

Why they might have gone wild: the Yorubas of southwestern Nigeria and the politics of the First Republic

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Abstract

This paper argues that contrary to the general belief that the Yorubas or the westerners through their unconventional mode of politicking destroyed Nigeria's first republic, the seeds of destruction were first sown in 1914 when Lord Frederick Lugard, the British chief imperial agent amalgamated the various autochthonous communities into one capitalist state. Drawing from the frustration-aggression theory as discernible in the works of Gurr (1970, 2000; Feierabend and Feierabend, 1972; Louis and Snow, 1981; Ellingsen, 2000; Stewart, 2000, 2002), the paper submits that if other ethnic groups had found themselves 'trapped' in similar conditions, their reactions could have not have more been different. The paper recommends that revisiting the 1914 episode should be the major agenda for 'peacing' Nigeria together from the pieces.

Keywords: Yorubas, South Western Nigeria, Politics, Nigeria, First Republic

"The west is now wise west" –
 Atiku Abubakar, 2003

Introduction

The statement above by the Nigeria's second executive vice-president, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, epitomizes the misconception which many politicians and people, mostly from the non-Yoruba areas had, over the years, about the Yoruba's approach to politics. Indeed, prior to the 2003 general elections, in Nigeria, which in democratization literature, constitute the 'second election' (see Omotola, 2004); there were deep apprehension in government and security circles, that the fourth republic like the previous ones might be violently consumed by political wild fire. Especially, the South-west, the territorial base of the Yoruba ethnic group, was recognized by the federal government, controlled by the People Democratic Party (PDP), and its agencies especially the security section, as the likely area of violence (Odion-Akhaine 2003;Ukoh, 2003:12).

However, as it turned out, the region never witnessed violence of unimaginable proportion before and after the election. In fact, the people of the region peacefully and 'wisely' voted for the parties and candidates of their choices (Ogunsanwo 2003:C8). As one source puts it, "the people of the region proved pundits and political soothsayers wrong by becoming 'wiser' and not 'wilder' (Basiru, 2012). What accounted for this paradigm shift? Were the people of the southwest really violent politically? What might have accounted for their violent actions in the country's first republic? Answering these and similar questions inform this study. Specifically, we interrogate, in retrospective fashion, the undercurrents of the political crisis that engulfed the western region of Nigeria in the first republic. In an addendum, we will probe into why similar patterns were not replicated in 2003.

To achieve this objective, the study is composed in a number of sections. Section Two chronicles the pre-colonial politics of the Yorubas. The third section looks at the political evolution of the Yoruba nation prior to independence in 1960. Section Four examines the genesis of the western region's crisis of 1965. The fifth section attempts a parallel between the politics of the era and that of the present in an attempt to obtain valuable lessons. Section Six concludes the paper with a number of submissions.

Yoruba's politics and society in pre-colonial Nigeria

As once remarked by the great Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) in his famous book *Politics* (1962:28), "man is by nature is a political animal". The implication of Aristotle's remarks is that man as a gregarious being cannot exist in social vacuity. Inevitably, he must associate with others in the community in order to realize his objectives. Aristotle theorized that people can only express their nature as reasonable, virtuous beings in an institutionalized setting. Specifically, the Athenian *polis* of his time symbolized such a setting. What can be inferred from Aristotle's classical thesis is that politics pervades everywhere and is conducted within the confines of the state. In other words, the state is the area of politics. These views were re-echoed by an American political scientist, David Easton (1965). He asserted that politics encompasses every human action because it involves the authoritative allocation of values.

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The positions of these thinkers affirm the inevitability of authoritative institutions, or states in human societies. These institutions, no matter how rudimentary, give order and coherence to social formations. As Yakubu (2006:16) lucidly remarks: 'We would like to say that all societies, regardless of their levels of sophistication must, perforce, have a form, if not substance of, in a more technical sense, a system of governance'. In Africa, contrary to the positions of some Eurocentric and racially-biased historians that pre-colonial African societies were stateless (Mangut, 2012:369), radical African historians and social scientists have contended that some great kingdoms in Africa had sophisticated systems of administration (see Otite, 1978; Nugent and Asiwaju, 1986).

