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ETHNICITIES AND TRIBES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Opening Old Wounds

S. N. Sangmpam



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1. Introduction

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Abstract
The Introduction defines the study problem. It describes how the two issues of the nature and origin of tribal identity in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have not only been part of the debate in African Studies since the 1970s, but have also been raised and debated by political leaders and ordinary citizens in SSA. It raises the two core questions of the study, states the study's main three-point argument, discusses the benefits of the study and its methods, and describes the content of the book chapters.

Keywords Ethnicity – Ethnic conflicts – Tribe – Tribal interests – Tribalism – Ethnic conflicts – Colonial state – African Studies – Social theory – Precolonial history

This study deals with two related claims made in the literature on "ethnicity" in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). First, that the population of SSA consists of "ethnicities" rather than "tribes." Second, that colonial rule explains the genesis, saliency, and persistence of tribal allegiance and conflicts in SSA. I argue that both claims are questionable on conceptual, historical, and empirical grounds. Tribes in SSA display a particularity that prevents them from being equated with "ethnicity" or being viewed as a creation of colonial rule.

When Yoweri Museveni took power in Uganda in 1986, he shunned competitive, multiparty-based politics in favor of a one-man no-party rule. He claimed that democratic rule is not possible in Africa because tribes and tribal interests do not allow for a smooth exercise of democratic rule. He has, for the past 31 years, held this view. This is a view that has also been expressed by

many other political leaders in SSA both before and after Museveni took power. There is no doubt that the claim is made to neutralize the opposition and to seize and consolidate authoritarian power for the claimants. Yet, for the recent period, the available evidence does support their claims. In the post-1990 period, when most countries in SSA moved from authoritarianism to democracy, elections and attempts at democratic governance in most of these countries have been driven by tribal considerations. Only a very few countries can defend a record of non-tribal exercise of democracy. There is much anecdotal evidence of this to be found on the internet. In November 2012, for instance, the *BBC News* site published an opinion piece by Calestous Juma, [1] in which the author argued that "tribalism stunts African democracy." Narrow tribal interests, he opined, do not allow the emergence of genuine political parties that compete on the basis of democratic ideas. Instead, these interests thrive on zero-sum games for parochial and self-preservation gains. Juma advocated the creation of idea-driven political parties to replace tribes and to foster democracy. Other similar opinion pieces have flooded the internet. As is often the case in this type of internet-based discussion, there are responses and comments from the readers of the pieces.

In discussing "tribalism" and democratic change, these postings implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, raise two related issues. The first issue is the nature of tribal identity in SSA. Some of the discussants agree with Juma (and Museveni) that tribalism stems from tribal identity, which is part of and anchored in the mindset of SSA. It is "part of the African civilization" that differentiates it from Western civilization. As one of the responders put it: "The discipline and culture of tribalism as a defining element in the everyday lives of the people [of SSA] supersedes anything that other civilizations may believe they have introduced—including Christianity and Islam…Its workings will remain as much a mystery to most Westerners as it did during the days of Stanley and Livingstone."[2] In other words, for this group of discussants, tribe and "tribalism" are an almost exclusive attribute of SSA. Other discussants do not view tribal identity as a problem exclusive to SSA, suggesting that it happens all over the world. They point to North America, Europe, and other parts of the world as being equally plagued by "ethnic" conflicts.

The second issue raised by the internet discussants is the origin and cause of tribal identity. Whereas the author of the *BBC News* piece acknowledges the role played by colonialism in fostering tribal identity, without unduly accentuating it, other discussants highlight such a role. According to one of them, "The artificial boundaries brought about by colonialists in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s confined different communities in definite regions. The demarcation created a

notion that if you are not from my tribe then you are my enemy."[3]

Anecdotal as they may be, these internet-based discussions raise serious questions about the nature and origin of tribal identity in SSA. Is tribal identity an exclusive attribute of SSA, an intrinsic part of African culture, or is it an invention of colonial rule? And if it is a cultural and civilizational attribute and does not "happen all over the world," should it not be referred to differently from the way tribal identity is referred to in other regions of the world? On the other hand, if it is not exclusive to SSA, but happens all over the world, why should it not be referred to in the same way as it is in other regions? These questions point to and echo the debate that has taken place in African studies on "ethnicity" since the 1970s. The debate has been about the two issues of the nature and origin of tribal identity in SSA that are being raised today in internet discussions.

With respect to the first issue—the nature of tribal identity—the debate revolves around the terms "tribe" and "ethnicity." Those scholars who, like some of the internet discussants, believe that tribal identity is not exclusive to SSA maintain that "tribe" should be replaced by "ethnicity." They argue that, just as the party organizations and politicians of nineteenth and twentieth century America fostered Irish-American, Italian-American, Jewish-American, and, later, Black American ethnic identities, so, too, "ethnic," and not "tribal," identities have formed in Africa. "Tribe" and "tribalism" are, thus, denigrating inventions of the West that need to be rejected.[4] Under the influence and authority of these scholars, the concept of "tribe" in African studies has been replaced by the concept of "ethnicity".

As for the origin and cause of this "ethnic identity"—the second issue—these scholars trace it to colonialism. It is now taken for granted that "ethnicity" in SSA was fostered by the colonial state. Daniel Posner goes so far as to proclaim that this paternity of the colonial state is now a settled debate.[5]

The debate raises two core questions. Is the population of SSA made up of "ethnicities" rather than "tribes"? And does colonial rule explain the genesis, saliency, and persistence of tribal allegiance and conflicts in SSA? This study tackles these two questions. I argue that, on conceptual, historical, and empirical grounds, the answers to the two questions are in the negative. I develop three main points.

First, manifestations of tribal allegiance in SSA differ from those in other regions. By choosing the term "ethnicity," a loose and catchall concept, as a substitute for "tribe," the literature falsely equates tribe with ethnicity and obscures this regional difference. Second, by viewing "linguistic," "religious," "racial," and "tribal" conflicts and cleavages as equal exemplars of "ethnic

conflicts," the literature wrongly reduces a tribe to a mere component or dimension of ethnicity. Third, by assuming, because of this double misidentification, that "ethnic" loyalties and conflicts are universally expressed around politics and the state via religious, linguistic, caste, racial, and tribal cleavages, the literature misleadingly privileges the role of the colonial (and postcolonial) state in explaining the saliency and persistence of tribal loyalties and conflicts in SSA. As a result, it fails to engage the exceptional historical trajectory of SSA and the peculiar genesis and manifestations of tribal allegiance in SSA.

Why should one open old wounds on the issues of tribe and ethnicity and the role of colonial rule? After all, the debate has been proclaimed "settled." What does one gain from reopening it? The answer is twofold. First, as just hinted, the debate raises intellectual issues of validity. Because the two major claims on "ethnicity" concern living societies and have enduring epistemological implications for those societies, they need to be subjected, like any other intellectual claim, to a validity test. In this case, the test is conceptual, historical, and empirical. This does not ignore the fact that views on ethnicity in SSA are a cumulative outcome of many years of research and arguments from different fields of African studies. Rather, it is to recognize that, once in a while, this outcome can be questioned and challenged. Out of these challenges comes a new way of thinking, which has conceptual and methodological implications.

Second, the study touches upon the relation between social theory and social prescriptions for SSA. Because the literature fails, as I argue, to inquire into the deep historical roots of tribal allegiances in SSA, the literature emasculates Africans and the precolonial history of SSA in favor of the colonial state. Its claims have negative implications for the development of a social theory of the saliency and persistence of tribal allegiances and conflicts in SSA that should serve as a guide for policy prescriptions. Raising the issue of the validity of the two claims made in the literature helps us to open avenues that grasp and shed light on the exceptional historical path of SSA. The consequent understanding of this path should help in developing a social theory or an explanation of the saliency of tribal allegiances in SSA. Only such a theory can help answer the question of whether Museveni and the internet discussants are right in their conclusions about tribal allegiance and the lack of democracy in SSA. And if they are (or are not) right, the putative social theory of tribal allegiance should help to inform the types of policy prescriptions needed to effect social change. Although I do not attempt such a theory here, I will allude to it in the conclusion (see Chapter 9).

To argue these points, I rely on comparative evidence from political science,

history, and anthropology. Although, for expository reasons, some comparisons are made with North America and Europe, methodologically SSA is best compared with North Africa, Asia, and South America, because these regions have what political scientists call the "most similar systems." The issue of tribal allegiance is more acutely raised in the four developing regions than in Europe or North America. Most studies about Africa adopt one of two approaches. In the first, "Africa" includes North Africa and SSA, and their similarities are either highlighted or taken for granted, at the expense of the geoecological, anthropological, historical, and economic differences between the two subregions. In the second approach, "Africa" actually refers only to SSA, while giving the impression that the analysis applies to Africa as a whole. Unlike both these approaches, I assume the important differences between North Africa and SSA noted above. For this reason, the focus of the study views SSA as consequently different from North Africa, despite their similarities. North Africa is compared with SSA in the same way as are Asia and South America.

The study is divided into nine chapters, including the Introduction (Chapter 1). In Chapter 2, I define both the concepts of tribe and ethnicity and their linkage to the colonial state. In Chapter 3, I shed light on the particularity of tribal allegiance in SSA in contradistinction to that in the other regions of comparison. I analyze the manifestations of tribal allegiance in SSA and compare them with the situation in the other regions to reveal this particularity. In Chapter 4, I discuss the comparative empirical evidence about tribes in SSA. I show that SSA has more tribes than all the other regions in the comparison. This profusion of tribes makes tribes in SSA a special category. On the basis of this evidence, I argue, in successive order, against equating "tribe" with "ethnicity", in Chapter 5; against making "tribe" a component of "ethnicity", in Chapter 6; and against assigning the paternity of tribal allegiance in SSA to the colonial and postcolonial states, in Chapter 7. In Chapter 8, I discuss the role of precolonial history in SSA in explaining tribal allegiance. I show that transatlantic slavery is only one facet of this history. One has to go beyond this facet, far deeper into the history of SSA, guided by the lurking question of why, comparatively, SSA has more tribes than the other regions of comparison. Finally, in Chapter 9, I draw implications from the analysis for a social theory of the particularity of tribal allegiance in SSA.

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Footnotes

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2. Tribe, Ethnicity, and Colonial Rule

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Abstract
Chapter 2 defines the concepts of both tribe and ethnicity and their linkage to the colonial state. Referring to the literature on ethnicity and its three major approaches, it discusses how the African studies literature rejected "tribe" in favor of "ethnicity," and how the adoption of the term "ethnicity" came hand in hand with the claim that the colonial state created tribes and fostered tribal identity.

Keywords Tribe – Ethnicity – Kinship – Colonial state – Tribal consciousness – Kinship – Cultural pluralism – Primordialism – Instrumentalism – Constructivism – Transatlantic slavery

The baseline definition of a tribe provided by Aidan W. Southall is: "A whole society with a high degree of self-sufficiency at a near subsistence level, based on a relatively simple technology without writing or literature, politically autonomous and with its own distinctive language, culture and sense of identity, tribal religion being also coterminous with tribal society."[1] Governments and intergovernmental organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations (UN) have used different variations of this definition to propose policies for "indigenous people." In India, for example, "scheduled tribes" are people who generally live in hill country, are said to be backward and poor, and are given special treatment in the constitution to protect them.[2] Although international organizations frequently modify their definitions, these definitions maintain (and expand on) the basic criteria associated with a tribe. For instance, the World Bank's ten criteria for "tribal people" include their loose tenure over traditional

lands generally not accepted by the dominant society or accommodated by its courts.[3] The inclusion of "sense of identity" in Southall's definition is not gratuitous; it refers to a line of demarcation between tribe A and tribe B, or between tribe A and other possible outside entities. It is invariably called "tribal" consciousness, loyalty, or allegiance. At a minimum, the identity implies loyalty and adherence of the members of the tribe to tribal ways of doing things.[4] In its most active form, the "sense of identity" involves one's consciousness and allegiance to one's tribe's cause in opposition to the causes of other tribes or entities. This active form has an ideological component; through a set of cognitive, affective, and evaluative practices, tribal allegiance not only distorts reality but summons its members to action.

Throughout this book, the term "tribe" refers to this baseline definition, to which I will add some other definitional elements as the discussion proceeds. "Supertribe" refers to a larger tribe, which often subsumes smaller tribes.

The concept of "tribe" is not universally accepted. The term "tribe" is generally contested and rejected, often mildly in the Americas and Asia and more vociferously in Africa. In its eight-volume General History of Africa, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization) prohibited the use of the term "tribe". Many reasons were invoked for this rejection. It is argued that tribes have been to a large extent assimilated with the broader society and, thus, cannot be very easily distinguished from that society.[5] In the specific case of SSA, the use of the term "tribe" is contested because of its static connotation; its arbitrary delineation of boundaries based on European perceptions of language, religion, dress, and territory that served colonial interests; its implied distinction between "tribal" Africa and "civilized" Europe; and its association with "tribalism," a pejorative term that connotes antagonistic tribal groups bent on destroying national unity.

More specifically, Southall[6] has argued that tribes have lost their political autonomy, technology, religion, and even languages. Some of today's SSA "tribes" never existed before Arab and colonial penetration. They became so when, for colonial imperatives, Arab or European given names and names of geographical areas were converted into tribal names. Native politicians contributed to this "artificial" creation of tribes both under colonial rule and in the postcolonial period. Examples include the term "Kavirondo", used by Arabs to designate a geographical area in Kenya, but which was later adopted by both Europeans and the Kenyans themselves for political reasons to denote a tribal entity from whence derived the "Luhia tribe". Similarly, the "Bangala tribe" in the Congo never corresponded to any tribal group before Belgian colonial

officials and ethnographers lumped together people of the upper Congo River area and assigned to them a supertribal identity, which was later adopted by the native politicians. Supertribes such as “Yoruba” in Nigeria are in fact an assortment of separate cultural groups that speak of themselves as Oyo, Egba, Ijebu, Ife, Ilesha, and others. In many cases, ecological references for people who live in a particular habitat without necessarily having distinct socio-cultural characteristics are identified with tribal identity. The island of Madagascar is a prime example, with such references as “Antanala” (the forest people), “Antandroy” (the people of the thorny cactus forest), and “Antankarana” (the people of the rocks and caves). Others have made arguments similar to Southall’s.[7]

Opponents of the term “tribe” also question other defining characteristics, such as descent from a common ancestor and a common language. Some of the groups that are said to derive from a common ancestor, they argue, are actually derived from different ancestors. An example is the Somali, who are generally viewed as a tribe with a common ancestry. A closer examination reveals that the Somali tribe is actually made up of two distinct groups, the Somali and the Sab, who claim a different ancestry. Also, the language used does not always support a common tribal identity, since different groups within a tribe may use different languages. This is particularly true of supertribes such as the Yoruba or Bangala. Finally, in “stateless” societies, it is very difficult to distinguish one tribe from another because they have ritual superintegration and intersecting kinship and distributive legitimacy.

In short, three problems militate against the use of the term “tribe”: problems of ambiguity in the definition; problems of illusion or false application of the concept to artificial or misconceived entities; and problems of transition and transformation—that is, the use of the concept of tribe unjustifiably with reference to phenomena that are a direct product of modern influences.[8] These issues were at the center of much of the anthropological debate of the 1970s, vigorously joined by academics and political leaders in SSA who were opposed to the term “tribe” and the whole of European scholarship behind its use.[9]

Arguments against “tribe” have led to a call for the use of the term “ethnicity.” Although scholars of “cultural pluralism” come from different disciplines, a common thread that weaves through all their studies is the use of “ethnicity” in lieu of “tribe”. The rejection of “tribe” in favor of “ethnicity” has involved two processes. On the one hand, the definitional elements of both tribe and ethnicity are merged and applied to ethnicity. On the other hand, ethnicity is distanced from tribe. Because of the definitional merge, ethnicity is viewed as a

contact between cultural-linguistic communal groups within societies that involves both positive and negative features. Among its positive features are pride in one's group, identification built around real or fictitious kinship, appreciation of one's own social roots in a community and cultural group, and a material and emotional support network for members of the group. The negative features include cultural prejudice, social discrimination, economic and political domination of other "ethnic" groups, and hostility and antagonism to other groups.[10] Beyond these positive and negative features, "ethnicity" is defined by its members' territory, the collective memory of its members, and, in non-Western societies, the adoption of and transformation by Western culture and technologies.[11]

Although, like "tribe", "ethnicity" describes a group identity, its scope is made broader to distance it from tribe. "Ethnicity" extends to such shared experiences of the group as colonization, immigration, or historical discrimination. The concept of "ethnicity" serves as a rallying point for mobilizing the group's members to compete effectively, especially in modern multiethnic states, for economic resources, positions in government and other social institutions, and protection.[12] Unlike tribe, ethnicity is said to prevent us from seeing society as a homogenous entity rather than a set of identities that are both malleable and dependent upon their relations with other identities. Unlike tribe, the argument goes, ethnicity allows "us to see the transformation and diversity as well as continuity and similarity…[and] how individual societies integrate individuals and groups who are not members of descent groups, who may not speak the same language, or live in the same territory."[13] In other words, ethnicity shies away from the focus on the presumed primordialism of tribal societies to reveal their changing circumstances. These traits are assumed to make ethnicity a universal reality.

This said, and to avoid confusion, throughout the book I use "tribe" whenever I refer to SSA and, occasionally, to situations where "tribe" is standard usage, such as "Amerindian tribes" and "Southeast Asian tribes." I use "ethnic" or "ethnicity" when the context refers to writers who privilege the term "ethnicity," and when I refer to regions other than SSA in order to demarcate the situation in SSA from that in the other regions.

