TEACHING TOLERANCE

MAGAZINE FEATURE

The Trouble with Tribe

How a common word masks complex African realities.

BY CHRIS LOWE

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Invite your students to investigate the history and hidden meanings of the word "tribe."

For many people in Western countries, the subject of Africa immediately calls up the word "tribe." Few readers question a news story describing an African individual as a "tribesman" or "tribeswoman," or the depiction of an African's motives as "tribal." Many Africans themselves use the word "tribe" when speaking or writing in English about community, ethnicity or identity in African states.

Yet today most scholars -- both African and non-African -- who study African states and societies agree that "tribe" promotes misleading stereotypes. The term "tribe" has no consistent meaning. It carries misleading historical and cultural assumptions. It blocks accurate views of African realities.

At best, any interpretation of African events that relies on the idea of tribe contributes no understanding of specific issues in specific countries. At worst, it obscures the reality that African identities and conflicts are as diverse, ambiguous, complex, modern and dynamic as those found anywhere else in the world.

What's wrong with "tribe"?

"Tribe" promotes a myth of primitive African timelessness.

The general sense of tribe as most people understand it is associated with primitiveness. To be in a tribal state is to live in an uncomplicated, traditional condition.

Most African countries are economically poor and often described as less developed or underdeveloped. Westerners often conclude that these societies have not changed

much over the centuries and that African poverty mainly reflects cultural and social conservatism. Interpreting present-day Africa through the lens of tribes reinforces the image of timelessness.

The truth is that Africa has as much history as anywhere else in the world. It has undergone momentous changes time and again, especially in the 20th century. While African poverty is partly a product of internal dynamics of African societies, it has also been caused by the histories of external slave trades and colonial rule.

In the West, "tribal" often implies "savage."

When the general image of tribal timelessness is applied to situations of social conflict between Africans, a particularly destructive myth results. Stereotypes of primitiveness and conservative backwardness are also linked to images of irrationality and superstition. The combination leads to portrayal of violence and conflict in Africa as primordial, savage and unchanging. This image resonates with traditional Western racist ideas and can suggest that irrational violence is inherent and natural to Africans. Just as particular conflicts elsewhere in the world have both rational and irrational components, so do those in Africa.

The vast majority of African ethnic conflicts could not have happened a century ago in the ways that they do now. Pick almost any place where ethnic conflict occurs in modern Africa. Investigate carefully the issues over which it occurs, the forms it takes, and the means by which it is organized and carried out. Recent economic developments and political rivalries will loom much larger than allegedly ancient and traditional hostilities.

Ironically, some African ethnic identities and divisions now portrayed as ancient and unchanging actually were created in the colonial period. In other cases, earlier distinctions took new, more rigid and conflictual forms over the last century. The changes came out of communities' interactions within a colonial or post-colonial context, as well as movement of people to cities to work and live. The identities thus created resemble modern ethnicities in other countries, which are also shaped by cities, markets and national states.

If "tribe" is so flawed, why is it so common?

"Tribe" reflects widespread but outdated 19th-century social theory.

As Europeans expanded their trade, settlement and military domination around the world, they began trying to understand the different forms of society and culture they encountered. Social scientists in the 19th century viewed societies as "evolving" along a sequence of organizational stages. One widespread theory saw a progression from hunting to herding to agriculture to mechanical industry. By this account, city-building -- the root of "civilization" -- arose from agriculture, and all forms of social organization and government that "preceded" this stage were considered tribal.

Over the course of the 20th century, scholars learned that such images tried to make messy reality neater than it really is. While markets and technology may be said to develop, they have no simple correspondence with specific forms of politics, social organization or culture. Moreover, human beings have proven remarkably capable of changing older identities to fit new conditions, or inventing new identities (often stoutly insisting that the changed or new identities are eternal). Examples close to home include new hyphenated American identities, new social identities (for example, gay/lesbian), and new religious identities (for example, New Age).

Social theories of tribes resonated with classical and biblical education.

