Ethical Ethnicity: a Critique

by AIDAN CAMPBELL*

IT has become increasingly evident that a conceptual framework of
ethnicity is being employed by analysts for understanding the continent
as the discrediting of African nationalism proceeds apace. Indeed, it
has become a commonplace to assert that part of this project's failure
can be put down to its notorious disregard for indigenous awareness.
'In order to overcome ethnic differences exploited by colonial powers',
according to Alan Fowler, 'many African governments systematically
negated traditional social organisations in the belief that they
'reinforced an unwanted ethnic awareness and, through their values
and practices, acted as barriers to rapid growth and modernisation'.[1]
The conversion to a positive view of tribalism by Basil Davidson has
served as something of a watershed. In 1992 he wrote that while
modern African nationalism amounted to a western imposition, 'The
history of precolonial tribalism…was in every objective sense a history
of nationalism'.[2]

This displacement of conventional nationalism by minority concerns
represents a social rather than a purely ideological shift. The discredited
élite currently in power in Africa is irrevocably associated with African
nationalism, and the new stress on ethnicity provides a rationale for
creating another leadership. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc and
the end of the cold war in 1989, the conditions that underpinned the
old African establishment created through the decolonisation process of
the 1940s and 1950s also began to crumble. Since nothing fundamental
has altered in the relationship between the West and Africa, the new
conditions since 1989 necessarily require the formation of a new élite,
although the need by no means determines that one will be successfully
established.

Historically, however, the West has always sought a solution that is
in some way organic by choosing to advance movements that are
already emerging in African society. That being said, it prefers those

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in Aidan Campbell, *Privileging the Primitive: African ethnicity and the rehabilitation of the West* (London,
Cassell, 1997).
   [1] Alan Fowler, *Institutional Development and NGOs in Africa* (Oxford, 1992), p. 10.
   [2] Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the curse of the nation-state* (London, 1992),
p. 75.

that emphasise the local over the general, the particular rather than the universal, the aboriginal rather than the national, minorities above the majority. Given the cynicism that exists about nation-states in the West, the disposition is even more enhanced today to by-pass those in the Third World and reach out to their indigenous peoples, to 'think global and act local'.

By favouring certain ethnic groups over Africa's nation-state institutions, a number of currently fashionable organisations have more in common with grand old imperialists like Lord Lugard, who introduced indirect rule through African chiefs and emirs, than with the post-war generation of European politicians who negotiated independence with African nationalists. Lugard and the owners of the Body Shop are unlikely allies but both share the preference of working with locally organised Africans. However, 'modern imperialists' who hope to cultivate an African vanguard are embroiled in a dilemma. By way of contrast to the favourable views now held about American Indians – North or South – the notion that African ethnic minorities can also possess a positive image continues to be problematic in countries where long-standing prejudices linger about primordial tribal hatreds.

The overall western attitude towards the concept of African primitivism remains complex. However, three main strands co-exist: the fear of primeval savagery as expressed through the pulp media; the colonial nostalgia that persists in Europe for 'our' African monarchs, as well as so-called 'martial' tribes like the Zulu; and the social constructionist notion that Africans can choose their own identity.

THE OGONI AND THE HUTU

In order to obtain a clearer idea of the complexities of western perceptions of African ethnicity, it will be useful to compare two groups who have recently captured the attention of the media – the Ogoni of the Niger Delta and the Hutu of Rwanda. One of the most interesting features of the coverage accorded to the events surrounding the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni activists in November 1995, was the treatment accorded to this group compared to that given to the Hutu after the massacre of an estimated half-million Tutsi in Rwanda in April/May 1994. Without being judgemental about the merits of either case, it is worth citing some comments about both events in order to obtain a flavour of the distinction being made.

According to a joint letter to *The Guardian* (London) signed by Anita Roddick of Body Shop, Charles Secrett, UK director of Friends of the Earth, Sara Parkin of the Green Party, Glenys Kinnock, a Labour Party member of the European Parliament, and Paddy Ashdown, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Ken Saro-Wiwa's trial [on charges of murdering four Ogoni leaders] resulted from the 'peaceful and effective campaign of protest against the environmental destruction and economic deprivation of the last 40 years perpetrated on them by the international oil companies and in particular Royal Dutch Shell'.[3] *The Economist* (London) agreed that the half-million Ogoni possessed 'a strong sense of identity', and that their land had been 'raped by the extraction of oil'.[4] And it was not long before the Fellows of the Royal Geographical Society in London voted by a large majority to remove Shell as their patron because of its responsibility for the 'exploitation, repression and suffering' of the Ogoni.

A leaflet published by Survival International, which campaigns for the rights of tribal people around the world, raised an issue which directly bears on the treatment of the Ogoni by pointing out that they were only one of the various communities in the Niger Delta whose roots 'go back for thousands of years':

Each local group or clan has its own identity, and often its own language … Formerly people honoured many deities of earth, sky and water, under a supreme God. Today nearly all are Christians, though the old beliefs are by no means dead…

Much of the violence [afflicting Ogoniland] has been attributed by the Nigerian authorities to 'ethnic' or 'tribal' rivalries. But there is evidence that these rivalries have been fomented from outside, and indeed that some of the attacks supposedly by local communities were in fact carried out by soldiers in plain clothes.[5]

Survival International apparently regards the cursory Christian faith of the Ogoni to be unproblematic. For the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, however, his concern for the people of Rwanda centres precisely on his opinion that their Christianity is 'only skin deep':

It's easy to talk about Rwanda being a Christian nation, but by their fruits you shall know them. Though the East African revival started in Rwanda in the thirties and forties, what happened since may indicate Rwanda is not as deeply Christian as we may think.[6]

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[3] *The Guardian* (London), 2 November 1995.
[4] *The Economist* (London), 18 November 1995.
[5] Survival International, *Niger Delta Peoples* (London, 1995).
[6] *The Independent* (London), 16 May 1995, p. 5.

The African Rights group, for its part, believed that the Hutu had become afflicted by a medical condition during the 1994 massacre: 'Genocide is such a pathological political condition that truly unusual motives are required for people to contemplate it…The Hutu extremists were able to tap deep currents of popular feeling.'[7]

An award-winning BBC journalist, Fergal Keane, appeared to agree that the psychological balance of the Hutu was in question: 'Tens of thousands became infected – and I can think of no other word to describe the condition – by an anti-Tutsi psychosis.'[8] For others, however, the Hutu had proved themselves even worse than the wholly European Nazis: 'The dead of Rwanda accumulated at nearly three times the rate of Jewish dead during the Holocaust.'[9] On the other hand, another version of the massacre blamed Rwanda's colonial heritage. According to the former secretary-general of France's *Médecins sans frontières*:

Just as Hitler's grand plan was founded on an engrained European anti-semitism which he played on by singling out the Jews as the source of all Germany's ills, the Hutu radicals are inheritors of the colonial lunacy of classifying and grading different ethnic groups in a racial hierarchy.[10]

Nevertheless, it seems perverse for Alain Destexhe to single out just the Hutu as the only ones to inherit this legacy of lunacy.

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To sum up: the Christianity of the Ogoni may be nominal yet they retain a strong sense of community. They are victims of an oppressive African régime. Their protests are peaceful, though somehow effective at the same time (allegations of trouble between Ogoni and other Delta groups are dismissed as due to the machinations of the military). On the other hand, the perfunctory Christianity of the Hutu is an issue. They are aggressors rather than victims. They also might have a strong sense of identity, but that is a problem rather than an asset. Their conflict with the Tutsi has been anything but peaceful, calling into question the state of their mentality.

