The Trouble with Tribe: Beyond a Monocausal Explanation for Ethnicized Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa

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The Trouble with ‘Tribe’
Beyond a Monocausal Explanation for Ethnicized Conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT
The trope of the African “tribe” is often invoked as an all-encompassing explanation for ethnicized political conflict across the continent. This argument places both too much and too little emphasis on ethnicity. It neglects the structural considerations that grant ethnicity its salience, whilst placing too little emphasis on the flexibility of ethnicity as a social construct and its differing usage in political structures across the continent. Instead, this paper begins with the presumption that ethnicity is a function of the circumstances in which it becomes significant. It examines the colonial (mis)management of ‘tribe’, and proceeds to investigate several structural causes that lead to the instrumentalization of ethnicity. These causes include the use of ethnicity as a political currency; the interaction of ethnicity with patron-client state structures; ethnicized political mobilization as a response to a lack of political institutionalism; as well as the Cold-War and post-Cold War international contexts. In examining these structural causes of ethnicized political conflict, this paper hopes to reshape the discourse around African political conflicts away from a presumed irrationality to an understanding of the intersecting factors that create and exacerbate ethnicized armed conflict in post-colonial Africa.
What is the trouble with ‘tribe’? Considering the grasp that ethnicized politics seems to have on electoral contests and civil conflicts across Sub-Saharan Africa, a characterization that directly correlates cause (‘tribe’) and effect (conflict) can be tempting. However, a closer analysis of the concept of ‘tribe’, as well as the conflicts and electoral contests that it is thought to unduly influence, uncovers layers of nuance that expose the inadequacies of this well-worn trope. This paper will contest the notion that ethnic conflict and ‘tribalism’ are *exclusively* at the heart of civil conflicts and electoral contests in Africa by rebutting the primordialist conception of ethnicity and exploring the colonial origins of the ‘tribe’ as a social cleavage. This paper will then explore the interaction of ethnicity with a myriad of other factors that, in combination, foment ethnic political conflict. It will do this by exploring three levels of analysis: individual, national, and international. At the individual level, this paper will recognize the role of neo-patrimonialism and the use of ethnicity as a political currency by African elites. At the national level, this paper will recognize state weakness and the instrumental use of ethnic solidarity in the creation of political movements. At the international level, this paper will explore the role of external actors, Cold War and post-independence realities, as well as international monetary policy in creating and exacerbating ethnic conflicts.

The “Tribe”: Contemporary Discourse and its Colonial Precedent

The definition of ‘tribe’ is itself notoriously slippery, rife with complications borne from a troubled history. The common conception of the African ‘tribe’ evokes images of a society defined by kinship and regional ties, often at odds with other
tribes in the region. However, the ways in which this concept significantly differs from other ethnic social configurations has only recently become the subject of scholarly attention.\(^1\) It is clear that there was indeed significant pre-colonial ethnic differentiation, but the extent to which these distinctions matched the common conception of tribe and tribalism is a topic of heated controversy. It is important to note, however, that although the veracity of ‘tribe’ is a source of considerable historiographical debate, the conception of ‘tribe’ can be seen to have served an important functional construct to European colonizers. That is to say, regardless of how ahistorical the concept may be, it was a useful concept in the construction and maintenance of colonial power. Colonial social anthropologists were granted the power to define the borders of the ‘natural’ African society, and they used this power to legitimize the rule of the conquering powers.\(^2\) This is evidenced by the lack of basic academic inquiry with which they undertook this project. Even in defining the role of the ‘tribe’ as the bedrock of African society, the colonial social anthropologists “saw no need to trace its sociological origins in other institutions or in previous historical epochs, nor to account for its persistence in the African historical landscape.”\(^3\) It did not matter, then, that the reality of African social structures did not reflect their colonial definitions- they were defined by colonialists in a way that necessitated the intervention of European powers.


