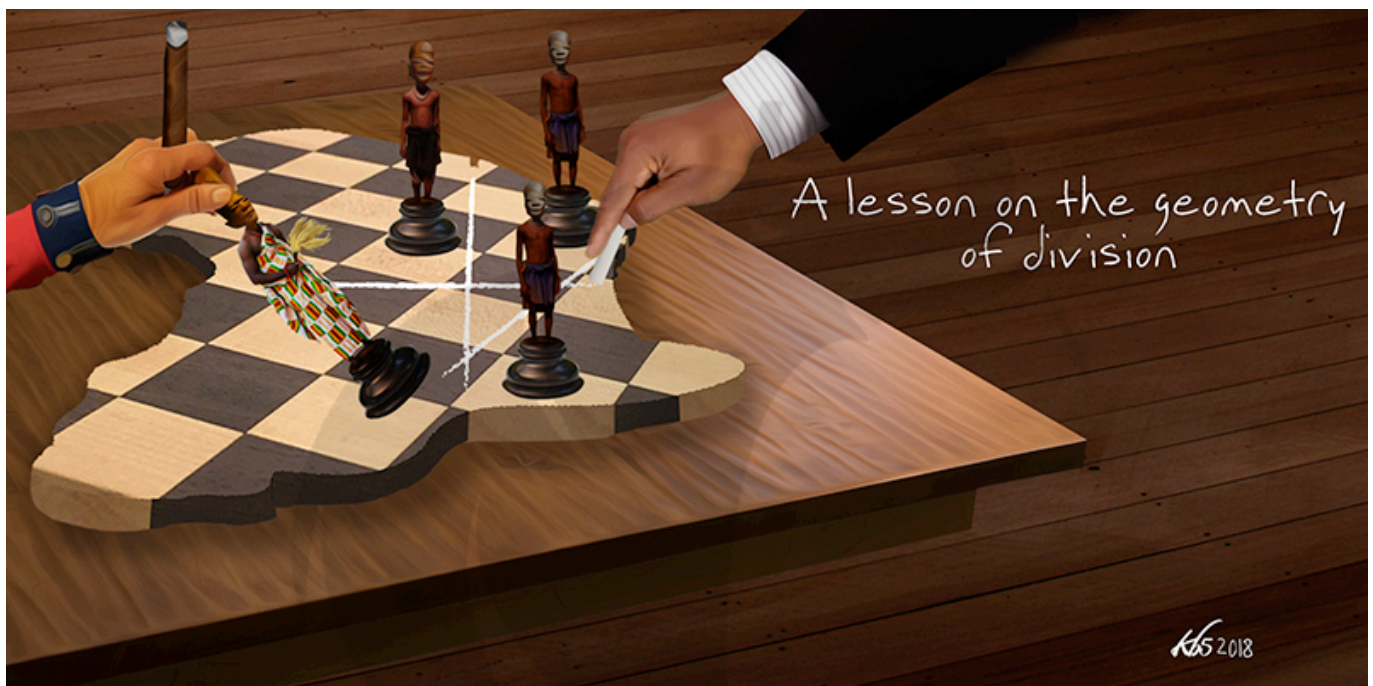




WHAT IS YOUR TRIBE? The Invention Of Kenya's Ethnic Communities

By Patrick Gathara



David Ndii's recent decision to [publicly renounce Kikuyu ethnicity](#) and adopt a "Jaluo" one may spark a long overdue debate about the nature of ethnicity in Kenya and in Africa. For many people, both on the continent and outside it, the idea of tribe - with its connotations of strong, primitive, primordial ethnicity and ancient cultural traditions - is an indispensable part of African identity. The makers of the blockbuster superhero movie, *Black Panther*, who imagined the fictional African state of Wakanda as the most technologically advanced nation in the world and one that retained its essential character, still felt constrained to organise that nation into tribes. Africans are first and foremost seen as tribesmen or tribeswomen and tribe is taken for granted as the best explanation for their actions. This idea is so deeply ingrained that few ever bother to question it.

Yet question it we should. For rather than something indelibly encoded into the African genetic make-up and over which one exercises little choice, tribe turns out to be largely an artificial construct. The fact is, there is a marked difference between how ordinary Africans, including Kenyans, think of tribe and its origins and what history and social science has to say about it.

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To begin with, just what is a tribe? Even this question turns out to be not as straightforward as some would have us believe. “Tribe has no coherent meaning” wrote Dr. Christopher Lowe of Boston University in his 1997 paper [“Talking about ‘Tribe’: Moving from Stereotypes to Analysis”](#). “If by tribe we mean a social group that shares a single territory, a single language, a single political unit, a shared religious tradition, a similar economic system, and common cultural practices, such a group is rarely found in the real world,” he wrote.

