'Black people ignore that their ancestors, who adjusted to the material conditions of the Nile valley, are the oldest guides of humankind on the way to civilisation". Cheikh Anta Diop
Tribalism: how ancient Africa had solved the problem

May 26, 2018. During a surreal scene, Douala chiefs destroyed, in the morning, the construction of a stele in tribute to Um Nyobe, father of the independence of Cameroon, on the pretext that the latter was not from Douala.

Such action echoes the quarrels in Congo-Brazzaville, where no one can agree on a national hero to honor, as each one of them is seen from an ethnic perspective.

For years in Ethiopia, the Oromo people have been fighting head-on the mainly Tigrinya government just as they had been fighting the Amhara regimes before. They complain about discrimination.

In Kenya, every five years or so, there is a semblance of civil war between the Luo and the Kikuyu; choices in presidential elections being made almost solely in relation to ethnic affinities.
In Côte d'Ivoire, 25 years of political crisis have lastingly created tensions between northern and southern peoples. Guinea Conakry permanently lives on the brink of civil war between the Fulani and Malinké peoples; the slightest spark being able to trigger carnage.

In Zimbabwe, the Ndebele people argue that they are oppressed by the Shona majority; a confrontation which led to 20,000 deaths in the 1980s.

But the most worrying case of all is Nigeria; a country which still does not assume its natural position of Africa and the black world’s leader; a wobbly giant that is structurally weakened and lacerated by actual ethnic hatred. 2 million Ibgos died in the Biafra Civil War in the late 1960s.

Although there are no displays of hatred in several countries, it is so rare for ethnic groups to live in genuine understanding and fraternity. People look at each other out of the corner of the eye, sometimes with cordial mistrust.

How did tribalism end up becoming a major problem in Africa? A problem that jeopardizes our future, quarrels that no longer even pay respect to the people who have died for the common cause.
As you will see, ancient Africa had solved the problem, which was not even one in reality. Studying the past shows us the way to restore peace, harmony and understanding among the peoples of Africa.

To fully understand this article, the reader should document himself or herself on the African Spirituality, on the role of the king in the African thought, and on Ma’at, the African philosophy.

The origins of ethnic groups in Africa

Of all the works of Cheikh Anta Diop, one of the most important is to have demonstrated that the Blacks of Africa are the same people, with the same religious foundations, the same cultural norms, the same philosophy, the same group of languages and often the same names. Many scholars following him like Théophile Obenga, Nkoth Bisseck or Mbog Bassong have reinforced this concept through their research.
Cheikh Anta Diop inaugurated a unicist perspective of Africa, which studies continue to confirm. Cameroonian Nkoth Bisseck said: “Africans basically share the same representation of the world, the same culture, the same value system and the same standards of behavior. The differences between their cultural, technical, political and religious institutions only constitute the modalities of the same reality.”

We all share the same basic identity because we all come from the peoples of the Great Lakes and the Nile Valley. And it is from East Africa that our ancestors migrated to the rest of the continent, in several waves. The differences between Africans today are real, but clearly peripheral. These are variants of the same identity.

The ethnic groups or tribes that exist in Africa today were formed centuries ago, from 500 to 1000 years ago in general. Many have coexisted within kingdoms and empires. How have we lived for 1000 years? Were the relationships as conflicting as they are today?

**Ekolo, the foundations of the African State**

The ancestral thought postulates that in the beginning, was the Nun, primordial water full of different scattered particles. One of these particles became aware of itself, it’s Imana (God). Imana extracts Ra from himself-herself, that is to say a noisy Energy which spins inside the Nun in a spiral movement.

It is this spiral that assembled the particles, to form all the elements of harmonious and orderly Creation. Imana-Ra constantly makes the created Beings evolve through a principle called Kheper.

According to the African philosophy (Ma’at), human societies were established in relation to the laws of creation of the universe. In...
ancient Africa, the clergy of vitalist (animists) priests ensured that Ma’at was applied throughout the country. Different ethnic groups / castes / clans in a State are ascribed to the scattered particles of the Nun. The king is the replica of God. He must therefore unite the ethnic groups in harmony and order, ethnic groups which are by nature different.

