European tribalism and African nationalism / TRIBALISME EUROPEEN ET NATIONALISME AFRICAINE

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European tribalism and African nationalism

MAZI OKORO OJIAKU

Asked what they consider the three most serious obstacles to unity and development in Africa, few people will, I contend, omit "tribe" or "tribalism". For one thing, both concepts are popularly associated with the continent and generally assumed to be inimical to progress and development. For another, both are vague and little understood by people who use them to refer to any form of African behaviour or life style incomprehensible or inexplicable to an outside observer, particularly one with a different cultural framework. Thus, the difference in culture and custom, in beliefs and institutions between Africans and non-Africans are often assumed to inhere from the tribalism of the African.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the possible genesis of these concepts especially in their current usage with respect to the African people, to demonstrate their basic weakness as analytical tools and to suggest more meaningful and functional alternative terminologies. For the practice of identifying African with tribe and tribalism is neither justified nor valid, being as it is the relic of a past born of Western ignorance and nurtured by European cultural chauvinism.

IMAGES WITHOUT REALITIES

"Tribe" and "tribalism" are undoubtedly images without realities, in light of the fact that the social unit they are supposed to represent does not really exist. Anthropologists who are believed to be experts on "tribal societies" are hardly agreed on what constitutes a tribe as reflected in their definition which ranges from a small, self-contained autonomous political community with a relatively simple technology, in which association is based chiefly on kinship, to a bigger territorial unit distinguishable by its members and others on the basis of cultural regional criteria (1). The problem with

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such definition is that it excludes virtually all groups presently considered tribes either because they are too big or too small.

A tribe is either a unit of the size — territorially and demographically — of the Yorubas of Nigeria or the Kikuyus of Kenya, or an entity of the order of a few thousand people, occupying a common territory and sharing a common culture. Otherwise, we must settle with the definition that a tribe is what the Westerner says it is. And this seems to be the standard definition today (2).

Most social units, big and small, in Africa undoubtedly share in common a number of features such as a sense of community among their respective memberships, relative independence from external political control and economic influence, the habitation of a common territory, and subsistence agriculture. But these characteristics which are clearly traditional peculiarities, hardly refer to or define the "tribeness" of a social unit.

Possibly there never was a tribe even in traditional Africa. Its invention was therefore both inevitable in light of European ignorance of the character and size of many African communities, early in the contact with the latter, and logical, in view of European cultural arrogance and racial superiority complex, on the eve of the colonization of the continent. For it is a historical fact that before the 18th Century when Europe attained her technological and industrial superiority over the rest of the world, African and European kings and rulers, addressed and treated each other as equals (3). But this changed shortly afterwards, as European image of themselves and of others underwent significant transformation, in response to the industrial revolution, the demands of capitalism, and the logic of imperialism and colonialism.

Impressed by their technological achievement and amazed at the low rate of change in African societies for example, Europeans readily identified themselves as a superior group of mankind, who owe their high status to their culture, hence their colour (4). Africa and its people were therefore

Aidan Southall describes a tribal society as one characterized by "a high degree of self-sufficiency, at or 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. Cf. Peter C.W. Gutkind, The Passing of Tribal Man in Africa (Leiden : E.J. Brill, 1970), p. 28.


F. G. Burke describes it as an association based chiefly on kinship, less on residential locality, and at least on special interest with a great "we feeling" or solidarity, the collectivity or group being more important than any single individual. Cf. Africa's Quest for Order (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 19.


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seen as inferior and primitive not just because of the absence of the industrial revolution, because of their different complexion, itself responsible for the lack of the revolution. It followed then that an "inferior" people should have inferior cultures, inferior institutions and inferior politics. The king in Africa, hitherto addressed and treated as a "brother" and an equal by his European counterpart, was reduced to the status of a chief; empires were seen only as small weak states, and the various institutions of the people consigned to primitivity. Consequently, groups such as the Ashanti, the Baganda and the Zulu, each with a long illustrious history and a national consciousness of collective identity and patriotism, were dubbed tribes, if only to differentiate them from their kind in Europe (5), and in so doing to convey their presumed inferiority. To acknowledge the national status of the African group would be to admit its similarity and equality with its European counterpart, hence to question the basic rationale behind imperialism and colonialism.

But to say this is not to deny any objective differences in the character of social units or political communities in Africa and Europe. The differences were inevitable, reflecting as they did the dissimilarities in environment, in history and geography as well as culture and civilization of the two groups. For while many European societies have been undergoing marked changes in their structure, economy and values, their African counterpart suffered comparatively less change, hence remained traditional. Nevertheless, these societies contained large communities comparable to their kind in Europe, in geographical area and population strength, and recognizable as nations, in the sense of communities with a common culture, tradition and history, and in some cases, common political, organizational and administrative structure. (6) But they differed from most European nations in one major respect: they were nations in traditional societies.