If African societies were devoid of a state structure as claimed by these racialists, the poser is: why did the British through Lord Lugard choose to preserve the existing political institution? Answering this question is outside the scope of this paper; much ink has been spilled on it elsewhere (Lugard, 1926; Coleman 1958; Faston, 1963; Ejiomofor, 1987; Young, 1994).

The point being made here is that politics in Africa before the colonial imposition of the Weberian state was played in an institutionalized setting. This was exactly the case of the Yoruba people of the present-day Nigeria before the advent of colonialism. To begin with, the Yorubas, who occupy the south western part of modern day Nigeria and speak a language called Yoruba, trace their origins to a common ancestor known as Oduduwa.

In fact, myth had it that Oduduwa founded the city of Ile- Ife, in the present day Osun state, one of the federating units in Nigeria. Today, the city is still regarded as the cradle of Yoruba civilization or simply the source. The founder of the ancient city, Oduduwa, we were told, dispatched his sons to establish cities and kingdoms around Ile-Ife. As Oyeleye (2010:272) remarks:

by the end of the sixteenth century, the political organization of most Yoruba kingdoms were complete and broadly similar. Each kingdom consisted of a capital town, a number of subordinate towns, villages, markets and farmlands and kingdoms whose rulers claimed descent from Oduduwa and ruled a clearly defined territory.

However, with the passage of time, some of these cities became very large and even surpassed Ile-Ife in terms of power and prestige. At this point in history, Ile-Ife, like Rome of antiquity, became the spiritual rallying point for all Yorubas. As it waned in prominence, Oyo, one of the cities founded by the children of Oduduwa, became the most powerful and prominent (Falola, 1999:20). Records had it that it came into existence in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries (Ade-Ajayi 1998:12). Its capital was old Oyo, which was located in the savannah area close to the River Niger. Interestingly, through wars and conquests, the Oyo empire expanded in all directions. By the sixteenth century, it had evolved a unique political system under the rulership of Alaafin, who was assisted in the day-to-day administration by a council of state called the Oyomesi.

Apart from the institution of Oyomesi, other organs that assisted the paramount head, the Alaafin, in the daily administration of the empire were: secret societies, age grades, war councils, etc. Within the city, the Alaafin-in-council was complemented in the discharge of its administrative duties by sectional/ward heads. These subordinate chiefs were in charge of the various peripheral provinces.

It should, however, be noted that at these peripheries the same form and substance of governance were replicated. Indeed, in each of the established kingdom, the Oba, assisted by the council of chiefs and other agencies, administered each kingdom. However, the peripheral Oba had to pay homage to the Alaafin through tributes and taxes.

Flowing from this illustration, it can be said that the political system was pyramidal in nature. In other words, the authority of the Alaafin was not only limited to the city centre where he reigned, but permeated all the nooks and crannies of the empire. Oyeleye (2010:273) described the scenario in this way: 'There is no doubt that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Old Oyo was the dominant political power because it succeeded in incorporating all kingdoms in Yorubaland into a single political system'. However, by the early nineteenth century, things fell apart, the empire like the great Roman Empire, disintegrated due to a combination of internal and external factors (see Johnson 1921).

The disintegration of the empire had monumental implications for its people. Specifically, it led to population displacement which ultimately altered the demographic pattern of the area. During the period, the Old Oyo city centre became desolate. In the process, new towns developed.

In the absence of the 'head' following the collapse of the empire, the whole of Yorubaland was embroiled in war as each tribe attempted to ensure its supremacy over others. Records have it that the sixteen years of inter-tribal war disrupted the socio-political and economic fabric of the area. However, by 1886, a treaty facilitated by the British authorities brought a truce among the various warring groups.

By this period, the socio-economic and political landscape of the area began to be transformed, first by the British traders and later by the colonialists. Precisely on January 1, 1900, the whole of Yorubaland in addition to other areas

around the Niger came under direct British colonial control. This development launched the Yoruba into a new form of politics.

Living with colonialism: The Yorubas under Indirect Rule

Colonialism, an imperialist project *a la* Lenin, no doubt altered the socio-political lives of communities it had encountered (Young 1988; Wilson 1977; Mangut and Wuam 2012). Wherever it found a foothold, it brought exploitation (Griffith 1995:91; Yandaki 2012). In the case of Nigeria, the British state, as we know, was the arrowhead of this exploitation (Basiru 2010(a)).

