



Talking about "Tribe" Moving from Stereotypes to Analysis

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This Africa Action resource, originally written for our predecessor organization the Africa Policy Information Center, has proved to be one of the most enduring and useful documents generated in Africa Action's rich history. Although it was written over a decade ago, the arguments presented here remain powerfully relevant for understanding current events.

The crisis in Kenya that emerged following the tarnished elections in December 2007 has captured the attention of the Western media and population alike. The dominant frame by which the situation has been represented by most American and European reporters and commentators is as a "tribal conflict" between the Luo and Kikuyu. The violence and turmoil that erupted after the elections are explained as the result of deep-rooted mutually hostile identities present among Kenya's people.

Not only does using the term "tribe" in this instance promote a racist conception of African ethnicities as primitive and savage, it prevents observers from coming to an accurate understanding of the causes of this conflict. To go beyond an ethnic analysis and consider the political, social and economic dimensions of Kenya's conflict, please see Africa Action's statement on the crisis available here:

<http://www.africaaction.org/newsroom/index.php?op=read&documentid=2707&type=15&issues=256®ions=4>.

Rethinking the use of "tribe" in the African context can support a discourse on Africa grounded in African realities that escapes the intellectual laziness of a term that has no coherent meaning. Whether dealing with Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan or any other African nation that experiences a conflict with ethnic dimensions, the U.S. should ground its policies in a nuanced understanding of the specific context of each situation rather than succumbing to the misleading and simplistic "tribal conflict" interpretation that so often enables policymakers to abdicate responsibility.

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The main text of this paper was drafted by Chris Lowe (Boston University). The final version also reflects contributions from Tunde Brimah (University of Denver), Pearl-Alice Marsh (APIC), William Minter (APIC), and Monde Muyangwa (National Summit on Africa).

For most people in Western countries, Africa immediately calls up the word "tribe." The idea of tribe is ingrained, powerful, and expected. Few readers question a news story describing an African individual as a tribesman or tribeswoman, or the depiction of an African's motives as tribal. Many Africans themselves use the word "tribe" when speaking or writing in English about community, ethnicity or identity in African states.

Yet today most scholars who study African states and societies--both African and non-African--agree that the idea of tribe promotes misleading stereotypes. The term "tribe" has

no consistent meaning. It carries misleading historical and cultural assumptions. It blocks accurate views of African realities. At best, any interpretation of African events that relies on the idea of tribe contributes no understanding of specific issues in specific countries. At worst, it perpetuates the idea that African identities and conflicts are in some way more "primitive" than those in other parts of the world. Such misunderstanding may lead to disastrously inappropriate policies.

In this paper we argue that anyone concerned with truth and accuracy should avoid the term "tribe" in characterizing African ethnic groups or cultures. This is not a matter of political correctness. Nor is it an attempt to deny that cultural identities throughout Africa are powerful, significant and sometimes linked to deadly conflicts. It is simply to say that using the term "tribe" does not contribute to understanding these identities or the conflicts sometimes tied to them. There are, moreover, many less loaded and more helpful alternative words to use. Depending on context, people, ethnic group, nationality, community, village, chiefdom, or kin-group might be appropriate. Whatever the term one uses, it is essential to understand that identities in Africa are as diverse, ambiguous, complex, modern, and changing as anywhere else in the world.

Most scholars already prefer other terms to "tribe." So, among the media, does the British Broadcasting Corporation. But "tribal" and "African" are still virtually synonyms in most media, among policy-makers and among Western publics. Clearing away this stereotype, this paper argues, is an essential step for beginning to understand the diversity and richness of African realities.

Section 1: What's Wrong with "Tribe?"

Tribe has no coherent meaning.

