

Using "Tribe" and "Tribalism" Categories to Misunderstand Africa

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Tribe, a concept that has endeared itself to Western scholars and journalists 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 mean common language, others common culture, some ancestral lineages, and others 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 contends that the term is so ambiguous and confusing that it should be abandoned by social scientists."

More disturbing is the political use of the term by the Rhodesian and South African governments to legitimize opposition movements and by journalists as a code of disorganized, primitive, and less civilized peoples. Most recently, this may be 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 are not Ndebele-speaking soldiers but speak 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 has also Ndebele-speakers and other members from non-Shona dialects.

In fact, the turmoils in Zimbabwe are primarily between different political parties with differing histories, leaderships, styles, goals, and memberships-differences

¹ <http://africa.wisc.edu/outreach/units/tribe.html>

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. 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 becomes tribalism.

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 and errors of judgement. 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 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 ethnic dynamic 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 as a tribe. The term had no validity in the pre-colonial period. It has less legitimacy now.