

# Comunidades Imaginadas

Nação e Nacionalismos  
em África



Coordenação

Luís Reis Torgal  
Fernando Tavares Pimenta  
Julião Soares Sousa

# Comunidades Imaginadas

Nação e Nacionalismos  
em África

Coordenação

Luís Reis Torgal  
Fernando Tavares Pimenta  
Julião Soares Sousa

Coimbra • 2008



COORDENAÇÃO EDITORIAL  
Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra  
Email: [imprensauc@ci.uc.pt](mailto:imprensauc@ci.uc.pt)  
URL: [http://www.uc.pt/imprensa\\_uc](http://www.uc.pt/imprensa_uc)

CONCEPÇÃO GRÁFICA  
António Barros

PAGINAÇÃO  
Paulo Oliveira  
[PMP]

EXECUÇÃO GRÁFICA  
????????????????

ISBN  
978-989-8074-57-7

DEPÓSITO LEGAL  
????????????????????????????

OBRA PUBLICADA COM A COLABORAÇÃO DE:



OBRA PUBLICADA COM O APOIO DE:

**FCT** Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia  
MINISTÉRIO DA CIÊNCIA, TECNOLOGIA E ENSINO SUPERIOR Portugal

Apoio do Programa Operacional Ciência, Tecnologia, Inovação  
do Quadro Comunitário de Apoio III



**IMAGINED MODERNITIES**  
**COMMUNITY, NATION AND STATE IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA**

It is a tribute to the influence of Benedict Anderson's book that social scientists today commonly refer to African nation-states as 'imagined communities'.<sup>1</sup> Although there is nothing *intrinsically* wrong in applying that concept – so long as it is properly defined – I want to suggest that its use is in fact perilous when it comes to understanding post-colonial Africa. Or to put it another way, the notion of 'imagined community' leads to an analysis of contemporary Africa that tends to obscure the processes at work and thus clouds our thinking. This is not primarily because Anderson's approach is at fault. Rather, it is because applying it to Africa lulls us into a false of clarity, which conspires in my view to provide a misleading picture of the politics of the continent. This is so for three main reasons.

First, the label 'imagined community' evokes a process of nation building that is all too familiar. The creation of the nation-state in Africa, therefore, is taken to be akin to that which took place in Europe. It is matter of sequence, not of species: given time, what happened in Europe will happen in Africa. Second, the use of Anderson's concept comforts the idea that there is but one model of the nation-state, even if the ways of 'achieving' it might differ. The assumption is that a nation-state is a universal template, the model on which every country is built. Third, the notion of 'imagined' community lends an agreeable, but artificial, local flavour to what is ultimately conceived as a universal concept. There may be variations in the actual construction, or even architecture, of the nation-state, it is argued, but its 'essence' is the same everywhere. In the end, a nation-state is a nation-state.

My concern here is not so much to determine the validity of Anderson's concept, which is another debate, but to see how it has been applied to Africa and with what consequences. To start at the beginning, it is true that Anderson himself hinted that anti-colonial nationalism was one of the roads to the 'imagined' nation-state. Although he was originally referring to the East Asian colonies, there seemed every reason to extend the concept to colonial Africa. Both the nature of anti-colonialism

---

<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Revised edition. (London: Verso, 1991).

and the programmatic intent of the nationalist movements in Africa pointed to a future political dispensation that would rest on the nation-state as it had emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century. Indeed, the colonial officials as well as the nationalists who contested their legitimacy shared the same belief in the appropriateness and viability of the nation-state.

What happened in the early years that followed independence appeared to confirm the relevance of the model. The new African elites were bent on consolidating the former colonial territories into viable countries, bringing the various ethnic communities together and offering the country a modernising vision of the future. Seen in this light, the move to one-party political systems seemed logical: it was part of a process of fashioning unity out of diversity whilst at the same time allowing all segments of the polity a voice in the state. This political strategy made it possible to mobilise people towards the 'imagining' of the nation-state in which they were now destined to live together. That most countries were highly artificial constructs, in which the only aggregating factor was the colonial experience, made this ideological travail of 'imagination' all the more necessary. But given that many European nation-states were also artificial edifices, there was at first no reason to think that the process of construction would be any more onerous in Africa.

