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The African Concept of Balkanisation

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In modern African political literature there is a recurrent reference to the dangers of 'balkanisation'. Already during the 1920s the Gold Coast nationalist Kobina Sekyi compared Africa with the Balkans, and warned not to follow the ways of 'balkanisation'.¹ Later Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Sékou Touré, and other anti-colonial leaders continued to employ the term which rapidly became a basic part of the phraseology of modern African nationalism. I shall attempt to analyse the concept, and to show its use, definition, ambivalence, and implications.

In European history the word 'balkanisation' refers to the processes of dissolution and disintegration in the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.² Nkrumah was so impressed by the significance of these developments – which began at the Congress of Vienna and culminated in the division of much of Europe into a host of small and weak nation-states – that he compared contemporary Africa with the Balkans,³ and this analogy was adopted by many other African leaders.

What is surprising is that African nationalists should have overlooked the fact that European 'balkanisation' liberated many peoples from colonial or quasi-colonial rule. It is consequently difficult to understand the negative connotation which the concept has for a number of African politicians and scholars, because the break-up of these imperial systems was essentially a process of decolonisation. The same arguments against the partition of Eastern Europe could have been – and, indeed, were – raised against the dissolution of the British and French Empires in Africa. According to Karl Deutsch, the driving force which broke up the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires was the nationalism of the Greeks, Serbs, Croats, Czechs, Bulgarians, Poles, and Rumanians.⁴ Since it is difficult to understand how African anti-colonial nationalists could be hostile to their European counterparts, it is fair to assume that their dislike of the concept of 'balkanisation' rests on a misreading of modern European history.

The status quo and revisionism

In Africa itself 'balkanisation' has various associations for different leaders. All are agreed that an inherent feature is fragmentation; there is wide disagreement, however, over what degree constitutes balkanisation. All take it for granted that the world is somehow fragmented into states, but this does not necessarily have a negative connotation. The question is what degree of fragmentation is considered 'normal', and when does this begin to be associated with 'balkanisation'. There is no consensus on this question.

¹ J. Ayodele Langley, *Pan-Africanism and Nationalism in West Africa, 1900-1945: a study in ideology and social classes* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 100-1.

² Cf. Eugen Lemberg, *Nationalismus – Psychologie und Geschichte* (Hamburg, 1964), p. 177; Oscar I. Janowsky, *Nationalities and National Minorities* (New York, 1945), p. 11; and Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and its Alternatives* (New York, 1964), p. 50.

³ E.g. Kwame Nkrumah, *I Speak of Freedom: a statement of African ideology* (London and New York, 1961), p. 200; and *Ghana Today* (Accra), 20 June 1962.

⁴ Deutsch, op. cit. p. 50.

Some African leaders regard the present map of Africa as an expression of balkanisation, and have so defined the territorial *status quo*.¹ For example, Julius Nyerere talks about the need of 'removing' the balkanisation of East Africa, and Nkrumah warns Africa not to 'remain' balkanised.² They would regard any further fragmentation as increasing the extent of existing balkanisation. Others, for example Obafemi Awolowo and Anthony Enahoro, never mention the term with reference to the post-colonial situation³ – only the disintegration of Africa into smaller ethnic units would constitute balkanisation. Another most recent and interesting example is Chief Gatsha Buthelezi's use of the concept of balkanisation with reference to breaking up the integrity of South Africa by the creation of independent Bantustans.⁴

Sometimes the distinction between these two different interpretations has been blurred in a curious way. For example, Senghor has used the concept in an ambivalent fashion. In 1956 he opposed the break-up of *Afrique occidentale française* (A.O.F.), and for the first time spoke of 'balkanisation'. Today, the 'balkanised' parts are the independent states of Senegal, Guinea, Upper Volta, Ivory Coast, Benin, Mauritania, and Niger. In 1958 Senghor declared Guinea's *non* in de Gaulle's plebiscite to be an act of balkanisation because it undid his hopes to reconstitute the A.O.F. at a later stage.⁵ This historical experience has led Senghor to confuse the concept of the nature of the *status quo* with the revisionist process designed to change it. He cannot decide whether balkanisation is a present condition or a future danger.⁶

