

# The Colonial Creation of Tribalism in Africa(?)

ISSAH TIKUMAH

*The theory of the colonial creation of tribes in Africa deserves re-examination from a contemporary African viewpoint. The main claim under review is that of Walter Rodney (1972), one of the chief protagonists of this anti-colonial proposition. This paper concludes that although there may be some truth in it, the accusation of the colonial creation of tribes in Africa has been grossly exaggerated. Precolonial African conquering groups had created tribes long before the Europeans came (Jonker 2009; Evans-Pritchard 1940). Colonisation might have encouraged tribalism in Africa by energising group-consciousness in several ways such as creating new names for certain 'anonymous' groups; subjugating hitherto independent tribes under other tribes; and, through the provision of new educational and economic opportunities, facilitated the upward mobility of hitherto downtrodden tribes so that former slaves now became rulers over their previous masters with all the resentments and tensions that entails. However, colonisation neither manufactured actual peoples out of the earth, nor created their differences; colonial officials only twisted and exploited pre-existing differences in new directions for their own nefarious goals and objectives.*

KEY WORDS: Tribalism, precolonial era, colonisation, Africa

## Introduction

Tribalism has often been vilified as the greatest obstacle to peace and progress in Africa (Ki-Zerbo 2006; Reader 1999). As a proper diagnosis of a problem is essential to identifying a sound solution, a factual exposition of theories relating to tribalism is crucial in the efforts to stem tribalism and promote peace and stability on the African continent. Stereotypical colonial theories about the African past as a civilisation-vacuum are coming under attack (Nyoni 2015; Bello 2015; Green 2010; Bellucci 2010; Muiu 2008; Fyle 1999). Western scholars have increasingly endorsed assertions by Africans about a past which was well civilised, under chiefdoms and kingdoms with comprehensive state structures, even at a time when Europe was still groping in medieval darkness. Similarly, African and Africanist historians seem to be unanimous in reporting that precolonial African states were multi-ethnic in population (Rodney 1972; Chinweizu 1975). This multi-ethnicity was born largely out of warfare. Powerful tribes conquered and absorbed weaker tribes into their dominions. However, there has been much written about a Machiavellian-style colonial creation of tribes in Africa for colonialist gains (Southall 1997). This paper aims to examine the merits of the theory of the colonial creation of tribes in Africa.

## Colonial Tribalism in Africa

Like many other concepts in the social sciences and humanities, the word tribe as a sociological or anthropological term does not have one specific, generally accepted definition. However, there is one logical thread

that runs through the defining traits of tribes as depicted in the various definitions and categorisation of groups as tribes: kinship, common ancestry, history, culture, and language (Ronfeldt 2006; Smelser and Baltes 2001; Southall 1997). A tribe is a group of related families, both close and distant in ancestral lineage. They are territory-bound, though individual members may travel far-and-wide, settle and even establish enclaves in other territories, for their survival.

Similarly, in scholarly deliberations, a precise definition of tribalism has yet to be born, because the word tribe itself is ambiguous by definition; what precisely constitutes a tribe lies in the eyes of the beholder. As Southall (1997) pointed out, a multiplicity of definitions only multiply confusion and add nothing to understanding. Here the definition by The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2023) is sufficiently comprehensive: Tribalism is the 'Behaviour, attitudes, etc. that are based on supporting and being loyal to a tribe or other social group; the state of being organized in a tribe or tribes.' The tribe provides its members with economic security by giving them land for farming and other necessities. The need to safeguard the economic security of group members may lead the tribe to become boundary-sensitive and discriminatory, even aggressive, towards other tribes. These two goals: provision of economic needs and defense against outsiders, are referred to as 'moral ethnicity' and 'political tribalism' respectively (Lonsdale in Berman 1998: 324).

The malleability and amorphousness of precolonial tribal identities remain clear. Perhaps the most important question to answer should be this one: 'Did colonisation create tribes in Africa?' The answer to this question is both 'Yes' and 'No'.

We can conceptualise 'colonialism' as 'the imposition of foreign rule by an external power, which culminates in the control and exploitation of the conquered people' (Okon 2014: 2). Motivated by a desire for the economic exploitation of the human and material resources of the foreign lands, political deception and misinformation, as well as military violence and intimidation, were often the chief weapons of the colonialists (Schaller 2012). It is instructive to note that the word 'colony' emanates from the Latin 'colonia' which literally means a 'farm/landed estate'. Having lost their lucrative 'farms' in America in the 18th century, and having been addicted to 'farming', European imperialists had to turn to Africa for new 'farmlands'. Thus, for the colonisers Africa was a farmland and a mine; their purpose in being there was simply to cultivate the land – using the free labour force of the inhabitants of the land itself – and take the produce back to Europe. As such, behind the smokescreen of a paternalistic goodwill mission to enlighten, civilise and maybe eventually equip the colonised with the skills of self-governance and put them on the path of progress towards joining the community of the truly human, the colonial state was primarily and essentially a merciless apparatus of capitalist exploitation, with the singular aim of maximising profit by any means. Based on African cash-crops and wage labour, the colonial political economy rested on a structure of bureaucratic control which was classically authoritarian in character (Bayeh 2015).