What? But people do identify as Kikuyus or Luos, no? And they have done this for ages, haven’t they? Well, yes and no. People have always banded together in groups in search of security. As they grew, such groups, initially defined by kinship relations, developed common ways of responding to and relating with the world around them, as well as systems to manage relations within the group. But since the world kept changing, so did these groups. Some were subsumed into others, some got separated and developed along different paths, others disappeared altogether. Customs and languages changed. The idea that our current ethnic communities have survived unchanged from ancient times is plainly false. As Prof. Scott MacEachern of Bowdoin College in the US [says](#), “‘Tribal’ and/or ethnic identities have never been primordial and immutable, in Africa or elsewhere.”

The politicisation of ethnicity

In fact, our current ethnic formations – some of which did not even exist a century ago – and our understanding of how they relate to each other, are the products of much more recent events. “What is a tribe?” [asks](#) Mahmood Mamdani, the Executive Director of the Makerere Institute of Social Research. “It is very largely a creation of laws drawn up by a colonial state which imposes group identities on individual subjects and thereby institutionalises group life... Above all, tribe was a politically driven, totalising identity.”

“The politicisation of ethnic identity began with the colonial experience,” says Prof. Kimani Njogu in the recent Africa Uncensored documentary titled [In Tribe We Trust](#). According to the book [Ethnicity and African Politics](#) by Crawford Young, “although the ethnic labels... have pre-colonial origins, they became comprehensive and rigidly ranked categories only in the colonial period; they were heavily influenced by imperial codifications and further transformed by politicised actions in the last half-century.”

In pre-colonial societies, as Young explains, ethnicity was a fungible cultural artefact, one that was not necessarily encoded into one’s genes, attached to particular homelands or imbued with ideas of political sovereignty. Individuals and even entire societies could navigate in and out of them.

Clearly, pre-colonial peoples had their ideas as to who they were and how they related to the world around them. But what we call tribes today bears little semblance to the ever-changing aboriginal identities they fashioned and would probably be completely unrecognisable to them. In any case, the idea that today’s ethnic communities necessarily grew out of kinship relations is bogus.

In pre-colonial societies, as Young explains, ethnicity was a fungible cultural artefact, one that was not necessarily encoded into one’s genes, attached to particular homelands or imbued with ideas of political sovereignty. Individuals and even entire societies could navigate in and out of them. In fact, even the ideas of kinship and shared ancestry were “notoriously malleable to serve contemporary social or ideological purposes. But once rooted in the social consciousness, mythology convincingly

impersonates reality.” For example, a [study](#) by Timothy Parsons of Washington University details how the colonial government once urged Meru elders to accept anyone willing to bow to their authority as Meru. He further states that “Kikuyu” was more an expression of agricultural expertise than a coherent or bounded ethnic group.

See more: [UHURU’S PYRRHIC VICTORY: Uthamaki’s suffocating hold on the Kikuyu people](#)

However, for a colonial administration that required order and control in order to facilitate its extractive aim, such inexactitude was unacceptable. Confronted with the reality of the diversity on the African continent, the European colonisers tried to hammer it into compliance with their preconceived ideas. Much of this was accomplished using administrative measures and backed up by brute force. Young writes: “The task of the colonial state was to discover, codify, and map an ethnic geography for their newly conquered domains, according to the premise that the continent was inhabited by ‘tribal man.’ This ethnic template, as imagined by the coloniser, became the basis for administrative organisation.” Parsons adds that “faced with a confusing range of fluid ethnicities when they conquered Kenya, colonial officials sought to shift conquered populations into manageable administrative units.”

Thus colonialism imposed its own version of order, superimposed its idea of tribes bounded within district boundaries on this ethnic patchwork, and even created an entirely new “traditional” administrative structure in the form of tribal chiefs who were actually state employees. Young writes of “the illusion that colonial ethnic mappings were historically authentic”. In this way, the state created the tribe which, in turn, became, as Parsons states, “the basic unit of government, education, labour, law, and most importantly land tenure.”

The late Prof Terence Ranger, in his famous 1983 essay on [The Invention Of Tradition in Colonial Africa](#), shows how invented traditions, both European and African, were a crucial plank in allowing colonial settlers and administrators to “define themselves as natural and undisputed masters of vast numbers of Africans.” Which meant reinventing colonials as feudalistic patriarchs and the African as the tribal savage. Though many “found themselves engaged in tasks which by definition would have been menial in Britain and which only the glamour of empire building made acceptable” they were still proud to belong to “an aristocracy of colour”. Echoes of this remain today in the deference with which European “expatriates” are treated.