Why this difference in treatment between the Hutu and the Ogoni? It is argued in this article that the latter are a prime example of a new African élite that the West is trying to establish throughout sub-

[7] African Rights, *Rwanda: death, despair and defiance* (London, 1994), p. 34.
[8] Fergal Keane, *Season of Blood: a Rwandan journey* (London, 1995), p. 9.
[9] Philip Gourevitch, 'After the Genocide', in *The New Yorker*, 18 December 1995, p. 92.
[10] Alain Destexhe, *Rwanda and Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1995), p. 28.

Saharan Africa, after the collapse of the post-war order, based on the promotion of a favourable attitude towards ethnicity. Is this differentiation between negative and positive images of indigenous peoples just another example of the long-standing western ambiguity about Africans? Historically, this has oscillated between lambasting 'atavistic tribalism' and romanticising the 'noble savage'. It is important to remember that this somewhat startling contradiction is devoid of any African content.

The continent simply serves as a mirror for changing western conceptions of itself. For example, maladjusted 'marginal man', who featured so prominently in colonial critiques of African nationalism, actually reflected Europe's loss of confidence in its imperial mission at that disturbing time. Indeed, according to some commentators, it was the West which lost its bearings during decolonisation. Thus, for Frank Füredi, 'By denying imperialism the Western elite was denying itself'.[11] Many who berated the so-called 'rootless' were really responding to a sense of their own marginalisation in the world. Thanks to the cold war against communism, however, the West temporarily managed to recover its sense of direction. The modern dichotomy between the Hutu and the Ogoni originates in the disorientation that ensued after the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the communist bogey.

Like the Body Shop's work among the Ogoni, various voluntary and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) hope to cultivate a new African élite based on a moral ethnicity. Through increasing their influence in the least privileged region of the globe, groups and agencies from Europe and North America can hope to restore the West's sense of a civilising mission – and its own coherence. The new NGO 'imperialists' see their task as iconoclastic in so far as traditional western prejudices about African indigenism form an important barrier to achieving their ambitious objectives.

AFRICAN TRIBALISM AS MIASMA

Television documentaries and advertisements regularly use coded images that foster misconceptions about African 'tribalism'. A current British army recruitment campaign features an angry African armed with a machine-gun who only stops gesticulating wildly when the (unseen) British officer takes off his sun glasses in order to make direct eye contact. In the press, more basic prejudices get aired frequently.

[11] Frank Füredi, *The New Ideology of Imperialism: renewing the moral imperative* (London and Boulder, 1994), p. 92.

A number of stories circulated in the English liberal press from 1989 onwards concerning plans by an eminent African leader to build a cathedral that was even bigger than the Vatican's St Peter's, albeit in the middle of a jungle. In a report criticising the amount of money that the President of Côte d'Ivoire, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, had spent on building the huge Roman Catholic Basilica of Our Lady of Peace in his home town of Yamoussoukro, John Ezard imagined the place to be swarming with termites, and then added: 'It is also possible to think of one of the occasional, furtive human sacrifices of Ivorian animism being performed on that central white marble altar'.[12] Meanwhile, Gerald Bourke had filed another story from Côte d'Ivoire alleging that 'bizarre ancestral rituals still flourish here' despite the attentions of European missionaries. 'Tradition dictates that the death of a tribal dignitary be marked by human sacrifices; the more powerful the personage, the more skulls he required.' No evidence was provided to substantiate this claim, although Bourke helpfully mentioned that 'Even the president, a staunch Roman Catholic, consults a marabout'.[13] The fact is that the press allowed its imagination to run riot at the alleged malpractices of this particular African leader who, when he died in December 1993, managed to be buried without the sacrifice of any of the many European dignitaries who attended his funeral…or anybody else for that matter.[14]

After one massacre in the tragic Liberian civil war, *Newsweek* magazine ran a feature entitled 'Africa: the curse of tribal war', which stated that 'An ancient plague, whose outbreaks are often bloody episodes like the one in Liberia, continues to afflict the people of sub-Saharan Africa'. Its writers referred to the 'wild profusion' of languages, religions, and ethnic groups in Africa, and claimed that 'such unparalleled cultural diversity brings with it a constant risk of conflict and bloodshed'.[15]

The notorious advertisement by *Médecins sans frontières* designed to raise funds over Christmas 1995 to cope with the crisis in Sierra Leone pictured a man with both his hands amputated:

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[12] *The Guardian*, 1 January 1990, p. 19. Ironically, Émile Zola also traced St Peter's origins to the pagan temples of imperial antiquity in *Rome* (Stroud, 1993), p. 170.

[13] *The Independent*, 9 August 1989, p. 6.

[14] Kaye Whiteman, 'The Last Farewell', in *West Africa* (London), 14–20 February 1994, p. 262: 'Just over 20 heads of state were spotted, including 14 from Ecowas…and six from central Africa…The French presence was a major source of wonder: it looked as if the whole of France's political class was joining to pay tribute to Houphouet-Boigny, who, after all, was one of them, having been a member of the National Assembly who rose to be a Minister of State under de Gaulle, before independence'.   [15] *Newsweek* (New York), 21 June 1993, p. 9.

They're ripping out tongues, gouging eyes and hacking off hands. Christmas in Sierra Leone. We don't understand why men can become ruthless butchers, but in the city of Bo, *Médecins sans frontières* surgeons are dealing with some of the most horrific mutilations they've ever witnessed. Armed groups vying for control of the country's mining areas have found that maiming works better than slaughtering when trying to 'encourage' people to leave their homes.[16]

The sub-text here is clearly Serb-style ethnic cleansing. And the example of Sierra Leone has been used by Robert Kaplan, an American political analyst, in order to make a wider point about what is alleged to be happening elsewhere:

Sierra Leone is a microcosm of what is occurring, albeit in a more tempered and gradual manner, throughout West Africa and much of the under-developed world: the withering away of central governments, the rise of tribal and regional domains, the unchecked spread of disease, and the growing pervasiveness of war.[17]

Tribalism in Africa is directly associated with anarchy. But Kaplan goes further and ties in events there with the fate of the West:

Africa may be marginal in terms of conventional late-twentieth century conceptions of strategy, but in an age of cultural and racial clash, when national defense is increasingly local, Africa's distress will exert a destabilising influence on the United States.[18]

One of the most fashionable of the themes that underpin the West's conception of African tribalism is the spread of epidemics through air travel, and Kaplan makes ample recourse to it. He locates the blame for AIDS on Man's eradication of the African jungle. So too does Richard Preston in a recent novel, where an Ebola-type virus is dispersed along the Trans-African Highway from a source near where the borders of Zaïre, Rwanda, and Kenya meet in Central Africa.[19] The underlying fear is that tribalism, in bringing about the collapse of the African state, will permit the diseases presently contained within the continent to contaminate Europe and North America.

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[16] 'Life is a Human Right', in *The Independent*, 16 December 1995.
[17] Robert Kaplan, 'The Coming Anarchy', in *Atlantic Monthly* (Boston, MA), February 1994, p. 48. [18] Ibid. p. 76.
[19] Richard Preston, *The Hot Zone* (London, 1994), is based around an outbreak of Ebola at the Reston disease centre, Virginia, in November 1989. Bridging the worlds of pulp fiction and the microbiology research laboratory, Laurie Garrett refers to the 1994 Rwandan massacre in her Pulitzer prize-winning book, *The Coming Plague: new emerging diseases in a world out of balance* (London, 1995), where she recalls that the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene staged a hypothetical epidemic scenario one month after Reston, in December 1989. An ethnic conflict had destroyed the 'entire national infrastructure' of an African state, permitting Ebola to spread to Germany and the United States. Ibid. pp. 592–4.

