

A History of European Acquisition of African Territories and Definition of their Boundaries, 1884 up to
the 20th Century

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to highlight and examine the various means the European powers used in acquiring the African territories and defines their colonial boundaries, with the view to establish how this single act, impacted on the existing historical thrust and continuity of the African growth, whether in cultural development, economic growth, or state-building. The study argued that, seizure of African territories by the European powers remained the major frame work for the imposition of formal colonization of Africa, thereby a denial of sovereignty to Africa. Meanwhile, such international boundaries or borders as were created by the European powers remained the major source of inter-ethnic and intra-state conflicts in Africa over the years. The Study adopts simple descriptive analysis of all historical data collated to achieve the objective of the study.

Introduction

Africa from all indications has a long history of series of migration and invasion of foreigners from Phoenicia, Greek, Romans, Arabs, India, Turkey, and the Western European societies.¹ Self-interest based on economic, political, military, and cultural prestige was fundamental factors that attracted each of these groups in to continent of Africa. Significant in this development within the continent was the varying degree of influx of explorers, merchants, and missionaries from Europe accompanied with significance new tides of forces such as industrial expansion and mercantilist concepts, abolitionists sentiments, and projects of foreign missions, doctrines and practices of racial superiority, the favour of European nationalism, and the dissemination of firearms.²

These forces made European presence ominous because it represented a great potential power than any previous alien groups mentioned so far. One then is not surprised when the inquiring explorers, missionaries, and merchant became the precursors of European colonial rule in Africa. Legitimizing this process was the 1884/85 Berlin Conference. Fundamentally, it did not only accelerated the shift from informal to formal involvement of Europeans in African politics, but led to the drawing of artificial boundaries which defined areas claimed by the various European power in Africa not minding its implications on the historically contiguous and closely related African communities. It is evidence that the single act obstructed the existing historical thrust and continuity of the African growth, whether in cultural development, economic growth, or state-building.³

Conceptual Frameworks

There is no agreed universal definition of boundary. In most case, the term is used inter-changeably to mean 'frontier' or 'boarder'. In the perspective of Akinyele, R. T, boundaries mark the limit to political

¹ J. Harris, Africa and their History, Penguin Group, New York, 1987, p.185.

² J. Harrison, p. 185.

³ J. Harrison,p.186..

jurisdictions.⁴ Situated in colonial African concept of boundaries, one would say boundaries are mere administrative lines drawn to separate contiguous states by demarcating their areas of jurisdictions and territorial sovereignty. From geographical perspective, Adelamo see boundaries as the limit beyond which a phenomenon is no longer dominant. It contains in it a notion of contact, which may be point form, linear or areal.⁵ A boundary to Onovoghe, may be real or imposed. In a partial contact, a boundary represent areas of various shapes, whose scores and peripheries can be distinguished for other contiguous or adjacent geographical area.⁶

Meanwhile, international boundaries refers to boundaries as were created in Africa by the colonial powers without due consideration of the socio-cultural, historical and political implication of the demarcation exercise. The whole experience arose from the power rivalry among European powers during the Berlin conference in 1884/85. The reason for the balkanization and partition of Africa was based on the quest for power and ensuring equilibrium. Reacting to the above, Asiwaju argued that, the 1884/85 Berlin West African Conference which led to the balkanization of Africa was essentially European affairs, there was no African representative and African concern were, if they matter, at all, completely marginal to the basic economic strategy and political interest of the negotiating European powers.⁷ Because the Europeans were in a hurry to achieving their economic interest in the partition, without due consideration to study the geography of Africa, there is no type of boundary be it,

⁴ R. T. Akinyele, 'Cross Boarder Cooperation Initiatives and the Potential Strategies for Boarder Community', A Paper Presented at the National Conference on Implementation Strategies for Boarder Community Development in Nigeria, Abuja, 2nd -3rd December, 2008. Cited in Onovoghe, Ikelegbe, Peaceful Co-existence and Sustainable Boarder Development between Nigeria and her Neighbours, Leo, E (ed) in History Unlimited, Essay in Honour of Professor Abendnego Ekoko, Minders Publishers CO. Ltd, Nigeria, 2012, p436

⁵ I. A. Adelamo, "The Concept of Boundaries in Geography", Akinyele, R.T., (ed) in Academic Decipline and Boarder Studies, Lagos, 2007, pp.15-28.

