



Ethnicity as an Asset: Reassessing Its Role in Nation-Building in African Governments

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ABSTRACT

This study reevaluates ethnicity's role in African nation-building, challenging its dominant framing as a liability and reconceptualizing it as a potential asset for state cohesion. Drawing on post-independence experiences across the continent, the paper interrogates how colonially imposed borders, divide-and-rule policies, and elite instrumentalization transformed ethnic identity into a source of conflict, as seen in Rwanda, Nigeria, and Sudan. Yet comparative analysis of Tanzania, Ghana, Botswana, and Ethiopia reveals that ethnicity does not inherently destabilize states. Instead, outcomes depend on institutional design, inclusive governance, and state capacity. Where public goods are delivered impartially and federal or consociational arrangements accommodate diversity, ethnic and national identities coexist without contradiction. The research contrasts Ethiopia's ethnic federalism with Rwanda's post-genocide civic identity model to show that both forced assimilation and politicized ethnicity entail risks. It further examines how education, secularism, and regional integration can reframe ethnic affiliation as a resource for national unity. The historical methods of description and analysis was deployed in this study. The study relied on secondary data drawn from arrays of scholarly publications. Case studies of secessionist movements, resource conflicts, and Mobutu's cultural nation-building in Zaire illustrate that state-building without inclusive nation-building produces fragile states. Concluding that nation-building in Africa is not about eradicating ethnicity but managing pluralism, the paper argues for nested identity structures, equitable resource distribution, and indigenous governance frameworks. When harnessed through democratic practice and good governance, ethnicity can strengthen social cohesion, historical reconciliation, and sustainable development, converting a perceived obstacle into a tool for genuine national integration.

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INTRODUCTION

Nation building in Africa has been a mixed and ongoing process since independence in the 1950s-1960s. Many African states have established formal institutions of governance- constitutions, parliaments, courts, and national symbols like flags, anthems, and currencies. Countries like Botswana, Rwanda, Ghana, and Mauritius are often cited for relatively stable governance, peaceful

power transfers, and deliberate efforts to forge national identity beyond ethnicity. Rwanda's post-genocide reconciliation and economic growth is a strong example of state-led nation building. However, many nations struggle with weak national identity. Loyalty often remains to ethnic group, religion, or region first, and to the state second. This has led to civil wars, separatist movements, and fragile democracies in places like Sudan, Ethiopia, Democratic

Republic of Congo, Nigeria, and Mali. Corruption, weak institutions, and dependence on foreign aid have also slowed the process. Overall, the state is unfinished, politically independent, but still working to become socially and psychologically united.

Post-independence leaders recognized that colonial borders grouped diverse peoples together, so they took deliberate steps, such as:

1. Ideology and nationalism: leaders like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania with *Ujamaa*, and Senghor of Senegal promoted Pan-Africanism and “one nation” ideologies to transcend ethnicity.
2. National Symbols and education: adoption of national languages, civic education, national service programs, and school curricula aimed at teaching common history. Tanzania’s use of Kiswahili as a unifying language is a notable success.
3. Infrastructure and integration: investments in roads, rail, and broadcasting to physically and culturally connect regions. The African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African State (ECOWAS), and other regional bodies were also created to foster continental unity.
4. Power sharing and federalism: countries like Nigeria adopted federal system and “federal character” principles to ensure ethnic groups had representation in government and civil service.
5. Reconciliation efforts: post-conflict leaders like Nelson Mandela in South Africa with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and Kagame in Rwanda with *Gacaca* courts, focuses on healing divisions.

Six major challenges or obstacles in harnessing ethnic diversities towards nation building in Africa is identified. However, ethnic diversity itself is not the problem- the challenge is how it has been managed. The six obstacles are:

1. Colonial legacy: arbitrary borders grouped hostile groups together and divided related groups, creating artificial states with no prior shared identity.
2. Ethnic politics and patronage: leaders often mobilize along ethnic lines to win elections and distribute resources. This creates “winner takes all” politics and marginalization of minority groups.
3. Unequal development: some regions or ethnic groups get more schools, roads, jobs, breeding resentment and perceptions of exclusion.
4. Weak institutions: when courts, police, and civil service are seen as biased toward certain groups, people retreat to ethnic networks for security and opportunity.
5. Conflict and trauma: civil wars, genocide, and displacement in Rwanda, South Sudan, DRC, and others have deepened mistrust.

6. External interference: cold war politics, and today, resource competition and extremist groups, have exploited ethnic faults lines.

Nation building is foundational. Without it, development efforts often fail. This shows the perceived or real influence of nation building to socio-economic and political development of African nations. On the political line, it is imperative to state that a strong sense of nation creates legitimacy. Citizens obey laws not just from fear, but because they identify with the state. It reduces coups, protests, and separatism, and enables peaceful elections and policy continually. On the socio-economic side, when people see themselves as “one nation,” they are more willing to pay taxes, support public goods, and sacrifice for long-term projects. Investors also prefer stable, united countries. Conversely, ethnic division leads to wasted resources on conflict, brain drain, and policy gridlock. Rwanda’s rapid GDP growth and Ghana’s stable democracy shows that when citizens trust the nation, development accelerates. In contrast, states fractured by division struggle to implement basic services. In short, nation-building turns a collection of groups into a society that can plan, produce, and progress together.

