

# AID THOUGHTS

Digesting the difficult decisions of development

## We Can Work It Out! We Can Work It Out!



Do we think as one, or are we just joined by circumstance?

I recently posted a rambling trail of thoughts about the [difficulty of state building in much of Africa](#). It was a generally bleak assessment: historical circumstances have made state-building difficult due in large part to the historical importance and continuing primacy of sub-national forms of identity. I also suggested that without a strong national identity and state, it's difficult to transform the economy in the ways needed to develop rapidly.

Having said this, there are examples of countries and leaders within Africa who have explicitly pursued nation-building with some success, and it's worth looking at these examples to see what kind of impact this has had on development. The two examples I am most familiar with are Malawi under Hastings 'Kamuzu' Banda and Tanzania under Julius Nyerere (Kenneth Kaunda also sought to rule Zambia using the ideology of 'One Zambia, One Nation', but I'm less familiar with the ins-and-outs of Zambian history).

What's most interesting about these examples is how they pursued nation-building policies and why they haven't gone on to more rapid development than the rest of Africa if state- and nation-building really is important

Nation building in Malawi and Tanzania took similar forms, but through rather different methods. Unity of state and nation was a key ideological component of Hastings Banda's vision for Malawi in the thirty-odd years he was Life President, and he pursued it vigorously. As a national language, he selected the language spoken by the Chewa, which at the time was considered simply to be a dialect of

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### BLOGROLL

- [Africa Can](#)
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Chinyanja. Giving it the name 'Chichewa', in 1968 the Government began an aggressive campaign suppressing other languages. Books published in Chitumbuka, Chiyao and Chilomwe were suppressed and banned; all instruction was given in Chichewa and English; and there was even a national 'Chichewa Development Board'.

Despite this, ethnic identities and linguistic identities did not disappear completely. Chitumbuka is still widely spoken in the North of Malawi, including by people not ethnically Tumbuka. However, it seems that Banda's approach to nation building worked. The most recent [Afrobarometer](#) survey shows that 57% of respondents felt more Malawian or only Malawian, rather than identifying by ethnic group when asked to make a choice (though this carries all the flaws of survey-data on ethnicity, in which the question asked, the appearance of the questioner, and the context of the interview can all materially impact the answer given). A [study on voting patterns](#) using the Afrobarometer data also shows that while voting was strongly determined by region, this was not so closely associated with tribal affiliation. And even then, the most recent general election was marked by reduced regionalism in voting patterns.

Julius Nyerere also pursued linguistic unity in Tanzania, but supplemented this with other nation-building policies. He chose to promote unity around the usage of Kiswahili, an old indigenous language (the first reference to it seems to have been made in the 13th Century) that was regarded as largely ethnically neutral. Kiswahili became the lingua franca of Tanzania, and Nyerere built on this: the educational system emphasised the unity of Tanzania as a nation, and taught a national history. The doctrine of Pan-Africanism that he so strongly believed in had the additional benefit of creating a meta-identity that united various ethnicities within Tanzania.

The contrast between Nyerere, a socialist who believed in the unity of Africans and his neighbour, Jomo Kenyatta, who was an anthropologist deeply aware of ethnic divisions and often seen as a 'tribal' leader in Kenya, is instructive. Kenya was governed in several languages, and students are taught provincial history rather than national history up to Standard 4. Nyerere's policies, though at times heavy handed (all teachers had to undertake a politicization period at one time!) created a truly national entity out of a country whose borders were defined by an agreement between British and German colonizers armed with a ruler and little in the way of nuance. Today, in the Afrobarometer survey 85% of people in Tanzania choose to call themselves Tanzanians rather than identify themselves by ethnic group. That's remarkable.

