

Brothers of a Different Land: National Identification Among the Yao of Malawi and Mozambique

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Introduction

When and why do individuals identify with the state? This project report summarizes one attempt to broach this question among the Yao ethno-linguistic group of Malawi and Mozambique. The goals of the project were to assess the validity and reliability of existing survey questions used in cross-sectional work, to trace the state and ethnic group level mechanisms that influence how strongly individuals feel attached to the national (state-level) identity, and to generate insights into the causes and consequences of national identification. The research methodology involved in-depth interviews with community leaders and randomly selected residents, as well as observations of village geography and characteristics.

This report provides a brief summary of a small portion of that data. In particular, it focuses on differences in national identification in the two countries, and the possible individual and state-level factors that might explain that difference. The data show that Mozambican Yao identify much more strongly with their national identity than do Malawian Yao, and more weakly with their Yao identity. While there are individual level factors that help explain variation in strength of national identification, such as formal employment, those factors cannot account for the big difference across the two national groups. Instead, that difference seems to be driven by the divergent colonial heritages of the two countries, and the different benefits realized by nationals of each country.

Background

The nation-state is the primary mode of political organization in the international system today. Based on the success of the nation-state in Europe, many predicted that post-colonial African leaders would attempt to culturally homogenize and build nations within the state boundaries that they inherited (Rothchild, 1983). However, with the possible exception of Tanzania, it is generally noted that post-colonial African states are not nation-states in the classic sense. Why not? This question is vitally important, as strong national identities may be associated with higher levels of cooperation, economic development, democratic functioning, and reduced conflict (Easterly and Levine, 1997; Miguel, 2004; Transue, 2007).

Scholars that have attempted to answer the question of why African states comprise weak nations generally fall into two camps. The first camp emphasize the unique historical trajectory of Africa, and predict that the nation-state will not be the organizational outcome we observe in Africa (Laitin, 1992, 2007). In particular, scholars have focused on

the impact of colonial rule (Young, 1985; Mazrui, 1983), anti-colonial resistance (Mazrui, 1983; Neuberger, 2000), and the ‘arbitrariness’ of African state borders, which produced both highly diverse states and partitioned cultural groups, both of which are purported to thwart nation-building (Gellner, 1983; Horowitz, 1985; Bienen, 1983; Asiwaju, 1985). An alternative view is that the same processes that led to the rise of European nation-states in the eighteenth century will, when and where present, produce nation-states in Africa. The main explanation for the rise of national attachment in Europe was increased modernization - education, urbanization, formal sector employment, and wide-spread literacy (Anderson, 1991; Gellner, 1983; Weber, 1979). These scholars would predict that as these conditions increase in African states, we will see the emergence of wide-spread, primary attachment to state identities.

Despite the relatively low levels of nationalism observed in African states relative to more developed countries, significant variation still exists in the extent to which African states have succeeded in nationalizing their citizens. For example, using Afrobarometer survey data from 2005-2006, I estimate that while 88% of Tanzanians choose their national identity over their ethnic identity, only 51% of Senegalese and 17% of Nigerians do (Robinson, 2009). How well do classic theories of nationalism account for that variation? To answer this question, in recent work I evaluate Afrobarometer survey responses from sixteen African states and evaluate potential correlates of national identification at three different levels (Robinson, 2009). At the state level, I find positive effects of per capita income and anti-colonial war experience on the percent of a states citizens that identify with the state over their ethnic identity: British colonialism, on the other hand, is negatively related to levels of nationalism. At the ethnic group level, the group’s population proportion, degree of partition, and relative economic condition are all significantly related to the strength of national identification. Finally, at the individual level, formal employment, level of education, urban living, and socio-economic standing all increase the likelihood of identifying with the state over one’s ethnic group. Thus, the broad findings are that classic modernization theories of nationalism explain a significant amount of individual-level variation across African states, but that theories based on Africa’s unique historical experience are significant at the ethnic group and state levels. The question remains as to *how* these characteristics influence individual identification.

While the results of my cross-sectional analysis suggest many interesting patterns, they do not allow me to understand the mechanisms that produce the patterns or whether the patterns are due to causation: both are common limitations of statistical work. In addition, there are reasons to interpret the survey measure of national attachment with caution, including issues of context specificity, social desirability, and behavioral implications.