Ethnic cohesion is the glue of nation building in Africa because diversity is the reality. Ethnic cohesion or unity is important to nation building in Africa in five major ways, namely:

1. Stability: cohesive societies are less prone to violence. When ethnic groups trust each other and the state, competition becomes political, not violent.
2. Resource mobilization: unity allows governments to implement policies that may hurt some groups short-term but benefit all long-term – like taxation, land reform, or national service.
3. Shared identity: cohesion creates a “we” that goes beyond tribe. This enables national pride, volunteering, and collective problem-solving.
4. Inclusive development: when all groups feel represented, talent from every community contributes. Marginalized groups don’t withdraw into separatism.
5. International standing: United Nations negotiate better trade deals and attract more investment. Divided nations are seen as risky.

Economic cohesion does not mean erasing cultures. Successful models like Tanzania show that unity can coexist with diversity – “unity in diversity.” The goal is not one culture, but one loyalty to shared rules, future, and destiny. In conclusion, African nation building is still in progress. Past leaders laid institutional groundwork, but ethnic politics, colonial legacies, and weak institutions remain obstacles. Yet the payoff is clear: without a sense of nation, socio-economic and political development stalls. With ethnic cohesion, African states can turn their diversity from a challenge into their greatest strength.

Musarurwa (2016) defines nation-building as the construction of national identity through the instrumental exercise of state power. Anshan (2026) identifies two key events that facilitated African independence: the unjust treatment of former colonies by European powers, and Egypt’s resolute stance during the Suez Canal Crisis. Although the attainment of independence in the 1960s generated optimism across Africa, nation-building efforts in several states were impeded by separatist movements, genocide, electoral conflicts, and disputes over resource control (Anshan, 2026). As of 2025, Africa has 54 sovereign

states. Borders and country names haven’t changed since 2025. However, there is a disputed territory known as Western Sahara which is not a sovereign country in Africa. Looking at the map below, one can boldly say that Algeria is Africa’s largest country. The Seychelles are Africa’s smallest country. Nigeria is Africa’s largest country by population while the Seychelles is Africa’s smallest by population. Africa’s highest point is Mountain Kilimanjaro while Africa’s lowest point is Lake Assal in Djibouti. Below is the political map of Africa retrieved from World Atlas.



Figure 1: Map of Africa retrieved from World Atlas

Giorgis (2010) says “the prototype state is dysfunctional, insecure, and fragile”. This statement is describing a state that lacks the basic capacity to function like a normal, stable country. This phrase is often used by historians and political scientists to describe “proto-states” or “fragile states” common in post-colonial Africa. The “prototype” here means the basic model of a modern state which had monopoly on legitimate violence+ effective institutions- is

present in name only. The form exists: flag, constitution, UN seat. But the function doesn’t fit-in, because it can’t deliver security, development, or national unity. As a result, identity politics has contributed to many conflicts such as Rwandan genocide, civil wars in Nigeria, Liberia, and Somalia, apartheid in South Africa, and recurring ethnic violence in Kenya. It has also driven several secession attempts, including in Belgian Congo 1960,

Uganda 1966, Nigeria 1967, Djibouti 1991, and Senegal 1991. In Nigeria, secessionist tendencies is exemplified by Biafra/IPOB-Igbo agitation (Ani *et al.* 2023). In this study, the historian's contribution to knowledge is embedded in the body of the work.

Statement of Problem: While ethnicity is often framed as a liability, this study reevaluates its role, arguing that ethnic diversity is not inherently destabilizing. Through comparative analysis of African states, it explores how inclusive governance, institutional design, and civic nationalism can transform ethnicity into an asset for national cohesion, stability, and sustainable development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on two inter-related theories that explain nation-building challenges and policy outcomes in postcolonial Africa, 1960-2025:

Modernization Theory

This is one of the earliest and most optimistic theories of nation building. It became popular in the 1950s-1960s, right when most African countries were gaining independence. This theory is propounded by scholars like Deutsch (1953) and Rustow (1970). This theory posits that nation-building progresses through economic development, education, communication, and social mobilization that weaken primordial loyalties and strengthen national identity. Nations develop in stages. As African countries become more "modern" – economically, socially, and politically – traditional loyalties like tribe and ethnicity will fade, and a unified national identity will emerge. It was heavily influenced by Western scholars like Walt W. Rostow, Gabriel Almond, and Karl Deutsch. The belief was: "Africa can become like Europe and America if it follows the same path." It explains why policies on education, national service, and language homogenization were deployed in Eritrea, Tanzania, and the Maghreb. However, Africa's experience shows modernization alone fails when institutions lack capacity and inclusivity.

