchester congress and in less than two decades they would have become, respectively, president of Kenya and Ghana. Kenyatta had been absent from Africa for 16 years; Nkrumah was a graduate of USA where he had moved to in 1935. What Kedourie wants to point out is that they were external characters and played a role mainly out of Africa.

In British police recordings, analyzed by Kedourie, Nkrumah in London in 1945 set up a society called "the Circle", whose members were students of West Africa. They bound themselves to recognize Nkrumah's leadership and trained themselves as revolutionaries, ready to fight in any part of the continent, so revolutionaries as professionals. Kedourie defines this organization as a sort of childish sect with ceremony oath etc. "If we had come upon this document, we would have taken it to be that their nationalism was childish daydream of absolute power, for the very fancifulness of its terms" (Kedourie, 1975, p. 108) [2]

Nationalism in Africa is a sort of obsession, it is a romantic idea of the same kind as as described by the Turkish nationalist historian, Tekin Alp, in his pamphlet "the Turkish and Pan turkish ideal", during the first world war. According to Kedourie nationalism is an intellectual idea, refined intellectuals are nationalists, the idea is captive and brings to the "derangement of the senses" (Kedourie, 1975, p. 100) [2], in the same words of the French poet Rimbaud, the irrationalism that justifies the homicide, the murder, the slaughter. Kedourie makes an other example of this Rimabaudian "derangement of senses" that brings to irrationalism in the nationalism ideology: the murder in 1897 in Poona, by an Indian activist, of the British official who had directed the measure against the plague because he had entered in their territory.

2. THE LEADER OF MAU-MAU MOVEMENT

Dedan Kimathi was one of the leader of the Mau-Mau revolution, the nationalist political movement born in Kenia after the WWII, against the colonial dominance. He was the administrator of the Oath to the organization, and this rite was similar to a religious ceremony. According to Kedourie, Mau Mau nationalism is strictly connected with local religion and even black magics. He believed himself to be chosen directly by Ngai, the Kikuyu god. He escaped in the forest, during the revolution, and dreamt of becoming "the Popular President of Southern Hemisphere" (Kedourie, 1975, p. 114) [2] and during a tribal ceremony he appointed himself with the title of K.C.A.E, Knight Commander of African Empire. All these deviations and Napoleonic grandeur in the African nationalism brought to

the so called bigmanism syndrome of the contemporary African dictators. In the documents and records reviewed by Kedourie, Kimathi appointed himself also as "Dictator of justice" (Kedourie, 1975, p. 114) [2] and executions and killing became an amusement since he started to become suspicious of everybody. He was also a mystic since he talked of dreams where he had appereance of God. Kedourie compares him to Hitler and his writings to the Mein Kampf. (Kedourie, 1975, p. 57) [2]

3. AFRICAN NATIONALISM AND CHRISTIANITY

African Nationalism Nationalism in Africa is also connected with religion and Christianity that is one of the dominant religion in Africa. Since Christian religion has often been associated with the colonialists, also the Christianity must be purified. In Ethiopian Christendom a Black Jesus stands in front of the gates of Paradise to admit black people and rejects the white ones. According to a South African preacher, Sundkler, "God is a good god. But he is not European. Anyone who says this, is a fool because Jesus has never put his foot in Europe, America or Australia, but Jesus has been in Africa" (Kedourie, 1975, p. 119). [2] The Jamaican black orator Markus Garvey, instead, advocated a religion which "would show God in our image", that is black. The African Othodox church encourages to forget the "white gods" and go back to a native church. There is sometime a complete rejection of the Christian religion, as in the Sundkler Church assuming that negroes have their own prophet and Messiah to take place of Jesus and sacred scripture. They are still waiting a Bantu prophet ready to sacrifice himself as Jesus.

Also Simon Kimbangu, leader of the Belgian Congo revolution who died in prison, affirmed to be called by God and he became the center of a religious cult. Another Congo leader, Simon Pierre Mpadi, founded also a religious movement, in 1939. The Khaki congregation whose object of veneration is Kimbangu himself, considered him as a Messiah who came to bring Congo people to liberation.

In the French Congo there is another religious legend, Matswa who founded in Paris a left association for the liberation of Congo. He was then arrested and sentenced to the exile and became the center of a religious cult in the French Congo, with its dogmas, scripture, priests and bishops and even a Pope. Wensday is the rest day and Masses are celebrated on Friday evenings. He is considered a Messiah that one day will come back and free all the Congolese.