The economic and political problems that beset Africa from the mid-seventies onwards were variously attributed to contingent factors or to the process of political maturation. Contingent in that the 1973 oil crisis seems to have induced an economic crisis worldwide, which hit the continent particularly hard. Maturation in that it was believed the one-party system was still bedding down into the type of 'African' political dispensation required for the consolidation of national unity. Although the wave of extra-constitutional events (especially coups d'état) was alarming, it did not at the time lead to any questioning of the model of the nation-state. It is only the apparent resurgence of ethnicity as a major factor in politics, culminating in the Rwanda genocide, which brought about the beginnings of a re-thinking about post-colonial politics on the continent. Since by then the one-party model was believed to have failed, the nineties were seen as a key transitional period.

In the last decade and a half the focus has been on democratic transitions, which has largely diverted attention from the question of the construction of the nation-state. As international pressure and domestic discontent coalesced into a movement towards the return of multiparty politics, little thought was given to the difficulty involved in 'imagining' the future of the African nation-state. Because of the assumption that democracy and development went hand in hand, donors and African politicians agreed on a programme of reform that rested on consolidating that assumed reciprocal virtuous circle. The promise to deliver multiparty politics brought renewed aid, which was intended to spur development and reduce poverty. But the question was never asked whether the failure to develop might have anything to do with the ways in which the political structures in place actually worked to prevent what was assumed to be a 'natural', or even necessary, transition from democracy to development.

I am not arguing here that the model of the nation-state is the *reason* for the crisis of development in Africa. As I have written elsewhere, the problem has to do with the ways in which power is exercised rather than with the question of the artificial

nature of the nation-state.<sup>2</sup> However, it seems to me some of the difficulty we have today in making sense of political processes in Africa is connected to the assumptions we make about the *construction* of the nation-state in that part of the world. Far from being the case that the nation-state in Africa is a recognisable species of the imagined community we can identify from Anderson's book, we need instead to rethink it in terms more appropriate to the continent. What this means is not so much that we need to look for a different type of state in Africa but to ask more insistently why it is that the state we find in Africa has not been constructed as it was 'imagined' when the colonies became independent.

Returning to Anderson's book, it is useful to remind ourselves that the original argument concerned the origin and spread of nationalism rather than the nature of the nation-state. In other words, the author was more concerned with the meanings and consequences of what came to be called nationalism in the nineteenth century than with the political dispensations and structures it brought about in different parts of the world. His was a debate with other scholars of nationalism. He was at one with Gellner and Hobsbawm in arguing that both nationalism and nations were the product of the modern world and served contextually specific political as well as economic aims. Those included the organisation of distinct communities into a single entity so as to facilitate, *inter alia*, (national) control over taxation, finance and investment. For these three scholars of nationalism, therefore, nations emerged as a result of the efforts of modern political actors and *not* because there were pre-existing well-defined 'primordial' (or 'essential') groupings that sought a national destiny.

Benedict Anderson argued that in Europe the nation-state emerged in part as the consequence of a work of 'imagination'. For him, this was the result of the deliberate efforts by the dominant national literate elites to use modern print media (or print capitalism) in the vernacular language to project an image of the nation-to-be. It is this image that became the 'myth' of the nation-state as it was consolidated in the nineteenth century and formed the foundations of the countries we know today. The model of the nation-state with which we are familiar, therefore, issues directly from Europe's historical experience. Because it is Europe that colonised Africa, that model was transposed, with some variations, to the continent and adopted, again with some variations, by the newly independent countries. However, that apparent continuity in the architecture of the nation-state obscured processes of political change that lie at the heart of the post-colonial transition in Africa.

