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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/11t011sd>

Authors

Posner, Daniel N

DeMaio, Jennifer

Publication Date

2026-04-09

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Peer reviewed

Terms Matter

The Use of “Tribe” in African Studies

Jennifer L. De Maio and Daniel N. Posner

Terms matter—especially when, as with the term “tribe,” they carry connotations that extend well beyond an author’s intended meaning. For decades, many scholars of African affairs have used the term “tribe” to refer to the continent’s social categories, and the term “tribal” to refer to the tendency for memberships in those categories to shape behaviors and outcomes. Most scholars who employ such language do so without contemplating the implications of their choice, taking their cues either from older literatures and journalistic accounts that use these terms or from the language that many Africans themselves employ to describe their social attachments and their countries’ political affairs. But the choice matters: using the term “tribe” or its derivations is deeply problematic. A product of colonialism, the label connotes backwardness, reinforces stereotypes about African exceptionalism, and contributes to the tendency for African society and politics to be seen through a “tribal” lens.

These critiques have been made by others (Southall 1970; Mafeje 1971; Rich 1974; Fluehr-Lobban, Loban, and Zangari 1976; Lowe 2008).¹ Our contribution is to go beyond the observation that “tribe” is a problematic term to wrestle with the surprisingly thorny question of what term scholars should actually use. We present data from fifty years of African studies publications on the use of the word “tribe” and its most common substitute, “ethnic group.” We then use these findings to motivate a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of adopting “ethnic group” as the preferred label for African cultural communities. We argue that, while replacing “tribe” with “ethnic group” solves some problems, it introduces others—notably the imposition, by outsiders, of yet another foreign term that Africans do not generally use.

We suggest that the challenge lies in balancing the desirability of avoiding a problematic term with respect for the ways Africans themselves speak about group memberships, while recognizing that these ways are products of Western classificatory schemes that were internalized by Africans through Western-influenced education, media, and socialization (Achebe 1973; Said 1978; Ngũgĩ 1986; Smith 2012).

"TRIBE" AS LABEL; "TRIBE" AS LENS

The term "tribe" is a European import. Most African languages have no equivalent for the English word "tribe" (Ngũgĩ 2009; Mafeje 1971), and the earliest European writings about Africa referred to the continent's communities not as "tribes" but as "nations," "states," "countries," or "kingdoms" (Fluehr-Lobban, Loban, and Zangari 1976). It was not until the eighteenth century, when a scientific racist ideology had come to dominate European understandings of Africans and their indigenous forms of social organization, that Africans began being referred to as belonging to "tribes." A comparison of the language used by European explorers of different eras is instructive of this shift. When Mungo Park wrote about his explorations in the Niger basin in 1790s, he referred to the people he encountered as "nations" and "states." By the time David Livingstone and Henry Morton Stanley were conducting their journeys more than half a century later, during the high era of colonization, the lexicon had changed: their diaries are full of references to the "tribes" they encountered. Such terminology was echoed in the writings of leading anthropologists and colonial officials during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who wrote extensively about African "tribes" and "tribal societies" (Mafeje 1971; Mamdani 1996; Young 1997).

The adoption of "tribe" as a label for African communities was not simply a benign choice of terms. Labeling Africans in this way served to justify their subjugation by the European colonizers. Designating African social organizations as "tribes," and Africans as "tribal" people, suggested that they were primitive and backward. This designation allowed the Europeans to think of themselves as civilizing and Christianizing the people they were colonizing.² The substitution of "tribe" for "nation," "state," or "kingdom"—terms historically given to European groups—also conveyed the implicit message that African social communities, and by extension Africans themselves, were of a lesser order than European peoples. Indeed, because the terms "tribe" and "tribal" tend not to be used to describe people or processes in the Global North, their use in writing about Africa perpetuates the idea that group memberships and intergroup competition are somehow different in Africa than elsewhere in the world.

Equally significant as the importation of the label “tribe” was the reification of “tribe” as the lens through which Africans—and Africa—came to be viewed. Prior to the colonial era, Africans saw themselves as belonging to multiple social groupings: lineages, clans, villages, towns, chiefdoms, language groups, and states, with the relevant identities shifting from situation to situation. As Iliffe writes, “identities shaded into one another, for people speaking the same language might belong to different chiefdoms, while one chiefdom might embrace people speaking several languages. It was an immensely complex social order” (2007, 239). The colonizers took this complexity and shoehorned it into a simpler framework, with “tribes” as the fundamental units. The Europeans arrived in Africa with the pre-supposition that Africans were naturally “tribal” people, and this was the lens through which they saw them and through which they fashioned their instruments of colonial rule.