What is a tribe? The Zulu in South Africa, whose name and common identity was forged by the creation of a powerful state less than two centuries ago, and who are a bigger group than French Canadians, are called a tribe. So are the !Kung hunter-gatherers of Botswana and Namibia, who number in the hundreds. The term is applied to Kenya's Maasai herders and Kikuyu farmers, and to members of these groups in cities and towns when they go there to live and work. Tribe is used for millions of Yoruba in Nigeria and Benin, who share a language but have an eight-hundred year history of multiple and sometimes warring city-states, and of religious diversity even within the same extended families. Tribe is used for Hutu and Tutsi in the central African countries of Rwanda and Burundi. Yet the two societies (and regions within them) have different histories. And in each one, Hutu and Tutsi lived interspersed in the same territory. They spoke the same language, married each other, and shared virtually all aspects of culture. At no point in history could the distinction be defined by distinct territories, one of the key assumptions built into "tribe."

Tribe is used for groups who trace their heritage to great kingdoms. It is applied to Nigeria's Igbo and other peoples who organized orderly societies composed of hundreds of local communities and highly developed trade networks without recourse to elaborate states. Tribe is also used for all sorts of smaller units of such larger nations, peoples or ethnic groups. The followers of a particular local leader may be called a tribe. Members of an extended kin-group may be called a tribe. People who live in a particular area may be called a tribe. We find tribes within tribes, and cutting across other tribes. Offering no useful distinctions, tribe obscures many. As a description of a group, tribe means almost anything, so it really means nothing.

If by tribe we mean a social group that shares a single territory, a single language, a single political unit, a shared religious tradition, a similar economic system, and common cultural practices, such a group is rarely found in the real world. These characteristics almost never correspond precisely with each other today, nor did they at any time in the past.

Tribe promotes a myth of primitive African timelessness, obscuring history and change.

The general sense of tribe as most people understand it is associated with primitiveness. To be in a tribal state is to live in a uncomplicated, traditional condition. It is assumed there is little change. Most African countries are economically poor and often described as less developed or underdeveloped. Westerners often conclude that they have not changed much over the centuries, and that African poverty mainly reflects cultural and social conservatism. Interpreting present day Africa through the lens of tribes reinforces the image of timelessness. Yet the truth is that Africa has as much history as anywhere else in the world. It has undergone momentous changes time and again, especially in the twentieth century. While African poverty is partly a product of internal dynamics of African societies, it has also been caused by the histories of external slave trades and colonial rule.

In the modern West, tribe often implies primitive savagery.

When the general image of tribal timelessness is applied to situations of social conflict between Africans, a particularly destructive myth is created. Stereotypes of primitiveness and conservative backwardness are also linked to images of irrationality and superstition. The combination leads to portrayal of violence and conflict in Africa as primordial, irrational and unchanging. This image resonates with traditional Western racist ideas and can suggest that irrational violence is inherent and natural to Africans. Yet violence anywhere has both rational and irrational components. Just as particular conflicts have reasons and causes elsewhere, they also have them in Africa. The idea of timeless tribal violence is not an explanation. Instead it disguises ignorance of real causes by filling the vacuum of real knowledge with a popular stereotype.

Images of timelessness and savagery hide the modern character of African ethnicity, including ethnic conflict.

The idea of tribe particularly shapes Western views of ethnicity and ethnic conflict in Africa, which has been highly visible in recent years. Over and over again, conflicts are interpreted as "ancient tribal rivalries," atavistic eruptions of irrational violence which have always characterized Africa. In fact they are nothing of the sort. The vast majority of such conflicts could not have happened a century ago in the ways that they do now. Pick almost any place where ethnic conflict occurs in modern Africa. Investigate carefully the issues over which it occurs, the forms it takes, and the means by which it is organized and carried out. Recent economic developments and political rivalries will loom much larger than allegedly ancient and traditional hostilities.

Ironically, some African ethnic identities and divisions now portrayed as ancient and unchanging actually were created in the colonial period. In other cases earlier distinctions took new, more rigid and conflictual forms over the last century. The changes came out of communities' interactions within a colonial or post-colonial context, as well as movement of people to cities to work and live. The identities thus created resemble modern ethnicities in other countries, which are also shaped by cities, markets and national states.

Tribe substitutes a generalized illusion for detailed analysis of particular situations.

