



## ***Historical Distortion and Human Degradation*** **The “Tribe” as a Eurocentric Mentality than African Reality**

**Kavazeua Festus Ngaruka**

*Binghamton University*

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br00562@hotmail.com

**Abstract:** The debate on the “tribe” (and “tribalism”) tends to be narrowly defined around the colonial and anthropological origins of the concept and/or in relation to the (derived) usage of these terms by Africans. In this article, the “tribe” is seen as an ideological construct of capitalist hierarchy and Eurocentric worldview as a whole, an instance of the dominant paradigm of social science, within which it has played a specific role.

### **INTRODUCTION**

If by tribe we mean a social group that shares a single territory, a single language, a single political unit, a shared religious tradition, a similar economic system, and common cultural practices, such a group is rarely found in the real world. These characteristics almost never correspond precisely with each other today, nor did they at any time in the past. (Lowe et al 1997; my emphasis)

The debate usually re-emerges every so many years in Kenyan [and possibly other] newspaper columns. It could be that every generation goes through the same debate which means that more work needs to be done to eradicate the term along with malaria.<sup>1</sup> (Mukoma Wa Ngugi <http://h-net.msu.edu>, April 2007)

The “tribe” or something presumably “tribal” has been an enduring feature of the

<sup>1</sup> “Tribe” of course is not simply a term, it is a concept.

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Kavazeua Festus Ngaruka, from Namibia, is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at Binghamton University, NY. Operating from a world-historical perspective, his scholarly concerns include race and other ‘identities,’ history and problems of social science, including epistemology and social movements. He has taught a range of courses in sociology and is a research associate of the Fernand Braudel Center (Binghamton University). From the author: I thank Mohammad Tamdgidi and Emmett Schaefer, faculty members at UMass Boston, for their insightful suggestions on an earlier version of this paper, and Donna DeVoist (Administrative Assistant, Fernand Braudel Center, Binghamton University) for her invaluable assistance and key editorial suggestions. Remaining weaknesses are of course my own.

debate on Black Africa since the nineteenth century (Mafeje 1971; Vail 1989; etc.). Colonial administrative necessities and the then fledgling discipline of classical anthropology have had a lot to do with this,<sup>2</sup> as had many receptive Africans, intellectually or as a survival mechanism within a 'tribe'-defining colonial order (Davidson 1992: 101, passim). Yet, far from being a historical specificity of particular regions, the "tribe" as it appears in modern social science, news media, and popular discourse, is rather a cognitive construct of capitalist hierarchy. It is historical as a concept of identity and power, and not as an analytical category. As such, the "tribe" is an expression of Eurocentrism in general and not simply of colonialism and anthropology; hence, its common acceptance, along with 'Oriental despotism,' by 'bourgeois' and Marxist circles alike, as evident in the "civilizational" explanations of history (Wallerstein 1992; Amin 1989; Blaut 1993; Valensi 1993).<sup>3</sup>

In Black Africa, while some have demystified the concept of "tribe" or have become indifferent to it, for others it still constitutes a dilemma: on the one hand, the *stigma* of the 'primitive,' 'barbaric' and 'atavistic,' the concept connotes, and on the other, the 'undeniable reality' it seems to describe. Thus to deny the "tribe" is to deny the African condition as it *really is*' (e.g. Ekeh 1990 cf. Amin 1997, Melber 1985, Mafeje 1971, Vail 1989, Wallerstein 1979). This of course is an old dilemma among the Western educated (Davidson 1992). One such agonizing figure was the Ghanaian (Gold Coast) clergyman Attah Ahuma. While paying homage to Africa in the abstract, urging Africans to be proud of their continent and its cultures, Ahuma's inner

<sup>2</sup> Obviously, classical 'colonial' anthropology has not been the only existent or envisioned anthropology (see e.g. Amadiume 1997).

<sup>3</sup> For a generalizing and distinguishing treatment of the African orientalist construct in relation to that of Asia, see Czajka (2005) "The African Orient," though its focus is not the "tribe" per se.

conviction was reflected in the position that "we must emerge from the savage backwoods and come into the open where nations are made" (quoted in Davidson 1992: 39). Such a wholesale self-indictment may find less sympathy among Africans today. Yet it is hardly surprising that one of the most stinging criticisms today from one African to another is to charge him or her with "tribalism." As a form of anti-ethnic discrimination in social institutions and other relations (see Hengari 2007), this of course is a genuine language of resistance *beyond* the conceptual meaning of the "tribe." That is, contrary to Peter Ekeh (1990) and others, the language of "tribalism" by Africans neither necessitates nor legitimates the analytical (or even terminological) acceptance of the "tribe" (Lowe et al 1997).<sup>4</sup>

As a phenomenon of hierarchy and a *status* definition of *savagery*,<sup>5</sup> the "tribe" (in, and given, the colonial context) represents some of the key forms of violence—in the relations and processes of exploitation, historical distortion, and the general assault on human *dignity*—that Fanon's social critique exposes. For Fanon (1963: 37), such violence expresses the necessarily unequal and "divided" "colonial world" (see later below).<sup>6</sup> Equally important is the role of power-related knowledge in the (psychic/ideological) creation of the colonized.<sup>7</sup> As he argues, colonialism "is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip" but rather "turns to the past of the oppressed...and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it," thus presenting a people "destined for *contempt*" and "*self-contempt*"

<sup>4</sup> On the terminological usage alone, see the ongoing debate at <http://h-net.msu.edu>, April 2007.