Christianity diffused to Africa through the Watch Tower teaching, that is the Jeovah congregations, starting from the beginning of 20th century. The missionary Joseph Booth in 1897 wrote the book "Africa for Africans". He introduced in central Africa the Watch Tower doctrine. The new and revised Christianity, in this form of "prophetism", is strictly connected to the rebellion against Europeans and white dominion. One of the Watch tower

prophecy, diffused in Eastern and Central Africa through magazines and pamphlets, was that one day a Messiah would have come free Africa from the white dominion, depicting the white man as the Devil that must be suppressed or exorcised. For example "The Beast" another publication of this same period, associate the 7th World power, that is Great Britain, to Satan. This form of nationalism constituted a radical attack and the literature of the Tower Watch, the Jeovah magazine, in Africa depicted the white men, the Europeans, the British as corrupted and stressed on their oppressive rule, using very violent images (swords, blood, etc) and words. One of the direct effect of this kind of new religious evangelization was the revolt in Nyasaland in 1915, by John Chilembwe, a seminary Baptist coming from Virginia and in contact with John Boots. This religious aurea has accompanied the leaders of nationalist movements in Africa, in the Kedourie deconstruction.

Years after, in Kenya, during the struggle for independence the "hymnbook" of the Kenia African Union presented the leader Jomo Kenyatta, as directly inspired by God. There are many hymns in the book that exalt Kenyatta as a religious character whom God has endowed with special powers.

Nkrumah, in Golden coast, was also invested of religious powers. A Christian prayer as "I believe" was parodied in a hymn to invoke Nkrumah. Nationalism is also sometime a mystique experience for the mass of people that gather for example in front of the prison where African leaders are closed. A popular "sentiment" that involve a whole nation. The same feeling that bind individuals to their family. A love experience, as in the conception of Aflaq the ideologist of the Arab Ba'th party (Kedourie, 1975, p. 131) [2].

In conclusion, regarding African nationalism, Kedourie puts in evidence its more radical aspects, a phenomenon coming from abroad and with deep connections with the irrationalism and local religions, giving birth to the religious syncretism. The national Leader became an object of religious cult soon after degenerating in the dictatorship of the Big Man" syndrome.

4. THE ABOLITION OF ENGLISH LITERATURE DEPARTMENT AT NAIROBI UNIVERSITY

However, African Nationalism is much more than an anthropological or sociological phenomenon, as in the Kedourie's view, and involve the sphere of politics and culture as we will see with Ngugi Wa Thiong'O.

Forty years after, we have another as important as different perspective of the African nationalism pre and post colonialism. In his 2012 work "Globaletics", Ngugi Wa Thiong'O [3], one of the most important writer of African Literature, explained the reasons why he, in 1967, with two other colleagues, Owuor Anyumba and Taban lo Liyong, members of African studies department at Nairobi University, wrote a document that called for the

abolition of English Department at Nairobi University which the same Thiong'O was member of. The document, that at that time raised much polemics and accusation of radicalism and extreme marxism, came four years after the independence of Kenya from the UK. "On the abolition of the English Department"⁴ marked an important stage in the history of the African Nationalism because it was also the milestone of the subsequent post colonial theories that spread during the 60s and after."We wanted Shakespeare abolished and replaced by Caribbean, African-American, Asian and Latin Marxists, including the most Marxist writers of all, V.S. Naipaul and Ralph Ellison"⁵, writes Thiong'O. The writer was a child during the Mau-Mau guerrilla in Kenya and his intellectual education was molded by colonialism and anti-colonialism resistance. The abolition of the English Department at University of Nairobi is, for Thiong'O, a necessary meseaurment in order to face the historical period which Africa was living in, building its path towards a real nationalism and a "collective consciousness". Shakespeare, Lawrence, Jane Austen were seen as "distractors" from the "whirlwind" of revolutionary changes the Kenyan which intellectuals were living in. English classics could prevent them from their self-awareness as new Kenyan citizens in an independent state. The demand for the abolition of English Department at Kenyan Universities was not only for a matter of contents but also of form and methods. Ngugi opposes infact to the literary critics method of the "close reading" used at that time in the English Literature classes.

"Close reading" and "poor theory": opposing literary critics methods

"Close reading should be an important companion of poor theory"⁶. But without that broad political-ideological framework, close reading⁷ and obsession with formalistic elements can turn into attempts to squeeze the world of a literary text through the eye of critical needle...It's like entering a treasure trove and counting the items inside without an awareness of their value, unable to relate them to anything outside" (Thiong'O, 2012, p. 29)[3]. There was a great discrepancy, a "gulf", between the literary texts studied at English Department of Nairobi University and the context where the students lived, so dense of revolutionary changes with new African states emerging together with rebellions, revolts, tumbols. Kenya and more in general Africa needed to build their own "national

⁵ Wa Thiong'O, Ngugi, "Globaletics", 2012, New York Chichester, Sussex: Columbia University Press.