The bottom-line problem with the idea of tribe is that it is intellectually lazy. It substitutes the illusion of understanding for analysis of particular circumstances. Africa is far away from North America. Accurate information about particular African states and societies takes more work to find than some other sorts of information. Yet both of those situations are changing rapidly. Africa is increasingly tied into the global economy and international politics. Using the idea of tribe instead of real, specific information and analysis of African events has never served the truth well. It also serves the public interest badly.

Section 2: If "Tribe" Is So Useless, Why Is it So Common?

Tribe reflects once widespread but outdated 19th century social theory.

As Europeans expanded their trade, settlement and military domination around the world, they began trying to understand the different forms of society and culture they met. In the 19th century, ideas that societies followed a path of evolution through definite stages became prominent. One widespread theory saw a progression from hunting to herding to agriculture to mechanical industry. City-focused civilization and related forms of government were associated with agriculture. Forms of government and social organization said to precede civilization among pastoralists and simple agriculturalists were called tribal. It was also believed that cosmopolitan industrial civilization would gradually break down older localized identities.

Over the course of the 20th century scholars have learned that such images tried to make messy reality neater than it really is. While markets and technology may be said to develop, they have no neat correspondence with specific forms of politics, social organization, or culture. Moreover, human beings have proven remarkably capable of changing older identities to fit new conditions, or inventing new identities (often stoutly insisting that the changed or new identities are eternal). Examples close to home include new hyphenated American identities, new social identities (for example, gay/lesbian), and new religious identities (for example, New Age).

Social theories of tribes resonated with classical and biblical education.

Of course, most ordinary Western people were not social theorists. But theories of social evolution spread through schools, newspapers, sermons and other media. The term tribe was tied with classical and biblical images. The word itself comes from Latin. It appears in Roman literature describing early Roman society itself. The Romans also used it for Celtic and Germanic societies with which many 19th and early 20th century Europeans and Americans identified. Likewise the term was used in Latin and English bibles to characterize the twelve tribes of Israel. This link of tribes to prestigious earlier periods of Western culture contributed to the view that tribe had universal validity in social evolution.

Tribe became a cornerstone idea for European colonial rule in Africa.

This background of belief, while mistaken in many respects, might have been relatively benign. However, emerging during the age of scientific rationalism, the theories of social evolution became intertwined with racial theories. These were used to justify first the latter stages of the Atlantic slave trade (originally justified on religious grounds), and later European colonial rule. The idea that Africans were a more primitive, lower order of

humanity was sometimes held to be a permanent condition which justified Europeans in enslaving and dominating them. Other versions of the theory held that Africans could develop but needed to be civilized by Europeans. This was also held to justify dominating them and taking their labor, land and resources in return for civilization.

These justifying beliefs were used to support the colonization of the whole continent of Africa after 1880, which otherwise might more accurately have been seen as a naked exercise of power. It is in the need to justify colonizing everyone in Africa that we finally find the reason why all Africans are said to live in tribes, whether their ancestors built large trading empires and Muslim universities on the Niger river, densely settled and cultivated kingdoms around the great lakes in east-central Africa, or lived in much smaller-scale communities between the larger political units of the continent.

Calling nearly all African social groups tribes and African identities tribal in the era of scientific racism turned the idea of tribe from a social science category into a racial stereotype. By definition Africans were supposed to live in tribes, preferably with chiefs. The colonizers proposed to govern cheaply by adapting tribal and chiefship institutions into European-style bureaucratic states. If they didn't find tribes and chiefs, they encouraged people to identify as tribes, and appointed chiefs. In some places, like Rwanda or Nigeria, colonial racial theory led to favoring one ethnic group over another because of supposed racial superiority (meaning white ancestry). In other places, emphasis on tribes was simply a tool of divide and rule strategies. The idea of tribe we have today cannot escape these roots.

Section 3: But Why Not Use "Tribe?" Answers to Common Arguments

In the United States no one objects to referring to Indian tribes.

Under US law, tribe is a bureaucratic term. For a community of Native Americans to gain access to programs, and to enforce rights due to them under treaties and laws, they must be recognized as a tribe. This is comparable to unincorporated areas applying for municipal status under state laws. Away from the law, Native Americans often prefer the words nation or people over tribe.