The theory says: build schools, factories, roads, and democratic institutions, and a modern national identity will follow. In Africa, it partly worked- Africa have universities, cities, and national economies. But it failed to predict that ethnicity would adapt to modern politics instead of disappearing. Today the lesson is: is modernization is necessary but not sufficient. You need economic development+ deliberate efforts to manage diversity+ fixing colonial structures.

The theory ran into serious problems/criticisms in Africa. First, it ignored colonial structures. Secondly, ethnicity did not disappear. Third, dependency problem- where African economies became dependent on exporting raw materials and importing finished goods. Fourth, cultural bias- critics say the theory is Eurocentric, ignores African values,

communalism, and indigenous institutions that could also build nations.

Colonial Legacy/Structural Theory

Drawing from Fanon (1963) and Rodney (1972), this theory argues that arbitrary borders, divide-and-rule administration, and exploitative political economies imposed by colonialism created weak, "strange implantation" states. These structural distortions explain persistent ethnicity-based politics, separatism, and resource conflicts. It provides the historical baseline for evaluating why government interventions succeeded or failed.

The theory also argues that the biggest obstacle to nation building in Africa is not African culture or ethnicity itself, but the political, economic, and territorial structures that colonialism left behind. In simple terms, the way African states were built by colonial powers made true nationhood very difficult after independence in the 1950s and 1960s. In summary, the colonial legacy/structural theory says: you cannot build a strong nation on a weak, divided, and foreign structure. Until African states reform these inherited structures – borders, institutions, economy, and identity politics- nation building will remain incomplete. The task then becomes "decolonizing the state": creating new institutions, economies, and identities that fit African realities, not colonial designs.

Critics say this theory is too deterministic. It ignores the agency of African leaders and citizens. First, countries like Tanzania and Botswana overcame similar colonial structures. Secondly, it risks blaming everything on colonialism and not enough on post-independence leadership choices. Together, these frameworks guide the study to assess how historical structures interact with institutional design and modernization policies to either constrain or advance nation-building in Africa.

Colonial Legacies and the Politicization of Ethnicity across Africa: From Divide-and-Rule to Contemporary Conflict

The study examines how colonial boundaries and policies entrenched ethnic divisions, and how post-independence elites instrumentalized ethnicity, turning it into a liability for state stability. The arbitrary territorial divisions imposed by colonial powers during the scramble for Africa disregarded pre-existing ethnic affiliations. Addressing the threat of ethnic warfare may therefore require integrating ethnic identity into political structures, with federal arrangements providing a potential mechanism for managing diversity. Instances of ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and Eastern Europe, and apartheid in South Africa, have led to ethnicity being widely construed as a cause rather than a symptom of social disorder. The violent manifestations of ethnicity have framed it in negative terms, thereby distorting the terms of potential

scholarly and political discourse. Such characterization derives partly from racial attitudes of the colonial period, informed by Social Darwinist thought that construed African tribal systems as intrinsically barbaric and savage (Ejovi et al., 2026).

Such representations were perpetuated in much of the literature on Africa and reflect an irrational and historically inaccurate consciousness. The instrumental invention of ethnic identity is problematic because it overlooked a central point: ethnic affiliation, whether recently constructed or historically continuous, constitutes a legitimate mode of identification and must be addressed within its contemporary context of social and political relevance. In British-colonized Sub-Saharan Africa during the 1940s, tribal unions and associations proliferated and were widely or actively encouraged under colonial policy of divide and rule. By the late 1950s, African nationalism remained largely artificial and lacked a coherent ideological foundation. Its primary aim was to unite populations divided by distinct languages and cultural traditions. In the post-colonial period, ethnicity came to be regarded increasingly as a threat to the project of nation-building (Alumona & Azom, 2018).

Ethnicity has often been framed as a destructive force in nation-building. Many social scientists who view ethnic affiliations as maladaptive in modernizing contexts-and as incompatible with the formation of a cohesive nation state- have argued that industrialization and modernization would gradually erode these ties. The prevailing assumption was that class-based interests would supersede ethnic identity over time. This expectation has not materialized in Africa. Tanzania and Ghana exemplify early post-independence efforts to diminish the political salience of ethnicity. Upon independence, the Tanzanian government sought to forge a national unity that would transcend ethnic identification. Like most African states, Tanzania is ethnically heterogeneous. Its leadership exercised stringent control over civil society, both as a reflection of its ideological orientation and as a strategy to cultivate a unified national identity and consolidate Julius Nyerere's political authority. However, the introduction of multiparty elections in 1992 led to a more liberal political climate, marked by greater freedom of expression and expanded avenues for political participation.

In Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, the country's first president, enacted legislation prohibiting the formation of political parties based on ethnicity, religion, or region. The 1969 and 1979 constitutions included provisions designed to limit ethnic politics, and National Redemption Council (NRC) prohibited the use of the term 'tribe' in official documents to eliminate divisive and tribal influences that undermine national unity. Despite these measures, attempts to eradicate or diffuse ethnic identity since independence have largely failed. This raises two central questions: To

what extent has ethnicity influenced national stability in Africa? And what is the relationship between ethnic identity and the process of nation-building?