Not all nations or nationality groups in traditional societies were organized as political units subject to a single supreme central government, although there were a number of such units, especially among the so-called "centralised" polities. The paucity of centralized polities was the result of the generally underdeveloped means or transport and communication among the people, of many a physical or ecological barrier, and of the characteristics subsistence economy. The result was the prevalence of village-size political units, and circumscribed sense of identity among the membership. Occasionally, the clan or a collectivity of contiguous village units, constituted the largest polity.

Strictly speaking, there were no tribes in Africa on the eve of European penetration and eventual domination of the continent. For even before then, Africa had experienced repeated large-scale movements of people from one region or area to the other, as the movement of the Christians

(5) Gulliver, op. cit., p. 54.
through North Africa or the Moslems later across the Sahara to western Sudan. The result was the mixing of people through conquest or marriage and the loss of that peculiar political and economic autonomy said to distinguish the tribe from other entities. Besides, the continental nature of Africa inevitably exposed people to relationships with their neighbours in a way that constantly and over a time, significantly affected both their culture and institutions, thereby corrupting their "tribal purity".

Thus, even before anthropology began effective study of what it calls the tribal society, the latter was hardly in existence any longer. This accounts, as Southall has pointed out, for the element of reconstruction that has always entered into the study of such a society in the terms generally used by the anthropologist (7).

Not surprisingly, limited as he was in his knowledge of African geography and institutions, and given his cultural chauvinism and arrogance, the coloniser aided by the anthropologist, his specialist on small and non-western societies, mistook the clan for the tribe. Even later, when it became evident that some clans were only a part of a larger community or nation, consisting of continuous sister-clans sharing common culture, traditions and a sense of unity, the idea of the tribe remained unchanged. Such was the case when the coloniser realized that the Ibos or the Yorubas or the Fanti, for example, did not just comprise of the small group whom they met in their initial contact, but rather of several others who were not readily accessible because of poor means of transport and communication. Instead of calling these groups nations which they were, the European persisted in labeling them tribes.

The "discovery" of some of these nations awaited the consolidation and extension of colonialism as it brought closer together related but hitherto isolated sister clans in the same territory. In so doing, colonialism awakened the various groups to their common identity by making them more aware of their common cultural symbols, rituals and language. The new consciousness in time stimulated the groups to join in a common political rather than ritual action on a far wider scale than was previously possible.

In many cases, however, some clans have remained the small, isolated and self-contained autonomous communities reminiscent of the anthropologist's "tribe": communities without sister clans, and belonging to no wider community or nation. While sharing some features in common with the clan within a nation, such a unit differs in the degree of its isolation and in its rather very limited horizons, typical of the small-scale society (8). We may accept the latter as a tribe if by that we mean that specific form of economic, political and social organization that can be fixed in space and time, relatively undifferentiated, practising a primitive subsistence economy.

(7) Gutkind, op. cit., p. 29.
and enjoying local autonomy (9). But to apply the same term to a large-scale society characterized by wide territoriality, heavy demography, intensity of relationships, a society that has been effectively penetrated by European colonialism and successfully drawn into money economy and world market, is to miss the mark. Such is indefensible because nonsensical. While it is permissible to refer such social units in traditional Africa as the Bushmen, or the Pigmies as tribes, addressing the Lubas, the Yorubas or the Kikuyus as same, contradicts the basic principles of sociological logic.

THE TRADITIONAL NATION AND TRADITIONAL NATIONALISM

This point is crucial to the present analysis because of the light it throws on the mistaken and misplaced emphasis by many scholars and African leaders on tribalism, and its supposed deleterious effects not only on the emergence of independent and unified nations but also on their socio-economic development. Tribalism is charged with creating immobilities in the social system, aborting or minimizing innovation (10), and with inhibiting the growth of civic loyalty and national stability, while promoting corruption, nepotism and secessionist movement (11).

It is most doubtful, as we shall presently demonstrate, that “tribalism” or the use of cultural symbolism or key cultural features to symbolize structural unity by members of the tribe (12), within the “modern” nations of Africa, is the powerful evil it is purported to be. In the first place, the nationality group or the traditional nation, not the tribe, is the problem; how to integrate the various powerful nationality groups into a truly modern nation of either Nigeria, Ghana, or the Congo, without destroying their cultural roots and identity, is the problem, and not the less onerous task of unifying the small, disparate and generally weak “tribes” or clans. As Professor Lloyd has pointed, the degree of inter-ethnic hostility arising from fears of political domination is dependent upon the relative sizes of the groups (13). But where there are many small ethnic groups, dominance by one group or permanent coalitions between culturally related ethnic groups, is unlikely to develop. The possibilities of unification are much greater.