Historically, the African nationalists concentrated their efforts on *anti-colonialism*. Their goal was to achieve independence rapidly and to ensure as smooth and profitable a decolonisation process as could be mustered. Although there is wide variation in how this took place in the different colonies, what remained constant was the nationalists' aim to capture and control the state. Their political language, therefore, was the mirror image of the metropolitan one: the creation of an independent nation-state was thus both the symbol and the foundation of the modern polity. Indeed, this is exactly what Nkrumah meant when he famously said: "Seek ye first the political kingdom..." – that is, take over the state and the rest will follow. Although different

---

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Chabal, *Power in Africa: an essay in political interpretation* (London: Macmillan, 1994).

nationalists had different (political or ideological) visions of what the post-colonial future would hold, they had no doubt that it would be built on the foundations of the model nation-state as had emerged in Europe. In this they were comforted by their erstwhile colonial masters, who liked to believe that they had bequeathed Africans a viable model.

Of course, there is no reason to believe that either the nationalists or their metropolitan overlords were anything other than genuine in their assumption that there was but one template for the twentieth-century nation-state. Nor is there any doubt that the main fear at the time of decolonisation was that ethnic and other 'communal' divisions might threaten the nationalist project. Accordingly, it seemed natural that the priority should lie in the projection – the making concrete – of the myth of national unity. So it was that in the first decade following independence the discourse as well as the practice of national politics in Africa was primarily concerned with the consolidation of the nation-state and the adjustment of the political machinery of the state to the requirements of political control. Not surprisingly, therefore, the study of post-colonial politics in Africa has long focused on what I call the 'nationalist' question – that is, how the African nationalists constructed the 'imagined' political kingdom.

The nature of the political crisis in contemporary Africa, marked in part by the weakening of the state, has re-opened this question and led to a re-examination of the question of nationalism. This is understandable. The assumption underlying the projection of the modern nation-state into Africa was that, like its European counterpart, it would create conditions favourable to modernisation and development – however these are defined. Here again the presumption at the end of decolonisation was that Africa would soon 'take off' economically, as indeed the former East Asian colonies seemed to do roughly around the same period. The fact that this has not happened and that the state in Africa seems to have evolved away from, rather than towards, the European model have contributed to a questioning of what nationalism had in fact achieved by way of state building.

The debate on the role of the state today in Africa turns around three central questions. The first is why institutionalisation has not proceeded as it was expected to do after independence. Or in other words, why is it that the state seems to be less strongly institutionalised and less bureaucratically efficient than it was then? The second is whether 'indigenous' forms of political arrangements, like neo-patrimonialism, are the cause or the consequence of this lack of institutionalisation. Here, the debate concerns the reasons why politics in Africa seem, to use my formulation, to have 're-traditionalised'. The third is whether political reform by way of 'democratisation' will make possible an economic type of modernisation capable of underpinning sustained development.

I have discussed these questions elsewhere<sup>3</sup> but here I want to suggest that one aspect of the re-assessment we need to make requires us to rethink Anderson's concept of 'imagined community'. In a nutshell, the argument is that our application of

---

<sup>3</sup> Patrick. Chabal & Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: disorder as political instrument* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999).

that notion to contemporary Africa has obscured the fact that what was at stake was not so much nationalism as it was modernity. Or rather, that the debate about nationalism was in fact a debate about modernity – by which I mean a debate about the modernity the nationalists envisaged and sought out. If that is true, then we have failed to register that the central issue about the state in Africa is not its identity as ‘imagined community’ but, rather, the role it plays in determining what modernity might mean in political and economic terms. In other words, what did post-colonial political practice entail in terms of the type of modernisation African has undergone since independence? I analyse this question by revisiting the three key questions identified above.

In Europe, as Anderson noted, the state arose out of the elites’ search for the political model that would suit the consolidation of the political community into the nation-state. In Africa it was the reverse: it was the newly created post-colonial state that defined the complexion of the political community. This had a large number of consequences, many of which relevant to an understanding of present day politics but I want here to concentrate on what this implied for the question of modernity.

In Europe, the search for a ‘national’ political framework, the nation-state, was driven by the need for the elites to rationalise and control the ongoing, and accelerating, *modernisation* of the economy. The question was how best to derive advantages from the industrial revolution in order to establish a national political framework that would ensure continued economic progress. In Africa, the circumstances were completely different. The nationalist elites assumed that the control of the state would make possible the management of the former colonial economy to the benefit of the newly created nation-state. In other words, they sought to take over the existing political and economic machinery, which they intended to direct to the (economic, social and political) *modernisation* of the independent country. In Europe political reform was the *outcome* of economic dynamics; in Africa it was the intended to be its *driving force*.