Each ethnic group retains political control over its territory, maintains its culture and language there. The language of the royal clan ends up coming on top of the local language. The division of roles between royal power and the power of the ethnic group in the territory is defined. Each ethnic group is represented in the council which assists the king in the country management. Ministerial posts are shared among these advisers.

When the king dies, it is this council made up of all levels of society, which unanimously elects the new king from among the legitimate contenders for the throne, or confirms the designated heir. The African political system is therefore that of a federal State.

*The prestigious kingdom of Benin in ancient Nigeria, Illustration by Angus McBride.*
The king reigned with representatives of the peoples making up the kingdom. Under the central government, there were smaller kingdoms with political autonomy. When a people was conquered, it still retained political control over its territory.

Ma’at being applied by the king, the sovereign must maintain harmony, justice and balance, and therefore cannot practice favoritism. Consequently, all ethnic groups benefit from the country’s resources. The king must also deal with the counter powers that are his councilors from ethnic groups. He cannot dismiss them.

The people are also driven by Ma’at. Everything is done to maintain harmony and peace between ethnic groups. The people freely discuss the functioning of the country under palaver trees. Discussions can last for days. All arguments are debated and exhausted. A consensus is finally reached and must satisfy everyone.

Deliberations are communicated to the central power and the king decides by trying to please everyone. The approach is inclusive. Rites and ceremonies – often led by the king, who is highly initiated into Vitalism, and aiming at strengthening unity – are held regularly. Myths based on historical facts are developed and disseminated to reinforce the feeling of unity.

This whole process – oriented towards unity in harmony, order, material wealth and a perfect state – is assimilated to the Kheper; that is to say the evolution of creation as defined by God. This is why state in Lingala is referred to as Ekolo. Ekolo comes from the verb Kokola, which means to grow together. Ekolo is therefore the African state. It is a multicultural, multilingual and inclusive federal state. It is a state comprising autonomous ethnic groups, who come together in harmony to grow together.
Regardless of the differences between peoples in ancient Africa, every ethnic group was generally respected, autonomous and justly integrated into Ekolo.
(Picture: African peoples, illustration by Leo and Diane Dillon).

This very elaborate political structure disappeared with European colonization.

**The state in the European tradition**

Whereas in Africa the state is built from the bottom to the top, in Europe the state is built from the top to the bottom. The tribe which takes power imposes its language and its culture on the rest of the country. Other languages and cultures gradually disappear.

In this basin, the principle is that not everyone can agree. This is the ideology of confrontation. There is always the opposition that almost never agrees with the government in power. The law is therefore that of the strongest, that of the majority. A policy that gathers 51% of the votes wins, leaving 49% of frustrated and excluded people. This is democracy according to the European thought.

France, for example, is a **central monocultural, unilingual and exclusive state**. All other languages (Occitan, Alsatian, Normand, etc.) have almost disappeared to the advantage of French, a language native to the Paris region. Local cultures are mainly folklore now.
The progressive wing and the conservative wing of the political landscape have clashed and criticized each other for decades, to convince 51% of the population and take power. These different approaches explain why European states were incessantly experiencing people’s revolts and revolutions, whereas Africa before the apocalypse of the European slave trade, generally knew peace and happiness attested by all foreign travelers. Although there were exceptions on both sides, this was how power was generally organized in the two basins.

And today, Africans are running after this “democratic” model out of breath. Made ignorant of their past, they strive to copy the Western model, with resounding failure.

**Colonization and Tribalism in Africa**

After defeating Africa militarily, European settlers set out to destroy the structures of the black thought. Many vitalist priests were killed. Houses of life, which were education venues were destroyed. Sacred forests were burned, holy places desecrated, worship objects stolen and taken to museums.

Christian authorities, following Islamic authorities have totally demonized Vitalism. The result is that the structures supposed to promote divine harmony, balance and order (Ma’at) have disappeared. Africans have adopted confrontation.