As the cold war was ending in Europe in 1989, a more élitist concern over the growth of ethnicity also surfaced, albeit centred upon the fate of the political institutions around the globe that began fragmenting in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet bloc. This political dissolution was perceived to be creating a vacuum into which ethnic nationalism could spread chaos and anarchy. This mood certainly reflected the East European experience, but evidently also applied to the concurrent demise of the colonially created African state. 'Nationalism typically intensifies when there is an increase in the proportion of people who have a voice in politics', according to Jack Snyder, and 'Ethnic nationalism appears spontaneously when an institutional vacuum occurs'. Indeed, 'It predominates…when existing institutions are not fulfilling people's basic needs, and when satisfactory alternative structures are not readily available'.[20] Snyder's élitism is explicit, yet most western abhorrence at African indigenism seems to stem not so much from its primitivism (often taken to be picturesque), but from its vulnerability to becoming a conduit for unregulated popular involvement in politics.

INVENTED TRIBES

Despite the dominance of the imagery of primitive barbarism in the popular media, contrary perspectives exist in other circles that represent indigenism as a positive feature, thereby challenging the image of Africa as the archetypal symbol of global malaise and decline.

The romantic notion of the 'noble savage' still evokes a response in the West.[21] The celebration of African primitivist art can be traced back to the influence of Paul Gauguin and Pablo Picasso, but has gradually spread beyond narrow Bohemian circles into the mainstream. The Royal Academy's exhibition in London, 'Africa: the Art of a

[20] Jack Snyder, 'Nationalism and the Crisis of the Post-Soviet State', in *Survival* (London), International Institute of Strategic Studies, 35, 1, Spring 1993, pp. 12 and 16. Writing in the same issue of this journal from a similar standpoint, Daniel Welsh remarks on p. 66: 'it is hardly a coincidence that…that extraordinary rise of ethnic consciousness around the world since the 1950s coincided with decolonisation'.

The school that views nationalism as a fundamentalist threat once it grips the masses goes back at least as far as World War II. For an African example, see P. C. Lloyd, 'Class Consciousness Among the Yoruba', in Lloyd (ed.), *The New Elites of Tropical Africa* (London, 1966), p. 334: 'The establishment of universal suffrage in a society where the electorate is largely semi-literate, with loyalties to the town transcending those to the state, leads to increased ethnicity at the higher political levels and among the elite.'

[21] This romanticisation is scornfully debunked by John Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses* (London, 1992), p. 45: the English intelligentsia merge 'the masses back into a pastoral world of birds and wild roses, which redeems…but also eliminates them', because it 'predated the revolt of the masses'.

Continent', from October 1995 to January 1996, was a great success,[22] and the British Museum is to build a new African gallery to put numerous artifacts on permanent display once the British Library vacates the Reading Room.[23]

Among military circles in the upper echelons of society, quiet admiration for the so-called African 'martial' tribes such as the Zulu and the Tutsi is on a par with their enthusiasm for the Gurkhas of Nepal and the Bedouin.[24] Important western forces sided with the Tutsi-dominated *Front patriotique rwandais* in Central Africa and the *Inkatha* movement in South Africa. But top people do not just sympathise with militaristic Africans. The House of Lords recently forced the British Government to send its High Commissioner in Botswana to investigate allegations that the Gaborone régime was transporting the peaceful hunter-gathering Bushmen (also known as the San) out of the Kalahari Desert in 'cattle trucks' in order to develop a safari-style tourist industry there. Laurens van der Post, a confidant of Prince Charles and author of a number of books and TV documentaries about the Bushmen, had for long claimed that they 'are of great importance to understanding our own rejected selves. They are an example of our partnership with nature that we so badly need to renew in order to rediscover the world within us'.[25] His campaign won the support of Baroness Thatcher, Lord Tebbit, and Lord Judd, the former Oxfam chairman, among others. During the days of British rule over the then Bechuanaland Protectorate, however, the Bushmen were at best neglected and at worst hunted down when they attacked cattle herds.

In Uganda, although the coronation of Ronald Mutebi as the Kabaka of Buganda in July 1993 was greeted with widespread approval – Britain's Labour Government had deposed his father in 1966 – some observers interpreted the ceremony as an act of political

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[22] The exhibition did manage to affront some post-modern sensitivities. 'Surely "Africa" as a unified and homogeneous entity is a stereotype that should have been despatched long ago', according to Nancy Van Leyden, 'Africa 95: a critical assessment of the exhibition at the Royal Academy', in *Cahiers d'études africaines* (Paris), 141–142, 36, 1–2, 1996, p. 237.

[23] In the art world, a useful distinction can be made between the nineteenth-century 'Orientalists', who portrayed the Exotic in an awkward demonstration of western superiority, and the twentieth-century 'Primitivists', who believed that the West's abandonment of the mythic aspect of its everyday life was responsible for its *fin de siècle* sense of malaise, and who sought in Africa, and elsewhere, authentic spiritual qualities capable of reviving their society 'by confronting it with its deepest memories'.

[24] According to Cynthia Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers: state security in divided societies* (Harmondsworth, 1980), p. 157, the 'colonial model' for the martial races were typically 'small communities which felt overwhelmed by large indigenous groups and…welcomed foreigners as protectors'.

[25] *The Daily Telegraph* (London), 17 May 1996.

manipulation by the President, Yoweri Museveni, and predicted further upheavals since it seemed to restore the domination of the Baganda. The ritual 'represents the realities of black African allegiance', claimed Tom Stacey: 'I speak of the re-emergence of the *tribe* as the only political entity that in the long run is going to work effectively in post-colonial Africa.'[26]

The Baganda Kabaka-ship had been completely transformed by the British from 1890 onwards, and in one sense its restoration could be seen as something more than a revival of primitivism.[27] According to Ali Mazrui, for instance, 'The capacity of the Baganda to be deeply anglicized and at the same time profoundly traditionalist remains one of the fascinating aspects of these people'.[28] Since the Kabaka-ship had almost become a venerable British institution (Mazrui describes it as an 'Anglo-African institution'[29]), the July 1993 ceremony not surprisingly provoked nostalgia among the old brigade for the days of the empire. But is it legitimate to talk about the colonial invention of tribalism? Were the European powers ever that powerful in moulding African society?

For mainstream apologists of colonialism, demonstrating the existence of pre-modern tribes formed an important part of their justification for imperialism, i.e. 'We at least helped to modernise Africa'. The allied policy of inventing African tribes explicitly contradicts this claim, yet can also be interpreted as a demonstration of colonial omnipotence. As the record has been gradually exposed by scholars, this latter aspect has been placed to the fore by more conservative analysts. They acknowledge that the European authorities undertook the creation of African tribes, though they are reluctant to claim this to be a deliberate programme. After listing a number of 'invented' aboriginal groupings in Uganda and Tanganyika, Philip Gulliver makes the significant remark that they were created 'as much by unconsidered reaction as by positive policy'.

According to Gulliver, the colonial promotion of indigenism was driven by a concern to meet the rising challenge of African nationalism: 'this emphasis on tribe was strengthened in the later opposition of colonial officials to growing nationalism.'[30] From this perspective, the

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[26] Tom Stacey, *The Independent*, 3 August 1993, his emphasis.

[27] See Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa* (London, 1991), pp. 416 passim.

[28] Ali A. Mazrui, *Soldiers and Kinsmen in Uganda: the making of a military ethnocracy* (London and Beverly Hills, 1975), p. 180.　　　　　　　　　　　　[29] Ibid. p. 173.

[30] P. H. Gulliver (ed.), *Tradition and Transition in East Africa: studies of the tribal element in the modern era* (London, 1969), p. 15. For confirmation that the colonial authorities managed to thwart the development of a conventional nationalist movement through this official sponsoring of a tribal agenda, see Crawford Young, *Politics in the Congo: decolonisation and independence* (Princeton, 1965), p. 575, and Frank Füredi, *The Mau Mau War in Perspective* (London, 1989), p. 5.

politicising of a selection of African cultural practices was far from being a conspiracy orchestrated by the West. It more resembled a panic response by colonial authorities reacting to the prospect of increased instability. The promotion of ethnicity seems to have originated from a sense of weakness by European administrators confronted by the threat of opposition: their tribal policies were attempts to react to a society going out of control.