The rejection of "tribe" in favor of "ethnicity" is not the only subject debated in the literature about SSA. Because tribal identity rests on the allegiance and loyalty of the tribal members to the cause of the tribe, a related interest has been to explain the existence, saliency, and persistence of such allegiance. Why does tribal identity exist in SSA, and why is it salient and persistent? The answer to

this question has been provided by the “cultural pluralism” paradigm. Although an old concept, cultural pluralism pervaded the lexicon of ethnic studies in the mid-1970s. Central to cultural pluralism analyses is the idea that cultural identities (racial, religious, caste, linguistic, and tribal) are natural, unavoidable (hence universal), and dynamic. The change and alteration of cultural identities over time are a function of politics and the actions of states and political regimes that define their saliency.[14] Even when ethnicity moves away from being sponsored by the state to adopting self-reliant and separatist stands, its actions can only be defined in relation to politics and the state.[15] An example is the ethno-cultural centrifugal forces provoked by population movements, globalization, political liberalization, and a changing sense of self-determination of native peoples that strengthened the consciousness of identity in opposition to the states in the post-Soviet period.[16] Because of its universalistic claims, cultural pluralism has served as the framework for analyses and explanations of the various forms of “ethnic” identity in the world, including those in SSA. Cultural pluralism has relied mostly on three main approaches: primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism. Attempts to “enrich” or “emancipate” cultural pluralism have led to critical reappraisals of these three approaches, causing critics to add an internationalist approach and to emphasize the role of “myths” in cultural identity and allegiance.[17]

Despite these critical reappraisals, the three main approaches of cultural pluralism have pride of place in the discussions about SSA. Primordialism views tribal allegiance in SSA as an outcome of similarities in physical and cultural features shared by individuals of a group. These features are almost “natural” or inherited, and they imprint the group identity.[18] As such, primordialism focuses on blood ties, their attendant emotional bonds, and the historical memory of other opposition groups.[19] Once this collective identity and its attendant security are disrupted or challenged, for example under colonialism and in conditions of political competition, people retreat to their tribal group. This interpretation of tribal allegiance is closely linked to and is almost the same as that which views tribal allegiance as an anachronistic, irrationally maintained, atavistic African residue. As for constructivism, it shares roots with postmodernism. Its proponents dwell on discourses, narratives, and symbols to explain tribal allegiance.[20]

Instrumentalism is the most widely used approach in explaining tribal allegiance in SSA. It revolves around the central argument that both the colonial and the postcolonial states engendered and fostered “ethnic” allegiance and its saliency and persistence, for their own purposes. This approach retraces the

instrumental role of colonialism back to the invention of the term “tribe,” the use of which helped the colonizers to administer their territories, to more effectively exploit the colonized populations, and to legitimize colonial rule. This administrative imperative translated into the naming of new, and not necessarily legitimate, chiefs; the establishment of new tribes either by carving up bigger groups or by amalgamating smaller ones; and the arbitrary grouping of tribes that favored some groups over others in educational opportunities. Moreover, the instrumental approach maintains that tribal allegiance arose in urban areas under colonial rule as the result of a deliberate policy of European employers, who preferred some tribes over others and, for this reason, hierarchically structured and divided migrants from rural areas by opposing them to each other in sustained policies of “divide and rule.” Because it viewed Africans as devoid of civilization, the colonial state imposed upon the rural population the status of tribal subjects, which emerged and continued in the postcolonial period, in opposition to the status of educated and urban citizens. In the postcolonial period, politicians have co-opted the colonial era’s urban migrants according to their preferences, thus erecting tribal boundaries and making distinctions.[21] Following in the footsteps of the colonial state, postcolonial leaders have manipulated and convinced various tribal groups of the evil intentions of some other tribes in appropriating societal resources. In so doing, they set tribes against tribes and, thus, took advantage of the rivalries thus created to consolidate their political power. Postcolonial leaders have also used their political power to favor some tribes over others, a practice that has caused the disfavored tribes to rely on their own group. The result has been an unending cycle of tribal conflicts.[22]

With respect to tribal amalgamation and favoritism under colonial rule, proponents of instrumentalism argue that the colonial state and its auxiliary agencies, such as Christian missions and ethnographers, relied on either a preexisting “myth” of a “supertribe” or on the cultural closeness of many tribes to create and consecrate the existence of a supertribe. To the already mentioned “Bangala,” a case of “mythical” amalgamation, they add the “Mongo” case, which reflects an amalgamation of culturally close tribes. With these amalgamations came the favoritism of some of these supertribes by the colonial administration. Examples given include, in Congo-Kinshasa, the real or imagined preference for the Bangala over the Bakongo and for the Baluba over the Lulua;[23] and in Gabon and Cameroon, for the Fang, who were viewed by French colonial officers and missionaries as their “lost brothers,” and were regarded as superior in relation to other tribes.[24]

There are, thus, two intimately linked issues to be considered in the debate about SSA: (1) the rejection of “tribe” in favor of “ethnicity” and (2) the proposed explanation of tribal allegiance. In the instrumentalist approach of “cultural pluralism,” tribal allegiance and its saliency are traced and imputed to colonial rule (and the postcolonial state). Peter Ekeh addressed both issues in his seminal 1990 essay titled “Social Anthropology and Two Contrasting Uses of Tribalism in Africa.” In the essay Ekeh lamented the abandonment of the advances made in social anthropology in addressing the issue of “kinship.” One of the consequences of this abandonment was the lack of clarity around the concepts of tribe, tribalism, and ethnicity that has since plagued African studies. He faulted both colonial/European social anthropology and African historians (the “Ibadan School” in Nigeria) for avoiding each other’s concerns and, thus, preventing scholarship on SSA to proceed in a sustained, consistent, and organic way. The legacy of this mutual avoidance has been, in addition to conceptual confusion, the failure to ground the concept of “kinship” in the history of SSA in order to explain its persistence. In filling this void, Ekeh strived to show that one important facet of this history, transatlantic slavery, explains the social origin and persistence of kinship in SSA. Later, under colonial rule, kinship was transformed into tribal groups whose members were bound together by new moral definitions of the colonial state. In other words, the idea of “kinship” allegiance was implanted during the time of transatlantic slavery but was redefined and expanded by colonial rule. Both historical episodes explain the persistence and saliency of kinship.

What can be said about these converging two-issue claims in African studies? Is the population of SSA made up of “ethnic groups” rather than “tribes”? Does colonial rule explain the genesis, saliency, and persistence of “tribal” allegiance and conflicts in SSA? To answer these questions, one must first specify the type of tribal allegiance in SSA.

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3. The Particularity of Tribal Allegiance in SSA

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Abstract
Chapter 3 sheds light on the particularity of tribal allegiance in SSA in contradistinction to that in other regions. In order to answer the two core questions of whether SSA has ethnicities rather than tribes and whether colonial rule created tribes and tribal identity, the chapter first determines whether tribal allegiance in SSA resembles that which prevails in other regions. The chapter surveys the manifestations of tribal allegiance and conflicts in SSA and compares them with the situation in the former Soviet bloc and in the three developing regions of North Africa, Asia, and South America. Based on these comparisons, the chapter concludes that tribal allegiance in SSA displays particular and peculiar features that are not shared with these other regions.

Keywords Kikuyu – Luo – Senoufo – Dioula – Baoule – Bete – Nationality – Eurasia – Virtual sovereignty – Tribal allegiance – Ethnic conflicts – Racial dominance – Racial conflicts – Profusion of tribes – Exceptional historical path

Consider the following events. In 2007 there was an electoral stalemate in Kenya. The incumbent president, Mwai Kibaki, claimed victory even though it was not sure that he had won. His opponent, Raila Odinga, accused Kibaki of rigging the elections. The stalemate led to violence that caused the death of more than 1500 people. In 2010 another electoral stalemate occurred in Cote d'Ivoire. The incumbent president, Laurent Gbagbo, also claimed victory even as the electoral commission proclaimed his opponent, Alassane Ouattara, the winner.

The stalemate degenerated into a new round of violence, rekindling the momentarily halted and dormant hostilities and violent confrontations that had started in 2000 in the form of an insurgency in the northern part of the country.

Electoral fraud and violence are not novelties in developing countries. In Kenya and Cộte d'Ivoire, however, what made these factors noteworthy, in addition to the relatively high level of violence, were the characteristics of the protagonists. Behind Kibaki were the Kikuyu, his tribe, who supported him in his claims, and behind Odinga stood the Luo, his tribe, who backed his claims. Both the Kikuyu and Luo perpetrated violence against each other over a period of time. Associate tribes joined them either openly or tacitly. In Cộte d'Ivoire, the two main protagonists were supported by the "north" for Ouattara and the "south" for Gbagbo. "North" and "south" are euphemisms for northern tribes, including the Senoufo and the Dioula (Ouattara's group), and for southern tribes, including the Baoule and the Bete (Gbagbo's tribe).

In 2011 southern Sudanese voted in a referendum to secede from northern Sudan and to become an independent country. Although falsely dubbed by the media as secession by the "Christian" southern people from the "Muslim" north, the secession is the culmination of the southern tribes' frustrations with and recriminations against their domination by the Arabs and their Arabized allies as tribal groups since independence was declared in 1956. The presence of Muslims in Western Sudan and their equally notable recriminations against the Arabs reveal that religion is not the issue. The Sudanese conflict is complicated by the fact that the Arab vs. non-Arab cleavage is doubled in the western and southern parts of the country by intertribal cleavages among non-Arabs.

Like Sudan, Angola and Mozambique faced tribal conflicts in the wake of independence. In both countries bitter civil wars were waged after independence; the wars ended only in 1993 for Mozambique and in 2002 for Angola. Although other factors (e.g., the Portuguese type of colonial rule and the ideological commitments of the warring factions) played a role in these wars, the tribal composition of the warriors explained their bitterness. In Angola, Jonas Savimbi, the main leader of the war against the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) government, was from the Ovimbundu tribe. This tribe constituted the backbone of the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), Savimbi's organization/party, and provided the lifeblood for the war. In Mozambique, the war against the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) government was led by the National Resistance of Mozambique (RENAMO), an organization whose leadership consisted of members of the Shona and Ndau tribes that border Zimbabwe.

Other notable examples of tribal recriminations have occurred in Chad,

Ethiopia, the two Congos, Mauritania, Uganda, and Nigeria, where scores of people have been massacred in tribal conflicts (e.g., 500 in March 2010), Burundi, and Rwanda. The latter two countries are infamously known for their cyclical genocides, the results of tribal recriminations between Hutus and Tutsis. In most other countries in SSA, antagonistic or competitive intertribal behaviors of various degrees are expressed routinely in daily practices, including land disputes, marriage restrictions, slurs and stereotyping, and job discrimination. In short, all the geographical subregions of SSA, from north to south and east to west, have been affected by tribal allegiances and conflicts before or after independence. Contrary to the view that tribal allegiance is declining,[1] there is evidence that globalization has exacerbated what David Apter calls "negative pluralism", which relies on and retreats to clanship and identity politics in SSA.[2]

What does the situation in SSA tell us comparatively? Tribal-like conflicts are not limited to SSA. In the post-Soviet period, we witnessed violent episodes of "ethnic" animosities in the former Yugoslavia, as it dissolved itself, and the assertion of ethnic loyalties in the constitutive republics of the former Soviet Union. This situation has convinced many that SSA is not, after all, alone in displaying "ethnic" loyalties and antagonism. Maybe so, except that "ethnic" conflicts in Eurasia display characteristics that differ from the tribal characteristics in SSA. In both the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, the constituent parts of these entities were "nationalities" at the time of their incorporation into Yugoslavia and the Tsarist empire/Soviet Union, respectively.[3] A nationality is an entity whose population has its own language, cultural traditions, historical aspirations, and a geographical home over which *it claims real or virtual sovereignty on the basis of two criteria*. The first criterion is being a group that entered the country *within recent memory* and that came from a *recognized political entity abroad* (e.g., Chinese in Southeast Asian countries). The second criterion—a historically specific situation—is being a group that used to belong to another polity, but became part of a union under communist rule in Eastern Europe and Central Asia; the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia are prime examples of such unions.[4] A nationality is not the same as a "nation" (as in "nation-state").

Under Soviet leadership, nationality had become an official criterion for classifying Soviet citizens in census-taking and in passports and other documents.[5] It, thus paradoxically, promoted and maintained alive the "sovereign aspirations" of the nationalities, while imposing, at the same time, the Russification of the nationalities. In Yugoslavia, the federal system held together by Marshal Tito and the Yugoslav Communist League rested on six republics,

each of which represented a nationality (e.g., Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia). Under Tito's leadership, although these republics were in a relatively freer union than the republics of the Soviet Union, their virtual sovereignty surfaced repeatedly. Croats, for instance, asserted their nationality vis-à-vis the federal government and the Serbs, and the Serbs asserted their nationality—with chauvinistic and deadly zeal—in the 1990s. It is no surprise, then, that within the two forced unions of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia the thirst of nationalities for sovereignty had generated pent-up frustrations and a desire for liberation and freedom.[6] In Yugoslavia, already in 1970 a former associate of Tito, Milovan Djilas, had predicted the breakdown of the union after Tito.[7] The Gorbachev revolution offered the constituent republics of Yugoslavia the opportunity to quench their thirst for sovereignty, releasing "ethnic" animosities.

The case of SSA differs from that of the former Soviet bloc in two major ways. First, unlike in Eurasia, where "ethnic" outbursts have erupted violently over *a relatively short period of time*, tribal conflicts in SSA are not sudden outbursts released by pent-up frustrations. They are, rather, ongoing practices that can and do lead at times to violent episodes such as those described above. But these practices do not always have violent outcomes. Daily tribal land disputes, opposition to intertribal marriages, job discrimination and the like constitute the majority of tribal conflicts in SSA, only occasionally erupting in violence. The best-known cases of violent conflicts between tribes have been cyclical, extending over the entire post-colonial period. These conflicts take the form of retaliatory actions. Rwanda, Burundi, and Nigeria exemplify this situation. On the other hand, the outbreaks of election-related tribal violence in countries such as Kenya and Cote d'Ivoire are the political outcomes and ramifications of ongoing tribal practices and intertribal competition in society. Indeed, tribal electoral rigging is a form of tribal job discrimination, albeit with collective consequences. It aims at depriving a tribal competitor of the job of governing the country in favor of one's own tribe or fellow tribesman. Like most tribal job discriminations, tribal electoral rigging is linked to ongoing, and not necessarily violent, tribal allegiance and antipathy. As for the involvement of tribes in the prolonged violence that characterized Angola and Mozambique, this points to the peculiarity of the situation. In both these countries, the violence was linked to the colonial and anti-colonial wars. In the immediate post-independence period, both Portugal and apartheid South Africa (as the colonial proxy) played the colonial card. Ongoing tribal rivalries among indigenous African freedom fighters latched onto the anticolonial wars, which were perforce violent.

Tribal manifestations in SSA are, thus, not always dramatically violent. In this sense, the case of SSA partly reflects the findings of some studies that have argued that "ethnicity" does not cause civil wars.[8] Indeed, in absolute number, the count of victims of tribal violence in SSA is lower than the number of victims of such violence in Asia. This reflects the higher demographic concentration of opposing groups in Asian regions (e.g., in South Asia), where much of the violence has occurred. Rather, manifestations of tribal allegiance in SSA are, in Ekeh's words, "institutionalized" practices—pervasive at times and serially manifested at other times—by "members of society, especially if they operate at the national level, who are required to uphold and promote supra-ethnic rules of coexistence in the multiethnic communities and states of Africa", but fail to do so because of "their loyalties towards their ethnic groups."[9] The impact of these "institutionalized" practices on social and political life is multifaceted.

SSA differs from the former Soviet bloc in a second major way. In SSA, tribes, *despite* their precolonial autonomy, do not aspire to sovereignty within the modern state as do nationalities. A few groups, such as the Fulani (also called Fulbe or Peul) and Dioula, who were dispersed historically throughout SSA, do not meet the criterion of nationality, since they cannot be linked to a recognized polity abroad in recent memory; their dispersal goes back many centuries. The Fulani dispersed as early as the tenth century. The Dioula, originally a trading group, migrated in the wake of the demise of the Mali and Songhay Empires in the latter part of the fourteenth century and the sixteenth century, respectively. Even if we consider the colonial and postcolonial state as a recognized polity from which some of these dispersed West African tribes came in more recent times, they still do not meet the criteria for a nationality. There is no evidence that they claim virtual or real sovereignty that results in major tribal outbursts. And this is so because in most cases their numbers are small, and their infiltration into other countries in SSA under colonial and postcolonial rule has taken place in small and often insignificant groups. But this does not mean that they are not involved in tribal competition. Like other tribes in their "host" countries, these migrant groups engage in many nonviolent tribal conflicts, such as those I have mentioned above. But their claims do not rest on a virtual or real thirst for sovereignty.

To be sure, in a few cases secession from the national state has been contemplated to assert tribal sovereignty. Katanga in Congo-Kinshasa, Biafra in Nigeria, Casamance in Senegal, Eritrea in Ethiopia, and South Sudan are notable examples. The first three failed in their quest (despite Casamance's ongoing

claim), while the last two succeeded. Because the five cases involved tribal claims of some sort, they can be, misleadingly, likened to the Eurasian situation. In reality, they should not be. It is worth mentioning that, even in the two successful cases of Eritrea and South Sudan, final victory came after prolonged wars and negotiations. These cases represent secession by "exhaustion." Both the two successful and three unsuccessful cases are symptomatic of the difficulties secessionists face in SSA.

There are many reasons for the difficulties faced by secessionists, including respect for the intangibility of the colonial borders of countries.[10] But the prime reason for these difficulties is that, although secessionists may lay claim to a piece of territory (e.g., a province), the territory is not inhabited by a "nationality", as was the case in the former Soviet bloc. Secessionist leaders have to contend not only with their own tribal group, but with *other tribes* in the province as well. These other tribes are not always receptive to the idea of secession. In the two successful cases of secession, Eritrea and South Sudan, more than one tribe in each case anchored the secession movements. They were not one "nationality" affairs. Although the Tigrays make up 50 percent of the population in Eritrea, the secession involved the other 31 tribes of Eritrea as well. South Sudan's secession did not rest on one "nationality" either. Although the Nuer and Dinka are the best-known tribes of South Sudan, neither can be said to have, alone, made the secession possible. Many other southern tribes were involved.

In both cases, the conflicts and negotiations leading to secession were made longer and were arduously drawn-out partly because of the divergent positions that tribes in the seceding territories held about the right to secede. In Eritrea, the Tigre tribe did not always hold positions consonant with those of the Tigrays. In the early years of the struggle for self-determination, the Tigre people were more open to finding unionist compromise with Ethiopia than were the Tigrays. In South Sudan, the Nuer and the Dinka did not always see eye to eye. The Nuer waged war against the Dinka leadership. They denounced the Dinka-dominated leadership of the South Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), the military wing of the South Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). The Nuer split from the SPLA in 1991 and defected to the government of Sudan. They accepted jobs in Khartoum while waging a tribal war against the Dinka. The Nuer were led by Riek Machar, their fellow tribesman who later engineered the Nuer insurgency against the Dinka President, Salva Kiir, in December 2013, triggering a military conflict in the Republic of South Sudan that lasted up to 2017. Against this backdrop of competing tribal positions in seceding territories, the successful outcome of secession had less to do with a nationality thirsting for sovereignty

than with other factors. Eritrea's status as a former Italian colony claimed by Ethiopia made Eritrea a case of "denied decolonization, not a secession… analogous to [the cases of] Namibia and Western Sahara."[11] Moreover, the identification of some of the tribes with Islam, as opposed to Ethiopia's Christianity, strengthened their self-determination claims. In South Sudan, the collective resentment of the southern people against the *racial* dominance of the Arabs allowed a united front of the Southern tribes against the North, despite their rivalries.

In the unsuccessful cases, tribes other than the main protagonists of secession in the would-be secessionist provinces were not always receptive to the idea of secession. In Katanga, for instance, the Luba-Katanga tribe remained staunchly opposed to the secession advocated by the other tribes under the aegis of the Lunda tribe. They supported the national government. In Biafra, non-Ibo tribes, such as the Ijaw, Ibibio, Efik, and others resented the ascendancy of the Ibo, the main protagonists of the Biafra Secession. Their often-uncooperative attitude toward the secession strengthened the hands of the Nigerian federal government in executing the anti-Biafra war that spelled the defeat of the secessionists. In Casamance, the Diola (or Jola) tribe may constitute the majority that drives the secession movement, but it is not an exclusive "nationality." Other tribes have their say.

In short, even the few cases of secession in SSA do not conform to the situation in the former Soviet bloc. Shying away from virtual or real sovereignty, tribes in SSA remain attached to the broader, if vague, territorial and political entity called a "nation-state." Each group is fully or partially aware that it shares such a nation-state with other tribes. Although tribes do not always live in a perfect union, their discontents aim, not at creating a sovereign state, but at replacing the holders of state power with other leaders, preferably members of their own tribe, if given the chance.

The case of SSA also differs from that of other developing regions, its peers of comparison, in four major ways. The first difference is the nature of the conflict. To be sure, like SSA, post-independence South America, Asia, and North Africa display many more instances of "ethnic" conflicts than do European or North American countries. The record of social and political conflicts in the "Third World" has sufficiently shown the role played by "ethnicity" in many of these conflicts, making them resemble those in SSA. Nevertheless, there is a big difference. In both South America and Asia, conflicts are racial, expressed invariably or alternatively in religious, caste, or linguistic terms. In South America, whether one considers the old axes (European-Amerindian, Mestizo-Amerindian, Mestizo-Afro South American, European-

Afro South American) or the more recent axes (East Indian-Afro South American, or East Asian-Afro South American in the Caribbean basin), conflicts are racial in that they involve groups that have been cast as "races" competing against each other. They do not involve Amerindian tribes competing against each other. And even when the latter type of conflict does occur, it is rendered insignificant because it is completely overshadowed by the racial axis. In Asia, "tribal conflicts" are equally overshadowed by the racial axis to the extent that people referred to invariably as "tribals," "scheduled tribes," "hill peoples," "minorities," or "barbarians" (in the case of China) are "races" in relation to the dominant racial groups, be they Indo-Aryans in India and Nepal, Bengalis in Bangladesh, Han Chinese in China, or Arabs in North Africa.

