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When I began the study of Africa in the 1960s African societies were almost universally assumed to be 'tribes', a European concept defined almost a century earlier within a theory of social evolution that required a 'form of society' to fill the long gap between the hunting and gathering bands of primitive communism and the ancient empires that brought the birth of 'civilization'. The tribal label was applied broadly to the indigenous societies of the Americas, Asia, Australia, the Pacific islands, and, pre-eminently, of sub-Saharan Africa: societies that appeared to lack even the early forms of state and market of civilization, and were routinely classified as 'primitive'. These groups also constituted the majority of societies being brought under imperial control during the second epoch of capitalist globalization, between 1870 and 1914.

A tribal society, within this intellectual and political context, was assumed to be ancient, stagnant and unchanging – a 'survival' of earlier stages of social evolution. They were perceived to be homogeneous cultures governed by primordial sentiments and rigid custom. This view was reinforced by the functionalist anthropology that dominated social research in colonial Africa from the 1920s to the 1960s. It eschewed studying the history of non-literate societies for the description of allegedly integrated socio-cultural systems existing in the time warp of the 'ethnographic present'. In the 1960s, when African colonies became independent nation-states, tribes were considered by many African leaders, as well as Western scholars and officials, as 'atavistic survivals' threatening modernity and development: hence, the declaration by one of the most determinedly modern of nationalist leaders, Samora Machel, that "for the nation to live, the tribe must die". As civil conflicts between 'tribes' multiplied after independence, political scientists rushed to explain them as the instrumental manipulation of primordial identities by unscrupulous politicians. For jet-set journalists dropping in to the latest crisis, 'ancient tribal rivalries and hatreds' became a convenient and thoughtless explanation that recalled all the imperial stereotypes of 'primitive' African savagery.

Meanwhile, the notion of 'tribe' was beginning to be undermined by the writing, from the 1950s, of the pre-colonial history of Africa; and, from the 1970s, of the colonial history of the continent. These writings revealed, not ancient and stagnant societies, which would have been no history at all, but a story of constant, often rapid, social-cultural change and significant cultural complexity and variation. The African states encountered by the imperial powers in their conquest of Africa turned out to have been relatively recent historical creations embracing numerous cultural communities: in contemporary terms, they were 'multi-ethnic'. Moreover, a large proportion of African societies involved people of shared similarities of culture and language lacking any centralized political institutions and any evident common identity. Tribes that Europeans dealt with and mentioned repeatedly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, like the Fingoes in South Africa, seem to have disappeared by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while several important contemporary communities appear to have come into self-conscious existence only within recent memory: for example, the Yoruba (Nigeria) in the 1930s; the Luhya (Kenya) only after 1945; and the Kalenjin (Kenya) from 1959. African 'tribes' increasingly appeared to be rather new creations rather than primordial and stagnant social entities.

By the 1970s, Africanists had begun to speak of 'sub-nationalism' and of ethnic groups instead of tribes. African communities, based on linguistic and culturally defined identities, appeared to be protean in form, contingent in origin and contextual in their subjective reality.<sup>1</sup> By shifting from tribe and tribalism to ethnic group and ethnicity, the invidious implications of the former for African 'difference' and 'primitivism'



were replaced by linkage to an increasingly visible global phenomenon. African experience could be seen in comparative and theoretical context with the rest of the world and as part of what is a relatively recent historical development. Although the political imaginary of ethnic communities typically claims ancient origins in the distant mists of the past, linguistic evidence alone suggests they are modern phenomena. The OED indicates that 'ethnic', from the Greek *ethnos*, is an ancient term; however, until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was commonly used to refer to the savage and barbarous 'other'. Its modern usage — referring to self-conscious groups defined by common descent, language and culture, strongly influenced by scientific racism — dates from the emergence of the ethnic nationalisms of Europe in the nineteenth century. 'Ethnicity', however, referring to a dominant form of socio-political identity based on ethnic communities, is strikingly contemporary. The OED records the first usage by American sociologists in the 1950s.

How old, then, are various ethnic groups and where did ethnicity come from? Two seminal works published in 1983 — Ben Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger — suggested ethnic communities were social constructions from diverse socio-cultural sources: characteristically hybrid agglomerations of old and new elements, and products of, indeed, responses to, the deeply contested development of modernity and its dominant institutions of the state and industrial capitalism.

John Lonsdale and I backed into the study of African ethnicity, through a project that we began in 1987 to examine the changing explanations by social scientists and historians of the phenomenon of 'Mau Mau' in Kenya. In 1986, Lonsdale had caused a stir at a conference on the political economy of Kenya at Johns Hopkins when he suggested that only African communities that had the Bible translated into their language ever developed ethnic consciousness or 'nationalism'. In 1990, Terence Ranger remarked to me that my book, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya*, contained a compelling explanation of the development of Kikuyu ethnicity in its analysis of the political economy of the internal conflicts that divided the Kikuyu and led to the development of Mau Mau. By 1992, our focus increasingly shifted to the study of how and when the Kikuyu became the Kikuyu, and, more broadly, to the development of African ethnicity and ethnic conflict.

