Accidental nation-building in Africa

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Introduction

National identity in sub-Saharan Africa (thereafter Africa) is often portrayed as underdeveloped and less important than ethnic identity, with some scholars attributing this to young, multi-ethnic states, artificially created by former colonizers, or limited resources which hampered the extension of state-led mass schooling (Herbst 2000; Smith 1986; Young 1985). Yet, both recent survey data (Afrobarometer; World Values Survey) and case studies from across the continent (Lentz 2013, Bhandari and Muller 2019) show that national identity is more robust than many predicted. While the number of scholars appreciating the strength of national identity is growing, the debate over what is driving national attachment is far from settled. Classic theories focusing on modernization, large-scale state-led nation-building or cultural cohesion, developed in response to the European experience, overlook the possibility of robust national identification in the absence of these components. Works on symbolic nation-building in Africa provide an important corrective to this paradigm, stressing attempts to project the nation through the performing arts, music or nationalist imagery (Coe 2005, Schramm 2000, Lentz 2001). Yet, we have insufficient evidence for their effectiveness as most studies focus on the *production* of nationalist content and not on its *outcome*, such as its internalization by ordinary people, raising questions to what extent symbolic nationalism can account for the strength of national attachment across Africa.

In this article, I present an additional pathway to understanding national identification, one that is an accidental byproduct of shared experiences and distinct country-level trajectories. I argue that divergent outcomes between countries, such as peace or conflict, development and democracy, can be used by citizens to draw inferences about national characters, providing the

basis for national imaginings. While African states are artificial constructs, they separate people, even if arbitrarily, into different experiences, which shape how they see themselves and others. The post-colonial period has produced a significant divergence of outcomes across Africa, inviting comparisons with neighbours and providing fertile ground for the construction of national narratives bolstering national identities. This pathway and other strategies of nation-building are not mutually exclusive. Yet, given the limitations of alternative modes of nation-building, such as state-led top-down programs, the accidental bottom-up processes that I highlight have filled the void.

I examine the puzzles of national identification with the case of Ghana, a multi-ethnic African nation without an ethnic core, but with robust national attachment. Drawing on over 200 original interviews with Ghanaian respondents from various regions of the country, I show that Ghanaian national self-conception is strongly influenced by the role of socio-political developments in the country, more so than cultural factors or state-led nation-building. The study was situated among relatively poor respondents, mostly in the informal economy, providing insights into national identity in generally inauspicious environment.

Ghana is an appealing setting to study national identity. Recent data indicate that Ghanaians have robust national identity and the percentage of Ghanaian respondents expressing greater attachment to the nation than to their ethnic group is close to the African average (Afrobarometer; WVS). This national identity exists at a comparatively low level of development. Furthermore, because British colonial legacy is seen as less conducive to national identification (Mazrui 1983; Robinson 2014), strong national attachment in a former British colony is more noteworthy. Ghana is also ethnically diverse, to a degree typical for the continent.[1] Ethnicity is socially and politically salient, with a substantial degree of ethnic politics

(Asante & Gyimah-Boadi 2004; Chazan 1982). It is thus not the case that the country has a strong national identity because of low levels of ethnic difference. Ghana's freedom of expression makes is a propitious setting to study national narratives because respondents can express their views with liberty.

This article makes several contributions. First, it broadens our understanding of the bases of national identification in the absence of significant cultural similarity or limited top-down nation-building programs. While I build on existing scholarship on oppositional nature of identity, I make several theoretical innovations. Scholars such as Barth (1969) have studied the importance of boundaries and comparisons with strangers, but I specify the basis of such comparisons. I draw on social psychology to provide the mechanisms linking events to the development of national imaginings. I also show how and why national identity constructed this way can emerge far from the country's borders and why it is not ephemeral. Furthermore, the original data employed here provide a unique opportunity to understand the *content* of national identities in an African country. As Breuilly argued, "The constant reiteration of the statement 'I am French' is empty unless linked to some notion of what being French means" (1982: 8). This study is providing such a notion for Ghana by collecting and analysing Ghanaians' national imaginings in their own words.

This article is organized as follow: It first discusses how national identity in Africa has been portrayed and why many scholars expect it to be weak. It then presents data highlighting the robustness of national identity in Africa. The following section discusses the inconsistency of existing theories of nation-building with empirical outcomes in Africa and presents an alternative pathway. The article then provides qualitative data from Ghana. The final section concludes.

Defining national identity

Before describing how national identity has been portrayed in Africa, we need to first explain the term. I follow Huddy and Khatib in defining national identity as "a subjective or internalized sense of belonging to the nation" (2007: 65). In this sense, national identity is a type of social identity; it includes an awareness of one's membership in a group *and* a psychological sense of group attachment (Tajfel 1981). The terms national identity, national identification and national attachment are treated here as analogous as they all centre on one's belonging to the nation. The process that results in individuals identifying with their nation is nation-building. There is substantial consensus among scholars that nation-building entails fostering widespread identification with the national group such that average citizens' primary allegiance is to the nation, above and beyond their loyalty toward other groups, such as tribe, ethnic or religious groups or a village community (Robinson 2016, Wimmer 2018). A voluminous body of work describes why national identification matters for myriad outcomes (see *inter alia* Fukuyama 2019; Koter 2019 for review).

National identity in Africa

Over the years, a large number of scholars has viewed national identity in Africa as weak for multiple reasons. Scholars note that following independence, African leaders inherited territorial units created by the colonizers with the absence of "nations" corresponding to state boundaries (Young 1985). Many observers described African nations at independence as "embryonic" (Dorman et al. 2007) or with a "tenuous hold on the popular imagination" (Emerson 1963: 96). Importantly, anti-colonial struggle did not translate into a strong national

identity after independence (Boahen 1987, Zolberg 1967) because in the absence of an external foe, there remained less holding African nations together (Werbner 1996).

Furthermore, scholars such as Crawford Young (1986) and Anthony Smith (1986) noted that the central difficulty of nation-building in Africa is the weakness of common cultural content. For Smith, the lack of an ethnic core in countries such as Ghana or Nigeria is particularly problematic because without it, "there is no place from which to start the process of nation-building" (1986: 259). Many classic studies of nation-building, such as Gellner (1983), see shared culture as key to the emergence of national attachment. Yet, as Robinson (2016) highlights, most African states lacked such basic building blocks of territorial nationalism, namely common language, history and cultural traditions. Many independence-era politicians saw ethnic fragmentation as a key obstacle to national integration (Coleman 1954; Young 1985; Zolberg 1967). Yet, Albaugh (2014) argues that African statesmen actually did not care about deepening national identification and demonstrated ambivalence toward national unity through language. They also largely failed to successfully project power into the hinterland (Herbst 2000). This outcome is consistent with Darden and Mylonas's (2016) argument that governing elites felt less compelled to pursue nation-building and to promote a common national language in the context of low external threats.