Instead of the European powers inventing African culture, Terence Ranger has demonstrated how they transformed nebulous customs into a rigid structure to suit their own purposes of cultivating a hierarchical élite of chiefs and kings. In his essay on the Manyika of eastern Zimbabwe, Ranger shows that although European missionaries and colonial authorities may have been responsible for slotting Africans into ethnic categories in the first place, Africans were able to respond flexibly to this development and even turn it to their advantage: 'Whites and especially missionaries played a key role in the definition of the Manyika identity but in such a way that the idea was open for all sorts of use by Africans.'[31]

Ranger has successfully rubbished the notion of colonial omnipotence through the invention of tribes, but at a cost. Rather than believe that the strength of African nationalism alone could have been sufficient to extract concessions from the colonial authorities, his perspective emphasises the flexibility of ethnicity as the real source of the power of African nationalism. In his celebrated 1983 essay, 'The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa', Ranger argued that the strength of pre-colonial identity was derived from flexibility:

Almost all recent studies of nineteenth century pre-colonial Africa have emphasised that far from being a single 'tribal' identity, most Africans moved in and out of multiple identities, defining themselves at one moment as subject to this chief, at another moment as a member of that cult, at another moment as part of this clan, and at yet another moment as an initiate in that professional guild.[32]

Through exhibiting such flexibility, Africans could avoid the colonial discourse and pursue their own, more organic versions. In his 1985 book on the Zimbabwean liberation struggle, Ranger mentions how attempts by white Rhodesians to cultivate a bogus layer of loyal chiefs failed: they only recruited 'a sequence of very aged men', and many of

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[31] Terence Ranger, 'Missionaries, Migrants and the Manyika: the invention of ethnicity in Zimbabwe', in Leroy Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London, Berkeley, and Los Angeles, 1989), p. 142.

[32] Terence Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa', reprinted in Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 248.

these collaborators were subsequently shot. On the other hand, the Shona spirit-mediums brought peasants and guerrillas together in a 'community of resistance' against the white occupiers. This rural religion 'prevented the past from being expropriated in its turn by the "belated" traditionalism of Rhodesia Front "tribal politics".'[33]

Ranger has correctly grasped that tribalism is a mediated form, in those times a resultant product of Africans struggling to free themselves from the colonial yoke. But how much substance can we attribute to his notion of a flexible African ethnicity that is capable of transcending the colonial experience, and that holds more responsibility than nationalism for ultimately defeating it? There is no doubt that ethnic consciousness still influences Africans, but it must be worth asking why these primeval cultural survivals are being so privileged today.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ETHNICITY

Ranger's work had been strongly influenced by a school of sociology that has inspired many recent developments in the fields of gender, gay, race, and class structures, as well as ethnicity.

This school, known as social constructionism, relies upon a radical interpretation of the notion that people are malleable. But the prejudice that humanity is fundamentally pliable had traditionally been a conservative one. The Austrian physician F. A. Mesmer (1734–1815) first revealed the suggestibility of individuals under hypnotism. The *fin de siècle* French sociologist Gustave LeBon (1841–1931) then proposed that mobs could also be 'mesmerised' or manipulated by a charismatic personality once they had been whipped up into a state of mass hysteria. Le Bon's seminal work, *Psychologie des foules* (Paris, 1895), was originally written to explain away the success of revolutionaries during the Paris Commune of 1870, but his theory was then adopted by establishment figures throughout the West anxious to inculcate racialism and militarism among the masses, the better to control them.[34]

The proposition that ethnicity is fluid can be traced back to the turn of the century, when society's racial divisions were first replaced by an emphasis upon cultural divisions instead. The German–American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942) posited the existence of many

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[33] Terence Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe* (London, 1985), pp. 14, 206, and 251.

[34] See Robert A. Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology: Gustave LeBon and the crisis of mass democracy in the Third Republic* (London and Beverly Hills, 1974).

'cultures', all equally valid, against the singular notion of Culture, meaning the state of civilisation to which any society can aspire.[35] Boas thereby reconciled his intellectual roots in the conservative German historical school of Dilthey, Ranke, and Rickert with his experiences of immigration into the American 'melting pot'. Contrary to the scientific racists, Boas argued that humanity was not divided racially but culturally. His epigones, such as Ruth Benedict, went on to maintain that society's culture moulded individuals from birth into traits that they kept for life. In many ways this determinism of 'cultural pluralism' simply substituted cultural explanations of human diversity for racist biological ones.[36] Boas, however, in allowing for the impact of migration between societies, made the important concession that cultures can vary under external influence and therefore admitted their fluidity.

The crucial other strand was provided by Edmund Husserl (1858–1936), who was also a product of the nineteenth-century German school of conservative philosophy. He postponed the issue of whether our ideas are real representations of an objective world, and so left that question on one sided ('bracketed off'). For Husserl, while the term 'subjective' refers to a single consciousness, 'objectivity' is reduced to mean those perceptions that had been verified by their common possession in a community, rather than admit any idea of external reality. Instead of the modern expression 'the social construction of reality', Husserl preferred 'an objective consensus between subjects' or the 'intersubjective constitution of the world'. According to James Heartfield, with this theme, 'Husserl influenced

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[35] See 'Franz Boas and the Culture Concept in Historical Perspective', in George Stocking, *Race, Culture and Evolution* (London and Chicago, 1982), ch. 9, pp. 195–233.

[36] Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: race, history and culture in western society* (London, 1996), p. 170, notes how Boas transmutes the familiar hierarchical social structure envisaged by the scientific racists into a more even-handed culturally demarcated society. Thus cultural pluralism implies the equation of social divisions, rather than their eradication.

Though Boas was seen as radical because of his explicit anti-racism, colonial administrators found they could identify with many of his themes. Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown affected a disdain towards Boasians like Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, yet they all, 'under different names, but with similar effect…resurrected Rousseau's noble savage, and presented the primitives as a source of envy to Western society'. Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism* (Cambridge and New York, 1992), p. 119.

According to Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: the 'objectivity question' and the American historical profession* (Cambridge and New York, 1988), pp. 144 and 549, cultural pluralism was particularly popular during the inter-war years because 'a certain detached skepticism towards the norms of one's own society became common' among leading anthropologists after the barbarities of World War I. In the 1950s, however, Boas went into steep decline – the zenith of American hegemony – as anthropology turned to stress 'the unity rather than the variety of cultures' and the concept of development came into its own.

sociologists like Max Scheler, Alfred Schutz and Raymond Aron, and philosophers like Martin Heidegger and, through him, Jean-Paul Sartre,'[37] and thereafter Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault, who gave constructionism a radical dimension. The modern theory of ethnicity is an amalgam, chiefly derived from the contributions provided by LeBon, Boas, and Husserl.