⁶ I. Onovoghe, Peaceful Co-existence and Sustainable Boarder Development-----p.436.

⁷ A. I. Asuwaju, Partition Africans: Ethnic Relations Across African International Boundaries, 1884/84, C. Hurst, Co. Publishers, Ltd, UK, 1985, P. vii.

astronomical line or mathematic lines or boundary based on relief features, that do not suffer for the defect of cutting across and thereby, dividing the territory of many African peoples.⁸

Boundaries in modern time had facilitated group contact and formed bridges of cooperation as well as promote socio-political and economic exchange such as those of the European Union. In Africa, the situation is quite different; rather, boundaries have continued to serve as culture of conflicts among African states. Ajiji, D. N is right when he observed that, apart from the divisions which arise routinely from the partition and creation of boundaries in Africa, partitioned groups were further pulled apart in consequent of the opposing integration process set in motion by the different states.⁹ Such process, Asuwaju argued, have blended to make the divided groups to look at different political, economic, and social direction.¹⁰

This no doubt had effects on the partiton culture areas. As a matter of fact, this manifested in the different policies individual African state pursue in matters of currency, politics, trade, transport, etc. The efforts to further encourage separation among Africans is the systematic application of names for the same people to distinguish between those on different sides of particular inter-state boundaries, as evidence in Nigeria nation and her immediate neighbours. This phenomenon dated back to the period when boundaries were created by the colonial powers in Africa.¹¹ The above development provides the opening for the study on the boundary demarcation and character of European boundary taking a historical reflection on the 1884/85 Berlin Conference.

Background to African Boundary Creation

⁸ R. O. Udoh, *The Human Geography of Tropical Africa*, Edicational Books, Nigeria, Ltd, 1992, pp.209-121.

⁹D. N. Ajiji, *Colonialism and Inter-Group Relations in Central Nigeria Highlands: The Afezere Story*, Aboki Publishers, Nigeria, 2011, p33..

¹⁰ A. I. Asuwaju, *Partition Africans: Ethnic Relations Across African International Boundaries, 1884/84*, pp.vii-viii.

¹¹ D. N. Ajiji, *Colonialism and Inter-Group Relations---*p.33.

It is already established that contact between Africa and the European world had been long before the 19th century. The earliest contact was motivated by an urge for primitive accumulation.¹² Rightly placed in the view of Magdolf as cited by Yankadi, it was the well trodden path to plunder, piracy annexation of foreign territories.¹³ The historical explanation here is that, conquests, enslavement among other cruel forces were part and parcels of primitive accumulation. Drawing a submission by Karl Marx, Yakadi, A. I hold the view that, primitive accumulation secretly is an accumulation that is not the result of the capitalist mode of production, but a complete beginning of the process.¹⁴

It begins the historical process of depriving the producer from the means of production, and it also appears as primitive because it is the prehistoric stage of capital and of the mode of production corresponding with it.¹⁵ There is no doubt that the urge for this primitive accumulation was instrumental for the emergence of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in between the 16th and the opening phases of the 19th century. The impact of this development was the apportioning the bulk responsibility for the production of surplus human labour in the America and the Caribbean islands. The slave trade had a devastating effect on Africa and made them easy prey for colonialism. Whereas the European slave traders were content in dealing with coastal communities, the colonialist was destined at occupying the length and breadth of the African continent. Expedition in to the interiors were financed and sponsored by European governments, commercial companies or by learned societies.¹⁶ Beginning from the late 18th

¹² A. I Yandaki, *The State in Africa: A Critical Study in Historiography and Political History*, Gaskiya Corporation Ltd, Kaduna, (Nigeria), 2015, p.116.

¹³ H. Magdolf, 'Imperialism: A Historical Survey' H. Alavi and Shanin, T. (ED) IN *Introduction to the Sociology of "Developing Societies"*, Macmillan, London, p.11. Cited in A. I Yandaki, *The State in Africa: A Critical Study in Historiography and Political History*, Gaskiya Corporation Ltd, Kaduna, (Nigeria), 2015, p.116.