How this came to be requires a foray into history, which would take us far off field. Suffice it to indicate that the repudiation and overshadowing of tribes and their related interconflicts came mostly as the result of the dominant racial groups asserting their political and economic power over the "tribals." Power assertion involved: (1) the assimilation of the "tribals" via a dominant religion or philosophical construct (e.g., Hinduism, Islam, Catholicism, Confucianism); (2) the flexibility and ability of the dominant religion to evolve and morph into sects and confessional derivatives that accommodate both the dissenting members of the dominant race and the tribals (e.g., Buddhism and Sikhism); and (3) the adaptive possibilities of the languages of the tribals, that is, their ability to remain as usable languages even as the tribals are being assimilated (e.g. the Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannadan languages in Southern India). Once the tribals were assimilated or made into marginalized "hill peoples" or "scheduled tribes," who were wards of the state under the control of the dominant race, tribal conflicts involving the tribals against each other "disappeared"; they were totally overshadowed by the racial axis of the cleavages and conflicts. Hence, one understands why, as the result of (2) and (3), religion, caste, and sometimes language occupy a pivotal place in "ethnic conflicts" in Asia and South America. In the absence of tribal conflicts, the flexibility of the dominant religion and the adaptive possibilities of the languages make religion, caste, and language the manifestations of "ethnic conflicts" in a racial hegemonic project.

This is not the case in SSA. Conflicts are not racial. The few cases displaying this racial pattern are Sudan, Mauritania, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. The latter two cases are, rather, disappearing remnants of European settlement colonial rule; Europeans are no longer the dominant racial group. In regard to Sudan and Mauritania, Arabs imposed their racial domination over tribes of SSA —until 2011 in Sudan. Unlike in Asia and South America, however, even these

four cases display an active double layer of conflicts: the first, racial, opposes Africans to Europeans and Arabs, and the second, tribal, opposes tribes of SSA to other tribes of SSA. In other words, in SSA, unlike in South America and Asia, tribal conflicts—and not racial, religious, or linguistic ones—are the pivots of conflicts. (The recent "religious" conflict in Nigeria will be addressed later).

SSA distinguishes itself from other developing regions in a second, quantitative way. Today, worldwide, there are 275 "minorities at risk"; that is, "ethnic" groups facing repression. These groups make up about one-sixth of the world's population amounting to more than 1 billion people in 116 countries, the majority of whom (85 percent) live in developing countries. Yet, among developing countries, SSA has the *highest proportion* of its tribal population at risk (36 percent).[12] Having the highest proportion of the population at risk does not suggest actual violence and repression; it means that the 36 percent face actual or potential repression. But the number does point to a particularity of SSA: As I show in the next chapter, SSA has the highest number of tribes in the developing world. This makes the chances of tribes in SSA being exposed to the potential or real risk of tribal conflicts or repression significantly higher than that in the other developing regions.

The third difference between SSA and other developing regions is that tribal allegiances and conflicts in SSA are more salient than those in the other regions. As a measure of their high saliency, these practices are acknowledged, if only grudgingly, by most, if not all, informed people in SSA, even those who do not engage in tribal politics and social discrimination. Indeed, rarely do we find a country in SSA whose citizens do not believe that "tribalism" is a problem in their country. The above short overview of tribal conflicts reveals the ubiquitous nature of the allegiances throughout all the subregions of SSA. Academic works that establish causal relations between tribal allegiances and conflicts, on the one hand, and socioeconomic and political outcomes, on the other, confirm, often unintentionally, this higher saliency.[13]

Compared with such characteristics in other developing regions, tribal allegiances and conflicts in SSA display a fourth distinguishing characteristic. They are persistent, as most of them predate independence or have existed since independence. In fact, compared with other regions where "tribes" exist and the term "tribe" is commonly used (North Africa, Middle East, and indigenous peoples of Asia and South America), tribal allegiances and conflicts, as manifested through *intertribal rivalries*, are more persistent in SSA than they are in these other regions. This persistence is acknowledged in various pronouncements made in SSA. Indeed, in recent years, a chorus of voices has

risen to advocate reliance on tribal allegiance as a positive, rather than negative, developmental strategy in SSA.[14] This reactive embrace of tribe is both reminiscent of and opposite to the rejection of the term "tribe" in the 1960s and 1970s by both politicians and Africanist scholars in SSA.[15] Beyond their defensive nature, both types of reaction to tribal allegiance (today's and those of the 1960s/1970s) point to the persistence of the allegiance. The reactions of the 1960s and 1970s reveal that the issue of tribal allegiance and conflict was just as preoccupying then as it is today. And the recent embrace of tribal allegiance as an instrument of development is, in fact, a reaction to the long-standing (hence persistent) negative assessment of tribal allegiance in the development of SSA. Since we cannot beat persistent tribal allegiance, we may as well join it for development purposes, seems to be the rationale of the proponents of the embrace.

Thus, SSA displays tribal allegiances and conflicts that are different from those in other regions. Their features bear repeating. They are: (1) ongoing practices and not necessarily violent outbursts; (2) are not based on "nationalities" thirsting for sovereignty; (3) are not racial but tribal in nature; (4) involve the highest proportion of tribes exposed to the possible risk of conflicts and repression in the developing world; (5) are more salient than in other developing regions; and (6) are persistent. This raises an obvious question: Why are they so? What causes these features to be particular and peculiar? An answer to this question has important implications for social theory, comparative politics, and ultimately for the perennial search for solutions to the predicament of SSA. The starting point for the answer should be comparative empirical evidence about tribes.

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15 There were exceptions, such as the former President of Nigeria, Nnamdi Azikiwe, who believed that tribalism was a pragmatic instrument for national unity.

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4. The Profusion of Tribes as a Determinant Factor in SSA

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Abstract
The particularity of tribal allegiance in SSA is linked to a peculiar feature of the region: its profusion of tribes. SSA has more tribes than North Africa, Asia, and South America—the regions with which SSA is compared. This profusion makes tribes in SSA a special category, which cannot be equated with "ethnicity" or be regarded as a creation of colonial rule. To support this assertion, this chapter makes a comparative and quantitative inventory of tribes in these four regions: SSA, North Africa, Asia, and South America. The quantitative evidence helps to draw the conceptual implications for the distinctiveness of tribal allegiance in SSA.

Keywords Profusion of tribes – Tribe mapping – Tribalism – Lineage descent – Kinship – Territorial dispersal

We may, methodologically and logically, assume that the peculiarity of the features of tribal allegiance in SSA discussed in Chapter 3 has to do with a particular and peculiar factor (or variable) that SSA possesses but does not share with the three other regions of comparison, North Africa, Asia, and South America. Such a particular factor could explain the particularity of the six features of tribal allegiance in SSA. Ultimately, one has to identify this factor and explain why it exists only in SSA. In this study, I do not define the factor in question, nor do I discuss why SSA does not share it with the other regions. I will provide a justification and a rationale for identifying and explaining it in the

conclusion of the book. Here I must simply point out that, at the observational level, there are empirical signposts that foretell the particularity of the putative or sought-after factor. Indeed, to identify the factor to which one may link the six peculiar features of tribal allegiance in SSA, the starting point should be empirical evidence about tribes in SSA. Such evidence needs to be, perforce, comparative. In this respect, it is clear that, as one compares SSA with the three other regions, one is struck by one major, albeit overlooked, fact. The evidence reveals that SSA has a profusion of tribes. It possesses more tribes than all the other comparative regions of North Africa, Asia, and South America. The profusion of tribes is the foretelling signpost. If anything, it suggests and alludes to the ultimate factor that accounts for the six peculiar features of tribal allegiance in SSA.

This situation has two analytical implications. The first is that the profusion of tribes and its link to the ultimate factor that explains the six particular features of tribal allegiance make tribes in SSA a special category. As such, tribes in SSA cannot be equated with "ethnicity" or be reduced to it. Nor can they be said to be an invention of colonial rule. The second implication is that, to identify the ultimate factor and to explain why it exists only in SSA, one has to explain why SSA has more tribes than the other regions.

With respect to the first implication, unfortunately the literature on "ethnicity" fails to place at the center of analysis the crucial fact that manifestations of tribal allegiance in SSA differ from those in other regions. As a result, the literature draws three faulty implications. There are worth restating here. Firstly, the literature opts for the term "ethnicity," a loose and catchall concept, as a substitute for "tribe"; it falsely equates tribe with ethnicity and obscures differences of SSA from other regions. Secondly, proponents of cultural pluralism view "linguistic," "religious," "racial," and "tribal" conflicts and cleavages as equal examplars of "ethnic conflicts." In so doing, they wrongly reduce a tribe to a mere component or dimension of ethnicity. Thirdly, they assume, because of this double misidentification, that "ethnic" loyalties and conflicts are universally expressed around the state via religious, linguistic, caste, racial, and tribal cleavages. As a result, they misleadingly privilege the role of the colonial (and postcolonial) state in explaining the saliency and persistence of tribal loyalties and conflicts in SSA.

These three pitfalls prevent the proponents of "ethnicity" from drawing the second analytical implication. That is, they cannot identify the factor that accounts for the six peculiar features of tribal allegiance in SSA. Indeed, because the literature privileges the colonial state, it fails to shed light on the exceptional historical path of SSA. It emasculates both the Africans and their precolonial

history in favor of the colonial state. As a consequence, it cannot properly raise and answer the question of why, comparatively, SSA has more tribes than the other regions that were similarly colonized. Only this question and an answer to it can open the door to explaining the peculiarity of tribal allegiance in SSA. In this book, I do not deal with this second implication. As already indicated, I will only provide the rationale for it in the conclusion. My focus here is the first analytical implication of the fact that the profusion of tribes makes tribes in SSA a special category.

Indeed, I have asserted that the profusion of tribes in SSA and its link to the ultimate factor that explains tribal allegiance makes tribes a special category. How does one prove this assertion? The starting point for the answer should be comparative evidence.

At the beginning of the Christian era, the population of China has been estimated to be 57 million people, that of the Roman Empire to be 54 million, and that of Africa as a whole to be 20 million. Of this 20 million, 10 million lived in North Africa as part of the Roman Empire, which means that SSA had only 10 million people at that time. By 1500 AD the world population had grown to over 300 million, while the population of SSA had increased to only some 47 million. By 1900 the world population had risen from roughly 500 million to over 2 billion, while the population of SSA had increased to only 129 million.[1] Today the total African population is about 700 to 800 million, despite the wild forecasts that had been made about its exponential growth in the coming decades. North Africa has a population of about 150 million, which means the total population of SSA is about 550–650 million people. The total population of SSA is not only smaller than that of the Asian continent, but it is also smaller than the population of each of that continent's two biggest countries, China and India; each of these countries has surpassed the 1 billion mark. Likewise, South America is geographically smaller than SSA (6,875,000 miles^2 [17,806,168 km^2] vs. 9,282,015 miles^2 [24,040,308 km^2]); yet its total population is about 550 million, which is about the same as or only slightly smaller than that of SSA.[2]

What is the relationship between this demographic reality in SSA and its tribes? In a 1990 publication, the Indian scholar R.C. Verma affirmed that the Indian peninsula had the second largest concentration of tribal populations, after that of the African continent.[3] The reference to "Africa" only restates the general suspicion—in the absence of actual data—about the profusion of tribes in Africa. The suspicion raises two types of questions. How many "tribes" are there actually in Africa? Does the suspicion apply to Africa as a whole? Invariably, the number of African tribes is put in the 2000 range without hard data to back up

the claim. And even if one could have relatively accurate information about the number of African tribes, one still needs to know how many tribes exist in the three other regions of comparison (North Africa, Asia, and South America) to be able to make the kind of comparative claim made by Verma. For this, one would need to rely on studies that have undertaken the Herculean task of comparatively and exhaustively mapping the peoples of the world. There are not many, if any, such studies. Nevertheless, two studies come close, and I use them here as a starting point.[4]

One of the earliest attempts at this type of world mapping, George Murdock's study, registers 16 "cultures" in North Africa, 7 in the Middle East, 81 in East Asia, 81 in Central and South America, and 125 in SSA. In the second, more informed study, David Price registers 75 "cultures" in North Africa, 506 in Asia, including the Middle East, 326 in Central and South America, and 939 in SSA. Quite clearly, data from the two sources underreport the number of tribes in all the regions. For instance, in the Indian peninsula, which is placed second to Africa because it contains about 640 tribes,[5] the number of tribes is undercounted by about 140. To be sure, the undercounting in the two studies has to do with the number of regions and tribes involved; the data could not be exhaustive. The Price study simply relies on the tribal data most frequently mentioned or described by anthropological and other sources. The Murdock study resorted to some random sampling in the selection of the data. And there is no doubt that the number of tribes that existed from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries differs from that which exists in the twenty-first century. Yet, regardless of the time period involved and the type of procedure used to collect the data, both the above studies and their samples cannot help but reveal that there are many more tribes in SSA than there are in the three other regions I have compared with SSA (North Africa, Asia, and South America). These studies confirm the aforementioned suspicion about Africa's first ranking in the world in "tribal concentration." But they reveal that the suspicion actually applies to SSA, and not to Africa as a whole. In fact, the Price study shows that SSA has more tribes than all the three other regions combined (940 vs. 906; see Table 4.1). Many other scholars interested in "ethnicity" often anecdotally repeat this conclusion.

Table 4.1 Suggested higher ranking of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in number of tribes, according to Price (1989)

SSA	North Africa	Asia	South America
940	75	505	326

Murdock's and Price's studies give a hint of the numerical superiority of tribal groups in SSA. But one still needs to have actual data about the exact number of tribes in SSA. For a relatively accurate numerical account of these groups, I did a counting of the data provided by Mohamad Z. Yakan's *Almanac of African Peoples and Nations*,[6] perhaps the only relatively exhaustive and encyclopedic description of tribal groups in all African countries. Yakan's data set yields 4624 tribes—which can be rounded down to 4600.[7] North Africa (minus Western Sahara and Mauritania), by contrast, counts about 96 tribes, most of which are Berber. SSA has, thus, about 48 times the number of tribes of North Africa. These tribal groups are dispersed throughout SSA. The regional distribution reveals that all the subregions have high concentrations of tribes (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2 Actual subregional distribution of tribes in Sub-Saharan Africa

West Africa	Central Africa	East Africa/Madagascar	Southern Africa	Total
1780	1211	919	714	4624

Thus, on the basis of the definition of tribe adopted earlier, SSA displays an "anomaly" when compared with other regions. Indeed, SSA has the lowest average population density of the three comparative regions (29/km^2 vs. 31/km^2 in South America and 70/km^2 in Asia)[8]; yet it has the highest number of tribes. By comparison with North Africa, Asia and South America, the SSA "tribe/population" ratio is higher. There are far more tribes per population cluster in SSA than is the case in the three other regions. Put differently, SSA is characterized by a higher profusion and dispersal of tribes. This raises the logical question: What explains this ratio? Unfortunately, this is not a question that is at the core of the anthropological debate, much less in debates in political science. Only historians allude to it as they discuss continental migrations. A fruitful debate about tribal allegiance will have to ultimately address and answer the question of why there is a higher profusion and dispersal of tribes in SSA.

But before answering this "why" question (in another study and allusively in the conclusion of this study), one has to deal with the "what" question. What does the profusion of tribes imply conceptually? How best to conceptualize the profusion of tribes in SSA? What concepts best help us come to grips with this profusion? Because of its seminal import, I will come back to Ekeh's essay referred to in Chapter 2. Here I want to simply point out that despite Ekeh's lament about the lack of conceptual clarity, he did not provide such clarity. To be sure, he sheds light on the two usages of the term "tribalism," and seems to take

it for granted that tribalism is the offspring of tribes. But he does not state clearly whether he opposes the term “tribe” itself. Nor does he clearly state his position about the term “ethnicity,” although he maintains that “ethnic groups” were a creation of colonial rule. It is, perhaps, in his avoidance of taking a clear position that Ekeh chose instead to use the broad term “kinship” as the operational concept throughout his essay. Not only is the term “kinship” problematic, but it also leaves unresolved the debate about tribe vs. ethnicity.

If one examines the sizes of the 4600 tribes in SSA, one is struck by their large variations —some are very small, others big. What can they all possibly display as attributes that make them count as separate tribal groups? Undoubtedly, a territorial location with some borders, however fuzzy; a common language or a variant of a major language (“dialect”); some cultural affinities not shared by other groups; a totem in some cases; and a claim to a common heroic figure or origin. But in most cases, if not in all, a claim to a common ancestor binds the other attributes together. A claim to a common ancestor rests on lineage. Lineage implies *descent reckoning* and differs from kinship reckoning. Descent is deeper and involves, generally, a communal group reckoned by steps of filiation to a common ancestor. Kinship is shallow and emphasizes the distinction of proximate generations and the unity of the sibling group, which includes half-siblings. Kinship includes what is generally referred to as “relatives” and does not presuppose a common ancestor. The rights and obligations of the members of a kinship group differ from those of descent reckoning groups, which are deeper and constraining. Rather than being largely nominal, as is the case in the West, descent relations create a network of relations in which the actors have very well defined roles. Moreover, in descent reckoning, a fictitious aspect coexists with reality, whereas kinship relations necessarily involve a real network of relations. Although kinship does exist in the West, descent reckoning does not. In non-Western societies, on the other hand, both kinship reckoning and descent reckoning exist, with descent reckoning dominating social relations.[9]

Lineage and descent reckoning revolve around institutional and functional units: the nuclear family, the extended family, the subclan, the clan, and the tribe. These units display variations and permutations in different parts of SSA. Whereas in some areas the clan may be the central unit, in other areas the subclan is the anchor. In other parts still, the subtribe (chieftainship) or the tribe itself is prominent. In some areas patrilineage prevails, while in others matrilineage is preeminent. Nevertheless, one cannot understand a “tribe” without a basic reference to lineage and descent reckoning. For this, one need not assume that all members of a tribe share blood ties or—which is not a

contradiction—a descent from a common ancestor. Indeed, in many tribes, as has been demonstrated in the case of southern African tribes, one finds many alien families or clans or subgroups, some of whom speak a dialect or language of their own and have their own customs. And everyone in the tribe is not the "kinsman" of everyone else. For example, in 1880 the Khoisan ("Hottentot") Tsaib tribe "consisted of 40 Tsaib, 60 Bondelswarts, 50 Orlans, 110 Basters, 34 half-breeds…and about 130 Bushman and Bergdama servants", and the Lobedu tribe in Transvaal consists of such aliens as Venda, Lemba, Tsonga, and Shona.[10]

Yet, for important reasons, the lineage and descent reckoning vocabulary and practices permeate everyday life in these tribes. To begin with, the king's or chief's lineage is the core lineage that rules the tribe. Because the ruling clan's members do claim descent reckoning, they impose a lineage imprint on the practices of the tribe as a whole, including via marriages. Furthermore, leaving aside alien clans or subgroups, most members of the tribe claim common descent as well. Isaac Schapera, who carefully surveyed and analyzed these southern African tribes to show the diversity of the peoples involved, still concluded that lineage ties "are indeed very important in public life."[11] Even in societies where tribes are not centralized ("stateless" societies) and no lineage structure is associated with a founding king, the lineage imprint is also pervasive, for the same set of reasons. In these societies, villages and chieftainships are ruled by core lineages. And although the tribe's membership cannot always claim with some certainty descent from a common ancestor, chieftainships, whose descendants claim a common ancestor, are the institutional binders that link the lower units (clans and subclans) to the tribe itself.

Overall, then, the characteristic features displayed by the discrete population groups called tribes are not universal—they do not apply to the West. Their variations in size, a common language or a variant of a major language, cultural affinities (including religious rituals) not shared by other groups, a claim to a common heroic figure or origin, descent reckoning, a claim to a common ancestor often codified in the form of a totem, and, above all, a *special form of territorial dispersal and higher profusion* make tribes a special category. These features complement those proposed by Southall in the baseline definition of tribe cited in Chapter 2: a high degree of self-sufficiency at a near subsistence level, simple technology, and political autonomy. Although some of these features may obtain individually in other, non-Western, regions, when taken in their entirety, they become *peculiarly Sub-Saharan African*. They define, as an ensemble or organic whole, tribal identity in SSA. This organic whole and its peculiar traits, if treated with the kind of care they deserve, should help us to

discover the ultimate factor that accounts for the six peculiar features of tribal allegiance in SSA. For our purpose here, however, the more pressing question is: What are the implications of this organic whole and its peculiar characteristics for “ethnic” studies? Can “tribe” be equated with “ethnicity”?