In fact, British colonial penetration of the Niger area began from the annexation of Lagos in 1861 on the grounds of stopping the slave trade. The assignment ended with the seizure of what is today known as Nigeria by 1900 following the defeat of one indigenous community after another (Azikwe 1978). The strategies adopted by the British to achieve this goal have been well documented in literature; they need no rehash here (Osuntokun 1979; Crowder 1973).

As stated earlier, by 1900, the territories of the north, east and west had come under colonial administration. In 1906, the vast territory had been constituted into two entities: the northern and the southern groups of provinces (Ballard 1971:334). By 1912, the two disparate entities were placed under one man, Sir Fredrick Lugard, with the instruction to unite the two entities (Basiru 2010: 109).

With the amalgamation in 1914, the Yorubas found themselves in completely new socio-economic and political environments. Indeed, it was a new system of administration, broadly referred to as indirect rule, a model of administration totally alien to them. The Governor-General Lord Lugard had probably thought that the system that he had earlier introduced in the north would work elsewhere, but as it turned out, in the Yoruba territory it was not very successful. Some of the factors for its dismal record in the area are given below.

1. No Yoruba Oba had an absolute authority in the mould of Louis XIV of eighteenth-century France.
2. The Yoruba political structure, as explained earlier, was a delicate balance of power between the King and the chiefs, to the extent that a tyrannical King could be deposed by his chiefs.
3. Its frameworks of regulation were not consistent with the Yoruba traditional system.
4. It was observed with the passage of time that the policy generated conflicts between the traditional elites and the emerging educated elites in Yorubaland.

It is instructive to note that despite the weaknesses in the Lugardian administrative projects, the people had no choice than to live with it. Aside from living in the imported system, the Yorubas were also confronted with the challenges of living with other groups in the Weberian-modelled entity. Prior to this period, they had only related at non-political levels with other groups. Thus, between 1914 and 1946, they had no choice but to mix politically not only with the Igbos, a majority ethnic group, but with other minorities in the southern protectorate (see Usman, 1994). At this juncture, a question is apt: did the political interaction produce positive outcomes?

To begin with, the British colonial system described as one of indirect rule did not aim to unity disparate groups but to divide them. In fact, it was a deliberate British policy to prevent people of Africa from forming a united front against it. In the case of Nigeria, between 1914 and 1945 the two protectorates were prevented from mixing politically (Nwosu 1977:28; Ikelegbe 2005:79. For example, while the Clifford Constitution of 1922 empowered the Legislative Council (LEGCO) to make laws for the southern protectorate, where the Yorubas habituated, the northern protectorate was governed through the Governor's proclamation (Ezera 1960; Egwemi 2009; Iroleke 2010).

Also, when the democratic torch was being lit in Lagos and Calabar, other areas were excluded from such a process. As it would soon be seen, this had implications for subsequent political developments in the country. As Nnoli (1995:47) succinctly remarks:

Colonial policy ensured that the various parts of the country did not share a common experience for a long time. In fact, from the time of the amalgamation of the north and south of Nigeria in 1914 until 1946 when the Richards constitution was introduced, the two sections of the nation were only tenuously linked in law.

They maintained political identities and separate administrations.

Even by 1946, when the two disparate entities were brought together for the purpose of interaction, the 1946 constitutional order reinforced regionalism and sectionalism (Albert 1998). Rather than attempting to really unite the various groups, it further divided the country into three entities: the north, the east and the west (Coleman 1958; Afigbo 1989). This arrangement set the stage for the regionalization and ethnicisation of politics. With the new order, each region came under the political dominance of a major ethnic group. In real terms, the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba became the political champions of the north; east and west respectively (Nnoli 1980; Egwemi 2012:296). The minorities in these regions soon resented the majority ethnic groups and even sought to work with like-minded groups in other regions.