To answer the questions, it is imperative to note that ethnicity has been a significant, though not deterministic, factor in Africa's post-independence stability. Its influence varies by state depending on manipulative ethnic cleavage. There are three notable variables where ethnicity destabilized states. Viz:

1. Conflict mobilization: in cases like Rwanda, Burundi, Nigeria, Sudan, and Republic of Congo, political competition became ethnicized. Elites mobilized ethnic identity to secure patronage, exclude rivals, and legitimize violence. This contributed to civil wars, coups, and state collapse.
2. Weak state legitimacy: when the state is perceived as an instrument of one ethnic group, others withdraw consent. This erodes the monopoly on violence and tax compliance, creating a cycle of instability.
3. Electoral violence: competitive elections in heterogeneous states often trigger ethnic bloc voting and violence, as seen in Kenya 2007-2008 and Cote d'Ivoire 2010-2011.

African Deliberate Ethnic Policies / Narratives and Nation-Building

Nation building in post-colonial Africa has been profoundly shaped by how states manage ethnic diversity. Because colonialism amalgamated heterogeneous groups within arbitrary borders, African governments adopted deliberate ethnic policies and constructed official narratives to foster unity and state legitimacy. With regards to deliberate ethnic policies, states have pursued two broad policy directions. The assimilationist/ integrationist approach seeks to transcend ethnicity through a single national language, civic education, national service, and centralized institutions. Tanzania's promotion of Kiswahili and *Ujamaa* ideology exemplifies this. The accommodationist/ federalist approach recognizes diversity through power-sharing, federal structures, quotas, and cultural autonomy. Nigeria's "federal character" principle and Ethiopia's ethnic federalism illustrates this model. Other principles' include affirmative action, decentralization, and post-conflict reconciliation mechanisms such as Rwanda's *Gacaca* courts and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

With regards to narratives of nationhood, the truth is, alongside policies, elites have constructed narratives to legitimize the state. *Pan-Africanism* and *nationalism* framed independence as a collective liberation project. Developmentalist narratives linked nationhood to modernization and shared prosperity. Unity-in-diversity narratives, common in Kenya, Cameroon, and Nigeria, celebrate multiculturalism as a national asset rather than a liability. Conversely, some leaders have

instrumentalized ethnicity through narratives of autochthony and marginalization, often to mobilize political support.

The implication of African deliberate ethnic policies for nation building: the effectiveness of these policies and narratives depends on perceived fairness, institutional capacity, and inclusive development. Where policies reduce horizontal inequalities and narratives foster a subordinate identity, ethnic cohesion strengthens the state. Where they entrench patronage or exclusion, they deepen fragmentation. Thus, nation building in Africa remains an ongoing project of balancing recognition of ethnicity with the construction of a shared civic identity. There are cases where ethnicity influenced national stability in Africa because it was properly managed. Three examples are cited below:

1. Institutional design: federalism in Nigeria and Ethiopia, consociation arrangements, and inclusive cabinet appointments have reduced but not eliminated tension.
2. Nation-building projects: Tanzania's *Ujamaa* policy and promotion of Swahili as a lingua franca successfully reduced ethnic salience in politics compared to neighbors. Ghana's *Black Star (we are one people)*. early bans on ethnic party also limited overt ethnic conflict, though ethnic voting patterns persisted informally.

Economic integration: where economic opportunities are less tied to ethnic networks, ethnic identity becomes less politically volatile. Kwame Nkruma initiated and implemented this with a Black star on Ghanaian National Flag. The symbolic value of this with regards to nation building is that the symbol engraved on the national flag gave a diverse groups (Ghanians) a shared symbol to rally around and pledge to all the time. The *Ujamaa* (freedom and Unity) by J. Nyerere in Tanzania encouraged familyhood and cooperation in addition to nationalizing the concept through a state policy institutionalizing extended family as one big family not competing tribe. *Ubuntu* ("I am because we are") in South Africa coined after Apartheid created a shared identity beyond tribe. If ones' humanity depends on another, then ethnic rivalry hurts everyone. This ideology has been nationalized and guide a lot decisions and conducts. In Rwanda, the "*Ndi Ubunyarwanda*" (*Before Hutu or Tutsi, I am Rwanda*) was made a national policy and taught in schools. ID cards no longer carry ethnicity as part of this. All these are some of the ethnic national Policies or narratives that have, or can galvanized nation Building.

