Editorial

Challenges for National Identity

In the context of culture and nationalism, scholars have difficulty agreeing on what national identity stands for. Such divergence on its various aspects saw the emergence of a number of theories. The concept of a nation is a recent creation: the First World War gave birth to the League of Nations, and the Second World War to the United Nations Organization. Since then, this concept has attained worldwide recognition as the only legitimate basis for the state.

The fact that nations consist of people who identify themselves as different from other individuals makes states nationally homogeneous. The most extreme method of attaining such homogeneity—the "ethnic cleansing" recently witnessed in Yugoslavia and Rwanda—occurred frequently in the twentieth century, culminating in the Nazis' attempt to rid Germany (and Europe) of a myriad of minorities.

The major obstacles to national identity reside in states whose different ethnic groups live in the same geographic spaces and claim them as their ancestral homeland. Africa falls into that category. Creating and nurturing a national identity can become difficult and complex because most political boundaries between these nation-states are the legacy of European colonialists who drew them with little concern for African needs, culture, and traditions. Such disregard for human beings confined more than 3,000 ethnic groups in 53 countries (including six islands). Furthermore, in addition to the three lingua francas (English, French, and Arabic), Africa has more than 800 languages. Nigeria, home to over 154 million people (as of 2009) representing more than 250 different ethnic groups, offers an excellent example of the compounded problems plaguing Africa in terms of national identity.

Thus, Africa faces the prospect of an exclusivist national identity that splits states into morsels exploited by dishonest political leaders—a situation that might lead to civil wars and human misery, as in Côte d'Ivoire, or create larger entities, as prophesied for Europe more than a century ago by French historian Ernest Renan: "Nations are not eternal. They had a beginning, they will have an end. A European confederation will probably supply their place on that continent."[1]

We have at our disposal many evolving ways of realizing national identity, which itself is fluid and changeable. For instance, individual emotions, which should not be discarded as irrelevant and/or irrational, will continue to play an integral role in the process of forming a national identity. Jeannette Bougrab, a member of French president Nicolas Sarkozy's *Conseil d'État*, is a daughter of a "Harki," a term for the more than 100,000 Algerian irregulars who fought on the French side during the Algerian war. Disarmed and abandoned by the French government when Algeria won its independence in 1962, those who survived and reached France (like her family) found themselves interned in

camps and segregated from the local population for decades. Bougrab, who had every reason to resent and reject France, instead proclaimed that "for me, France is an ideal. I vow to France a genuine love and a limitless passion. This country is mine. . . . I feel French and I am proud of being French."[2]

The fact that national identity is the sum of millions of individual emotions like this one gives us hope.

Rémy M. Mauduit, Editor
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Notes

1. Ernest Renan, "*Qu'est-ce qu'une nation*" (lecture delivered at the Sorbonne, Paris, 11 March 1882). See John Joseph Lalor, ed., *Cyclopaedia of Political Science, Political Economy, and of the Political History of the United States*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Melbert B. Cary and Co., 1883), 930.

2. "Pour moi, la France est un idéal. Je lui voue un véritable amour et une passion sans limite. Ce pays est le mien. . . . Je me sens française et fière de l'être" (translated by the editor). Jeannette Bougrab, "Une certaine idée de la France," in Institut Montaigne, *Qu'est-ce qu'être français?* (Paris: Hermann éditeurs, 2009), 19–20.