The first book about an African ethnic group written from the constructionist standpoint was published as long ago as 1942. Siegfried Nadel – a Viennese professor who served as an anthropologist for the Anglo-Sudan administration – produced a study of the Nupe of Northern Nigeria, in which he defined the African tribe as 'a group the members of which claim unity on the ground of *their conception* of a specific common culture' (my emphasis). He drew a clear distinction between the openness of bottom-up cultural communities and the rigidity of top-down political units:

> The political unit, unlike culture and community, is exclusive…Cultural groups and communities have fluid boundaries; the association (in our case the political unit) is or is not rigid; but its boundaries…are by definition rigid.[38]

This differentiation between the cultural and the political would eventually evolve into a distinction between moral ethnicity and political tribalism, but in Nadel's time the idea that Africans could chose their own ethnic identity was marginal. Thanks to the post-war boom in the West, it would remain so for the next 40 years. In 1970, for example, Aidan Southall was still contesting the 'ethnicity is fluid' case against all comers: 'To hammer home the importance of interlocking, overlapping, multiple collective identities is one of the most important messages of social and cultural anthropology.'[39]

During the 1980s – and especially since the end of the cold war – the social constructionist school of African ethnicity became the dominant

[37] James Heartfield, 'Marxism and Social Construction', in Suke Wolton (ed.), *Marxism, Mysticism and Modern Theory* (London, 1996), pp. 8–9. It would be churlish to associate social constructionism with the notorious subjectivism of Bishop Berkeley (1685–1753), who argued that nothing exists objectively except as collections of ideas produced by the mind.

[38] Siegfried F. Nadel, *A Black Byzantium: the Kingdom of Nupe in Nigeria* (London, 1942), pp. 17–18. Interestingly, this book was warmly welcomed by that influential advocate of indirect rule Lord Lugard, who wrote the foreword.

[39] Aidan Southall, 'The Illusion of Tribe', in *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (Leiden), 5, 1–2, January–April 1970, p. 36. The first 'modern' social constructionist was actually Paul Mercier, with his 'Remarques sur la signification du "tribalisme" en Afrique noir', in *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* (Paris), 31, 1961. Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the social organisation of culture difference* (Oslo and London, 1969), p. 10, argued: 'We give primary emphasis to the fact that ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus we have the characteristic of organising interaction between people.'

paradigm among the western intelligentsia.[40] Admiration for the products of empire has faded, while substantial disillusionment with the results of independent Africa has continued to increase. The old tribal kingdoms and rulers that duplicated the British monarchy and parliament have been replaced by environmentally sustainable African ethnic minorities, who seek solace in contemplating their past customs and beliefs, tolerating other identities, and generally feeling satisfied living in a multi-cultural milieu that abides by mutual respect – unless and until they are cruelly manipulated by unscrupulous politicians.

But far from the theory of ethnic fluidity arising out of a close analysis of trends in Africa, the popularity of social constructionism derives from the disintegration of society in the West. That explains why constructionist theories – though around for many decades – spent so long on the margins of Africanist thought.[41] The emphasis on the fluidity of ethnicity closely matches the modern western condition of anomie and alienation, the loss of faith in tradition and the lack of coherence in society, and the privileging of the local. Among conservatives, an increasing despair that capitalism can ever 'deliver the goods' has provoked sympathy for ecological movements that present any technological change as a problem. Among radicals, a similar loss of faith in their socialist project resulted in de-prioritising social change in favour of the small-scale. With society at the national level seen as abstract and unrealistic, the region, province, and/or district are viewed as real and pragmatic alternatives. Even trendy globalisation

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[40] See, for example, Crawford Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison, 1976), and Nelson Kasfir, *The Shrinking Political Arena: participation and ethnicity in African politics, with a case study of Uganda* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976). From the 1980s onwards, apart from Ranger's work, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, 1983); Michael Banton, *Racial and Ethnic Competition* (Cambridge, 1983); Paul Brass, *Ethnic Groups and the State* (London and Sydney, 1985); Dov Ronen (ed.), *Democracy and Pluralism in Africa* (Boulder, CO, 1986); Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origin of Nations* (Oxford, 1986); Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: conflict in Kenya and Africa*, Book 1, *State and Class*, and Book 2, *Violence and Ethnicity* (London, 1992); Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: anthropological perspectives* (London and East Haven, 1993); and Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: the politics of the belly* (London and New York, 1993).

[41] Saul Dubow suggests that the conversion of social constructionists to the ethnic agenda in the 1970s was a consequence of their disillusionment with Marxism, which precipitated their final break with the whole modernist project. See 'Ethnic Euphemisms and Racial Echoes', in *Journal of Southern African Studies* (Abingdon, OX), 20, 1994, pp. 355–70. The discrepancy in periodisation between the inception of the academic discourse and the popular explosion of interest at the end of the 1980s was not so much due to any functional requirement that sufficient time must elapse before conceptual innovations seep into the public arena, but more to the fact that it is far easier to relinquish an intellectual outlook than drop decrepit ideologies which none the less serve to prop up society. In addition, unlike academia, members of 'the establishment' did not willingly endure the relativisms of the constructionist standpoint, which they only adopted once their traditional convictions had been found demonstrably deficient in the aftermath of the Soviet crisis.

theories are presented as supporting the rôle of the neighbourhood. As Füredi puts it rather bluntly:

Paradoxically, the more the world becomes internationalised, with every region brought into an intimate relationship with world market forces, the more the singularity of the experience of the parish-pump is insisted upon.[42]

Hence the current antagonism to all things national, and especially the nation-state, is far from expressing any progressive sense of internationalism. It is rather part of a more general hostility to society at large as compared to the parochial.

This partiality to all things local is not just confined to the West. From the Yanomami Indians of the Amazon to the Zapatista supporters in Mexico's Chiapas region, the superiority of the local and indigenous over the wider society is everywhere extolled. In the 1980s, using his South-East Asian experiences, Benedict Anderson brilliantly captured the new version of ethnicity by arguing that local communities imagined their own identity,[43] albeit unconsciously transposing categories generated through the crisis of western society to the Third World. Nevertheless, his conception spread through the literature, and this narrowing perspective has been imposed on developments in Africa. Thus for Wyatt MacGaffey, the difference between an ethnic group and a tribe depends on whose imagination was at work:

In Kongo [a Zaïrean province], an area where one would expect to find tribes if such things existed, we find instead a constant flux of identities…Although both 'tribes' and 'ethnic groups' are imagined communities, the difference between them may be that while an ethnic group imagines itself, a tribe has been imagined by others.[44]

Crawford Young has probably set out the most systematic appraisal of social constructionism as it applies to ethnic identity, which for this US scholar is 'a subjective self-concept', peculiarly suited to encapsulating the experience of the *urban* African:

Urban residence places persons in juxtaposition and social interaction with culturally differentiated individuals, perceived as groups from far more diverse provenience than would be characteristic in the countryside. For both self and other, it is inconvenient to interpret social reality through too complex a mapping system. A reductionist process occurs, whereby roughly similar groups

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[42] Frank Füredi, *Mythical Past, Elusive Future: history and society in an anxious age* (London, 1992), p. 239. For example, despite claims that the world-wide web of the Internet brings people together internationally, they meet only as isolated individuals stuck in their offices or homes, not socially.

[43] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, 1983).

[44] Wyatt MacGaffey, 'Kongo Identity, 1483–1993', in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (Durham, NC), 94, 4, Fall 1995, pp. 1035–7.

in language or even general area of origin are grouped in ordinary social discourse. Reductionism is most pronounced in the perception of others.[45]

After explaining that 'Subjective identity itself is affected by the labels applied by others', and that 'Through a feedback process, when a designation achieves general currency, it may be gradually internalized by the group itself', Young makes the useful point that the original epithets 'Negro' and 'Indian' were eventually adopted by the targets of abuse themselves. He concludes with the proviso that although identity is subjective and fluid, it is 'not infinitely elastic' since physical attributes like skin colour remain more or less indelible.[46] Nevertheless, the interaction of individual imaginations is always allocated more weight in the production of ethnicity by constructionists than, say, wider concerns like socio-economic developments or the impact of international relations upon African society. Why is this in a theory that claims to study social phenomenon?