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5 Ajit K. Danda, *Tribal Ethnography*, Indian Council of Social Science, 1996, p. 3. (Danda 1996).

6 Mohamad Z. Yakan, *Almanac of African Peoples and Nations*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1999 (Yakan 1999).

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8 Calculated from Hammond, *The Ultimate Atlas*, vol. 2, p. 48; Angus Madison, *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective*, Paris: OECD, 2001, Table A-C, p. 175 (Madison 2001); and World Bank, *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth*, Washington, DC, 1989, Table 1, p. 221 (World Bank 1989).

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p. 42 (Maquet 1971).

10 I. Schapera, *Government and Politics in Tribal Societies*, London: C.A. Watts, 1956, pp. 17–18 (Schapera 1956).

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5. Tribe is not Ethnicity: Anti-Tribe and Pro-Ethnicity Arguments are Untenable

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Abstract
The evidence in Chapter 4 about the profusion of tribes in SSA confirms that tribes in SSA are a special category. Chapter 5 outlines the first implication of this evidence. The chapter shows that the concept of “ethnicity” does not agree with the historical and empirical reality of SSA. It argues against equating “tribe” with “ethnicity” by using the available historical and empirical evidence about tribes (e.g., Somali, Bangala, Yoruba) that have served as paradigms in efforts to reject the concept of tribe; this evaluation helps to argue against the concept of “ethnicity.”

Keywords Peasants – Double home – Descent reckoning – Somali – Kavirondo – Luyia – Yoruba – Ethnicity – Ethnic malleability – Colonial rule – Invention of tribes – Dominant racial group – Fictitious kinship – Supertribe

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The empirical and theoretical notes in the preceding chapters make the arguments advanced against “tribe” untenable. We may start with Southall. One reason for his repudiation of the term “tribe” is that tribes have been assimilated by the broader society and have, thus, lost their political autonomy, technology, and religion. This is only partially true, as rural exodus has contributed to the urbanization of rural masses and “depeasantization.”[1] Yet the assimilation in most cases is very partial. Rather than disappearing under the influence of capitalism and urbanization, as predicted by such scholars as Colin Leys,[2] the lineage relations of production have been maintained by peasants. In most cases

the involvement of urbanized masses in the production of cash crops or their own food is through lineage-owned land. Most workers and landless laborers have maintained a “double home”, having their social focus both in the city and in their rural/lineage base. This is manifested through their seasonal migrations from their workplace to the village; their return to the village/lineage base when they are unemployed or lose their jobs; their solid contact with the lineage elders to whom they send a portion of their wages for bride price and other social functions; and their participation in sorcery, ancestral cults, and “tribalism”. Bureaucrats and businesspeople also maintain double homes by practicing tribal sorcery and participating in ancestral cults. Even when the totem or lineage markers are not present in urban areas, geographical/regional and/or linguistic commonalities remain the reference point for “tribalized” social and political competition among urban groups. In all these cases, the “return to the village” is indissociable from the place of the village land—the tribal homeland.

If the national state has often encroached upon the political autonomy of precolonial kingdoms and structures (tribes), in no way has this encroachment erased the memory, reference, or attachment to whatever remains of this precolonial structure of authority. The government in Uganda may have the upper hand over the Buganda, but it has not eliminated the kingdom of Buganda. In fact, for its own survival, the government has allowed the kingdom to reinvigorate itself after the king (the Kabaka) was exiled for a while. Although descent from a common ancestor is not always proven, in most cases it is, or at least, such descent is strongly subscribed to by the members of the tribe, because, by definition, descent reckoning includes a fictitious aspect. And, as just argued, in those cases where no clear lineage affiliation can be traced for the whole tribe, the chieftainship is the lineage binder between the tribe and the lower units, such as clans and subclans. Another binder is the tribal religion and rituals, which have not disappeared either.

That the Somali and the Sab are actually two distinct tribal groups rather than being one single tribe, called the Somali, is plausible. So is the fact that some tribes cannot be easily distinguished from each other because of their ritual superintegration, intersecting kinship, and distributive legitimacy. But neither fact negates the existence of “tribe.” For proof. one needs to come to terms with the history of SSA. In the precise case of the Somali, the historical reality starts with the physical ecology of their land. That land was, as early as the sixteenth century, a dry savannah and a semi-desert. This condition triggered expansionist movements to new and fertile grazing lands toward Ethiopia and the southwest. The result was the assimilation of local tribes, who deliberately suppressed all references to their former self and assumed Somali genealogy and identity.

Among these local tribes were the Sab. Other groups, such as the Gurra, Garri, Gabra, and Sakuya, who actually belong to the Oromo supertribe, also assumed Somali identity.[3]

This situation does not militate against "tribe" for two reasons. First, the historical account clearly suggests that the constitutive parts of Somali were tribes before they formed the Somali supergroup. On this ground, one can ignore the term "Somali" and still face up to the reality and presence of "tribes." Second, if the term "Somali" is not ignored, the record informs us that the tribes in question came together after being separate tribes. In this case, the adoption of the Somali identity by the invaded groups (e.g., the Sab) does not differ from the adoption of the identity of any colonizing group by the invaded and colonized people. Colonized and assimilated Sab people became part of the Somali tribe as part of the historical process of the territorial dispersal of tribes in SSA. There is no reason, then, why the union of the original Somali and the invaded Sab should not be referred to as a tribe, since it meets the definition of a tribe, including partly fictitious descent reckoning for the invaded Sab and especially the peculiar tribal dispersal in SSA. Perhaps Southall's denial of the attribute of a tribe to the Somali has to do with the fact that they are not a perfect example of group harmony. The infighting among their many clans—those belonging to the original Somali, the Sab, and other groups—is a vivid reminder of this lack of harmony. But even in this case, there is no reason why the concept of tribe should not apply. Tribes are by nature made up of different clans that often fight and compete against each other. The Somali case in the postcolonial period may be extreme, but it is not unusual. So, even assuming that Southall's reason for denying the concept of tribe to Somali is the disunity between the original Somali and Sab, the denial does not hold water.

Arabic and European names given to geographical areas that were later made into names of tribes do not militate against the concept of "tribe" either. These geographical areas were rarely barren areas with no inhabitants. The Arab geographical reference "Kavirondo" (which was later used as the name of a Luyia tribe) implies a territory over which a given population lived. Regardless of the absence of a collective name for this population in pre-Arab or pre-European days, one can assume, at a minimum, that the territorial location and the presence of the population involved basic cultural traits, a language or dialect, some way of tracing descent, and some rituals. In fact, historians have shown that the people called today Luyia (Luhya) were an offshoot of a dialectal differentiation of a single Eastern Bantu language group that led to the proto Luyia-Gisu tribe.[4] It is quite plausible that some of the people associated today

with the Luyia group are not original people from that territory and may not have always lived there. And the people may not have been known as “Luyia.” But what history reveals is that well before the Arabs, Europeans, and Kenyan politicians, there were tribal groups, however small, in the area—the only difference is that they may or may not have been called the “Kavirondo” or “Luyia.” Even if one recognizes that Arabs and colonial officials named some tribes in Kenya or elsewhere, which led later to “malleability in ethnicity,” the malleability occurred because of the distortion of the original names or the double naming of historically real tribes by either the Arabs or colonial officials. Over time, the populations identified themselves with these different branches of the name as an “ethnic group.” Yet this does not negate the original tribe, whose existence was real and not a colonial invention. An example here is the *Batetela* and *Kusu* in the east-central region of Congo-Kinshasa. Although the two emerged as “ethnic groups,” they were not so before Arab and Belgian distortions and the double naming of an original tribal group called the *Nkutshu*.

The same can be said about the dismissal of Madagascar’s tribal groups because their tribal identity is assigned to them on the basis of the type of ecology of their land. It is true that, compared with larger tribal groups—such as the Antaisaka and the Betsimisaraka—the Antanala, the Antandroy, and the Antankarana, whose names are derived from their types of habitat, are small groups. As such, they are likely to have moved to their present areas by splitting from their neighbors. In fact, the “tribalization” process in Madagascar owes a lot to the history of the island from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, which owes much to its ecology and various migrations. Migrations from East Africa, Arabia, and Southeast Asia; the slave trade; and the geoecology that triggered the expansion and encroachment of some groups on other groups’ territories, are all factors that caused the formation and splitting of tribes in the island.[5] Because of these movements, some offshoot groups maintained broad similarities with their neighbors in their socio-cultural traits. They also maintained some similarities with their original groups. Yet these broad affinities do not mean that, as “forest people” or “the people of the rocks and caves,” the Antanala and the Antakarana have not developed specific traits that distinguish them even minimally from their neighbors and their original groups to make them a tribe. It is difficult to imagine a small group, which has lived in an ecologically defined area for a very long time, that has not developed some specific cultural traits. Over time, a tribal identity is built. If one dismisses the tribal identity of the Antanala as “forest people,” then one should dismiss the tribal identity of the Kikuyu in Kenya. After all, the tribal name of the Kikuyu is derived from “mukuyu”, because they settled where the mukuyu (fig tree) grew.

The reasons given for “supertribes” such as Yoruba or Bangala to dismiss the concept of tribe are just as shaky. The rather easy and paradigmatic reference to a few supertribes in an attempt to prove that “tribe” was artificially made or that colonial rule was responsible for the making of tribes does not address the real issue, in two ways. First, if the Oyo, Egba, Ijebu, Ife, or Ilesha call themselves Oyo or Egba rather than Yoruba, then there is no reason to dismiss them as “tribes”; they display all the characteristics of a tribe provided above. In this case, the debate about “Yoruba” becomes pointless. The same holds true for the Bangala (to which I return in Chapter 7). Second, and more importantly, the term “Yoruba” was not an “artificial invention” in a vacuum, as has often been suggested. It emerged historically because of the preexistence of these assorted tribes.

Historians have identified three main groups of dialects that differentiated the many tribal groups that later became Yoruba. Two of the three groups (which included the Ife) were older than the third (which included the Oyo). Between 1100 and 1500 AD some of the groups expanded and established their hegemony over the others. One of the outcomes of this process was the emergence of relatively major territorial tribal states such as Oyo, Ife, and Benin. With this emergence of major states some form of cultural homogenization of the three original tribal/dialectal groups occurred. Because this emergence took place under the aegis of the Ife or Oyo, who had, thus, accumulated political and cultural prestige, most other tribal groups could not help but claim common ancestry with the Ife. As a result, there was cultural, linguistic, and religious/ritual convergence—hence, the birth of a Yoruba supertribe. Examples of this convergence include the modern pattern of installation ceremonies and royal insignia, which are similar throughout Yoruba states. The role of lineage in this convergence was asserted by the fact that the king of the Yoruba city-state depended on lineage chiefs, who were a type of “vassal” to the king.[6] The cultural homogenization of “Yoruba” was further strengthened by the Oyo state as it became deeply involved in the Atlantic slave trade, subduing other groups (Egba, Ijebu, Ife, Ilesha, and Igbomina) and, thus, forming a Yoruba cultural complex. Confirmation for this cultural complex is provided by the fact that traditions in Oyo and Benin mention the same founding dynasty of Oranmiyan and there were large numbers of Yoruba under Benin’s authority.[7]

It is perhaps because he is impressed by the peculiarity of the tribes of SSA that Southall, despite his opposition to the term “tribe,” still leaves the door open to its use; indeed, he maintains that the characterizations of the “tribal societies” as provided above “still hold fairly well empirically.”[8] This admission, forced by

the very peculiarity of the tribes of SSA, plus the above discussion compel us to conclude that the reasons advanced to repudiate the concept of "tribe" in SSA in favor of "ethnicity" are untenable. Ethnicity is not an adequate substitute for tribe. To be sure, as a simple term, tribe can be replaced by ethnicity when this is also viewed as a simple term. Terms are terms. Just like names, some are beautiful and pleasant to the ear, and others are not. They can be dropped and replaced. In fact, if the movement to replace "tribe" by "ethnicity" is based on convenience or on African sensitivities, then the term "tribe" can be eliminated in favor of "ethnicity". But tribe is more than a term; it is a concept. It is a mental representation of a concrete society whose understanding or comprehension involves a process of mediation by (i.e., comparison with) other empirical and theoretical data. It implies causal relations. When compared with other situations referred to as "ethnicity," the situation in SSA does not agree with them. "Tribe" in SSA is not a simple conceptual variable of "ethnicity," which is supposed to exist in all the regions of the world.

It may be helpful here to come back to the differences between SSA and other developing regions. It is worth repeating that many of the definitional elements I have provided in preceding chapters about lineage, descent reckoning, and tribe apply to indigenous tribal groups in Asia and South America as well. In light of this, it may be asked why the concept of ethnicity can be applied to Asia or South America and not to SSA. There are two answers to this question. The first, as stated earlier, is that not all the definitional elements proposed for SSA apply to the other regions. This is particularly the case with the profusion of tribes. The second answer flows from a previously made point. I explained earlier that, unlike these other regions, where racial conflicts are pivotal and overshadow intertribal cleavages, in SSA tribal conflicts are the pivot of conflicts. Due mostly to the racial element, indigenous "tribes" in North Africa, Asia, and South America are involved in relations with a *dominant*—often invading—racial group. The dominant group structures, organizes, and circumscribes these relations according to its political and socioeconomic interests. In this sense, the relations rarely feature intertribal cleavages between indigenous people; the pivot is displaced to the dominant group-indigenous people axis. As such, these types of relations in the three other developing regions fit in well with the concept of "ethnicity," since "fundamental to the nature of ethnic groups is inter-group contact, *usually with a dominant group*."[9] Indeed, the three regions are characterized by vertical ethnic relations. Vertical ethnic relations in North Africa, Asia, and South America are pyramidal, unequal, and dominated by one "ethnic" group politically, economically, and socially. Examples include Arabs in Sudan before partition, Arabs in the Middle

East, Europeans or Mestizos in South America, Han Chinese in China, Kinh in Vietnam, and Indo-Aryans in India. But these "ethnic relations" do not reflect the situation in SSA. Apart from the dying situations in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Sudan, and Mauritania already mentioned, relations in SSA are not controlled by a dominant racial group. Instead, SSA is characterized by horizontal tribal relations. Horizontal tribal relations rest on assumed and built-in equality among tribal groups. No tribal group dominates the others. This assumed equality begets demands by each tribe—however small—to be given (or to take) equal chance to control political power.

The definition of ethnicity is made so elastic to make up for what it lacks in specificity; it is "the strategic selection of symbols for purposes of self-identification and for the identification of others from a range of available symbols."[10] As such, "ethnicity" is applied in a universalistic fashion, for the sake of convenience, to dissimilar situations simply because groups in almost every country of the world use malleable identities to advance a political cause. Surely "ethnicity" in Britain or the United States, where "race" is prominently featured, is not the same as "ethnicity" in Cộte d'Ivoire or Kenya, simply because all the groups involved are malleable and resort to politics. The "ethnic" group "Latinos" in the United States (which includes immigrants from all of Latin America) does not remotely resemble the Chaga, an "ethnic" group in Tanzania. The characteristic features and the peculiarity of tribes in SSA demarcate these tribes from today's situation in the Americas, Western Europe, and settlement colonies in Oceania and Asia, where "race" or recent migrations from other regions of the world determine "ethnicity."

One invariably encounters difficulties when conflating the tribal situation in SSA and "ethnicity." An example is a 1993 entry about "ethnicity" in *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*.[11] The author of the entry, who took good care to integrate in his entry some of the most representative literature on ethnicity throughout the world, could not help but use more examples from SSA than from other regions of the world. Regardless of the reason for the selection of the examples, reliance on examples in SSA in a comparative piece on "ethnicity" does suggest the peculiarity of the situation in SSA. At a minimum, this selection reveals the higher "frequency" of tribal occurrences in SSA. This invites a different way of looking at the case in SSA.

Another example from the same 1993 study is the contradictory process of merging the definitions of tribe and ethnicity while distancing the two concepts from each other. On the one hand, "ethnicity" is supposed to have a "fictitious kinship." Yet it is, at the same time, defined as "groups who are not members of

descent groups." If, as seen, descent involves a fictitious aspect, then denying membership in descent to ethnic groups, which are supposed to have a "fictitious kinship," is a flagrant contradiction. It points to the pitfalls inherent in conflating "tribe" and "ethnicity."

Of course, one may reserve the term "ethnicity" only for "supertribes" such as Yoruba, Ibo, Bakongo, or Omyene (in Gabon), because they consist of subgroups that speak dialectal variants of the main language and have local variations of the main group's culture. Or because some of them (e.g., Yoruba and "multinational Fulani") are more numerous than the Norwegians or Irish, who are undeservingly referred to as "nations."[12] But this still would not solve the core conceptual issue. It is worth noting that most, if not all, definitions of ethnicity do not mention the size of the group as a definitional criterion. Nor do definitions of tribe mention the size of the group. The size of the Yoruba, the Fulani, or any other group in SSA does not, therefore, qualify as the reason for calling them "ethnicities."

But there is a more important deterrent against the use of "ethnicity" when dealing with supertribes. There are three aspects of the problem that inexorably redirect one's attention to the concept of tribe. First, most, if not all, members of the supertribe believe that they descend from the same ancestor. In other words, tribal descent reckoning applies. Second, as hinted above in the case of the Yoruba, subgroups within the supertribe behave as autonomous tribes. Their territorial separation, dialectal variations, and other local cultural habits make their daily operations resemble those of any other tribe not subsumed by a supertribe. Third, let us assume that a supertribe is powerful enough to integrate all the subgroups and to become a fully integrated supertribe. In the context of SSA, even this integrated supertribe does not escape one of the defining features of "tribe"; that is, it stands amidst a profusion of other tribal groups, some smaller, some larger, and some perhaps more or less integrated than it is. Regardless of the size or level of integration of these other groups, their profusion dictates to the integrated supertribe a *specific type of relations* with them that differs from that which prevails in Canada between French-speakers in Quebec and English-speakers, or in Belgium between the Flemings and the Walloons as "ethnic groups."

In short, the definitional elements of the tribe I have proposed above apply to the supertribe as well. As such, they militate against substituting "ethnicity" for "tribe" even in the case of supertribes. And this has nothing to do with "essentialism" or with implying that French Canadians or Flemings are "civilized", whereas the Omyene or Yoruba are not. It has to do with the conceptual reality that should guide any effort in explaining SSA. If tribe cannot

be equated with ethnicity, can it be made a simple component of ethnicity? The next chapter answers this question.

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6. Tribe Is Not a Component of Ethnicity

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Abstract
The evidence in Chapter 4 showing that tribes in SSA are a special category also shows that tribal allegiance in SSA cannot be made the equivalent of the "religious ethnicity" or "linguistic ethnicity" found in other regions. As such, tribal allegiance in SSA is not a component of ethnicity.

Keywords Ethnicity – Tribe – Rational choice institutionalism – Bemba (speakers) – Linguistic ethnicity – Tribal ethnicity – Caste ethnicity – Intersecting kinship – Supertribe – Colonial rule – Cultural pluralism – Religious conflicts – Tribal allegiance – Hausa-Fulani – Igbo – Christians – Muslims – Social theory – Territorial dispersal – Profusion of tribes

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To be sure, not all those scholars who prefer "ethnicity" to "tribe" do so for the same reason. Many do so to avoid offending African sensitivities. In this case, they assume that the constitutive components of "ethnicity" are equivalent to and similar to those of a tribe. As a result, they equate tribe with ethnicity. Others view ethnicity as a pluralistic and conceptual matrix within which various components—racial, linguistic, nationality, religious, caste, and tribe—can fit. Here "tribe" is but one of the many components of ethnicity. There is, thus, 'racial ethnicity,' 'linguistic ethnicity,' 'nationality ethnicity,' 'religious ethnicity'…and 'tribal ethnicity.'[1] Scholars involved in this kind of study insist that every community has multiple potential "indices of ethnic fractionalization" and that the relevance of each index will vary according to the issues in that community. For instance, in Bosnia religious cleavage makes Bosnia more fractionalized, and in Belgium language cleavages makes that country more

fractionalized.[2]

Daniel Posner applies this model to Zambia.[3] Posner is in broad agreement with other proponents of instrumentalism and rational choice institutionalism. However, he presents a rather more extreme version of instrumentalism. He argues that: (1) the colonial state created not just ethnicity but ethnicities and shaped their numbers, sizes, and spatial distributions; (2) political competition and conflict acquires different saliency depending on what type of "ethnicity" or "ethnic cleavage" (linguistic or tribal) is at play (in Zambia people belonging to different tribes [e.g., the Lunda or Bisa] can claim, at one point, depending on their strategic political interests, to be Bemba simply because they speak the lingua franca Bemba, and at some other times they may identify themselves with their own tribes on the basis of their rational interests); and (3) the choice of the type of ethnic cleavage is dependent on the strategic interests of the political actors, which are shaped by institutional rules and constraints. Because it falls outside the scope of this study, (3) is not discussed here and (1) is dealt with in the next chapter, where I discuss the role of colonialism in general. Here only a few words can be said about (2); that is, the supposed "fluidity" of the choice made by people in SSA between "linguistic ethnicity" and "tribal ethnicity."

