

# Chapter 5

## Political Identity in a Postcolony: Citizenship, Belonging, and Nation–Building in Ghana

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter examines contemporary constructions of citizenship identities in Ghana. Citizenship in former colonies could be conceptualised as structurally and substantively different from Western forms due to the articulation of pre-existing and European modes of political organisations and belongings. National citizenship was supposed to redirect all subnational allegiances to the state, but scholars argue that this does not always happen. In former colonies such as Ghana, the tension between ethnic and national identities are believed to be especially intense. In this chapter, the author argues that the popular dichotomy between ethnic and national identities is an elusive one. It fails to capture the ways in which citizens actually think of themselves as members of various political communities. This failure stems from the practice of unproblematically applying an ideal-typical conceptual dichotomy to the messiness realities of the social world.*

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3677-3.ch005

## INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial countries like Ghana present a fascinating puzzle for scholarship on national identity. Political identities are subjectively rooted but are not limited to individuals' mental states. They influence and are influenced in turn by larger social and political processes. The nation state as a political form of organisation is relatively new, and in non-European societies, its 'inauthenticity' is especially poignant. The novelty and specificity of the origins of the nation state in postcolonial countries is given prominence in analyses of national integration (see Godefroidt et al., 2016; Young, 2007). This is especially because struggles for independence was often waged not only against colonial officials but sometimes against the colonial state itself (Ekeh, 1975). As a result, these states are seen as 'utterly alien European social and political systems' which lack legitimacy, and which may actually be 'a fomenter of violence' (Badie & Birnbaum, 1983, p. 99; Oduro, 2009).

St Clair Drake, an African American social anthropologist who conducted research in West Africa during the 1950s and 1960s, and served as an informal advisor to Kwame Nkrumah and other newly independent African leaders, observed at close quarters the radical social changes and reconfigurations of political orientations at the twilight of empire. The changes that decolonisation brought sometimes misaligned political and socioeconomic developments. At the macro level, he argues, the consolidation of the *modern* state was happening against the backdrop of a *traditional* social set-up. In particular, for a long-subjugated people struggling to improve their material conditions, so-called elite concerns with constitutionally enshrined privileges often came off 'as less important than getting ahead with the job of building schools and clinics, piping water into villages, or industrializing the country' (Drake, 1956, p. 84). Drake observed that the struggle for these material rewards of nationhood sometimes excited 'a conflict between ethnic loyalties and national loyalties'. But such struggles need not always end up polarising society or stirring primordial cleavages. In fact, attempts to exclude others on narrow ethnic basis could sometimes spectacularly backfire. For instance, Nana Sir Ofori Atta's attempts to narrowly define Akyem<sup>1</sup> identity at a time when the booming cocoa economy had brought in a large migrant population 'did not go uncontested' and was resisted not only by 'Akyemfo commoners but also by Asante, Akuapems, and more strikingly, by Ga and Northern residents of the Kingdom' (Rathbone, 1996, p. 518), showing the capacity of commoners to mobilise cross-ethnic coalitions to push back against exclusionary politics.

This chapter examines contemporary constructions of citizenship identities in Ghana. Citizenship in former colonies could be conceptualised as structurally and substantively different from Western forms due to the articulation of pre-existing and European modes of political organisations and belongings. National citizenship was

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