Social constructionism correctly recognises the contingent character of capitalism, but maintains self-imposed limits on its sometimes useful insights. The fact is that 'social' only means the social interaction of individuals, never society as a whole, and 'construction' is their extrapolation to form an – albeit contingent – community. But can it be true that consensual imaginations create so powerful a determinant in society? There is an assumption that interpersonal relations are able to impose themselves directly on capitalist society, whereas, in fact, they only impinge indirectly – once they have been mediated through the irrational 'invisible hand' of the market. In fact, society cannot simply be extrapolated from the accumulation of interpersonal ties.[47] On the contrary, the forms that these take are derivative of broader economic and political trends in society.

This flaw accounts for a significant misconception about modern ethnicity. The notion of Identity (with a capital 'I') is inherently dependent upon the past, upon background, on your 'roots'. Ethnic identity is naturally conservative, and therefore (in the abstract) repugnant to constructionists. Hence for Jean-François Bayart, the editor of *Politique africaine* (Paris):

The very notion of ethnic group, at least in the form in which it is usually imagined, that of a given entity, going back over centuries and corresponding to a limited geographical area does not square with fact…If this extreme

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[45] Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism*, p. 42.   [46] Ibid. p. 43.
[47] Thus, from another perspective, Eriksen, op. cit. p. 159, mistakenly imagines as regards Mauritius that 'If the trend of interethnic marriages continues, an ultimate effect may be the end of ethnicity as we know it today'.

diachronic flexibility of ethnic identities were recognised historically, one would see that pre-colonial black Africa was not, strictly speaking, made up of a mosaic of ethnic groups.[48]

The emphasis on the *flexibility* is consequently crucial, since this modifies Identity's rigid conservatism by infusing it with such modern conceptions as radicalism, globalism, and the uncertain. Yet, in reality, because of the flaw referred to above, the flexibility of identity derives more from the uncontrolled actions of the market rather than definite interpersonal choices. In conclusion, then, constructionism's 'ethnic flexibility' only puts a gloss on capitalism's usual recasting of traditional social institutions. Cf. Karl Marx's famous expression of Capital's impact: 'All that's solid melts into air.'

The contemporary popularity of social constructionism cannot be put down to its theoretical inconsistencies, however. It is more a result of the collapse of the institutions, parties, and trade unions that people traditionally looked to for both protection and advancement in Europe, and the nationalist project in Africa. In western society today, the idea that you survive by making swops between identities, rather than by joining a movement, has acquired the status of orthodoxy. The notion began on the gay scene and then spread into gender and racial issues – and from there into third-world studies. We know that some scholars have located ethnicity's superiority over nationalism in its ability to provide alternative identities into which Africans could manoeuvre. For the constructionists, then, ethnic multiplicity – or fragmentation – does not pose a problem but is rather a cause for celebration. Fredrik Barth noted as far back as 1969 that the persistence of ethnic identity depended upon the supply of alternatives: 'What matters is how the others, with whom one interacts and to whom one is compared, manage to perform, and what alternative identities and sets of standards are available to the individuals.'[49]

Multiplying identities seemingly express creativity and make for the best possible world. From this perspective, anything which impedes the elasticity of the interchanges of minorities, which seeks to impose definition upon the undefinable, is not only wrong but dangerous. To attempt to define ethnicity any more deeply smacks of 'totalitarianism', 'western conceit', 'male arrogance', or, in academia, 'essentialism'. By placing indigenism into rigid categories or boundaries, essentialism provides the intellectual rationale for ethnic cleansing.

[48] Bayart, op. cit. pp. 46 and 50. The author makes a bow towards the notion of a universal ethnicity with his suggestion that there 'might be an ethnic awareness without ethnic groups'.
[49] Barth, op. cit. p. 25.

Social constructionists frown upon any analysis that tends to probe beneath the surface, any essentialism, because their theory contains a number of contradictory propositions. If we assume that all social phenomena are merely contingent constructions, what happens when ethnicity itself is demystified? Instead of assigning a privileged place to indigenism, let us debunk (or 'deconstruct' in the parlance) it too. If ethnicity is really so fluid, how can cultural diversity be maintained over time? Patently, if cultures are compatible, and can flow into each other, then diversity must eventually be abolished.[50] Again, if there are limits to fluidity to maintain ethnic diversity, what are they? And are they generally applicable?

Meanwhile, what is it about localism that makes it relevant to the modern condition? If ethnicity is globally relevant, and the limits that preserve it are generally applicable, how can constructionism also maintain that universals are essentialist? Or is ethnicity itself culturally essentialist, as some would presumably argue? If so, how does this differ fundamentally from racial theories of African tribalism? Caught as it is between universalism and particularity, fluid ethnicity is left emasculated.

Such criticisms can be taken much further at the philosophical level. While social constructionism readily admits that globalism is an abstraction (albeit mysterious – hence 'chaos theory') and that the nation-state is also abstract (but in an incompetent and even dangerous way – 'risk society'), it insists that its privileged localism somehow remains pragmatically practical. Little does it realise that this 'concrete' parochiality will remain abstract too, so long as it is abstracted from the universal. As will, vice versa, any universal theory that is disconnected from local reality.[51]

Both ethnicity's contested universality and its alleged localism are empty abstractions. This leaves its much-vaunted fluidity looking

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[50] Eugeen Roosens, *Creating Ethnicity: the process of ethnogenesis* (London and New Delhi, 1989), pp. 157–8, seems to recognise this point when arguing that ethnicity is not a primitive phenomenon because minorities seek to maximise (or minimise) their identity to obtain access to high-tech: 'In many cases, a kind of transcultural consensus is reached about the value of a number of products of the modern world...It may take some time, but in the long run high-quality goods win consensus about their worth in widely different cultures. Consequently there is a steady movement in the various cultures towards uniformity.'

[51] See Istvan Metzaros, *The Power of Ideology* (London and New York, 1989), p. 45: 'In this respect it does not really matter whether "universality" or "particularity' dominates in the theories in question. In the end it comes to the same thing. For the dominance of "universalism" in "modernity" can only amount to *abstract* universality. And, by the same token, the cult of "difference" and "particularism" in "postmodernity" remains constrained by the inherent limitations of *abstract* particularity.' In other words, it is only by tracing the mediating links between the universal and the particular that both can be made socially relevant.

rather wooden. Occasionally, social constructionists try to resolve these contradictions by getting identities to mix via individual discourse. Logical consistency is not critical, however, for the success of their project. Anyway, they prefer to accommodate ethnicity rather than abolish it. They celebrate the diversity of minorities, not out of altruistic generosity to other cultures, but to excuse the West from having to explain why it has failed to modernise Africa, as well as why it has lost faith in its own system to deliver decent living standards. Consequently a revived 'cult of the primitive' co-exists uneasily with the usual panic about African savagery.[52]

ESSENTIAL ETHNIC CONFLICT

For social constructionism, tribal rivalry can never be the result of ethnicity, but represents rather its negation. Ethnic clashes are always the result of outside, usually political, interests converting porous ethnic boundaries into over-determined enclaves or ghettos to suit their own agenda. Thus for Alan Phillips, the director of the London-based Minority Rights Group, self-serving politicians have exploited the fears of different communities in Rwanda and Burundi, with the result that 'the polarization of the conflict and the use of indiscriminate violence have subordinated other identities and entrenched ethnic boundaries'.[53] In a monograph attempting to clarify the Zulu/ANC conflict in Natal, Morris Szeftel claims 'It is all too easy to assume that "who says ethnicity, says conflict" and to forget to ask which forces and institutions politicise divisions and structure conflict and how they do it':

Given the intensity of so many ethnic conflicts and the subjectivist nature of ethnicity this tendency to collapse different layers of action together is understandable. Yet we need to remind ourselves that many people with different identities live together in varying degrees of tolerance and even generosity. People can be conscious of a particular identity without it having