Given this political reality, the Yoruba leaders responded by forming a political party that could in the real sense articulate and aggregate their interests in colonial Nigeria. As a matter of fact, the Action Group was formed in 1951 solely as a Yoruba party. Strategically, it was to serve the interest of the Yorubas. During the same period, another ethno-regional party, the Northern People Congress (NPC) was formed in the north; the Igbos in the eastern region of the country embraced the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC), originally formed by Herbert Macaulay, a Yoruba man. With the electoralisation of politics by the colonial authorities in the 1950s, these ethno-regional parties contested and won regional elections and formed regional governments (Nnoli 1995).

In the western region, where Chief Obafemi Awolowo held sway, politics in the beginning was characterised by serious inter-ethnic horse trading. This form of politics may probably have laid the foundation for the mutual hatred and animosities that characterized future politics in Nigeria. For the sake of emphasis, they need a brief account here. The first was the cross-carpeting drama in the western region in 1953, when the leader of the NCNC, Dr. Nnamidi Azikwe, was betrayed by the Yoruba NCNC parliamentarians. He was prevented from becoming the premier of the western region (Fani-Kayode 2012). Obafemi Awolowo who in a normal situation ought to have been the opposition leader, through "ethnic cross-carpeting" became the premier of the western region. After the imbroglio, Dr. Azikwe relocated to his ethnic base, and subsequently became the premier.

The second event was the independence motion crisis that culminated in the Kano riots of 1953 which seriously threatened the unity of the country. Taken together, these two main events, together with some minor events sowed the seed of distrust between the North and the South on the one hand and between the Yoruba and the Igbos on the other hand. As it would soon be established, they laid the foundation for the events of the first six years of Nigeria's independence.

However, as independence approached, constitutional conferences were held in both Lagos and London to prepare the country for self-rule. By this time, the Yorubas, conscious of their identity and of what might befall them should they lose power at the centre, sought accommodation with minorities, mostly from the North. Indeed, for the purposes of the 1959 general elections, the Action Group (AG) sought alliances with the northern minority parties, notably the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) of Sir Joseph Tarka (see Sklar, 1964; Osumah and Aghemelo, 2010).

As it turned out, the AG like other parties could not win a majority in the federal parliament. At this stage, political alliance among the parties became inevitable. Dr. Azikwe's NCNC, rather than teaming up with Awolowo's AG, chose to rather work with the NPC. The direct outcome was that the AG was relegated to becoming the opposition party; its leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, became the chief opposition leader in the Federal parliament (Dudley 1968).

On October 1, 1960 the country entered the post-colonial era with a federal parliamentary constitution. This new order required politics to be played at both the horizontal and vertical levels in the most civilized way. Did this happen?

The western region crisis of 1965

In literature on Nigerian government and politics, the epithet 'wild wild west' symbolizes the outcome of the western region crisis of 1965 and paints the Yorubas as violent people. Going by the turn of the events, the question is: are the Yorubas really a violent people? This section seeks answer this question in the context of the western region crisis of the early 1960s. To start with, violence, one of the instruments for resolving conflict in a social formation, can be deployed by any group (be it ethnic, religious, racial, etc.) when forced to do so by the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions (Gurr 1970, 2000; Feierabend, and Feierabend 1972; Louis and Snow 1981; Ellingsen 2000; Stewart 2000, 2002).

For example, in most countries of the world today, violent conflicts are a product of socio-economic and political deprivation (Lemarchand 1993; Adekanye 1995). The point is that no social group is immune from violence when conditioned to act in such a fashion. Thus, the Yoruba people of western region prior to 1965 may have been faced with conditions that made violence inevitable. Before we examine these conditions, it is apposite to put the crisis in perspective.

On October 1, 1960, the Nigerian State, as stated earlier, emerged as an independent state with a tripartite federal structure, i.e. western, eastern and northern regions. The head of the federal government was centered in Lagos. Although on the surface this seems to be the best arrangement for the country at the time, the northern region in both geographic and demographic terms was bigger than the two southern federating units put together. In essence, this had implications for national politics. At the parliamentary level, this meant that the northern region could dominate the federal parliament. Similarly, at the inter-governmental level, it also made the same unit able to lord it over the remaining units (Elaigwu 2007).

In the end this was exactly what took place in Nigeria in the First Republic. Between 1960 and 1963, the federal government, an alliance between two core regional parties, the NPC and NCNC, sought to weaken the third region.