\(^2\) Ibid., 672

\(^3\) Ibid., 673
The conception was historically configured as a dichotomy: the stagnant, uncivilized African ‘tribe’ was contrasted against the dynamic, modern European ‘nation’ and was found to be wanting. Through this paradigm, the African tribe was seen as a residue from some pre-modern epoch, an expression of the of the barbarity and irrationality of African peoples. As tribalism was Africa’s ‘natural’ condition, it extended backward and forward into the expanse of time, seemingly in perpetuity.

The construction of this dichotomy had several important functional consequences. For one, by presuming the inferiority of African socio-political structures, it provided a direct impetus for the civilizing mission and the white man’s burden. More significant for the purposes of this paper, however, is that this dichotomy created a concrete classification system through which the colonizers could rule. It rigidified fluid social structures and introduced the element of bureaucracy. Consider the case of Rwanda, where the concepts ‘Tutsi’ and ‘Hutu’ were in reality positions of status, not tribal affiliation, prior to the advent of colonialism. With the introduction of colonial bureaucracies, identification cards and censuses served to stagnate social movement between the groups. In the case of Rwanda, as in other post-colonial African states, ‘tribe’ and ethnic identity were made essential to the African body politic through the process of colonization.

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The European passion for classification also served the interests of the colonial system in another way. It served as a justification for divide and rule, elevating some ‘tribes’ as closer to Europeans and marginalizing others from systems of power. As Mahmood Mamdani argues, these systems were necessary to facilitate indirect colonial governance. It is for this reason that he argues that “[tribalism then was the very form that colonial rule took within the local state.”

This action was undertaken for two important reasons: it prevented solidarity between colonized groups; as well as giving the colonizing power a lessened load from the internal governance of the colony. However, the systematic marginalization of particular communities and the social inequalities that resulted had important ramifications for the post-colonial African landscape. Returning the example of Rwanda, the Belgian colonizers privileged the Tutsi community over the Hutu, going so far as to require all non-Tutsi to invest forced labor into constructing the colonial infrastructure. As this paper will later show, many of the advantages endowed to certain ‘tribes’ by the colonizers continued into the post-colonial political landscape. In fact, by the middle of twentieth century, the disproportionate accumulation of wealth by Tutsi had led to the adoption of the ‘Bahutu Manifesto’ in

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6 Mahmood Mamdani, Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1996), 8

7 Ibid., 183

1957, which called for the double emancipation – both from Belgian colonizers and Tutsi oppressors.⁹

In many ways, the colonial legacy has been definitional to the African experience of tribe and ethnicity. Indeed, the arbitrary borders that enclose many unrelated communities and separate contingent communities is a residue of colonialism. However, this paper will contend that many of the ways in which contemporary discourse (mis)understands the role of ‘tribe’ in African politics is also itself partly a residue of the colonial past. The argument that ethnicity is essential to the identity of the individual; that it is an immutable fact of history, region and society; is known as primordialism.¹⁰ This seemingly benign argument, however, carries with it the legacy of colonialism. To argue that tribalism is Africa’s ‘natural’ condition of the African political system is to argue against the dynamism and fluidity of identity. In reality, it is not a given that ethnicity is automatically more important to an individual than other social cleavages, such as religion or region. Most importantly, the primacy that such an argument places upon ethnicity and tribe distracts from the structural causes for conflict, it echoes the claims of irrationality that colonizers used to legitimize their rule. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o argues, assumed ‘traditional’ hostility was deemed sufficient to explain the reasons

⁹ Ibid.

that the Kikuyu were the victims of 2007 post-election violence in Kenya.\textsuperscript{11} The explanation that there exists a “traditional enmity between Tribe X and Tribe Y” was considered sufficient.\textsuperscript{12}

However, as Einar Braathen argues “the significance of ethnicity is a function of the circumstances under which it suddenly becomes salient”.\textsuperscript{13} ‘Tribe’, then, may seem to lie at the heart of an electoral contest or civil conflict, but the reality of the conflict cannot be understood without analysis of the undergirding structural factors to which it responds. Ethnicity, then, is certainly an important element of the African political landscape but its significance can only be understood when taken in context with other traversing factors that also impact upon the political discourse. This paper will now explore the first of these traversing factors – the use of ethnicity as political currency by governing elites across the continent.