Historically, the US government treats all Native American groups as tribes because of the same outdated cultural evolutionary theories and colonial viewpoints that led European colonialists to treat all African groups as tribes. As in Africa, the term obscures wide historical differences in way of life, political and social organization, and culture among Native Americans. When we see that the same term is applied indiscriminately to Native American groups and African groups, the problem of primitive savagery as the implied common denominator only becomes more pronounced.

Africans themselves talk about tribes.

Commonly when Africans learn English they are taught that tribe is the term that English-speakers will recognize. But what underlying meaning in their own languages are Africans translating when they say tribe? Take the word *isizwe* in Zulu. In English, writers often refer to the Zulu tribe, whereas in Zulu the word for the Zulu as a group would be *isizwe*. Often Zulu-speakers will use the English word *tribe* because that's what they think English speakers expect, or what they were taught in school. Yet Zulu linguists say that a better translation of *isizwe* is *nation* or *people*. The African National Congress called its guerrilla

army Umkhonto weSizwe, "Spear of the Nation" not "Spear of the Tribe." Isizwe refers both to the multi-ethnic South African nation and to ethno-national peoples that form a part of the multi-ethnic nation. When Africans use the word tribe in general conversation, they do not mean the negative connotations of primitivism the word has in Western countries.

African leaders see tribalism as a major problem in their countries.

This is true. But what they mean by this is ethnic divisiveness, as intensified by colonial divide and rule tactics. Colonial governments told Africans they came in tribes, and rewarded people who acted in terms of ethnic competition. Thus for leaders trying to build multi-ethnic nations, tribalism is an outlook of pursuing political advantage through ethnic discrimination and chauvinism. The association of nation-building problems with the term "tribe" just reflects the colonial heritage and translation issue already mentioned.

African ethnic divisions are quite real, but have little to do with ancient or primitive forms of identity or conflict. Rather, ethnic divisiveness in Africa takes intensely modern forms. It takes place most often in urban settings, or in relations of rural communities to national states. It relies on bureaucratic identity documents, technologies like writing and radio, and modern techniques of organization and mobilization.

Like ethnic divisions elsewhere, African ethnic divisions call on images of heritage and ancestry. In this sense, when journalists refer to the ethnic conflicts so prominent all across the modern world -- as in Bosnia or Belgium -- as tribalism, the implied resemblance to Africa is not wrong. The problem is that in all these cases what is similar is very modern, not primitive or atavistic. Calling it primitive will not help in understanding or changing it.

Avoiding the term tribe is just political correctness.

No, it isn't. Avoiding the term tribe is saying that ideas matter. If the term tribe accurately conveyed and clarified truths better than other words, even if they were hard and unpleasant truths, we should use it. But the term tribe is vague, contradictory and confusing, not clarifying. For the most part it does not convey truths but myths, stereotypes and prejudices. When it does express truths, there are other words which express the same truths more clearly, without the additional distortions. Given a choice between words that express truths clearly and precisely, and words which convey partial truths murkily and distortedly, we should choose the former over the latter. That means choosing nation, people, community, chiefdom, kin-group, village or another appropriate word over tribe, when writing or talking about Africa. The question is not political correctness but empirical accuracy and intellectual honesty.

Rejecting tribe is just an attempt to deny the reality of ethnic divisions.

On the contrary, it is an attempt to face the reality of ethnic divisions by taking them seriously. It is using the word tribe and its implications of primitive, ancient, timeless identities and conflicts which tries to deny reality. Since "we" are modern, saying ethnic divisions are primitive, ancient and timeless (tribal) says "we are not like that, those people are different from us, we do not need to be concerned." That is the real wishful thinking, the real euphemism. It is taking the easy way out. It fills in ignorance of what is happening and why with a familiar and comfortable image. The image, moreover, happens to be false.

The harder, but more honest course, and the only course which will allow good policy or the possibility of finding solutions (although it guarantees neither) is to try to recognize, understand and deal with the complexities. To say African groups are not tribes, and African

identities are not tribal, in the common-sense meanings of those words, is not to deny that African ethnic divisions exist. It is to open up questions: what is their true nature? How do they work? How can they be prevented from taking destructive forms? It is, moreover, to link the search for those answers in Africa to the search for answers to the similar questions that press on humanity everywhere in the world today.