For these two reasons, I decided to take these questions to the field. In 2009, I carried out 6 weeks of field work among a single ethnic group that crosses international lines – the Yao of Malawi and Mozambique. Doing so allowed me to hold any ethnic-group wide cultural characteristics constant, and analyze the effect of divergent state-level policies and histories on national identification. Additionally, I was able to assess the effect of the ethnic group’s distribution in each state, including if and how the degree of partition and the consequent differences in relative size affect how individuals identify with each state. It was also important that members of the group reside in states that vary in the state-level characteristics theorized to be important in the literature, and found to be significant in the cross-sectional results presented above - per capita income, colonial power, and anti-colonial war experience. Thus, the project was inherently comparative: I compare the experience of being a Yao in Malawi with being a Yao in Mozambique, and assess the effect that residing in each state has on the strength of attachment to the state identity.

Research Methodology

An ideal field site would include 1) a single ethnic group that crosses state lines such that the resulting split is asymmetric in the distribution and relative sizes of the two resulting groups, 2) differences in the state-level characteristics of the countries, and 3) variation in the level of nationalism on each side of the border as recorded by the Afrobarometer. The Yao of Malawi and Mozambique present an ideal group to study.

Field Site

The Yao (waYao, Ajao, Ajua) are a Bantu-speaking ethno-linguistic group that reside along the southeastern shore of Lake Malawi. Historically, the Yao were traders, primarily in ivory and slaves, but are predominately farmers today (Mitchell, 1971; Pachai, 1973). The Yao had fairly strong pre-colonial political organizations, and, during the colonial period at least, the Yao identity transcended administrative borders (Mitchell, 1971). The 2.4 million members of the Yao tribe today are citizens of Malawi (51%), Mozambique (23%), and Tanzania (24%). The proportions of each state's population that is made up of Yao are 8%, 3%, and 1%, respectively. Thus, the Yao provide variation in both the degree of partition and relative size across the three states. The Yao were also chosen because of the variation in state-level characteristics of Malawi and Mozambique. Mozambique is richer than Malawi, fought an anti-colonial war, and was not a British colony. Malawi, on the other hand, gained independence peacefully and was a British colony.

Based on the cross-sectional patterns discussed above, and these differences in state- and ethnic group-level characteristics of the Yao on each side of the border, we should expect the Yao in Mozambique to be more strongly attached to the state than than the Yao of Malawi. Consistent with the broader patterns across Africa, that is exactly what the Afrobarometer data show. In Mozambique, 96% of the Yao interviewed identify with the state more than the ethnic group, while only 24% in Malawi do ($t=8$, $df=188$, $p<0.001$). This pattern holds even relative to state averages: state-wide level of nationalism were 49% in Mozambique and 32% in Malawi, meaning that the Yao in Mozambique are *more* nationalist relative to other Mozambicans and the Malawian Yao are *less* nationalist than other Malawians, on average.

While existing data suggest this region as a interesting place to study the micro-foundations of national identification, they cannot provide insight on what those micro-foundations are. Thus, I conducted a small field survey in this area in the summer of



2009.

Survey

To take advantage of this variation, I conducted interviews with 68 individuals in eleven villages around the Malawi-Mozambique border, near the Chiponde-Mandimba border crossing. Over six weeks, I was based in Namwera, Malawi and Mandimba, Mozambique, and made day trips to five Yao villages in Malawi and five Yao villages in Mozambique. As all interviews were conducted in Chiyao, I recruited a research assistant and translator, Mr. Godfrey Chimanya, from the University of Malawi, Chancellor College.

Before conducting interviews, we sought the permission of local authorities to speak to members of the population. Within each village, we interviewed the village chief and five or six randomly selected individuals from the village (the randomization procedure included random selection of households and random selection of a household member from each household).

The survey included questions about language capabilities, travel, education, extent of friendship and kin networks, opinions of members of other ethnic groups and nationalities, the perception of a shared Yao ‘destiny’, and the strength of attachment to different groups. In particular, each respondent was asked what it meant to them to be a member of each of the five different identity groups to which they nominally belonged: village, ethnic group, religion, country, continent. Then, using a methodology pioneered by Miles and Rochefort (1991), we used a set of cards, one for each identity, and led each respondent through an exercise to rank their degree of attachment with each of the five identity groups. These questions aimed to identify the factors that drive differences in nationalism on each side of the border. Individuals were also asked the Afrobarometer survey question on national versus ethnic identity. The chief interviews were similar, but also included additional questions about the degree of between-village communication and coordination, as well as co-ethnic cross-border contacts.