⁶ Poor theory is a special project of literary critics approach at Critical Theory Institute (CTI) of Irvine, Usa which Thiong'O is member of. The "poor theory Manifesto" is downloadable here: <http://www.humanities.uci.edu/critical/poortheory.pdf>

⁷ "Within a wider theoretical framework, close reading can turn every text into a treasure house. It is the one approach that can prevent theory from becoming the kite that has lost its moorings or prevent critics from becoming attorneys and judges who argue their cases, in prosecution or defense or judgment without adducing reasons from the evidence (Thiong'O, 2012, p. 29)".

conscience” starting from an indigenous literature. ”From the English classroom there were no critical bridges to help us to cross the gulf” (Thiong’O, 2012, p. 31) [3]. The “bridge” to cross the “gulf” came instead from African and Caribbean literary fictions. It was a 20th century literary phenomenon, so it didn’t have anything to do with writers as Eliot, Lawrence or Shakespeare. Wa Thiong’O and his colleagues ordered and categorized this new Literature “in English language” but not “English”, distinguishing two major waves: before 1950s with Caribbean and South African writers (C.R.I James, Claude Mackay, Alfred Mendes and S.E.K. Mqhayi, B. Walset Vilakazi, the brothers Dhlomo) and the post-war emigrations of Caribbean workers and intellectuals or the Caribbean “renaissance” with giants as V.S. Naipaul, George Lemming, Andrew Salkey and Samuel Selvon, Chinua Achebe. In these fictions the characters really reflected the “howling winds” (Thiong’O, 2012, p. 32) of Africa at that time. While obeying all the aesthetics law of fiction, these novels depicted the drama of the colonial and anti-colonial worlds. From these fictions was possible to desume the “theory” of the colonial situation. ”Fiction is the original poor theory. Confronted with an environment that they could not understand the humans invented stories to explain it. The understanding of nature begins with its personification.... Classical orature of all societies have stories of the why, how, when and what of the phenomenon of nature” (Thiong’O, 2012, p. 33). According to Wa Thiong’O, the novel is a “contemplation” of the social life and in the same time its “mirror-like”. How could Jane Austen, Lawrence, Dickens reflect the “whirlwind” of Kenya in that specific historical period? African/Kenyan Nationalism and the building of “a memory of some common past or destiny», to speak as Miroslav Hroch in the premise, was strictly connected also to a deep renovation of its literary fictions and critical analysis methods.

5. THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT AND AFRICAN LITERATURE

Four and half century of English literature were still the “core” of the curriculum at English Department of Nairobi University in 1967, after four years from the independence. When Ngugi Wa Thiong’O entered the English Department of Nairobi University there was only a course on African Literature held by prof. Esk’ia Mphahlele but with his departure to Zambia the course was not taught anymore. The English Department at University

of Nairobi seemed to Wa Thiong’O as “the clerk in charge of one of the trading stations in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, so mindful of his appearance and dress.... as if protecting them from the surrounding turmoil” (Thiong’O, 2012, p. 47) [3]. The English Department seemed as the last outpost of the British Colonialism: the claim for its abolition well inserted itself in a process of cultural emancipation which Kenya needed in order to build a national consciousness. English Department at University of Nairobi didn’t give space and dignity either to the emerging Caribbean literature or to the “stories” of Africa. In that context a department of English Literature could play the role as the last “enclave” of the British cultural predominance that denied to Africans their literary dignity. Wa Thiong’O presented then a discussion paper to the acting Chair proposing some changes in the curriculum to reflect post-colonial developments. He was answered that “the principle was still the need for a study of the historic continuity of a single culture, English of course (Thiong’O, 2012, p. 47)” [3]. It could be permitted some exceptions but English was the great tradition with African as an ancillary to be admitted into the master narrative as time and space allowed. African fiction and novel could be only an “ancillary” of the English Literature. It was as the English Department wanted to continue the same colonial cultural paradigm of a superior and inferior culture. In their counter-paper, the Kenyan teachers answered that if there had to be the study of a “single” culture it should have been African and English should have been neither allowed the role of “ancillary”. It simply should have been abolished. ”On the abolition of the English Department” Manifesto was the last and final call for the abolition of the slavery even when the slave chains had been already broken.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] Hroch, M. (1996). *From National Movement to the Fully-formed Nation: The Nation-building Process in Europe*, in Balakrishnan, Gopal, ed. *Mapping the Nation*. New York and London: Verso.
- [2] Kedourie, E. (1975). *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*. London: Routledge.
- [3] Thiong’O, N. W. (2012). *Globaletics*. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press.