The All-African Peoples Conference which convened in Tunis in 1960 supported the creation of a Greater Morocco and described the independence of Mauritania as balkanisation – today this new state supports all resolutions of the O.A.U. against balkanisation. The A.A.P.C. also demanded that Katanga and Buganda remain within Zaïre and Uganda respectively, that Zambia be a part of an independent Central Africa, and that Togo join Ghana.⁷ Two of these four political entities are now independent states. Today nobody makes the distinction between 'balkanised' Mauritania, Zambia, or Togo, and 'non-balkanised' Ghana or Morocco.

¹ *Ghana Today*, 5 June 1963, p. 3; Kwame Nkrumah, *Class Struggle in Africa* (New York, 1970), p. 50; Kenneth Kaunda, *A Humanist in Africa* (London, 1969), p. 123; Julius K. Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity/Uhuru na Umoja: a selection from writings and speeches, 1952–65* (Dar es Salaam, 1966), pp. 40 and 85–6; and Mamadou Dia, *The African Nations and World Solidarity* (New York, 1961), pp. ix, 84, and 140.

² Julius K. Nyerere, 'East African Federation', in Gideon-Cyrus M. Mutiso and S. W. Rohio (eds.), *Readings in African Political Thought* (London, 1975), p. 337; and Kwame Nkrumah, 'Continental Government for Africa', *ibid.* p. 345.

³ I have checked all Obafemi Awolowo's books, and all the speeches of Anthony Enahoro contained in A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: a documentary source book, 1966–1969*, Vols. I and II (London, 1971).

⁴ Gatsha Buthelezi, 'Message to South Africa from Black South Africa', Soweto, 14 March 1976.

⁵ See William Foltz, *From French West Africa to the Mali Federation* (New Haven, 1965), p. 117.

⁶ Cf. Léopold Sédar Senghor, *On African Socialism* (New York, 1964), where the President of Senegal speaks on p. 16 about the fear of balkanisation (implying that it does not yet exist), and on p. 19 about the Africans' responsibility for balkanisation (implying that it does).

⁷ Colin Legum, *Pan-Africanism: a short political guide* (New York, 1965), pp. 121 and 273–4.

For the school of thought which defines the *status quo* as balkanised, and which in 1960 opposed the creation of several new states, the existing system has simply become more balkanised. For those who regard only secession as balkanisation, and who opposed the break-up of the A.O.F. or the independence of Mauritania, Togo, or Zambia, the results curiously ceased to be controversial – only more secessions would be labelled again in a derogatory fashion. This intellectual inconsistency reflects the confusion over what degree of fragmentation constitutes balkanisation.

The two different perceptions are important to understand, because those who regard the present situation as a manifestation of balkanisation will tend towards expansive revisionism; while those who are only against the break-up of the existing territorial units will usually be strict adherents of the *status quo* ideology, and less inclined towards regional or pan-African unification.¹

The Somali leaders regard the *status quo* as being responsible for the fragmentation of their nation. Thus they do not see any inherent contradiction between their opposition to balkanisation and their aspiration to a Greater Somalia which entails the support of secession in eastern Kenya and southern Ethiopia:

the principle of self-determination when used properly to unify and enlarge an existing state with a view towards its absorption in a federal system of government is neither balkanization nor fragmentation. It is a major contribution to unity and stability... We refuse to be 'balkanized'... We are... a single Somali nation.²

The falling domino theory

The concept of balkanisation includes the idea of a chain reaction, which once started is difficult to contain. Immanuel Wallerstein observed that 'every African nation... has its Katanga'.³ Accordingly many view balkanisation as a process of falling dominoes initiated the moment a precedent occurs and gains legitimacy.⁴ The speeches of Anthony Enahoro during the Nigerian civil war best represent this alleged dynamic ingredient:

