By Paul Goldsmith

Time is an important part of indigenous conflict management processes. The Meru *Njuri Ncheke*, for example, would often send the disputing parties away, sometimes repeatedly, in order to force them to further review their case. This encouraged the parties to eventually sort out their problems by themselves, thus sparing the elders of the need to take sides in the argument.

When the issues at stake do not go away and the passage of time fail to dissipate the grounds for dispute, then we are forced to concede that there is some substance to the complaint. This indeed is the case in the recurring issue of secession, which keeps resurfacing in Africa, a continent that boasts the lion's share of the sixty active secession movements worldwide.

The number of secessionist movements in Africa is on the rise, even if many appear to lack substance or are difficult to accurately classify. Historically, the movements have included destructive and unsuccessful gambits, such as the unilateral declarations of independence by Biafra in Nigeria and Katanga in the Congo. Then there are the opportunistic political movements that benefitted from conditions, like those that allowed Eritrea and Somaliland to demand autonomy due to crises overtaking Ethiopia and Somalia, and minor but potentially disruptive subnationalists like FLEC – the partisans of Cabinda independence who had faded from view before launching an attack on the Togolese national team en route to the World Cup in 2010.

> There are two versions of Ndii's argument: the first one, which appeared in his *Saturday Nation* column on March 16, 2016, argued that Kenyans needed to consider "divorce" as an alternative to living in a failed marriage. His second foray into this nebulous zone

shifted the focus of the narrative from secession to self-determination in the aftermath of the controversial August 8th national elections.

Some of these movements are still active but off the radar, like Polisario, which for decades has waged a freedom campaign against the former Spanish Sahara. Others are long-gestating insurgencies that have been waiting in the wings, like the multinational movement for Tuareg self-determination that rapidly moved to carve out the state of Azawad in northern Mali following the collapse of Muammar Gadaffi's government in Libya. Many have waxed and waned over time, like the Casamance dissidents in Senegal, the Rif nationalists of Morocco, whose campaign dates back to the 1920s, and the Bakassi freedom fighters of northern Cameroon. Others are predicated on dynastic traditions, like the Kingdom of Lunda-Tchokwe and Lozi revivalists. Some are the gambits of plucky contrarians, like the diminutive Bubi community behind the Movement for the Emancipation of Bioko Island in oil-rich Equatorial Guinea.

Such variegated secessionist phenomena may highlight separatist forces embedded within Africa's political landscape, but they are hardly limited to the African continent. Longstanding aspirations for self-rule elsewhere have opted for the kind of legal/constitutional pathways adopted by movements in Catalonia, Quebec, and Scotland. Even in an integrated and stable polity like the United States, relatively minor developments, like the election of a polarising president and a local resource boom generated by the shale oil bonanza, have reactivated separatist conversations in California and Texas.

The idea of secession is not going away, and the universality of the concept provides the backdrop for David Ndii's recent arguments that have activated a new secession debate in Kenya. There are two versions of Ndii's argument: the first one, which appeared in his *Saturday Nation* column on March 16, 2016, argued that Kenyans needed to consider "divorce" as an alternative to living in a failed marriage. His second foray into this nebulous zone shifted the focus of the narrative from secession to self-determination in the aftermath of the controversial August 8th national elections.

The latter polemic, broadcast through the economist's provocative NTV interview two weeks after the polls, ignited a Twitterstorm that spawned hashtags (like #democracyorsecession and #LetsTalkSecession), which attracted a steady stream of supporting comments with the usual dissenting or disparaging remarks.

> Ndii noted that the discourse on separation is a normal contribution to an ongoing conversation, observing that, "we sanitise our political debates but people speak about these things in their vernaculars all the time." The post-election violence of 2008 was one manifestation of such conversations, and the issues run deeper than the opposition's present disenchantment with electoral politics.

A petition directed at the African Union was launched around the same time. The petition got a modicum of traction initially, although it remains far short of its target of 1.5 million signatories. Not surprisingly, the chatter has subsided since the nullification of the presidential polls by the Supreme Court.