Over the last few decades researchers have increasingly identified modern African tribalism as a delinquent child of the forced marriage between the unsettling storm of colonisation on the one hand, and indigenous socio-cultural, economic and political values on the other (Fearon in Weingast and Wittman 2006; Berman 1998; Vail 1989; Horowitz 1985). Europeans justified their invasion of Africa by the pretext of a paternalistic mission to organise and civilise disconnected clusters of acephalous, unruly pockets of primitive peoples, only to discover upon arrival there that 'they were unable to govern without the participation of African allies and intermediaries' (Parker and Rathbone 2007: 102). For instance, in some places, the British 'imported an Indian population to serve them as clerks and merchants' (Chinweizu 1975: 129). But that could only answer one aspect of the governance question for the colonisers.

Lacking in adequate administrative personnel, political legitimacy and cultural understanding, and yet determined

to exploit the human and material resources of Africa, the intruding colonial powers entered into 'alliances with local "Big Men", using ethnically-defined administrative units linked to the local population by incorporation of pre-colonial patron-client relations' (Berman 1998: 305). By the agency of 'bureaucratic authoritarianism', with the colonial administrators established at the top of a hierarchical pyramid of control while local chiefs and sub-chiefs – some of whom were directly appointed or even invented by the colonial administrators (Rodney 1972) – stretched down to the base of the pyramid as the conduits between the indigenous community and the colonial officials. This alliance between the colonialists and tribal chiefs was symbiotic, albeit asymmetrical. With the colonial governor at the peak of the client-patron pyramid, each weaker or less powerful client (the African chiefs and their sub-chiefs or headmen) facilitated access to labour and raw-material resources within his dominion, in return for protection and financial reward from the superior patron. This was at the tribal level. At the intertribal level, through the instrumentality of mapping and the population census, the colonial authority attempted to delineate and demarcate the African peoples into clear-cut tribal definitions with rigid geographical boundaries. In the process, homogeneity was crudely turned into heterogeneity, and heterogeneity tagged with homologous ascriptions. The sentiments of the colonial subjects mattered very little to the colonists who pursued their will with their fingers placed on the trigger of the decimating machinegun (Schaller 2012). The primary goal was colonial administrative convenience for maximum political control and economic exploitation.

With the partition of the indigenous peoples into tribal enclaves whereby one's movement outside of his/her officially demarcated tribal enclave was monitored and scrutinised, the colonial subjects were conditioned to nurture and develop ethnically-informed closed minds with heightened perceptions of otherness, that is, 'us versus them' sentiments and attitudes (Mason and Athow 2001; Christopher 1988; Morrok 1973). It was at this point that the seeds for intertribal hostility in postcolonial Africa were sown by the colonial administration.

The colonial style of the invention of tribes in Africa is aptly summarised by Berman in the following passage:

Thus, through reliance on collaboration with 'tribal authorities' ruling over demarcated, enumerated and supposedly homogeneous administrative units composed of a single tribe [*italics is my highlight*], the colonial state was actively engaged in the invention of ethnicities that often bore little correspondence to pre-colonial identities and communities, and were occasionally, as in the case of the 'Luba' in the Belgian Congo entirely novel creations. Moreover, colonial

states acted to define the culture and custom of the demarcated 'tribes' with a greater degree of clarity, consistency and rigidity than had ever existed before. 'The most far-reaching inventions of tradition in colonial Africa', Ranger notes, 'took place when Europeans believed themselves to be respecting age-old African custom'. Nowhere was this more evident than in the definition of customary law, governing such crucial issues as marriage and access to land and property, which was supposed to be administered by the chiefs and headmen. Relying on its local allies as sources of information on what was expected to be a fixed and consistent body of rules, the colonial state allowed chiefs, headmen and elders to define a customary law that asserted and legitimated their power and control over the allocation of resources against the interests of juniors, women and migrants (1998: 320).

Thus, the creation of administrative units was based on theory rather than reality, that is, the demarcation of administrative units hinged on the false assumption of group homology; and, through the patronising of local chiefs, custom and tradition were manufactured and turned into tools of colonial manipulation. With the motive to prevent the development of trans-ethnic anticolonial collaboration, divide and rule was the strategic logic behind the fragmentation of communities and the creation of tribal enclaves. The consequence of this process of segregation was the development of moral ethnicity and political tribalism in the African polity.