**Big Men, Personal Rule and the Ethnicized State**

The use of tribe and ethnicity as a political currency is not a new phenomenon, and it is certainly not unique to Africa. However, the interaction of tribe and ethnicity with the politics of personal rule can contribute to our understanding of the systemic factors that lead to the conflagration of ethnic violence and electoral contests. This paper will show that this interplay operates in three ways: first, the politics of personal rule means that political leaders can


\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13} Einar Braathen, “Ethnicity Kills? Social Struggles for Power, Resources and Identities inn the Neo-Patrimonial State”, 4
allocate resources disproportionately to certain ethnic communities; second, those leaders that feel threatened in the security of their power can use a call to ethnicity to garner support and court potential clients; and third, the unpredictable way in which neo-patrimonial states allocate resources results in a winner-take-all governing philosophy that heightens competition for political power.

In a neo-patrimonial political structure, political elites use the resources of the state in order to secure loyalty and support from other actors.\(^\text{14}\) By using public coffers to finance personal support, elites fuse public and private interests and create clients that are faithful to the individual ruler, as opposed to the political objectives that the ruler espouses to the public. As the power flows not from the office, but from the individual leader, this form of governance has come to be known as ‘personal rule’. The impersonal structures of the political system are often integrated into, or run alongside, the neo-patrimonial system. This form of governance has been considered to contribute to the stability of some regimes, as it can be used as a pressure valve to invite political dissidents into the regime.\(^\text{15}\) However, as this paper will now show, when the politics of personal rule are ethnicized, it can exacerbate political conflict and electoral contests.

While the simple fact of ethnic heterogeneity or tribal affiliation may not itself create violence or electoral conflict, when it is combined with the politics of resource distribution it can become a flash point that engulfs in conflicts and

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\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 11

\(^\text{15}\) Leonardo Arriola, "Patronage and Political Stability in Africa," *Comparative Political Studies* 42 (2009): 1340
electoral contests. A president in a neo-patrimonial system has the authority to skew the allocation of resources in order to create or maintain patron-client relationships. This can occur, as in the case of Kenya, “in total disregard of merit and qualifications”.\(^\text{16}\) As Mulinge and Munyae argue, the state can be ‘ethnicized’ in regard to resource allocation in two ways: first, the favoring of a certain group by a personal ruler creates a sentiment of legitimate ownership amongst the group and entrenches their commitment to defend their newly won prized position; second, once the higher echelons of a certain organization are sufficiently ethnicized, it opens opportunities for the lower strata of the organization to also be allotted to a particular ethnic group.\(^\text{17}\) This can result in the near-total control of a certain ethnic group in positions of power.

A call to ethnicity is a powerful force; it at once grants salience to ethnic divisions and creates ready-made supporters, as well as providing a distraction from the issues that may arise from legitimate criticism of modes of governance. As Richard Ilorah argues, “The leaders manipulate members of their ethnic group into believing that reforms are threats to both their political and economic power bases, and that ... reforms are more likely to reverse than increase prosperity.”\(^\text{18}\) The mobilization of ethnic identities by political leaders serves to rigidify the divides between ethnicities, providing a platform for scapegoating and the further economic


\[\text{\(^\text{17}\) Ibid.}\]

marginalization of political dissidents from other ethnic communities. When President Moi of Kenya faced the political challenge of the newly minted multi-party elections in 1992, he mobilized his fellow Kalenjin through a call to ethnicity, reminding them that the privileged status that they were afforded by his presence as leader was at risk. Thus, the monocausal explanations for the 1992 pre-election violence in Kenya that posited an innate ethnic enmity between the Kalenjin and Kikuyu are incomplete, at best.

As the ability of the president in a neo-patrimonial system to distribute resources is nearly unrivaled, the competition for political office becomes correspondingly more fierce. Thus, the pattern of patron-client relationships results in a winner-take-all philosophy, where all politically significant ethnic populations of the nation want a chance to ‘eat the national cake’. As Adebayo Adedeji explains the ways in which the winner-takes-all philosophy compounds the issues of the issues of resource allocation and the call to ethnicity, in a passage that is well worth quoting at length.