The conditions surrounding the development of national identities in Africa are often negatively compared to the historical experience of nation-building in Europe. Leading works on the topic have consistently stressed modernized economies and centralized state efforts, be they through the spread of print capitalism, industrialization, economic development, mass schooling or road-building, communication and transportation networks (Anderson 1983; Deutsch 1953; Gellner 1983 etc.). In contrast, the absence of these developments and the general context of

underdevelopment made nation-building particularly challenging (Herbst 2000). Herbst (2000) further highlights the difficulty of forging national identity during the time of peace. As he notes, war in Europe helped boost nation-building because external threats provided a powerful impetus whereas African leaders struggled to figure out how to build nationalism in times of peace.

Manifestations of national identity in Africa

Recent studies and public opinion polls contradict much of the received wisdom, showing that a high number of Africans across several countries identify with their nation (Robinson 2014; Miles and Rochefort 1991; Bhandari and Mueller 2019). For example, the World Values Survey (WVS) reveals high levels of national identification, comparable to those found in much older nations. In each round of surveys, WVS selects a handful of African countries alongside many other countries in the world. In the surveys, respondents are asked to agree or disagree with a statement "I see myself as part of" Nigeria, Ghana etc. The data show that resounding majorities of those polled see themselves as belonging to their nation. Figure 1.1 shows data for the African countries polled alongside select Western countries, as well as nations from Latin America and Asia. These numbers suggest an equally, if not more, robust endorsement of the nation as in many countries around the world.

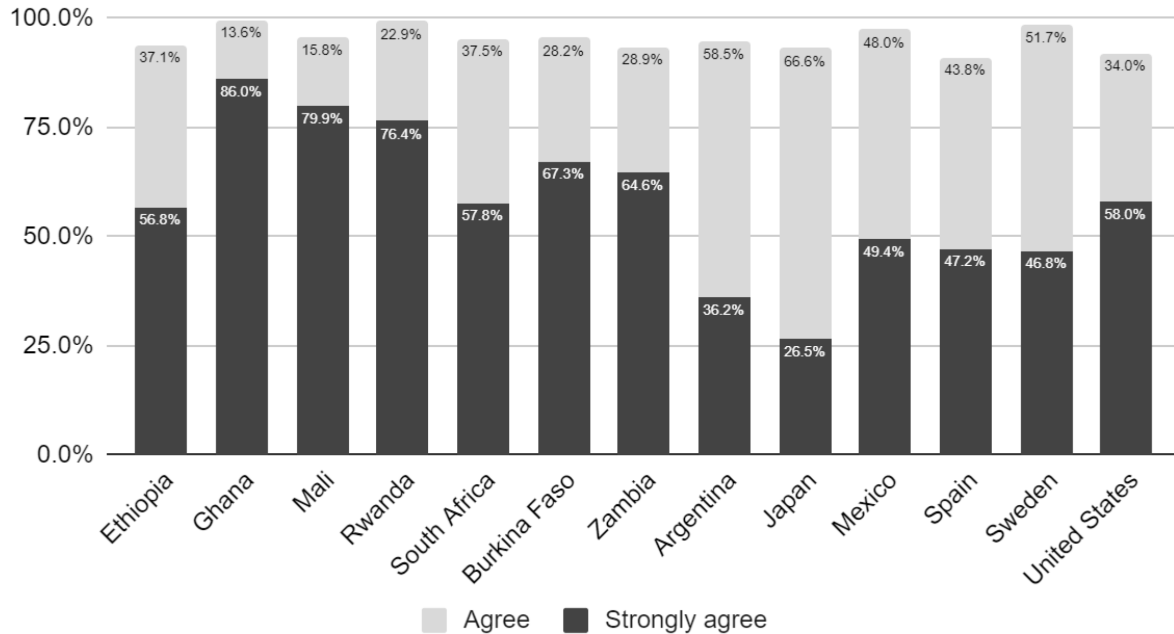

Figure 1.1. Share of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement "I see myself as part of" a given nation.
Source: World Values Survey, Round 5, 2007.

What is even more telling is how respondents prioritize their identities. While expressing belonging to the nation can be seen as costless, placing national identity above other identities reveals greater commitment. In earlier WVS rounds, respondents were asked to choose their most salient identity. Figure 1.2 shows the percentage of respondents from all African countries polled by WVS, and select other countries, who identify first and foremost with their country. The data reveal that African respondents are no less likely to identify with their country first than their counterparts from other continents.

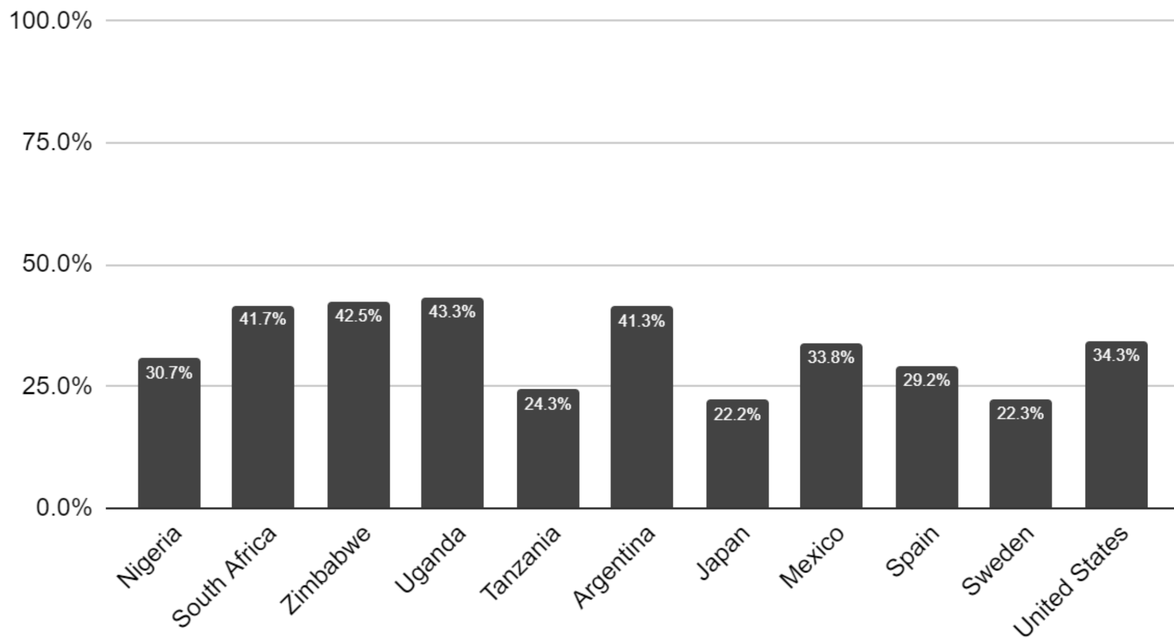

Figure 1.2 World Values Survey, Round 4.