In the second place, relatively few people from a single “tribe” command the crucial positions of power and influence in many an African country as to threaten others with domination, in contrast to those from the nationality groups, whose numerical strength more easily arouses intense competition with others because of the threat it poses. Thus, in Nigeria for example,

(9) Mafeje, op. cit., p. 258.
(10) Gulliver, op. cit., p. 324.
(12) Burke, op. cit., p. 34.
the Hausa nationality, more so than the Birom group constitutes greater threat to Nigerian unity or to the power of nationality groups such as the Yorubas or the Ibos. Had Nigeria been made up of “tribes” only, the picture would be different, and the problem less critical today.

Lastly, while the tribes cannot be dismissed as inconsequential even in countries with nationality groups, the fact remains that economically and politically the status and the future of the new nation-states in the world depend on the big groups. To the degree that the strength of a country is measured in terms of its human resources, and in light of the growing trend towards popular democratic government in the world today, the groups with superior numbers logically control the power.

Tribalism is therefore a misnomer for a process better described as traditional nationalism, by which we mean the brand of nationalism which is animated by the values and normative principles of a traditional society. Nationalism is used in the present context, in the sense of the activities of any organization or group that explicitly asserts the rights, claims or aspirations of a given African society (from the level of the language-group to that of Pan-Africa) in opposition to authority, whatever its institutional form and objectives (14).

A society is traditional when it is marked by strong attachments arising from a sense of natural affinity, deriving from one’s birth into a given family, religious community and language group. Relations are functionally diffuse, involve a wide portion of the lives of the group members, hence the strong sense of group obligation and solidarity (15). Traditional nationalism is therefore nationalism governed by the ties, the value system, the obligations and loyalties arising from one’s membership in a traditional society.

It is the logical response of people whose society is largely traditional, to the rapidly changing world around them; an effort at adjustment to new conditions as the old social institutions — the village, clan or even tribe are increasingly subordinated to the “modern” society. The latter differs from the traditional society in its characteristic scientific technology, its extensive social interdependence, its greater social, personal and psychic mobility, large-scale literacy, urbanism and secularism (16). To term the response of a traditional society tribalism is to mystify the African adjustment to the modern world; it is, as one observer has remarked, to draw an invidious and highly suspect distinction between Africans and other peoples of the world in a manner likely to discourage rather than promote better understanding among all peoples (17).

This response or reaction varies to place and circumstances. Thus, a villager or a member of the clan who in his community endeavours on behalf of the social unit to maintain its traditional integrity and autonomy is not necessarily nationalistic as he is clannish. His concern is not with the nationality but with the clan. Again clinging to traditional life rather than accepting modernity by one exposed to the changed economic and political conditions as in the urban centers, is not clannishness, or tribalism, or even nationalism, but rather, traditionalism (18). But invoking tribal loyalty and identity as an ideological basis to appeal to the masses otherwise distant from one economically or educationally (19), or mobilizing supporters by appealing to common cultural values, and in so doing arousing emotions of tribal solidarity, is a clear expression of tribalism. When or where the appeal is based on considerations of solidarity derived from membership in a traditional nationality group, such reflects traditional nationalism.

This kind of distinction among the variety of reactions and responses of people under varying conditions, has the dual advantage of explicitness and intelligibility, over the current practice which divides tribalism into rural and urban. What is commonly termed rural tribalism is plain clannishness. Urban tribalism is a meaningless notion, if only for the fact that the "tribesman" ceases to exist in an urban setting, since he no longer lives in the same manner or among the same people, nor under the same codes and conditions as he did in his native tribal community. Locality as a constituent of the tribe and an element of tribalism is lost under urban conditions. Even where tribesmen from the same tribe live together especially in cities away from their homeland — be it Lagos or the strangers' quarters in a number of the cities in Northern Nigeria, they no longer live entirely as tribesmen, since their new place of habitation scarcely reflects their world of the tribe. The new style of life here is generally a mixture of the tribal, the traditional and the urban values, each set of values serving an important purpose.

Furthermore, what is termed urban tribalism is nothing different from the expected behaviour patterns of people from a traditional society trying to adjust to the different and strange lifestyles in the urban world. Whether it is an English peasant trying to cope with life in London, or a native American Indian attempting to succeed in Los Angeles, the picture is similar; the adjustment process utilizes both the peoples' traditional value system as well as some of those of the city. Failure to admit this fact could result in an invidious and highly suspect distinction between Africans and other peoples in their respective responses and reactions to the modern world.

(18) What Professor Southall and Mr. Legum refer to as tribalism is rather traditionalism. For Southall it is the "carrying over of the features of a tribal (substitute, traditional) society into a different system", Gutkind, op. cit., p. 30. Legum's tribalism "is the manifestation of over-riding group loyalties by members of a culturally-affiliated society to locally-based interests which involve tradition, land and opportunities for survival and growth". Ibid., p. 103.

