



Colonialism and Historical Imagination: How Colonial Designs Shaped Post-apartheid Identities

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Abstract

Ethnic identity has continued to undermine national unity and integration across post-colonial Africa, and South Africa seems to be no exception. Post-apartheid South Africa has been bedevilled by the spectre of ethnic politics in a way which shows the durability of toxic ethnicity. Ethnic identities in Africa and South Africa in particular, were forged by colonial powers and apartheid (in the case of the latter) through identity construction and the classic strategy of divide and rule.

Fluid pre-colonial social 'identities' were recast and calcified into hide-bound, immutable and toxic ethnicity that was invested with a separatist consciousness underwritten by corresponding differential economic livelihoods. This study argues for the need to dig deeper into history to understand the state of pre-colonial identities and how colonial designs constructed the latter to undermine resistance by indigenous people and therefore to perpetuate its domination.

The scourge of tribalism has dominated Africa's political imagination since the dawn of liberation (la Hausse, 2000; Webster and Pampallis; 2017; Vail, 1989). Ironically, Africans, including the revolutionary forces that contributed to freedom, have quite often uncritically accepted these extraneous ascriptions of tribal identities, to the detriment of the post-colonial national imaginary. As a result, the post-colonial nation-building project has been invariably debilitated by allegiances rooted in toxic, fractious social identities rather than a 'pan-tribal' vision (Cohen and Middleton, 1970). The historical record, however, shows that tribalism was/is a colonial construct designed to give bearing to colonial domination (Vail, 1989). Weighing in on the history of ethnicity, Vail (1989: 5) argues that "...empirical evidence shows clearly that ethnic consciousness is very much a new phenomenon, an ideological construct, usually of the twentieth century, and not an anachronistic cultural artefact from the past." South Africa is no exception to this seemingly iron law of post-colonial African politics. It follows that only a deeper understanding of the historical processes that formed tribal identities can enable post-colonial, post-apartheid society some heuristic insights into how to manage this menace.

In fact, in terms of historiography (Myers, 2008; Cohen and Middleton, 1970; Harries, 1994; Peires, 1981; Vail, 1989) the term 'tribe' may be a misnomer retrofitting forms of identities into pre-colonial African which just did not exist.

Cohen and Middleton (1970: 2) have questioned

the history of the term 'tribe' and its use by administrators and others in Africa, as well as by anthropologists who have adopted the tribe or ethnic group as a focus of analysis. It would seem that the popular notions of tribes and tribalism only emerged in Europe and America after the development of fairly clear-cut racist stereotypes concerning Africa. Earlier travellers, missionaries and explorers spoke of 'peoples', 'kingdoms', 'sultanates', and 'customs', but only rarely of tribes. However, by the early twentieth century, colonial administrators and those reporting on African territories were using the term to describe what they believed to be clear-cut and stable groups, each having distinct cultural traditions.

In view of the seeming lack of historicity in the terms 'tribe' and 'tribalism' as socio-cultural categories, this

study probes the history of the pre-colonial ethnic relations in the territory which would become South Africa, in order to argue that while forms of group identities were a reality, not only did 'tribalism' as understood in post-apartheid society not exist but also--- and more critically--- that tribal consciousness was the function of colonial conquest (Lekgoathi, 2006; Mudimbe, 1994; Mamdani, 2013). It further holds that the spectre of tribalism in contemporary South Africa is primarily attributable to the history of the strategy of divide and rule of the colonial (and apartheid) state. Tribalism became a useful instrument in the hands of the colonial rulers to divide the indigenous populations with the aim of forestalling resistance to external racial conquest and thus sustaining colonial rule (Lekgoathi, 2006). It is also worth noting that even in cases where colonial policies did not seem to have direct effect on the creation of tribalism, tribalism remained an epiphenomenon of colonial rule and policies. This last point is supported by the absence of evidence in the oral tradition pointing to conscious tribal resentment between or among the indigenous people whose chiefdoms were largely geographically contiguous or co-extensive (Ehret, 2016).

On the contrary, historiography points to the heterogeneity of most pre-colonial African societies, such as the Nguni and Sotho components of the Ndzudza Ndebele (Delius, in Bonner et al, 1989). Engendered by necessity, processes of ethnic co-mingling, co-existing, assimilation and absorption continued well into the era of European settlement.

Indeed, where history records conflict, sporadic or chronic, among the indigenous populations prior to the advent of colonialism, such conflicts are largely ascribable to scarcity of resources such as land, and not to any primordial urge to hate 'the other' (Ehret, 2016; Peires, 1981). Wholesale socio-economic transformation of the pre-colonial landscape which saw the abrupt changes in the economic make-up of African societies because of the era of proletarianisation, migration system, land dispossession and the creation of the reserves, created conditions of precariousness where ethnic solidarity in the face of potential competition from other 'outsiders' became a real threat (Marks in Vail, 1989). Invariably, such periods emerged during the colonial presence (Harries, 1994).

The tribalisation process was driven by the missionaries,

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the English colonial authorities, as well as the Afrikaner governments (i.e., ZAR and the apartheid government) all of which constitute the collective historical agency that effectively constructed the modern state in its evolutionary stages culminating in the Union government of 1910, (Mudimbe, 1994; Lekgoathi 2006; Mamdani 2013). It helps to provide this conceptual clarity given that these three agents (i.e., the Christian missionaries as well as the colonial and Afrikaner governments) may have each acted alone but all of them manipulated the notion of ethnicity for their respective interests (i.e., divide and conquer).

