

REITH LECTURES 1961: The Colonial Reckoning

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Lecture 2: African Nationalism

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In my last talk I asked the question: 'What is the nature of the force that in less than a decade has swept the rule of Europe out of almost the whole of tropical Africa and has bred more than twenty new nations in its place?' The ready answer is 'African nationalism'. But how have the tribes of yesterday become the nations of today? Is this the kind of nationalism we have known during the last few centuries in the Europe where nationalism was bred, or something new? Nations have generally developed where peoples have had as their common possession territory, race, history, customs, language, religion and, at least in large measure, environment and way of life. These are only favouring conditions: a nation is made by the desire of people to come together into one state and this desire has been successfully asserted even without one or two of these conditions.

The astonishing fact about Africa is that nearly all its new nations lacked all these elements except two. One is race, and yet in some parts there are racial as well as tribal divisions as in Kenya, in Uganda and the Sudan. The other is common territory. But the territories were arbitrarily demarcated by alien powers only some sixty to seventy years ago: so arbitrarily that they sometimes cut right through important tribes. Moreover these boundaries enclosed scores, the larger even hundreds, of what were before completely independent units of all shapes and sizes. In Nigeria the British Government felt obliged to recognize 110 separate Native Administrations. Language also divides. There may be a dozen or more separate languages in one medium-sized country. In Nigeria, again, there are 248. Customs are often sharply distinct. Religion divides because animist religions were intimately linked with the ancestors of each group, and the entry of Islam and of Christianity has in places imposed new divisions. Further, because of immense physical contrasts, a single territory may enclose half-nomad pastoral tribes and settled cultivators, divergences far greater than can be found in European nations.

What of history, the long record of shared experience, perhaps the strongest cement of nationalism? With important exceptions, especially in West Africa, this hardly exists in the European sense. Most tribes or smaller groups share a belief in common ancestral heroes, and the memory of common wanderings in this fluid continent. But such bonds may be dividing rather than uniting forces, for very rarely is one tribe large enough to support a viable national state.

Asians, too, have had their difficulties in creating their new states. Yet they had very large groups which shared ancient cultural unity and pride from a long history, a classic art and literature and famous and widespread religions of the book. True, the ultimate origins of all nations could be traced back to congeries of tribes slowly welded through the centuries. But in Africa tribalism has been preserved intact and on an immense scale right into the twentieth century.

The reason for this is found in one of the strangest facts in history. Here was a huge continent lying actually within sight of the ancient worlds of Asia and Europe. In its north-eastern corner one of the greatest of early civilizations was bred around the lower Nile, but its direct contact hardly seems to have spread south of the middle reaches of this great river. Africa's northern fringe became more the southern shore of Europe than its own northern border. Between this coastal belt and tropical Africa stretched the Sahara desert, growing ever more desiccated: a formidable obstacle to full communication though never a total barrier to the passage of migration, of ideas, including that of Islam, and of trade—though this was largely in slaves. But the contact was enough to breed a succession of large states in the Western Sudan. These ancient trans-Saharan links with the world and also the later more direct coastal contact with Europe since the Age of Discovery have given a long lead to the civilization of parts of West Africa.

But the great inner tropical bulk still remained almost entirely secret from its neighbouring continents, shut off from direct communication with their civilizations and even largely from their knowledge. It was long after Europeans had crossed the wide oceans to occupy the new worlds of America and Australia that they made effective entry into inner Africa. True, they sailed around Africa, they occupied the temperate Cape and the Mediterranean coastlands, and they made footholds here and there at other points of its coasts. But they did not know Negro-land, though they knew Negro slaves. It was guarded by its inhospitable, unindented coasts; by cataracts that broke the flow of its rivers; by desert and forest; by disease and by the apparent lack of any lures that might tempt Europeans to brave these multiple hostilities.

In the nineteenth century a few explorers, men of the highest courage and resolution, with heavy loss of life began the real, deep penetration of Africa, traced the Niger, saw the amazing tropical snows of Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya, and stumbled on the great lakes. Lake Nyasa found by Livingstone, Uganda and the Nile source waited to the seventh decade. It was only in 1877 that Stanley emerged from the first crossing of Africa at its equatorial girth on an expedition which took him some three years—and turned his hair white. And these pioneer explorations meant only the drawing of a few dotted lines across a highly conjectural map.