¹⁴ A. I Yandaki, *The State in Africa*: p.116. K. Marx, See'Part r. m. Hutchins (ed), *Eight'Great Books of Western World*, William Benton Publishers, London, 1977.

¹⁵ K. Marx, See'Part r. m. Hutchins (ed), *Eight Great Books of Western World*, William Benton Publishers, London, 1977, p.354.

¹⁶ U. O. Umozuerike, *International Law and Colonization of Africa*, Nwamife Publishers, Ltd, Enugu, (Nigeria), 1979, p17.

century to the first half of the 19th century, twenty exploring expeditions were recorded. The number rose to twenty-seven between 1851 and 1860, twenty-nine between 1861 and 1870, forty-seven between 1871 and 1880, and eighty-four between 1881 and 1890.¹⁷

Satisfied with the role the slave trade had accomplished its role in the international system; it was abolished and gave way for legitimate trade built-up of merchant capitalism.¹⁸ These changes arose from the fact in the one hundred years before 1880s; Europe has improved dramatically in the use of new sources of energy, in applying science and technology to production. The industrial revolution began in England in the 18th century but later in the 19th century, it spread to other European states like Belgium, France, Germany, and Italy by the close of the century. Consequently, Europe in the 19th century was described as the 'workshop of the world' with an insatiable appetite for the raw materials to feed her industries and an ever awaking eye on the growth of markets for her industrial products.¹⁹ As more the number of industrial firms' increased, mass competition became the order of the day. Consequently by the late 19th century, this concern about sources of raw materials became more obvious in many European countries than ever before.

By the close of the 19th century, it was practical that European industries were in a depressed situation therefore called for government protection on the industrialist and their businesses. As official regulations, they asked the government to enforce high tariff in their national markets to keep out foreign goods. Several European countries complied bringing to an end the era of free trade in most part of Europe. On the contrary, V. I Lenin drew our attention to three basic implications of this action. First, the period in Europe could be seen as an era of monopolistic stage of capitalism. Second, it represents a

¹⁷ Y. Savelyev, *The World and Africa: An Outline History of Africa*, Moscow, Cited in U. O. Umozuerike, *International Law and Colonization of Africa*, Nwamife Publishers, Ltd, Enugu, (Nigeria), 1979, p17.

¹⁸ A. I Yandaki, *The State in Africa*;, p.117.

¹⁹ J. Gavin, 'The Invasion of Africa', E. A Ayandele et al 9ed0 in *The Growth of African Civilization: The Making of Modern Africa*, Vol2, the Late 19th Century to the Present Day, Longman, London, 1971, p.4.

stage that would have further effects in the economic and political sphere. For instance, it could lead to among others, the seizure of the sources of raw materials by the trusts of the 'oligarchy', and the 'partition of the world'. The third possible would be the export of capital different from the export of commodities under non-monopoly capitalism.²⁰ In the height of the above crisis, there must be assured way out for the capitalist European nations.

The better alternative was acquisition of colonies outside Europe, and the alternative was the continent of Africa. Africa as envisaged by the Europeans offered new cultivatable land for the production of food. The industrial revolution required raw materials such as palm oil and kernel, Cotton, rubber, timber, ivory, hides, and skins. Significant in this regards was the demand for expanding markets for European manufactured goods especially of the inferior types.²¹

The European was highly optimistic that Africa could supply cheap raw materials for the upkeep of their industries, because they had already had the knowledge of African performance in the plantations in America and the Caribbean during the slave era. They had also had the conviction that, what competitive capitalist industry requires from Africa would be not only the supply of labour by mere peripheral contacts, but Plantations had to be equipped, labour force had to be recruited, by way of conscription, roads and railways to the ports and from them to the place of consumers had to be constructed so that European consumable goods could be sold. All these demands strong did not only require control, but a total control of the entire continent..²²

The above therefore implies a formal call for the extension of the political sovereignty of the European state over African territories. It could be taken to mean what A. I Ayandaki referred to as the birth of institutionalization of the colonial state in Africa.²³ By this, the stage for scramble and partition of Africa

²⁰ V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1939,

²¹ U. O. Umozuerike, *International Law and Colonization of Africa*---p.18.

²² J. Maquet, *Africanity*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1072, Cited in A. I Yandaki, *The State in Africa*;, p.120.