Can people in SSA choose between "linguistic ethnicity" and "tribal ethnicity" just like people elsewhere in the world can choose between "religious ethnicity," "racial ethnicity," and "linguistic ethnicity"? I think not. It is true that people of different tribes do use the language of a supertribe, such as the Bemba, and do identify themselves with the latter in some situations. The reasons for this are many, including the subconscious effort at simplification—recognized by Posner himself and others—and the feeling of being safer in the larger group. Another reason is that people tend to identify themselves with broad geographical regions that are often dominated by one major vernacular even when they are not members of the tribe originally associated with that vernacular. For instance, it is not unusual for people in central and southeastern Zimbabwe to be called "Shona" because of the dominance of the Shona language; for urban/Dakar dwellers in Senegal to identify themselves with Wolof; or for people in the entire eastern part of Congo-Kinshasa to call themselves "Swahiliphones." It is no big surprise, then, that people living in the northeastern part of Zambia refer to themselves as "Bemba" because of the dominance of the Bemba language in the region. In all these cases, one cannot speak of the saliency of "linguistic ethnicity" simply because some political or economic advantages accrue to those people who live in these regions and speak the regional lingua franca. In fact, in most of these cases, especially in urban

areas, the lingua franca serves as a non-tribal binder for its users,[4] and not as a strategic divider.

But more to the point: Let us concede the point to rational choice by recognizing that for obviously strategic reasons some tribes or individuals may identify themselves as Bemba speakers and gain politically or economically from this choice. This still does not equalize "linguistic ethnicity" and "tribal ethnicity," presenting to would-be political actors a strategic choice between the two. For the central question remains: What is the nature of the relation between "Bemba" and "Lunda," between "Bemba" and "Luba," or between "Bemba" and "Bisa"? The answer is both conceptual and historical.

Conceptually, it helps to go back to the notions of ritual superintegration, intersecting kinship, and distributive legitimacy shared by tribes, which sometimes make it difficult to distinguish one tribe from another. The Bemba, on the one hand, and the Lunda, Luba, and Bisa, on the other, share a cultural base that can easily pass from the former to the latter. In fact, in almost all cases of regional domination by a lingua franca, the tribes involved tend to be contiguous to each other. In this case, even if one accepts that colonial rule allowed the domination and spread of the lingua franca in the region, it is difficult to dissociate the lingua franca from the tribes; that is, the Bemba language (the lingua franca) from the Lunda, Luba, and Bisa as tribes. The Lunda and Bisa, who speak the Bemba language, have no difficulty identifying themselves with the overall Bemba tribal culture. "Bemba speakers," like "Yoruba speakers," form a "supertribe." Their opposition to other groups such as the Lozi or Tonga in Zambia is not linguistic only, and cannot be isolated as "linguistic ethnic cleavage." It is tribal in the same sense as Yoruba opposition to the Ibo is tribal, even though within the Bemba, Ibo, and Yoruba supertribes, small tribes do maintain their autonomy or separate identity. Language is embedded in tribe despite the emergence of urban linguae francae that have become almost non-tribal in big urban environments. It should not be surprising that tribes lend their names to languages spoken by the people belonging to those tribes. Linguists have proposed many valid reasons to explain why European colonization and European languages have not displaced the languages of SSA.[5] There is no doubt, however, that the inseparability of tribe and language remains one of the main reasons, if not the main one, for the failure of colonization and European languages to spell the "death" of the languages of SSA. Unless one "kills" the tribe first, the tribal language cannot be displaced. In SSA, the tribe is the matrix within which linguistic interests are fashioned.

The conceptual understanding is facilitated by history. Historically, the

identification of the Lunda, Luba, and Bisa with the Bemba is not surprising. Since the eighteenth century, the Luba Empire and its chiefs had established a confederacy among the Bemba. In fact, oral tradition tells us that the Bemba Empire was founded by Chiti Muluba from the Luba country. It is also recorded history that the Lunda general, Kazembe, had settled among the Bemba after they surrendered to him in the 1760s and that he conquered the Bisa around 1790. And since the eighteenth century the Bemba had repeatedly encroached upon the Bisa territory.[6] Precolonial history thus provides ample reasons to doubt that the Bisa, Luba, or Lunda became "Bemba speakers" simply as a strategic choice between "linguistic ethnicity" and "tribal ethnicity" created by colonial rule (and institutional rules and constraints). Rather, precolonial historical affinities among the groups have made them parts of a supertribe, the Bemba. They "act Bemba" because they cannot, historically, help it.

Almost every tribe in SSA exhibits *the sum of the components*, which, in other regions such as Europe (e.g., Bosnia and Belgium) and Asia, are individually regarded as "ethnicity." For example, the Dioula tribe in West Africa exhibit, at the same time, descent, religion, language, and caste. One cannot speak of the Dioula tribe without alluding to the sum of these components. Likewise, one cannot talk about the Kikuyu or the Luo without *at the same time* taking into account their descent, traditional religion, and their language. In other words, it is not the case that the Dioula defend their tribe's interests against the Bete serially; that is, as linguistic interests first, then as religious interests, and so forth. A slur against the Luo language by a Kikuyu will not provoke a "linguistic ethnic" conflict but a tribal conflict between the Luo and the Kikuyu, as tribes. In this case, language ethnicity in Belgium, religious ethnicity in Bosnia, or caste ethnicity in India are simply not the equivalent of "tribal ethnicity" in Cộte d'Ivoire or Kenya.

Indeed, given that: (1) TRIBAL ETHNICITY = descent + religion +language + caste; and (2) RELIGIOUS ETHNICITY = religion (or LINGUISTIC ETHNICITY = language); it follows that: (1) is not equal to (2). Presenting the two situations in SSA and the three cases in the other regions as instances of "ethnicity" in "cultural pluralism" is a false equivalency. Data on violence, for instance, obtained from linguistic conflicts in Belgium or religious conflicts in India or Bosnia cannot be compared with the aforementioned tribal violence in Kenya and Cộte d'Ivoire and be lumped together as "ethnic violence." The comparison (equation) involves two sets of totally different (unequal) variables.

In fact, even if one considers religious conflicts involving imposed and imported European and Arab religions (e.g., Christianity and Islam) in SSA, these conflicts cannot be isolated in the form of "religious ethnicity." They

almost always take place around and within the tribal confines, as shown in Sudan before its partition. Nigeria offers even more examples. In addition to the March 2010 conflict noted in Chapter 3, in which 500 people were killed, there have been many other cases. In 2000 in Kaduna, for example, 400 people died in confrontations. The same number of deaths was also recorded in Abia State. In almost all these cases, the confrontations between groups are invariably dubbed "religious conflicts" between Muslims and Christians. They, presumably, resemble "religious ethnicity" in Bosnia or religious ethnicity ("sectarian conflict") in the Middle East. Nothing could be further from the truth. Religious conflicts in Nigeria cannot be likened to sectarian conflicts in the Middle East. In the Middle East, Sunni Muslims are assisted in their conflict with Shiite Muslims by other Sunni Muslims from all over the world. Consider here Muslim Jihadists from South East Asia, South Asia, North Africa, Europe, and North America who have lent their militant zeal to the Sunnis in Iraq and Syria. But it is not the case that Hausa Sunni Muslims in Nigeria are assisted, in their conflict with the Ibo Christians, by Sunni Muslims from all over the world. Indeed, what is puzzling is the fact that these "religious conflicts" repeatedly feature Muslims of the North and Christians of the South. Northern Muslims are almost always identified with the Hausa/Fulani tribes, and Southern Christians are almost always identified with the Ibo and associated tribes. We know that there are Muslims and Christians in almost all the major regions of Nigeria, except in the East, where Christianity is predominant. In the West and in Lagos the number of Muslims is almost equal to that of Christians. Yet "religious conflicts" in the Yoruba West and Lagos regions do not occur as frequently as in the North. If religion were the leading cause of the conflict, wouldn't religious confrontations take place in most other Nigerian regions as frequently as they do in the North?

The reality is that religious cleavages mirror long-seated tribal allegiances and conflicts. They are ramifications of the tribal conflicts of the immediate post-independence period that featured the northern Hausa-Fulani tribes and the southern Ibo people, and of which the Biafra War was an outcome. The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe pointed to these tribal roots of the conflicts in a 2012 article in *The Guardian*, 1 year before his death in 2013. He pointedly remarked that "the persecution of the Igbos didn't end with the Biafran conflict. Until the nation faces up to this, its mediocrity will continue." In the article, Achebe retells the story of how the execution of the Biafra War was a clear attempt of the Federal government, led by the northern Hausa/Fulani military elite to weaken, suppress, and even eliminate the Ibo people. These anti-Ibo policies continue today.[7]

As I watched, on TV, Achebe's funeral, held in his native town in the Ibo

country, I was struck by the Christian pomp and pageantry in the church during the funeral. While I do not know the degree to which the writer was a practicing Christian, I do know that he was born in the Eastern region of Nigeria, where Christianity was introduced early on by Europeans. That story is told in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.[8] So although I was struck by the Christian pomp, I was not surprised by the fact that the funeral was held in a Christian church. Yet, most puzzling to me was the fact that, in his *Guardian* article, Achebe, who knew better than most the place of religion in Nigeria, did not link the fate of the Ibo people today to "religious conflicts" between Christians and Muslims. Instead, he clearly highlighted the tribal dimension of the Nigerian predicament. It then occurred to me that, in reality, there is no puzzle. Religious conflicts were not invoked because Achebe knew that, in Nigeria, "religious conflicts" rest on the shoulders of the tribes. They are a euphemism for tribal cleavages.

This is not to minimize the global destabilizing potency of Christianity and Islam as religions. In many countries today religious claims often do raise and target the same types of interests and issues as those raised and targeted by tribal allegiance. It can, therefore, be objected that the distinction I make between tribe and "religious or linguistic ethnicity" is moot. What matters is that religious or linguistic interests do contribute to the conflicts just as tribal interests do. Fair as this objection may be, it misses a major point at the core of this study. While I do not dismiss religious cleavages, I believe their social weight in SSA is overstated. Apart from the recent Islamist movements in Nigeria, Northern Mali, and Somalia, which are offshoots of international terrorist networks, religious conflicts are not equivalent to tribal conflicts in SSA. Even the Islamist movements are partly derivatives of tribal conflicts (e. g., the Tuareg problem in Mali and clanic fractionalization in Somalia that led to the so-called "state vacuum" and the rise of the Islamists). It is precisely because "tribe" is regarded as equivalent to these religious or linguistic cleavages within "ethnicity" that the particularity of SSA tribal allegiance is obscured. Achebe's article highlighting the tribal dimension in Nigeria illuminates this particularity. Obscuring this dimension by making it equivalent to religious cleavages has a negative impact on the formulation of a social theory that could shed light on the historical trajectory of SSA.

Thus, the reality/substance of the tribe—and not the term itself, which is replaceable—becomes the operational concept for SSA. This does not imply that a tribe is an unchanging entity, incapable of adapting itself to demographic, technological, and economic changes, either positively or negatively. Nor is a tribe always a tightly homogenous entity, as revealed in the case of Southern Africa's tribes referred to in Chapter 4. In fact, some scholars opposed to the

concept of “tribe” show, inadvertently, how lineage and tribe followed a “dynamic path” historically and should not be viewed as immobile and stuck in tradition.[9] Some of these scholars provide ways of understanding the adaptability of the tribe in SSA.

Among the latter group of scholars one finds Igor Kopytoff and his colleagues, who joined the debate in the late 1980s. They argue that “tribe” is a European creation, which rarely includes common characteristics, such as physique, custom, polity, language, character, mind, and group identity. Through the use of the term “tribe”, anthropology has perpetuated the widespread stereotype of SSA as a region mired in timeless immobility, where features associated with the tribe are seen as historically given. To counter this view, these scholars have proposed a different way of reading African history, based on the concept of the “African frontier.” Through this concept, they maintain, one can understand the political cultures of far-flung societies in SSA; that is, frontier polities at the periphery of mature societies in SSA. Because these frontier polities reveal ceaseless flux among populations who are relatively recent occupants of their present habitat, they provide a more “dynamic” and “fluid” view of societies in SSA than does the concept of “tribe.” This fluidity results from the fact that these “far-flung” frontier societies are offshoots groups that left their original land and spread throughout the continent. Often through consolidation and centralization, they reconstituted themselves into new cultural entities at the “frontier zones.” Frontier zones are, thus, representative of the dynamism of societies in SSA. These zones explain the profound similarities in the political cultures of far-flung societies in SSA.[10]

What is worth emphasizing for my purpose here is that this African frontier account—and others like it—do not deny the presence of the tribe in SSA. Nor can they show convincingly that the situation in SSA is better explained when the tribe is subordinated to and made a component of “ethnicity.” The frontier account simply confirms the *special form of territorial dispersal and higher profusion* of tribes in SSA. In this mode of dispersal, the influence of the original tribal groups on the frontier groups is unavoidable and unmistakable. Indeed, the proponents of the “African frontier” concept themselves tell us this much: “As the initial tidal frontier crept across Africa, the frontiersmen were bringing with them a basically similar kit of cultural and ideological resources. It is thus not surprising that Sub-Saharan Africa should exhibit to such a striking degree a fundamental cultural unity.”[11] The origins of these cultural and ideological resources are the core tribes from which the frontier tribes split or the core tribes that moved entirely to the frontier zones. In other words, tribes were centrally

pervasive but dynamic and changing at the same time. This still holds true today. Those who have visited SSA in recent years after a long hiatus will attest to these changes within the tribe.[12]

Once the conceptual reality of the tribe is accepted, a question remains. Are tribes and tribal allegiance an invention of the colonial (or postcolonial) state?

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Footnotes

1 See Cynthia Enloe, *Ethnic Conflict and Political Development*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973, pp. 20–27 (Enloe 1973).

2 David Laitin and Daniel Posner, “Constructing Ethnic Fractionalization Indices,” undated typescript (Laitin and Posner no date).

3 Daniel Posner, *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005 (Posner 2005).

4 The case of Wolof in Senegal is perhaps the most telling; see also Eyamba G. Bokamba, “The Lives of Local and Regional Congolese Languages in Globalized Linguistic Markets,” in C.B. Vigouroux and S.S. Mufwene, eds., *Globalization and Language Vitality: Perspectives from Africa*, London: Continuum, 2008, p. 113 (Bokamba 2008).

5 Salikoko S. Mufwene and Cecile B. Vigouroux, “Colonization, Globalization and Language Vitality in Africa: An Introduction,” in C.B. Vigouroux and S.S. Mufwene, eds., *Globalization and Language Vitality*, London: Continuum, 2008, pp. 26–27 (Mufwene and Vigouroux 2008); and Eyamba G. Bokamba, “The Lives of Local and Regional Congolese Languages in Globalized Linguistic Markets,” pp. 97–121.

6 John Illife, *The Africans*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 107, 108, 115 (Illife 2007); Jan Vansina, *Kingdoms of the Savanna*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966, pp. 170–171 (Vansina 1966).

7 Chinua Achebe, “The Genocidal Biafran War still haunts Nigeria,” *The Guardian*, Tuesday, October 2, 2012 (Achebe 2012).

8 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, London: Heinemann, 1958 (Achebe 1958).

9 See, among others, Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990 (Vansina 1990).

10 Igor Kopytoff, ed., *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 4–7 (Kopytoff 1987);

11 Igor Kopytoff, ed.,*The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*, p. 10.

12 Symptomatic of the change is V. S. Naipaul's recent book *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief* that, contrary to Naipaul's preconceived views on rituals in SSA, records the shrinkage of folk religion and other practices (Naipaul 2010).

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7. Tribal Allegiance and the Overstated Role of the Colonial State

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Abstract
Chapter 7 evaluates the second major claim of the proponents of the concept of ethnicity in SSA. Similarly to the evaluation of the first major claim of these proponents (see Chapters 5 and 6), using the conceptual, historical, empirical, and comparative evidence, this chapter argues against assigning the paternity of tribal allegiance in SSA to the colonial and postcolonial states. It examines many of the cases often exhibited as "ethnic" outcomes of colonial rule and shows that the role of colonial rule in such cases was minimal. Rather, tribes in SSA evolved on their own. Their tribal allegiances predated colonial rule. In many instances, it was actually the profusion of tribes that dictated tribal policies to the colonial state, and not the other way around. This chapter shows that the role of the postcolonial state in fostering tribal allegiance has also been overstated.

Keywords Colonial state – Cultural pluralism – Tribal allegiance – Ethnic allegiance – Real history – Ethnic consciousness – Class consciousness – Primordialism – Instrumentalism – Bangala – Mongo – Bakongo – Luba – Precolonial markers – Tribal stratification – Kinship – Tribal partition – Colonial decoupage – Balkanization – Profusion of tribes – Nationalism – Independence

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As I have already indicated in Chapter 2, the "cultural pluralism" paradigm and its three main approaches (primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism) have proposed explanations for the saliency and persistence of tribal allegiances in SSA. Leroy Vail's criticisms of these explanations are worth summarizing

here.[1] Against the purported African atavism, he argues that the claim of primordialism is a tautology, since it basically states that Africans act as tribalists because they are tribalists; that "ethnic" consciousness is an ideological construct of the twentieth century and not an anachronistic cultural artifact of the past; and that primordialism is ahistorical, since it fails to take into account both the actual message of those appealing to ethnic consciousness and real class interests. He agrees with the claim that colonial rule created "ethnicities" and that the colonial urban working environments of the rural migrants stimulated "ethnic" consciousness; but he faults the claim on two grounds. First, its proponents are "evolutionists," who believe in the promise of a modernized nation freed of "ethnic" centrifugal forces and who see "ethnicity" as a negative force; they rarely preoccupy themselves with the history of Africa, which would reveal to them a different understanding. Second, they cannot explain the origin of "ethnic" allegiance and why it has persisted. Vail maintains that the origin of "ethnic" allegiance is more fruitfully sought around one's history, the heroes of one's "ethnic" past, and the manifestations of one's culture, especially language.

Many of these criticisms are apt. And I must add that the same can be said of constructivism. It is also ahistorical, because it relies on discourses, narratives, and symbols in explaining tribal allegiance and ignores the real history of SSA in favor of constructed and speculative narratives. It is no surprise that there is much insistence in African studies on the "malleability," "fluidity," and "invention" of "ethnicity", since, presumably, much depends on the narratives, myths, and ad-hoc circumstances of would-be "ethnic" members. This neglect of real history and the embrace of evolutionism, which views tribal identity only in its opposition to modernity, are obstacles to adequately accounting for the origin and persistence of tribal allegiance.