I realize vividly from my talks with Lugard that for many tribes the period from their first contact with the white man until today has been no more than the space of a single long lifetime. I have even once or twice myself been the first white woman to be seen by some groups.

The intrusion was late but the mastery which followed it was swift. The technological superiority of the Europeans ensured that. Their science gave them control of disease. Their steam powered the big ships needed for the bulky produce of the tropics and drove the trains along the rails which penetrated tropical Africa before the roads. The first white men must have seemed almost like gods. Much of the penetration was by consent and by very one-sided treaties. Opposition was sporadic. Only in Ashanti and the Sudan was it at all serious for Britain. To meet it there was the rifle and the field-gun, but above all the new machinegun, light to carry and deadly in fire-power. A few bursts and its reputation quickly spread. There was some truth in Hilaire Belloc's couplet:

*Whatever happens we have got
The maxim gun and they have not.*

The suddenness and strength of this penetration meant taking over tribal Africa almost intact and confronting it with twentieth century Europe. Africans sometimes suggest that their emancipation today is that of nations which the Europeans subjected. But that evades the basic historical fact which explains nearly everything that has happened to Africans-the cruel trick which geography and history played upon them and I might now say also upon us Europeans who so casually took over the responsibility for their problem continent.

When at last Africans woke to self-consciousness it was to discover that as long as history recorded they had been ignored, enslaved, subjected, despised or patronized by the rest of the world. They did not, because they could not, feel this sense of indignity as a nation, or nations. They *could* feel it as tribes but it was more often felt by those already emerging from tribalism. These felt it in two ways, first as individuals, secondly as members of a race. This was because in form and colour Africans, perhaps we should say Negro Americans, are strikingly marked off from other races. If to be black was to be despised, they could never escape in this life from the livery of scorn. Thus their determination to gain their freedom was something entirely different from that of the Greeks or Poles, or Italians, who in the last century felt the shame of *their* subjection to alien rule not so much as individuals but as members of a conquered nation. Moreover, these peoples could feel themselves the equals or the superiors of the Turks, Russians, or Austrians who had subjected them. But the European rulers of Africa believed that Africans were not only almost immeasurably inferior to themselves in development but were inherently, permanently inferior as a race.

Here lay the fundamental damaging mistake. Science and experience, certainly my own personal experience of African pupils and friends, have taught most of us to abandon this view. We suspect that it was cherished by our predecessors largely because it seemed to justify the subjection, the indefinite subjection, of Africans. But we need not rebound to the opposite extreme and assume that the incoming Europeans had no reason at all for such a view as they explored the utter material poverty of most of Africa and tried to understand why such a vast region had remained so static while nearly all the rest of the world had in varying degrees advanced in civilization. With our growing knowledge of Africa, old and new, its sociology and its history, we can correct this European belief in African inferiority. But there can be no doubt about its immense and lasting influence upon both Africans and Europeans.

Africans woke slowly. Most of Britain's new subjects lay passively enclosed within her power, still shut off from the wider world. I travelled much in Africa between the wars, trekking widely on horse, foot or Model-T lorry away from centres and main roads. I never saw overt signs of discontent or antagonism; everywhere friendliness and curiosity. Colonial officials often accompanied me but they never hesitated a moment to let me trek and camp alone. In thirty years I have only once myself been given a police escort and that was in Kikuyu country during the Mau Mau rebellion. Only in one or two of the larger cities, up to about the middle nineteen-thirties, did the scanty vanguard of the young politically-minded define their discontents.

It looked like a colonial honeymoon, this period of acceptance: but not, in spite of appearances, of social health. The sinews which had held tribal life taut and virile had slackened in the wider peace and protection brought by the white man. Two acids were eating into the healthy cells” of family and tribal life: the western money economy and Christian education, both of them weakening old cultures before they could construct the new. Boys left home and parents for school. Young men left wives and lands to earn wages, and both came back with new ideas and a disturbing independence of mind towards chiefs, elders, tribal religion, discipline, and magic. The standards of western education began to creep’ up in the schools, form by form. At last young men were ready for the great, the revolutionary, adventure of seeking higher education abroad, as young Indians had done before. They came first in a trickle, then in a flood, from the west coast—hardly appearing until the late nineteenth-thirties from elsewhere. Today these students are better prepared for this adventure, more sophisticated. But the earlier generation in London and other universities passed through an experience which might be shattering.