²³ A. I Yandaki, P.121.

was set. Even though European annexation of some African states began many years back before 1884, this particular date laid the foundation for political colonization of Africa.

The Berlin Conference, 1884/85 and the Acquisition of African Territories

The principle modes of European acquisition of Africa territories came in various stages. During the scramble for Africa at the close of the 19th century, the various European powers lay claim to virtually the entire continent. As reported by Martin Meredith, At meetings in Berlin, Paris, London, and other capitals, Europeans statesmen and diplomats bargained over the separate spheres of interest they intended to establish there. Their knowledge of the vast Africa was very little. Hitherto Europeans had known Africa more as a coastline than as continent; their presence had been confined mainly to small isolated enclaves on the coast used for traditional purpose; only in Algeria and in Sothern Africa had more substantial European settlement taken root.²⁴

As the business of apportioning African territories in Europe continued, the land and people back home in Africa became little more than pieces on a chessboard,²⁵ while the exercise itself was celebrated in Europe. Lord Salisbury, the then British Prime Minister commented carelessly to his London audience, we have been giving away mountains, rivers, and lakes to each other, only hindered by small impediment that we never knew exactly where they were.

A general overview of the Berlin meeting shows that:

²⁴M. Martin, *The State of Africa: A History of 50years of Independence*, Simon and Schuster, London, 2006, p.1.

²⁵ M. Martin, p.2.

The maps used to carve up the African continent were mostly inaccurate, large areas were described as terra incognita. When marking out the boundaries of their new territories, European negotiators frequently resorted to drawing straight lines on the maps, taking little or no account of the myriad of traditional monarchies, chiefdoms, and other African societies that existed on the ground. Nearly one half of the new frontiers imposed on Africa were geometric lines, lines of latitude and longitude, other straight lines or arcs of circles. In some case, Africa societies were rent apart: The Bakongo was partitioned between French Congo, Belgian Congo, and Portuguese Angola. Somaliland was carved up between Britain, Italy, and France. In all, the new boundaries cut through some 190 cultural groups. In other case, Europe's new colonial territories enclosed hundreds of diverse and independent groups, with no common history, culture, language or religion.²⁶

More importantly to note is that, some kingdom remained intact. For instance, the French retained the monarch n Moroccan in Tunisia, the British ruled Egypt in the same name of Dynasty of foreign monarchs founded in 1811 by an Albanian mercenary serving in the Turkish army. Other kingdoms like Ghana (Gold Coast), Zambia, were merged in to larger colonial units. Meanwhile, kingdoms that had been historically antagonistic to one another, such as Buganda and Bunyoro in Uganda were merged in to one colony. In the Sahel, new territories were created across the great divide between the desert regions of the Sahara and the belt of tropical forests to the south-Sudan, Chad, and Nigeria- throwing together Muslim and non-Muslim peoples in latent hostility. By the time the scramble for Africa was over, over ten (10,000) African polities had been amalgamated into fourty European colonies and protectorate, giving birth to modern states of Africa.

Treaties of Cession and Conquest

On the ground, European acquisition of African territories was enforced both by treaty and by conquest. From their coast settlement, European official move far into the Africa hinterlands to proclaim the changes agreed in the Europe. Recognizing the authorities of African rulers, kings, and chiefs, European military expeditions hastened concluded treaties with African chiefs and rulers in which they were

²⁶ M. Martin, pp.1-2.

forced to surrender their sovereignty or to request for European protection.²⁷ Obstacles hitherto regarded as insurmountable were quickly overcome. Such treaties which were not fully understood by the African rulers, were regarded as the complete surrender of sovereignty right to the European invaders in disguise for “protection.

Through the signing of such treaties, the African chiefs lost their independence. Commenting on this subject, Ronald Oliver quoted Sir Harry Johnson as saying that, the treaties signed by Johnson on ...expedition...were in the foreign office records... They are simple documents... by which the dignitaries declared himself at peace with the queen of England, agreed to admit British subjects to his country, and to submit all disputes to Her Majesty’s representatives... When the protectorates were later established, it was done by proclamation without reference to the treaties, and it applied equally to those groups which had signed and to those which had not.²⁸

In most areas of Africa, blank treaty forms were provided where African rulers append their signatures. Typical of such treaties were provided by a British company in Africa, the Royal Niger Company, in its drive to acquire African sovereignty right in the Niger Valley. In one of such documents, it reads:

We the undersigned chiefs of, with the view of bettering the conditions of our country and people, do this day cede to the Royal Niger Company (Chartered and Limited), for the whole of our territory extending from.... We also give to the said Royal Niger Company full power to

²⁷ Morocco concluded treaty with France in 1631, France with Algeria in 1666, Tunisia in 1777, cited in A. I Yandaki, P.22.