In his 2016 article arguing the case for "divorce", Professor Ndii cited literature that explains nationhood as a social construct based on a shared sense of "connectedness". While the institutions created by a state sustain governments, nationhood is ultimately a function of the sense of being connected to the myriad other individuals who will never know or meet each other. This acceptance

of membership in a wider polity is the essence of Benedict Anderson's oft-cited treatise on imagined communities.

Ndii contests the reality of this cognitive connectivity in Kenya, and invokes the eminent historian Bethwel Ogot, who declared that the "Kenya Project" was dead. This is one way to look at it, especially when many states are facing a similar failure of imagination.

The political undead and the zombie state

Ndii's unhappy marriage essay in the *Saturday Nation* for the most part presented a positive vision for the viability of the country's individual units. For example, a revitalised Coast with its unifying Kiswahili language, long history, and shared way of life could survive by using its resources to diversify using its Indian Ocean trade links. The ten Mount Kenya counties could become the region's Switzerland, which although landlocked, is still Europe's most prosperous nation.

On a less positive note, Ndii observed that other regions, like Nyanza and Northeastern, have sacrificed and suffered for Kenya's nationhood without getting much in return: "if the Luo Nation channeled its considerable human capital and political energy to the development of Luoland, it will without doubt be an enviable nation and economic powerhouse in no time."

These are credible scenarios, at least for the sake of counterfactual arguments about self-determination. In the NTV interview, Ndii noted that the discourse on separation is a normal contribution to an ongoing conversation, observing that, "we sanitise our political debates but people speak about these things in their vernaculars all the time." The post-election violence of 2008 was one manifestation of such conversations, and the issues run deeper than the opposition's present disenchantment with electoral politics.

In theory, the unhappy marriage and failure of imagination driving Ndii's narrative reduces millions of those Kenyans who are disillusioned by the outcomes of the past three elections or whose regions were deliberately neglected by the 1965 Sessional Paper No. 10 to politically undead citizens living in a zombie state. This imagined variation on the anti-nation may not figure in Benedict Anderson's definition of national communities based on a "deep horizontal comradeship," but it is a logical extension of the concept. The idea of nationhood may be abstract but the ramifications on the ground are concrete.

> In most disaffected areas, governments actively suppress secessionists and defectors, while in some regions the large tracts of near-stateless territory and weak state administration deem the issue moot. In other areas, including large swathes of the Horn of Africa, transactional arrangements between state actors and factions on the periphery now provide an alternative to the use of force.

This is why Mwalimu Julius Nyerere recognised the importance of grounding his newly independent Tanzanian government in a strong ideological commitment to nationhood while forging a unitary Tanzanian identity. Ndii documents how in Kenya the post-independence governments of the day have faced multiple opportunities to put the nation on the same footing but in each instance instead chose to reinforce the entrenched *status quo*.

Comparative perspectives on the contours of the African State

Identity politics is commonly perceived to be the common culprit bedeviling the problems of governance in Kenya and many other African countries. Negative ethnicity is exacerbated by three

other basic constraints inhibiting state consolidation: the size of countries; the location of borders; and the internal composition of a country's different communities.

Although many analyses focus on the latter two factors, the issue of size is an interesting variable insofar as it largely dilutes horizontal connectivity by increasing the tendency to strengthen the centre. As the political scientist Ian Spears noted in a 2004 article on the secession debate, "many early European states were not so different from African ones in terms of ethnic and linguistic diversity," qualifying the observation by noting that African countries are on average more than twice the size of European nations – Western Europe can fit into the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola is larger than the six eastern European nations whose political transformations ended the Cold War.

The influence of size is compounded in large territories that have poor infrastructure. A viable nation-state is in theory more likely to emerge out of diverse but geographically circumscribed collectives than it is by forcefully unifying relatively homogeneous populations scattered over a large territory. The nation-state took off in Europe in part because population densities were high and economies did not have to contend with the spatial and environmental barriers, the climatic vagaries, and the poor infrastructure that foster the physical and psychological isolation that still characterises many African regions.