A key part of this process was the adoption of “tribes” as administrative units. Where “tribes” did not exist, the colonizers created them. Where they already existed, their salience as social categories was reified through their adoption as the units of colonial administration (Mamdani 1996; Young 1997). The Europeans “reduced Africa’s innumerable dialects to fewer written languages, each supposedly defining a tribe” (Iliffe 2007). They promoted narratives of divisions and ancient hatreds between and across “tribal” groups in an effort to divide and conquer (Gourevitch 1998). The result was the transformation of the African social space from one characterized by multiple overlapping community memberships to one in which affiliations with one’s “tribe” came to be viewed as the principal, defining source of social and political identification.

Seeing Africa through a “tribal” lens was the product of these outsiders’ views, but the perspective came to be adopted, and even internalized, by Africans themselves.³ Many Africans exposed to the writings of European anthropologists, historians, and administrators came to adopt the view that their societies should be seen through the lens of “tribe.” As Ngũgĩ writes of African intellectuals: “they have come to see each other through the colonial invention of the tribe, tribalism, and tribal wars, elevating cultural marks of difference such as distinct rituals, and even languages, as the real basis of divisions and communal identity” (1981, 22). But it was not only educated elites who internalized this perspective. The adoption of “tribe” as a lens through which the world was seen extended to non-intellectuals as well. The organization of the colonial state, which endowed “tribal” chiefs with significant powers over land, development funds, and the administration of justice, also created incentives for regular, non-elite Africans to invest in their identifications with the “tribes” that provided access to these resources (Posner 2005, ch. 2).

Like the negative connotations associated with labeling African social communities as “tribes,” viewing Africa through a “tribal” lens has significant problematic implications. By privileging “tribe” as an analytic lens, it causes many researchers to focus—or to focus first—on explanations in which ethnic identities play central roles. This approach leads to analyses that are biased toward concluding that ethnic factors caused the events in question, even when due consideration of other variables might generate alternative, and potentially more powerful, explanations. The fact that such other factors are more likely to be considered (and found to be salient) in non-African settings only reinforces the stereotype that African affairs are indeed “tribal.” For example, understanding the Rwandan genocide as the result of longstanding “tribal” rivalry between Hutu and Tutsi ignores the ways in which colonialism reified intergroup differences. Viewing the civil war in former Sudan as “tribal” overlooks the key role that oil and land played in the conflict. An important question to ask is whether similarly lazy explanations would be offered if the units in conflict were described not as “tribes” but as “interest groups,” as they might be in non-African settings.

A legacy of colonialism, then, was the importation of a term for indigenous African social organizations that was laced with negative, infantilizing connotations and the imposition of a way of thinking about African society and politics—as revolving around “tribal” identities—that has biased the way both Africans and non-Africans think about the continent’s affairs.

HOW “TRIBE” IS USED IN THE LITERATURE AND ON THE GROUND

Because of the disparaging connotations of the term, many scholars in the African studies community have moved away from the term “tribe,” adopting instead the less problematic term “ethnic group.” We document this shift in figure 2.1, which presents data compiled from the first, second and third issue of every fifth volume of four leading African studies journals: *African Affairs*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, *African Studies Review*, and *Review of African Political Economy*. For each article in these issues, we count appearances in the main body of the article of the word stems “trib” (to identify instances in which the author used the term “tribe,” “tribal,” “tribalist,” “tribalism,” “tribesman,” etc.)⁴ or “ethnic” (referring to “ethnicity,” “ethnic group,” or using “ethnic” as a modifier—as for example, in “ethnic politics” or “ethnic favoritism”). The figure reports, for every fifth year between 1965 and 2020, the share of articles including at least one mention of either “trib” or “ethnic.” In all, we coded 756 articles.⁵



Trends in the use of the terms “tribe” and “ethnic” in top African studies journals, 1965–2020.

Source: This figure is derived from the authors’ data analysis.

In the late 1960s, roughly 60 percent of articles published in these four top African studies journals included mentions of “tribe,” compared to roughly 30 percent that referred to “ethnic.” By the 2000s, this pattern had reversed, with occurrences of “ethnic” outnumbering occurrences of “tribe” by nearly two-to-one. In the most recent year surveyed, 2020, 55 percent of articles contained at least one mention of the word “ethnic,” compared to just 18 percent containing mentions of “tribe,” “tribalism,” and so on. While Ekeh’s reflection in 1990 that “it now appears that the term ‘ethnic group’ has replaced the disparaged concept of ‘tribe’ in African scholarship” (1990, 661) was somewhat premature, the movement has been clearly in that direction.