In-line with the classical modernization theory of nation-building, ethnic identity is pre-modern and incompatible with nation-building. The expectation was that industrialization, urbanization, and state centralization would dissolve ethnic loyalties in favor of a unified national identity and class interests. Tanzania and Ghana's early

policies reflected this view. To state the obvious, one is not out of place to state that: ethnicity is resilient-industrialization and urbanization did not erase ethnic identity. Instead, they often redefine it. Urban migrants maintain ethnic networks for economic and social security in weak welfare state, example, Ohan'eze ndi Igbo in Lagos state, Nigeria. Secondly, ethnicity can be instrumentalized for nation-building:- inclusive nationalism often incorporates ethnic symbols, languages and histories into a broader national narrative. Botswana's Tswana identity formation and Tanzania's use of Swahili shows how elements of ethnicity can be scaled up to build national cohesion. Thirdly, state capacity mediates the relationship: where the state delivers public goods and enforces rule of law impartially, ethnic identity coexists with national identity. Where the state is predatory or exclusionary, ethnic identity becomes the primary bases for political organization against the state. Lastly, nation-building shapes ethnicity: - state policy determines which ethnic categories becomes politically salient, how boundaries are drawn, and whether ethnic identity is politicized. Nation building in Africa is not about eradicating ethnicity, but about managing pluralism. Successful nation-building creates a nested identity structure where individuals hold both ethnic and national loyalties without seeing them as contradictory. Failure occurs when the state is captured by one group or when political competition is structured exclusively along ethnic lines. Citizens now rely upon traditional tribal principles of cooperation for their overall security and well-being which the state failed to provide for (Ejovi *et al* 2016). People look for self defense in kinship ties or their equivalents. Ethnicity in South Africa had long being buried during apartheid years. Ejovi *et al* (2016) is of the view that "Africa needs a process of social engineering to instigate nation-building, with four imperatives, emphasizing what is African, nationalizing what is tribal, idealizing what is indigenous, and indigenizing what is foreign".

Challenges Against Reliance on Ethnicity as a Tool for Nation-Building in Africa

A key risk lies in the uncritical ideological and political imitation of Western models. Modernization in Africa does not necessitate the eradication of ethnic consciousness. The potential of federalism as an institutional framework for managing diversity has, to a large extent, remained underexplored. The main challenge is that postcolonial African state is an alien or strange implantation on the soil of Africa. Wars and violent conflicts of varying degrees and intensity plaque the countries in Africa from Maghreb to Zimbabwe, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria and Somalia. Underdevelopment breeds poverty and disease.

Furthermore, the influence of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in mobilizing and shaping national identities in Africa has diminished since the end of

the Cold War, particularly from the 1980s onward. However, contrary to what has been known, Omotosho (2016) posits that ethnicity constitutes a resource rather than an inherent obstacle to national development. When properly harnessed, it can be converted into a tool for nation-building. Omotosho (2016) maintains that it can also generate resources for cohesion and peaceful coexistence if deployed within the framework of good governance and genuine democratic practice by political elites and statesmen. In the pre-colonial era, ethnicity did not pose significant governance constraints, as ethnic polities retained autonomy and engaged through diplomacy and external trade. Moreover, shared cultural traits—including African Traditional Religion, arts and crafts, mythologies and oral legends—provided a unifying framework that allowed African societies to coexist as empires, kingdoms and dynasties despite existing differences.

Colonial rule introduced new ideologies, political structures, and ways of life that remain difficult to reconcile. Colonial authorities deliberately sowed division and hatred among ethnic groups to advance neo-colonial interests, using ethnicity as a strategic tool or instrument of control. Omotosho (2016) contends that the situation is still redeemable if political leaders foster unity, move beyond historical grievances, address intellectual poverty, dismantle corruption entrenched through ethnic patronage, and build governance systems that reflect indigenous cultural structures and diversity. In such circumstances, ethnicity can serve as an effective tool for advancing national consciousness and integration.

Unlike most African states, Ethiopia was not subjected to direct European colonization yet still confronted the challenge of integrating diverse ethno-linguistic groups (Zahorik *et al.*, 2026, p. 180). The Ethiopian case demonstrates that both forced assimilation and institutionalized ethnic federalism entail significant risks. Elite manipulation of ethnicity continues to fuel instability (Mashimbye, 2025, p. 65). Rwanda, although relatively ethnically homogeneous — with Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa distinctions being social rather than linguistic — experienced one of Africa’s most devastating genocides in 1994 (Zahorik *et al.*, 2026, p. 187). Rwanda’s experience shows that even in the absence of deep ethnic cleavages, identity politics can become lethal when instrumentalized by elites. Post-conflict nation-building here has prioritized unity over ethnic recognition. In the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya), Arab-Berber cleavage/identity overlaid with French colonial legacy and Islamic identity and state centralization. The Maghreb shows that nation-building in relatively homogeneous cultural zones still requires managing sub-national identities. Denying recognition tends to increase instability. However, it has been observed that education will help remedy the situation.