Importantly, many Africans prefer to identify in national rather than ethnic terms, despite high social salience of ethnicity in Africa. Afrobarometer forces respondents to choose between their ethnic or national identity, using the equivalent of the so-called Moreno question. Depending on the survey round, on average approximately 40 to 50 per cent of respondents across different countries report greater attachments to their nation than their ethnic group. Figure 1.3 shows the data for round 6 of the Afrobarometer.[2] The data also make clear that there are relatively few Africans who value their national identity less than their ethnic identity, with many embracing both identities equally.

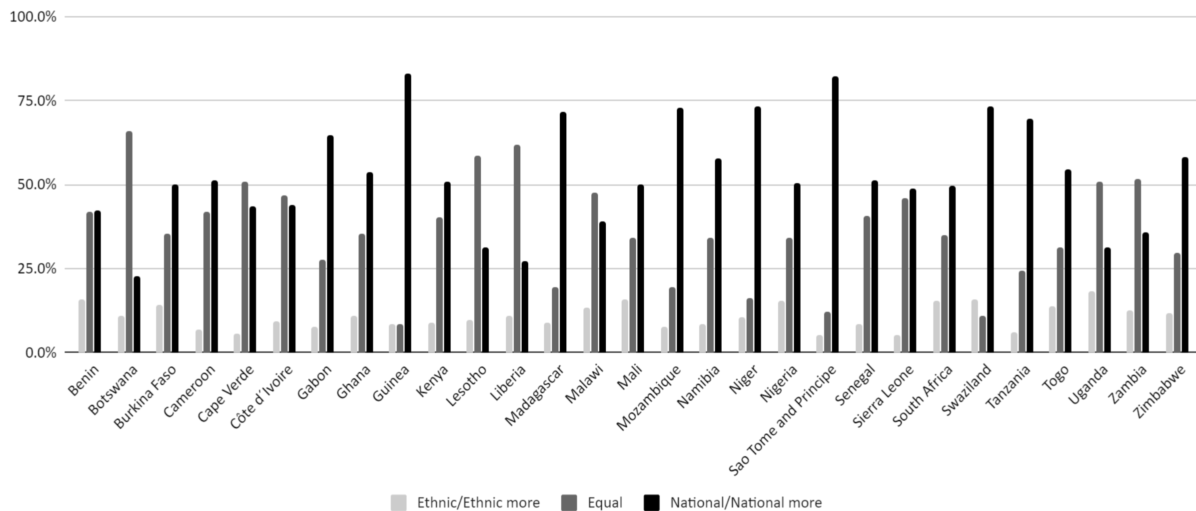

Figure 1.3. Ethnic Versus National Identification. Source: Afrobarometer, Round 6. The bars show percentages of respondents choosing to identify as "ethnic only" or "more ethnic than national," "equally ethnic and national," or "more national" and "national only".

The embrace of national identity visible in the data is also consistent with findings from case studies from different parts of the continent. Lentz (2013) describes the stark proof of the continued importance of the nation in Africa on display during independence celebrations across the continent. Miles and Rochefort (1991) show that citizens of Niger side resoundingly with their national over ethnic identity. Robinson (2016) finds striking behavioural manifestations of national identity in Malawi, which are strong enough to counteract ethnic bias. Bhandari and Mueller's (2019) respondents in the border region of Niger and Burkina Faso strongly endorse their existing national identity when given the choice to change it.

Pathways to nation-building

This empirical reality challenges many existing paradigms explaining the emergence of national identification, rooted in the Western experience, because most African countries are missing their crucial components such as centralized state efforts (e.g. Breuilly 1982) or a

modernized economy (Gellner 1983). Deutsch (1953) links the emergence of widespread national identity to the rise of mass communication, which comes about with the growth of industries, towns and literacy. Bendix (1964) sees the development of national citizenship as a result of industrialization. Both Anderson (1983) and Gellner (1983) focus on print capitalism and industrialization, respectively, in underpinning cultural assimilation of a nation.

This pathway fits closely the European experience but is at odds with most African cases. First, most African countries have had generally low levels of development during the post-independence period, with low urbanization, industrialization and low literacy levels. In short, the crucial elements of modernization were not present during this time period. Second, it is not the case that more developed countries in Africa have higher levels of national identification. The relationship between development and national identity is very inconsistent. While Robinson (2014) found that wealthier countries reported higher levels of national identification in the third round of the Afrobarometer survey, this was not the case in the subsequent four rounds of the surveys (rounds 4 through 7), with the relationship skewing in the opposite direction as more countries were surveyed. Likewise, Bhandari and Muller (2019) show that national identification is inversely related to the Human Development Index. Indeed, some of the least developed countries on the continent, such as Niger or Mali, have some of the most robust national identification.

While Ghana is not in the lowest quartile of development in Africa, it lacks many attributes of a modernized economy. As late as 2010, half of Ghanaian population lived in rural areas and was employed in agriculture (World Bank). Only 14 per cent of people worked in industry. What is also inconsistent with modernization theory is that rural Ghanaians, as well as those with no formal schooling and no formal employment, identify with the nation as

vigorously as other Ghanaians. In Round 6 of the Afrobarometer, 57 per cent of rural Ghanaians (N=1066) choose their national over their ethnic identity, compared to 52 per cent of Ghanaians overall (N=1066). Even among respondents with no formal schooling (N=403), the figure was 51 per cent. Among respondents with no employment (N=820), fully 56 per cent choose their national identity. According to modernization theory, people in the periphery, disconnected from the formal economy and schooling, are supposed to be least likely to identity with the nation, yet that is not the case in Ghana.

In his book, *Nation Building*, Wimmer (2018) highlights the importance of the provision of public goods by the national government in the process of nation-building. In comparing Botswana with Somalia, he attributes Botswana's much greater success at nation-building to its effective and equitable public goods provision by the state, which helped integrate different groups and prevented political exclusion. The state in Botswana managed to provide both high levels of public goods, such as schooling, and to distribute it fairly among different ethnic and regional groups (with the notable exception of the San ethnic group). Among the different aspects of successful provision of public goods, Wimmer suggests that adult literacy rates offer a good proxy to gauge state success. With its 87% literacy rate in 2013 (UNESCO) Botswana boasts one of the highest rates in Africa. During the same period, Ghana's literacy rates were above average on the continent but lower than in Botswana (71.5% in 2010, rising to 79% in 2018). Behind Ghana's overall rate also lie significant regional, as well as ethnic and religious, disparities, deviating from the equitable condition set by Wimmer. For example, a young female from the Ashanti region was more than twice as likely to be literate (83% vs. 40%) as a female in the same age bracket from the Northern region (UNESCO). The Ga had 30 percentage points higher literacy than the Mande (93% vs. 63%). Overall, while Ghana has done an above average

job of providing public education, it falls significantly short when compared to countries such as Botswana, as documented by Wimmer, or Gabon, where youth literacy rates are above 90% in every region (UNESCO). Moreover, Green (2019) recently showed that public goods are weakly and inconsistently correlated with national identification across Africa.