For Further Reading

There is an abundant academic literature on "tribe" and ethnicity, much available only in specialized academic publications. The following are a few shorter sources which discuss the issue in general terms and provide references to other sources.

In *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World* edited by Joel Krieger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), the articles by A. B. M. Mafeje on "Tribalism" and Okwudiba Nnoli on "Ethnicity" are short essays with additional literature references.

A short statement from a standard textbook in African Studies, "On the Concept of Tribe" can be found in John N. Paden and Edward W. Soja, *The African Experience* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), Volume II, 20-22. This is followed by a section on the "Nature of Ethnic Community."

An often-cited early statement by a prominent anthropologist rejecting the term is Aidan Southall, "The Illusion of Tribe," in Peter Gutkind, ed., *The Passing of Tribal Man in Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 28-51.

Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, Richard Lobban and Linda Zangari, "'Tribe': A Socio-Political Analysis," writing in *UCLA's Ufahamu VII: 1* (1976), 143-165, also argue the case for discontinuing the use of the term.

"If It's Africa, This Must be a Tribe," originally published in a special 1990 issue of *Africa News*, "Capturing the Continent: U.S. Media Coverage of Africa," is available on-line at <http://www.africanews.org/info/tribe.html>.

In the H-Africa discussion group of Africanist historians and other scholars, there have been two recent discussions of the use of the word "tribe," as well as other related discussions of Western stereotypes of Africa. See <http://h-net2.msu.edu/logs>.

Then choose the H-Africa discussion, and check the logs for June 1995 and October 1997 in particular.

Case in Point: Zambia

Zambia is slightly larger than the U.S. state of Texas. The country has approximately 10 million inhabitants and a rich cultural diversity. English is Zambia's official language but it also boasts 73 different indigenous languages. While there are many indigenous Zambian words which translate into nation, people, clan, language, foreigner, village, or community, there are none that easily translate into "tribe."

Sorting Zambians into a fixed number of "tribes" was a byproduct of British colonial rule over Northern Rhodesia (as Zambia was known prior to independence in 1964). The British also applied stereotypes to the different groups. Thus the Bemba, Ngoni and the Lozi were said to be "strong." The Bemba and the Ngoni were "warlike" although the Bemba were

considered the much "finer race" because the Ngoni had intertwined with "inferior tribes and have been spoiled by civilization." The Lamba were labelled "lazy and indolent" and the Lunda considered to have "an inborn distaste for work in a regular way." These stereotypes in turn often determined access to jobs. The Lunda, for instance, were considered "good material from which to evolve good laborers."

After Zambia gained its independence in 1964, the challenge was how to forge these disparate ethnic groups into a nation-state in which its citizens would identify as Zambians. To a large extent, this has succeeded. Zambians identify with the nation as well as with individual ethnic groups. Many trace their own family heritage to more than one Zambian group. Most Zambians live not only within but beyond their ethnic boundaries. Identities at different levels coexist and change.

With an economy focused on copper mining, the urban areas and mines became a magnet for Zambians from across the country and all ethnic groups seeking employment. By the 1990s almost half of all Zambians lived in urban areas. Despite ethnic stereotypes, no group had an overwhelming advantage in urban employment. Cultural diversity was combined with a common national experience, which was reinforced by several factors.

First, Zambia adopted a boarding school system for grades 7-12. This system brought together children from all ethnic groups to live and learn together for nine months of the year. Along with English, several Zambian languages and social studies also became a major component of school curricula enabling Zambians to learn about and to communicate with each other. As a result of living together, interacting in the towns and cities, and going to school together, the average Zambian speaks at least three languages.

Second, Zambia's first president, Kenneth Kaunda, made a point of establishing policies and using tools that would promote nation-building. For example, he popularized the slogan "One-Zambia, One Nation". This slogan was supported by the use of tools such as ethnic balancing in the appointments to cabinet and other key government positions. The intent was to provide Zambia's various ethnic groups with representation and hence a stake in the new nation that was being forged. Ethnic background has been only one among many factors influencing political allegiances.

