
Early History Of African Tribes

Although historians know very little, for certain, about much of Africa's early history, there is however unanimity among scholars, that 'tribes' may have been around since time immemorial. Today, there are reportedly about 3,000 tribes in Africa, who are believed to be speaking more than 2,000 different languages. Yet, Emeritus Professor Donald Wright, who is subscribed to this Listserv, in his excellent article, *What Do You Mean There Were No Tribes in Africa?* has also argued that ethnicity, as we come to know of it today, did not exist in pre-colonial Africa. Wright (1999) has cautioned against the futility and the insignificance of reading ethnicity into pre-colonial African societies.

The usage of the term - "tribe" - in these modern times - does not correspond to what our identities are. Ethnicity in Africa generally, and the Gambia in particular, has always been a fluid and very loose entity. Wright (1999) has reminded us, for example, that the ruling family of Niumi in The Gambia absorbed into their (ethnic) group whoever was prepared to accept their authority and adapt to the customs and beliefs practiced by them, and not just anyone born into them. If I read Wright (1999) correctly, during the period in question, one could have, for example, "become" a Mandinka and adopted it as an identity, by simply speaking the language (Mandinka) and giving loyalty and allegiance to the ruling family of Niumi.

We are still learning (and getting to know more) about the fascinating history of ancient Africa; and in fact, much of what we know about this period, including the various African cultures prevalent at the time, has mainly come from the oral tradition of storytelling. Of course, throughout the centuries, and by virtue of the tradition of oral storytelling, some of these stories have been passed down orally to humankind. Often referred to as Griots, in our own context, these oral storytellers or oral communicators, just like a historian, have had a sacred duty and obligations to remember, preserve, share our rich history and cultures. And from the narratives of oral communicators, who have had to preserve the stories of their people for generations by passing them down in the form of stories and songs, it is evident that there were several ancient 'tribes' or civilizations of Africa.

Ancient African history teaches us that ancient African civilizations did include tribes and cultures, for example, from the Kingdoms of Ghana, Zimbabwe, Kush, Aksum, Ancient Egypt. And each one of these Kingdoms had a culture that was different to others. Yet, among today's scholars, there is a near unanimity that pre-colonial African identities were, to a certain extent, loose, fluid and complex. Therefore, when it comes to the issue of ethnicity, there is more to the problem than meets the eye. This might be a bit of over-simplification on my part, given the fact that there are disagreements between or among the primordialist, instrumentalist, and constructivist schools of thoughts on the origin and nature of ethnic identities. But on the whole, there are two theoretical discussions/arguments on African "ethnicity".

The first school of thought argues that ethnicity is a colonial construction, created by the interaction between the colonial anthropologists, early ethnographers, administrators, European Christian missionaries and their "colonial subjects". However, the second school of thought maintains that ethnicity has in fact, predated colonialism in Africa and that traces of ethnicity can be found in pre-colonial African societies. Therefore, while one school argues that ethnicity was

a colonialism construction, the other contends that it was a local construction and that it predated colonialism.

The term 'tribe' itself had its origin in ancient Rome, but it was later used to give a description and account of the various cultures experienced by the West through European exploration. It was initially a popular word used by anthropologists in particular, but by the mid-19th century, scholars started to disuse the expression and later replaced it as an anthropological term, with another phrase 'ethnic groups' towards the end of the 20th century. The word 'tribe' was discarded by many scholars on the basis that it was difficult to define and that it was, in the context of Africa, a disparaging or derogatory term. 'Ethnic group', defined, among other things, as a group of people with a common ancestry and language, a shared cultural and historical tradition, is the most widely used term these days. What we can deduce from the literature on ethnicity in Africa is that before the advent of Western colonization, Africans did not just categorise or identify themselves wholly by ethnicity.

In fact, there is considerable evidence that modern African ethnic identities were constructed or invented during the colonial period. Indeed, if anything, the concept of tribes was a colonial construct or creation. As a concept, it was an integral part of how the British colonialists were going to rule colonial Africa; and it was brought about for two main reasons. First of all, Europe had both a social hierarchy structure and a social class system, and because of these classifications in Western societies and their sense of cultural purity or superiority, the colonialists, from their vantage point, wanted to transplant these divisions of European nations onto the African map.

As European colonialists and explorers began to explore and discover Africa, they started to learn about as well as comprehend, the various forms of societies and cultures they were coming into contact with. The colonialists had categorised Africans into discernible groups and promoted among these groups, a renewed sense of social and economic, as well as political rivalries based along ethnic lines. Now, instead of trying to understand and also accept the diversity, fluidity and multifaceted nature of the prevailing circumstances at the time, the colonial masters felt it was trouble-free and more straightforward just to put our people into categories or groups purely based on perceived differences and divisions of ethnicity.

Secondly, colonial authorities also decided that placing our people, deemed to have dissimilarities into "tribes" with "chiefs", would be an effective and sustainable way of creating a political order in the colonies. Thus, the partitioning of Africa, particularly the improper delimitation of our porous borders, were arbitrary acts which European colonialists had imposed with no regard to our local conditions and realities, thus creating, naturally, a post-colonial separatist problem in some parts of Africa. The secessionist conflict in Casamance, Senegal comes to mind right away. Sadly, Europe's arbitrary post-colonial borders left Africans packed or sardined together into countries that do not even reflect and represent their cultural heritage and religious beliefs, a paradox that has left intractable problems in today's Africa. For example, Christian South Sudan was given to Muslim North Sudan.