Even so, the map of Europe has been in a [near-constant state of flux](#) since the fall of Rome. The Treaty of Westphalia laid the foundations of the modern state system in in 1648. For the next three hundred years, the continent's aristocrats, generals, and charismatic ethnic champions engaged in a succession of often overlapping inter-state wars that established the political template for modern Europe.

During the mid-19th century, a new phase powered by demographic surplus and economic expansion was underway. The Industrial Revolution fueled the 19th century consolidation of territories under Russia, the Austrian-Hungary Empire and greater Prussia by absorbing polities on their eastern periphery. Circumscribed Western European states like Spain, Portugal, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom extended their hegemony by establishing overseas colonies.

The competition among the crown heads of Europe that generated the modern map of Africa culminated in World War I. The "war to end of all wars" went a long way towards establishing today's European borders, including settling many of the disputed boundaries in the Balkan region formerly ruled by the Ottoman Empire. World War II initiated a similar sorting out for most of the protagonists' overseas possessions.

It is an evolutionary truism that every kingdom, sultanate, empire, and state started small. In most regions, exchange relations and demographic pressures prompted neighbouring polities to link up and form larger unions, either through conquest or by coming together in order to resist the same. Sometimes they ended up where they started. The city of Venice controlled an Italy-sized state before Italy came into existence only to end up as a mid-sized municipality. Tiny Lithuania was a large country that briefly swallowed Poland. Pate dominated the East African littoral from Mogadishu to Kilwa but today it is a small village of 2,000 people living in 18th century stone houses.

The United States of America followed a pathway similar to the free-scale networks reconfiguring our current world through social media and other non-digital linkages. Just as free-scale networks begin small and grow exponentially, the nation began as a cluster of socio-culturally similar units and grew by integrating a diversity of human immigrants and mainly larger territorial units as they reached a certain threshold of internal governance capacity.

The pursuit of Jefferson's Manifest Destiny allowed the nation to achieve a workable balance of centralisation and local autonomy, *albeit* it also entailed the reduction of indigenous Americans and other racial categories to the status of quasi-citizens along the way. That battle for equality is still being fought.

> Historical scholarship, including the seminal contributions of Professor Ogot, indicate that precolonial Kenya's complex mix of fuzzy-edged communities were more connected through trade, intermarriage, resource sharing agreements, risk-spreading mechanisms and cultural syntheses during the late 19th century than they are now. Colonialism replaced the rapidly evolving developments on the ground with a new kind of regional political economy based on class, race and power concentrated in the State.

These complicated historical trajectories contrast with the case of sub-Saharan Africa, where low population densities and group mobility inhibited the emergence of states in many areas of the continent. External intervention replaced the accelerating processes of local state formation and reconfigured the continent's national units according to the logic of imperial expansion.

Political independence initiated the movement towards self-determination, but the consensus endorsing the policy of preserving colonial boundaries preempted the process. The policy reflected two lines of thought. The first was predicated on the developmental aspirations of independence movements; almost everyone agreed that the new governments were better off investing their energies and resources in developing their nations rather than in negotiating the inherently contentious issue of sorting out the problems of their artificial boundaries.

The second derived from the pan-African predilections of the new leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, who saw the Organization of African Unity as the first step towards a United States of Africa. The eruption of internal conspiracies/insurgencies and military coups extinguished this vision before the 1960s decade had run its course; a pattern of patrimonial governance, corruption and cross-border insurgencies prevailed in its place.

In practice, the preservation of borders principle also included direct interference in a country's internal affairs. It still occurred, but most of the mischief involved indirect methods. Neighbouring governments often supported the various insurgents, secessionists and rebels across their borders, not because they subscribed to the principle of self-determination, but to sustain what one scholar has termed the politics of reciprocal destabilisation.