While large scale, state-led centralized nation-building programs, do not fit well the African experience,[3] many studies highlight ways in which African governments used nationalist iconography, relying especially on visual and performing arts, such as dance (Schramm 2000, Schauert 2014), music (Askew 2002, Turino 2000), festivals (Apter 1996, Lentz 2001, N'Guessan et al.) architecture (Hess 2000), or currency and postage imagery (Fuller 2008). After noting over the years the lack of cultural content of African nationalism (1985, 1986), Crawford Young in his recent writing (2012) concluded that national identity is buttressed by "a limited repertoire of common icons" (2012: 309), or "banal" symbols, to borrow Michael Billig's (1995) term. N'Guessan, Lentz and Gabriel (2017) documented how national day celebrations in Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso bring the central state into the periphery, making the national territory more concrete. Other cultural festivals in Ghana, which are carefully curated by state cultural officers, serve a similar function, merging local culture into national culture through state bureaucratic institutions such as the regional branches of the Centre for National Culture (Lentz 2001, N'Guessan 2014). Performing and musical arts, colloquially referred to as "drumming and dancing," are also at the core of cultural programming in Ghanaian schools (Coe 2005). Dance, and especially the famous Ghana Dance Ensemble, has been one of the key ways of projecting the nation and exhibiting Ghana's cultural tradition in a standardized way (Schramm 2000, Schauert 2014).

These projects all clearly show intentional nationalist production. There are, however, questions about how successful they have been in instilling national attachment among ordinary people. Some criticisms of these programs include the fact that they were sometimes too elitist, had shallow reach, or were divisive. N'Guessan et al. suggest that national festivals have both the potential to unite but also engender conflict by fuelling regional competition and resentment (2017: 699). Apter (1996) notes a similar competitive dynamic in relation to Nigeria's famous Festival of Arts and Culture, Festac'77. The reliance on bureaucrats to act as gatekeepers of local culture is also contentious as such actors lack the legitimacy of traditional custodians of culture (N'Guessan 2014). Coe (2005) documents how nationalized culture produced for school consumption is devalued and contested. She also suggests that the cultural education is rather intermittent and not taught consistently. Schramm describes how the national dance curated by the Ghana Dance Ensemble deviated from traditional norms (2000: 351-2) whereas Schauert noted how the dancers "exploit fissures in the nationalist façade" (2014: 26). Lentz and Nugent also point out that most symbols used for nation-building are potentially divisive (2000: 24). For example, Kwame Nkrumah's nationalist imagery displayed through art and currency resulted in a significant backlash (Hess 2001, Fuller 2008, Dorman et al. 2007:7) and at times led to more conflict than integration (Bandyopadhyay and Green 2012).

In addition, many of the banal symbols highlighted by Billig (1995) and Young (2012), have limited spread across time and space. For example, sporting events can generate feelings of national euphoria[4] but they seem to be short-lived. Many of the other national symbols, such as stamps (see Fuller 2014), are rather scarce given the limited reach of the postal service. For every time that a researcher comes into contact with a symbol of the nation state, there are many more instances when we do not see such a symbol where they would be expected. It is hard to

reconcile the inconsistent reach of symbols and icons with the widespread attachment to the nation in most African countries.

More importantly, most scholars working on symbolic nationalism have focused on inputs, rather than outputs, of these nation-building enterprises. Namely, they studied to a much greater extent the imagery produced rather than the degree to which national sentiment has been internalized by people. Yet, an intent to raise national attachment through the use of performing arts will not necessarily be successful. As Wimmer pointed out, "Creating an independent nation-state with a flag, an army, an anthem, newly minted money, and freshly printed passports did not guarantee that citizens identified with the nation" (2018: 2). We should thus not assume that mere existence of national symbols leads to national identification. The provision of nationalist art does not automatically lead to creation of strong national attachments among the populace, especially given the limitations inherent in these policies.

Finally, it is also worth pointing out that theories such as the minimal group paradigm (Tajfel 1970), offer little traction in understanding national identification in Africa. Such approaches expect group identity to emerge even in the presence of very limited commonalities between group members. Yet, such theories offer little help in explaining why countless Africans would privilege their national over ethnic identity. If national identity was such a shallow category, why would people embrace it over ethnicity, which is known to be symbolically and materially consequential?

The preceding paragraphs highlighted the limitations of the leading explanations of national identity formation. I present here an alternative and overlooked pathway toward developing national attachment, and later present data from Ghana that illustrate this process. I suggest that nation-building in Ghana, not atypical for Africa, is most consistent with a

decentralized, bottom-up, emergence of national identities on the basis of shared country-level experiences, which allow contrast with other nations. In theorizing this pathway, I build on previous scholarship on oppositional nature of identities. However, I make several innovations, including proposing a specific mechanism, and accounting for non-border communities where comparisons are drawn without face to face interaction with out-group members.

Nation-building as a byproduct of events

In contrast to theories that stress the importance of cultural cohesion and state-led nation-building projects, I contend that citizens can develop their national identity on the basis of their country's shared experiences. I draw on Barth's (1969) insight that identities can be derived from boundaries and comparisons with out-group members. I suggest that highly salient events, such as conflict or peace, that are widely known even in information-poor environments, can be used by people to compare themselves to the citizens of neighbouring countries. Even in the absence of top-down, government-instigated nation-building programs, social and political developments can accidentally lead to nation-building by providing salient points of reference for national narratives.

Developments such as varied state performance, incidences of political violence, conduct and results of elections, and the extent of democratization and economic development, produce unique national experiences. These different social realities, whether good or bad, in turn, generate ideas about the national character of people who experience them. Because none of these developments happen with the explicit goal of nation-building, I see this process as largely accidental. National attachments can be a *byproduct* of economic or political divergence from one's neighbours rather than a result of *deliberate* nation-building practices. This is not to

say that top-down nation-building and cultural cohesion do not matter. Rather, my argument is that they are not a *necessary* condition for nation-building and that bottom-up narratives about countries' trajectories can provide an alternative pathway to building national identity.

Political and socio-economic trajectories lend themselves to the construction of national narratives because divergent outcomes are often interpreted not as accidents of history but as a reflection of the people. Hence, they portray the national character. Negative events such as post-electoral violence, civil war, inability to prevent the spread of disease, as well as positive developments such as peace, stability and democracy, provide fertile ground for narratives about national characters. Such economic and political events lend themselves to creating both national imaginings about one's nation and developing stereotypes[5] about other nations.

Many people, certainly not only in Africa, are inclined to see outcomes as a reflection of people who produced it; namely, they attribute results to personality traits rather than to circumstances. This tendency is known in social psychology as "fundamental attribution error" (Ross 1977) or "overattribution effect" (Jones 1979). Overattribution reflects a systemic bias in people's perception process in which they overestimate personality and disposition and underestimate situational constraints. Indeed, this effect is very consistent and it is "one of social psychology's better-replicated phenomena" (Tetlock 1985). While most studies have focused on interpretations of individual behaviour, the same logic has been also applied to groups (Hewstone 1990).