Expressions of nationalism in traditional societies in Africa were not unknown prior to European colonization of the continent, as shown by the various wars both secular and religious in the Western Sudan, as between the Fulani and Kanuri, or the Ashanti and the Fanti, in East Africa between the Hitu and the Buganda overlords and in South Africa under Chaka the Zulu. Most of these wars were directly or indirectly, born of the slave trade, which set one neighbour or group against the other, resulting in what erroneously has been called intertribal, as different from international wars.

In general, opposition to alien authority and a determination to preserve group culture, traditions and institutions through the exercise of autonomy, was the major objective behind these wars. Whether the authority was that of another African group or a European imperial power, the goal was the same. The Ashanti nationalism in the 19th Century is perhaps the most well known case; less known are the Yoruba, the Hausa Fulani, and the Ibo opposition.

To some degree, the nationalism stimulated primarily by the rapacities of the slave trade, was checked by European colonialism which arbitrarily divided the continent into subject territories, put a stop to the slave trade, and imposed its own values and institutions on the African society. But this created in its wake a new kind of problem: it increased the danger to the autonomy of many of the nationality groups now brought together under one administrative political unit. Thus whereas in Nigeria for example, the rivalry and conflict between the Ibos and the Yorubas was less frequent before the colonization, it increased in intensity and frequency, following the creation of Nigeria.

Traditional nationalism also underwent a formal change, in response to the impact of colonialism and western civilization. Thus, whereas the earlier rivalry was conducted within two or more political and economic systems, the later one was carried out within one economy and one polity. Also, while pre-colonial nationalism was expressed mainly in wars, raids and the preservation of the purity of a group's values, culture and lifestyles, what followed was expressed in the form of competition for jobs, amenities, positions of power and influence and for resource allocation in the new polity. And, while the leaders of earlier nationalism were the kings, chiefs, war-lords or elders, who controlled much power and authority in the rural areas, the Ibo or Yoruba nationalism of a later time, was dominated by the western-educated, whose major theatre of action was primarily the cities, and only secondarily the rural areas.

Thus, European colonization and the resultant exposure of hitherto isolated groups to a larger world through trade and education, sharpened every group's awareness of both itself and others, particularly in the urban centers where the contact between different nationality elements became most intense. Traditional nationalism readily reared up its head here in a new form: the new organizations, associations or unions with membership drawn
exclusively from the nationality group. In most cases, a major objective of these organizations was to protect the interest of its members, to ensure the preservation of their culture and values, and to promote the socio-economic betterment of the members’ homeland (20).

THE DYNAMICS OF TRADITIONAL NATIONALISM

The modern urban center in Africa, created by the mutual interpenetration of the African and European value systems is characterized by a new social system embodying diverse and conflicting elements. What is particularly unique about the society in general and the city in particular, is the fact that the individual bears within himself two totally different and invariably incompatible values and beliefs: As a member of the traditional society he bears with him the norms and values of his society; as one also exposed to the values of the West, he carries the bureaucratic values emphasized by the coloniser. To the degree that he embodies both these varying norms, he works within two sets of symbols at the same time, with resultant disharmony and inconsistency in his social personality (21). This also leads to frequent conflict between persons; one’s behaviour is quickly seen by others as deviant. As with the individual so with the city, which because it contains both the traditional as well as western standards of value and practice, also embodies conflict and disharmony.

This conflict manifests itself today in traditional nationalism, as reflected in the formation of the various kinds of organizations with a strong tinge of traditionalism, in the new urban centers. Animated by a value system which enjoins mutual support on the part of all members, the organizational activities range from repatriating the corpses of deceased nationality members, helping the destitute, settling disputes between “brothers” and others, to rural development projects such as building hospitals and schools, constructing roads or awarding scholarships to the youth for studies overseas. This nationalism also exhibits itself in the attitudes of leaders seeking to bind their followers together in competition with others for social and economic benefits in the modern sector. Generally speaking, these organizations tend to be all purpose in objective; they cater to the cultural, economic and political interest of its members as well as providing them with ideology, source of income and even religion.

Apart from the strength of the obligations of the traditional society, the general character of African urban centers — being primarily commercial and only secondarily industrial centers — was not such as to compel people formerly relatively stationary in their affiliations, to more readily form new groupings. This accounts in part for the relative weakness or paucity of

special-purpose organizations in these centers. Trade unions, professional associations and the like, were few and weak. Not surprisingly loyalty transcending kinship membership and nationality affiliations only developed quite slowly; in many cases it was retarded. Under this condition, associations diffuse in function and with a membership based on primordial attachments flourished, to protect individuals and groups recently shorn of their traditional ties in the cities. In time they laid the foundation for the special-purpose associations — the political parties and the trade unions, that emerged later in response to "modern" nationalism (22).