The second thing was to partition tribal identities. The ethnic groups were therefore called “race” and they were made to believe that they had no links with each other. They were classified, making one believe that they were superior to the other, and playing with these antagonisms to divide and rule better.
Africans have been wrongly categorized by Europeans. This is how the German and then Belgian settlers divided the baNyarwanda – a unique people belonging to the same kingdom, with the same language, the same culture and religion – through the socio-professional castes that composed it. They broke ties and skillfully pitted the Hutu working people against the Tutsi ruling caste, who previously lived in peace. This resulted in nearly 800,000 Tutsis and then 400,000 Hutus killed since the 1990s. (Picture: Rwandan identity card mentioning “ethnicity” even before the name. This Tutsi woman was killed)

As the colonists had taken the vast majority of material resources, ethnic groups clashed with each other to get the leftovers, thereby setting up a competition to access the crumbs that Europeans were willing to leave behind. When African States became independent, African people – convinced that they did not have their own history and model, or that the study of history is a waste of time as many still believe – have adopted the system of central, unilingual, monocultural and exclusive state almost everywhere.

Ethnic antagonisms being strong, we preferred neutrality by choosing the colonial language as the official language, then slowly letting the country’s languages and cultures die. Moreover, they were from the colonial point of view considered as inferior, even evil. Ethnic identities being exacerbated, Africans almost always vote only by ethnic affinity. Political parties are basically regional and ethnic parties. The largest ethnic group takes power. It’s democracy!

In the event that the result of the ballot boxes is respected, the president is therefore the choice of his ethnicity and associates. He is there to serve the neocolonial power that reigns with arms in hand, and to serve his ethnic group. The latter reserves for itself most of the remains that the colonist leaves behind. The ruling ethnic group enjoys the benefits while “others” are de facto excluded and frustrated.
Power being from top to bottom, the people no longer feel heard. All of this creates tensions that can lead to war. The other ethnic groups await the day they, too, will have power. They wait for “their turn” as we say in Africa, to enjoy the benefits alone. Many are plotting to make this happen. The imperialist powers use it to extend their power over Africa. This is how, during the worst tribal carnage in our history, France armed the Igbo separatists during the Biafra war, in order to grab the oil in the region and break Nigeria, which we already knew was a giant in the making.

The Biafra War, a conflict between the Igbo people and the essentially Hausa government, is the first of a series of wars, which have ascribed to...
In a nutshell, it is clear that the issue of Tribalism in Africa does not come from the existence of ethnic groups themselves. Tribalism is due to Western philosophies and institutions, which are absolutely incompatible with African sociological reality. Africans have unconsciously:

- replaced their philosophy of harmony (Ma’at) with that of confrontation;
- compartmentalized their ethnic identities and see themselves as foreigners, where they knew how to give life to their fraternity bonds;
- replaced a state respectful of all languages and cultures, by a neo-colonial unilingual and monocultural state;
- replaced inclusiveness and consensus (Ma’at) with the majority law alone; and
- replaced the sense of balance (Ma’at) with competition for access to scarce material resources.

This is the problem in Kenya where after three Kikuyu presidents and one Kalenjin, the Luos want their turn. This is the case in Zimbabwe, where the Shona represent 80% of the population; therefore, the Ndebele will never be validly represented under the current majority system. This is the problem in Guinea where the Fulani people believe that it is their turn to take power, after the Malinké and the Susu people. This is the problem in Botswana where the Kalanga (10%) want their language to become an official language like that of the BaTswana (80%), etc. It is all this that creates the tensions we see everywhere in Africa.

The solution, therefore, is not to wipe out ethnic groups and invent a unique identity. Africa is already unique. All ethnicities, all these variants of the unique African identity, are a great wealth. The solution is to return to our philosophy and our institutions, to a model designed by us and for us.

African states must become Ekolo again.
“We are not detribalizers (…). We acknowledge the historical value of the ethnic groups of our people. It is the very source from which the modernization of national culture will spring up” Um Nyobe (1913-1958), father of Cameroon’s independence.

Hotep!

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Notes :

La pensée africaine, Mbog Bassong
Precolonial Black Africa, Cheikh Anta Diop
Quand l’Africain était l’or noir de l’Europe, Bwemba Bong

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