²⁸ R, Oliver, Sir Harry Johnson and the Scramble for African, London, 1957, p.160 as quoted in A. I Yandaki, The State in Africa: A Critical Study in Historiography and Political History, Gaskiya Corporation Ltd, Kaduna, (Nigeria), 2015, pp.124-125.

settle native disputes arising from any cause, whatever, and we pledge ourselves not to enter into any way with other tribes without the sanction of the said Royal Niger Company...

We understood that the said Royal Niger Company... have full power to mine, farm, and build in any portion. We find ourselves not to have any intercourse with any strangers or foreigners except through the said Royal Niger Company...

The said Royal Niger Company agreed to pay native owners of land a rescannable amount of money for any portion they may require. The said Royal Niger Company binds them to protect the said chiefs from the attacks of any neighbouring aggressive tribes...

We the undersigned witnesses, do hereby solemnly declare that the chiefs whose names are placed opposite their respective crosses have in our presence affixed their crosses of own free will and consent, and that the saidhas in our presence affixed his signature.

Done in triplicate at...this...day of 188...

This having been done, the interpreter declares thus:

I, ...of ..., do hereby solemnly declare that, I am well acquainted with the language of the country, and that, on the ...day of ...,188..., truly and faithfully explained the above Agreement to all the chiefs present, and they understood its meaning.²⁹

The development represents the various ways African chiefs in Africa signed away their territories to the predecessors of the colonial state in Africa.

Inter-European Bilateral Treaties

²⁹ An extract from Edward Horslet, the Map of Africa by Treaty, London, 1894, p.467. Cited A. I Yandaki, The State in Africa, p.126.

Since Africans were denied international personality, their future was decided by bilateral treaties entered in to by the European states. The recognition of the European states of the exclusive right of one of them over a territory provided sufficient title in international law.³⁰ What implies here is that, the recognition of this law served as encouragement and a challenge to transfer a mere claim into actual occupation. This recognition followed the exercise of one or more of the modes already discussed. Chapter VI³¹ spelt out the modus operandi for future acquisition of territories and the formal recognition of existing practices. Section XXXIV of this Act prescribed thus: Any power which henceforth take possession of a trace of land on the coast of African continent outside of its possession, as well as the power which assumes a protectorate there shall accompany the respective Act with a notification thereof, address to the other signatory powers of the present Act, in order to enable them, if need be, to make good claim of the land.³²

Since the above signatory powers of the aforesaid Act recognized the obligation of the European powers to establish authority in a region occupied, sometimes, Territories were acquired by prescription. The point here means that, occupation of a territory for a long time period without any challenge by any fellow European power was regarded as evidence of

³⁰ U. O. Umozuerike, International Law and Colonization of Africa----p.24.

³¹ U. O. Umozuerike, p.24.

³² U. O. Umozuerike, p.24.

title to such a territory. Prescription tended to rectify, confirm, or modify title already claimed.³³

Confidence in such Act, African territories was reshuffle at will. A major one occurred as the result of the First World War. German colonies (territories) were shared among other European powers- France, Britain, Belgium, and the Union of South Africa, a British dominion founded in 1910. As is clearly indicated by U. O. Umozuerike, Tanganyika was handed over to Britain, South West Africa to South Africa, Rwanda-Burundi were given to Belgium, while Togoland and Cameroon were divided between Britain and France respectively. Desperate to appreciate one another after the First World War, Britain surrounded Juba land to Italy to form part of Italian Somaliland.³⁴