In these nations, political power is sought in order, *inter alia*, to acquire control over the means of production. Those who win in the intense and brutal political power competition no longer need to exert themselves in furthering their economic well-being. Those who lose are not just immiserated and pauperized but run the risk of losing their lives because African economies are usually state-dominated. Because it is the state that sets the terms of competition between groups, the pursuit of particularistic objectives often becomes embodied as a national goal. This results in the

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20 Nasong'o, "Resources Allocation and the Crisis of Political Conflicts in Africa", 52

21 Ibid.
over politicization of social public goods, which significantly weakens the state itself, and in the ethnicization of the competition.22

This clearly provides an impetus for mobilization along the same ethnic and tribal lines under which certain ethnic communities were relegated from the means of production. The interesting paradox remains that if a marginalized community were to mobilize against the ruling elite as a result of these conditions, it would be as a result of the exact same reasons that make adopting the role of power so enticing. It bears reminding, then, some perceived longstanding inter-ethnic hatred would be woefully insufficient to explain the eruption of political violence or electoral contests. As this paper will now show, the actions of these political leaders in creating the patron-client relationships, disproportionately allocating resources, using a call to ethnicity to garner political support, and fostering a winner-take-all spirit of governance has serious consequences on the structure of the African state, and its relationship to tribe and ethnicity.

State Weakness and Ethnic Solidarity

The consequences of the personal rule paradigm for the structural relationship of the state to ethnic and tribal communities is important in understanding electoral contests and political violence. While those who subscribe

to a primodialist inter-ethnic hatred thesis may point to the mere fact of heterogeneity as the primary source of conflict, this paper will show that changes to the structure of the African state contribute to the eruption of political violence and contested elections. This paper will show that state-level structural conditions can result in ethnic conflicts in three ways: first, through the lack of effective political institutionalization, second, by creating a ‘minority at risk’ syndrome which results in the mobilization of tribe and ethnicity; and third, through the retreat of the state.

The lack of effective political institutionalization can be seen as a direct result of the politics of personal rule, as the fusion of the public and private interests make a difficult prospect of creating “effective political organizations and procedures which promote harmony among social groups and regulate their behavior as they engage in competition for the ever scarce societal resources.”23 Nasong’o argues that it is not the mere existence of disparate ethnic groups in a single political space that causes conflict, but the fact that this political competition occurs in a context that lacks political institutionalism.24 The lack of effective means of political change, combined with the winner-take-all governing philosophy mobilizes communities that are systematically marginalized from the levers of power.25 The mobilization of the marginalized Acholi ethnic group in northern Uganda follows this pattern, as no

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23 Nasong’o, “Resources Allocation and the Crisis of Political Conflicts in Africa”, 46
24 Ibid., 44
effective pressure valve existed to diffuse the conflict that pitted the Lord’s Resistance Army against the Ugandan government from 1986 to present.26

The ‘minority at risk’ syndrome is a dynamic that occurs when there is “a general feeling among disadvantaged groups that the advantaged group has taken over the country”.27 It is related to political institutionalism, as the state cannot provide the necessary guarantees to effectively integrate the minority group into the political system. This is evident in the 1992 pre-election violence that occurred in the Rift Valley of Kenya. Kikuyu dominance of political and economic resources in Kenya during the Kenyatta years (1963-1978) led to a widespread sentiment that the Kikuyu, as a community, had hoarded the levers of power. This discontent remained even as the Kalenjin assumed power and had their own chance to ‘eat the national cake’ under President Moi.28 As the prospect of newly minted multiparty elections loomed over the 1992 presidential elections, President Moi used a call to ethnicity to remind the Kalenjin community of the stakes of losing the election. In fact, ‘Kalenjin’ identity was itself an arbitrary construction by Moi, it was a consolidation of several small ethnic groups into one common community from which Moi could garner support.29 Indeed, the minority at risk syndrome was certainly at play in Kenya. That “fear of domination by one or several ethnic groups... continued to feature prominently in political party politics in Kenya during the period after independence.”30 When the prospect of the 1992 election drew