Overattribution can, for example, explain why people see their country's prosperity as a natural outcome produced by certain attributes of its people rather than good fortune. To illustrate, Germans might see their successful economy as a result of German ingenuity. Conversely, the economic hardship endured by Greece during the Eurocrisis was sometimes

portrayed as a result of Greek profligacy in contrast to Germans' respect of rules. As *The Economist* put it, the EU bail-outs were seen by many as "a transfer from industrious Germans to feckless Greeks" (March 16, 2019). Such thinking is common because personal traits are cognitively easily available and they can be the first explanation of outcomes that comes to mind (Tetlock 1985).

Because such narratives are quite simple, if not simplistic, they do not necessitate coordination or resources to become widespread and potent. In contrast to textbooks needed to teach geography or history, you do not need a concerted effort for people to start thinking of themselves as hospitable or hard-working, especially when such narratives reflect highly salient aspects of life, such as peace or prosperity, or hardship.

In European countries, scholars have not had to scrutinize the role of such contemporary stereotypes, because national identity is taken for granted. In contrast, in Africa, in the absence of significant cultural cohesion and well-funded top-down nation-building, these national imaginings can play a more prominent role. For example, while the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of the world's weakest and most dysfunctional states, Congolese national identity is surprising robust (Englebert 2006). The DRC cannot fulfil many of the most basic functions of the state, such as providing stability and exercising sovereignty over its territory, let alone providing universal schooling with nationalist content to its children. It is also one of the world's least culturally cohesive states. Yet, the very dysfunction of the state might be contributing to the creation of national identity. Since the days of Mobutu's disorderly dictatorship, there has been a saying that in order to survive (in then Zaire) you had to "fend for yourself" (*se débrouiller*). Indeed, *débrouillardise*, namely the ability to manage in difficult circumstances, has become a defining national characteristic (Trefon 2004). These national

imaginings based on country-level experiences are further buttressed by comparisons with other countries.

Other scholars have highlighted the importance of national comparisons for national identification (Sahlins 1989; Nugent 2003) but they have largely studied it *in the borderlands* where the national boundaries are visible and tangible reminders of national differences. Sahlins (1989) documents the embrace of national identities by peasants in the Pyrenees along the French-Spanish border, in opposition to one another, long before the infrastructure of the nation was built from the centre. Similarly, Nugent's (2003) study of the Ghana-Togo borderland, reveals that "regular interaction across the border, which might have been expected to work against the logic of national integration, actually tended to reinforce a sense of difference between those who now called themselves Ghanaian and Togolese" (2003: 16). Nugent chronicles how cross-border smuggling, which is a testament to state weakness, actually had an unintended consequence for national identification as "the very act of smuggling made border peoples more aware of what made them Ghanaian rather than Togolese" (2003: 16). Bhandari and Mueller's (2019) recent study of national identity in Niger also focused on the development of nationalism in the borderland, namely the Niger-Burkina Faso boundary.

In this vein, scholars commonly expect that borders can heighten national awareness (Robinson 2014) but they generally treat this as a peripheral phenomenon. The logic of national identification in border areas rests on frequent face-to-face contact between two populations, be they French and Spaniards, or Ghanaians and Togolese, where people can see differences with their own eyes. In contrast to existing work, I suggest that national narratives based on cross-national comparisons are not limited to the borderlands and they do not require living close to an actual boundary. Personal experience with foreign countries is not necessary to embrace ideas

about national differences. People can develop narratives about foreigners as well as about themselves far from their countries' borders. The information that can plant seeds about national characters is abundant even in information-poor environments. Despite comparatively limited access to the media is in rural Africa, even in remote areas people can hear on the radio about events such as civil wars, terrorism or electoral violence in other African countries.

The importance of shared national experiences should not be confused with the concept of "linked fate"[6]. The latter focuses on interdependence between members of a nation, namely the idea that your well-being depends on how well other members of the nation are doing. Conversely, people can perceive national characters regardless of whether their day to day livelihood actually depends on how well other members of the nation are doing. Thus, my argument is not that what unites Ghanaians (or Togolese etc.) is the sense that if other Ghanaians are doing well, they will do well, but the sense that Ghanaians have certain character traits in common, which are forged and exhibited through their common national experiences.[7]

Some previous studies point to the importance of shared experiences for national identity. Wedeen (2003) shows in the case of Yemen how "common experiences of moral panic" can generate "passionate belonging to the imagined community of the nation." She argues that a gruesome string of murders of young women that gripped Yemen in the early 2000s created a sense of "collective vulnerability" and brought about "*episodic* expressions of national identification" (2003: 682, emphasis in the original). Like Wedeen, I see the potential of commonly shared experiences to generate national identity but, in contrast to her, I explain why such national belonging might be lasting rather than episodic. Although public fascination with a serial killer is bound to fade, longer-term developments such as democratization, civil strife or terrorism have implications for national imaginings over a longer period of time, beyond the

moment when they are actively discussed or experienced. People use these events to make *inferences* about themselves and others. Thus, the importance of shared experiences is not just how they make people feel in a given moment, but what people conclude from them about their national character.

National imaginings in Ghana

I now turn to original interview data from Ghana to show how Ghanaian responses are consistent with national identification developed on the basis of shared experiences.

Data & Methodology

To understand how Ghanaians conceive of their national identity, I rely on qualitative evidence gathered from 200 semi-structured interviews carried out in Ghana in 2017 and 2018. I conducted the interviews in four distinct regions of the country: the capital, Accra, and the Ashanti, Volta and Northern regions. These areas were selected to cover the homelands of Ghana's main ethnic groups, the Ashanti, Ewe, Dagomba and Ga. These groups also have a different place in Ghanaian culture, with the Ashanti being more culturally and economically dominant than the other groups. The Northern region has a much larger Muslim population, in contrast to other parts of Ghana. These sites also represent areas across political cleavages, with the Volta region aligned with the former ruling party, the NDC, the Ashanti heartland associated with the ruling NPP, and the Northern and Accra areas more mixed. In each case, I selected urban neighbourhoods in the main city in the region, as well as surrounding villages. In addition to Accra, interviews in the selected regions were focused in and around the regional capitals of Kumasi (Ashanti), Ho (Volta) and Tamale (Northern). Fifty interviews were carried out in each

regional location. In the capital, Accra, I covered several different neighbourhoods, with a distinct mix of ethnicities and with different histories of settlement and a varied socio-economic mix. The interviews are not a nationally-representative sample, but they are meant to be broadly reflective of *ordinary* Ghanaians from diverse regions. Because from the perspective of some dominant paradigms, such as the modernization theory, national identity is particularly puzzling in the context of underdevelopment, I focused largely on poorer neighbourhoods, slums and villages, rather than upper-class neighbourhoods. Consequently, the interview sample is dominated by people from very ordinary professions typical for Ghana, such as street vendors, farmers and tailors, most of them part of the informal economy.