The Limits of Colonial Instrumentalism in Some Specific Cases

Yet Vail's own summary of the history of SSA is incomplete. He relies on specific historical circumstances in South Africa[2] to account for tribal allegiance. In examining South Africa's political economy since the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886, he argues that capitalist infiltration in the region brought about enormous changes for the populations of the region. These changes were first felt through the imposition of taxes by colonial governments, which forced Africans to seek employment in the new capitalist enterprises. Ecological disaster and drought, the need to pay for bride price, and the

alienation of African lands by the Apartheid policies of “native reserves” resulted in the loss of land by Africans, who migrated to the cities for employment. The fight over land, the disruption of lineage ties, and the unbroken chain between the city and the village had the effect, in the absence of class consciousness, of arousing “ethnic” consciousness. The latter was sustained by intellectuals acting as culture brokers, by African intermediaries of indirect colonial rule, and by the masses who were in need of traditional values in the face of the disruptive social changes. In the postcolonial period, the unbroken link between the village and the city and the inability of the state to deliver socioeconomic services has strengthened “ethnic” consciousness at the expense of national consciousness.

Vail’s reliance on South Africa’s specific circumstances to account for tribal allegiance falls back on the colonial state’s instrumentalism. In his account, capitalism, the colonial state’s imposition of taxes, the need for indigenous South Africans to seek employment in towns, and the Apartheid state policies are the reasons for tribal allegiance. The colonial state anchors this explanatory chain. It and whatever came with it allowed a chain of events to occur that culminated in tribal allegiance. This is only partially true, and the role of colonialism is overstated. For instance, Vail regards the role of the intellectuals and the masses in the creation of “ethnicity” as being almost completely reactive to the disruption of colonial rule. Rather than being purposeful generators of their role, African tribal groups and intermediaries are regarded as being subservient to what Europeans did. No surprise, then, that in Vail’s view “ethnic” consciousness is an ideological construct of the twentieth century. Presumably, no tribal consciousness could have been formed in the absence of the colonial state.

Surely, these African “cultural brokers” and intermediaries could not have gone along with the colonial state without precolonial markers that reminded them of their “culture”; hence, the clan or tribe from which they gained their tribal allegiance. In fact, the postcolonial situation to which Vail alludes reveals the importance of these markers, thus contradicting the claim of colonial state-generated tribal alliances. There is no doubt that the inability of many postcolonial states in SSA to solve socioeconomic problems exacerbates tribal tensions, forcing the suffering masses to retreat to their tribal bases. Yet the claim of colonial state-generated tribes does not explain why the resulting conflicts and retreats take tribal and not “class” forms. After all, classes also exist in postcolonial SSA.

In defense of Vail one could, of course, argue that in the SSA context we should assume, as has been amply debated, that class and “ethnicity” cut across

social relations.[3] Maybe so, except that Vail does not make this argument. Or it could be argued that class consciousness is not well developed in SSA, allowing tribal allegiance to fill the void. But if, as Vail contends, tribal consciousness is a construct of the twentieth century, why is this construct more developed than class consciousness, itself also a construct of the twentieth century, if not earlier? The reality is that people in SSA retreat to their tribes, and not to class, because tribal allegiance is pervasive. It is not poor services by the postcolonial state or the lack of class consciousness that dictates the retreat to the tribe. The pervasiveness of the preexisting tribal markers constitutes a trigger for tribal followers whenever they face *any* big adversity. It was the same under colonial rule. And since Vail correctly concurs that this pervasiveness does not stem from "primordialism" or irrational atavism, one has to propose another type of explanation for it. Unfortunately, those who attempt such an explanation tend to provide a circular answer.[4]

Vail's unquestioned acceptance of the concept of "ethnicity" and reliance on the colonial state's instrumentalism are representative of the more general point I make here. The double misidentification of the tribe by either falsely equating it with "ethnicity" or wrongly reducing it to a mere dimension of ethnicity has adverse explanatory implications. The assumption that "ethnic" loyalties and conflicts are universally expressed around politics and the state via religious, linguistic, caste, racial, and tribal cleavages misleadingly privileges the role of the colonial (and postcolonial) state in explaining the saliency and persistence of tribal loyalties and conflicts in SSA. Empirical and historical evidence runs counter to this instrumentalist view that assigns to the colonial state the paternity of tribal allegiance.

Take the supertribe "Bangala," often mentioned as the paradigmatic example of tribal creation by colonial rule. The story of the Bangala, as a supertribe, was told in stages by both Henry Morton Stanley, the Anglo-American explorer, and Belgian colonial officials and ethnographers. Stanley arrived at the lower Congo River in 1877 from Zanzibar, after trekking along the entire Congo River course. He met tribal groups along the river bank. A year later he told the story of the "Bangala", who lived in a string of villages extending ten miles along the Congo River's banks.[5] It was thanks to this earlier encounter that Stanley was later able to help the Belgian colonial officer Coquilhat to establish a colonial outpost in the area—this outpost was named Coquilhatville (later renamed Mbandaka).

It is not clear who told Stanley that the name of the people was "Bangala." It is possible that he may have mispronounced what he heard from the locals, since his spelling of other local names (e.g., "Boma", spelled "Embomma" based on

his mispronunciation)[6] suggests such a possibility. Another possibility is that he may have referred to the river traders, most of whom were the Bobangi, and their lingua franca was le lingala.[7] Still a third, and most probable, origin of the name Bangala is that it came from the Mongala river, a tributary of the Congo River that has lent its name to one of the subregions of the province of Equateur in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In any case, only later did Belgian colonial ethnographers seize on Stanley's account, giving the term "Bangala" a rather exaggerated importance and substance as a tribe. This importance accrued as the area served as a hub for the recruitment of the colonial state's soldiers and the workers needed for the steamers on the Congo River. The recruits perforce came to be known as, or claimed to be, "Bangala" despite their different tribal origins. As the Congo transited from colonial rule to independence and postcolonial politics, politicians in Kinshasa—the capital city of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the main center of convergence for claimants to Bangala tribal identity—seized the opportunity to compete against their tribal and political rivals by appealing to Bangala tribal allegiance.

So only on the surface do the Bangala appear as an invention of colonial officials and ethnographers and of postcolonial city politics. A closer look at their story reveals that the exaggerations and embellishments of the story occurred after Stanley's time. But these embellishments do not detract from the incontrovertible reality. Whether Stanley mispronounced or misidentified the term "Bangala", he was referring to more than 12 tribes he had encountered along the Congo River. They inhabit a region that can be reasonably referred to as the "Bangala region"[8] because of its geographical circumscription by the Congo River tributary, the Mongala. Both the presence of real tribes and the territorial circumscription are, thus, two compelling reasons to view the term "Bangala" as a loose version of a "supertribe." The colonial recruitment of soldiers and workers who became "Bangala," the colonial ethnography that embellished their story, and the indigenous politicians who took advantage of the Bangala, all seized *post facto* on Stanley's reference to real tribes in the "Bangala region." One need not dismiss the fact that politicians used the term "Bangala" to their advantage to find wanting the claim that colonial rule or postcolonial politics invented the Bangala.

In any event, the paradigmatic reference to the "Bangala" to either oppose the concept of tribe or to assign the paternity of the Bangala to colonial rule does not square with the de-emphasis of the label "Bangala" in the postcolonial period. Indeed, as the Congo Crisis of 1960–1965 deepened and various institutional arrangements (the creation of new political parties and provinces)

were attempted, political party activities increasingly reflected the wishes and "go-it-alone" strategies of the various tribes in the region. Provincial electoral rivalries during this period revolved around individual tribes, such as the Mongo, Budja, Ngombe, and others.[9] In Kinshasa, or the Congo in general, rarely do people invoke the term Bangala; they more freely refer to the Mongo, Ngbandi, or Ekonda as separate tribal groups, thus confirming that behind the term "Bangala" stood real tribes and not an empty "mythical ethnic" shell invented by colonial powers.

Other alleged cases of colonial rule-inspired tribal allegiances in the Congo are those of the Mongo and the Bakongo. It is maintained that in both these cases the colonial state's auxiliary agents, missionaries, and would-be ethnographer administratorss implanted the idea of "ethnic" self-consciousness among the Mongo and the Bakongo through their writings; that the Bakongo and Mongo "intellectuals" and politicians readily referred to these writings to make their case for Bakongo and Mongo "ethnic" consciousness; and that in both cases the implantation of "ethnic" consciousness was the work of Flemish officials, who, reflecting the ethnic conflict in their native Belgium, displayed sympathies toward the Mongo and the Bakongo as native cultures threatened by assimilation.[10] This is a paternalistic overreach. These writings were not read only by Mongo or Bakongo "intellectuals" or politicians. Other educated Congolese of that time and those who later became "intellectuals" have read some of these writings. That only the Mongo and Bakongo readers became tribally self-conscious indicates that they had precolonial markers that resonated with these writings. In fact, the data and ethnographic information used by the Flemish missionaries were collected from Mongo and Bakongo sources and villages. The tribal identity of the Mongo and Bakongo may have been confirmed by the writings of colonial officials, but this identity was not a new invention. The Mongo and Bakongo people themselves knew the story despite the danger of distortion that is inherent in oral history.

In the case of the Mongo, it is true that they may not have known about their dispersed and hidden brethren in other geographical areas of the Congo (such as the Sankuru area)—the result of the migrations of these populations. Yet with or without the writings of the Flemings, linguistic and other cultural affinities shared by the dispersed Mongo tribes were powerful triggers for a Mongo tribal awareness whenever and wherever these tribes were to meet. The contribution of the colonial rule in this is to have simply "opened up" the territorial space that allowed this meeting. Colonial rule did not create their tribal allegiance.

Undoubtedly colonial officials favored some tribes over others, a factor that

boosted their egos and, hence, their sense of tribal worth. But in all these cases the reality is that colonial officers chose these tribes precisely because their precolonial status, behaviors, or practices as tribes (i.e., tribal identity/allegiance) were added values for the colonial enterprise; so the colonial officers favored them. The cases of the Fang, the Luba, and the Ibo exemplify this phenomenon. The Bible was translated into the Luba language and colonial officers more readily depended on them for clerical jobs, at the expense of the Luba's neighbors. Although such favoritism led to a reactive tribal awareness by neighbors, colonial officers did not invent Luba tribal pride, or its usable qualities that were exploited by these officers. The development of the qualities that were prized by the colonial officers was a result of the Luba's migrations and their encounters with east coast Arab-Swahili slavery. These factors had made the Luba risk-takers and entrepreneurs in the Congo well before colonial rule.[11] These entrepreneurial qualities were the ones that appealed to the colonial officers. In other words, the Luba tribal identity was already in place before colonial rule. Logically, it follows that one cannot assign the reactive tribal allegiance of the Luba's disfavored neighbors to colonial rule's favoring the Luba, but to the Luba's precolonial time-derived tribal identity that had made colonial officers favor them.

The same holds true for the Fang and the Ibo. That French colonial officers thought of the Fang in Gabon and Cameroon as their "lost brothers", whom they favored, was due to the Fang's precolonial usable traits: their strength, love of work, and openness to opportunities, all of which were reflected by their expansionism that had resulted in the absorption of some other tribal groups in their ranks.[12] The Ibo of Nigeria also held an advantage over the other "supertribes" under colonial rule. They were able, as Chinua Achebe explains, to acquire "an unquestioned advantage over [their] compatriots in securing credentials or advancement in Nigerian colonial society. Unlike the Hausa Fulani, [they were] unhindered by a wary religion and unlike the Yoruba unhampered by traditional hierarchies. This kind of creature, fearing nor God nor man, was custom-made to grasp the opportunities, such as they were, of the white man's dispensation."[13] The reason for the lack of deference to hierarchies and, hence, the prevalence of the individualistic and highly competitive personality of the Ibo can be traced back to their precolonial decentralized state system ("stateless societies"), as opposed to the centralized states in some other societies, and, like the Luba, to their encounter with slavery, which had a great effect on the "stateless" societies of the Ibo.

Thus, in all three cases, of the Luba, Fang, and Ibo, tribal allegiance was not

invented by colonial rule; it predated the latter. The cases of these three tribes lead to a general statement. The preferential treatment that some colonial officials showed for some tribes at the expense of others did exacerbate the "tribal divide." But this occurred because these officials and employers must have detected (and exploited) some underlying differences in behavioral patterns or some traits differentiating the tribal groups that predated colonial rule. These differentiating traits constitute tribal identity. Colonial officials did not invent them.

An aspect of these differentiating traits is the process of tribal stratification. According to some proponents of instrumentalism, the colonial state played a decisive role in "ethnic" stratification; it allowed the expansion of some tribal groups and the preservation in their favor of the preexisting social inequality vis-à-vis other tribal groups. Examples include the Germans and the Fulbe in northern Cameroon, the Germans and the Tutsi in Rwanda, and the British and the Buganda in Uganda. Undoubtedly, these policies were implemented by the colonial states, and these different tribes were affected by these policies. But why would the colonial states target the Fulbe, Tutsi, and Buganda—admittedly for their own interests—if these three groups did not provide the colonial states with sufficient reasons to use them as "intermediaries"? Obviously, as tribal groups, they had convinced German and British colonial officials of their "worthiness" in advancing colonial interests. There was something intrinsically "Fulbe," "Tutsi," and "Buganda" that distinguished them from the other groups. This included the minority and pastoralist status of the Tutsi and Fulbe, on which colonialists generally relied in their fight against the indigenous majority in a divide-and-rule strategy; the preeminent position of the Buganda; or some other advantage that could be used against other tribes. The intrinsic traits of these three tribes are the same as the tribal identity that predated colonial rule. In this aspect, these three tribes did not differ from the Fang, Ibo, or Luba. In fact, the Fulbe provide counterfactual evidence to the claim of a colonial instrumental role in tribal allegiance. Despite the colonial state's opposition to slavery, the Fulbe remained a slavemaster tribe both in Guinea and in North Cameroon, thus displaying their independent precolonial identity as a tribal group. If the colonial state were so instrumental in ordering their stratification, why was it not successful in imposing on them the end of slavery?

The fear of being incorporated by the colonial state into a wider entity (e.g., the Buganda into Kenya, and the Sotho, Swazi, and Tswana into South Africa) is also said to have provoked a sense of tribal consciousness among these tribes.[14] True, the fear of incorporation may have added to the tribal consciousness of the Buganda and these three Southern African tribes, but it by no means created that

tribal consciousness. The very fact that the tribes resented the idea of incorporation signals their fear of losing their preexisting precolonial tribal identity and allegiance.

In short, arguments that assign to the colonial state the instrumental role of breeding tribal allegiance in some specific cases do not fare well under close scrutiny. But what about the role of the colonial state in general?

The Broader Case Against Colonial Instrumentalism

In his 1990 essay, Ekeh takes more seriously the role of the precolonial history of SSA in explaining tribal allegiance than does much of the literature. Yet he grants much more power to the colonial state in explaining the saliency of tribal allegiance and persistence than it deserves. Ekeh provides five indicators to support the instrumental role of the colonial state in expanding "kinship" into "ethnic groups" and "kinship ideology." [I have already, in Chapter 4, pointed to Ekeh's failure to bring conceptual clarity to the concepts of "tribe" and "ethnicity" because of his recourse to the use of the generic concept of "kinship." I use his own terminology.] The first Ekeh's indicator is that the colonial state was an outside imposition, and, as such, it coexisted and functioned alongside the many tribal groups in SSA. Because the colonial state thus remained separated from these groups, which had their own values and morality, it preserved their role and place—and hence prominence—in society. Second, the colonial state rested on the principle of institutionalized amorality, while action within tribal groups was governed by the principle of morality. Given this duality, the colonial state relied on precolonial kinship moral codes to expand kinship into tribal groups that interacted within the colonial setting. Because these groups did not exist before colonial rule, they became salient and tainted with the colonial state's amoral code. Third, the colonial state did not provide welfare to its colonial subjects in the polyglot cities. As a result, kinship and tribal groups substituted for the colonial state and provided welfare for their members, thus making kinship/tribes prominent. Fourth, through religion, colonial rule promoted the tribal allegiance of some groups. An example is the translation of the bible into some tribal languages, which raised the level of tribal consciousness of these tribes in opposition to other tribes. Fifth, the colonial state appointed and imposed "chiefs" where they had not existed.[15] Through these five points, Ekeh reflects the broader views of the proponents of instrumentalism that I have summarized in Chapter 2. According to these views, the colonial state is assigned a major responsibility in the creation of tribal

allegiance.

A closer reading of the five indicators, however, reveals that the role assigned to colonialism is, as in other cases discussed above, overstated. With respect to the first indicator, if the colonial state remained separated from preexisting tribal groups in SSA, it is because—and this flows logically from Ekeh's own argument—of the difficult position in which it found itself; the "values" and "morality" of preexisting tribes forced the alien colonial state to give them their "space" to operate. This situation does not prove the instrumental role of the colonial state in inventing tribal allegiance. Indeed, the situation is reflected in Ekeh's second indicator. That the colonial state, however amoral, relied on a precolonial kinship moral code to create some ally tribal groups only confirms that this code (tribal allegiance) preceded colonial rule. It was there for the plucking, and could not be ignored. It is true that the colonial state rearranged the "kinship" code in some respects in an attempt to use it for its own exploitative purposes. But it did not invent the code.

Regarding the third indicator, the fact that tribes provided welfare for their members when the colonial state failed to do so obviously indicates that this role had been played before the advent of colonial rule. Tribes could not have, all of a sudden, learned to play this role just as the colonial state revealed itself to be incapable or unwilling to deliver social welfare. Undoubtedly, in the new urban and polyglot environments, tribal groups that delivered welfare to their followers became more indispensable than they were in the villages. But both in the cities and villages, the prominent role of the tribe or clan in the delivery of welfare was an attribute of the lineage-built-in cooperation that existed in precolonial times. If the delivery of welfare to tribal followers signalled tribal consciousness, then this consciousness predated the colonial state. As for the fourth indicator, which subordinates the rise of tribal allegiance to the role of the colonial state's religion in propping up some tribes, I have already shown, in the case of the Luba, why this argument is not tenable. It need not be repeated.

Concerning the fifth indicator, it is true that colonial officials appointed tribal chiefs. In some cases where new chiefs were appointed, the colonial state did so because the legitimate chiefs had disobeyed orders of the colonial state that had violated the traditional/tribal moral code or prescriptions. As the legitimate chiefs sought to uphold these prescriptions, their actions subverted the goals of the colonial state. As a result, they were removed from their office and replaced by more compliant chiefs. Yet this situation does not support the argument that the colonial state invented tribal allegiance. On the contrary, it reveals that the preexisting tribal allegiance (hence, the legitimate chiefs' commitment to tribal prescriptions) *had forced* the colonial state to make the new appointment. In fact,

this commitment to precolonial tribal allegiance was so strong in some cases that even the chiefs newly appointed by the colonial state did not always remain compliant to the dictates of the colonial state. For instance, in the Kikuyu reserves the British had sought to create a "new" brand of chief through the schooling of the children. Some of the newly appointed chiefs refused the British colonial orders to send their children to European/mission schools. Instead, they sought to maintain much of the Kikuyu tribal organization.[16]

To be sure, not all colonial appointments of new chiefs were due to the actions of recalcitrant legitimate chiefs. Some were the result of the imperatives of colonial bureaucracy and governance. In addition to the appointments of new chiefs, other aspects of the imperatives of colonial governance were the arbitrary divisions of big groups into small tribes, or, conversely, the grouping of small groups into bigger tribes. In all these cases, new tribal demarcations were imposed on the populations. But these new demarcations did not flow from the wild imagination of the colonial officers. While colonial interests led to the acts of demarcating and grouping, the demarcating and grouping of people *in tribal groups* was dictated by the preexisting reality of the tribes in SSA. That is, in the face of the imposing fact that tribes made up the society of SSA and states were tribe-based, the colonial state had no choice but to imitate what was already in place. As a result, even its arbitrary territorial/administrative division could not escape this reality. The colonial state grouped populations along tribal lines to create administrative consistency with what was already offered in the SSA context.