27 Mulinge Munyae, “Ethnicization of the State”, 154
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 146
30 Ibid., 148
closer, the Kalenjin, Maasai and Pokots violently mobilized against the Kikuyu in the Rift Valley and the Luo and Luhuya in western Kenya.\textsuperscript{31} Thus, the violence was not the result of inter-ethnic enmity, but of historical grievances that can only be understood when the causal structural factors are considered. The minority at risk syndrome results in the instrumentalization of ethnic cleavages because marginalized communities respond to an increasingly ethnicized state by creating ethnicized political movements of their own.

As a result of a lack of political institutionalization, ethnicity can assume a role of opposition that otherwise would have been served in the political process. It is important to note, part of the normal function of ethnicity and tribe is that of an imagined community, an understanding of mutual interest. However, when situated in a context without political institutionalization, ethnicity’s power of solidarity can be used to mobilize ethnic grievances. This was certainly the case in Nigeria. The 1967-1970 Biafra civil war was the result of the political mobilization of the Igbo and Ijaw people of southeast Nigeria.\textsuperscript{32} The country is split along regional and religious fault lines that overlap with ethnic lines. The people from the oil-rich delta of Ogoniland “complain bitterly of political and economic marginalisation by the Nigerian Government despite their ancestral land being the main source of the country’s oil and thus of government revenue.”\textsuperscript{33} This marginalization, the Igbo argue, is due to the control that the Hausa-Felani ethnic group holds over political

\textsuperscript{31} Nasong’o, “Resources Allocation and the Crisis of Political Conflicts in Africa”, 52

\textsuperscript{32} Richard Ilorah, “Ethnic Bias, Favouritism and Development in Africa”, 700

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
power. While the neo-patrimonial system was, in fact, utilized to contain the ethnic tensions by enticing would-be secessionists with the patron-client system, the structures of ethnicity and tribe hold significant connotations and the minority at risk paradigm and lack of political institutionalization are both realities of the Nigerian political landscape.

The politics of personal rule, then, can be seen to contribute to the lack of political institutionalization that is a mark of political structures across the continent. The ethnicization of these levers of power, and the subsequent marginalization of certain ethnic and tribal communities, can create the minority at risk paradigm which can be mobilized into political opposition and conflict. This paper will now explore the international structural conditions that are at the heart of electoral contests and civic violence across Africa.

Ethnicized States and Global Forces

The causal factors of ethnicized political violence and electoral contests reach far beyond the nation-state level. The international context in which these events take place shape, exacerbate and maintain conflict. When international factors are intermingled with the local politics of tribe and ethnicity, it can have serious consequences for the political structure of African states. This paper will now explore two international forces: the implications of the Cold War and the post-Cold War international landscape; and the influence of Structural Adjustment

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34 Cletus Chukwu, “Ethnicity and Political Conflicts in Nigeria,” in *Conflict in Contemporary Africa*, ed. P. G. Okoth et al. (Nairobi: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation, 2000), 141
Programmes (SAPs) and other international interferences. Just as ethnicity and tribalism alone is not sufficient to breed ethnic conflict, these factors should be thought of as exacerbating factors – they compound the issues that this paper has already explored at the individual and national levels. Of course, one of the most important international factors is one that this paper has already considered – the factor of colonialism.