The remarkable fact of the matter is that despite decades of such stratagems in the presence of endemic frictions, revolts and militarisation of ethnic militias, the continent's map remained intact until Eritrea separated from Ethiopia in 1993 and when, after a protracted struggle, South Sudan became independent in 2011. (Somaliland declared itself independent and reverted to its pre-unification status following the collapse of the Somali state in 1991, but is still not recognised internationally.) The general resistance these precedents encountered does not diminish the fact they have not uncorked the bottled-up forces of secession across the continent.

The independence of South Sudan raised the number of independent countries from 92 after World War II to 195. The number of independent breakaway nations will continue to grow as both constitutional and violent processes of redefining international borders run their course. We can expect that the forces contributing to this will eventually give rise to a number of new nations in Africa as well. These expectations do not square up with the fact that by international standards, the relatively small alterations in Africa's political borders are an anomaly.

Several explanations account for the current state of affairs. The African Union and the international club of nation-states are rigid proponents of the cartographic *status quo*, as unrecognised Somaliland can attest to. In most disaffected areas, governments actively suppress secessionists and defectors, while in some regions the large tracts of near-stateless territory and weak state administration deem the issue moot. In other areas, including large swathes of the Horn of Africa, transactional arrangements between state actors and factions on the periphery now provide an alternative to the use of force.

Despite the logic of scholarly analyses, a country's size, borders and internal diversity may not be the independent drivers of discord we have long assumed they are. Rather, most movements reflect a situation-specific mix of common internal factors, including social exclusion, concentrations of mineral wealth, the dominance of ethnic cartels, alienation of land and natural resources, institutional failure, chronic human rights abuses and generations of unresolved communal grievances.

These issues, not colonial borders, make it difficult to dismiss the likelihood that the map of Africa will look different in the not too distant future. The number of active secessionist movements, opportunistic external sponsors operating behind the scenes and the formation of bodies like the [Organization of Emerging African Nations](#) and the [Federation of Free States of Africa](#) are proof that the secession narrative in Africa is not going away.

On their websites, most members of these organisations state that they are committed to pursuing self-determination by peaceful means. None of the violent insurgencies in Africa in the last twenty years, including the rebellions in Darfur, were fought to advance a separatist agenda. Hopefully, Africa will not need a hundred years of internecine wars to sort out the self-determination problem. But don't expect to see the Free State of Kasai lining up to play against the Republic of the Caprivi Strip in the African Cup of Nations any time soon.

Deconstructing the secession narrative in Kenya

Historical scholarship, including the seminal contributions of Professor Ogot, indicate that precolonial Kenya's complex mix of fuzzy-edged communities were more connected through trade, intermarriage, resource sharing agreements, risk-spreading mechanisms and cultural syntheses during the late 19th century than they are now. Colonialism replaced the rapidly evolving developments on the ground with a new kind of regional political economy based on class, race and power concentrated in the State. Ownership replaced the institutionalised culture of rights and reciprocity. At the same time, arrangements were being made to redistribute settler-owned land to a carefully calibrated set of elites and yeomen. Meanwhile, peasant farmers and communities on the coast, Maasailand and northern Kenya were incorporated into the new order without their consent.

> Analyses of the post-colonial order, including David Ndii's critique of Kenya's unhappy marriage, have consistently suffered obfuscation by those who deploy the language of economic nationalism to divert attention from the real questions, like why economic inequality in Kenya continues to increase, who decides that the country's constitutionally recognised historical injustices are no longer an issue, and how to cope with the political amnesia that, as Ndii inferred during his NTV interview, returns whenever the excesses of the ruling elite are challenged.

The rulers of independent Kenya extended the contradictions of independence and ownership of the State to the periphery; the natives became restless and some fought back, but then new cracks

began opening up closer to the centres of power.