[52] Note the justification for using the term 'ethnicity' instead of 'tribalism' given by Eriksen, op. cit. p. 10: 'When we talk of tribes, we implicitly introduce a sharp, qualitative distinction between ourselves and the people we study…between modern and traditional or so-called primitive society. If instead we talk of ethnic groups or categories, such a sharp distinction becomes difficult to maintain. Virtually every human being belongs to an ethnic group, whether he or she lives in Europe, Melanesia or Central America…Anthropologists themselves belong to ethnic groups or nations. Moreover, the concept and models used in the study of ethnicity can often be applied to modern as well as non-modern contexts, to Western as well as non-Western societies.' The implications of this growing tendency to categorise modern society along ethnic lines is fully explored in my forthcoming *Privileging the Primitive: African ethnicity and the rehabilitation of the West.*

[53] Alan Phillips, 'Preface' to Filip Reyntjens, *Burundi: breaking the cycle of violence* (London, 1995), Minority Rights Group International Report, p. 5.

much relevance for the way they conduct their personal lives. They can also exhibit high levels of prejudice against other groups.[54]

Ranger has managed to inject dynamism into our conceptions of pre-colonial African society by portraying it in a way that is strikingly reminiscent of modern theories of globalisation – the rapid movement of commodities around the world economy uninhibited by national-state boundaries. As he explained in 1983, 'Competition, movement, fluidity were as much features of small-scale communities as they were of larger communities.'[55] From this perspective, problems can only arise because of insufficient flexibility where ethnic boundaries meet. In Ndebele-speaking Matabeleland, according to Ranger, Shona guerrillas 'were not sufficiently flexible to be able to adopt the composite ideology which had served them so well throughout two-thirds of the country'.[56] They tried to force the local peasantry to speak Shona. The inevitable result was the Shona/Ndebele conflict in the area following Zimbabwean independence in 1980.

By 1994, Ranger had found another explanation for continuing tribal strife in Matabeleland – the outside interference of Mangosuthu Buthelezi's *Inkatha* movement:

Some of the competing definitions of tribal identity are generous and inclusive while others are narrow and xenophobic. This is how I see the situation in contemporary Matabeleland where the argument rages between an exclusive and narrow Ndebele identity, which seeks to ally itself with Buthelezi's Inkatha, and a much wider idea of Ndebeleness, which includes all the various peoples of Matabeleland, and is perfectly compatible with the possession of a Zimbabwean identity as well as a Ndebele one.[57]

He warns the Zimbabwean Government that its decision to send a delegation of Ndebele chiefs to KwaZulu to 'relearn' Zulu rituals is 'neither informed nor careful. Based on the notion of Ndebele/Zulu essentialism, it already had wide-ranging political repercussions'. Instead, Ranger calls for a 'nuanced' study of the Ndebele image since it is in a state of 'constant development', and makes an appeal for 'careful and informed interventions' – in so far as Ndebele identity 'can be influenced from outside'.[58] The implied deduction here is that if ethnic characteristics are vulnerable to external influences for evil purposes, then they are also open to be affected positively by others.

[54] Morris Szeftel, 'Ethnicity and Democratization in South Africa', in *Review of African Political Economy* (Abingdon, OX), 21, 60, June 1994, p. 191.
[55] Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa', p. 248.
[56] Ibid. p. 216.
[57] Terence Ranger, 'The Tribalisation of Africa and the Retribalisation of Europe', in *St Antony's Seminar Series: Tribe, State, Nation* (Oxford, 1994), p. 10.   [58] Ibid.

THE SEPARATION OF ETHNICITY AND POLITICS

The implication that African ethnicity is flexible and consequently open to political manipulation has been widely drawn, for instance by those conservative commentators who favoured a particularist view of society. According to Gulliver in 1969:

> Both the concept and the operative groups denoted by the term 'tribe' are flexible, sometimes very highly so. The cultural forms and symbols can be, and are, manipulated to conform to and give support to differing groups (i.e. tribes) for differing purposes and interests. Thus the groups on the ground are capable of variable cultural definition according to circumstances. There are no absolute groups of people, defined and delineated once and for all, and to be labelled tribes. This is a general characteristic of particularism within wider society.[59]

Gulliver sought to justify the manipulation of tribes for the sake of colonial stability. For its part, however, social constructionism emphasises the need to protect them *from* manipulation to ensure stability. This distinction is what makes such theories of ethnicity attractive to organisations like the Body Shop and Survival International. The problem they face in building a new African élite is how to make African ethnicity popular in the West, where the dominant perception is fear of tribalism. The conservative conception relies on outside manipulators to control ethnic tensions. But this approach is no longer fashionable since it ignores domestic disapproval over overt western intervention in Africa, as during the Somali débâcle of 1992–3.

Social construction theory meets this concern by separating ethnicity from politics altogether. It assumes that politics in general, and political manipulation in particular, confronts Africa as a problem. On the other hand, an ethnicity unsullied by political restrictions can offer a cultural solution and help generate a more decent African society. According to Gerhard Maré, 'Democracy also necessitates that the boundaries of ethnic groups should be porous, allowing escape and entry. The tighter the definitions of membership, the more totalitarian an ethnic group becomes.'[60]

For many constructionists, outside intervention can be legitimate so long as it is also non-political; that is, if it enables ethnic flexibility to flourish. Indigenism is unproblematic so long as it remains above political manipulation. But logic dictates that such pristine purity can

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[59] Gulliver (ed.), op. cit. p. 34.
[60] Gerhard Maré, *Ethnicity and Politics in South Africa* (London and New Jersey, 1993), p. 4.

only be sustained if ethnicity is cleansed of all political influences. For Maré, for example, 'Ethnicity should neither be privileged, nor should it be granted a special status through prosecution or denial'.[61] But normalising ethnicity by excluding it from political discourse looks little different from imperialist attempts to civilise African tribal customs that Europeans found repugnant, such as the ceremonial killings of prisoners, or female circumcision. Through this modern-day processing, it is African ethnicity itself that is being 'cleansed'. It is being transformed into a cultural entity that will not embarrass western sponsors through raising unmentionable issues.[62]

Eriksen hits a topical note when he argues that those ethnic groups that revitalise themselves through creating a culture and a literature are more likely to survive than minorities who remain illiterate, who 'may easily turn into underclasses' – in other words, end up like the Hutu.[63] Citing the case of the San of the Kalahari, he suggests two possible scenarios: assimilation as a 'low caste' in Botswana society, or they 'develop an elite of interethnic brokers', who can be either educated members of the indigenous group itself, or 'foreign anthropologists, missionaries, or NGOs such as Amnesty International or Survival'.[64]

The Body Shop has forged links with leaders of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People over a number of years by talking to them about environmental concerns since 1993. But the notion that ethnic Africans are more likely to respect nature is itself highly suspect. Environmentalism is a concern mainly promoted by a small, but influential, section of the intelligentsia in Europe and North America. Murray Bookchin has argued that such westerners have turned aboriginals 'into a postmodern parody of the noble savage', and that this romanticisation imposes tough ethical objectives on indigenous peoples:

Worst still, the 'noble savage' myth obliges aboriginals to be superior beings, indeed almost angelically virtuous and exemplary in behavior and thought, if they are to enjoy the prestige of Euro-American recognition and the rights to which they are entitled.[65]

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[61] Ibid. p. 109.
[62] According to two Oxfam fieldworkers, Jenny Rossiter and Robin Palmer, 'Northern NGOs in South Africa: some heretical thoughts', in *Critical Choices for the NGO Community: African development in the 1990s* (Edinburgh, Centre for African Studies, May 1990), p. 44, 'If partners should say something with which an agency disagrees, there is a discrete silence – for example, on the gender awareness of the Mujahideen'.   [63] Eriksen, op. cit. p. 129.
[64] Ibid. pp. 127 and 130.
[65] Murray Bookchin, *Re-enchanting Humanity* (London and New York, 1995), p. 120.