The zero-sum nature of the Cold War meant that nearly all states, even those previously deemed peripheral, were important strategic considerations in the simmering conflict between the United States and the USSR. Third World countries were thrust to the center of international politics, as it was understood that warfare between the superpowers would be fought on proxy battlefields, rather than on American or Soviet soil. The influx of military aid that the superpowers provided to these secondary states was substantial to say the least – heightening the stakes of political office. ‘Friendly’ dictatorships were supported across Africa and Asia to the tune of $107.3 billion in arms and equipment by America alone between 1950 and 1979.\(^\text{35}\) However, the post-Cold War period and the demise of the Soviet Union meant that these supportive relationships were no longer considered necessary to American interests, and the money evaporated from the coffers of African states.\(^\text{36}\) This scarcity heightened the internal competition for resources within African states, exposing the unequal distribution of resources along ethnic lines. It is not


surprising, then, that the outbreak of many ethnicized political conflicts across the continent occurred along the timeline as major shifts in the international system. The clan-based civil war in Somalia, for example, a country considered particularly critical during the Cold War due to its geography, began in earnest in 1991 – the same year as the dissolution of the USSR.³⁷

The Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) issued as a directive of the International Monetary Fund also exacerbated resource scarcity. Structural Adjustment sought to align the African states that they served with the neoliberal principles that they espoused: austerity, financial liberalization, and denationalization. The result was the dismantling of the fledging social welfare nets and social capital of many African states. SAP intervention in Somalia in the 1980s “triggered the devaluation of the shilling by more than 90 per cent, brought further cutbacks on state employment and social spending, and worsened the trade balance.”³⁸ The foreign debt of many African states skyrocketed as a result of a shift from foreign assistance to commercial borrowing in the 1970s, ever reducing non-military aid budgets.³⁹ ⁴⁰ In Somalia, the national debt approached of $1 billion less than a decade before the onset of the civil war.⁴¹

This sort of resource scarcity not only heightens competition for the remaining resources from disparate ethnic groups, but also challenges the ability of

³⁸ Ibid., 57
³⁹ Mary Kaldor, New and Old Wars, 85
⁴⁰ Einar Braathen, “Ethnicity Kills? Social Struggles for Power, Resources and Identities inn the Neo-Patrimonial State”, 14
⁴¹ Ahmed Samatar, “The Somali Catastrophe: Explanations and Implications”, 57
neo-patrimonial rulers to entice the loyalty of their clients. As the system of personal rule derives power from the individual leader, and not the office, the inability of a president to deliver clients is a major blow to the workings of the system.\textsuperscript{42} The public coffers are, for the first time, empty to both the public and to the private ruler and cannot purchase the loyalty or complacency of rival ethnic leaders. Thus, due to international pressures, the patron-client system can come apart at the seams.

This paper contested the notion that ethnic conflict and ‘tribalism’ are \textit{exclusively} at the heart of civil conflicts and electoral contests in Africa by rebutting the primordialist conception of ethnicity and exploring the colonial origins of the ‘tribe’ as a social cleavage. This paper then explored the interaction of ethnicity with individual factors of neopatrimonialism and the use of ethnicity as political currency by African leaders. At the national level, this paper recognized a lack of political institutionalization and the minority at risk syndrome, which can lead to the mobilization of forces along ethnic lines. This paper recognized the international factors to be the impact of Cold War and post-Cold War paradigms as well as Structural Adjustment Programs.

Essentialist claims about the heart of African civil conflicts and electoral violence urge you to “leave all reason at the door before you enter the chamber of African conflicts.” However, this paper showed that what truly lies at the heart of African ethnic civil conflicts and electoral contests is not simple tribalism, but a complex interplay of historical, social and political factors. As when speaking about

\textsuperscript{42} Einar Braathen, “Ethnicity Kills? Social Struggles for Power, Resources and Identities inn the Neo-Patrimonial State”, 14
any complex topic, and particularly when explaining the reasons that groups commit acts of violence against one another, selecting a monocausal explanation such as the ‘tribe’ is woefully insufficient. Established kinship systems do indeed have an impact upon African politics, just as they do the world over. To ignore the structural factors effectively dispossesses ordinary Africans from their agency – ordinary Africans who may or may not claim tribal affiliations. This argument says that the individual Somali, Nigerian or Kenyan is simply swept along with the tide of historical animus, acting from an irrational inter-tribal hatred that extends perpetually backward and inevitably forward into time. In reality, individuals respond to current conditions with a mind to historical precedents, they act. Only once this fact is considered in contemporary discourse can we truly begin to analyze the role of kinship ties in African political conflict.
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