



## The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-state

*By Basil Davidson*

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Basil Davidson on the nation-state in Africa and its huge disappointments, its relationship to the colonial years and the parallels with events in Eastern Europe. North America: Times/Random House

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The postcolonial countries of Africa turned to nationalism as a liberating force, but as Davidson observes in this profound inquiry, the modern African nation-state has meant harsh dictatorships, massive poverty and ever-increasing transfer of wealth to the industrialized world. Author of more than 20 books about Africa ( *The African Genius* ), he traces the roots of this crisis to Africans' slavishly copying European models of governance and denying their own past. Tribalism in Africa, he argues, has often been a force for good, creating progressive civil societies that were eventually undermined by alien rule and imperialist partition. Surveying nascent movements for democracy from Eritrea to South Africa, he sees the beginnings of a new politics of decentralization and grass-roots participation in self-government. With a masterful knowledge of the whole continent as is, evokes--is?--racist stereotype , Davidson in this energizing meditation delivers a powerful rejoinder to pessimists who would write off contemporary Africa.

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From Library Journal

In this thought-provoking book, Davidson, a prolific, longtime writer of African history and politics, discusses not only Africa and its overwhelming problems but also draws comparisons of the conditions and the causes of Africa's malaise with those of Central and Eastern Europe both in 1918 and today. He details the legacy of imperialism and the failures of the nation-states of Africa after independence. In a surprising conclusion, Davidson sees the ground for hope "in one or another mode of the politics of participation." He points to the Economic Community for West African States and the Southern African Development Coordination Conference as proposing projects that have "supposed a gradual dismantlement of the nation-statist legacy derived from imperialism, and the introduction of participatory structures within a wide regionalist framework." He reminds us finally that "even those most nationalist of peoples, the English and the French, might before long find themselves without sacred and sovereign frontiers between them."

Recommended as a thought-provoking purchase.

- *Maidel Cason, Univ. of Delaware Lib., Newark*

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From Kirkus Reviews

For 40 years, Davidson (*Can Africa Survive?*, 1974, etc.) has fought to secure Africa's place in world history. The stakes in this battle have been more than academic, as the commonly accepted notion that "Africa had no history" served as justification for the European colonial domination of the continent and its peoples. Here, Davidson shows how that historical denial not only allowed colonialism to take root but also contributed to the imposition of European-style national governments after independence. At independence, according to Davidson, a Western-educated African elite rose to power over traditional African leaders because it was commonly assumed that Africa had no indigenous models for ruling nation-states. Gathering the historical evidence, Davidson shows that, before the imposition of colonialism in the late 19th century, Africa was well along in the process of evolving its own models for the nation-state. The Asante kingdom of modern-day Ghana, for example, was "manifestly a national state on its way to becoming a nation-state with every attribute ascribed to a Western European nation-state." Historians, though, neglected or were unaware of Africa's rich political history; and so Davidson portrays an Africa stripped of tradition. Africans under colonialism were told that, in order to be civilized, they must cease being African--while at the same time they could never be European. Ironically, this view didn't change after independence, with adherence to African tradition still derided as "tribalism" and seen as an obstacle to development. What Africa's leaders

inherited, says Davidson, was "a crisis of social disintegration." From here he charts the plummeting spiral of economic and social decay that has brought Africa to its current political crisis. Davidson's reach extends through medieval Europe, 19th-century Japan, and to the quandary faced by Eastern European nations today. He offers a rich and fascinating history, essential for any understanding of modern Africa's troubles--and a welcome contrast to the blame-the-Africans-for-their-problems books that have proliferated in the past decade. -- *Copyright ©1992, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

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