Third, after independence the marriage rate among people of different ethnic identities increased. In the same way that one should not immediately assume that an American called Syzmanski speaks or understands Polish, neither should one necessarily expect a Zambian with the last name of Chimuka to speak or understand Tonga. As with most Americans, Zambian names are increasingly becoming no more than one indicator of one's ethnic heritage.

Many Zambians do use the word tribe. Its meaning, however, is probably closer to that of an "ethnic group" in a Western country than what Westerners understand by a "tribe." The word does not have negative undertones, or necessary implications of the degree of group loyalty, but refers to one's mother tongue and, to lesser extent, specific cultural traits. For example, in the same way that Jewish Americans celebrate Bar Mitzvah as a rite of passage into adulthood, various Zambian ethnic groups have similar rites of passage ceremonies, such as Siyomboka among the Lozi and Mukanda for the Luvale. An urban family may or may not celebrate a particular rite, and may need to decide which branch of the family's older generation they should follow.

Case in Point: Hutu/Tutsi

The deadly power of the split between Hutu and Tutsi in central Africa is witnessed not only by the genocide of more than half a million carried out by Hutu extremists against Tutsi and moderate Hutu in Rwanda in 1994, but also by a long list of massacres by extremists on both sides in recent years, in Rwanda, in Burundi, and in eastern Congo.

Trying to understand this set of conflicts is as complex as trying to understand the Holocaust in Europe, or current conflicts in the Middle East or the Balkans. No outside framework or analogy to another region can substitute for understanding the particularities of the tangled recent history of the Great Lakes region. But one point is clear: there are few places in Africa where the common concept of "tribe" is so completely inappropriate as in this set of conflicts. Neither understanding nor coping with conflict is helped in the slightest by labelling the Hutu/Tutsi distinction as "tribal."

Before European conquest the Great Lakes region included a number of centralized, hierarchical and often warring kingdoms. The battle lines of pre-colonial wars, however, were not drawn between geographically and culturally distinct "Hutu" and "Tutsi" peoples.

Furthermore, within each unit, whether pre-colonial kingdom or the modern countries defined by colonial boundaries, Tutsi and Hutu speak the same language and share the same culture. Stereotypes identify the Tutsi as "pastoralists" and the Hutu as "agriculturalists," the Tutsi as "patrons" and the Hutu as "clients," or the Tutsi as "rulers" and the Hutu as "ruled." Some scholars have tried to apply the concept of "caste." Yet each of these frameworks also exaggerates the clarity of the distinction and reads back into history the stereotypes of current political conflict.

In two respects, such stereotypes are misleading. First, shared economic, social and religious practices attest to the fact that interaction was much more frequent, peaceful and cooperative than conflictual. Second, the historical evidence makes it clear that there was at least as much conflict among competing Tutsi dynasties as between Tutsi and Hutu polities.

What is clear from recent scholarship is that the dividing line between Hutu and Tutsi was drawn differently at different times and in different places. Thus, leading Burundi scholar Rene Lemarchand notes the use of the term "Hutu" to mean social subordinate: "a Tutsi cast in the role of client vis-a-vis a wealthier patron would be referred to as 'Hutu,' even though his cultural identity remained Tutsi" (Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 10). But both "clients" and "patrons" could be either Hutu or Tutsi. There were Hutu as well as Tutsi who raised cattle. A family could move from one group to the other over generations as its political and economic situation changed.

As historian David Newbury notes, the term "Hutu" in pre-colonial times probably meant "those not previously under the effective rule of the court, and non-pastoralist (though many 'Hutu' in western Rwanda owned cattle, sometimes in important numbers)" (David Newbury, Kings and Clans. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, 277). More generally, the Tutsi/Hutu distinction seems to have made sense in relation to the political hierarchy of a kingdom. It accordingly differed, and changed, in accord with the political fortunes of the different kingdoms and with the degree of integration of different regions into those kingdoms.