Some nationalist scholars and politicians have gone as far as portraying tribal differences in Africa as a purposeful invention of 'Machiavellian colonial policy' following a divide-and-conquer paradigm (Southall in Grinker and Steiner 1997: 41). A dispassionate inquiry will find such accusations against colonisation to be only somewhat valid. However, colonisation may have indeed created tribes in the sense that some of the entities that came to be designated as tribes only appeared in the literature 'for the first time during the colonial period and must in this sense necessarily be considered a product of it' (Southall in Grinker and Steiner 1997: 41). To buttress this point, Southall cited the case of the Luyia in Kenya to explain how some interest groups (i.e. associations) came into existence as tribes. The Luyia originated from a group formed by politically-intentioned individuals from loosely-related, somewhat acephalous cultural entities, in response to colonial administrative exigencies. On account of their cohabiting the same geographical zone and sharing similarities in culture and politico-economic aspirations, this interest group ended up being consecrated as a tribe by colonial officials. The Luyia people had never been known or heard of until about 1935-1945. 'The fact is that many tribes have come into existence in a similar way to the Luyia, through a

combination of reasonable cultural similarity with colonial administrative convenience', Southall argued (in Grinker and Steiner 1997: 42-3).

The situation in Rwanda and Burundi under the Belgians is another textbook example of how colonial administrators created tribes in Africa. How did 'Tutsi' and 'Hutu' which were, more or less, mere class terminology in precolonial time eventually turn into tribal identity? The colonial administration created a space for mandatory statements of tribal affiliations on birth certificates, travel documents, and so on. Those who identified as Tutsi then became the favoured workers for the colonial administration. This led to the strengthening of tribal identity and the sharpening of the sense of otherness between the Hutu and the Tutsi (Dowden 2009). As part of their divide and rule tactics, colonial administrators deliberately began to encourage and promote diverse African cultures (customs, languages and so on) as a way of intensifying sentiments of group identity and cultural distinctiveness between the various peoples in their colonies (Rodney 1972). Colonial administrators may also have created tribes through the fueling of intertribal tension and animosity by subjugating some (hitherto self-governed) tribes under other tribes, thus fertilising the seeds for inter-community discontent and resentment in postcolonial Africa. A notable case was the British extension of the dominion of the Buganda kingdom to cover the Banyoro lands in Uganda (Green 2010). Thus, as Parker and Rathbone rightly concluded, colonial officials did not actually create group and individual differences, but they pushed these differences 'in dangerous, and ultimately disastrous, new directions' (2007: 47).

Mamdani's (2002: 8) terminology of 'citizen' and 'subject' may be another way to explain the colonial creation of tribalism in Africa. Through Western education opportunities and colonial privileges, colonial policies, so divisively manipulative in intent and character, classified the African kith-and-kin into 'citizens and subjects' on their own land. Those who proved their human credentials by managing to turn themselves into pseudo-Europeans through adaptation to Western culture and subservience to colonial interests, were lifted up to the status of citizenship and lordship over their 'benighted' compatriots who remained in the class of subjects. This made it possible for former slaves, at both intra and intertribal levels, to rule over their former masters. By these internal and external divisions and reversions of power and fortunes, which united 'diverse ethnic groups in a common predicament' under some favoured or privileged tribes; lumped up multiplicities of variant identities under one monolithic whole; and consequently denied 'the existence of an oppressed majority', Mamdani argues the colonisers laid the foundations for the 'string of ethnic civil wars' in postcolonial Africa.

It is necessary to add that the colonial scheme of the invention of tribes, as analysed above, was augmented by two “unenlisted” allies – missionaries and anthropologists. Let it be noted, however, that the role of European/American missionaries in colonial Africa is a rather controversial one, a controversy Roland Ndille captured in this point in the following passage:

While a school of thought holds that the missionaries were motivated by a spiritual revival and response to the call to ‘go ye therefore, and teach all nations... unto the ends of the earth... what I have commanded you’, decolonial and subaltern studies hold the very strong opinion that missionaries played an ambiguous role in preparing the grounds for European occupation and the entrenchment of coloniality. Within this civilizer-colonizer debate, I argue ... that there is a significant amount of historical evidence to justify that missionaries served as forerunners of colonialism and have used missionary correspondences, data on their interaction with the indigenous communities as well as critical secondary literature to present the Cameroon experience (2018: 2).

After considering the pros and cons to the argument, Ndille concludes that the plea that colonisation was the unintended consequence of the humane purpose of missionaries is strongly refuted by the fact that ‘substantial evidence abounds in almost all parts of the world where missionaries made inroad to hold strong to the position that they were not the angels of mercy but conquerors or the foot soldiers of European/American subjugation of indigenous people’ (2018: 8).