Eventually, they succeeded in balkanizing it. The AG government in the west, aware of this lopsidedness, campaigned for the redress of the imbalance in the federation. For daring to promote such an agenda, the region seemed to have suffered immensely as a new region, the mid-west region, was created out of it in 1963.

The creation of the mid-west made the region the weakest in terms of power. As the region struggled to reclaim its relevance, crisis erupted within the AG and the party became factionalised into the Awolowo and the Akintola factions. In 1962, an intra-parliamentary dispute broke out in the western House of Assembly when the faction loyal to the party leader and the chief opposition leader at the federal level, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, attempted to remove premier Chief S.L. Akintola and replace him with a new premier, Alhaji D.S. Adegbenro. In a swift reaction, the loyalists of the premier in the house became violent and parliament became a battlefield (Mackintosh 1966).

The crisis gave the federal government under Alhaji Tafawa Balewa the opportunity to declare a state of emergency in the western region and appointed his personal physician, Dr. Majekodunmi, a Yoruba man, as the sole administrator on May 29, 1962. With the declaration, constitutional government was temporarily suspended in the region. and emergency rule was lifted on December 31, 1962; power was restored to Chief Akintola who by then had allied with the NPC through his newly formed party, the Nigeria National Democratic Party (NNDP). With this development, the people of the region may have felt alienated from the country (Ekiran 2006:299).

At this historic moment, there was no clear leadership direction as the main regional leader, Chief Awolowo, and others had been put out of circulation for alleged treasonable felony. Perhaps the only option probably left for them was to kick Chief Akintola, the out-of-favour premier, out of office via the electoral process. Thus as the western region election beckoned, expectations were high that the day of reckoning had finally come for Chief Akintola.

In December 1965, the much-awaited election was held, but people's hopes of voting Chief Akintola out of power were dashed due to electoral fraud and malpractices never before recorded in Nigeria's political history. The people, having been denied the golden opportunity by the forces from within and without, frustratingly reacted in a manner that was least expected by the perpetrators of the fraud. For almost four weeks, the entire region was turned into what can be safely described as resembling the Hobbesian state (see Dudley 1982).

The federal government in a determined move to curtail the violence often tagged "weti e", ignoring Samuel Huntington's advice about the danger of using the army for quelling civil strife, deployed the army to quell the riot in Yorubaland (see Huntington 1968). In the end, the army capitalised on the unfolding events to intervene in Nigeria's politics, marking the end of the First Republic on January 15, 1966.

The foregoing narratives have presented the background that set the pace for the crisis in the western region in 1965. Therefore, it may be safe to argue that it was not the Yorubas that caused the collapse of the First Republic but the political structure bequeathed to the imperfect union by the British colonial power. Aside from this inheritance, the culture of mistrust also contributed to the crisis (Osaghae 1998). By way of digression, the European experience has shown that effective nation-building was a *sine qua non* for political stability and development. Britain, like other colonial powers in Africa, did not promote this ideal.

As presented earlier, the colonial state in Nigeria via the policy of divide and rule, rather than promoting nation-building, divided the people at both the elite and mass levels. Politics was characterised by ethnic chauvinism and the so-called nationalists became tribal barons. In specific terms, they did not see the entity they aspired to rule as a united entity. For example, to Chief Awolowo, 'Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographic expression. There are not "Nigerians" in the same sense as there are "English", "Welsh" or "French". The word "Nigerian" is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not'. (Awolowo 1947).

Similarly, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, a leader of the Northern People's Congress (NPC), during one of Nigeria's constitutional conferences, asserted that: 'Since the amalgamation of the north and the south provinces in 1914, Nigeria had existed as one country on paper. ... It is still far from being united. Nigerian unity is only a British intention for the country' (West Africa 1994: 255). At independence, rather than embracing a new model of political engagement that could spur development, the leaders continued to play the ethnic cards; politics rather than becoming routine became all-round war among the various ethnic groups in the country (Ake 2001, Odukoya 2006). This was perhaps the crux of the matter.

The Fourth Republic: a paradigm shift?