Of course, most ordinary Western people were not social theorists. But theories of social evolution spread through schools, newspapers, sermons and other media. The term "tribe," which comes from the Latin *tribus*, was tied to classical and biblical images. The ancient Romans used tribus to denote segments of their own population, as well as the Celtic and Germanic societies with which many 19th- and early-20th-century Europeans and Americans identified. Latin and English Bibles adopted the term for the 12 lineages of Hebrews who settled the Promised Land. This link of tribes to prestigious earlier periods of Western culture contributed to the view that tribe had universal validity in social evolution.

The concept of tribe became a cornerstone for European colonial rule in Africa.

This background of belief, while mistaken in many respects, might have been relatively benign. However, emerging during the age of scientific rationalism, the theories of social evolution became intertwined with racial theories. These were used to justify, first, the latter stages of the Atlantic slave trade (originally justified on religious grounds) and, later, European colonial rule.

Some people who believed that Africans were a primitive, lower order of humanity saw this as a permanent condition that justified Europeans in enslaving and dominating them. Others held that Africans could develop but needed to be civilized

by Europeans -- which often meant in "exchange" for their freedom, labor, land and resources.

This reasoning was used to support the colonization of the whole continent of Africa after 1880, which otherwise might more accurately have been seen as a naked exercise of power. Thus, all Africans were said to live in tribes, whether their ancestors built large trading empires and Muslim universities on the Niger River, densely settled and cultivated kingdoms around the great lakes in east-central Africa, or lived in much smaller-scale communities between the larger political units of the continent.

Calling nearly all African social groups "tribes" and African identities "tribal" in the era of scientific racism turned the idea of tribe from a social science category into a racial stereotype. By definition Africans were supposed to live in tribes, preferably with chiefs. The colonizers proposed to govern cheaply by adapting tribal and chiefship institutions into European-style bureaucratic states. If they didn't find tribes and chiefs, they encouraged people to identify as tribes and appointed chiefs.

In some places, like Rwanda or Nigeria, colonial racial theory led to favoring one ethnic group over another because of supposed racial superiority (meaning White ancestry). In other places, emphasis on tribes was simply a tool of divide-and-rule strategies. The idea of tribe we have today cannot escape these roots.

Common Arguments Reconsidered

In the United States no one objects to referring to Native American "tribes."

Under U.S. law, "tribe" is a bureaucratic term. For a community of Native Americans to gain access to programs, and to enforce rights due to them under treaties and laws, they must be recognized as a tribe. This is comparable to unincorporated areas' applying for municipal status under state laws. Away from the law, Native Americans often prefer the words "nation" or "people" over "tribe."

Historically, the U.S. government treats all Native American groups as tribes because of the same outdated cultural evolutionary theories and colonial viewpoints that led European colonialists to treat all African groups as tribes. As in Africa, the term obscures wide historical differences in way of life, political and social organization, and culture among Native Americans. When we see that the same term is applied indiscriminately to Native American groups and African groups, the problem of primitive savagery as the implied common denominator only becomes more pronounced.

Africans themselves talk about tribes.

When Africans learn English, they are often taught that "tribe" is the term that English-speakers will recognize. But what underlying meaning in their own languages are Africans translating when they say "tribe"? In English, writers often refer to the Zulu tribe, whereas in Zulu the word for the Zulu as a group is *isizwe*. Zulu linguists translate isizwe as "nation" or "people." Isizwe refers both to the multi-ethnic South African nation and to ethno-national peoples that form a part of the multi-ethnic nation. When Africans use the word "tribe" in general conversation, they do not draw on the negative connotations of primitivism the word has in Western countries.

Avoiding the term "tribe" is just political correctness.

To the contrary, avoiding the term "tribe" is saying that ideas matter. If the term "tribe" accurately conveyed and clarified truths better than other words, even if they were hard and unpleasant truths, we should use it. But "tribe" is vague, contradictory and confusing, not clarifying. For the most part it does not convey truths but myths, stereotypes and prejudices. When it does express truths, there are other words that express the same truths more clearly, without the additional distortions.

Given a choice between words that express truths clearly and precisely, and words that convey partial truths murkily and distortedly, we should choose the former over the latter. That means choosing "ethnic group," "nation," "people," "community," "chiefdom," "kin-group," "village" or another appropriate word over "tribe," when writing or talking about Africa. The question is not political correctness but empirical accuracy and intellectual honesty.