Under colonial rule, first by the Germans and then by the Belgians, this hierarchical division was racialized and made more rigid. Ethnic identity cards were required, and the state

discriminated in favor of Tutsi, who were considered to be closer to whites in the racial hierarchy. This was reinforced by versions of history portraying the Tutsi as a separate "Hamitic" people migrating into the region from the north and conquering the Bantu-speaking Hutu. In fact, current historical evidence is insufficient to confirm to what extent the distinction arose by migration and conquest or simply by social differentiation in response to internal economic and political developments.

In the post-colonial period, for extremists on both sides, the divide has come to be perceived as a racial division. Political conflicts and inequalities in the colonial period built on and reinforced stereotypes and separation. Successive traumatic conflicts in both Burundi and Rwanda entrenched them even further. Despite the efforts of many moderates and the existence of many extended families crossing the Hutu/Tutsi divide, extremist ideologies and fears are deadly forces. Far from being the product of ancient and immutable "tribal" distinctions, however, they are based above all in political rivalries and experiences of current generations.

[For a collection of articles introducing the complex Great Lakes crisis, see the Association of Concerned Africa Scholars Great Lakes Briefing Packet, December 1996 (available for US\$9.00 from ACAS, 326 Lincoln Hall, 702 S. Wright St., Urbana, IL 68101; e-mail: acas@prairienet.org; web: <http://www.prairienet.org/acas>).]

Case in Point: Zulu Identity in South Africa

Zulu identity in South Africa is historical, not static. What it means to be "Zulu" has changed over time, and means different things to different people today. Before the nineteenth century, "Zulu" was the clan name of the kings of a small kingdom, which was tributary to the Mthethwa kingdom. Beginning around 1815, the Zulu kingdom displaced the Mthethwa kingdom and conquered dozens of other nearby small kingdoms which gradually took on Zulu identity on top of older local identities.

Culturally these communities already had much in common. Similarities of culture and mutually intelligible language extended south to the Xhosa, Mpondo, Thembu, Xesibe and Bhaca kingdoms, as well as north to many but not all of the political communities in what are now Swaziland and Mpumalanga province in South Africa. Ethnic identities within this continuum of culture and language came mainly from political identification with political communities. The expansion of political powers, such as the Zulu and Swazi kingdoms, created new identities for many people in the 19th century.

White colonization began in the 1830s, when the Zulu kingdom was still quite new. White conquest took decades. Many chiefdoms remained in the independent Zulu kingdom while others came under the British colony of Natal. Many people and chiefs only recently conquered by the Zulu kingdom fled into Natal, rejecting political Zulu identity, although retaining cultural affinity. But as all Zulu-speaking people came under white South African rule, and as white rule became more oppressive, evolving into apartheid, the Zulu identity and memories of the powerful independent kingdom became a unifying focus of cultural resistance.

Under South African rule, the term "tribe" referred to an administrative unit governed by a chief under rules imposed by the white government. Tribes were thus not ancient and traditional, but modern bureaucratic versions of the old small kingdoms. Yet the Zulu people or nation was also referred to as a tribe by whites. Thus the Zulu "tribe" was composed of several hundred tribes.

With apartheid, the government fostered ethnic nationalism or tribalism to divide Africans, claiming that segregated, impoverished land reserves ("homelands") could become independent countries. Conversely, when the African National Congress (ANC) formed in 1912, it saw tribalism --- divisive ethnic politics --- as an obstacle to creating a modern nation. But it saw diverse linguistic, cultural and political heritages as sources of strength. The new nation had to be built by extending and uniting historic identities, not by negating them.

Since the 1980s severe conflict between followers of the ANC and followers of the largely Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) has killed tens of thousands of people. Sometimes portrayed as reflecting primitivism and ancient tribal rivalries, this violence illustrates how "tribe" misleads.

Most of the conflict has been Zulu people fighting other Zulu people in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. There are complicated local causes related to poverty and patronage politics, but the fighting is also about what Zulu ethnic or national identity should be in relation to South African national identity. Zulu people are deeply divided over what it means to be Zulu.