In May 29, 1999, Nigeria returned to democratic government after almost fifteen years of military autocracy. People's expectations were high that the new federal democratic order would bring the best in terms of governance and development, both at the centre and the peripheries of the Nigerian Federation (Ojo 2004:77). Prior to this era, the nation had suffocated under various aconstitutional regimes that repressed, suppressed and denied the people the rights of representation (Aiyede 2006:152). The new dispensation was therefore expected to usher in an era of political

tolerance among different groups in the country. Indeed, an era was expected that would be remarkably different from those of the first and second republics. As it turned out, political liberalisation unleashed the centrifugal forces that were once suppressed under military rule (Duruji 2008).

Although the orgy of ethno-religious violence cut across all geo-political zones in the country, it was obvious that the Niger-delta zone was the major arena of violence. In this zone, the Ijaw ethnic group, through various militia groups, deployed violence on two fronts before 2009. The first was against other groups within the region (e.g. against the Ilajes and Urhobos in Ondo and Delta states respectively); secondly, and disastrously, against the Nigerian state which they engaged in fierce battle until the amnesty deals of 2007 (Allen 2000; Omeje 2004).

This development may have made some observers to equate democracy or free society with violence (Agbu 2004). At this juncture, the question may be asked: is democracy synonymous with violence? In our view, this may depend on the model of democracy being practised in a given social formation. Basiru (2010(b)), argues that liberal democracy in a plural society like Nigeria, where structural violence is rife, may unleash the hidden violence in such societies. Similarly, Adekanye (1995) in his insightful studies on Rwanda and Burundi, demonstrates how political liberalisation imposed on the governments of the two countries in the early 1990s contributed to the genocidal violence in 1994.

To be sure, when a particular ethnic group sees its access to power and resources as being blocked by the other group in power and where there is no alternative route to achieving its objectives (e.g. true federalism, resource control, power devolution, etc.), such an ethnic group(s) may become violent. The risk for such behaviour is high in democracy where certain rights are guaranteed. This may have been the situation in the post-military Nigeria (Badmus 2003)). For instance, at the peripheries of the Nigerian federation, violence has characterised inter-group relations. In Plateau state, the indigenous groups (Berom, Anaguta, Afizere) and the settlers (the Hausa-Fulani) have since 2001 engaged in fierce struggles to control the soul of the state.

The above illustrations show that violence and ethnic suspicions have not disappeared from Nigeria's democracy. Thus, these groups like the Yorubas and the Tivs, in the first republic, may have considered violence the best way to present their cause.

Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated, in a narrative fashion, the contrary to the belief in some quarters that the Yorubas of the southwestern Nigeria engineered the collapse of the first republic. It is the contention of this researcher that the ruined republic had its foundation, laid in 1914 by the British chief imperial agent, Lord Fredrick Lugard. The central thesis then is that if other groups had found themselves 'trapped' like the Yorubas, they would have gone wild as well. In other words, the event could have been tagged 'wild wild north' or 'wild wild east' as the case may be.

On why the outcome of the 2003 general election in Yorubaland did not follow the same pattern as those of 1965 and 1983, the explanation lies in the fact that power at the centre had shifted to the zone. Even though the elections were marred by irregularities (Okoh 2005:40), the fact remains that a Yoruba man, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, was in charge at the centre. Probably, the story could have been different if a non-Yoruba figure was in charge. The 2011 post-election violence in the northern part of Nigeria may have validated our thesis here (Obi 2011; Ogunwale, 2011).

In all, Nigeria is not a civic nation but a primordial one where critical issues are defined not only in ethno-regional terms, but occasionally resolved on the streets and, in the case of the Niger-delta, in the creeks. Obviously, these developments are not healthy for growth and progress.

Given the foregoing, what can be done? We submit that if the country must move with the rest of the world, some fundamental actions must be taken. First, there is a need for the politico-economic decentralisation of Nigerian federal system so as to guarantee greater harmonious intra- and inter-ethnic relations, social justice, equity, stability, and security. Second, there must be a convention for a national dialogue where all groups in Nigeria would engage in genuine "talks" devoid of official interference. In the final analysis, such dialogue, we hope, would produce a new charter of engagement among the various Nigerian groups. By so doing, a new nation, civic in all ramifications, would emerge.

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