Most scholars already prefer other terms to "tribe." So, among the media, does the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). But "tribal" and "African" are still virtually synonyms in most media, among policy-makers and among Western publics. Clearing away this stereotype is an essential step for beginning to understand the diversity and richness of African realities.

This essay was adapted with permission from "Talking About 'Tribe': Moving From Stereotypes to Analysis," originally published by the Africa Policy Information Center in 1997. The principal author was Chris Lowe, a historian of Africa who lives in Portland, Ore. Additional research was provided by Tunde Brimah, Pearl-Alice Marsh, William Minter and Monde Muyangwa.

One Zambia, One Nation

Zambia is slightly larger than Texas. The country has approximately 10 million inhabitants and a rich cultural diversity. English is the official language, but Zambia also boasts 73 different indigenous languages. While there are many indigenous Zambian words that translate into "nation," "people," "clan," "language," "foreigner," "village" or "community," there are none that easily translate into "tribe."

Sorting Zambians into a fixed number of "tribes" was a byproduct of British colonial rule over Northern Rhodesia (as Zambia was known prior to independence in 1964). The British also applied stereotypes to the different groups. Thus the Bemba, Ngoni and the Lozi were characterized in various colonial records as "strong." The Bemba and the Ngoni were "warlike," although the Bemba were considered the much "finer race" because the Ngoni had intertwined with "inferior tribes and have been spoiled by civilization." The Lamba were labelled "lazy and indolent" and the Lunda considered to have "an inborn distaste for work in a regular way." These stereotypes in turn often determined access to jobs.

After Zambia gained its independence in 1964, the challenge was how to forge these disparate ethnic groups into a nation-state whose citizens would identify as Zambians. The country's first president, Kenneth Kaunda, made a point of establishing policies and using tools that would promote nation-building, as reflected in the popular slogan "One Zambia, One Nation." Several factors reinforced the common national experience across the cultural spectrum.

First, the Kaunda administration attempted to achieve an ethnic balance in appointments to the cabinet and other key government positions. The intent was to provide Zambia's various ethnic groups with representation and hence a stake in the new nation that was being forged.

Second, with an economy focused on copper mining, the urban areas and mines became a magnet for Zambians from across the country and all ethnic groups seeking employment. By the 1990s almost half of all Zambians lived in

urban areas. Despite ethnic stereotypes, no group had an overwhelming advantage in urban employment.

Third, Zambia adopted a boarding school system for grades 7-12. This system brought together children from all ethnic groups to live and learn together for nine months of the year. Along with English, social studies and several Zambian languages also became major components of school curricula, enabling Zambians to learn about and to communicate with each other. As a result of living together, interacting in the towns and cities, and going to school together, the average Zambian speaks at least three languages.

Fourth, after independence, the marriage rate among people of different ethnic identities increased. In the same way that one should not immediately assume that an American called Syzmanski speaks or understands Polish, neither should one necessarily expect a Zambian with the last name of Chimuka to speak or understand Tonga. As in America, names in Zambia are often unreliable indicators of ethnic heritage.

Many Zambians do use the word "tribe." Its meaning, however, is probably closer to that of an "ethnic group" in a Western country than what Westerners understand by "tribe." The word refers to one's mother tongue and, to lesser extent, specific cultural traits. For example, in the same way that Jewish Americans celebrate Bar Mitzvah as a rite of passage into adulthood, various Zambian ethnic groups have similar rites of passage ceremonies, such as Siyomboka among the Lozi and Mukanda for the Luvale. An urban family may or may not celebrate a particular rite and may need to decide which branch of the family's older generation they should follow.

To a large extent, the effort to forge "One Zambia, One Nation" has succeeded. Zambians identify with the nation as well as with individual ethnic groups. Many trace their own family heritage to more than one Zambian group. Most Zambians live within but also beyond their ethnic boundaries. Identities at different levels coexist and change.

Adapted with permission from "Talking About 'Tribe,'" Africa Policy Information Center.