In the early 1990s the violence spread to the Johannesburg area and often took the ethnic form of Zulu IFP followers vs. Xhosa ANC followers. Yet this was not an ancient tribal conflict either, since historically the independent Zulu and Xhosa nations never fought a war. Rather it was a modern, urban, politicized ethnic conflict.

On the one side, the IFP has continually stressed its version of Zulu identity. Also, since the ANC has followers in all ethnic groups, as the 1994 elections showed, neighborhoods with many Xhosa residents may have been specifically targeted in order to falsely portray the ANC as a "Xhosa" organization. On the other side, the ANC at the time tried to isolate the IFP in a way that many ordinary Zulu people saw as anti-Zulu, making them fearful. As has been recently confirmed, the apartheid regime's police and military were actively involved in covert actions to instigate the conflict.

The IFP relies heavily on symbols of "tradition." But to see that as making Zulu identity "tribal" obscures other realities: the IFP's modern conservative market-oriented economic policy; the deep involvement of all Zulu in an urban-focused economy, with half living permanently in cities and towns; the modern weapons, locations and methods of the violence, and the fact that even as the IFP won the rural vote in the most recent elections, a strong majority of urban Zulu-speakers voted ANC.

Case in Point: The Yoruba People

There are 20 million or more people who speak Yoruba as their mother tongue. Some 19 million of them live in Nigeria, but a growing diaspora are dispersed around Africa and around the world. Yoruba-speaking communities have lived in other West African countries for centuries. Yoruba culture and religion have profoundly influenced the African diaspora in Brazil, Cuba and other New World countries, even among communities where the language itself is completely or partially forgotten.

Taking a quick look at linguistic or national communities of similar size, one can see that this is roughly equivalent to the total numbers of Dutch speakers (21 million, including

Flemish speakers in Belgium). It is more than the total population of Australia (18 million) or the total number of speakers of Hungarian (14 million) or Greek (12 million). Like parallel communities of Igbo-speakers (16 million) and Hausa-speakers (35 million), situated largely within but also beyond the borders of the state of Nigeria, the Yoruba people has a long and complex history which is hard to encompass within "tribal" images.

There is a long artistic tradition, with terra-cotta sculpture flourishing in the Ile-Ife city state a thousand years ago. There is a common mutually understandable language, despite many dialects and centuries of political and military contention among distinct city- states and kingdoms. There is a tradition of common origin in the city of Ile-Ife and of descent from Oduduwa, the mythical founder of the Yoruba people.

Notably, Yoruba common language and culture predate any of the modern "nations" of North or South America. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Oyo kingdom ruled over most of Yorubaland, but included non-Yoruba speakers as well. Today that territory is within the nation of Nigeria, with borders created by European conquest. Yoruba identity does not coincide, then, with the boundaries of a modern nation-state. Its historical depth and complexity, however, is fully comparable to that of European nations or other identities elsewhere in the world that do.

Among Yorubas, a religious pluralism of traditional religion, Islam and Christianity has prevailed for more than a century, with political disputes rarely coinciding with religious divisions. Ancestral cities or polities (ilu, comparable to the Greek polis) are a far more important source of political identity, along with modern political divisions.

In short, Yoruba identity is real, with substantial historical roots. But it corresponds neither to a modern nation-state nor to some simple version of a traditional "tribe." It coexists with loyalty to the nation (Nigeria for most, but many are full citizens of other nations), and with "home-town" loyalties to ancestral cities.

In determining what term to use in English, one cannot resort to the Yoruba language, which has no real equivalent for the English word "tribe." The closest are the words eniyan or eya, with literal translations in English as "part" and "portion." The term may refer to the Yoruba themselves, subgroups or other groups. In Yoruba, Hausa-speakers would be referred to as awon eniyan Hausa or awon Hausa, meaning "Hausa people." Non-Yoruba-speaking Nigerians of whatever origin may be referred to as ti ara ilu kannaa -- "those of the same country."

In English, no term actually fills in the complexity that is in the history and present reality so that outsiders understand it as do the people themselves. Terms such as "ethnic group" or simply "people," however, carry less baggage than "tribe," and leave room open for that complexity.