Similarly, Okon’s input to the debate is that ‘although there is a glaring absence of scholarly consensus on the role of the missionaries in the colonisation of Africa, the argument seems to favor the view that some missionaries cooperated essentially with colonial authorities in the exploitation and cultural subjugation of Africa’ (2014: 7-8). Okon argues, knowing that they were European and therefore had more in common with the European traders and colonial administrators than their African counterparts, missionaries in Africa, who, moreover, ‘in critical times of need, depended on traders for funds, and relied completely on administrators for physical security and protection’, necessarily had to collaborate with colonial administrators as and when required. Aside from helping to facilitate colonial penetration of the African polities, by orientating their African converts to disparage and shun their African ancestral beliefs, cultures and traditions in favour of western ways of life, missionaries also helped to ingrain on the African psyche the ‘colonial mentality’ (that is the tendency to perceive anything Western as superior

to its African alternative). In this sense, missionaries not only aided colonisation to thrive in Africa, but also helped to hook postcolonial Africa onto European cultural imperialism (Okon 2014: 13).

Focusing on the case of precolonial Xhosa Chiefdoms in southern Africa, Paul Gifford (2012) argued that it was missionary activities that tilled and softened the land for the colonial seeds to eventually germinate on the African soil with minimal toil. Their mission being to convert the people to Christianity, missionaries had to first and foremost learn the languages as well as study the cultures, customs, traditions and understand the psychology of their would-be converts in order to accomplish their evangelical mission. In the process, the missionaries also familiarised Africans ‘with the language and tradition of their future rulers’ – European colonisers, thus eventually building the bridge between the African polity and European colonial rule. When colonial officials eventually arrived in Africa, the missionaries, who had already learnt the languages and cultures of the African peoples and earned their trust, played the role of interpreters and mediators between Africans and the Europeans. Missionaries might have had good intentions from the start, but knowingly or unknowingly, willingly or unwillingly, their intentions seemed to have shifted in the long course of their dealings in Africa. Christian missionaries, Gifford elucidated, had played a pioneering role in the formation of the anti-slavery movement of the eighteenth century that eventually forced European governments to act to halt slavery. Missionaries then set out to replace the slave trade with a battle to reform the African soul for Christ. In the end, however, Gifford concluded, ‘the war was not between God and Satan for the souls of Africans, it was between Europe and Africa for the hearts and minds of the people’ (2012: 9).

There is not much argument about the fact that colonial seizure and occupation of African territories was facilitated through dubious treaties (Parker and Rathbone, 2007). As Chinweizu put it, the African chiefs ‘discovered, too late, that their signatures had been traps’ (1975: 45). Only the most trusting would believe that the missionary interpreters and intermediaries did not condone and connive with their European fellows in the signing of all these land-grabbing treaties. Whatever their motives might have been, Christian missionaries, by accident or by design, prepared the ground for the colonial conquest in Africa. Rodney (1972) studied how the French colonial administration enlisted the support of the Catholic Church in France after realising that the British missionaries’ war to win souls for Christ in Africa was actually winning souls for British imperialism.

If missionaries did indeed pave the way for the colonial onslaught on Africa, then whatever good or evil

colonisation eventually delivered to Africa, including the creation of tribalism, missionaries must share the praise or blame for it. The volatile situation in northern Nigeria is a typical example of how missionaries created political tribalism. By providing western education to Christian converts from minority tribes in northern Nigeria – where Islam was the official religion of the precolonial state and where, for that matter, missionaries won virtually no converts from the Hausa-Fulani Muslim groups – missionaries not only sharpened the sense of otherness in the minority tribes but also, they eventually supplied these minority tribes with tools for political agitation and self-emancipation from their precolonial tribal overlords. To date, as each election demonstrates, religious and political divisions in northern Nigeria go along tribal lines – Islam for the majority tribe and Christianity for the minority tribes, with all the socio-political tensions and hostilities that entails.

The first task of missionaries upon arrival in Africa was to learn the languages of the people they were there to convert, and it was at this point that the missionaries' own role in the invention of tribes began. As Ndhlovu (2014) noted, not only is language one of the primary means by which the cultural coherence of a group is expressed and sustained, but also, group barriers are often coterminous with language barriers. Colonial administrators recognised and, with the 'complicity' of missionaries, utilised the segregative power of distinctive languages in the 'creation' of tribalism in Africa.

Berman explains the point in the following manner:

By compiling grammars and dictionaries from one among a diversity of variant local dialects, usually that spoken around the mission station, missionaries transformed it into the authoritative version of the language of a whole 'tribe' and propagated it through their schools. By creating and disseminating a standardized print vernacular, the missionaries promoted the development of an indigenous literate elite, encouraged the recording of standardized local history and custom, and thereby had an important impact on the conceptual reification of particular ethnic groups and their cultures (1998: 322).