Once fractionalization starts, it certainly will result in the further disintegration of the former Eastern Region of Nigeria. Neighbouring states with ethnic and other problems similar to ours will in due course also disintegrate, and a chain reaction will be set up all over Africa. Africa would end up in petty little principalities... once the right to secede was conceded, not only Nigeria but all the other multi-ethnic states of Africa would disintegrate.⁵

The belief in the falling domino theory is deeply implanted in African political thought.⁶ During the Nigerian civil war this interpretation of

¹ Cf. Opoku Agyeman, 'The Osagyefo, the Mwalimu, and Pan-Africanism: a study in the growth of a dynamic concept', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (Cambridge), xii, 4, December 1975, pp. 653–75.

² *Somali Republic and African Unity* (Nairobi, 1962), pp. 15 and 33, an official publication of the Somali Government.

³ Immanuel Wallerstein, *Africa: the politics of independence* (New York, 1961), p. 88.

⁴ See, for example, Modibo Keita's reactions to Biafra in *Afrique contemporaine* (Paris), 36, March/April 1968, p. 20.

⁵ Enahoro, in Kirk-Greene, op. cit. Vol. II, pp. 148 and 354.

⁶ According to D. Mudola, 'The Search for the Nation-State and African Peace', in *East Africa Journal* (Nairobi), vi, 11, November 1969, pp. 17–22, the creation of Biafra did not

balkanisation as a continuing dynamic process prevented many potential supporters of Biafra from crossing the Rubicon of recognition. Emeka Ojukwu endeavoured to explain that 'a country never disintegrates because another one did, otherwise there would be only fragments of countries left in the world today – after all there have been many precedents for disintegration'. On the other hand, he remained a prisoner of the chain reaction theory, seeking to assure other African leaders that the secession of Biafra would not become a precedent – indeed, that it would be a warning:

We Biafrans are satisfied that Biafra may yet prove to be a lesson for the furtherance of unity in other states of Africa... rather than a precedent for disintegration... Never again in Africa will one nation of a political community seek with impunity the total annihilation of another community.¹

What we have demonstrated very clearly to Africa is how not to treat minorities. I do not think anybody would want to face this problem again.²

Nyerere argued that the domino theory had been used by imperialists, and that Churchill had used the same rationalisation to defend his opposition to the breaking away of India from the British Empire. Nevertheless, Tanzanian newspapers conceded that the fear of progressive disintegration and balkanisation was legitimate and real, and called for a recognition of Biafra for humanitarian reasons rather than because of a general rejection of the domino theory.

Sometimes the concept of progressive balkanisation is also mobilised to fight regional autonomy schemes and federalist programmes within states. These constitutional and institutional compromises are then rejected as the first steps which will ultimately lead to full-scale secessionism.³ Among other African leaders, Kenyatta, Nyerere, Obote, Lumumba, Nkrumah, and Haile Selassie have voiced their hostility to this 'partial' balkanisation on numerous occasions.

Political philosophers since Plato have dealt with the question of the optimal size of a state. The concept of balkanisation as it is currently used in Africa contains an inbuilt hostility towards small states, reflecting the broader preoccupation of African political thought with their dangers. While the partition of the continent in the nineteenth century did not create nation-states – as was the case with the Balkans – ethnic secessionism in post-colonial Africa does aim to give ethnic-cultural groups their own states, as in Europe.

encourage other secessions. On the other hand, it is difficult to know what would have happened if Biafra had survived.

The Sanwi movement in the Ivory Coast quoted the Biafran 'precedent', which had been recognised by the Government of Houphouët-Boigny. President Macias of Equatorial Guinea said that the Biafran 'precedent' encouraged a secessionist movement in Fernando Po. Because both movements were much older than the civil war, the rôle of the 'precedent' is questionable.