All interviews were conducted in person together with research assistants who also served as interpreters. Only a minority of interviews were conducted in English and the rest were carried out in the dominant local language of the area: Twi in Accra and Kumasi, Ewe in the Volta region and Dagbani in the Tamale area. To understand why Ghanaians identify as Ghanaian, I asked questions about perceived cultural commonalities, experiences with state nation-building programs, differences between Ghanaians and other Africans and perceptions of other African nationals, among others. These questions were open ended and we asked any necessary follow-up questions alongside our pre-set script. It was important to use open–ended questions as not to fit respondents' answers into pre-determined categories. Given the incomplete understanding of national identification in Africa, it was crucial to be open to unexpected answers from respondents. This format avoided priming respondents and did not force them to choose from a closed menu of possible answers. The questionnaire-led interviews provided consistency but were flexible enough to allow discussion. The face-to-face format gave us not just people's verbatim responses, but also their tenor, enthusiasm and body language.

As with most research, we have to be concerned about issues such as social desirability bias affecting the veracity of responses, especially in the presence of a foreigner asking questions about one's nation. Yet, it is clear that interviewees did not reflexively try to portray themselves and their nation in a positive light and many of them showed much introspection. The fact that many respondents mentioned both positive and negative characteristics of their countries, increases confidence in their truthfulness. Additionally, the existing freedom of expression in Ghana allowed interviewees to respond freely to questions.

All interview transcripts were coded in MaxQDA to aid content analysis. I used this program to quantify and establish patterns in the data, revealing the frequency of different narratives appearing in interviewees' responses. The interview excerpts illustrate the narratives voiced by respondents, whereas the frequencies help put these narratives in comparative perspective. This approach thus allows us to see what is most salient to respondents. Interviewees could provide multiple answers and they were not forced to choose between different elements of their national perception. Admittedly, there is always a possibility that meaningful factors remain unsaid. Nonetheless, these interviews provide a portrait of how a diverse group of Ghanaians perceive their national identity. While many studies focus on nation-building policies rather than their impact, this study complements those approaches by studying what aspects of national identity resonate with ordinary people.

In my sample, 56 per cent of respondents reported that Ghanaians are more attached to their nation, whereas 32 per cent said that Ghanaians are more attached to their ethnic group. As in the Afrobarometer surveys, these numbers indicate considerable attachment to the nation, with greater prioritization of the nation over ethnic identity. The interviews help shed light on what being Ghanaian means to people. Figure 1.4 shows responses to what Ghanaians think makes

them distinct from other Africans. The figure shows that rather than culture or language, most Ghanaians point to their character and the presence of peace as their defining characteristic.

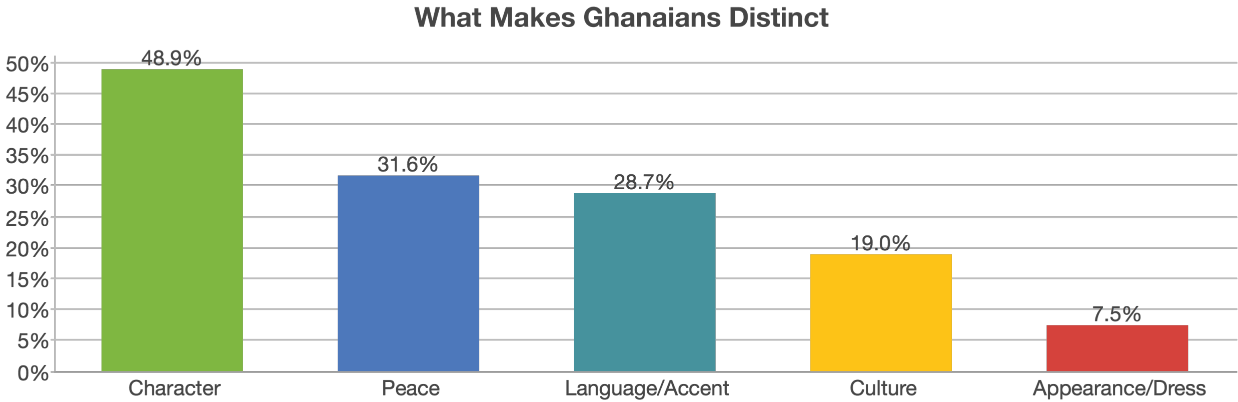

Fig. 1.4 Responses to what makes Ghanaians Distinct

Respondents were also asked about the source of the national pride. Although pride is distinct from national identity (see Wimmer 2018), the sources of pride help shed light on what makes national identification attractive to citizens. Figure 1.5 shows the distribution of sources of pride among respondents.

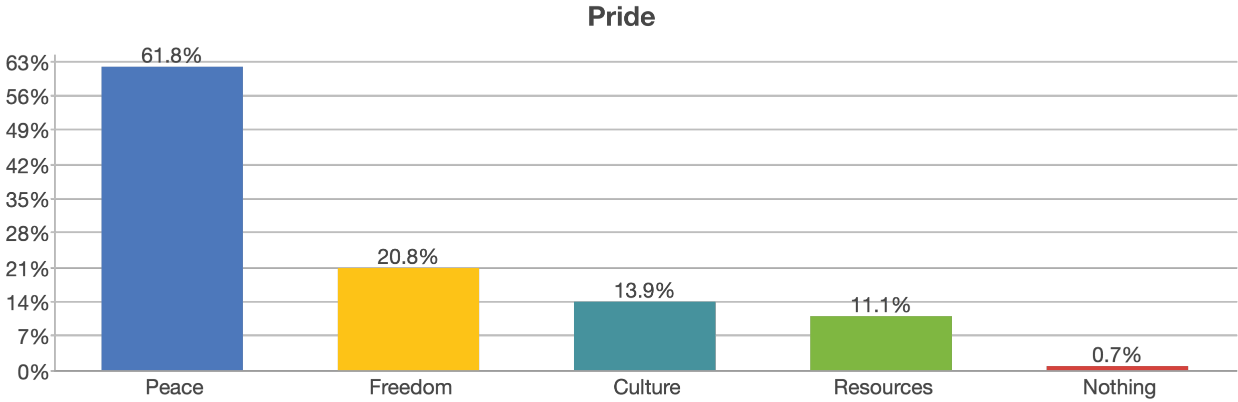

Figure 1.5 Sources of pride
Note: The figure shows responses to the question: what, if anything, makes your proud to be Ghanaian?

The frequency of peace is startling, especially because the interview questionnaire never mentions the word peace.

I know turn to a discussion of how the data fit with different pathways of nation-building.