<sup>5</sup> In the categorically negative 19<sup>th</sup> century sense, ostensibly 'typified' by Africans and other 'Negroid' peoples (Nederveen Pieterse 1992) i.e., not in the earlier, still ambivalent, notion of 'savagery' (Nederveen Pieterse 1992).

<sup>6</sup> The colonized being further subdivided by "tribe," central to the flexibility and efficiency of exploitation (Mamdani 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Of course, obversely also the colonizer.

(Fanon 1963: 210, 211; my emphasis). Such is the impact of this for Fanon that the (anti-colonial or 'nationalist') reinterpretation of the past is no mere rewriting of history, but a *reclaiming of humanity*: following the discovery that "there was nothing to be ashamed of in the past" (Fanon 1963: 210, 209-212). As should be evident in our argument, these and related questions have historically characterized the "tribe" as a Eurocentric/colonial concept and practice.

### "TRIBALISM" AND EUROCENTRIC MENTALITY

In "The Ideology of 'Tribalism,'" Mafeje (1971) insists that "tribalism" was the *mentality of Western anthropologists* themselves (and their African converts), which led them to seek and 'discover' "tribes" in Africa; conceived and analyzed as *discrete* social entities.<sup>8</sup> On the assumption behind this, Mafeje notes: "It is usually argued that social behaviour in Africa is so *diverse, so inconsistent, and so fluid* that it is nigh impossible to classify or treat it with any amount of consistency" (Mafeje 1971: 253; my emphasis). It is argued that the "tribe" was originally adopted as a "*heuristic*" device for the "convenience of analysis" with "only *intuitive* meanings" attached to it. Not until the political and, hence, conceptual *crisis* of 'colonial' anthropology, induced by the anti-colonial move-

ment (1950s-1960s), was any significant attempt made "to define the tribe" (Ekeh 1990: 662; my emphasis); and when a definition was attempted, "the outcome was not enlightening" (Ekeh 1990: 662). Thus the concept was a reflection "of *ideology*," than empirical reality (Mafeje 1971: 253; original emphasis).

The "tribe" reflects the quintessential Eurocentric image of Africa, that has been commonly acceptable across ideological lines, i.e., "When it comes to Africa, answers vary independently of whether the observer is a liberal idealist, a Marxist materialist, or an African 'convert'" (Mafeje 1971: 253).<sup>9</sup> As a construct of ethnocentric-hierarchical relations, the "tribe" reflects what has been called a "'structured' ignorance" which operates *irrespective* of ideology (Robinson 1983: 173) and the "ethnography of beliefs" (Blaut 1993: 30ff.) as a resistance to new ideas, especially those from the oppressed or socially marginalized. This seems to explain the un-historicized double presumption of the "tribe" as both a precolonial continuation and a resistance or hindrance to capitalist modernity.

Historically speaking, the "tribe" belongs to that epistemology and cognitive categories that presumably distinguished the West from the rest of the world, as one of the ideological manifestations of European domination of the world by the nineteenth century (which remained strong into mid-20<sup>th</sup> century), or ('core') Europe's new image of the world (Adas 1989) and of Africa (Curtin 1964; Nederveen Pieterse 1992),<sup>10</sup> that resulted in the perception of '*unique*' social realities and '*their*' investigative categories<sup>11</sup> between the '*dynamic*'

<sup>8</sup> While projecting the "tribe" to all African groups, anthropological studies themselves tended to focus on the smaller, seemingly unconnected, groups, to the exclusion of centralized states (albeit in the process of subjugation); the latter, as theme, emerging as the critical counter in the hands of nationalist (and other Africanist) historians (Ekeh 1990). Between these two intellectual currents, matters relating to 'ethnicity' had no valid conceptual space. Concerns with 'nation building,' and the 'nation' as a 'higher evolutionary form' in the 'modernization' paradigm, perpetuated the problem, especially since 'ethnicity' was still equated with ('atavistic') "tribalism" (Vail 1989: 1-2ff).

<sup>9</sup> For a definition of Eurocentrism, see Amin (1989); for related implications also Lambropoulos (1993) and Valensi (1993).

<sup>10</sup> This was not without precedent in the past, but until the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe's self-comparison with the rest of the world was more heterogeneous than categorical (Adas 1989; Nederveen Pieterse 1992: chapter 2).