Now we come to a problem: though Malawi and Tanzania have done well in terms of building a nation out of the post-colonial period, neither are substantially better performers than their neighbours. Tanzania is doing quite well; Malawi has been growing very fast for the last couple of years, but it's clear that neither is breaking away from the pack and putting together a Chinese-style industrial development success. Why aren't they doing better than their more fractured neighbours? There are two possibilities to consider here. Firstly, it's possible that Malawi and Tanzania are doing better than they otherwise would be because of their stronger sense of national identity. Secondly, it's possible that national unity is not sufficient or even desirable if it's too strong.

The first issue has already been discussed by Edward Miguel. He wrote a paper in 2004 called 'Tribe or Nation?' which compared districts in Kenya and Tanzania with similar ethnic make-ups and examines the provision of public goods in each district. What he shows is that the impact of ethnic diversity on fundraising for public goods and provision of public goods for their population is much smaller for Tanzanian districts and villages than for their ethnically similar Kenyan counterparts, where it has a significant negative impact on both. What this indicates is that Tanzania, where ethnic identity is generally less important than national identity, is better able to coordinate actions across ethnic groups in order to achieve outcomes that benefit everybody, in this case, the provision of public goods. It thus may be the case that countries with more 'national' identity and unity are better able to coordinate their development processes, with concrete effects on the standard of living.

- [Tales from the Hood](#)
- [Texas in Africa](#)
- [The Burning Issue](#)
- [The Roving Bandit](#)
- [View from the Cave](#)
- [Views from the Center \(CGD\)](#)
- [Waylaid Dialectic](#)
- [Wronging Rights](#)

## LINKS

- [AidData](#)
- [Centre for Global Development](#)
- [Givewell.net](#)
- [Matt @ Oxford](#)
- [OECD-DAC](#)
- [Overseas Development Institute](#)
- [Poverty Action Lab](#)

## RECENT POSTS:

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- [In which Roving Bandit and I join forces, for the greater good!](#)
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## TAGS

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The second issue is one for speculation. Having discussed these ideas with a number of friends, a few different suggestions have been made, all of which may offer some small element of the truth:

- Perhaps a united identity is necessary, but insufficient: it may be that some form of crisis or historical opportunity must occur before a country can undertake the transition to a true capitalism, one capable of generating rapid growth and better incomes for all. It may be that once this crisis occurs, those countries riven by divisions may descend into conflict; those with a sense of unity may take the opportunity to rebuild their economies and societies.
- It may be that Nyerere and Banda were \*too\* successful in nation building. It's possible that since the transition to capitalism requires resource transfer it is necessary that there are some divisions within society, along which a class of capitalists and a class of labour can emerge. In cases with too much or too little division, it may be that opportunities to create capitalism aren't grasped because either too many or too few groups are willing and able to grasp opportunities to accumulate.
- It may also be that the entire issue is a red herring. Marxists would argue that class is the most important organising concept in economic development; where Africa might be struggling is that the historical economic forms and the subsequent impact of colonialism and aid have served to dampen or destroy class ties and subsequently limit the potential of the society to transform from pre-capitalist to capitalist economic forms.

I'm not sure where I stand on this one. As a historian, one of the most striking things about Africa's history is the way in which states have been so difficult to form and the ways in which fluid and relative identity among the populations have been so important in determining the history of the continent. Ethnic identities, linguistic identities, religious identities and political identities have been assumed, discarded and remoulded throughout history, and often they have been held and used interchangeably at the same time. As an economist I am most struck by the multiplicity of economic forms that exist in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many of these are pre-capitalist.

Maybe it's just the economist in me, but I think these two factors are related, or in the very least that solving the latter requires some understanding of the former. I think we're a long way from changing the economic forms, though there are those who have started asking these questions. We're closer to understanding how identity influences the stability of the state. The next steps are the hardest. What do we do with this knowledge, and these questions? How do you advocate for nation-building policies when they clearly subjugate certain identities? And can development workers call for resource transfer when we aren't all direct stakeholders? The first step, as ever, is to get people talking.

**Update:** Made a small amendment to the paragraph about Miguel's paper to better reflect his findings.

Tags: [malawi](#), [State building](#), [Tanzania](#)

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