They realized for the first time something of the standing in the world of Africa and of black people generally. Many, perhaps most, of them would run up against the colour bar and be deeply injured by the impact. Yet in many other contexts of their new life they would enjoy a sense, a conflicting sense, of freedom and equality, a higher standard of life, and new intellectual and social adventures. They had learned English at school and the record of the English assertion of liberties from Magna Carta to the Reform Act of 1832 and beyond. Now they could actually observe our free political life and the workings of our civil liberties. Some of them might enter into an equal association with white women and perhaps experience the supreme racial compensation of sexual intercourse with them. By the end they might find themselves cruelly polarized between a far greater racial anger and a far stronger determination—and hope—to escape from it.

Our student would return to Africa. What might he meet? The fact of the subjection of his people to a few white officials, which he would now see with new eyes. And he would have the shock of seeing, also with new eyes, the poverty and—by western standards—the ignorance of his own people. And yet had he not proved by his own academic achievement the intellectual equality of his race? He might find escape from his almost intolerable anger or sorrow by projecting not a part, but perhaps the whole, blame for them upon the white man, and especially upon the ruling power. A further blow might befall him: either the refusal of the good official post he felt he had so strenuously earned, or appointment to a white man’s post with inferior pay and conditions. This discrimination, especially in early days, might have some reasons behind it. But perhaps no grievance has been so effective in deepening the already deep enough bitterness of the new intelligentsia. It might almost be said that as a result of all their experiences many of these young men, these few potential leaders, were in a pathological state of mind.

Is it surprising, then, that they began to see only one way of escape from their intolerable sense of personal and racial humiliation? This was to gain independence from the white man’s control, to awaken the apparently docile masses, who had not shared their experiences and who accepted the white man’s rule as part of a new immutable order. They must break this spell of subjection, organize the new discontents into a movement for self-government, create a nationalism of a new kind,

one which Lord Hailey has called 'Africanism'. For these young men could not regard their haphazard blocks of Africa, containing tribes different from and even repugnant to their own, with the emotions of a nationalist. It was, I repeat, as individuals, as members of a race, humiliated if not oppressed, that the masses must be aroused. The leaders could start in the towns where men of several tribes were thrown together in a bewilderment and discontent that was beginning to transcend tribalism. Today the rest of the world is seeking to sublimate nationalism. But how else could the Africans have sought to integrate their small broken societies and regain their lost sense of autonomy and dignity.

The hopes of a handful of pioneer nationalists must at first have seemed pretty small. Yet there were some favourable conditions. British colonial governments presented no monolithic front of unbending negation, still less of sustained repression. And in Britain herself there were sympathizers especially, but by no means solely, in the Labour Party. The party had at first been a little uncertain of its policy, whether it should end or mend the empire. But during the nineteen-thirties its members became increasingly well informed and constructive. Mr. Creech-Jones, and later Mr. Fenner Brockway and others, became almost 'members' for the colonies. Their wide correspondence and contacts with colonial leaders allowed them to ask awkward and detailed parliamentary questions and to make weighty contributions to debates. The party, without being communist with a capital 'C', was deeply influenced by communism —and who among us has not been? This increased their fellow- feelings with the colonists as the under-dogs of capitalist exploitation. They could approach imperial questions with a sense of detachment, of innocence. I remember once flying south from Cairo with a Labour minister. At the Khartoum halt we strolled at night along the Nile, past the superbly confident bronze Kitchener on his charger. I wondered aloud how long it would stand, this statue we had put there. 'We did not put it there', said my companion. Thus the Labour opposition could offer advice and encouragement to the African dissidents, a safety valve which, as with India also, may have prevented many reformists from turning rebels.

During the nineteen-thirties, also, the Africans could watch the growing strength of India's advance to independence and 'Congress' became a word and inspiration far outside its Asian home. But the shell of colonial power was being chipped away by more powerful forces from outside than from inside the empire, to the great encouragement of the African nationalism just stirring within that shell. In the first world war Africans fought and died and Africa provided some battlefields. But this had only limited political effects. But the League of Nations Covenant, with its reference to backward peoples 'not yet able to stand alone in the modern world', held a distant hint of promise.