The demarcation of the Cameroon-Nigeria border has also created disputes between the two countries. Prior to independence, Western Cameroon, under the protectorate of the British, was partly administered by Nigeria until 1961 when it obtained independence by joining the Republic of Cameroon, which had already attained independence. Today, Anglophone groups in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon, particularly those from the city of Bamenda,

are calling for secession from the rest of Cameroon, which is Francophone. In short, the colonialists saw colonial Africa as a fountainhead of wealth and natural resources and therefore, manipulated and exploited the demarcation of Africa's arbitrary borders in line with colonial subjugation at the Berlin Conference of 1884 – 85.

In the context of the Gambia, British colonialism fostered and advanced parochial attitudes and tribalism and set residents of the colonial territory in conflict or competition with the protectorate, leading to antagonism between United Party (UP) and PPP; resentment between the educated folks and the unlettered; and envy between Muslims and Christians. You see, until independence, colonial Gambia, for administrative purposes, was divided into the “Colony” and “Protectorate”. The colony was composed of the Capital (Bathurst) and its surroundings (Kombo St Mary), while the “protectorate” was made up of the remainder of the Gambian territory – the rural areas to be precise. The name of the capital was changed from Bathurst to Banjul in 1973.

The residents of the “colony” were referred to as British Subjects and those of the “Protectorate” or rural areas were called British Protectorate Persons. And this meant that people from the colony enjoyed political, educational and legal privileges, while rural folks were denied these rights and privileges. Thus, the creation (and perpetuation) of Colony-Protectorate antagonism in both Colonial and Post-Colonial Gambia can be attributable, to a very large extent, to British imperial policy of divide and rule strategy. The colonial policy of divide and conquer, as mentioned above, not only created differences between urban and rural folks, but it also fomented animosities between them. In fact, in the immediate aftermath of independence in 1965, the British strategy of divide and rule tested the social cohesiveness and harmony of the country, but Sir Dawda Jawara was a pragmatist who nursed all ethnic groups. The social cohesion seen in the country was to a large extent, due to the low level of inter-ethnic rivalry in The Gambia.

There were traditionally high levels of inter-ethnic contact and tolerance, stemming from the country's small size, a shared religion of Islam (which for many supersedes ethnicity), common cultural values and economic interdependence. This ethnic heterogeneity meant that any political appeal to ethnic identity would tend to lack clout. In the Gambia after 1962, the PPP was at pains to stress that it was a party representing all Gambians and not just the Mandinka group of its leader, Dawda Jawara. Jawara became adept at broadening his PPP support base, whilst at the same time maintaining his appeal to the rural Mandinka majority. A political pragmatist, Jawara recognised that the country's ethnic heterogeneity meant that a narrow appeal to ethnic identity, and a distribution of resources on that basis, would fail to produce the levels of support he was seeking. Jawara was skilful in his cultivation of effective ties and shrewd balancing of factions within the PPP to back his political ambitions. The fact that ethnic conflict was largely absent, is attributable to Jawara's willingness to share power and needless to say, Sir Dawda's efforts in this direction were greatly assisted by Gambians' high degree of inter-ethnic tolerance.

As I highlighted previously, these social divisions prevalent in African societies were largely created by the British colonialists, and regrettably, they have continued to prevent our people from seeing beyond your surname. Going forward, Gambians ought to shy away or refrain from the use of this derogatory term “tribe”, which, sadly, fills our online or social media discourse, especially in the so-called new Gambia. In my view, the issue of identity still remains, by and large, a complex matter in the Senegambia area. Ethnicity can shift and has been shifting. In

other words, it is open to change. For instance, marriages can change ethnic definitions and as such, members of ethnic groups can define and redefine their identity by virtue of personal, economic and cultural changes. Having said that it should be pointed out that although ethnic identity can be complicated, Gambians, generally, have tended to identify their “ethnicity” with their mother tongue or the arterial language that they have been exposed to from birth. In the Gambia, quite often, there is a strong correlation and connection between “ethnicity” and one’s mother tongue.

In fact, in African Studies, there is a large body of literature describing the interconnections between ethnicity and one’s mother tongue. Gambians represent a rich array of ethnic backgrounds and as such, the diversity of our “language groups” is to be celebrated. President Barrow is a good example of this Gambian heterogeneity/diversity. Three heterogeneous cultures have identified Barrow’s identity. Linguistically, President Barrow is Fula/Peul/Pulaar; culturally, he is largely, Soninke/Sarahulay; and ethnically, he is a Mandinka.

President Barrow is in fact, a native speaker of Mandinka, Pulaar and Soninke. This is why I have argued elsewhere, that the politics of divisions/polarization has no place in the post-Jammeh Gambia. The Gambia has had a long and rich history of cultural integration, heterogeneity, acculturation and generations of intermarriage between different “language groups”. Therefore, as far as I am concerned, we have no tribes in our country and in fact, in this post-Jammeh Gambia, Gambians should now begin to openly question the morality and usefulness of the term – tribe - its full meanings and its origins. ‘Tribe’ is a colonial cliché, utilized by anthropologists of the colonial period to “label” our forefathers. The term should therefore be dropped from our daily lexicon, as it has often created violence, cycle of hate, distrust and divisions in post-colonial Africa.

In reality, what is often referred to as “tribalism” in African Politics is, in actual fact, the politics of favouritism, nepotism, corruption, cronyism, partisanship and political patronage. Political patronage is the practice of using of state resources to reward individuals for their loyalty and electoral support. Appointments to public office are not made on the basis of merit and ability, but rather through political patronage. Meritocracy therefore takes a back seat to mediocrity and as often is the case, government officials would display remarkable ineptitude. The renowned African philosopher from Ghana, Professor Kwasi Wiredu, known for his lifelong academic work on “conceptual decolonization in contemporary African systems of thought” has repeatedly called for the removal of the unmerited and dispensable Western epistemologies that are found in African philosophical practices.