State-led nation-building

State-led nation-building has played a crucial role in many countries but in Ghana the average respondent had relatively little experience with nation-building programs. When asked whether their government was doing anything to promote national identity, around one third of respondents (33.6 per cent) said no or they could not think of anything relevant. Among those who said yes, many could not give any examples when asked to explain their response. Moreover, many of those who said yes were either vague, merely hopeful that the government would do something, or stated that the government was "trying" (20.6 per cent). There certainly were respondents who could think of relevant government programs, but they were in the minority (40.6 per cent). Among those who saw evidence of state-led efforts, the most commonly invoked examples were national identification card, the co-called "Ghana card" (18.2 per cent), free education (10.8 per cent) and infrastructure (6.5 per cent). Yet, even the national identification card was often accompanied by criticism because of the way in which it was implemented. Ghanaians have to provide rather burdensome documentation, such as birth certificates, which they often lack, especially in rural areas, generating many complaints about potential exclusion. The responses indicate general appetite for government programs but largely unfulfilled expectations. These responses also hint at the disconnect between state nation-building production and its actual reach.

Cultural Cohesion

The interviews challenge the notion that Ghanaians are united through cultural cohesion. Respondents were asked questions about Ghanaian culture and what Ghanaians have in common. Many respondents could not think of what Ghanaians have in common (13.8 per cent) with some noting that they have “nothing in common” (A-8), “Not sure what [they have] in common” (A-24) and others stating that they “didn’t see much in common between different ethnicities” (A-18).[8] Those pointing to having some culture in common typically mentioned skin colour, language, dress, or food such as *banku* and *fufu*.

In line with the official discourse of “unity in diversity” frequently promoted by successive Ghanaian governments (e.g. N’Guessan 2014, Schramm 2000, Schauert 2014), people often pointed to diversity as a defining characteristic of Ghanaian culture, seeing more cultural differences than similarities. For example, some respondents stated that Ghanaians have tribal marks in common. This answer at first appeared puzzling because different ethnic groups have different tribal marks. Follow up questions revealed that respondents were perfectly aware that tribal marks varied and they could recognize tribal marks belonging to different ethnic groups; they clarified that they saw tribal marks as a commonality because even though they vary throughout the country by ethnic group, all the tribal marks in Ghana were different from marks in other countries.

The same logic was often applied to languages. Many respondents stated that Ghanaians have language in common. Respondents were always prompted to explaining which language they meant. In most cases, people meant that Ghana has *many* languages but these languages are different from languages in other countries. In contrast to other regions of Ghana, respondents in the Ashanti region commonly (and erroneously) thought that everyone in Ghana speaks Twi.

Many respondents around Kumasi thus listed the Asante variant of Twi as something Ghanaians have in common. While respondents rarely thought of English as a language they have in common, they occasionally pointed to Ghanaians being surrounded by French-speakers, since all countries neighbouring Ghana use French as their official language. Further examples of statements pointing to unity in diversity included religion and dance. For example, one respondent stated that there are "different cultures in different regions but they all have dance" and that "We are all religious, whether Muslim or Christian" (A-22). Importantly, even this expansive notion of Ghanaian culture, with all its diversity, was not mentioned by respondents as frequently as one might imagine.

Furthermore, some of the respondents who saw some cultural similarity were often misinformed. For example, the belief among some Ashanti that all Ghanaians speak Asante Twi is clearly incorrect.[9] Even though Twi is widely spoken in the south of Ghana it is by no means universal and many of those who speak Twi do not speak the Asante dialect. Likewise, some respondents who stated that Ghanaians have religion in common incorrectly thought that Ghana is entirely a Christian country.

Shared country experience

Respondents' answers lend much support to the argument that Ghanaian identity arose in response to commonly experienced socio-political conditions, in particular, the country's peace in a turbulent region. This experience has been internalized by citizens and has produced a consistent national image. The interviews document peace as a crucial element of Ghanaian identity. While the fact that Ghanaians cherish peace might not be surprising, the sheer extent, and the centrality of it to their national perception, is striking. There are several important observations to make about the peace narrative. First, peace is by far the most commonly

invoked word describing what it means to be Ghanaian and what makes Ghanaians distinct. The words “peace”, “peaceful” and “peace-loving” were mentioned 270 times in 142 interviews. Second, the narrative of peace is extremely consistent throughout the country; peace was mentioned by a majority of respondents in every location.[10] All four regions paint a very similar picture of what people understand as the core of national identity, despite the vast socio-economic differences between the four regions. Third, socio-political developments, such as peace, become internalized as characteristics of the people, in that they are viewed not just as a characteristic of Ghana but of *Ghanaians*. Importantly, respondents can see both negative and positive consequences of their national character. Finally, respondents also have the tendency to see other Africans through the lens of socio-political developments in their countries, attributing those developments to people’s national character.

It is clear that political developments, such as peace, have become internalized by the Ghanaian people. As one respondent stated, “our identity is our peace” (A-23). Similarly, another interviewee explained that “There is love and peace here; that’s how we identify” (H-5). Moreover, the peace enjoyed in Ghana is not seen as luck; to most Ghanaians peace is not a coincidence, rather it is a result of the Ghanaian national character and the way that Ghanaians conduct themselves. In this respect, while Ghanaians might not share many cultural traditions, they are understood to share personal qualities and behaviours that define them. Respondents provide very specific illustrations and explanations of the peace-inducing national character. For example, one respondent noted that “we don’t fight, we talk” (A-6). Another suggested that “Ghanaians resolve their disputes” whereas “other Africans fight” (A-7). Similarly, another respondent pointed that “we don’t use force” to resolve issues (N-2).

There was a constant refrain of Ghanaians' *dislike of fighting* and *love of peace*, such as in a statement that "Ghanaians like peace; they don't fight" (A-11) or that "Ghanaians are understanding people who hate strife" (H-2). Numerous respondents stated almost verbatim that "Ghanaians don't like fights" (A-16), (N-3). Others noted that "Ghanaians are not violent" (K-14); in contrast, "others [other Africans] like fighting" (T-13). At the same time, dozens of respondents described how "Ghanaians love peace" (A-31) and "we love each other" (N- 9). Interviewees saw the Ghanaian people as a "nation of peace" (T-25). The term "peace-loving" was very frequently used to describe what Ghanaians have in common, with respondents noting "we are peaceful people" (K-29) and other describing Ghanaians as "peaceful and loving" (T-21). Many believed that they are seen as peaceful people outside of Ghana.

People were clearly taking ownership of peace and attributing it to Ghanaian behaviour. As one respondent noted "Ghanaians *want* peace" (A-24, emphasis added). Even more importantly, another interviewee noted that "we know how to maintain our peace" (T-5), evoking the idea that peace is something that Ghanaians work hard to achieve. These responses were all the more striking because they came from open-ended questions about common characteristics of Ghanaians. There was nothing in the question that would prompt such a response and respondents were never asked about what accounts for peace in Ghana.

Peace was not the only development that was seen as core to the Ghanaian experience. Other respondents also mentioned being free as a characteristic of being Ghanaian, with the word free and freedom appearing 103 times. Freedom referred to both freedom of expression and freedom of movement, with some respondents explaining that "you can roam around" freely in Ghana (T-20). The notion of "roaming freely" described the ability to move around because of

safety and few security concerns (i.e. freedom from violence) but also lack of government restrictions.