The fact that “tribe” has not completely disappeared from use in academic outlets is noteworthy given the widespread recognition among African studies scholars of the problems associated with the use of the term. Equally significant is that, throughout the period surveyed, group memberships—whether referred to as “tribes” or “ethnic groups”—are mentioned in the majority of articles (see figure 2.2). With the exception of the outlier year of 2015, nearly two-thirds of all published articles mention “tribes” or “ethnicity/ethnic groups.” One explanation for this pattern is that ethnicity is simply a central issue in African affairs, and so *must* be mentioned at least somewhere in the treatment of most topics of research. Another explanation is that the colonial emphasis on “tribes” as the basic building blocks of African society,

and of “tribalism” as the lens through which African politics and society must be viewed, continues to cast a long shadow—a shadow reinforced by generations of postcolonial scholarship that puts ethnicity front and center in its analyses. By this explanation, scholars of Africa emphasize “tribe” or “ethnicity” not because of its fundamental importance to African politics and society but because this is the aspect of Africa they have been taught to see.

Additional evidence for these trends comes from social media data collected in Kenya in the run-up to the 2017 elections. De Maio and Dionne (2021) analyzed more than fifteen thousand tweets by eighty-six candidates running for various levels of political office. Tweets containing the stem “trib” appeared more than ten times as frequently as those containing the word “ethnic.”⁶ This reinforces the point that, notwithstanding the substitution of “ethnicity” for “tribe” by many Africanist scholars, the term “tribe” (or its derivations) remains the preferred word among Africans, or at any rate among aspiring political candidates in Kenya.

However, while “tribe” may be the term that was used, the frequency with which it was invoked suggests that “tribal” or “ethnic” issues were not the subject that the candidates sought to emphasize in their mobilizational messages: fewer than 2 percent of all tweets mentioned either term. To the extent that the contents of the tweets provide a window onto the issues that aspiring political candidates in Kenya saw as important in the run-up to the 2017 elections, ethnicity (however labeled) was not among them.⁷ This stands in



Articles mentioning “tribe” or “ethnic” in top African studies journals, 1965–2020.

Source: This figure is derived from the authors’ data analysis.

marked contrast to the preoccupations of many Africanist scholars, as highlighted in figure 2.2 above.

WHAT, THEN, TO DO?

To recognize that “tribe” is a foreign and problematic term and that the reification of the social categories to which it refers distorts explanations for political and social outcomes is not, however, to say that the term does not denote something real. The units referred to as “tribes” *do* play an important role in social and political life in many African countries. The correlations between “tribal” membership and voting patterns (Gibson and Long 2009), levels of trust (Biggs, Raturi, and Srivastava 2002; Kasara 2013), patterns of trade (Robinson 2016), flows of patronage goods (Burgess et al. 2015; Kramon and Posner 2016), and other important political and social outcomes are too robust to ignore “tribes” as meaningful social units simply because the term that is commonly used for such groups carries negative connotations. Even when causal attribution to “tribes” is misplaced—for example, when an episode of election violence is said to be caused by “tribal hatreds”—membership in a cultural identity group does often play a role (in such cases, as a tool used by local leaders to motivate people to act in ways that serve the leaders’ own political ends). In such situations, “tribal” memberships matter, even if not as direct causes of the outcome at issue and even if not to the degree that the literature’s preoccupation with “tribal” or “ethnic” explanations often suggests. Notwithstanding the problematic nature of the term that is ordinarily used to describe the phenomenon, “tribal” identity groups are, in fact, salient, in many aspects of social and political life in Africa.

One response in the scholarly community has been to concede that “tribe” is an unfortunate term but then to use it anyway—sometimes employing quotes (as we have throughout this chapter) to signify the problematic nature of the label. Another approach is to explicitly discuss the negative connotations attached to “tribe,” provide a lengthy discussion of the colonial origins of the term, and, having done this, go on to use it in the rest of the book or article. This strategy has the advantage of clarifying the problematic character of the label, and sometimes also the fact that the “tribal” units that are discussed are not natural, atavistic attachments but invented administrative categories. Such discussions provide context that may allow readers to resist internalizing the negative associations with the terms “tribe” and “tribal.” However, the drawback of this approach is that it puts the burden on the reader to put the pieces together, and it risks having some consumers of the work read the part of the article or book that employs the term “tribe” without having read

(or read carefully) the part that provides the necessary background discussion of the term's origins and problematic nature.