¹ Emeka Ojukwu, *Biafra*, Vol. I, *Selected Speeches with Journal of Events* (New York, 1969), p. 238.

² Emeka Ojukwu, *Biafra*, Vol. II, *Random Thoughts* (New York, 1969), p. 176.

³ See, for example, the opposition to regionalism in *Zik: a selection of speeches of Nnamdi Azikiwe* (Cambridge, 1961), p. 108. Nkrumah spoke contemptuously of federalism: 'it does not unite, it balkanizes', in *Ghana Today*, 26 April 1964, p. 2; see also his 'Constitutional Government for Africa', loc. cit. p. 345.

Widespread African opposition to ethnic revisionism is based on opposition to smallness, for many agree with Yakubu Gowon that 'mini-states' are a degradation of black people.¹ Obote vividly expressed this sentiment when he said 'African nationalism hates small states'.² Nkrumah identified balkanisation with an Africa divided into 'small, weak and unstable states'.³ Much of the negative connotation attached to balkanised states has to do with their assumed small size.

Big-power politics and manipulation

'Balkanised' states are generally depicted as the creation of the big powers.⁴ For Nkrumah, balkanisation in Europe arose 'from the action of the great powers when they divided into a number of small and competing states the colonial possessions of the Turkish Empire in Europe'.⁵ He believed that the 'policy of creating several unstable and weak . . . states in Africa, was the same policy adopted by the great powers at the Congress of Vienna'.⁶ In other words, 'balkanised' states are a product of colonialism, a primary tool of neo-colonialism, and a result of alliances with imperialist forces. While Nyerere accused the imperialists of perpetuating balkanisation,⁷ the A.A.P. Conference in Tunis in 1960 declared that this strategy was 'a way to perpetuate neocolonialism'.⁸ Touré explained why balkanisation must be feared because of a 'Machiavellian plan' by the big powers aimed 'at dividing Africa in order to remain master of the continent'.⁹ The belief in, and the revolt against, foreign machinations and intrigues are part and parcel of all nationalism. Nkrumah's and Touré's attacks on the balkanising big powers are essentially not different from Fichte's tirade against those who meddled in German affairs in order to divide and rule Germany.¹⁰

African leaders who talk about the rôle of the European powers in the 'balkanisation' of Africa disregard almost completely the fact that many of the pre-colonial political units were even smaller than the European-made boundaries which usually incorporated a variety of African societies. Nkrumah once conceded that: 'Fundamentally, the reason that African groups failed to maintain their independence and succumbed to colonialism was that they were too small and not economically viable.'¹¹ If we accept this as an accurate analysis, then the association of African fragmentation with the colonial partition is revealed as a myth of nationalist ideology, one that no African leader can apparently do without.

¹ Yakubu Gowon, in Kirk-Greene, op. cit. Vol. II, p. 318.

² *Uganda Argus* (Kampala), 3 February 1960. This was said during the Buganda crisis, when secession was threatened.

³ Kwame Nkrumah, 'I Speak for Freedom', in Martin Minogue and Judith Molloy (eds.), *African Aims and Attitudes* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 214.

⁴ See Lemberg, op. cit. p. 177; Salo W. Baron, *Modern Nationalities and Religion* (New York, 1947), p. 254; and also Janowsky, op. cit. p. 9.

⁵ Nkrumah, *Ghana Today*, 31 August 1960.

⁶ Nkrumah, *I Speak of Freedom*, p. 201.

⁷ Nyerere, 'East African Federation', loc. cit. p. 337.

⁸ Legum, op. cit. p. 274.

⁹ Touré, quoted in *ibid.* p. 121.

¹⁰ K. R. Minogue, *Nationalism* (London, 1967), pp. 65-6.

¹¹ Nkrumah, *Ghana Today*, 26 April 1961, p. 2.