Berman (1998) went on to cite John Peel's (1995) and Terence Ranger's (1983) analyses on the cases of the Yoruba in Nigeria and the Manyika in Zimbabwe respectively. Missionaries' linguistic innovations not only helped to promote and reify the ethnic consciousness of the Yoruba people, but also popularised the very name Yoruba itself; it was in similar ways that missionary activities developed and nurtured the ethnic identity of the Manyika in colonial Zimbabwe.

Anthropologists soon arrived with their own contributions to the invention of tribes in Africa. The role of the anthropologists in colonial Africa is as controversial as that of missionaries. Andrew Apter provides an insightful representation of this controversy:

In the important collection by Asad (1973), James (1973) could cast the anthropologist in Africa as a 'reluctant imperialist' capable ... of openly criticizing colonial authority and policy, whereas Faris (1973) could confirm that those like Nadel were willing co-conspirators in imposing theoretical-cum-colonial order and control (1999: 3).

Sule Bello is direct to the point:

Critical to imperial activities were the essential requirements of justifying its domination by depicting Africans as sub-humans, on the one hand, as well as providing the politico-administrative structures for the management of its colonial territories on the basis of a policy of divide-and-rule, on the other. Not only do these requirements have tremendous ideological implications, they also led to racial segregation and the introduction of "tribal" divisions, or the Bantustanization, of the 'Native' African population (2015: 21).

These exploitatively divisive needs, Bello argues, not only informed colonial anthropologists' research programs, but also determined their choice of research methodology and assumptions. Berman (1998) balances between the two extremes: while anthropologists and colonial officials did not always agree among themselves, British anthropologists certainly shared with the colonial officials the mistaken beliefs and assumptions of socio-cultural homogeneity and primitivity of African communities. British functional anthropologists, whose focus was on cultural integration, unscrupulously generalised application of research findings from one community to a whole tribe without pausing to consider internal variations and without any inclination to place tribal representations in their proper historical contexts. Furthermore, anthropological analysis ended up bequeathing a set of conceptual analytical tools and methodological approaches that a growing indigenous intelligentsia could harness for its own construction of tribal identities (Ericksen 2010). The result was a proliferation of literature of identity constructions and contestations as indigenous historians from every tribe scrambled to create versions of history most favourable to their own tribal constituencies and question the glorious identity claims of rival tribes. Indigenous intelligentsia became the mouthpiece of their tribes both at the level of intertribal relationships and in official dealings with the waning-and-fading colonial administration (Berman 1998).

The colonial masters left more than half a century ago, but the intelligentsia politics of tribalism created by the triumvirate forces of colonial officials, missionaries, and anthropologists remains and even flourishes. The situation that emerged in the footprints of the departed colonial masters was one of *new people, new style, old dance*. The composition of national governments in the postcolonial African state is but a conglomeration of tribal representatives and regional advocates. It is still necessary to caution against the tendency to exaggerate the story of the colonial invention of tribes in Africa. The credibility deficit of such nationalistic theories is often betrayed by their own internal contradictions. It is good, for example, to examine the arguments of Walter Rodney. Condemning the colonial/anthropological accusations of tribal atavism against Africans as 'one of the most important historical arrests and stagnation' Rodney (1972: 275-7) acknowledges, though, that Africans did indeed live in family-based social organisations, of which the largest unit was the tribe, which comprised a group of families with a common ancestry. However, beyond being of the same ethnic stock, sharing a language and culture, Rodney (1972: 276) maintains, 'members of a "tribe" were seldom all members of the same political unit' or commercial interests. Furthermore, the intertribal harmony and solidarity of the African past are evidenced by the fact that all of 'the large states of 19th century Africa were multi-ethnic, and their expansion was continually making anything like "tribal" loyalty a thing of the past, by substituting in its place national and class ties.' But total replacement of ethnic affiliation with civil ties, Rodney explains, may span generations. Besides, within every group, there are always some parochial, conservative tribal or regional elements who would resist change and would attempt to reverse any transition or transformation process. Rodney argues that, far from being a hotchpotch of genetically tribal folks, Africans' inability to depart from tribalism should be blamed on European imperialism. To begin with, European colonisation disrupted and halted Africa's march towards total detribalisation by destroying the well-developed, multi-ethnic precolonial states that had formed the engine of the detribalisation machinery. Besides, Rodney continues, because tribalism could neither be easily destroyed by colonial machinations nor settled comfortably in the unsettling disorientation of colonisation, it 'tended to fester and grow in unhealthy forms'. To exacerbate the matter, the colonial masters themselves soon found intertribal animosity as a powerful divide-and-rule instrument in their constant efforts to stop the natives from uniting against 'their principal contradiction with the European overlords' (1972: 276-7).

