

Using “Tribe” and “Tribalism: to Misunderstand African Societies

David Wiley

Department of Sociology and African Studies Center
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Tribe, a concept that has endeared itself to Western scholars, journalists, and the public for a century, is primarily a means to reduce for readers the complexity of the non-Western societies of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the American plains. It is no accident that the contemporary uses of the term tribe were developed during the 19th-century rise of evolutionary and racist theories to designate alien non-white peoples as inferior or less civilized and as having not yet evolved from a simpler, primal state. The uses and definitions of 'tribe' in the sociological and anthropological literature are varied and conflicting. Some authors appear to define tribe as common language, others as common culture, some as ancestral lineages, and others as common government or rulers. As anthropologist Michael Olen notes, "The term tribe has never satisfied anthropologists, because of its many uses and connotations. Societies that are classified as tribal seem to be very diverse in their organization, having little in common." Morton H. Fried and this author contend that "the term is so ambiguous and confusing that it should be abandoned by social scientists."

The terms tribe and tribal were very useful to the white Rhodesian (now Zimbabwe) and South African governments during the apartheid years to characterize the liberation movements that were mobilizing against their racial rule as a code-word for disorganized, primitive, and less civilized peoples. For instance, this was seen in the description of the Zimbabwean Patriotic Front liberation movements ZAPU and ZANU as "tribally based" movements in academic journals, the network evening news, the New York Times, and even the Smithsonian Magazine. Accordingly, ZANU represents the Shona tribe and ZAPU the Ndebele tribe. In fact, a majority of the ZAPU cadres were not Ndebele-speaking soldiers but spoke Shona and Sotho dialects. Indeed, the ZAPU leader Joshua Nkomo is not Ndebele but Kalanga in rural origin. ZANU, on the other hand, has a majority of Zezuru, Ndau, Manica, Karanga, and other Shona-family dialects, none of whom shared common chiefs or rulers. ZANU also had speakers of Ndebele and other non-Shona dialects as officers and members.

In fact, the turmoils in Zimbabwe were primarily between different political parties with differing histories, leaderships, styles, goals, and memberships, differences which should be well-known to members of political parties and religious organizations in Western nations. And these different party organizations help to "create" these ethnic, not tribal, identities in the same way that the ward organizations and politicians of 19th and 20th-century America fostered the Irish-American, Italian-American, Jewish-American, and, later Black American ethnic identities which had not been their identities in their countries of origin. In the same manner, being an ethnic Irish-American and the wearing of the green in New York became more important than being an Irishman in the old country before immigrating. Similarly in Africa, persons who never identified as Shona in the rural areas but as members of a particular village or lineage or family suddenly find Shona identities in the rough and tumble of urban politics. In New York, we term it ethnicity, but in Africa it has been labeled as tribalism.

Even more striking is the invention of ethnic (labeled tribal) identities and their varied and plastic salience across the African continent. In some cases, “tribal identities” have been invented in order to unite colonial and post-colonial clerical workers or other occupational and social groups to serve the interests of the members even though they were not bound together by language or lineage.

In the United States, where similar derogatory language of tribe has been used to characterize and stereotype Native American or First Nations peoples, the identity has been reified in federal legislation that requires “tribes,” formerly under the Bureau of Indian Affairs, to accept that formal tribal identification in order to access the hunting, fishing, farming, and casino rights of reservations. Almost humorously, the Menominee peoples of Wisconsin decided to decline that nomenclature because many members lived in Milwaukee and other non-reservation sites; however, they then learned they must reverse that vote and re-declare themselves as “a tribe” in order to regain their reservation rights.

Misperceiving and misnaming ethnicity in Africa, however, is not a small error. As the Confucian Analects note, "If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language is not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success." Misonaming African ethnicity as tribalism has long bedeviled U.S. foreign policy in Africa, leading to miscalculations of U.S. interests and errors of judgment. When we respond to a political movement as only a tribal reality, we misjudge its strength, its potential organization, and the breadth of its appeal, as we clearly did in labeling as tribal groups the three political liberation movements of Angola.

The success of the term 'tribe' in shaping our perceptions of the African societies may be seen in the widespread usage of the term by African journalists and scholars. Because English, French, Portuguese, and occasionally Afrikaans were the languages of the schools and the city, tribe, *tribu*, and the other cognates defined the language of urban and political interaction and defined the categories into which rural and urban societies were allocated during the colonial period. Now, prominent African leaders use the term in appealing for "an end to tribalism," referring to the urban and national struggles for political power in utilizing ethnic and language ties as a means to aggregate power and authority. They too miss the ethnic dynamic and mistakenly link the urban ethnicity to the rural societies. Finally, tribe is a source of misunderstanding the great diversity of rural Africa by labeling small hunting and gathering groups of less than 100 persons as a tribe as well as a far-flung, multinational Fulani trading group of millions of persons across circa 19 nations as a “tribe.” The term had no validity for describing the pre-colonial period. It has less legitimacy now. And the term is as demeaning as ever.

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See also *Talking about "Tribe": Moving from Stereotypes to Analysis*, by Chris Lowe with Tunde Brimah, Pearl-Alice Marsh, William Minter, and Monde Muyangwa, 1997, <http://www.africaaction.org/talking-about-tribe.html>