Is it correct and fair to attribute to colonialism any intention to fragment in the era of decolonisation? K. R. Minogue points out that in Cyprus, Guyana, Malaysia, Nigeria, South Yemen, and the West Indies, for example, Britain sought to unite rather than to divide and rule.¹ This analysis is accepted *inter alia* by both Senghor and Azikiwe:

The Africans themselves are primarily responsible for the balkanization. The British accepted Nigerian independence only on condition that the Federation be safeguarded.²

Whilst the European nations may be accused of balkanizing Africa in the 19th century... they have atoned for it by federating many African territories which are now being balkanized by African nationalists.³

Balkanisation is regarded in general not only as the creation of colonialism or neo-colonialism; it is also associated with dependence and weakness. In this context the analogy with Europe is convincing and correct: the Balkan states have been described as 'helpless pawns in the desperate game of the Great Powers'.⁴ In 1920 Lenin attacked 'the deception which the imperialist powers systematically practice by creating in the guise of politically independent states, states which are absolutely dependent upon them economically, financially, and militarily'.⁵ Some 40 years later, many African leaders concurred in this description of the effects of balkanisation, and emphasised the political and economic vulnerability of such states, a weakness which threatened to make their independence nominal.⁶ In the words of Nkrumah: 'The new Balkan states of Africa will not have the independence to shake off the economic shackles',⁷ and 'so long as we remain balkanized... we shall be at the mercy of colonialism and imperialism'.⁸ Another variant of the same theme is Buthelezi's condemnation of balkanisation in South Africa as a 'way to give white domination a breathing space'.⁹

The concept of balkanisation is also frequently associated with strife. The several wars between the small nation-states which succeeded the Ottoman Empire brought about their identification with national jealousies and disputes, thereby disregarding the fact that in other parts of that continent small countries coexisted in harmony and peace. Nkrumah took over the European image of balkanisation and its association with war: 'It is now an indisputable historical fact that the creation of the small independent states in Europe provided the fertile soil out of which developed the national jealousies, dissensions and disputes which culminated in the First and Second World Wars.'¹⁰

¹ Minogue, *op. cit.* pp. 88-9.

² Senghor, *op. cit.* p. 19.

³ Nnamdi Azikiwe, 'Pan-Africanism', in Rupert Emerson and Martin Kilson (eds.), *The Political Awakening of Africa* (Englewood Cliffs, 1965), p. 149.

⁴ Janowsky, *op. cit.* p. 9.

⁵ V. I. Lenin, 'Preliminary Draft of Theses in the National and Colonial Questions for the Second Congress of the Communist International, June 5, 1920', in *Collected Works*, Vol. x (New York, 1938 edn.), p. 237.

⁶ E.g. Dia, *op. cit.* p. ix; and Nyerere, *op. cit.* p. 40.

⁷ Nkrumah, *I Speak of Freedom*, p. 255.

⁸ Nkrumah, 'Continental Government for Africa', *loc. cit.* p. 345.

⁹ Buthelezi, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Nkrumah, *I Speak of Freedom*, p. 201.

It is questionable if any serious student of history will accept this analysis which overlooks many other factors, including the competitive ambitions of the big powers. To us it is important that this image has been transferred to Africa. To Nkrumah the military struggles in the Congo during the early 1960s were the Balkan wars of Africa.¹

Ojukwu has been a lonely voice in the attempt to refute the anarchic picture attributed to balkanisation:

For a time there were endless wars in Europe; incessant conflicts until the old European empires were dismantled, until the Balkans were balkanized – then came peace.²

Europe found peace through Balkanization, why not Africa through Biafranization.³



In general, we can conclude that the concept of balkanisation with all its negative associations expresses the opposition by contemporary African nationalists to political disintegration. But the definition of what that constitutes is in dispute.

¹ *Ghana Today*, 10 March 1965.

² Ojukwu, *Biafra*, Vol. II, p. 195.

³ *Ibid.* p. xx.