Results

Sample

We interviewed a total of 68 individuals across 10 villages. Within the five villages on the Malawian side of the border, we spoke to 37 individuals, while in the five Mozambican villages we interviewed a total of 31 respondents. Table 1 summarizes the demographics of the sample as a whole and by nationality. We interviewed about equal numbers of men and women. The average age of our respondents was 41 years old, though ages ranged from 18 to 89. Respondents in Mozambique were significantly younger than Malawians respondents. Mozambicans had also attained formal education at a higher rate than their Malawian counterparts, although the difference was not significant. Finally, the majority of our respondents were subsistence farmers, with a slightly larger proportion of respondents being farmers in Mozambique.

Group Identification

This section summarizes the ways in which individuals identify, as well as the way in which they think about their different group identities.

Table 1: Respondents' Descriptive Statistics, by Nationality

	Malawian	Mozambican	Full Sample
Male	0.46 (0.51)	0.52 (0.51)	0.49 (0.50)
Age	45 (17)	37 (16)	41 (17)
Any Formal Education	0.61 (0.50)	0.74 (0.44)	0.67 (0.47)
Subsistence Farmer	0.54 (0.51)	0.65 (0.49)	0.59 (0.50)
N	37	31	68

Note: Standard deviations are in parenthesis

Ranking Identities

Using a set of five cards, each with a different group identity (African, Religious,¹ National, Ethnic, and Local), we asked respondents to select the identity group to which they felt most attached. That identity group card was then removed, and of the remaining four identities, the respondent was again asked which he or she felt most attached to. This continued until all five identities had been ranked. This task proved somewhat difficult for many respondents, and 13 respondents could not complete the task (typically, these respondents maintained that they did not know). Table 2 shows the average ranking of each group identity, broken down by country, for the other 55 respondents. Note that lower numbers designate a higher ranking (e.g., the highest ranked identity receives a 1, the lowest a 5).

Table 2: Average Rank of Each Identity, Out of Five

	Malawian	Mozambican	Full Sample
African	3.25 (1.14)	3.33 (1.41)	3.29 (1.27)
Muslim/Christian	2.00 (1.44)	1.89 (1.22)	1.94 (1.33)
Malawian/Mozambican	3.14 (1.15)	2.52 (1.25)	2.84 (1.23)
Yao	2.83 (1.49)	3.48 (1.22)	3.14 (1.39)
Local Village	3.68 (1.33)	3.78 (1.15)	3.73 (1.24)
N	37	31	55

Note: Standard deviations are in parenthesis. Bold text denotes a statistically significant difference between the Malawian and Mozambican samples with 95% confidence.

As the table shows, on average individuals ranked their religious (typically, Muslim) identity as the most important, followed by their national identity. More interestingly for this project, the only significant differences in identity rankings across the two sub-samples were in terms of national and ethnic identification. As expected given existing Afrobarometer data, Mozambican Yaos identify more strongly as Mozambican than Malawians Yaos identify as Malawian. For Malawian Yao, their Yao identity is, on average, more important than their Malawian identity, and the reverse is true for Mozambican Yao. At the

¹94% of the sample were Muslim.

individual level, 48% of Malawians in the sample ranked their national identity over their ethnic identity. By contrast, over 70% of the Mozambicans ranked their national identity over their ethnic.

Identity Content

Each respondent was also asked about the content of each of these five identities. In particular, they were asked an open-ended question about what it means to be [African/Muslim/Malawian/Yao/from X Village]. Each response was then coded into one of the following categories:

- **Practical/Rights**

Being a member of this identity group gives one certain rights and privileges. For example, “it means entitlement to farming resources.”

- **Cultural**

Being a member of this identity group means that you have share certain cultural practices with other members of the identity group. For example, “it means not eating mice.”

- **Personality/Descriptive**

Being a member of this identity group means that one has certain personality traits. For example, “it means that one is hardworking in everything he does.”

- **Natural/No Choice**

Being a member of this identity group is through no choice of ones own. For example, “it means only that one was born here” or “I just am. I cannot change this.”

- **Nothing/No Content**

Being a member of this identity group means nothing. For example, “this means no big deal to me.”

Across the whole sample, there was quite a bit of variation in the content of the different identities. The African identity was mostly characterized as either natural or descriptive, while religion was seen as cultural. Nationality was largely seen as practical, while ethnicity was characterized as both natural and cultural. Village of origin was seen as overwhelmingly practical.

In terms of country-level differences, Mozambicans were much more likely to characterize their national identity in terms of practical rights and privileges than their Malawian counterparts. In terms of Yao identity, Malawians were much more likely to think of their Yao identity in terms of its cultural content. There were no real differences in the characterization of the African, Muslim, or local identities.

Predictors of National and Ethnic Identification

The section above outlined differences in the relative importance of national and ethnic identities between Malawian and Mozambican Yaos, as well as the way in which those identities are characterized. This section summarizes some of the individual and country level characteristics that help us understand this difference.