Historical research had revealed the Kikuyu to be a people of hybrid origins, linguistically and culturally, as a consequence of successive incoming waves of migrants and refugees from surrounding communities. Appearing first as a recognizable group in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the name Kikuyu referred to their position as farmers within the local cultural ecology of agricultural, pastoral and hunting-gathering peoples. But they, or various parts of them, could also be known by the particular sacred groves at which they made sacrifices, or, politically, as *mbari ya atiriri* (clan of "I say to you"), a group whose elders gathered to discuss public affairs. There were no institutions or traditions of political unity as a community, and sections of the Kikuyu argued and fought amongst themselves, including over matters of cultural practice and the correct way to speak the language, and raided each others' herds as often as they did those of the surrounding Maasai. Political power went to male elders in proportion to the size and prosperity of their *mbari* of wives and children and unrelated dependents and clients. Wealth signified moral virtue, weighted influence in councils of elders, and legitimized the authority to decide for others. Europeans, especially missionaries and colonial officials attentive to similarities of dialect and cultural practices, recognized the Kikuyu as a 'tribe' before the Kikuyu did themselves. The origins of a consciousness of 'Kikuyuness' appears in the 1920s amongst a first generation of mission-educated young men who — barred from participation in 'pagan' rituals by missionaries and living in towns where they wore European clothes and worked for money — were rejected by traditional elders and had to argue amongst themselves and with the elders over their proper place in the community. This culminated in 1928-29 with the publication of the first Kikuyu language journal, *Muigwithania* ("the reconciler"), whose columns were dominated by debates over "Kikuyu Karing'a", 'real or authentic Kikuyuness', and how to reconcile Kikuyu and European culture. The first editor, Jomo Kenyatta, later published his LSE thesis, written under Bronislaw Malinowski, as a functionalist account of Kikuyu institutions and culture. *Muigwithania* remained his nickname amongst the Kikuyu and an accurate depiction of his intellectual and political project.



It became clear to us that Kikuyu ethnicity and, through the comparative evidence, that of other contemporary African communities, was both modern in its development, literate in expression, and an indigenous response to the impact of colonial modernity of the state and market; a social product, or construction, of the activities of individuals and groups, both African and European. It was the outcome of two inter-twined social processes. The internal process, "moral ethnicity," involved a deeply contested struggle over the legitimacy of authority, the distribution of property, and the social boundaries and membership of the community, occasioned by the disruption of the traditional moral economy and relations of class, gender and generation. The external process, "political tribalism" was the mounting confrontations between developing ethnic communities and with colonial regimes over access to the resources of modernity. Indeed, it appears that such conflict was often the product of the "development" programs of late colonialism after 1945 that enormously increased the social and economic resources distributed by the state as well as the scope and impact of the market.

So, African ethnicity is neither old nor atavistic, but rather a fundamental part of the African experience of modernity. What does this tell us, then, about ethnicity in other parts of the world? Theoretically and comparatively, are we dealing with global social processes that, as the anthropologist James Clifford insists, are producing increasing cultural difference instead of homogeneity? This is the paradox of globalization: a world ever more intimately tied together by communications, investment and the extraordinary movement of goods and people, is rent by increasing conflict amongst politically mobilized ethnic communities. The global village is a raucous chorus of discordant voices. To understand this paradox requires attention to the political economy and the political imaginary (all political communities being 'imagined'), the material and the cultural. From this perspective I would suggest the following hypotheses:

First, ethnicity is a product of the impact of Western modernity, and a particular outcome of the internal crises and conflicts engendered by two of its salient institutional and cultural characteristics:

1. The separation of the political and the religious, which undermines the ideological legitimation of power in pre-modern societies.
2. The separation of the political and the economic through the creation of a self-regulating market, which undermines the traditional distribution and redistribution of material resources.

Second, these factors threaten the indigenous moral economy, generating new conflicts of class, gender and generation and provoking in reaction both modernist and anti-modernist movements. Ethnic communities and identities are, in particular, the outcomes of contests of hegemony and efforts to reconstruct the moral economy within the bounds of states and markets.

Third, whether identities of class, ethnicity or wider national communities come to dominate in specific circumstances is contingent upon both the characteristics of the indigenous society and the particular form and impact of modernity on it. There is no single universal outcome.

Fourth, ethnic communities are protean and hybrid in both social composition and cultural content, borrowing freely from both 'traditional' and modern elements, changing and adapting them in changing compositions of 'authentic' identities and political practices.

What, then, is the relationship between ethnicity and democratic governance?

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<sup>†</sup> As a Nigerian friend of mine put it many years ago: "When I was small, I was a child of the village. When I went to boarding school, I was an Ngwa boy. I became an Igbo only when I went to university in Lagos; and a Nigerian only when I went to graduate school in Britain."