Education serves as a pathway to improve living standards by enhancing social mobility and transforming citizens at both individual and national or collective levels. School curricula must therefore be oriented toward urgent national interests and emerging needs. The pedagogical formation of learners emphasizes the inculcation, development and dissemination of new national values, norms and belief systems intended to consolidate nascent post-colonial states and cultures. Human resource development was a priority for post-colonial nationalist leaders, who sought to cultivate skilled human capital capable of driving societal reconstruction and transformation. There is an imperative to reconnect post-colonial realities with pre-colonial histories, drawing on cultures, identities, and institutions as foundations for authentic post-colonial development. Education in Africa bears the responsibility for facilitating this reconnection and thus carries a substantial burden in post-colonial and post-liberation nation-building processes (Bereketeb, 2020). The ultimate objective is the liberation of the African mind and personhood. Oyibokure and Okolie (2023) argue that widespread loss of lives and property resulting from insecurity has significantly undermined the effective implementation of government policies and initiatives intended to strengthen the state. On this note, one can say that the key elements that promote nation-building are:

1. Shared values and beliefs: a population bound by common values, beliefs, and attitudes.
2. Effective ruling class: a competent governing elite capable of suppressing hostile, detrimental forces and internal civil unrest while defending the country against external threats.
3. Economic prosperity: a level of economic development that enables citizens to live fulfilling lives and maintain good health.
4. Centripetal nationalism: nationalism is a volatile force that can serve as a foundation for either strong loyalty or disintegration. When effectively channeled towards state institutions, it facilitates the formation of a cohesive and politically significant national community.

Institutional Models for Managing Ethnic Diversity in African States

Here, the researcher compares federalism, consociationalism, and civic nationalism in countries like Nigeria, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Rwanda to assess how institutional design can transform ethnicity into an asset for cohesion. Africa is linguistically heterogeneous, with nearly 200 languages distributed across five major language families: Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo, Khoisan, and Austronesia. The territorial state constructed during decolonization do not correspond to this ethno-linguistic diversity. While some African state have adopted indigenous languages as official languages, colonial

languages remain dominant in governance. English serves as an official language in 22 African countries, French in 20, Portuguese in 6, Spanish in 1, German in 1. Consequently, the link between language and nation building appears weaker in sub-Saharan Africa, than in places such as Iran, Serbia, or the Basque region of Spain where linguistic homogeneity has been more central to national identity formation. The case of Mobutu Sese Seko illustrates an authoritarian to cultural nation building. Following his 1965 coup d'état Mobutu presented himself as a nation builder, albeit an "enlighten despot". As a former journalist he recognized the need for cultural authenticity and a shared national identity grouped in Bantu philosophy to unify Congo's diverse ethnic groups. Through the "authenticite campaign" he renamed the country and the Congo River "Zaire" mandated the citizens to abandon colonial names in favor of ancestral Bantu names, replaced names of places in Congo like Leopoldville and Elizabethville with Bantu names; Kinshasha and Lumbabashi respectively (Meredith 2005); replaced western attire with "authentic" cultural dress and required membership in the single state party, *Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution* (MPR) or Popular Movement of the Revolution in English. These policies generated a sense of collective belonging and pride in Bantu cultural heritage ancestral beliefs and values.

State building without concurrent nation-building cannot produce a durable or substantive form of cultural nationhood. E-governance reforms in various African states have set the pace for transformative force to enhance accountability, transparency, efficiency and rule of law in public administration (Apat *et al* 2025). According to Taoua and Musila (2003), the post-colonial Congolese government pursued nation-building by asserting state control over cultural and political discourse, using tactics such as censorship and intimidation. The colonial policy of "divide and rule", which arbitrarily demarcated territory without regard for pre-existing cultural affinities and indigenous boundaries, sowed the seed of discord and animosity in emergent post colonial states. Post independence political elites replicated this logic in their contestation for power, patronage and recognition by instrumentalizing ethnic and regional identities thereby reinforcing diversity consciousness as a political tool (Asiegbu 2015). This perpetuation of divisive political strategies contributed significantly to the entrenchment of corruption across the continent.

Nation buildings seeks to counteract these legacies by ensuring respect for diverse cultural groups and by guaranteeing equal citizenship rights, privileges, and opportunities both constitutionally and in practice. Such guarantees are intended to foster a sense of belonging and national unity among heterogeneous population. The arbitrarily drawn colonial boundaries have also generated enduring territorial dispute in Africa. Consequently,

persistent political instability since the 1950s – exacerbated by ethnicity and regionalism- has produced cycles of conflict, instability, elite aggrandizement, acrimony and inter-ethnic hostility, necessitating deliberate nation building interventions. Nation building also functions as a process of historical reconstruction: it can facilitate national reconciliation, reverse the adverse legacies of colonialism, and restore African unity and dignity. Given that poverty alleviation and social unity remain among Africa's most pressing needs, nation building is posited as the centre mechanism for achieving these objectives. Contrary to the notion that nationhood is purely colonial imposition, pre-colonial Africa already featured large scale political formations- such as ancient Egypt, the Ghana, Mali, and Songhai empires, the Benin and Aksen kingdoms, the Sokoto caliphate, the Botswana polities, and the Zulu kingdoms- that exhibited core attributes of nationhood in many cases Meredith (2005). Colonial intervention disrupted these indigenous processes of political integration.