Highlighting the impact of countries' trajectories on national imaginings, Ghanaians also described other Africans through this lens. Foreigners were overwhelmingly seen through the prism of events, such as insecurity or terrorism, and people often see violence as *a characteristic* of the people experiencing these events. For example, Nigerians were often seen as contributors to their country's insecurity because "Nigerians like fighting" (A-3) or "Nigerians don't like peace; they like bloodshed" (N-2).

Importantly, while Ghanaians constructed a widespread narrative of themselves as a peace-loving nation, they were not uncritical of themselves. Many respondents were very candid and ready to list Ghanaians' weak spots noting, for example, that "Ghanaians do not like change, which is making the country worse off" (K-7) or that "Ghanaians are peaceful, but selfish sometimes" (K-13). Others noted that "Ghanaians are too religious" (K-25), "We are undeveloped" (K-38), "Ghanaians are filthy, they do not practice cleanliness" (K-47), "Ghanaians are careless" (K-49) and "We don't think fast" (T-15). Thus, respondents are not reflexively prone to put Ghanaians in good light and denigrate foreigners. Rather, they are quite discerning and exercise their judgement in determining what are positive and negative characteristics of their fellow countrymen. They do not say that Ghanaians are good and foreigners are bad; they converged on a very specific understanding of the Ghanaian nation that favours certain positive political developments in their country.

It is useful to briefly discuss the security situation in the region to shed light on why peace would be so central to Ghanaian identity. Simply put, peace and stability in Ghana, especially over the last quarter of a century, sharply contrasts with incidence of conflict and

instability in the region. All of Ghana's neighbouring countries have experienced political strife in the last couple of decades. Its neighbour to the west, Côte d'Ivoire, recently emerged from a civil war and went through bouts of electoral violence. To the north, Burkina Faso, has been rocked by jihadist terrorism. To the east, Togo's long-standing authoritarian regime has seen violent clashes between protesters and security forces. Although it is not a neighbouring country, Nigeria, the "giant" of West Africa and the closest Anglophone country, also serves as a point of reference for Ghanaians. The multiple sources of instability in Nigeria, including terrorist activities of Boko Haram, periodic clashes between Christians and Muslims in the country's so-called Middle Belt and generally elevated levels of crime, provide a stark contrast with Ghana. Admittedly, Ghanaians' descriptions of instability in other parts of West Africa are often imprecise. They are generally aware that there are problems and conflict, but they paint a rather broad picture of widespread and generalized instability in the region, sometimes exaggerating the level of violence. Indeed, as Renan (1882) famously argued, getting facts wrong about one's history vis-à-vis others is a crucial part of making a nation. To the extent that, in Renan's telling, a nation "is a daily plebiscite," which exist when it is continuously affirmed by their citizens, Ghanaians' appreciation of their peace, versus perceived conflict among neighbouring nations, gives Ghanaians clear reasons to affirm their membership in the nation. Thus, regardless of how accurate their perceptions are, they provide tangible comparisons with their own nation.

Importantly, there is a lot of consistency in the narratives collected at the four different locations, despite the socio-economic and demographic differences of the areas. The notion that Ghanaians share a peace-loving character was present in every location. Peace was also the main source of pride everywhere. The prevalence of common narratives across the country support the idea that Ghanaians have a shared understanding of their identity and that peaceful character is a

central part of their national self-conception. They also systematically believe that other Africans view them through that lens. Reponses across sites were consistent, but not identical. Character and peace were most commonly invoked in the capital, whereas in the Kumasi area culture, alongside character, played a more important role than elsewhere in the country. This might not be surprising given that the Ashanti culture and Twi language occupy a more dominant position than other sub-cultures and languages in Ghana. While due to the nature and size of the samples, I cannot offer definitive comparisons between regions, these patterns hint that shared national character might be a particularly appealing conception of national identity in non-dominant and culturally diverse settings.

Conclusion

Addressing the mismatch between the limitations of formal state-led nation-building programs and the robust levels of national identity in Africa, this article suggested an additional pathway towards the emergence of national attachment, based on shared country-level experience and divergent socio-political trajectories. Common developments and lived experiences, as well as differences with others, can create resonant national imaginings. Given the human tendency to attribute events to people's characteristics rather than circumstances, different socio-economic outcomes can generate narratives about national characters. Because these imaginings are based on rather rudimentary information, they can flourish even in information-poor settings. The interview data from four regions of Ghana highlight the prevalence of narratives of peace as the defining characteristic of the Ghanaian nation. Although some scholars see peace as detrimental to nation-building (Herbst 2000), the case of Ghana shows that peace can actually become the centrepiece of national imaginings. While Ghanaians

can be quite critical about themselves, they ascribe their country's peace to Ghanaians' character rather than favourable circumstances. The conflict elsewhere in West Africa reinforced respondents' perception of a distinct Ghanaian national character. While the mechanism of accidental emergence of national identities should travel to other African countries, the specific content of national narratives will differ. Peace is certainly not the only event that could produce national imaginings and I expect that people in other nations will build their national narratives around other salient experiences, be they hardship, which breads resilience, or prosperity, which highlights entrepreneurial spirit or savvy. Many Zimbabweans feel that what makes them distinct is their resilience fostered through years of economic decline under Robert Mugabe.[11] Even in European countries, it is worth examining to what degree political trajectories, such as the Swiss history of neutrality, are central to national identity. Studying the salience of national identity in Africa can helps us re-examine what we know about nation-building and how it comes about.

Endnotes

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[1] See Posner 2004 for various fractionalization indices. Ghana scores relatively high on all of them, be it ELF (0.71), Posner's PREG (0.44) or several others.

[2] This question was asked in rounds 3 through 7 but not in rounds 1 and 2.

[3] Tanzania is often portrayed as an exception (e.g. Miguel 2004).

[4] Depetris-Chauvin and Durante (2017) show that following victories of national teams in important matches, people report lesser sense of ethnic identity.

[5] The concept of stereotype is commonly associated with Walter Lippmann's 1922 book, *Public Opinion* (Newman 2009).

[6] E.g. Brewer & Gardner 1996. See also Robinson 2016 for discussion.

[7] Moreover, linked fate is typically a *manifestation,* rather than a *cause* of, national identity.

[8] All interviews were anonymous. Interview codes refer to the location and respondent number at a given location. A stands for Accra, N for Nsawam, part of Greater Accra region, K for Kumasi area, T for Tamale area, and H for Ho area. Interviews in Accra and Nsawam were conducted in August 2017 and in Kumasi, Tamale and Ho in August 2018.

[9] Albaugh 2014 shows that around 50% of Ghanaians speak languages belonging to the Akan group, which includes Asante Twi.

[10] 30 respondents in Kumasi, 32 in Tamale, 34 in Ho and 46 in Accra.

[11] Author field notes, Botswana, May 2019.

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