Referring specifically to Nigeria, Rodney asserted that there is no historical evidence anywhere of ethnically-based wars between Igbos and Hausas in the pre-colonial era. He then went on to contradict himself by concluding:

'Of course there were wars, but they had a rational basis in trade rivalry, religious contentions, and the clashes of political expansion'. This conclusion dilutes Rodney's assertions of the absence of pre-colonial intertribal animosity, for the question that begs for an answer is 'to what extent could tribe be separated from religion in the pre-colonial era?' A common religion (usually rooted in deified ancestry) is a salient feature of classical tribal identity and ethnocentrism (Ronfeldt 2006). Historically, as Ronfeldt explained, religion-rooted tribalism has been the most ethnocentric, exclusionary and antagonistic type of all tribalisms. James Fearon (in Weingast and Wittman 2006) cited a modern example of the unity of religion and tribalism in the contrast between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

In a booklet entitled *Islam or Tribalism?* (Tikumah 2006), I argued that minority tribes in northern Nigeria (and elsewhere) accepted Christianity only as an escape route from the scorch of Hausa-Fulani tribal chauvinism. A Hausa-Fulani Islamic evangelist in Nigeria once explained to me that people often accused his ancestors of fighting wars to impose Islam on other peoples. But one fact those accusers did not know, he continued, was that in many cases the Hausa-Fulani were fighting economic wars under the banner of religion. Islam has strict rules for fighting wars: when you go out to fight non-Muslims, there is a three-tier procedure you must follow. First, explain the mission of Islam to them, then invite them to accept it voluntarily. If they choose not to accept the faith, then the second option is for you to ask them to sign a peace pact with you: they will never fight you or aid anyone else against you; they will allow you to freely practice, preach and invite people to Islam on their land in a peaceful way; in addition, they will pay annual levy (*jizyah*) to you in return for military protection and security guarantees from the Islamic state. If they refuse the offer of alliance, then the third option is war. Ironically, the Hausa-Fulani 'Islamic' warriors hardly ever gave any chance for the first two options. They always went straight to war. Not only did they rarely give the people they attacked any option to accept Islam, but also, they often took concrete measures to discourage those people from accepting Islam. The secret is, the evangelist concluded, that the payment of *jizyah* included in the second option can only be imposed on non-Muslims; once the people accepted Islam, then the obligation to pay *jizyah* is lifted automatically by Islamic decree; the Islamic state cannot extort any levy from a Muslim apart from the obligatory property-tax (*zakat*) that every other Muslim must pay annually. So, the *jizyah* was often the priority of the Hausa-Fulani warriors and not the religion. As such, they preferred the people they conquered to remain non-Muslims so that they could continue to extort levy from them.

Over the story of the Hausa-Fulani warriors fighting economic wars in the name of religion, much ink has

been spilt by northern Nigerian historians, the very grandchildren and great-grand children of those warriors themselves. See, for example, Sule Mohammed's *History of the Emirate of Bida to 1899 AD* (2011: 183-93). Not only did the Hausa-Fulani warriors prioritise economic interests over Islam, but also, they did so in the most flagrant disregard for Islamic injunctions. For instance, the Islamic law does not allow the *jizya* to be taken in human beings, but in money or material commodity only, yet those ostensible soldiers of Islam would often demand from the vanquished that they should pay the *jizya* in slaves (Mohammed 2011). In short, tribal bigotry of the Hausa-Fulani became as much an attractive motivation for other peoples in northern Nigeria to join the newly arrived Christianity, as it had become an impenetrable barrier to the spread of Islam outside the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group.

In light of the foregoing, as conversion to Christianity automatically turned them into the allies of the more powerful European invaders, precolonial intertribal underlings found Christianity as a way out of tribal humiliation by the powerful tribes. Rodney himself implicitly acknowledged this point: 'It is to be noted that in West Africa, long before the colonial scramble, many outcasts in society and persons who suffered from religious and social prejudices were the first converts of the Christian church' (Rodney 1972: 310).

Similarly, the idea Rodney raised that precolonial inter-tribal wars might have been motivated by economic interests, rather than tribal malevolence, may only be partially true and cannot score high in the test of critical probity; for there is not much evidence of individual tribes fighting intra-group civil wars for economic gains. Except for instances of skirmishes of inter-clan rivalry usually pertaining to succession disputes, tribes did/do not usually fight within themselves. Tribesmen would not rationally fight among themselves over economic interests since sharing of economic gain and possession is one of the central pillars of tribal solidarity (or 'moral tribalism'). Tribes only fought and looted outsiders to acquire cattle, slaves and other forms of wealth. Thus, the choice of battlefield for economic pursuits was informed by tribal affiliation. Moreover, as Rodney himself (1972) pointed out, precolonial rulers rarely seized or sold their own tribesmen as slaves; they only enslaved other tribes. Therefore, the economic factor cannot logically stand alone as Rodney would have us believe; it must be seen as an appendage of tribal bigotry. In other words, granted that economic gain was the end in inter-tribal wars, tribalism was the means to that end.