West and the 'now stagnant' or 'never developed' non-western worlds (Amin 1989: 124ff; Bernal 1987; Wallerstein 1991: 94-7; Adas 1989).

As a legitimating ideology of the status quo, Amin captures the essence of the problem when he argues that:

The dominant vision of history is based on one fundamental proposition: the *irreducibility* of historical developments...to reason. [This] may be expressed either by an avowed refusal to define general laws of social evolution that are valid for humanity as a whole, or by an *idealist construct*—like the Eurocentric one—that opposes “Occident” and “Orient” in absolute and permanent terms. Dominant Western historiography has oscillated between these two attitudes, which have the same implications, since both effectively legitimize the status quo. Historical materialism can potentially serve as a means of escape from the impasse, *provided* that it is *liberated* from the distortions of *Eurocentrism*. (Amin 1989: 124; my emphasis; see also Blaut 1993)<sup>12</sup>

Valensi (1993) shows the actual ideological and temporal creation of these identities and their ascribed meanings, even if not in relation to underlying socio-structural transformations. Perhaps more general than 'permanent differences' is the search for some unique cultural characteristic by these “civilizational” explana-

<sup>11</sup> 'Uniqueness' here is contrasted with (historical) particularity. While the latter implies variation 'on the theme,' the former implies discreteness or absolute differences.

<sup>12</sup> As expressions of a constituted worldview, these and related ones need not be and are often not conscious (of their legitimating role), which partly explains their persistence as theories (Blaut 1993).

tions—which when discovered elsewhere as well, the whole explanation collapses (Hodgson 1974 on Weber; and Blaut 1993 on the 'European Miracle'). As it is argued:

Most solutions to the puzzle [of uneven development and/or the 'rise of the West'] tend to look for some Western European structural secret, some long-standing “civilizational” characteristic which led inevitably to this development. These structural explanations cross the great ideological divide of liberal and Marxist thought...Although Weber's views are supposed to be contra-Marxist views, it seems clear that *a large number* of Marxists also give “civilizational” explanations. (Wallerstein 1992: 589, 591; my emphasis)

In Fredric Jameson's Marxist 'civilizational' explanation, partly drawn from Perry Anderson (see Jameson 1986), the so-called “tribal...mode of production” is contradictorily presented as “resistance” to and as in “symbiosis” with capitalism, either way denoting its presumed 'persistence,' while the “Asiatic mode” presents a related but “different” challenge to capitalism:

In the gradual expansion of capitalism across the globe...our economic system confronts two very distinct modes of production that pose two very different types of social and cultural *resistance* to its influence. These are the so-called primitive, or tribal society on the one hand, and the Asiatic mode of production, or the bureaucratic imperial systems, on the other. African societies and cultures, as they became the object of systematic colonization in the 1880s, provide the most striking examples of the *symbiosis*

of capital and tribal societies; while China and India offer the principal examples of another and quite different sort of engagement of capitalism with the great empires of the so-called Asiatic mode. (Jameson 1986: 68-9; my emphasis)

Jameson's depiction above is a background explanation to his well-known and equally problematic division of the world under "Multinational Capitalism" (cf. Ahmad 1987), noted for the argument or "hypothesis" about what "*all* third-world cultural productions seem to have in *common* and what distinguishes them *radically* from analogous cultural forms [of the first world," which is that "*All* third-world texts are *necessarily...national allegories*" (Jameson 1986: 70; my emphasis). Not only do such literatures represent an "outmoded" stage long surpassed in the "first world" according to Jameson. As such, they are also repugnant to the aesthetic "tastes" of "western readers" (Jameson 1986: 65-66). This relates to Jameson's depiction of "Multinational Capitalism," which is defined in terms of "fundamental breaks" from one region to the next, emerging as a *three-fold world* characterized by *ideologies*: the 'capitalist' 'first world,' the 'socialist' 'second world,' and the 'third world' of 'nationalism' and colonial legacy (Jameson 1986: 67, *passim*).

There is no need to dwell on this here. In his critique of Jameson, Aijaz Ahmad (1987) presents an entirely different world, a singular (global) system not defined by ideologies or 'modes of production.' Nor is it a world whose intra-regional and global connections, including commodity and trade relations, started with European expansion, however important this became (Rodney 1982; Moseley 1992; Mamdani 1996: 145-6). Despite the varying *degrees* of regional homogenization (common to capitalist hierarchy) and the differing impact of this upon social movements (Amin 1997),

the question is not one of categorical differences or "absolutised" Otherness (Ahmad 1987: 10). Nor is the 'first world' itself as homogeneous (Morrison 1992 etc.) or aesthetically exclusive as it might seem (Ahmad 1987). That is, even here, "For Whom Does One Write?" (Sartre 1988) is more complex than Jameson would admit.<sup>13</sup>

Elsewhere, Perry Anderson writes confidently about the "tribe" (without the name) and its derived knowledge:

British anthropology developed unabashedly in the wake of British imperialism. Colonial administration had an inherent need of cogent, objective information on the peoples over which it ruled. The *miniature scale* of primitive societies, moreover, made them *exceptionally* propitious for macro-analysis; as Sartre once commented, they form '*natural*' significant *totalities*. British anthropology was thus able to assist British imperialism, and develop a *genuine theory*—something sociology in Britain was never able to do. (Anderson 1968: 47-48; my emphasis)

Ironically, "when the question to what extent tribes were categories of colonial administration rather than sociologically definable units of analysis had been posed...the "tribe"...was far from a "natu-

<sup>13</sup> On the African scene, it seems problematic enough for Jameson to pick a known 'socialist' such as Sebène Ousmane as the representative of the 'national allegory' for Africa. More conspicuous, however, is the absence from the discussion of Ousmane's best-known work, and which for long has been held as a standard of *socialist sensibility* in African literature, namely *God's Bits of Wood*. Was this perhaps part of Jameson's attempt to homogenize each of his three worlds? Socialists of course can be and have been nationalists (Balibar 1990 cf. Amin 1997), but not in Jameson's categorical distinctions.

ral” unit of analysis,” having no “meaningful” social *boundaries* (Moore 1993: 19).

In general, the debate on the “tribe” continues to invoke the epistemology of an African ‘uniqueness’ on the part of some. In his quest “Toward the political sociology of Africa,” Ekeh (1990), for example, laments the rejection of the “tribe,” which he seeks to revitalize, as the only concept, according to him, that can properly address the ‘prevalence’ of “kinship bonds” in Africa. The latter seems to Ekeh both ‘pre-modern’ and ‘peculiarly’ African, based on a categorical (absolute) contrast drawn between Africa and Europe:

In Europe, the Hobbesian problem of order [or ‘the war of all against all’] was resolved for the individual through the successful transfer of his relations of reciprocal ties of citizenship (which guaranteed his protection from insecurity) from kinship nexus to feudal and protostate institutions. [Such that Europe] eventually *blossomed* into *modern kinship-free* statehood....In the African experience, the Hobbesian problem has not been solved for the individual by some embracing state.... It has been alleviated through an undergrowth and suffusion of kinship bonds. (Ekeh 1990: 692; my emphasis)

Ekeh seems to take the *relatively* greater culturally-homogenizing capacity of the European state (in any case mainly the dominant states) for the *absence* of any ‘out-of-state’ forms of group solidarity. And while referring to the confusion surrounding the adoption of ‘ethnicity’ into a theoretical context dominated by the “tribe,” he does not distinguish between the two meanings of ‘ethnicity’ as others have done in order to underscore the importance of ‘ethnicity’ (e.g. Vail 1989)—namely the mere *terminological* substitution of ‘ethnic-

ity’ for “tribe” (for the ‘polite,’ Vail 1989) on the one hand, and the different *conceptual* meaning of ‘ethnicity’ as a *relation* of groups to the state and the nation on the one hand, and to the *economy* and (many times) *trans-territorial* economic networks on the other, to put it shortly, which is its expression as a world-systemic phenomenon (Dunaway 2003; Melber 1985) with its own African particularity, and not simply an African issue. The social realm of the economy (not just the state) needs emphasizing in the (re)production of ethnic solidarity. The character of Africa as an economic ‘periphery’ of global capitalism implies among other things that ethnic solidarity cannot always relate to the world economy *through* the state and the nation. In this sense a regional approach is more illuminating (than the conventional national or state-centric one) in understanding ethnicity.

From a world historical perspective (on capitalism) (Wallerstein 1974, 1979; Amin 1989, 1997), Africa’s ‘prevalent’ “kinship bonds” (Ekeh 1990) or ethnic solidarity—rather than being explained by the “tribe,” a concept of ‘discrete’ or *self-enclosed* social entities—reflects the social character of a ‘periphery’ in the world economy. According to Wallerstein:

One of the major indications of success [of states] as well as one important mechanism in the process of centralizing power was the degree to which the population could be transformed...into a culturally homogeneous group...In the sixteenth-century, while core states are moving towards *greater* “ethnic” *homogeneity*...peripheral areas are moving precisely in the *opposite* direction. (Wallerstein 1974: 147; my emphasis)

On African and “third world” ethnicities, Amin argues that:

In the peripheral areas of the system, capitalist expansion created complex social models, thus producing a *wide variety of situations*, within which national or ethnic factors occupy positions that are themselves often different from those they occupy in the central areas of capitalist expansion. (Amin 1997: 14; my emphasis)