Ranger also notes that “since so few connections could be made between British and African political, social and legal systems, British administrators set about inventing African traditions for Africans... transforming flexible custom into hard prescription.” So successful was this effort that “many African scholars as well as many European Africanists have found it difficult to free themselves from the false models of colonial codified African ‘tradition’.” As he would [more recently summarize](#), the colonial period was marked “by systematic inventions of African traditions - ethnicity, customary law, ‘traditional’ religion. Before colonialism Africa was characterised by pluralism, flexibility, multiple identity; after it African identities of ‘tribe’, gender and generation were all bounded by the rigidities of invented tradition.”

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However, it is important to note that while tribe and tradition were built into the very foundation of

the colonial state, the people were not just passive victims. Just as they had been doing for eons, they both resisted and reacted to the impositions, inventing and discarding identities and traditions of their own. At the outset of the colonialism, some identities, like Kikuyu, were already in the process of being created though, as [described](#) by Prof Bruce Berman, were not yet stable nor traditional; they hardened in response to the colonial state. Later, similar innovations like Gusii, Luhya, Kalenjin and Mijikenda appeared in the years between the two World Wars to essentially beef up numbers for the negotiation of status within the colonial state. What John Iliffe said of our neighbours to the south in his book, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, was true in Kenya: “The British wrongly believed that Tanganyikans belonged to tribes; Tanganyikans created tribes to function within the colonial framework.” Such ethnic and cultural refashioning continues to this day.

The important takeaway is that rather than ancient “nations”, today’s ethnicities are a creation of the colonial era – “state-sponsored tribal ethnographies and romantic essentialised notions of tribal culture”, as Parsons describes them. Writing a decade ago as Kenya threatened to descend into ethnic carnage, American historian Caroline Elkins, author of *Britain’s Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*, [noted](#) that “Britain’s famous imperial policy of ‘divide and rule’, playing one side off another, ... often turned fluid groups of individuals into immutable ethnic units, much like Kenya’s Luo and Kikuyu today. In many former colonies, the British picked favourites from among these newly solidified ethnic groups and left others out in the cold. We are often told that age-old tribal hatreds drive today’s conflicts in Africa. In fact, both ethnic conflict and its attendant grievances are colonial phenomena.”

In addition to creating and freezing tribal identities, the colonial state discouraged and outrightly forbade political organisation across the district lines they had drawn up. This meant that tribes were not just administrative and geographical entities; they were also set up as units for political mobilisation. Tribes were, therefore, state-mandated political identities that substituted for authentic cultural expression. “The structure of tribal administration enabled the ruling British elite to deny any representative character to the troublesome urban nationalist, while claiming for itself just that,” wrote Talal Asad, Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York in his essay *“Political Inequality in the Kababish Tribe.”* “Thus ‘the tribe’ and the ‘tribal system’ from being a means of efficient administration became the justification for perpetuating colonial domination.”

The tribalisation of governance

During the bulk of the colonial era, competition for state power was conducted along racial lines (race being [a similarly artificial construct](#)) while resistance to it was channeled along the tribe. The Legislative Council, for example, had a racial make-up, with representatives of Europeans, Arabs, Indians and eventually Africans. However, as Barasa Nyukuri of the University of Nairobi [observes](#), “The early political parties in Kenya that championed the nationalist struggle against colonial establishments were basically ‘distinct ethnic unions’.” As independence approached, feuds over the state that the British would leave behind were transferred to the tribal arena.

Sadly, despite their relatively recent colonial origins, tribal identities have proven to be all too enduring and ingrained. In the post-independence era, the ruling elites who inherited the colonial state from the British largely maintained its extractive nature and divide-and-rule character, even further entrenching ethnicity while paying lip service to the need to eradicate tribalism.

This understanding provides a different perspective to the essentialist arguments offered by David

Ndii about Kenya [being a marriage of tribes](#). The reverse is actually true. The reality is that Kenya created tribes and then based its governance arrangements around them. And this is the primary reason why tribalism continues to infect our politics – as the Kenyan investigative journalist John Allan Namu declared, “Kenyan politics, by design, was always meant to be tribal.”

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The consequences have been predictable. Rather than tools for common advancement, the state and the resources it controls have become prizes in a bitter, no-holds-barred, ethnic contest for supremacy. The “totalising identity” of tribe has meant that Kenyans are unable to conceive of themselves otherwise, and thus are unable to imagine a different basis for political engagement. The zero-sum nature of the competition for power further reinforces and hardens tribal affiliations, engendering a with-us-or-against-us mentality with those who resist it branded as “ethnic traitors”. This all creates a vicious spiral at the bottom of which lie brutal conflagrations, death and displacement. Floating above the melee, just as the British did, is the political class that incites and is then able to continue its thieving ways with little fear of retribution.