In contemporary Africa nation building remains critically relevant for three inter-related reasons. First, it addresses colonial legacies by mitigating ethnic cleavages and fostering socio-economic development through the construction of a unified national identity and stronger state institution, thereby reducing conflict and improving living standards. Second, it promotes social cohesion by redirecting citizen loyalties from narrow sub-national identities towards a broader inclusive state. Third, it enables institutional development by establishing robust political and economic structures- such as an effective civil service, independent judiciary and modern infrastructure- necessary for sustainable development. Finally, nation building is essential for deconstructing colonially imposed territorial divisions and their historical consequences. According to Bayran *et al.* (2018 p.250) the primary objective of nation building is to transform conflict-prone societies into peaceful ones. In the Maghreb, post-independence states adopted an assimilationist approach. They promoted Arabization and a unified Arab-Islamic identity, often at the expense of Berber/Amazigh languages and cultures (Debelo & Keno, 2025). Ethnicity tends to become destabilizing when the state is perceived as exclusionary or when elites instrumentalize it. Conversely, where institutions ensure inclusive participation and equitable distribution of public goods, ethnic identity can coexist with national identity. According to Schaerrer (2013), the Rwandan Patriotic Front (*Front Patriotique Rwandais*, (RPF) government's post-genocide nation-building strategy involved banning ethnic labels in public discourse, promoting a unified "Rwandan" identity, and centralizing power to prevent a recurrence of violence. Reconciliation initiatives and gacaca courts were employed to restore social cohesion (Nantulya, 2006). RPF was founded in 1987 by Rwandan Tutsi refugees, mainly in

Uganda, and later became the ruling political party after ending the 1994 genocide. Paul Kagame has been its de facto leader since mid-1990s. Drawing from Schaerrer

(2013) and Nantulya (2006) work, below is a quick comparison for the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front EPRDF and RPF models.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis for EPRDF and RPF using figure

Aspect	EPRDF, Ethiopia 1991-2019	RPF, Rwanda post-1994
Core Identity Strategy	Ethnic federalism: recognized and institutionalized ethnicity. Constitution organized regions by ethno-linguistic groups + right to secession.	Assimilation/ Civic identity: Banned ethnic labels in public. Promoted single “Rwandan” identity to suppress Hutu/Tutsi divisions.
State Structure	Decentralized: power devolved to ethnically-defined regions. Aim was inclusion + self-determination	Power concentrated at the center. Aim was control + preventing recurrence of ethnic violence.
Logic	Gave groups political voice, but ethnic identity got politicized and became source of tension.	Reduced overt ethnic conflicts, but critics call it top-down limits political space.
Trade-off	Gave groups political voice, but ethnic identity got politicized and became source of tension	Reduced overt ethnic conflict, but critics call it top-down + limits political space.

The bottom line is that EPRDF tried to make ethnicity the basis of the state. RPF tried to erase ethnicity from the state. Both were post-conflict responses, but opposite approaches. Post-independent governments often exploited ethnic divisions to maintain control, thereby reinforcing fragmentation and weakening national identity. A notable case is Ethiopia’s ethnic federalism after 1991 (Berriso and Sorsa, 2005). The EPRDF structured federal units around ethnicity. While this approach reduced certain forms of marginalization, it also entrenched ethnic identity in political life. The resulting tensions became most evident during the Tigray conflict of 2020-2022 (Bandyopadhyay & Green, 2013). The EPRDF served as the ruling political coalition from 1991 until its dissolution and replacement by the Prosperity Party in 2019.

Filibus and Onyebuchi (2025) note that the Arab Spring shows how youth-led social movements can drive major political change. Similarly, Nigeria’s 2020 EndSARS protests against police brutality prompted systemic reforms within the Nigeria Police Force (Okeleke, 2025). Okeke *et al.* (2022) contend that nation-building cannot succeed without quality education. Oyewole and Adegoke (2018) argue that nation-building is a protracted, continuous process that demands constant reassessment of domestic and global conditions shift. Concerning power and resource distribution, Christensen and Laitin and Christensen (2019) observe that economic resources failed to expand while political power became increasingly concentrated in the hands of semi-authoritarian rulers struggling to maintain order. Asiegbu (2015) identifies ethnic pluralism as the most significant obstacle to nation-building in most African states. Adebayo (2014) points out that since 1960 — often called Africa’s “golden year” of independence — deficits in leadership and governance have continued to undermine nation-building. These factors foster citizen discontent, which can fuel

secessionist movements. Ani et al. (2023), for example, examine secessionist tendencies in Nigeria through the Biafra/IPOB-Igbo agitation. Igbokwe-Ibeto (2024) maintains that nation-building is not a finished project but an ongoing process. Akuche (2016) argues that mistrust leads citizens to prioritize ethnic or regional affiliation over national identity, weakening their commitment to nation-building. Giorgis (2012) observes that across much of Africa, government efforts at nation-building have been undermined by the absence of democratic governance and by stalled socio-economic development. Nation-building is thus inseparable from strategies for socio-economic development.