Thus in Africa, nationality is less characterized by “strong political centralization” and more by “multiple divisions along ethnic lines” (Amin 1997: 15). Contrary to the *fixed* notion of “tribe,” these “divisions” are not static across time and space—their extent (size) and the very *criteria* of ethnic-belonging being constantly redefined in relations to social conditions and environment (Penvenne 1989). Economic crises (under certain conditions) may result in narrower ethnic boundaries and thus increased number of ethnic definitions/criteria (Penvenne 1989), as Amin shows from the point of view of the state (in the current negative world economic impact upon social stability in much of Africa, since the 1980s) namely that:

The unity of the ruling class is shattered, whereupon some of its terrified members attempt to secure *new forms* of legitimacy through the use of ethnicity, whenever it suits their aims. (Amin 1997: 17; my emphasis)

It is not implied that the prevalence of ‘ethnic conditions’ in Africa was a ‘new creation’ of the world economy. It is rather the (world economic) reproduction of the African ‘periphery’ and its ethnic implications that concerns us here, including the relatively greater precedent of the creation and exploitation of ethnic divisions by African state-makers and other administrators.

Space does not allow for the treatment

of social science in general on related problems, except to refer briefly to the question of social distortion and legitimation already raised. As it is commonly known and as Amin (1989) implies, the conception, if not always of ‘uniqueness,’ but of some presumably consequential *particularity* of specific groups has long been a means of *disaggregating* the social foundations of power and inequality or of legitimating them by locating the ‘explanation’ of status in the groups themselves, be it race/class, gender, or other, inequalities. In the tendency toward *state-centrism*, the dominant current of social science has had the same implications, i.e., limiting a proper *understanding* and *critique* of the (world) system as a whole by *reducing* the problem of global inequality to *internal* explanations: to ‘values’ and ‘policies’ of nations/societies and the like. Despite such convincing critiques as those of ‘dependency,’ ‘underdevelopment,’ and, more comprehensively, ‘world-systems,’ perspectives (So 1990), state-centrism continues unabated. Reasons for this of course include the continued (re)assertion of the power structure and the (world-wide) local projects thereby defined (Wynter 1996).

One general problem of local orientation has been the tendency to see the end of colonialism as an opportunity to, *now*, deal with ‘development’ in *almost exclusively* national terms. In his characterization of the changing expression of African poetry since the 1960s, Tanure Ojaide, for example, underscores what is to him a preferred trend:

The *national* orientation of the new poetry is *an admission* that African problems *now* originate mainly from Africa and *not* from outside. The new writers whether in Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda or Kenya are nation-oriented...Even neocolonialism is seen now as working against the interests of Af-

rican countries *because* of African *collaborators*, especially the corrupt members of the ruling class. (Ojaide 1989: 118-9; my emphasis)

There is no disputing the imperative of local engagement, critical and organizational, save to stress that the local, including Africa, is (at least for several centuries now) an *integral* part of the global, in which the dynamic of local reproduction includes but goes beyond “corrupt” bureaucracy. Concerns such as ‘debt-cancellation’ reflect this understanding of the overall power structure, or *local engagement as a global consciousness*. In her excellent and far-reaching critique, Sylvia Wynter (1996) urges us the ‘underdeveloped’ to seriously reassess the concept of ‘development’ as ideology and practice of the *same* world hegemony, to put it shortly. This of course raises the question of the ‘alternative’ which cannot be discussed here (see Wynter 1996).

In this context (above), the ideological character of the “tribe” and the “Asiatic mode” might only be more apparent because of the closer relation of these concepts to the ethnocentric self-distinction of the West from ‘the Rest,’ but they are not the only expression of ideology as ‘true’ knowledge; hence the necessity not to ‘rethink’ but ‘*unthink*’ social science in its current form (Wallerstein 1991). Or the depiction of *Social Science as Imperialism* (Ake 1979). Not only the *persistence* of institutionalized bad theories (Blaut 1993), but also the *recurrence* of similar ones through social transformations (global, regional, or local), even from once more *holistic* and *critical* circles (Wallerstein 1977; Balibar 1990; Conze 1992; Hobsbawm 1997<sup>14</sup>), must be noted in this respect, as reflecting an *ongoing* dialectic of power and resistance and

<sup>14</sup> On Hobsbawm, the seesaw between economists and economic historians with changing economic fortunes.

the changing position and composition of social agents, among other things. The often incomplete critique of ‘antisystemic’ movements (partially reproducing the criticized) is of course part of this general problem.<sup>15</sup>

## THE AFRICAN PAST

That precolonial African history cannot be reduced to the perspective of the “tribe” is by now long evident from the vast body of African histories produced. It is one of those ideas that “will hardly be novel to most Africanist historians,” to paraphrase Moseley (1992: 524) in a different context.