Another approach, whose adoption is evident in the pattern displayed in figure 2.1, is to eschew the word altogether, substituting the term "ethnic" or "ethnic group" for "tribal" or "tribe." This strategy certainly solves the problem of using a term with negative connotations. It also addresses the issue of using different terms for the same concept in Africa and elsewhere. But, because "ethnic group" is also an imported term, it does not solve the problem of lexical imperialism.⁸ Classifying African social communities as "ethnic groups" rather than "tribes" amounts to embracing another label, furnished yet again by outsiders, that Africans do not use to describe themselves. Insisting on using "ethnic group" rather than "tribe" is similar to insisting on using the term "Latinx" to refer to people of Hispanic, Latino, and Spanish origin in the United States. In the same way that "ethnic group" has been advocated as a substitute for the offensive label "tribe," the term "Latinx" was coined by activists in an effort to provide a non-gendered, more politically correct label for Hispanic Americans. Notwithstanding these worthy intentions, public opinion data suggests that very few Hispanic adults have even heard of the term, and very few express interest in using it to describe their identity (Noe-Bustamante, Mora, and Lopez 2020; Newport 2022). Although we are unaware of similar polling on the use of the term "ethnic group" in Africa, our sense is that it would reveal similar unfamiliarity and disinterest among Africans in adopting it as a substitute for "tribe."

Indeed, a major response to the rejection of the word "tribe" in academic writing about Africa is that "tribe" is the term that Africans themselves use. In part as a consequence of the salience of communal identities in political and social affairs, and in part due to socialization to the use of the term, Africans *do* use the label "tribe" in everyday conversation and to describe themselves and others. References to "tribe" and "tribalism" regularly appear in newspaper headlines and in social media posts (Ojoye 2017; *Daily Guide* 2021; Kandimba and Musika 2022). As Ekeh notes, "while tribalism seems now abandoned in academic scholarship in African studies . . . paradoxically, the use of the term tribalism is enjoying unprecedented boom not only in everyday interactions among ordinary Africans but more especially among high-ranking Africans in government and university institutions" (1990, 661).

The ubiquity of the use of the term by Africans raises challenging questions about the appropriateness of its use by (especially non-African) scholars. Does respect for Africans require eschewing use of the term "tribe" because of its negative connotations? Or does it, instead, require using the term that Africans themselves use to describe their world? By this latter view, insisting on replacing "tribe" with "ethnic group" should be seen not as an act of respect for Africans but as a rejection (or perhaps just an ignoring) of the

terms that Africans themselves use in descriptions of their own affairs. At the extreme, it could be interpreted as an attempt by Western intellectuals to “reinscribe their power to define the world” (Smith 2012, 14)—that is, an attempt by scholars from the Global North to push upon Africans a term that those scholars have decided is appropriate to describe a set of social categories to which they do not themselves belong. To be clear: we do not believe that most non-African scholars who use the term “ethnic group” are doing so as a means of asserting their “power to define the world”; our impression is that most scholars have not thought very much about the fact that “ethnic group” constitutes yet another imported label. But whatever the intentions may be, the effect of using “ethnic group” instead of “tribe” does privilege an outsider’s view of what the “right” term should be over the terms that Africans themselves employ.

The push-back to the push-back, however, is that the main reason that Africans themselves use the term “tribe” is because they were socialized into using it by Western-influenced educational curricula and administrative systems. This raises the thorny question of how much weight should be accorded to local usage, and whether deference to such usage may serve only to reinforce the socialization into the adoption of a highly problematic term. Is the right path to reject both “tribe” and “ethnic group” and instead revert to the labels “nation,” “state,” and “kingdom” that were used by Africans to refer to their communities prior to the arrival of the Europeans? A problem with this approach is that it blurs the salient distinction between ethnic communities whose precolonial manifestations were highly centralized, and thus can properly be labeled “states” or “kingdoms,” and those that were decentralized or that did not exist as coherent communities prior to their “creation” under colonialism (Vail 1989; Mamdani 1996; Werbner and Ranger 1996; Nathan 2019), for which designation by such terms may be misleading.⁹ An appropriate response to this dilemma could be an international conference at which African citizens and scholars come together to decide for themselves what term should be used to refer to the important but fraught concept of “tribal” communities. Non-Africanist scholars can then take their cues from what Africans themselves have decided, rather than impose yet another foreign label.