THE USES OF TRADITIONAL NATIONALISM

Every nationalism is traditional to the degree that it is animated by the values and traditions of its society; for a people's history, culture, world outlook as well as the things they cherish and treasure most, inevitably influence the way and manner they project themselves as a national group. Where the society is mainly traditional, the nationalism is bound to reflect marked traditionalism, as is the case in most "Third World" (23) societies. This is not without advantage.

With few exceptions, the nation-state in present-day Africa is an artificial creation of the European coloniser. It has its origins in the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 which arbitrarily partitioned the continent among the imperial European powers and in so doing either threw together groups with different and dissimilar customs and languages, else divided others hitherto united by a common territory, language and history. Many a new nation-state is thus a mosaic of peoples with differing values, traditions, sentiments and religions. To adjust and live effectively in this new society requires new tools and new approaches, not only because of the character of the varying groups within the new polity, and the size of the polity itself, but also because of the new and complex situation created by the impact from the West. The latter has introduced in Africa literacy, cash economy, a new urbanism, improved means of transport and communication as well as centralized governmental administration and bureaucracy associated with the modern society.

Since the African society is largely traditional and since most individuals in the society have not yet sufficiently acquired the major tools as literacy and the bureaucratic norms needed for effective operation in the modern society, their reaction and response to the world around them, tends to bear two modalities. The one springs from attachments to the traditional world of which they are more familiar; the other from the impact of westernism. The result is that traditional institutions and values are transmuted under the new conditions of urbanism, and western impact. Thus, traditional

(22) The Kenya National Congress evolved out of Kikuyu Central Association; the Action Group of Nigeria out of Egbe Omo Odudua.
(23) For a fuller description of the "Third World" see Worsley, op. cit.
secret societies, age group associations, the extended family system and communalism, for example, are all differently utilized today to achieve, if only in part, an old objective: group welfare and solidarity, under the changed and rapidly changing conditions.

Traditional nationalism serves therefore to bridge the gap between the old and the new thereby contributing towards the process which enables Africa and its people to enter the mainstream of contemporary history. It plays a major part in the cultural development, political socialization, national unification and the institutionalization of new roles among the people, in the new nation-states.

Such organizations, associations or unions, as the Ibo State Union among the Ibos, or Egbe Omo Oodunwa among the Yorubas, characterized by membership drawn from one nationality group, have contributed significantly to the development of their communities. They have built roads and schools, established hospitals and post offices and even erected pipe-borne water in many a remote part, thereby facilitating the modernization process in areas that would have remained backward, else waited for government assistance to initiate and promote their development. In so doing, these traditional organizations spared their governments the pressure for assistance of great proportion and expense, thereby averting widespread frustration and discontent likely to attend failure to achieve desired public objectives.

Aside from the group pride attendant on such accomplishment, traditional nationalism has also the advantage of enlarging the social world of its members by promoting allegiance to units far larger than existed in the pre-colonial era. Through the use of various symbols it provides the people a sense of common identity as well as of the integrity of their own cultures, thus enabling them to assert the personality of Africa in the modern world. It serves as a medium through which large numbers of tradition-bound people are drawn into the mainstream of the modern culture by exposing the individual to a wide network of persons often of varying skills and positions, to retain and guide him in the ways of urban life, and to acquaint him with such essential criteria as rationality, merit and achievement orientation. In this way, the organizations or unions contribute to the diffusion of entirely new ideas, habits, technical procedures and a considerable restructuring of social relationships among its members, while facilitating the opportunities for individual and group mobility as well as the social contact which help to speed the process of resocialization.

The various associations which reflect traditional nationalism serve as a plank for leadership training both in the modern methods of business as well as in the newer associations of an urban society, as for example, the trade unions, political parties or professional societies. In this way, traditional nationalism gives new status to many a group like the young and ambitious who act as the interpreters and leaders of those less westernized and sophisticated than themselves. Since their new roles help to bring them into contact with both their group and members of other nationality groups,
they help widen their horizons, while imbuing them with increased self-confidence, psychic mobility and adjustment to the cosmopolitan ethos of the city.

And in a function no less important, through the unions or organizations, traditional nationalism acts as an adaptative mechanism by substituting, on behalf of the “urban villager”, a grouping based on common interest, and capable of serving many of the same needs as the traditional family or lineage. To some degree, membership in these bodies replaces much of the psychic security and moral assurance one loses by leaving the village, with the new companionship and the new opportunity it offers in the mutual sharing with others like oneself in moments of joy or sorrow. Not uncommonly, the organizations or unions, provide in the fashion of the extended family, counsel and protection in terms of legal aid, or sickness and funeral benefits to their members, thereby, enabling them to continue their most important kinship obligations (24).