The projection of the “tribe” onto the African past reflects two related aspects of the epistemological problem, the presumed ‘*non-dynamic*’ social character of Africa till the advent of European colonization, and the continuing ethnocentric construct of Africa as a *counter-identity* to the West or ‘Civilization,’ as criticized in “Tribal Culture as a Product of Civilization” (Stammeskultur als Zivilisationsgut) (Melber 1985; my translation).<sup>16</sup> The first, as a general depiction of the non-West, is that which is captured by Eric Wolf in *Europe and the People Without History* (1982). For Africa in particular, this was held “to be patently true” or was “simply accepted” (Davidson 1992: 74-75). The second continues to impact the process of knowledge-formation on Africa, as Amadiume (1997:

<sup>15</sup> I.e., the ‘Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism’ (Nandy 1983). Or: “for a disciple, changing the view does not necessarily mean changing the power relations that determine whose questions and whose histories are given more weight” (Depelchin 1999: 167). More conceptually, Wynter (1996) on ‘Development,’ and Tamdgidi (2007 and 2001 respectively) on the ‘undialectical dialectics’ of Marx and Marxism, and on what defines a movement as ‘antisystemic.’

<sup>16</sup> “Civilization’ (as with ‘culture’) in this sense does not refer to actual material or cultural products, but to a *politicized* identity claimed on the latter basis.



5), for example, shows on “historical depth” and the “curriculum” of African history in “European...academic institutions.” As she argues, “Europeans have had the shortest period of relations with Africans,” yet there is a “determination by European scholars to *confine* the history of Africa to their *own* historical *construct*” (my emphasis):

It seems to me that our problem is one of historical depth. Whose interest does the use of a specified historical depth serve? Why is it that European scholars insist that Africans *confine* themselves to the post-1945 period—the so-called modern or contemporary period—while, in contrast, the British National Curriculum instructs history teachers to regard the post-1960s period as *current affairs*? My answer to this is simple: because it serves colonialist and imperialist interests. Imperialism has to construct a self-importance and relevance, and so Europeans have given themselves missionary power as ‘civilizers’. Under such circumstances, Africans can only then assume the *status* and *identity* accorded to them by Europeans, and have no resource of classical cultural heritage *from which to counter* European *racismæ*...Is this why European mainstream academic institutions *have not welcomed* the teaching of *ancient* African history? (Amadiume 1997: 4-5; my emphasis).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Or ‘un-African’ aspects in general. It is reported, as late as 1973, that the Department of English at Cambridge University (UK) “did not believe in any such mythical beast as ‘African Literature.’” The idea of African literature in the English Department “turned out to be not so natural” (Soyinka 1976, Preface p. vii).

Consciously, or implicitly, the earlier Africanist challenge to the Eurocentric image of Africa was the emphasis on African empires and centralized states (showing both the scale and dynamism of precolonial Africa). However, in generally shying away from the ‘humbler’ social forms, such histories left the latter in a conceptual limbo (Ekeh 1990; Freund 1984). Of those who have specifically questioned the “tribe” in precolonial Africa, most have depicted or emphasized the *interrelations* among social forms, while the treatment of lineage/kinship systems themselves in some (e.g. Shao 1989) still, or even more, questions the colonial/anthropological concept of “tribe.”

In his brief observation, Walter Rodney (1982 [1972]) combines and redefines some of the key aspects on the “tribe” and precolonial Africa. First, on “tribalism” (as ideology) Rodney notes that in its common journalistic setting, it is understood to mean that Africans have “a basic loyalty to tribe rather than nation” and that “each tribe...*retains* a fundamental hostility towards its neighboring tribes,” such that postcolonial civil war, for example, meant that “the natives *returned* to killing each other” as soon as the colonial power left (Rodney 1982: 227; emphasis in original). Or that “they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality” which, according to Fanon, the colonists hoped the ‘natives’ would believe, having no access to their own historical past save the distortions presented by colonialism (Fanon 1963: 210ff, 211). Often attached to this is the notion of “*atavism*,” to imply that they were returning “to *their* primitive savagery” (Rodney 1982: 227; my emphasis). Rejecting this as the “exact opposite of the truth” as even “a cursory survey” of the African past shows (ibid: 227), Rodney turns to the “tribe” itself. Following the principle of family living, Rodney argues, Africans were organized in groups which had common ancestors. Theoretically, the

“tribe” was the largest group of people claiming descent from a common ancestor at some time in the remote past. Generally such a group could therefore be said to be of the same ethnic stock, and their language would have a great deal in common. “Beyond that” or in reality, however, members of the “tribe” were *seldom* all members of the *same* political unit and *very seldom* did they all share a *common* social *purpose* in terms of activities such as *trade* and *warfare*. Instead, African states were sometimes based entirely on *part* of the members of a given ethnic group or (more usually) on an *amalgamation* of members of different ethnic communities (Rodney 1982: 228). Despite differing nuances, others have given a fairly similar interpretation (Freund 1984; Melber 1985; Davidson 1992). Elsewhere, John Shao (1989) contrasts the modern anthropological concept with the original “tribe” in Roman antiquity, showing that the modern concept defines an abstracted part from an organic whole:

The literal concept of tribe was first used by the Romans to denote the *three* independent parts that went *into* the formation of the Roman People (*Populus Romanus*): the Ramnes, the Titii and the Luceres. Each part was thus *one third*, (tribus) or tribe *of* the people. (Shao: 1989: 144-5; my emphasis)

It is important to note that Rodney in particular does not preclude the possibility of entities that could be called “tribal,” increasingly *residual* and *exceptional* as these might have been with the emergence of national entities and class relations, given the “lengthy historical process” involved. Thus for example:

In Asia the feudal states of Vietnam and Burma both achieved a considerable degree of national homoge-

neity over the centuries before colonial rule. But there were pockets of “tribes” or “minorities” who remained *outside* the *effective sphere* of the nation-state and the national economy and culture. (Rodney 1982: 228; my emphasis)

### COLONIALISM AND THE “TRIBE”: SCIENCE, IDEOLOGY, AND POLICY

The *pigeonholing* concept of classical anthropology could not comprehend the complex reality described above, except to *fragment* it. In this it was closer to the construct of colonial policy than social reality (Moore 1993). Its definitional emphasis was that of “tribes” as “self-contained, autonomous” communities, with “territoriality, primitive government...and a primitive subsistence economy” as “primary features” (Mafeje 1997: 257-8). More conspicuous of the definitional problem is that anthropologists of Africa as a rule eschewed ‘culture’ as a *concept*<sup>18</sup> in defining the “tribe.” The idea of *trans*-territorial cultural identities ran counter to the very definition of the classical “tribe.” In contexts such as North America, not only did anthropologists use ‘culture’ as a concept, they did so with the opposite intent: to connect the fragmented, but culturally related, Native American communities (Moore 1993); an idea whose attempted adaptation to the African context met, perhaps unsurprisingly, with little success (Moore 1993). In this context, Mafeje (1971: 258) argues, “‘Culture’ was *never mentioned* as one of [the defining features]” of the “tribe” (my emphasis). According to him, the concept of ‘culture’ entered African anthropology through the “‘modernization’ crusade” of political scientists and pluralist sociologists, around

<sup>18</sup> As opposed to cultural *aspects* documented as ‘custom.’

the 1960s. However, one or another notion of 'culture' as a *concept* was often used by the state (and state-engendered anthropology such as *volkekunde*<sup>19</sup>) to justify, among others, segregation policy and the 'geography of race,' as a 'preservation' of 'a way of life' (Dubow 1995; Gordon 1991, 1988; Sharp 1981; Mamdani 1996).

Much has been made of the *tension* between anthropologists and the colonial state (see James 1973). However, pending itinerant anthropologists and missionaries, before the colonial image became embarrassing, it was largely the state that had problems with *professional* anthropologists and not the other way round. Such anthropologists were, for example, deemed potentially subversive and bearers of negative news to the outside world. For the Afrikaner dominated state (South Africa and Namibia) this was the '*liberal threat*' of mainly 'English' anthropologists and especially missionaries, but also others (Gordon 1991; Gordon and Douglass 2000). In this case the '*Europeanization*' instead of *re-tribalization*<sup>20</sup> of the 'natives' impacted questions such as social control, assimilation, and competition with whites.

Most preferred were state-appointed (in time increasingly 'state-trained') anthropologists, operating within the administration—except in those situations where substantive expertise was needed (see Lackner 1973). Thus in the Afrikaner context, *volkekunde* emerged as a form of state knowledge (Gordon 1991). From the other end, until the crisis of the discipline,<sup>21</sup> British social anthropologists (the most influential group in Africa, Moore 1993) had *actively* sought a closer relationship with the state—for access to the 'natives,' financial support, and so on; thus their petitions to the Crown on their usefulness to

<sup>19</sup> Afrikaans lit. 'Knowledge of peoples or nations.'

<sup>20</sup> This was the *actual creation* of "tribalism" through the state, claimed on some 'traditional' authority (Vail 1989; Mamdani 1996).

the Empire—which is said to have influenced their paradigm (Feuchtwang 1973; Moore 1993; Copans 1977), as was the case with *volkekunde* (where the tension was hardly an issue) (Gordon 1991; 1988; Sharp 1980, 1981).

As an object of colonial policy, the "tribe" as a concept and practice afforded (actually and potentially<sup>22</sup>) a significant degree and flexibility of exploitation and control, akin to the category of '*illegal immigrants*, who can be drawn in when needed and expelled when not. Within the basic division of colonial society, the "tribe" represented a secondary (or second) *racial* criterion, legitimated not in terms of physiological differences, but (as a concept of 'civilization,' the 'lack' thereof) in terms of 'culture' i.e. "tribal" "traditions" and "customs." Indeed (for reasons too complex to mention here), Afrikaner-specific constructs of race and racism (Apartheid), for example, utilized cultural (and ethnological) concepts more than those of biological determinism and scientific racism (see Dubow 1995; Gordon 1991, 1988; Sharp 1981). In both acknowledging Fanon and deviating from him on the basic structure of colonial society, Mamdani (1996) better captures this aspect and role of the "tribe" (whether or not the "tribe" itself is for him also a racial category).

