National Identity
and the Language of Metaphor

In his now famous essay “DissemiNation,” Homi Bhabha draws attention to the many ways in which “The [modern] nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor”; metaphor, Bhabha reminds us, “transfers the meaning of home and belonging [...] across those distances, and cultural differences, that span the imagined community of the nation-people.”

The historical context

The nation’s constant search for metaphors of self-definition and self-renewal is often part of historical processes whose origin and logic trail off into mythic time, and ancestral memory itself becomes a privileged zone of awareness/ consciousness accessible only to those who have mastered the ability to dream the future through the re/fracturing prism/prison of the past. Any critical encounter with the past is never a simple or even a safe entry point into a knowledge of how a people, any group of people, came into being. The full story of the modern neo-colonial state of Ghana is neither in the official archival records nor in library acquisitions of formal historical studies. The precise moment of the making of this nation-state is neither the frequently cited Bond of 1844 nor the ecstatic hour of “the birth of the nation” at a second past midnight on March 6, 1957, that magic moment so much like countless others we were to witness across the continent of Africa from the late 1950s into the mid-1960s:

It tasted good. To the surging crowds at the Lagos racecourse, to the thousands who packed the polo grounds in Accra, to the multitudes that lined the streets of Nairobi, Kampala, Abidjan, Freetown, or Dar es Salaam, it tasted very good indeed.

“It is the hour of truth,” proclaimed President Senghor in Dakar.

“At long last the battle has ended!” Kwame Nkrumah exulted, watching the red, green, and gold colors of Ghana fluttering in the night breeze. “Ghana ... is free for ever.”

Given the nature of colonialism and the many ways in which it sought to stifle the fundamental aspirations of colonized African peoples, it is understandable that the people sang and danced their way into the dawn of what they perceived to be “a new era,” that their political leaders spoke with so much pride and hope in their voice.

The historic nature of these ritual ceremonies of independence from formal colonial rule may neither be denied nor belittled. However, in the light of what we know now, it seems clear that formal declaration of independence as a momentous event is no necessary guarantee for the successful and safe “birth of a nation.” It certainly is no insurance against the nation state’s growing pains or “the noble collapse of [her] dreams.”

In the midst of all the jubilation, there were those among us who were moved by a larger and deeper vision to step back and call our attention to various contradictory omens. In Nigeria, Wole Soyinka was to take us away from the great “Gathering of the Tribes,” from the jubilant city crowds into the dense forests of our imagined community where we were drawn into a different kind of dance, the dance of history’s repeated cycles of violence and the aborted hope. Not too long after the sounds of victory were heard across the Gold Coast, now renamed Ghana, Kofi Awoonor was to insist that anyone who had cared enough to look a little closely at things would have noticed that the new nation of Ghana was in fact being born into the “revolting malevolence” of a dunghill. Ayi Kwei Armah had earlier offered us an apprehensive, almost frightening view of the new-born nation in the symbolic “old man child”:

It was the picture of something the caption called the old man child. It had been born with all the features of a human baby, but within seven years it had completed the cycle from babyhood to infancy to youth, to maturity and old age, and in the seventh year it had died a natural death.

These are visions of the artist as humanist, who, as Robert July suggests, is often preoccupied with “basic questions of national development and purpose,” and is

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3 Wole Soyinka, *A Dance of the Forests* (London: Oxford UP, 1963). A prefatory note to the published play indicates that it “was first performed as part of the Nigerian Independence Celebrations, October 1960.”