This situation is best illustrated by examining the process of colonial territorial divisions and the creation of colonies. It is worth recalling that colonialism in Asia and South America, like colonialism in SSA, involved brutal conquests, repression, and territorial groupings and divisions. I do not, therefore, subscribe to the view that SSA faced a more brutal and more repressive colonial rule than Asia and South America, as some have argued.[17] What is specific to SSA, however, is the mode of colonial partition of its territory. The impact of the profusion of tribes in SSA on the mode of partition was undeniable. Indeed, unlike Asia and South America, SSA contains a large number of small, economically and internationally non-viable countries that were forged by colonial agreements. Africa as a whole has 54 countries, over one quarter of the United Nations (UN) membership. North Africa has only 5 countries, plus the border case of Mauritania. The majority of the countries, 48 of them, are thus found in SSA. Asia, the largest continent in the world, has 37 countries, if one does not include central Asian states that were until recently part of the Soviet

Union. Continental South America has 21 countries in addition to the 12 big and many small Caribbean Islands. In this sense, the "balkanization" of SSA cannot be dissociated from European colonialism. However, compared with Asia and South America, the colonial mode of territorial partition that resulted in a large number of small and non-viable states in SSA was mainly dictated by the profuse precolonial tribal configuration in SSA that lacked recognized territorial boundaries. This point needs some elaboration.

To understand colonial partition in South America, one has to consider the fact that this continent was colonized by Europeans earlier than Asia and Africa. Related to this is the almost exclusive presence of the Iberian powers, Portugal and Spain, in Central and South America at the early stage. Whereas in Africa the presence of seven competing European powers raised the stakes and dictated the policy of territorial swapping, in South America Spain and Portugal did not face such tough competition. Although Portugal engaged in skirmishes with France in parts of Brazil (e.g., the Amazon),[18] and Spain faced some Portuguese encroachments around the borders of its territory with Brazil, these two colonial powers did not have to swap territories, which could have resulted in the splintering of their regions. Competing Spaniards founded cities and settlements under the same king's orders and within administrative structures whose apexes were four viceroyalties. Territorial arrangements under the four viceroyalties resulted in relatively large unified entities (more unified than French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa). These entities disintegrated into small territories only in the post-independence crisis period,[19] as is best illustrated by what occurred in the Central American countries. Originally constituted by Spain as the "United Provinces", with their power center in Guatemala, the five provinces split in 1823 to become the autonomous and independent countries that they have remained since.[20] The colonial territorial partition in Latin America thus bore the imprint of the two Iberian countries.

In light of this historical background, one might conclude that the difference between territorial partitions in South America and SSA lies in what their respective colonial states did. This is only minimally true, however. The presence of seven European colonial powers in SSA at the time of the colonial partition was not unique. Even though they arrived later than Spain and Portugal, other colonial powers (Holland, England, France, Denmark, the United States) did join in colonial adventures in South America as well. In this sense, it is not the presence of seven colonial powers in SSA vs. two powers in South America that made the big difference in territorial partition between SSA and South America. Rather, the configuration of the *precolonial tribes* in the two regions

was the difference. In South America, colonization had major demographic implications. Most notable was the quasi-extermination of the indigenous population and its thin settlement in some areas such as the Southern Cone. In the face of these demographic patterns, Europeans built their settlements (which later constituted countries) according to the prospect of finding gold or silver or other riches, farming, and finding labor. As a result, the geographical and sociological configuration of a large indigenous population and the presence of tribes did not dictate the territorial division; it was only very marginally part of the colonial calculus.

In South and Southeast Asia, many colonial powers also became involved in colonization. Among these were Spain, Portugal, Britain, France and Holland. To be sure, the states of Southeast Asia were not uniformly united or strong entities. They displayed many weaknesses that were noticed by Europeans. Unlike in SSA, however, the advent of colonial rule in Asia was preceded by the existence of a number of states with relatively well-defined territorial and cultural borders. Although European colonial powers competed against each other in Asia as they did in SSA, such precolonial borders prevented Europeans from making new territories with new borders. In Indonesia, the Dutch relied on the preexisting indigenous state to govern without major territorial alterations; in the Philippines the Spaniards "united" the islands along the administrative model developed in Mexico; Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, although grouped as French Indochina, were colonized as preexisting indigenous kingdoms; India fell to British colonial rule when it was an empire dominated by the Moghuls, despite Muslim and Hindu antipathies toward each other. Still, Britain did not remake the territorial borders of the empire. Instead it relied on the pre-existing borders and reformed the empire's code and rules. When Korea was colonized by Japan in 1910 it was under a unified dynastic rule that had been in place since 677 AD.[21]

In the Middle East, two colonial sequences followed each other. The first was the Ottoman Empire, and the second took place when European powers replaced the dissolved Ottoman Empire around World War I. Under the Ottoman Empire, Middle Eastern countries constituted entities under a common administrative system, except for Lebanon, which was governed differently. This system had strengthened these entities and provided much of today's "Arab unity." By the time Europeans took over, the various Middle Eastern countries were, by and large, what they are today. Exceptions were Jordan, a desert inhabited by 200,000 people, in which country the British installed the Hashemite ruler Abdullah; Saudi Arabia, whose borders with Jordan were not set

until 1925; and some of the small oil-rich kingdoms.[22]

The picture in SSA contrasted with that in both South America and Asia. It is true that the interior of SSA was suddenly opened to Europeans in the 1800s by explorers such as David Livingstone and Henry Morton Stanley. The attendant expectations of discovering untapped wealth led to intense competition among colonial powers. This culminated in the Berlin Conference that "carved up" Africa in 1885. As a British politician put it: "We have been engaged in drawing lines upon maps where no white man's foot has ever trod. We have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, only hindered by the small impediment that we never knew exactly where the mountains and rivers and lakes were."[23] Nevertheless, had the precolonial territorial and sociopolitical picture of SSA resembled that of Asia and South America, the "carving up" would not have had to result in 48 states. Rather, in SSA the profusion of tribes dictated the mode of colonial territorial partition because of their vast territorial dispersal and the lack of recognized territorial boundaries for many of them. The profusion of tribes and these two related features had deep impacts on colonial officers. They made it difficult for the European colonizers to understand and respect the patterns of tribal settlements in SSA.

Under these circumstances, the colonial powers were forced to adopt two options. The first option was to regroup and lump tribes together for the purpose of creating new colonial states. In this case, previously autonomous small or even relatively big tribes were grouped together, not to form a supertribe, but to form a European colony under the aegis of the colonial state. The second option, a consequence of this colonial grouping, was the splitting of previously integrated tribes into autonomous parts that were connected to the new colonies, regardless of who controlled the colonies. Examples include the Fang in Gabon and Cameroon, the Hausa in Nigeria and Niger, the Ewe in Ghana and Togo, and the Chokwe in Portuguese Angola, British Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), and Belgian Congo. This pattern repeated itself in many parts of SSA. Either way, the main outcome was the colonial partition of SSA into a plethora of small territories/countries.

What does this tell us about tribal allegiance? Two things. First, in those cases where precolonial tribes preexisted within the confines of a new colony that subsumed them, it cannot be argued that the colonial state created their tribal allegiance. Tribal allegiance predated the new colony. If anything, the colonial state simply opened up the "national" territory within which each of these subsumed tribes had to deal with or be connected to more tribes ("virtual compatriots") than was the case before colonial rule.

Second, in the case of the tribes split into separate colonies, it is true that being situated in separate colonies/countries has had the effect of reviving their tribal allegiance to their once original precolonial group. A case in point is that of the Ewe in Togo and Ghana seeking to unite at the expense of both Ghana and Togo, at different junctures of postcolonial history. In many cases, the splintered tribal groups have been a thorn in the side of the national state, as their allegiance to their original tribal group is stronger than their allegiance to the state to which they are linked. The Tutsis in the eastern part of Congo-Kinshasa, who revere their Tutsi tribal group more than they do the Congolese nation-state, are another example.[24] But in all these cases the claim that colonial rule invented tribal allegiance is contradicted by the facts. The Dioula in West Africa, the Ewe, the Chokwe, or the Bakongo in Congo-Brazaville—all of whom are split tribal groups—do not owe their tribal allegiances and conflicts to the fact that colonial rule split them and placed them in different colonial territories. If this were the case, we would expect the Ewe in Togo to develop tribal allegiance only to the Ewe in Togo as a Togo tribe created by colonial rule and not to the Ewe in Ghana. But this is not the case. That most of these split groups seek to reconnect with each other in an attempt to reconstitute their original bigger precolonial tribe, despite being located in different colonial territories, only reveals that they had developed their tribal allegiance before the colonial splitting occurred. In many situations it is the reconnection with the original bigger tribe that leads to intertribal conflicts.

I do not deny the fact that colonial partition was not in the interest of the Africans. Rather, the point here is that the oft-repeated argument that colonial rule created tribes that did not exist before colonization overshoots its target. Colonialism could not, even if the colonial powers had wanted to, have created the 4600 tribes found in SSA. While we do not have the exact percentage of tribes that can be attributed to the colonial division, it is, no doubt, very minimal. The overwhelming majority of the tribes in SSA predated the actions of the colonial state or evolved on their own. In short, there is much evidence that allows us to conclude that colonial rule did not invent or fabricate tribal allegiance. Even if one accepts that colonialism divided up or lumped together some previously existing groups into “tribal” entities, this was not done in a vacuum. Colonial powers could divide and regroup peoples only because, as Howard Handelman concurs, there were already many such groups in existence.[25] Their very profusion, despite the attempts of colonial rulers to order them, suggests that the colonial state was not as omnipotent a creator as one is led to believe. While the Europeans’ policy of colonizing SSA was deliberately

theirs, the attendant mode of territorial division was dictated by the profusion of tribes in SSA.

As goes the colonial state, so goes the postcolonial state. There is an almost automatic consensus among the proponents of instrumentalism that the colonial state invented tribal allegiance, and the postcolonial state inherited and strengthened this phenomenon for its own use. Here also the case is overstated. There is no doubt that, just as occurred under colonial rule, the postcolonial state and politicians do instigate and use tribal allegiance to advance their own political interests. But just as the colonial state did not invent tribal allegiance, so, too, the postcolonial state could not "inherit" it from the colonial state. One cannot inherit what does not exist. Tribal allegiance predated both types of states, which only strengthened and used it for their own ends. The "inherited tribal allegiance" argument, of course, does not explain why Ethiopia, which was not colonized, has been beset by tribal allegiances and conflicts. And, more importantly, this argument does not explain why other developing regions with a similar fate of having been subjected to a colonial state and having tribes do not display tribal allegiances and conflicts that are equivalent in saliency and persistence to those of SSA.

Even in the case of the events leading to and following independence in the countries of SSA, the claim that the colonial state allowed tribal allegiance is a false one. Consider the following events in which the colonial state supported tribal parties to break up nationalist opposition to colonial rule. In British colonies, attempts to impose and imitate the Westminster parliamentary system in the newly independent countries led the competing parties to be, perforce, tribal parties. In French colonies in West Africa, such as Cộte d'Ivoire, local branches of the Rassemblement Dẻmocratique Africain (RDA; African Democratic Rally), which fought for independence on a pan-African basis, were opposed by tribal parties supported by the French, who sought to protect their colonial interests. In Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah's anti-tribal and pan-African nationalism was opposed by tribes such as the Ewe.[26] In all these cases, tribal allegiance did play a role and colonial officers fanned its flames. But fanning the flames of a fire is not the same as setting the fire. Colonial officers sided deliberately with tribal parties or indirectly allowed their flourishing (as in the Westminster parliamentary system case) to protect their interests. But they did not invent the Ewe, Agni, Brong, or Kru, some of the tribes on which colonial officials relied to sponsor tribal parties. It is because the Ewe, Agni, Brong, and Kru already displayed tribal allegiance that they became the targets of colonial officials, and not the other way around. It follows that tribal parties that have existed or still spring up in countries in SSA in the postcolonial period are not a

legacy of colonial rule or of the simple instrumental will of the postcolonial state.

Even those who reject colonial instrumentalism fall back on the postcolonial state's instrumental role. For instance, some authors maintain that "ethnicity" in SSA is not an outcome of colonialism and slavery. And they explicitly reject instrumentalism. Yet they explain the saliency of tribal allegiance by arguing that tribal groups in SSA cannot form a "union" because they lack commonalities in language, customs, culture, and territory. As a result, politics in the national context dictate a recourse to tribal allegiance to gain access to the resources of the state.[27] In other words, even though tribes are historically antagonistic and uncooperative toward each other, only through the postcolonial state and postcolonial politics does tribal allegiance take form. The postcolonial state and its politics are, thus, made responsible for tribal allegiance. This argument is deceptive. It rejects instrumentalism in the name of instrumentalism. If the lack of commonalities among tribes leads to politics dictating a recourse to tribal allegiance, then tribal allegiance is not generated by the state and politics. Rather, the lack of commonalities in language, customs, culture, and territory is the real and more important cause of tribal allegiance. In this case, to explain the very existence of tribes and tribal allegiance, one has to explain why the lack of commonalities in language, customs, culture, and territory occurred in SSA in the first place. No such explanation is provided. Instead, the postcolonial state is inaccurately presented as the catalyst of tribal allegiance. The explanation of tribal allegiance requires that we go beyond the colonial and postcolonial state to ask questions about precolonial SSA.

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Footnotes

1 Leroy Vail, “Introduction: Ethnicity in Southern African History,” in Leroy Vail, ed., *The Invention of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) (Vail 1988).

2 Other explanations of tribal/ethnic allegiance view it as an outcome of both specific historical circumstances and primordialism; see John Comaroff, “Of Totemism and Ethnicity: Consciousness, Practice and the Signs of Inequality,” *Ethnos*, Vol. 52. no. 3–4 (1984), pp. 301–323 (Comaroff 1984).

3 Richard Sklar, “The Nature of Class Domination in Africa,” *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 17, no. 4 (1979), pp. 531–552 (Sklar 1979); R. Lemarchand, “The State and Society in Africa,” in Donald Rothchild and Victor Olorunso, eds., *State Versus Ethnic Claims*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1983, pp. 44–64 (Lemarchand 1983); and Timothy M. Shaw, “Ethnicity as the Resilient Paradigm for Africa: From the 1960s to the 1980s,” *Development and Change*, Vol. 17 (1986), pp. 587–605 (Shaw 1986).

4 For an example of such circular answers, see Richard Sandbrook, *The Politics of Africa’s Economic Stagnation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, chapters 2–4, esp. pp. 39, 43, 63–66, 76 (Sandbrook 1985). For an alternative way out of the impasse, see S.N. Sangmpam, *Pseudocapitalism and the Overpoliticized State*, Aldershot: Averbury/Ashgate, 1994 (Sangmpam 1994); and S.N. Sangmpam, “Social Theory and the Challenges of Africa’s Future,” *Africa Today*, Vol. 43, no. 3 (1995), pp. 39–66 (Sangmpam 1995b). In these two works, I show that, because of the preeminence of lineage in the making of the tribe, clan/tribal allegiance stifled class consciousness. More importantly, an explanation of the pervasiveness of tribal markers requires that we come to terms with the history of SSA.

5 Henry M. Stanley, *Through the Dark Continent*, New York: Harper and Bros, 1878 (Stanley 1878).

6 See Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998, p. 47 (Hochschild 1998).

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8. Precolonial History and the Saliency and Persistence of Tribal Allegiance

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Abstract
This study has argued that the literature on ethnicity has ignored and vitiated the precolonial history of SSA. This chapter discusses the role and the facets of this precolonial history in explaining tribal allegiance in SSA. Although one of these facets is transatlantic slavery, the chapter shows that transatlantic slavery is only one factor. One needs to go beyond transatlantic slavery, far deeper into the history of SSA, guided by the lurking question of why, comparatively, SSA has more tribes than the other regions that have been examined.

Keywords Primitivism – Tribal allegiance – Precolonial history – Transatlantic slavery – Kinship – Kinless people – Slave states – Social theory – Lineage

Because modernization theory viewed tribal allegiance as primitivism, it was assumed that this allegiance would disappear in the face of modernizing trends. This assumption did not materialize. Tribal allegiance has survived and persisted. I have so far shown that the literature unwarrantedly imputes tribal allegiance to the actions of the colonial and postcolonial states, and it does the same with respect to the persistence of tribal allegiance. Although the literature errs when it relies on the colonial and postcolonial states to *explain* the genesis of tribal allegiance, there is some truth in attributing its persistence to colonial rule and the postcolonial state. The reason is simple. As already argued, both types of state resorted to tribal allegiance to meet their policy ends. Their frequent recourse to tribal allegiance has had the effect of keeping it alive, thus

partially contributing to its persistence. But if we consider that: (1) colonial rule and the postcolonial era in SSA have a combined life span of only about 132 years, and (2) tribal allegiance predated both types of state, then the persistence of tribal allegiance has a far longer history than whatever the colonial and postcolonial states may have contributed. It follows that the reasons for the persistence of tribal allegiance are to be sought deeper in the precolonial history of SSA.

Although Ekeh[1], like the proponents of the instrumentalist literature, attributes the persistence of tribal allegiance to the colonial and postcolonial state, his foray into the precolonial history of SSA better illuminates both the origin and persistence of tribal allegiance than these proponents do. Indeed, Ekeh is one of the very few scholars who have not only invoked the need to refer to the precolonial history of SSA but who have actually delved into that history to shed light *theoretically* on tribal allegiance. A precolonial historical category that he brings to life in his explanation of tribal allegiance and its persistence is transatlantic slavery. Ekeh's main argument is that the exigencies and imperatives of the slave trade explain the onset, scope, and persistence of "kinship" (tribal allegiance) in SSA. In support of this argument, he examines the impact of the prolonged disruptions by slavery on relations between individuals and states. His argument runs counter to that proposed by the British historians J.D. Fage and A.G. Hopkins,[2] who maintain that slavery prepared the conditions for commercial revolution and for the destruction of kinship in favor of state formation in Africa. Against this line of thought, Ekeh argues that, in reality, the state was the institution that faltered in the face of slavery, while "kinship" (tribal allegiance) prospered. As a result, the state did not protect individuals; kinship did so, and thus its scope and persistence were established.

To support the idea of these two contrasting relations between individuals and the two precolonial institutions of the state and kinship, Ekeh examines three types of precolonial states and their ties to transatlantic slavery. The first type consisted of states not involved in the slave trade, of which Ethiopia and Benin are exemplars. Ethiopia's "feudal" relations and Benin's city-state arrangements stood as protective shields for their "citizens" against slavery. As a result, in these two states there was no need for kinship to develop as a protector against slavery. These state arrangements and strengths further explain Ethiopia's resistance to and escape from European colonial rule. The second type of state consisted of corrupt states deeply involved in the slave trade. Examples are the states of Dahomey, Oyo, and Hausa-Fulani, which sold their citizens to slave-traders. As a result, citizens sought refuge in kinship, making it the preeminent

form of protection in society. An illustration of the preeminent role acquired by kinship is the deep involvement of kinship structure in politics and governance in the Oyo state.

The third type of state consisted of those states that were at the very outset creations of the slave trade. States in the Niger Delta and the Atlantic coast of West Africa are prime examples. In these states, the "leaders" were slave merchants, who drew their legitimacy from foreign slave merchants. They had no legitimacy vis-à-vis the populations and societies which they "led". The predatory nature of these states invigorated kinship ties as the only protective bastion for the populations against the states and their foreign slaving allies. In addition to noting these three types of state, Ekeh analyzes the situation in "stateless" areas such as those of the Ibo. In these areas, raids by slave states led to the emergence of a pristine form of kinship of unilineal descent groups to resist the raids. These descent groups assumed political functions in society.

The impact of these types of states on kinship ties (tribal allegiance) on state-society relations was shown in three ways. First, the slave trade imposed a division between the state and society, in which the state grew apart from society, and society grew independent and relied on itself through kinship. Second, the separation of state and society by the slave trade weakened the alliance between the state and the populations. Because European colonialism was the historical successor to the slave trade, this weakness prevented states in SSA from successfully resisting the colonial onslaught, except in Ethiopia and Benin. Ironically, the slave states were easily defeated by Europeans, their former allies in the slave trade. Third, state involvement in the slave trade ended the cultural heights that had been reached by preslave states such as Benin and Ife.