The inter-war years were marked by two world events painfully relevant to Africa. Italy wantonly and cruelly invaded Ethiopia, the only ancient independent black kingdom of Africa, a kind of Zion to all those Negroes who had first awoken to their subjection. They projected their emotions upon the far-away kingdom where, had they known it, Negroes were still enslaved. The cult led to semi-religious manifestations called Ethiopianism. West Africa also had its reactions. 'Let Abyssinia, the only black kingdom, be shattered', cried a Gold Coast newspaper, 'and all our hopes will be doomed'. But perhaps nothing is more instructive than the immediate reaction of the young Nkrumah, just arrived in London, when he saw the placard: 'Mussolini invades

Ethiopia'. 'At that moment', he writes, 'it was almost as if the whole of London had declared war on me personally'. He glared at each impassive face, wondering if those people could realize the wickedness of colonialism. 'My nationalism surged to the fore. I was ready to go through hell itself if need be in order to achieve my object'. Here, indeed, is nationalism with a difference, aroused by the sense of common race with distant and unknown Ethiopia.

The second event was Hitler's demand for the return of the colonies taken from Germany in the First World War. Some public men, later branded as 'appeasers', felt that surrender might at least be preferable to another world war. But the issue was soon entangled in ideology. German spokesmen revived a theme that lay deep in some German pseudo-philosophies which had exalted the right of a master-race, the *Herrenvolk*, to rule. Britain was despised for losing this will to rule, for betraying Nordic man. Hitler ridiculed the weak ideas of trying to civilize the barbarous peoples or of allowing the Indians to govern themselves. In *Mein Kampf* he had said that 'it was a sin against all reason... a criminal madness to train a born semi-ape to become a lawyer'.

The Africans, and again, especially the West Africans, listened to this debate from the side lines. But by this time the voices of diplomacy were drowned by the guns, they had heard Britain reject the Nazi ideas of race and advertise her own promise of ultimate self, government for Africans.

During the war Britain's lone stand may have been heroic but it was a time of retreat and of colonial loss in Asia. She had to rely upon the loyalty and support of her African subjects, to ask sacrifices of their manpower and in their economic life. This subtly altered her relationship with them. And the end of the war tilted the balance still further. British imperial power was now seen to have been the result of a unique opportunity, and it showed a relative diminution when her two giant allies stalked together into the international arena in their awakened strength. In their different ways each Colossus was antagonistic to British imperialism. Mr. Wendell Willkie flew round the world and informed it quite truly, that it was now one. But he also said that everywhere he found America was respected because she was free from the taint of the hated imperialism. It happened that late in the war I was in the United States lecturing, in the attempt not, indeed, to question the fine surge of idealism there, but to correct distorted views of Britain's colonial record. Some American voices were being raised to advise Britain to quit fighting a war to preserve her empire and to join America and Russia in fighting the real war for freedom. India was then in question rather than Africa, and one well-known writer warned America to stand aloof from Britain in Asia and so avoid having turned against herself 'the fearful hatred of the coloured races and the blaze in 'their dark eyes'. In the current mood it was not always easy to deal with some of my audiences. In Chicago I found that although Queen Anne might be dead, George III was not. But the pressure of our great ally could not be ignored. I am sure that it greatly increased both African hopes and our own readiness to speed up the process of emancipation.

America somewhat modified her attitude before long. But the other great ally, turned rival, did not. I must refer to this again, but let us remark here that Russian influence has played upon the Empire in three ways. First as a theoretical attack upon what was called economic imperialism. Secondly as an example of what communism could

achieve in a huge country which resembled much of the dependent world in its industrial backwardness, its sprawling disunity and the illiteracy and agricultural stagnation of its peasantry. Its achievement, a real one however much idealized by propaganda, had a penetrating effect upon peoples who had been enclosed within a bilateral relationship with their rulers. Hitherto they had seen advance only in terms of following in Britain's footsteps with Britain's help, and therefore at Britain's pace. But now Russia offered not only a condemnation of colonialism but also an alternative. Russia's third form of influence was by direct political intervention, which now had a chance to play an increasingly effective part in an awakening Africa.

Finally, far more than the old League of Nations, the United Nations Organization provided a sounding board for the attack upon colonialism and also established new principles and agencies with the help of which the attack could now be pressed home.

These are some of the converging events and influences which turned the world into a hot—house for the forced and rapid growth of African nationalism. We have looked at this growth in terms of ideas and emotions. We have still to see how it expressed itself in terms of politics. We have viewed it, too, from the African side, and must consider within what administrative and constitutional forms Britain tried to contain and develop these forces and how she ultimately handled the final critical process of political emancipation.