Precolonial wars in Africa can hardly be separated from tribalism. Even economics and religion were passengers in the tribal vehicle. Colonial administrators certainly did

not create the names Hausa and Yoruba in Nigeria, Xhosa and Zulu in South Africa, Ashanti and Ewe in Ghana and so forth and by the mid-19th century animosities between these peoples were as old in Africa as colonialism was new there. In short, as Isaack Albert aptly put it, 'The attempt to blame Africa's problems on outsiders alone and not Africans themselves, as Rodney did, amounts to a monocausal explanation, if not an over-simplification, of a complex problem' (2011: 5).

## Conclusion

Colonisation has three different images in the perceptions of Africans: for some Africans colonisation was an evil, for some it was a blessing, and for others it was a mixture of both evil and blessing (Parker and Rathbone 2007). It is a crime of scholarship to seek to present colonisation as if, as some nationalist politicians and academics (such as Rodney 1972; Chinweizu 1975; Schaller 2012; and others) have attempted to do, it had just one-and-the-same face in the eyes of all Africans. The downtrodden tribes of the precolonial age would certainly have seen colonisation as a blessing, a liberating force. Colonisation created tribes by unearthing marginal social groups who had been buried alive under the deadweight of the ethnocentric chauvinism of the domineering tribes of the precolonial age, by nurturing the conducive atmosphere for 'ascriptive tribalism' to mutate into 'aspirational tribalism'. As Okon (2014: 169) rightly warned, scholarship driven by sentimental rigidity and prejudice and devoid of 'historical objectivity and neutrality' represents an existential threat to wisdom. As a Dagbana by tribe (the overlord tribe in northern Ghana since precolonial days), I was never a victim – and I mean my forefathers were never victims, but rather, they were perpetrators – of precolonial tribal colonisation. However, in the spirit of siding with the weak, I have to say, even at the cost of causing outrage, that to the extent that colonial tribalism gave voice to the voiceless, created the possibility for the downtrodden tribes of pre-colonisation to also rise from rags to riches, may God bless colonialism. This, however, is not to say that I subscribe to the nonsensical assertion – that in view of the benefits resulting from colonisation such as 'equal' access to education, improved transport facilities, health care and so on – that Africans had voluntarily invited and willingly embraced colonisation for their own good, an assertion Okon (2014) has already denied, citing the abundant evidence of Africans' massive military resistance to colonisation to demonstrate its absurdity. Such an assertion is tantamount to saying that if a woman loves a child she bore out of a violent rape, then the woman had somehow invited the rapist's acts. Colonisation did as much good as it did evil and, for the sake of intellectual credibility, neither its good nor its evil should be twisted and distorted based on sheer sentiment. By creating a somewhat level-playing field in politics and economics for all tribes, including pre-colonial underdogs, colonisation

has contributed to peace and progress in Africa as much as it has created new dimensions of violence and regress on the continent.