Thus, the African nationalist project embodied a vision of modernity that was derived from the European experience; its core assumption was that the creation of the independent African nation-state would deliver European-type modernity. In that sense the coming of independence was the transfer of the ‘imagined modernity’ projected by Europe. But in truth, this expectation could not be met, although the nationalist elites claimed to uphold it whilst they set about consolidating political control. Over time, the consequences of the sedimentation of post-colonial politics *and* the state’s inability to deliver on the concrete economic benefits of modernity combined to challenge such assumptions. Or rather, it triggered the re-assessment at all levels of society of what modernity might entail in the post-colonial context. If the independent state could not deliver economic development, then what did it mean to be a modern nation-state?

What seemed to happen was an ostensibly contradictory process. On the one hand, the political elites invested the colonial state and appeared to make it work according to its intended (Western) modern institutional logic. Not only did it continue to accept responsibility for the duties it had in colonial times but it also took on a more pro-active development role – planning and directing the country’s economy. On the other hand, it rapidly became manifest that the realities of day-to-day politics started to impinge on the state’s capacity to function effectively – and as a result

its bureaucratic capacity declined. This situation had drastic consequences for the economy. The failure to achieve state-engineered growth allied with the difficulties provoked by an increasingly predatory state made the dream of Western-style material modernity ever more elusive. The 'imagined modernity' that was adumbrated by the conquest of the political kingdom turned out to have been a cruel mirage for the immense majority of the African population. They thus began to (re-)imagine their own modernity. Why did this happen?

If the nationalist elites had thought that their political project entailed a particular type of Western (capitalist or socialist) modernity, the realities of the politics they practised after taking over made manifest that this was not so simple. The main nationalist contest during, and to some extent after, decolonisation was ostensibly between the 'modern' (mainly westernised and educated) and the 'traditional' (mainly chiefly and rural) elites. The fact that, by and large, the former prevailed over the latter, gave the impression that the (Western) modernity they projected would also triumph. So it was that the alternative vision of modernity embodied in the 'traditional' political project seemed to be historically doomed. Did 'traditional' not mean 'backwards', as so many nationalists argued? This seemed all the more lethal since, in the context of independence, the dominant discourse was that of a type of modernisation that was consonant with the Western experience. The very march of history appeared to de-legitimise any form of 'traditional' argument. Nor was it envisaged, either then or later, that some Africans might imagine 'modernity' differently.

The point here is that the assumption of the superiority of 'modern' over 'traditional', which appeared to have been sealed by the consolidation of the nation-state on the Western template, blinded us to important political processes at work in post-colonial Africa. And these processes – which I have dubbed, in deliberately provocative fashion, 're-traditionalisation' – were acting in a different, complex and (at first) rather subterranean fashion. What I mean is *not* that Africa was going backwards but that it was going forward along paths dictated as much by 'tradition' as by 'modernity'. It is the near-universal presumption that African modernity somehow would not be 'traditional' that prompted me to re-think what had happened by means of a focus on 're-traditionalisation'. My intention, therefore, was to stress what should have been obvious: the assumption that modernisation was the same as Westernisation failed to take into account the fact that Westernisation had followed the paths of *Western* 'traditions'. We also know now, even if we did not understand it well a couple of decades ago, that Asian modernisation has followed the paths of *Asian* 'traditions'. Surely, therefore, it stands to reason that African modernisation will also follow the paths of *African* 'traditions'. But what does this mean concretely?

I try to answer this question by looking more specifically at the evolution of the African post-colonial state, since by common consent the state is critical to development. Although there is debate as to why the state in Africa has not institutionalised more securely and why it has been so patently unsuccessful at promoting development, I would stress one particular aspect that is all too often neglected: the nature of contemporary neo-patrimonialism on the continent. What I want to stress here is that the standard view on this question, as found in the bulk of Africanist social sciences is mistaken. It interprets patrimonialism as a remnant of an earlier 'traditional' time when societies were run differently – much as it is seen to have existed in Europe

before the advent of the 'legal-rational' state. But this is to miss the point about the notion of *neo*-patrimonialism – a concept meant to convey the fact that it is a modern adaptation of a 'traditional' political dispensation.