If doubts persist about the attitude of Africans towards this environmental agenda, one can only speculate on how the African clients of the Body Shop feel about openly expressing their opinions on gay and gender rights, female circumcision, and other nostrums of western ethics. For their part, the Body Shop's representatives have papered over accusations of violence attributed to their own Ogoni agents.[66] Let us not forget that Christian missionaries and Victorian administrators hoped they could train their African chiefs not to embarrass them by exposing their more relaxed attitude to sex. The values taught in the Body Shop's Littlehampton headquarters in Sussex may be wholly different from those learnt in, for example, the famous King's College at Budo, where the Ganda aristocracy were trained in the customs of the English public school, but the principle of engineering Africans in western ethics is shared. It is through such an educative process that new African élites emerge that are acceptable to the West.

In an interesting contribution, Charles Tilly reintroduces the state as a potential ally in orchestrating ethnic toleration. Using the example of post-*apartheid* South Africa, he notes:

States selectively confirm, co-opt, reinforce, or even create identity-bestowing social networks within which people organise work, sociability, and collective action; to some degree, all such networks come to depend on the state's backing, or at least its toleration.

Thus the people of KwaZulu apparently depend 'in part on the South African state's toleration of Zulu separateness'.[67]

There is hope, then, even for politicians so long as they foster non-political ethnicity. But John Lonsdale has taken this line of thinking one step further with his conception of a 'moral ethnicity' that supervises African politicians. He wants to revive Hegel's dialectic: 'ethnicity is universal; it gives the identity that makes social behavior possible…It instructs by moral exclusion.'[68] As with any dialectic, the 'inner logic' of ethnicity is continually modified – by contest, debate, and controversy:

my reading of history suggests that ethnicity has been an arena of common moral debate as much as a vehicle of unquestioning sectional ambition. Its

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[66] The journalist Chris McGreal alleged in *The Guardian*, 23 March 1996, that Ken Saro-Wiwa was complicit in the murder of the four moderate Ogoni leaders in May 1994.

[67] Charles Tilly, 'A Bridge Halfway', in *Contention* (Bloomington, IN), 4, 1, Fall 1994, p. 18. The only difference here from the structure of *apartheid*, or separate development, seems to be the deployment of the phrase 'state's toleration'.

[68] John Lonsdale, 'The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: wealth, poverty and civic virtue in Kikuyu political thought', in Berman and Lonsdale, op. cit. p. 328.

deep political language has followed an inner logic partly independent of the changing uses to which its key concepts have been put in high politics. Its values have fired, but also disciplined, ambition. If that be so, the study of an ethnic imagination may not be so subversive of modern African states as is generally believed; it may be constructive.[69]

Lonsdale takes pains to stress that, like political tribalism, moral ethnicity is a contested arena, but whereas the former is motivated merely by selfish intrigue, for the latter the synthesis is 'civic virtue':

Political tribalism flows down from high-political intrigue; it constitutes communities through external competition. Moral ethnicity creates communities from within through domestic controversy over civic virtue.[70]

For this scholar, moral ethnicity can make an effective impact for two reasons. It 'is the only language of accountability that most Africans have'. And it is authentically African, 'Because native, it is a more trenchant critic of the abuse of power than any Western political thought'. Moral ethnicity here poses as the people's guard or night-watchman: 'High-political awareness of the vigilance of moral ethnicity may be, as much as canny political tribalism and a lively civil society, what keeps Kenya at peace.'[71]

But if ethnicity is an elastic arena where values should be openly 'contested', then that makes it much easier to introduce – or to smuggle in – politically correct western ethics. These can perhaps overcome their alienated, foreign character and acquire a genuine African authenticity if the problems encountered through the clash of different cultural values can be resolved amicably.

Can everyone participate in such a debate? Since ethnicity is now widely regarded as substantially a subjective experience, attempts to influence this usually focus on the spheres of culture and education – the ambit of academics and the professions. The anti-political bias of constructionism tends to favour this direction as well. Furthermore, through promoting ethnicity as an aspect of culture rather than a political phenomenon, the masses are conveniently expunged from the debate.[72]

Young decisively plumps for the intelligentsia as the originators of ethnic discourse – 'The ideologization of identity depends upon the emergence of cultural entrepreneurs, almost always associated with the rise of a professional middle class and intelligentsia' – and then goes on to make a useful contrast:

[69] Ibid. pp. 317–18.   [70] Ibid. p. 466.   [71] Ibid. pp. 466–7.
[72] Thanks to Mark Ryan for this point.

A distinction is worth making between the cultural entrepreneur, who devotes himself to enlarging the solidarity resources of a community, and the political broker, who mobilises ethnicity in a given situation, crystallizing collective aspiration in the social and political realm. The latter archetype, the cultural politician, applies his skills to the optimum combination of the existing stock of factors of cultural mobilization.[73]

Here Young places responsibility for the formation of his ethnic 'subjective self-concept' with the African cultural élite in particular rather than the urban African in general. Despite its focus on individual interactions for the creation of ethnic identity, this diminishing of the rôle of general subjectivity by social constructionism indicates that its hostility to politics may derive from fear of mass involvement rather than abhorrence at the morals of the political cadre. For Young, though the cultural entrepreneur initiated the ethnic dialogue, the political broker very often finished it. For the success of 'moral ethnicity', however, it is important that the cultural entrepreneur retains an authoritative influence over the debate.

Social constructionism assumes that Africans cannot be expected to cope with politics – in particular, manipulation by unscrupulous politicians. This aura of paternalism is then augmented by suggestions that 'careful and informed interventions' are required to guide ethnicity in a more tolerant direction. The idea that Africans require an education in ethnic ethics follows closely on the need for 'interventions'. To deny this assessment is to lay oneself open to the charge of essentialism, although such 'guidance' or 'assistance' by external 'facilitators' makes a mockery of the notion that ethnic 'flexibility' and political 'manipulation' are fundamentally different from each other.

Africans can therefore be differentiated into those who accept the West's ethical agenda, like the Ogoni, and those who do not.

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We are now in a position to draw together some preliminary conclusions about the recent debate between supporters of primordial theories of ethnicity and those who prefer an instrumentalist inter-pretation. Both hold assumptions influenced by social construction-ism, but when primordialists perceive ethnicity as a mythical entity emerging out of the past to engulf society, they are accused of essentialism and even complicity in racism by instrumentalists who are

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[73] Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism*, pp. 45–6.

certain that ethnicity is an entirely modern phenomenon. Whereas the latter used to portray social classes and movements as inventing ethnic identities to achieve ambitious goals like the preservation – or the overthrow – of colonialism, their perspective has considerably narrowed down over the years to the current situation where instrumentalism usually means depicting small clusters of people forging indigenist roots as a survival strategy to access scarce resources or ameliorate descrimination.

Although any indigenous authenticity, and all ethnic morality, is by definition denied by the instrumentalists, it was the protagonists of such a standpoint that began to prevail over their primordial rivals in the public arena as soon as the celebrations at the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the African nation-state in the 1980s turned into groans as western institutions too began to crumble in the 1990s. Instrumentalist theories of ethnicity were only briefly flavour of the month, however. The immorality of instrumental ethnicity was frowned upon as tending to exacerbate social instability.

The present vogue is for the morally inclined theories of ethnicity that in reality sanitise African communities. But which morality? Approval for ethical theories of ethnicity has only intensified the pressure to establish an original source for indigenism that can be beyond reproach. In general, the trend has been to depict ethnic communities as morally appropriate because they stand close to nature. In other words, indigenism is naturalised. The ethnic is biological. Despite their profound aversion for anything that smacks of essentialism, social constructionists have fashioned a doctrine with ethical ethnicity that sanctions the same sort of quasi-biological determinism that they have spent their careers attempting to refute.