## References

- Albert, I. O. 2011 'Pinched, ditched or jinxed? The mantra of African solutions to African problems.' Inaugural Lecture delivered at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, February 3, 2011.
- Apter, A. 1999 *Africa, Empire and Anthropology*, University of Chicago: Chicago, Illinois 60637-1539 <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev.anthro.28.1.577> (accessed 21/02/2023).
- Bayeh, E. 2015 'The political and economic legacy of colonialism in the post-independence African states', *International Journal in Commerce, IT and Social Sciences* February, 2, 2. (February) ISSN:3394- 5702 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273577309> (accessed 14/02/2023).
- Bello, S. 2015 *Emerging Perspectives on the Origins, Functions and Consequences of Ethnocentrism in African Affairs*, ARADA: Kano.
- Bellucci, B. 2010 *The State in Africa*. [http://repositorio.ipea.gov.br/bitstream/11058/6341/1/PWR\\_v2\\_n3\\_State.pdf](http://repositorio.ipea.gov.br/bitstream/11058/6341/1/PWR_v2_n3_State.pdf) (accessed 14/02/2020).
- Berman, B. 1998 'Ethnicity, patronage and the African state', *African Affairs*, July, 97, 388: 305-341. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/723213> (accessed 21/02/2023).
- Chinweizu, 1975 *The West and the Rest of Us*, Random: New York.
- Christopher, A. J. 1988 'Divide and rule', in *Area*, September, 20, 3: 233-240. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20002624> (accessed 14/02/2023).
- Dowden, R. 2009 *Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles*. Public Affairs: New York.
- Eriksen, T. H. 2010 *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (3rd ed), Pluto Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183h0h1.1> <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183h0h1.1> (accessed 14/02/2023).
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1940 *The Nuer: A description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Fearon, J. D. 2006 'Ethnic mobilization and ethnic violence', in B. R. Weingast and D. A. Wittman (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Political Economy*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Fyle, M. C. 1999 *Introduction to the History of African Civilization Precolonial Africa- Vol. 1* University Press of America <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780761814566/Introduction-to-the-History-of-African-Civilization-Precolonial-Africa--Vol.-1> (accessed 19/02/2023).
- Gifford, P. 2012 'The vanguard of colonialism', *Constellations*, 3, 2. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29173/cons17204> (accessed 21/02/2023).
- Green, E. D. 2010 'Ethnicity and nationhood in pre-colonial Africa', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 16, 1. <http://personal.lse.ac.uk/GREENED/NEP.pdf> (accessed 21/02/2023).
- Horowitz, D. L. (eds) 1985 *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, University of California Press: California. <https://pestuge.iliauni.edu.ge/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Horowitz-Donald-L.-Ethnic-Groups-in-Conflict.pdf> (accessed 12/02/2023).
- Ki-Zerbo, J. 2006 'African intellectuals, nationalism and pan-Africanism', in Mkandawire, T. (eds.) *African Intellectuals: rethinking politics, language, gender and development*, Zed Books: London.
- Mamdani, M. 2002 *Citizen and Subject*, Princeton University Press: Princeton.
- Mohammed, S. 2011 *History of the Emirate of Bida to 1899*, ABU Press Ltd: Zaria, Morrok, R. 1973 'Heritage of Strife', in *Science and Society, Summer*, 37, 2: 129-151. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40401707> 14.02.2023 (accessed 11/02/2023).
- Muiu, M. 2008 'Civilization on trial', *Journal of Third World Studies*, Spring, 25, 1: 73-93. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45194438> (accessed 19/02/2023).
- Ndhlovu, F. 2014 *Becoming an African Diaspora in Australia*. Palgrave Macmillan: London.
- Ndille, R. 2018 'Missionaries as imperialists', *Sumerian Journal of Social Science*, 1, 2: 51-58. <https://www.sumerianz.com> (accessed 14/02/2023).
- Nyoni, P. 2015 'What Africa had before colonization', in *This is Africa*, <https://thisisafrika.me/african-identities/africa-colonisation/> (accessed 14/02/2023).
- Okon, E. E. 2014 'Christian missions and colonial rule in Africa', *European Scientific Journal*. June, 10. No.17 ISSN: 1857 – 7881 (Print) e - ISSN 1857-7431 <https://eujournal.org/index.php/esj/article/viewFile/3557/3397> (accessed 15/02/2023).
- Parker, J. and Rathbone, R. 2007 *African History*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Reader, J. 1999 *Africa: A Biography of the continent*, Vintage Books: New York.
- Rodney, W. 1972 *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. (2009 edition) Panaf Publishing Inc.: Abuja.
- Ronfeldt, D. 2006 'Tribes – the First and Forever Form', in *In Search of How Societies Work*, Rand Pardee Center [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working\\_papers/2007/RAND\\_WR433.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working_papers/2007/RAND_WR433.pdf) (accessed 14/02/2023).
- Schaller, D. J. 2012 'Genocide and mass violence in the 'Heart of Darkness'', in D. Bloxham and A. D. Moses (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, 345–364. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199232116.013.0018> (accessed 14/02/2023).
- Smelser, M. and P. Bates (Eds) *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Elsevier USA.
- Southall, A. W. 1997 'The illusion of tribe', in R. R. Grinker, S. C. Lubkemann and C. B. Steiner (eds), *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History and Representation* (2nd ed). Wiley-Blackwell: New Jersey.
- The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/tribalism> (accessed 20/02/2023).
- The American Heritage Dictionary* <https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=tribe> (accessed 20/02/2020).
- Tikumah, I.H. 2006 *Islam or Tribalism?* ABU Press Ltd: Zaria.
- Vail, L. (ed.) 1989 *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, Currey University of California Press: London <http://rk.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft158004rs/> (accessed 20/03/2022).

## Author

Issah Tikumah has years of experience teaching at the university level. He has taught at Ahmadu Bello University (Zaria 2007-2010); University of Cape Verde (2011-2022); and Jean-Piaget University in Cape Verde (2016-2021). As a writer, Tikumah has a number of books – including novels and essays – and academic journal papers to his credit. These publications centre on matters of socio-cultural practices, inter-group (ethnic/tribal) relations, religious affairs and educational development in Africa. His latest publications include *Africanism: Commonsense for Beginners* (2017); *Refugees' Rebellion* (2015) and *Baptism of Orphanhood* (2013). For his critical writings, he was expelled from Nigeria in 2010. Tikumah has received several international scholarly nominations, including: ICORN Guest-Writer (2012); and Elisabeth-Wolffheim Scholar (2013). He is currently a PhD research student under the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.