All these result in what Professor Burke has termed the “process of socialization”. Through this process individual members of a group or community shed their beliefs, values and behaviour relative to membership in certain groupings; are exposed to new values and beliefs; modify their behaviour and human interrelationships, and act in such a way as to form new groupings which give expression to the new or altered values, beliefs and behaviour (25).

The dysfunctionality of traditional nationalism has been more widely publicized than its merits. It is claimed, for example, that traditional loyalties weaken the emergence of wider loyalties in the new nation-states of Africa because they entail implicit attachments to values and institutions considered incompatible with the requirements of social reconstruction. It is even argued that because of the particularistic obligations and the diffuse orientation inherent in nationality groups, the merging of their roles with political ones, can and does result in the compounding of favoritism and corruption in government as well as in the intensification of separatist movements inimical to national unity (26).

While this may be true to some extent, the fact remains that traditional nationalism is possibly one of the least powerful forces militating against national unity. Wide scale illiteracy, general poverty, poor or ineffective leadership, poor means of transport and communication, are among the obstacles to unity in the new nations of the world. As a matter of fact traditional nationalism has contributed more towards national unity than it has hindered.

It is common knowledge that the colonial struggle for independence in Africa succeeded only with the formation of mass parties, which

(25) Burke, op. cit., p. 2.
(26) Bascom, op. cit.
reached the widest cross-section of the population in a way that linked the leadership with the masses. Earlier movements failed partly because being urban based, their membership was narrow and limited to the few educated people residing in the cities, and partly because of the poor means of transport and communication and the general low rate of literacy in the society. Still, another imponderable was the presence of nationality groups, as in Nigeria. Since in some cases, these differed from one another as England, France or Germany did from each other, founding a mass or national party or movement capable of embracing such variety of nationalities, especially under the colonial conditions, proved not only difficult but generally impracticable (27).

It is most doubtful that reliance on appeals on ideological grounds would have succeeded in forging a political movement since ideological differences under the colonial situation were minimal. Besides, of itself, ideology does not command much allegiance. Hence the recourse to the nationality group with its characteristic cultural and linguistic ties among large populations, as the rallying point for the formation of parties. Primordial attachments were viewed as the best basis for political units, on the logic that legitimate authority acceptable to the masses flows only from the inherent coerciveness of such attachments. The idea was to build a political base first among one's own people, thereafter to open the party or movement to people outside of the nationality group. The success of the Action Group party in pre-1966 Nigeria, and the strength of the Kenya National Union in Kenya today, is a sure indication of the wisdom of building parties in multi-national polities, first on nationality basis.

It can even be argued that the states into which Nigeria is currently divided owe much of their existence to traditional nationalism. Clearly the twelve states are not based on the logic of the twelve “tribes” of Israel, nor on Christ’s twelve apostles. With all its imperfections the division follows closely the natural boundaries created in the country by differences in culture, language and traditions. Evidently, the artificial colonial divisions based on administrative convenience for over a quarter century, could not weather a decade of turbulent traditional nationalism following the country’s political and constitutional independence, as demonstrated by the cataclysm and social convulsion Nigeria suffered between 1966 and 1970. It is doubtful that this would have occurred had Nigeria created more room initially for the dynamics or a more healthy traditional nationalism.

Nigeria’s hard and painful experience can still be avoided in other countries ready and willing to listen to the demands of traditional nationalism particularly in areas where the latter aims at reuniting groups and peoples divided arbitrarily and separated politically by the new administrative structures created by European powers. The Yorubas in Dahomey are separated from their kins in Nigeria; the Ewe of Ghana from their fellow nationals in Togoland, and the various Somalis in the British, French and

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Italian ex-colonial territories. Unfortunately, resistance against this unity has strongly come from the artificial territorial units created by the colonisers on the basis of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Thus while traditional nationalism has acted to unify peoples with a common culture and history, modern nationalism has tended to perpetuate disunity.

THE USES OF TRIBALISM

As already indicated, the tribe was the creature of the coloniser; its reason for being was to differentiate the white hence civilized man from the non-white and presumably uncivilized man, especially the African. Such differentiation in turn provided the rationale for the colonization of the continent: to civilize and Christianize the African became the self-imposed burden of the white man by late 19th century.

The idea of tribe in time conditioned almost every aspect of colonial policy and practice. The ideal education for the African was one which endeavoured both to civilize him and to perpetuate tribal values and way of life; colonial administration was viewed as ideal if carried out under the authority of the “tribal chief” through European supervision; and socio-economic development was measured to the degree that it favored colonial exploitation without detribalizing the individual or society. No wonder the bitter resentment by the coloniser against the African who acquired mastery of a European language, adopted European style of life and competed favorably with the European in any area of activity. Like an upstart Caliban, he was readily condemned by the very Prospero who saw his mission as the civilization of the tribesman. Thus, with a contradiction peculiar to colonialism, the idea of the tribe was used not only to justify European expansionism, but also her domination of the continent. It was therefore used to keep the African in his place while he was being Europeanized.