Harnessing Ethnic Identity for Inclusive Governance and Sustainable Development:

Here, the researcher explores the role of education, equitable resource distribution, and indigenous governance frameworks in integrating ethnic affiliation into nation-building to promote unity, legitimacy, and socio-economic progress. As a historical analysis reveals, African nations share common experiences rooted in Trans-Atlantic slave trade, imperialism, prolonged poverty, and ongoing assaults on the continent’s collective dignity. These shared historical legacies have shaped Africa’s identity and continue to define its development challenges. Regional integration is therefore fundamental to achieving holistic socio-economic growth across the continent. Bridging the persistent gap between policy formulation and implementation is equally critical for sustainable material progress and industrialization. Orji (2012) contends that intergroup relations constitute the pivot upon which African economic integration must revolve. Large-scale projects that are unviable for single states can become feasible through pooled economic resources. To advance self-reliance and governance, Orji

(2012) proposes the establishment of an African Education Summit (AES) to oversee education policies geared towards self-reliance, and an African value Reorientation Centre to monitor leadership accountability and combat corruption. Existing institutions such as the African Union, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and the African Development Bank (AfDB) exemplifying ongoing regional integration efforts. Good governance provides a solid institutional framework for sustainable economic development by establishing effective institutions, laws, policies and programs that are geared towards fostering economic prosperity and social justice (Apat *et al* 2025).

The concept of "nation" should be understood as a political community that may be multi-ethnic and multi-racial, yet whose citizens' share closely related historical experiences and are bound by common citizenship and identity. Such a community perceives itself and is recognized by others as a distinct political entity with defined territorial and sovereign rights. The integration of such community, could be achieved by the study of their history or past. History is a tool for nation-building. History centers on the systematic study of human activity across time, it offers critical insights for understanding and shaping the future (Ake, 1990). Historical inquiry involves interpreting selected facts to reconstruct knowledge of the past (Carr, 1961). Collingwood (1945) defines history as a scientific investigation of past human actions, based on evidence and directed toward human self-knowledge and development. Colenso and Saunders (2002) further argues that Pan-Africanism can take the form of ethnic nationalism, while restorative impulses often manifest as tribalism. Another constraint to nation-building is COVID-19 restrictions.

Nation-building in Africa was also impacted during the COVID-19 period. As Gwala and Mashau (2022) observe, travel restrictions elicited varied responses that ultimately hindered nation-building. Bereketeab (2020) contends that many colonial structures remained intact after independence, despite nationalist leaders' stated intention not to uncritically reproduce the colonial legacy. As Alumona and Azom (2018) note, religion constitutes one of the strongest forms of identity for both individuals and groups. The Darfur conflict in Sudan, ongoing since 2003, illustrates how ethno-racial cleavages fueled hostilities between the predominantly Muslim Arab north and the largely Christian African south. This tension escalated into armed violence that claimed numerous lives (Akim & Akim, 2019).

Villa-Vicencio (1990) argues that theology has historically shaped ideas of nationhood in Africa, and the church has played a dual role: sometimes legitimizing state power, other times critiquing it. He contends that effective nation-building requires the church to move beyond being a state

instrument and instead act as a moral voice that promotes justice, reconciliation, and inclusive citizenship. The text is often cited to show how religious institutions influence political identity and governance in postcolonial Africa. Core point to note is, church-state engagement is not just political but theological. Okeleke (2025) added that "morality should be taught in schools churches and media broadcasts to prevent youth engagement in drugs, violence and anti-social behavior such as involvement in violent protest and criminality." Musarurwa (2016) observes that several nation-building programs have been criticized for compulsory participation, corruption, the militarization of citizens, the rise of militias, and the inefficient use of resources..

Political leaders in Maghreb built strong centralized states to govern the diverse heterogeneous populations. However, they have to manage the tension between the ever rising religious movements and the secular state institutions/ apparatus. Today, Maghreb has issue of public authority management, problems of fighting jihadist groups and had to address the demands of their ever growing populations. Secularism holds that the state and religion should operate in separate spheres, arguing that religious reasoning has no place in shaping civic policy, law, or public education. It upholds the principle of freedom from religious authority- meaning freedom from government interference in religious affairs, freedom from state-sponsored persecution, and freedom from the imposition of a single official faith. In societies that are religiously and denominationally diverse, secularism serves as a key foundation for democracy, national cohesion, and nation building. By treating all citizens equally, regardless of belief, it helps prevent sectarian division and creates a common public space where people of different faiths, and of no faith, can participate as equals.

CONCLUSION

Identity politics constitutes a structural impediment to nation-building in Africa. Primordial modes of belonging and identification are readily co-opted and instrumentalized as vehicles for political competition and advantage. Africa's constrained record in nation-building and sustainable development is likely to persist, as identity-based cleavages continued to pose significant challenges to democratic consolidation and governance. As stated earlier, since 313 A.D., mainstream church theology has typically supported those in power and has at times been used to justify corrupt, oppressive governments. The people of Africa prefer democracy to other political regimes or setups that exist. Because of this, the actions of those who resisted the church's compromise during Hitler's regime are an important chapter in the theology of nation-building, especially

regarding the relationship between church and state in Africa today.

Ethnicity is not inherently destructive to nation-building in Africa. When managed through inclusive institutions, equitable governance, and civic nationalism, ethnic diversity becomes an asset that fosters cohesion, stability, and sustainable development rather than a driver of conflict.

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