Basing a state on the idea of tribe has also led to the perpetuation of regional inequalities as communities “not in government” are either neglected or, worse, treated as enemies of the state. It also drives corruption as public office is seen as an opportunity for tribal “eating”. Which is why the ethnic affiliation of the head of a public institution is always a good indicator of the ethnic composition of its employees. It is also the reason Members of Parliament feel constrained to defend public officials who suffer disciplinary action, as was the case recently when Lily Koros, the CEO of the Kenyatta National Hospital, was [sent on compulsory leave](#) after doctors at the hospital performed a brain surgery on the wrong patient. As Jerotich Seii [observed on Twitter](#), “If Lily Koros was, say, Mjikenda, not a peep would have been heard from these Kalenjin MPs. Ok, perhaps from Mjikenda MPs. And therein lies the problem. We defend tribe and not competence.”

Social justice activists railing against “*uthamaki*” – the skewing of state appointments towards particular groups – and demanding “regional balance” seem incapable of comprehending that the construction of the state around the idea of tribe is itself the problem.

The tribalisation of governance also fosters development strategies based on false ideas of ethnic characteristics, such as the one that some groups are not as suited for modernisation as others. Further, as Mamdani explains, the idea of unchanging tribes leads to the deification of fake, colonially-articulated, “traditional” culture and values, as well as the externalisation of social progress as “Western”. That has real consequences for social policy, for example [on gay rights](#).

Tribe is not destiny

It will be impossible to eradicate tribalism without undoing the colonial state on which our current ideas about ethnicity are founded and whose logic of extraction sustains them. As [John Lonsdale puts it](#), “There are, then, two very different dynamics currently at work in Kenya: internal ethnic

dissidence and external tribal rivalry. Neither can be disarmed without rewriting the rules of political competition for the power of a rather different ('post-post-colonial') state." Tribes today exist primarily as vehicles for capturing the state rather than as celebrations of diversity - which they, in fact, try to rub out. They exist to safeguard elite extraction and to prevent us from imagining different ways of being.

Kenyans today have perfected the curious art of decrying tribalism even while accepting the validity of tribe. Following the colonial template, the 2010 constitution institutionalizes ethnic formulations as the basic unit of government via the creation of counties based on colonial administrative districts and the safeguarding of "ethnic diversity" in public jobs. Today's social justice activists railing against "[uthamaki](#)" - the skewing of state appointments towards particular groups - and demanding "regional balance" seem incapable of comprehending that the construction of the state around the idea of tribe is itself the problem. In a [recent article](#), for example, Boniface Mwangi seems unaware of the irony of establishing his Kikuyu bona fides - "I am as Gikuyu as Gikuyus come" - before launching into a screed against Kikuyu tribalism.

The only way to completely eliminate real and potential inter-tribal tensions is to eliminate tribes. And the only way to do that is to eliminate the colonial state that created and nourished them, and to construct a different identity, built on different foundations, in its place.

Recognising that the tribe was a colonial-era invention is empowering because it means it can be disinvented or reimagined; tribe is not destiny. Many look to Tanzania as an example of how the [adverse effects of tribe can be ameliorated](#) through public policy. Young also cites Kenya as an example where this has been attempted via constitutional design through devolution, the proscription of ethnically-based political parties and the requirement for presidential candidates to garner 25 per cent of the votes in a majority of the counties. However, this retains - rather than challenges - the idea of tribe and only seeks to manage relations between tribes, which means the potential for harmful political mobilisation of tribal affiliation remains. As Young acknowledges, "while constitutional engineering is of substantial value, it cannot alone respond to the challenge of accommodating cultural diversity".

The only way to completely eliminate real and potential inter-tribal tensions is to eliminate tribes. And the only way to do that is to eliminate the colonial state that created and nourished them, and to construct a different state and identities, even a national identity, on different foundations in its place. The problem is less the politicisation of ethnicity and more the ethnicisation of politics - the assumption that ethnicity is destiny without interrogating how ethnicity was and still is manufactured.

Kenyan social and political scientists can and should lead this effort. For too long we have left it to the politicians who have an interest in maintaining the status quo. Many Kenyans will understandably be scared of the idea of letting go of the ethnic brands that have defined them their whole lives, regardless of how hollow or counterproductive that branding may actually be. Providing a language to deconstruct the state and the tribe, as well as developing a basket of alternative, homegrown and much more authentic and beneficial political identities, are the overriding challenges of our time.

There is no point in pretending that this is going to be either easy or straightforward. Or that such a project would not itself be vulnerable to capture by a ravenous and oppressive elite seeking to legitimise its rule, as has happened in Rwanda. But we can begin a national conversation about who

we really are as people and how we build a Kenya for Kenyans and an Africa for Africans. That itself means beginning to see ourselves not as the “tribes” of Western imagination strait-jacketed by concocted traditions, but as free and thinking human beings with varied and ever-changing ways of being, and who are capable of imagining and bringing to life new worlds of our own.

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