<sup>21</sup> This was not a uniform process for the continent as a whole. Perhaps the earliest significant critique of British social anthropology was in the context of Southern Africa, centered on the more industrialized South Africa, by the 1920s and 1930s, for a number of reasons, including a greater integrated regional economy with unavoidable implications for understanding rural reproduction (Moore 1993; Werbner 1984) and the new, more stringent, racist policies of the South African state (since the 1920s), which forced some anthropologists to rethink their relation to the colonial state and the conceptual implications of their discipline (Gordon & Douglas 2000: 252, *passim*); though the innovative significance of all these should not be exaggerated (Magubane 1971).

<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately we can here only highlight the basic experience and logical tendency, shorn of time/space variations.

In Fanon's characterization already mentioned, the colonial world is divided into highly consequential "compartments," which defines the "lines of force" and the differential *life-chances* and *experiences* of the colonizers and colonized (Fanon 1963: 37-8). Otherwise put, the "zone where the natives live is not complimentary to the zone inhabited by the settlers;" rather, the two zones follow the "principle of reciprocal exclusivity" (Fanon 1963: 38, 39). In this context, *race* assumes an even greater role as an ordering and legitimating principle: "it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race" (Fanon: 1963: 40). Correspondingly, Mamdani argues:

In the main...the colonial state was a double-sided affair. Its one side, the state that governed a racially defined *citizenry*, was bounded by the rule of law and an associated regime of rights. Its other side, the state that ruled over *subjects*, was a regime of *extra-economic coercion* and *administratively* [i.e. not legally or rights] driven justice. (Mamdani 1996: 19; my emphasis)

Thus for Mamdani, as for Fanon, the two racially defined zones pertain first and foremost to the definition or demarcation of "civil society" and its implicit *rights* as "the society of the colons," which was also the realm of direct state rule (Mamdani 1996: 19). Indirect rule, in the "tribal areas," on the other hand, "signified a rural tribal authority," which "was about incorporating natives into a *state-enforced* customary order" (Mamdani 1996: 16, 18; 19; my emphasis). And, "whereas the civil society was *racialized*, Native Authority was *tribalized*" (Mamdani 1996: 19, my emphasis). Between these two realms was the "third group" of "urban-based natives" in a more complex position (see Mamdani 1996: 19,

passim).

Defined as a realm of subjects, not of citizens, the "tribal" offered a *flexible* mechanism of exploitation. More important here was the, "all-embracing," *concentration* of "customary" or "tribal" power of Native Authorities. Flowing from this were several "consequences." According to Mamdani (1996: 22), more than any other colonial subject, the African was categorized, not as a 'native,' but as a "*tribesperson*" (my emphasis). This reflected customary law itself, which was defined in the plural, as the law of the *individual* "tribe," and not in the singular, as the law for *all* 'natives' (Mamdani 1996: 22). The same fictitious or convenient definition applied to the question of "tradition" and "custom" as a legitimization of ostensible 'independent,' 'primordial,' "tribes." As Mamdani points out, in the late nineteenth century African context, there were several traditions, not just one. But the tradition privileged by colonial powers as the 'customary' was the one "with the *least historical depth*." Thus "*custom*" also came to be "the language of *force*," masking the uncustomary power of Native Authorities (Mamdani 1996: 22; my emphasis). The overall conclusion is that the African colonial experience was "marked by force to an *unusual degree*," one in which the colonial state, *through* the controlled authority of the chief, "breathed life into a whole range of compulsions: *forced labor, forced crops, forced sales, forced contributions, and forced removals*"<sup>23</sup> (Mamdani 1996: 22-23; my emphasis).

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<sup>23</sup> "In the context of a semi-industrialized and highly urbanized South Africa, this meant, on the one hand, the forced removal of those marked as unproductive so they may be pushed out of white areas back into native homelands [reservations] and, on the other, the forced straddling of those deemed productive between workplace and homeland through an ongoing cycle of annual migrations" (Mamdani 1996: 7). Less-industrialized Namibia, as a colony and periphery of South Africa, felt the same impact.

## CONCLUSION

It is possible that the social character of the African 'periphery' has *reinforced* the tendency to see Africa "as *particularly tribal*" (Mafeje 1971: 253; my emphasis). The problem, however, is that of social science itself, specifically the tendency toward *fragmentary* conceptualizations—as is the methodological emphasis on social entities themselves, at the expense of the *relations* and *processes* that define the entities or within which the entities emerge and are reproduced (Hopkins 1982)—characteristic of the dominant paradigm of social science. In connoting the 'primitive,' the "tribe" (and related language) *obscures* the true character of the colonized and their descendants as an exploited creation of capitalist modernity (see Gordon and Douglass 2000 on the "Bushman").

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