Thus, Ekeh locates the onset of the preeminence of tribal allegiance in the slave trade. The weakness of the alliance between the state and society and the attendant states' inability to protect their populations in the face of slavery allowed tribal allegiance to become prominent. Over the long haul, this weakness and the state-society schism characterized the colonial and postcolonial states as well, as they proved themselves incapable of protecting their citizens. "Indeed, the distrust of the state and its institutions by the individual has been the norm rather than the exception in the history of Africa. In many instances, the individual has needed his kinship ties to save him from harassment by the state and its agencies."[3] As a result, tribal allegiance strengthened itself and persisted.

Ekeh has made a major contribution to social theory in SSA. Although the colonial and postcolonial states figure prominently in his explanations of tribal

allegiance, he does not, however, locate the genesis of this allegiance in colonial and postcolonial politics. For him, "kinship" loyalty was implanted during slavery, but was emboldened by colonialism and postcolonialism. In taking this stance, Ekeh pays homage to the deep history of SSA. Yet his homage remains incomplete. In his attempt to explain the genesis of kinship, Ekeh unduly elevates the slave trade to the preeminent position as the explanatory variable par excellence. In reality, this is not the case, for several reasons.

Take the case of Oyo state, one of the states deeply involved in the slave trade. To support his argument that kinship strengthened itself because of slavery, Ekeh invokes the fact that the rule of succession by primogeniture of an earlier time was replaced by feuds among royal lineages/clans. This argument does not hold, on two grounds. First, the primogeniture of the earlier time did not preclude the existence of lineage, since, although only one of the king's sons could become king upon his father's death, the different wives of the chief/king came from different lineages/clans. This means that the rule of primogeniture of the earlier time operated against the backdrop of lineage ("kinship") and coexisted with it. Second, comparative evidence reveals that succession feuds among royal lineages were common occurrences in such groups as the Kuba,[4] even though there is no evidence that the Kuba were subjected to transatlantic slavery as were the Oyo. Lineage played a major role in politics even in the absence of transatlantic slavery. Indeed, comparative studies on modes of production confirm that SSA relied, not on slave, feudal, or capitalist modes of production, but on the lineage mode of production. In this case, politics could not avoid lineage descent in the same way as politics in a state with a capitalist mode of production cannot avoid capitalism.[5]

In decentralized ("stateless") societies, Ekeh hypothesizes that the pristine type of lineage relations that occurred there was a reaction to the slave trade. He draws this hypothesis from an examination of the fate of kinless people, called *Osu* among the Ibo of Nigeria. Before the Atlantic slave trade began, *Osu* were slaves and despised outcasts. The crisis of the slave trade worsened their conditions of daily living, and increased their numbers. This situation suggests, in Ekeh's reasoning, that kinship had acquired tremendous importance during the time of the slave trade. He has a point. That the conditions of the kinless people had deteriorated is highly probable. And it is highly plausible that lineage became an indispensable refuge for individuals, which only made kinless people more insecure because they lacked lineage ties. But the fate of the *Osu*, to the extent that it can be linked to the slave trade, did not explain the genesis and prominence of lineage. The latter, as Ekeh himself implicitly recognizes,

preceded the slave trade. *Osu* were associated with ugliness before the slave trade because they lacked or had lost their lineage ties. One's place within the lineage was so essential that lacking it made one an outcast, a slave. Herein lies the preeminence of lineage before, and regardless of, the Atlantic slave trade. Individual security in many societies in SSA required that one be a member of the lineage. The evidence from the Ambuun (also known as Bambunda) of Congo-Kinshasa supports this point. Not only are kinless people among the Ambuun despised and treated as slaves, just as they are among the Ibo, but more intriguingly and convincingly, the Ibo and the Ambuun share the same term for the kinless—*Osu* among the Ibo and *Oso* among the Ambuun. And these telling similarities exist despite the fact that the Ambuun, located in central Africa, were not subjected—as far as the evidence can tell—to the transatlantic slave trade.

In contradistinction to cases where the slave trade elevated "kinship," Ekeh maintains that kinship was weak in both Ethiopia and Benin as an outcome of their state-society relations. This is a view espoused by some historians as well.[6] In the case of Ethiopia, "feudal relations" are said to have been at the center of the state-society nexus and to have protected against slavery and colonialism and, collaterally, against the political strength of kinship. Leaving aside the issue of feudalism, which has been persuasively shown not to be an Ethiopian attribute,[7] it is highly debatable whether "kinship" was as weak as Ekeh maintains so that it allowed "feudalism" to resist the slave trade. The fact is that Ethiopia does not seem to have resisted slavery so well. Evidence from the Middle East reveals that "Ethiopians were imported (as slaves) along the valleys of the Blue Nile and the Nile or passed through the transit ports of 'Aydhab and Zayla' on the African coast of the Red Sea into Egypt or Arabia."[8]

Concerning "kinship" (tribal allegiance) proper, it has not been weak in Ethiopia either. The evidence for this does not come only from the contemporary situation, which clearly reveals that Ethiopia is deeply embedded in tribal politics. Indeed, Ethiopia happens to be the first country in SSA to have openly devised its political and administrative format along tribal lines, because of the very potency of tribal allegiance in the country.[9] And this does not seem to be a recent phenomenon. The historical evidence shows that as early as the seventh century AD, the social and political map of Ethiopia was fashioned by the "profusely represented" tribal groups,[10] who competed against each other, contributing, for instance, to the fall of the kingdom of Axum in the eighth century.[11] The evidence points to tribal allegiance predating, paralleling, and postdating the slave trade in Ethiopia. In this sense, the Ethiopian situation does not differ from that which prevailed in other countries in SSA. In the Kongo

kingdom, one of those most affected by slavery, lineage was strongly present before the Portuguese slave trade had destroyed the kingdom by 1526. Well before slavery became the motive for the Portuguese colonization of Angola by the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, the Imbangala, the Mbundu, and the Kongo fought as lineage-based tribes. And in East Africa, lineage-based tribes existed well before the slave trade wreaked havoc in the nineteenth century. The only difference is that Ethiopia resisted and escaped colonialism. But the reasons for this outcome are not "feudalism" and weak tribal allegiance. They are to be found in Ethiopia's other historical trajectories.

It is symptomatic of the imposing presence of tribal allegiance in the era before the transatlantic slave trade in SSA that, in analyzing the impact of slavery on kinship, Ekeh views kinship as a "refuge" for individuals in the face of the predatory slave state. In his view, kinship was "invigorated" by slavery. The vocabulary itself suggests that kinship was already an important bastion in society before the slave trade began.

My critical remarks do not diminish Ekeh's contribution to explaining both tribal allegiance and its persistence. He is correct about the impact of the transatlantic slave trade on shaping the tribal landscape in many societies in SSA, especially those on the Atlantic coast. Indeed, the historical record reveals that in some areas the slave trade dictated the shape of "tribalization." But this shaping was only an addendum to an already established or enfolding process of continental population distribution, the real genesis of tribal allegiance and persistence.

Having thus shown that tribes in SSA constitute a special category, and that they are not an invention of colonial rule, and that they predated the slave trade, how may the foregoing analysis help one discover the factor that ultimately explains the peculiarity of tribal allegiance in SSA?

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Footnotes

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9. Conclusion: Why Does it Matter?

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Abstract
The conclusion of the study addresses the implications of the analysis for a social theory of the particularity of tribal allegiance in SSA. The analysis in Chapters 2–8 of the book reveals that the two major claims made about tribal allegiance in SSA in African studies do not resist close scrutiny. By ignoring the particularity of SSA and by privileging the role of the colonial and postcolonial state in its treatment of tribal allegiance in SSA, the literature fails to explain the particularity of tribal allegiance and its saliency. This failure cries out for an alternative effort to develop a social theory of the high saliency of tribal allegiance in SSA. Such a theory, if based on the precolonial history of SSA, would have serious prescriptive implications for social change in SSA.

Keywords Tribe (as concept) – Ethnicity (as concept) – Tribal allegiance (persistence of) – Social theory – Structural functionalism – Bantu languages – Territory-based values – Social change

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The social reality of SSA does not agree with the concept of “ethnicity,” but rather with “tribe”, viewed as a concept and not as a simple term. Tribe and ethnicity are two different concepts. Tribe rests on descent reckoning and territorial dispersal and profusion; ethnicity claims a set of non-descent malleable identities around the modern state and its multifaceted competitive issues. The concept of “ethnicity” is applied to dissimilar situations in a universalistic fashion. Yet my goal here is not to request that “ethnicity” be dropped in favor of “tribe” in daily parlance and in the writings about SSA. Although such a request would make logical and intellectual sense, those whose

sensitivities are easily bruised by the pejorative and denigrating meaning attached to “tribe” would not welcome it. More importantly, the request would distract from the focus of this study. This is not an exercise in labelling and name change.

I have argued that “tribe” in SSA is doubly misidentified. It is either falsely equated with “ethnicity” or wrongly reduced to a mere dimension of “ethnicity.” This double misidentification is at the basis of the unwarranted and exaggerated role assigned to the colonial state (and its postcolonial successor) in inventing tribal allegiance and its persistence in SSA. Indeed, by establishing an equivalency between tribal allegiance in SSA and other forms of allegiance in other regions in the name of “ethnicity,” the cultural pluralism paradigm, which assumes that “ethnic” loyalty and conflicts develop universally around the state, has obscured the peculiarity of tribal allegiance in SSA and unduly elevated the influence of the colonial (and postcolonial) state. Rather than forcing social scientists to delve into the deep history of SSA to discover the genesis of such a peculiarity, the cultural pluralism paradigm has caused them to focus on the colonial and postcolonial state to explain tribal allegiance.

The elevation of the colonial state to the position of the genitor of tribal allegiance, in turn, has the effect of rendering irrelevant the people of SSA; their actions and behaviors do not seem to have played any role in the process. Moreover, the precolonial history of SSA is thus emasculated and deprived of any import and impact. In a strange twist, postcolonial social science comes to resemble colonial social anthropology. Indeed, recall that the latter’s preoccupation with the functioning of tribes, *as they were found* at the advent of colonial rule, for colonial governance’s expediency led to colonial anthropology’s structural functionalist and “deus ex machina” view of tribes.[1] Tribes were a given; there was no need or urge to understand them through their precolonial genesis. The same scenario seems to be repeating itself in postcolonial ethnic studies. Cultural pluralism posits ethnic loyalty and conflicts around the state as a universal given. In SSA the colonial state was the matrix around which “ethnic” loyalty and conflict developed, and the postcolonial state “inherited” the situation. As a result, there is no need or urge to inquire whether this universally conceived “ethnic loyalty” is the same as or equivalent to tribal allegiance in SSA; or whether precolonial history may have played a role in differentiating the two types of allegiance.

Because it fails to answer these inquiries, social theory about SSA cannot convincingly explain why there is such high saliency and persistence of tribal allegiance and conflict in SSA. It is no surprise that primordialism keeps on sneaking into discussions over and over again. But more importantly, failure to

explain why there is such high saliency and persistence of tribal allegiance leaves any causal relationship one establishes between tribal conflicts and socioeconomic outcomes in SSA on very shaky ground. Those who attempt to establish such a relationship do not agree with each other.[2] This has negative prescriptive implications. Insofar as the citizens of the countries of SSA believe that "tribalism" is a problem, they clearly or vaguely expect a "solution" to the problem. Yet the explanatory process that would help provide this "solution" is unable to deliver.

Consider the now oft-quoted status of SSA as the "poorest region" of the world. Let us assume that the Kikuyu-Luo conflict in Kenya, the Dioula/Senoufo-Bete/Baoule conflict in Cote d'Ivoire, and all the other tribal conflicts noted in Chapter 3 are exemplars of the higher saliency, persistence, and particularity of tribal allegiance in SSA compared with other regions. Then, at a minimum, the higher saliency and particularity should be kept as a possible suspect in explaining the "poorest region" status of SSA. [Is it pure coincidence that SSA, which has the highest saliency of tribal allegiance and conflicts, is also the "poorest" region?] Logically, one has to explain why tribal allegiance in SSA displays the six particular features discussed in Chapter 3: (1) ongoing practices, and not necessarily violent outbursts; (2) not based on "nationalities" thirsting for sovereignty; (3) not racial but tribal in nature; (4) involving the highest proportion of tribes exposed to the possible risk of conflicts and repression in the developing world; (5) more salient than that in other regions; and (6) persistent. An explanation of this particularity would help in the understanding of the possible causal links of tribal allegiance with the "poorest region" status and would help in proposing a possible solution. In this case, social theory would have prescriptive implications. The literature about SSA does not offer these possibilities.

The starting point for addressing the six peculiar features, especially the higher saliency and persistence, of tribal allegiance and conflicts in SSA is the recognition that the roots of tribal allegiance are not to be found in the colonial state, and even less so in the postcolonial state. Although both types of state used and strengthened tribal allegiance to reach their own respective ends, their role was simply to codify and "nationalize" this allegiance by providing it with a forum in a national territory—as opposed to a previously narrow space involving only a few of the closest neighboring tribes. The contribution of both types of state to the persistence of tribal allegiance and conflicts is limited to their repetitive use of and recourse to tribal allegiance for their own goals. Neither of these types of state should therefore, be viewed as *the* genitors of and reason for the higher saliency and persistence of tribal allegiance in SSA. In many ways,

the actions of both types of state have been dictated by the intractable power of tribal allegiance in the societies of SSA.

Instead, the roots, genesis, and particularity of tribal allegiance in SSA are more fruitfully sought in the precolonial history of SSA. Although one aspect of this history is transatlantic slavery, as competently argued by Ekeh, this factor has limitations as an explanatory variable. One needs to go beyond it, far deeper into the history of SSA, *guided by the lurking question of why, comparatively, there is a profusion of tribes in SSA.* Put differently, the challenge to build an explanation of the genesis, higher saliency, and persistence of tribal allegiance and conflicts in SSA requires that we: (1) take transatlantic slavery seriously without elevating it to the level of the explanation par excellence and (2) grapple with the question of why SSA holds the world record for the number of tribes (the profusion issue). To build such an explanation, tribal allegiance should be viewed as a historically rooted practice and phenomenon. This requires that one define the determinants or factors that made tribal allegiance a historical outcome and assigned to it a peculiar historical character in SSA.

This requirement can be met only by returning to the definitional elements of a tribe discussed earlier in the book. Tribal allegiance, like class allegiance, always involves and implies relations with other groups. The clan's or tribe's totem is the symbolic representation of these relations and the demarcation line between groups. These relations imply and impose an internal communal or collective allegiance or loyalty for each group vis-à-vis and in contradistinction to the others. Tribal relations and conflicts are inextricably linked to and shaped by this internal and collective oppositional loyalty. In almost all cases, the loyalty invokes a common ancestor and/or a totem. But behind the ancestor and totem stands the group's land or territory, the most important trigger of these oppositional allegiances.[3] The totem, descent from a common ancestor, or the common language, only sustains and reflects the collective allegiance to some historical territory-linked values.

To understand this, it is worth recalling that the history of SSA is replete with tales of heroic figures, great hunters, and pioneers in hostile and impenetrable territory, who became venerated founders and ancestors of tribe-states.[4] Although an ancestor is venerated and used as a point of reference for descent reckoning, the veneration, even when embellished and stripped of its original justification in later days, is linked to the ability of the ancestor to occupy the land for his followers. As the griot reminds Sundiata Keita, the founder of ancient Mali: "cut the trees, transform the forests into fields, for then only will you become a true king."[5] In this sense, descent and the totem cement tribal

allegiance, but do not create it. The group's land or territory (even when not invoked because of elapsed time or intervening changes) is the original and main point of reference for allegiance.

The common tribal language or dialect (and religion and rituals) is connected to the territory as well. Indeed, linguists tell us this much. They insist on the importance of speakers in the vitality of languages. Speakers are viewed as "direct external ecology." Yet their impact on the language or its variations is a function of their interaction with "indirect external ecology." The latter, which includes the historical time during which the speakers lived, their location, economic system, and the structure and make-up of the populations, influences them and their behavior in choosing language variations. In the specific case of the Bantu languages, the indirect external ecology comprised the physical/geographical environment and the economic/technological systems that the Bantu populations faced in their migrations. Both the ecology and the migrations influenced and structured the Bantu languages via contacts with preexisting indigenous populations (such as the Pygmies and Khoisans) and mutual connections among migrating Bantu populations.[6]

In this account, there is no doubt that the location/territory looms large. It anchors any type of economic system, determines the type of physical challenges (e.g., climate) the populations face, the type of technology they adopt, and the type of migrations they contemplate. Thus, even tribal languages were fashioned by territory-based factors. This only confirms the importance of territory in the search for an explanation of the particularity of tribal allegiance, its higher saliency, and its persistence in SSA. The questions then are: Why and how did these territory-defined attributes of the tribe occur? And why and how did they plant the seeds of demarcation between the type of tribal allegiance in SSA and that in other regions?

These two questions, if properly answered, should constitute the foundation of a social theory of the particularity of tribal allegiance in SSA, its higher saliency, and its persistence. Indeed, the two questions force us to provide an answer to the question of why SSA has a higher number of tribes than the three other regions of comparison—North Africa, Asia, and South America. In providing this answer, these two questions will help us to discover the ultimate factor (variable) that explains the six peculiar manifestations of tribal allegiance in SSA, and why this factor exists only in SSA. Such a social theory would have prescriptive implications for society. Given the very peculiarity of tribal allegiance in SSA *and the peculiarity of its possible cause*, the putative social theory suggests that any prescriptions would need to be particular as well. It suggests that prescriptions concerning the relation between tribal allegiance and

social change or democracy in SSA should not rely on universalistic solutions that ignore this particularity of SSA. Nor should such prescriptions reflect the Museveni solution referred to in Chapter 1. The Museveni type of solution lacks intellectual depth and privileges primordialism.

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Footnotes

1 See V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, pp. 30 and 38 (Mudimbe 1994).

2 For differing opinions on the role of ethnicity, see Michael Chege, "Comments on Structure and Strategy in Ethnic Conflict: A Few Steps toward Synthesis," in *Annual World Bank Conference on Development Economics 1998*, Washington, DC: World Bank, 1999 (Chege 1999); Paul Collier and A. Hoeffler, "On the Economic Causes of Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers—New Series*, Vol. 50, no. 4 (1998), pp. 563–573 (Collier and Hoeffler 1998); Paul Collier, "The Market for Civil War," *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 136 (2003), pp. 38–45 (Collier 2003); and William Easterly and Ross Levine, "Africa's Growth Tragedy: Policies and Ethnic Divisions," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 112 (1997), pp. 1203–1250 (Easterly and Levine 1997). Others; for example, James Fearon and David Laitin, have been forced to admit that their theories need to be revised and better informed by real narratives of their case studies—see J. Fearon and D. Laitin, "Burkina Faso," Typescript, no date).

3 The term "territory" is used here to reflect the baseline definition of "tribe" as a society with a high degree of self-sufficiency and political autonomy. In this sense, a tribe is a territorially defined society. "Territory" is not used here to revisit the debate about whether precolonial African states and leaders controlled territory or people, and what was the extent of the territory (see Goran Hyden, African Politics in Comparative Perspective. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 65–68; and Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*. Princeton University Press, 2000 (Herbst 2000)) or whether the territory presupposed the existence of well marked boundaries (see Igor Kopytoff, ed., *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987 (Kopytoff 1987).

4 D.T. Niane, *Sundiata: an Epic of Old Mali*, London: Longmans, 1965, p. 62 (Niane 1965); John Illife, *The Africans*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 72 (Illife 2007); Jan Vansina, *Kingdom of the Savanna*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965, p. 71; Ndaywel e Nziem, "The Political System of the Luba and Lunda: Its Emergence and Expansion," in B.A. Ogot ed., *UNESCO General History of Africa* V: *Africa from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992, p. 592 (Ndaywel e 1992); Simon Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993, pp. 2–5 (Bockie 1993).

5 D.T. Niane, *Sundiata: an Epic of Old Mali*, 1965, p. 62.

6 Salikoko S. Mufwene, *Creoles, ecologie sociale, evolution linguistique*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005, pp. 93–96, 125–131 (Mufwene 2005). For the English version of the argument, see Salikoko S. Mufwene, *The Ecology of Language Evolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001 (Mufwene 2001);

and his *Language Evolution: Contact, Competition and Change*, London: Continuum Press, 2008 (Mufwene 2008).

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