Another, quite different, rationale for rejecting the term “ethnic group,” for at least some purposes, is that the label is often too broad in its meaning. Social identities in Africa are multidimensional, and if we are to study the conditions under which some social identities become salient rather than others, we need precise terms that distinguish between the many group designations that fall beneath the umbrella category of “ethnic.”¹⁰ For example, Posner’s work on ethnic politics in Zambia turns on the distinction between identity categories rooted in language group, region of origin, and what he

calls “tribe,” by which he means the community defined by the boundaries of the Native authorities constructed by the Northern Rhodesian government during the colonial era (Posner 2005).¹¹ While Posner could certainly have chosen another label for this third identity category, “ethnic group” would not have worked, as the common language understanding of the term encompasses all three of the categories that he seeks to distinguish from one another. In an influential essay on the use of the term “tribe,” Lowe (2008) writes: “If the term ‘tribe’ accurately conveyed and clarified truths better than other words . . . we should use it. But ‘tribe’ is vague, contradictory and confusing, not clarifying.” For some purposes, the term “ethnicity” may be equally vague.

While the question of what to do about the term “tribe” may be unclear, the question of how to respond to the tendency to view Africa through a “tribal” lens is straightforward. Scholars of African affairs must be conscious of the tendency to privilege ethnic (or “tribal”) explanations and ask themselves: is there another account, not involving ethnic attachments, that provides an alternative, and perhaps even stronger, explanation for the phenomenon I am studying? Pushing back against the “tribal lens” does not imply ignoring ethnicity where it may be salient. But it means thinking hard about other factors that might account for the behaviors and processes we seek to explain. Doing so is not easy given the hold that ethnicity has come to have over many scholars’ views of African affairs. But it is necessary work if we are to truly understand the African experience.¹²

CONCLUSION

Although its importance is sometimes overstated, membership in communal groups is a salient feature of many aspects of political, social, and economic life in Africa. As scholars of African affairs, we therefore need a term to describe such memberships. For reasons documented both in this essay and elsewhere, the term “tribe” is problematic for this purpose due to its colonial origins and its deeply negative connotations. However, substituting “ethnic group” for “tribe,” while an improvement in many respects, is an imperfect solution. Because Africans generally do not use the term, insisting on using “ethnic groups” to describe African cultural communities amounts to forcing another foreign term on Africans, albeit one with considerably less undesirable baggage. While we offer no concrete recommendation on the terms that should be used, our hope is that the foregoing discussion will put scholars in a stronger position to make this choice with a fuller understanding of the implications of their decision.

NOTES

1. The broader subject of decolonizing language is discussed in Ngũgĩ (1986), Zeleza (2009), Smith (2012), and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), among others.
2. The comparison between Park, who spoke highly of the intelligence of the people he encountered during his travels, and Livingstone and Stanley, who described the “tribes” they came across as “heathen,” “uncivilized,” and “primitive,” is again instructive of the shift in how Africans were perceived prior to and during the colonial era (Fluehr-Lobban, Loban, and Zangari 1976).
3. For a broader discussion of the impact of colonialism on internalized racism among Africans, see Hamilton (2021).
4. We are careful to rule out appearances of “trib” that do not refer to derivations of “tribe”—for example, “contribution,” “distribute,” “attribute,” and so forth.
5. *Review of African Political Economy* only began publishing in 1974, so the figures for 1965 and 1960 only include data from the four other journals.
6. Authors’ calculations.
7. Of course, it may be that ethnicity was, in fact, a preoccupation of many candidates but they felt it potentially damaging to emphasize this publicly, lest they be called out as “tribalist.”
8. Until recently, few African language dictionaries even had entries for the word “ethnic group.”
9. On the importance of the distinction between contemporary ethnic groups that do and do not trace their roots to precolonial states, see, among many others, Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2013) and Wilfahrt (2021).
10. While “ethnic” identities are commonly distinguished from identities based on religion, race, gender, and socioeconomic status, they are usually understood to encompass identities rooted in language, region, shared culture, caste, and sect, as well as the category commonly referred to in the African context as “tribe.”
11. Posner (2005) provides an example of the approach, described above, of discussing the colonial origins of “tribal identities” at length in an early part of the manuscript and then using the term “tribe” later in the book, relying on readers to have read both parts to fully appreciate the meaning of the term in its later appearances.
12. See Wilfahrt (2021) for a recent example of a study that consciously pushes back against “ethnic” explanations.

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