Tribalism was readily exploited to break stiff opposition to colonial rule. By exciting one group against the other either by supporting the weaker to the anger of the stronger, or by playing on the supposed tribal differences between two groups of people, the coloniser effectively created divisions even where there was unity, weakened his opponents both militarily and politically, and consequently imposed his rule upon allies and adversaries alike. Such was the case when Italian colonialism set the Hawiye, the Digib, the Rahanwin against the Darod in Somalia; similarly the British coloniser instigated the Fanti against the Ashanti, while the French set the various Sudanese people one against the other.

Tribalism performed yet another function: for both the coloniser and the colonised it was used subjectively and inconsistently as a “blame pinning device”. In the opinion of the coloniser, for example, the African lacked much of the prerequisite for independence because he was tribal. Thus, to prepare him for the task, he had to be “educated” and “civilized” like the coloniser and no less by the latter himself; this meant instilling in him the values, tastes and life styles of the master. To be educated and civilized
was thus to adopt European culture: to behave, act, think and live like the Europeans, and to reject many of one's traditional values and customs.

To the extent that this was a major goal, colonialism was quite successful. Many an African who was educated became European in everything except in colour. He became in a way a black Englishman or Frenchman, hence presumably qualified to bear the "white man's burden," namely to "civilize" the less fortunate tribesmen, and thus lead them to independence. Yet, the educated African was viewed by the coloniser as his worst enemy: he was accused of preciousness, of pretensions to wisdom and of boldness, not associated with the timid and subservient villager, before the European. He was vilified for being "de-tribalised," for not living and acting like his illiterate or less educated kinsmen, and for not subscribing to the traditions of his tribe.

Tribalism was thus blamed for much of Africa's ills: the continent's putative "underdevelopment" was ascribed to tribalism as reflected in either the lack of education and civilization, European-style, among the people, or too much education as evidenced by those who having been Europeanized, cut themselves loose from the world of their tribe. In being "detribalized," it was claimed these Africans lost touch with the tribesman and hence disqualified themselves as the leaders of their people.

On the other hand, the colonised tended to see his problems in tribal terms. His failure to obtain what he wanted was quickly blamed on the tribalism of others who, in his view, either secured the desired good or else obstructed him from getting it, chiefly because he is not a fellow tribesman. Leaders who feel threatened in their positions by others, not infrequently appeal to tribal loyalties to increase their popular support. Thus, by capitalising on the loyalties and fears of their fellow members, they claim an aura of traditional legitimacy, or whip up feelings of antagonism against outsiders in order to resolve or obscure divisions within their own constituency.

Yet the fact remains that many people do not necessarily owe their positions in government or industry to their tribal membership: however, their positions often give them a visibility that easily attracts accusations of discrimination and tribalism even on occasions when other criteria not based on primordial attachments are obviously determinant. All the same, the use of tribalism as a "blame pinning device" has a therapeutic effect: it serves as an emotional release or a face-saving device for one's failure where someone else succeeds.

For the group, the device can have a great negative advantage. Where complaints about the modern nationalist party in power are transformed into complaints about the tribal group or groups in power, the tendency to reject the men while implicitly accepting the system is increased. As Professor Lloyd observed:

When the incumbent of a modern office is criticised in terms of his ethnic origin the new role of the office is tacitly accepted; were attacks upon the
failings of the modern sector to be directed against its structure rather than against the individual traits of its personnel, the survival of the new state would be seriously jeopardized (28).

TRADITIONAL NATIONALISM OR TRIBALISM: WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

It makes a lot of difference whether the concept employed to describe the social behaviour of a group of people, is traditional nationalism or tribalism. Which term is used will determine the degree to which a particular phenomenon or event is understood, and the extent to which the solution of a problem, arising therefrom, is achieved. Concepts are used for analytical purposes in so far as they help to simplify and categorise social behaviour. They are useful only so long as they have a consistent meaning, and can become a part of a general currency of terms. The more vague, the more imprecise are the concepts, the less is their analytical utility. Moreover, they must have a universal validity in that they can be applied wherever the conditions to which they apply exist. If their application depends upon intuition, guesswork, or the like, then they are analytically useless (29).

The failure of many an African leader to solve problems supposedly caused by tribalism points to one possibility, namely, misconception of these problems, for while the existence of the latter is hardly in doubt, claims as to their causes or source of origin, are not readily convincing, particularly when associated with tribalism. Effective and successful solution of these problems rests on a sound understanding of their causes: this in turn demands looking beyond the false and deceptive pointers to the real and actual ones, on the logic that the knowledge so gained would contribute significantly to the improvement and betterment of the society.