In other words, that concept was meant to express the fact that neo-patrimonialism was the outcome of local political modernisation, which had *not* resulted in the expected political Westernisation. However we may want to debate the accuracy of the notion of neo-patrimonialism, there is no doubt that it reflects a complex set of political developments that have resulted in the type of state found today in Africa. Of course, there is wide variation in how such states have functioned since independence. And it is certainly true that some neo-patrimonial states have been more efficient than others in the conquest, control and management the new political kingdoms. Yet, what is also true is that, with the possible exception of Botswana, they have not brought about the modernity that was envisaged at decolonisation. And in particular, they have not *either* improved the well being of the majority *or* facilitated a form of economic growth that would generate the resources required for development. People are getting poorer and there is little development.

This is not the place to discuss the reasons why – which I did in *Africa Works*. What is of interest here is what it implies for our discussion of 'imagined modernities'. What nationalism conveyed for Africans was not primarily the fact that they now would live in a recognisable nation-state – the boundaries of which they already knew from colonial rule. It was instead the promise that they would be granted access to the material aspects of modernity that had been so tantalisingly dangled before them. Here too colonial rule had pointed the way in that there had been significant improvements in living and often working conditions: health, education, employment, infrastructure, etc., which all could identify concretely. Therefore, the assumption was that independence meant above all the achievement of even greater material benefits. This assumption obscured the issue of the relationship between 'modernity' and 'tradition'. *It led to the belief that it would be possible concretely to use the 'modern' political instruments of the state to achieve the modernisation of society.* However, this was to misconceive what had happened in Europe, where it was the transformation of society that had led to the fashioning of the modern state.

Because of this misreading of the historical record, which suited the nationalists, there was little recognition that in Africa too society was in the process of (re-) shaping the post-colonial state. What the concept of neo-patrimonialism represents, therefore, is the reality of the fact that African 'traditions' slowly but surely began to impinge on the workings of the state that had been set up at independence. What I mean here is that the post-colonial state was increasingly seen and used, by the elites as well as the population at large, as a political instrument in historical and cultural harmony with existing 'traditions' as they had evolved since the pre-colonial period. Let us leave aside a sterile discussion of whether 'traditions' exist as such. The point here is only to stress the importance of trying to understand what those 'traditions' (on which there might be debate) are and how they have affected post-colonial politics.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Which is the subject of my next book: Patrick Chabal, *Africa: the politics of suffering and smiling* (London: Zed Press, forthcoming).

To recast the discussion of the failure of the state in Africa to live up to its modernising expectations is also to explain why it was misguided to assume that Anderson's notion of 'imagined community' was immediately relevant. What is historically significant is whether what is 'imagined' is feasible in the circumstances. Indeed, it is clear that where the process of socio-political and economic maturation is primarily driven by domestic factors, as it was in Europe, the realm of 'imagination' is constrained by the process of modernisation already in train. Where, as in Africa, there is a forced historical march into a type of political modernity that has been imposed from the outside, it is very much less likely that it will achieve the same results. If, additionally, the socio-cultural and political 'traditions' extant are not easily compatible with the imported state machinery, then it is even less likely that the newly created nation-state will emulate its European model.

If we take seriously the business of trying to understand what is happening in Africa, we need to revise our assumptions about what the 'imagined community' does mean in the post-colonial context. The danger with Anderson's notion is that we easily, and lazily, extend to Africa the image we have of what modernisation and development are. Whilst we all share a desire to see the lives of Africans improve as quickly as possible, we must resist the temptation to project our own Western presumptions onto a continent with such a different history and culture. Out of respect for these differences, we must accept that modernity might be imagined differently by those who have suffered such a brutal and broken trajectory into the twenty first century. If we revise our assumptions, and expectations, we can then begin to focus on what the evidence of contemporary life in Africa tells us. We may not like what we see – and indeed Africans themselves are not content – but it is more important to understand than to berate. Only then can we open ourselves to the modernities that present-day Africans are imagining.