Individual-Level

Unlike in my previous work using Afrobarometer data, I do not find evidence in this sample that men are more likely than women to identify with the nation over ethnic group. This could be due to the matrilineal and matrilineal customs among the Yao. To test this possibility, I looked at the Afrobarometer data for all ethnic groups within Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia. Those data show that the difference between men and women only exists for patrilineal ethnic groups. In the matrilineal groups, men and women identify in indistinguishable ways. Thus, the data are consistent with patterns in the larger Afrobarometer dataset.

Similarly, I do not find an effect of level of education, or having ever attended school, on group identification. However, consistent with previous work, I do find that formal employment is a significant predictor of identifying with the nation over ethnic group.

Other factors that are related to national identification are the degree to which a person has lived and travelled outside of his or her own locality. Frequency of crossing the international border, and the belief that others across the border will know one is foreign, are both positive predictors of national identification. This finding is consistent with work in social psychology that finds that others' perceptions of one's identity has a strong effect on how an individual identifies. In other words, if I think that others see me as Malawian, I am more likely to identify as Malawian.

Country-Level

Although there are several individual level predictors of national identification, these differences cannot explain the big difference in identification between Malawians and Mozambicans. For example, although formal employment is a strong predictor of national identification, formal employment is not significantly higher in the Mozambican sample than in the Malawian sample. Thus, there remain country-level differences that must be driving identification differently.

First, Malawi was colonized by the British, while Mozambique was colonized by the Portuguese, and the latter were colonized much, much earlier. How might this have affected national identification? Different colonial powers had different ways of ruling the populations under their sphere of influence. The British typically employed "indirect rule" in which they exercised control of the population through intermediaries. These intermediaries were typically chiefs, either real or invented. One implication of this method of rule is that it invented or reified local level identities (tribes) from the more fluid group identities that existed pre-colonially (Vail and White, 1991). By contrast, the Portuguese exercised much more direct rule over the populations, which perhaps led to greater homogenization across locales, weakening of pre-colonial local institutions, and stronger ties to the center – ultimately increasing identification with the colony, and later state, relative to local identities.

Patterns in the data are at least consistent with this colonial difference. Individuals in Malawi identified much more with their ethnic groups than individuals in Mozambique, and they attributed more cultural content to that identity. Further, this difference had practical implications, as well. In Mozambique, 67% of the sample spoke Portuguese, while in the Malawian sample not a single respondent reported being able to carry a conversation in English. This difference is driven by the fact that primary education is carried out in Portuguese in Mozambique, while in Malawi the policy has fluctuated between vernaculars and chiChewa, although in practice the vernacular (here, chiYao) has always been the most widely used.

The second consequential difference between Malawi and Mozambique was not one that I had anticipated. When we asked respondents at the end of the survey why they thought

there was stronger nationalism in Mozambique than in Malawi, the overwhelming majority of respondents on both sides of the border cited the abundance of land in Mozambique as compared to Malawi, and its superior quality. This is, of course, consistent with the characterization of the national identity, by citizens of both countries, in terms of the rights and privileges bestowed on members of that identity group. Especially for those Malawians living near the border, like those in our sample, the benefits of being Malawian seem small or non-existent compared to their brothers across the border.

Conclusions

This research project offers a very preliminary understanding of how states influence individual identification, providing insight into the processes that engender nation-states. The project used interviews with the Yao living along the border between Malawi and Mozambique to understand how different states influence local identities differently.

The data confirm that individuals in Mozambique identify much more strongly with their nation than do individuals living across the border in Malawi. In contrast, Malawian Yao are much more likely to identify with their ethnic group. The findings suggest that two main differences between Mozambique and Malawi are driving this differences in the way that their Yao citizens are identifying. The first is their different colonial heritages. Under indirect rule by the British, local tribal identities were strengthened, and ties to the center were weak. In contrast, the Portuguese state penetrated local life more fully, and as a consequence left a legacy of speaking and learning in the colonial language and a weaker sense of ethnic identification. The second difference is in what the state, and membership in the national group defined by it, can offer to its members. In the particular region where this study was conducted, Malawians were given much smaller and less productive tracts of land than their counterparts across the border. This difference in benefits of national membership seemed to drive the degree of importance individuals attach to that group identity.

This report summarizes only a small amount of the data collected, and suggests many additional questions both for this data and for future data collection efforts. The individual level data allows for hypothesis-building on the mechanisms responsible for different group identification, which in the long term may generate novel theoretical insights into the process of nation-building in Africa.

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