If what presently is mistaken for tribalism were understood in its true light as traditional nationalism, a new awareness could be gained in the effort to build modern and united nation-states in Africa. For then the task becomes one of devising ways and means of positively utilizing the nationalism to build a bridge between the old and the new and to institutionalize Western values and techniques in Africa without destruction to traditional cultures and customs. The fact remains that the strength of the transfer of westernism to Africa depends upon how well what is transferred is anchored on the values and institutions of the African people.

As long as tribalism survives as a concept, it will continue to misrepresent reality before both the person who uses it and the person to whom it is supposed to refer. As was pointed out earlier, tribe and tribalism were

the creatures of the coloniser; they did not refer to the reality their inventor ascribed to them, but were used to justify and sustain the ideology and practice of colonialism. Professor Diamond has correctly observed, "Recourse to the explanatory principle of tribalism is a western reification which blocks our view of African reality and deflects our attention from our responsibility" (30).

True emancipation in Africa therefore entails not only the effective destruction of colonial domination but the elimination of the concepts upon which the institution itself rested. Awareness of the fact that Ibo and Yoruba are not just tribes but nations means too that their members are Ibo and Yoruba nationals respectively, and that the new polity, Nigeria, of which both nations, along with others, are a part, is not a country in the sense England or France is one, but in the sense that the United States of America or Switzerland is. Hence the need to see Nigeria's problems in a wider perspective and to seek their solution in the context of a federation.

And finally appreciation of the traditional nationalist element in Africa challenges any attitude which accepts the boundaries — both geographical, political and economic created by the coloniser as final. The strength of traditional nationalism may yet alter colonial boundaries, create new ones as it draws new maps to meet the aspirations and demands of people who find themselves caught up in the untidy and poorly conceived territories arbitrarily created by the coloniser.

TRIBALISME EUROPEEN ET NATIONALISME AFRICAIN

(Résumé)

Les termes "tribu" et "tribalisme" sont généralement utilisés par ceux qui prétendent expliquer l'état d'infériorité de l'Afrique en matière de développement et de progrès. Or, ces termes n'ont guère de signification précise lorsqu'il s'agit de l'Afrique. Ils ne sont, en réalité, que le reliquat des temps du colonialisme, particulièrement de la fin du XIXe siècle, alors qu'il s'agissait d'établir la supériorité du blanc civilisateur sur le noir jugé non-civilisé.

La notion de tribu est d'ailleurs assez confuse chez les anthropologistes et lorsque ceux-ci entamèrent l'étude de ce qu'ils ont nommé la société tribale, ce type de société avait à peu près disparu. Ce que l'on peut dire, c'est que, d'une part, il n'y avait pas de tribus en Afrique à l'époque de la pénétration européenne et d'autre part, le colonisateur a donné le nom de tribu à ce qui était en fait le clan. Quant au terme "tribalisme", il sert par erreur à désigner ce que nous appelons nationalisme traditionnel, c'est-à-dire cette forme de nationalisme qu'animent les principes et le choix des valeurs d'une société traditionnelle.

(30) Gutkind, ed., op. cit., p. 27.

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Sans doute le nationalisme traditionnel a-t-il subi un changement notable pour répondre à l'envahissement du colonialisme et à la puissance de la civilisation occidentale. Il s'est notamment affirmé dans les centres urbains, prenant la forme d'organisations nouvelles, d'unions et d'associations ayant pour objectif majeur la sauvegarde des valeurs culturelles et l'amélioration des conditions socio-économiques de la terre natale des affiliés. En définitive, on peut dire que le nationalisme traditionnel, faisant le pont entre le monde de jadis et celui d'aujourd'hui, favorise le processus qui doit permettre aux peuples africains d'accéder au niveau général de l'histoire contemporaine. Son rôle est déterminant pour les nouveaux États indépendants, puisqu'il développe leur fond culturel, crée et accélère la socialisation politique et l'unification nationale. Sur ce dernier point, il est vrai, on a pu émettre un certain nombre d'objections. Il n'en demeure pas moins que le nationalisme traditionnel a largement contribué à donner de la cohésion à des populations ayant un fond commun de culture et d'histoire, alors que le nationalisme moderne a cherché à perpétuer la désunion.

Nationalisme traditionnel ou tribalisme ? Il faut se méfier des concepts vagues et erronés qui ne peuvent avoir de valeur analytique. Le terme “tribalisme” a trop servi à justifier les objectifs de l'impérialisme colonialiste pour que l'on puisse encore le retenir. L'émancipation réelle et effective des pays africains exige non seulement la suppression de toute domination coloniale, mais aussi l'élimination des concepts et de la terminologie utilisés par elle. Ainsi, si ce que l'on range encore sous l'appellation fausse de tribalisme était considéré dans son véritable éclairage comme relevant du nationalisme traditionnel, on aurait sans aucun doute pris meilleure conscience de la grande tâche qu'est l'édification de nations africaines modernes et unifiées.