The idea of secession in Kenya was floated by Rift Valley hardliners in the Moi government during the transition to multiparty politics. It resurfaced after the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) kicked off the debate in the coastal region of Kenya in 2010. The MRC's strategy focused on pursuing self-determination through legal advocacy. They were scapegoated by the Provincial Administration for a series of relatively minor incidents of violence, and were consistently demonised in the press. Even though their leadership council has intentionally eschewed violent methods and repeatedly issued statements denying the charges levelled against them, including the violent Tana Delta attacks of 2012, many Kenyans still assume they are a militant organisation.

Although the historical arguments supporting their "*Pwani si Kenya*," (Coast is not Kenya) campaign came to define public perceptions of the MRC, in my discussions with their leadership and rank and file members, the repeated declaration "*Tumechoka na ahadi*" (We are tired of promises) was the more prominent mantra cited to justify their social movement. The discourse they instigated among marginalised minorities likewise focused more on the same "unfulfilled promises" of the post-colonial political order than the notion that it is time to actively pursue the separatist alternative.

In a review of the legal options facing the Mombasa Republican Council, Okiya Umtata Okoiti reviewed the substance of the relevant constitutional articles (255, 256, 257) and concluded that the MRC, or other similarly inclined organisations, "cannot secede unilaterally without the consent of, or negotiation with, the remaining Kenyan State." Based on historical evidence, any unilateral assertion of independence, he observed, is tantamount to a declaration of war.

While legal pathways for self-determination do technically exist, they require near impossible conditions, ranging from gaining the consent of 24 county assemblies to passing a constitutional amendment in Parliament that must be ratified by a national referendum. The Constitution does, by the same measure, guarantee avenues for the free and open discussion of secession and other issues of national sovereignty. On this score, David Ndii is correct to state that it is healthy to conduct the debate in the open.

But while secession remains a controversial subject in Kenya and most other African countries, it is toxic for many of the elites at the apex of the post-independence food chain. When the MRC tried to discuss their agenda in public, they were attacked and harassed by the security forces. After the Supreme Court lifted the ban that erroneously grouped the MRC with real armed groups like the Mungiki, the Provincial Administration used the police and lower courts to crack down on its members with renewed vigour.

The MRC affair did not end violently, as NTV anchor Larry Madowo noted in his interview with Ndii. Although the leadership is bogged down fighting their court cases and things have moved on, the movement succeeded in many ways: their campaign stimulated coastals to reimagine their future, and the wake-up call resonated across and beyond the region. Even coastals who did not agree with the call for secession opined that the MRC was the "best thing to happen on the coast since independence".

The idea of self-rule can be seductive and its advocates typically indulge in unrealistic expectations. Supporters of the Republic of Mthwakazi (i.e. Matabeleland), for example, claim "she will be a leading torch bearer in all democratic practices that will be adored by other nations." Post-secession realities in this region offer some decidedly different cautionary lessons. Eritrea descended into a police state, the economy stagnated, and five thousand Eritreans are fleeing abroad every month. The brutal new civil war that erupted in South Sudan suggests that the regional autonomy guaranteed by the 1972 Addis Ababa Accords was in hindsight the better solution. The long national

discussions preceding the restoration of the nation-state in Somaliland, in contrast, represents a useful model for bottom-up governance and the integration of marginalised minorities—with the caveat that the country narrowly averted its own clan-driven conflagration following the unilateral declaration of independence.

The sum of these perspectives help explain why our Oxford-educated economist couched his polemic in abstract terms like connectivity, imagined communities and learned opinions on the state of the "Kenya Project". His arguments were analytically robust, sober and addressed deep-seated fissures in the body politic; the responses from the other side tended to be rude, ad hominem and shallow in comparison.

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Secession is only one of the options available when a nation's disenchanted citizens choose to opt out. At the moment, the discussion is for the most part academic, conjectural and more about methods forcing improvements in governance than actual separation. This can change quickly if one day a number of Kenya's less connected communities decide to act at the same time.

Time will tell if the contested process of structural reform and devolution will deliver the outcomes that will put these questions to rest. The clock is ticking.