In such exercise of colonial takeover, only Ethiopia, an Ancient Africa Christian African state, once ruled by the legendary Pester John, was able to escape the onslaught of the European occupation during the scramble. It could be recalled that, when in 1896 Italy invaded Ethiopia from their coastal enclave at Mansawa on the Red sea, they were forced out by the then Emperor Menelik. However, forty years after, determined to bring to bear an East Africa Empire, Italy under Bonito Mussolini took a revenge through the use of military forces, captured Addis Ababa, forcing the Emperor Haile Slassie to exile in England. Consequently, Ethiopia became Italian territory, added to her possession of Eritrea and Somaliland.³⁵

Having achieved the long imagined Africa potentials structured in the acquisition of her territories, the various European powers then lost much of their earlier interest in these territories. As noted by M. Martin, Colonial government all African states became more concerned with making their territories

³³ E. Hertslet, "The Map of Africa by Treaty 486. The Participants were Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, and Norway, Turkey and USA,(the last failed to ratify it.). Cited in U. O. Umozuerike, p.24.

³⁴ M. Martin, pp.4.

self-supporting. Administration was thus kept to minimum education was placed in the hands of Christian Missionaries, economic activities were left to commercial companies, while the main function of government were limited to maintaining law and order, raising taxation and provision of infrastructures such as roads and railways..³⁶

Impact of Colonial Boundaries on Africa

It is noted that the artificial boundaries as were created by European colonial powers had the effect of bringing the people together many different ethnic nationalities within nations that did not have the ability to accommodate or provide for the cultural and ethnic diversity. Indeed, this negligence on their part has come to constitute the major source of conflicts in the post-colonial states in Africa. In his response to the above development, Austen Asiwaju attributed these conflicts to European imperialism in Africa.³⁷

In the face of this difficulties faced by African resulting from the imbalanced distribution of territories and creation of Westphalia boundaries, some scholar have argued that, in some ways, the restrictions placed or imposed by the colonial maps, boundaries and demarcations are also limited in some sense. Commenting on this, Aliyu, and Efem N. Ubi, cited the views of some scholars that: The existing boundaries are arbitrary and confer 'juridical statuses on the

³⁶ M. Martin, pp.4-5..

³⁷ A. Asiwaju, "Cross Boarder Relations in Africa: A Comparative Perspective with Special Referenceto Nigeriaand her Proximate Neighbours", A Paper Presented at the National Seminar on the Management of African Borders, August 7th, 2001. See also R.Austen, ";Mapping African Problems of Regional Definitions and colonial/ National Boundaries", Adapted from a workshop Organized by the Center for Latin American, Middle Eastern , Este Assi, South Asia, and Estern Europe/ Rissia/Euroasian Studies and the Committee on Africa Studies at the University of Chicago, June, 18-29, 2001, as cited in Aliyu, and Efem N. Ubi, pp.260-261.

colonial states that are operated on the bases of agreements among the colonial powers rather than real consensus and integration of the resident populations into real political entities. As a consequence of the arbitrary nature of their evolution under colonialism, today, no other regions of the world can match the nationalities issues and challenges facing the modern states in Africa.³⁸

The above situation became eminent at the point of European decisions at the Berlin Conference table where a map of the continent was simply used to share up the territories among the various European powers and their interest in Africa. This has the consequences of distorting existing communities, kingdoms, and political arrangements and dislocating tribal/ethnic groups and off course, thereby creating multinational colonial states which laid the foundation for inter-group, inter-state, and intra-state conflicts within and amongst the unwilling cohabitants of the various Africa states.³⁹

Conclusion

One most important event recorded within the African continent by the 19th century was the undue varying degree of influx of European powers accompanied with significance new tides of forces that culminated in portioning of the African territories among the various European groups in Africa. Legitimizing this process was the 1884/85 Berlin Conference. Fundamentally, it did not only accelerated the shift from informal to formal involvement of Europeans in African politics, but led to the drawing of artificial boundaries which defined areas claimed by the various European power in Africa. What

³⁸ Aliyu, and Efem N. Ubi, p.262.

³⁹ B. Hurhes, Continuity and Change inWorld Politics Competing Perspectives, Printice-Hall, Inc, New Jersey,1997.

ultimately resulted was a drawing of geometric boundaries that divided Africa into fifty irregular countries. This new map of the continent was superimposed over thousands of indigenous cultures and regions of Africa. The new countries lacked rhyme or reason and divided coherent groups of people and merged together diverse ethnic nationalities.

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