Theoretically, it worth reiterating the platitude that ethnicity, like race, is not a ‘natural’ category but a product of complex historical processes (Delius in Bonner at al, 1989). Against this background, ethnicity can be usefully seen as a historically contingent construct. The amaSwati, baVenda, maTsonga, amaZulu and amaNdebele, for instance, are all break away groups that formed into ethnic units as a result of imposed historical conditions. There are therefore both subjective and objective conditions to the formation of ethnicity. Nowhere is this more amply demonstrated than in the history of the amaZulu people. As John Wright shows in the case of group identity formation of the amaZulu people, the notion of ‘Zuluness’ is a result of convergence of interests between the colonial policy of indirect rule in Natal, the colonial frustrations of the emerging African intelligentsia and the reaction of the Natal chiefs to the urbanisation processes that were beginning to undermine their powers (Carton at al, 2009).

Where the creation of ethnic consciousness was neither

a direct nor an indirect result of colonial machinations, it most likely resulted from the nascent, novel interests of the African intelligentsia and petty bourgeois as they instrumentalised their relatively privileged social location for both self-preservation and self-affirmation, in the emerging disruptive European modernity (Harries, 1994). However, such ethnically-tainted interests were embedded in and were therefore the social outcomes of the constitutive, incipient ensemble of colonial social relations (ibid). Prior to colonial conquest, African societies evinced isolated and insignificant cases of identity-based animosity towards one another (Peires, 1981; Elphic and Giliomee 1979). Besides the fact that mostly people identified themselves on the clan basis, historiography has shown that the co-mingling and mixing of people (including mass desertions) was par for the course across time and space as dictated by their objective conditions (Ehret, 2016). Therefore, ethnicity was highly fluid (Lekgoathi, 2006). In and of itself, this lack of historicity regarding the systemic and ideologised discrimination of other ethnically different people makes a lie to claims of patterned, hidebound tribally defined group identities.

Natal was one of the first areas to see the insidious hand of ethnic experimentation. It was in Natal that the deliberate strategy that underscored British colonial approach first sputtered to life (Mamdani, 2013).

According to a body of historical literature Sir Theophilus Shepstone was the main exponent of this strategy in Natal (Martens in Carton at al, 2009; Mamdani, 1996; 2013). According to Mamdani (2013: 7) “...a theory of history framed the agency of the native, set into motion by the colonial legal system, and targeted by its administrative practice. Tribalism is reified ethnicity. It is culture pinned to a homeland, culture in fixity, politicised, so that it does not move.” So it was that Shepstone, as Martens says, “found in the Zulu monarchy a model for his system of indirect rule”(Martens in Carton, 2009:). Chiefs came in handy to the colonialists as the colonial system sought to avoid tempering with the customary institutions and, instead, used them to prop up colonial rule. This was undergirded by the ideology of ‘tribalism,’ propounded into popular consciousness through essentialising the glories of a ‘Zulu past’ (ibid). The 1847 Natal Locations Commission report was one of the first documents to outline the principles of Shepstone’s native administration and his assertion that prosperity depended on the “management and efficient control

of the large native population" which guided colonial policy in the twentieth century (Martens in Carton, 2009: 125). So, this policy of tribalisation fanned out from Natal to the rest of the country.

In pre-colonial times, many geographic spaces had a conglomeration of ethnic groups living together or sharing borders (Ngcukaithobi, 2018; Harries, 1994; Peires, 1981). In none of these areas does the historical record report toxic ethnic differentiation leading to pronounced ethnically defined resentment or conflicts. Mass migration was not unusual among many of indigenous populations in cases of serious, factional disaffection with their monarchies. To be sure, some ethnic communities did submit to the authority of others for a variety of reasons but historiography does not record ethnicity as the primary or even secondary reason for these volitional submission. Harries sees the Tsonga ethnic consciousness as "very much a human construct, a social product..." which was fabricated over time (Harries in Vail, 2009: 83).

As Harries shows, "by 1860 four small semi-independent clusters of the East Coast refugees had begun to emerge in the Transvaal" (Harries in Vail, 1989: 84). These are the clans which would later be consolidated into 'a Tsonga tribe'. Harries also states that the Nkuna and the Baloyi clans, who occupied the Haernersberg area, fell under the political authority of the Pedi chiefs (ibid). Once again mutual understanding and deference to the much stronger chiefdoms loom larger as the reasons for this arrangement than identity politics. Interestingly, the preceding inter-ethnic co-existence happened outside the context of a colonial presence, which would invariably prove cause for fractiousness born of self-conscious toxic identities.

While, according to Harries (in Vail, 1989), the people classified under the label 'Tonga' were generally referred to in a negative way, this does not in any way suggest an ethnic motif. For instance, Harries argues that this term was used equally by the Zulu speakers and several chiefdoms of Southern Mozambique. Given the multifarious clans and people of shared cultural affinities that lived in the north and south of the Spelonken hills, it would have been easy to establish if indeed this pejorative term was ethnically motivated.

In addition, Harries (in Vail 1989) puts down the

emergence of a unified Tsonga tribe, and thus consciousness, to the agency of Christian missionary anthropologists. Anthropologists played no small role in the formation of what is known as Tsonga-Shangaan people in South Africa. In forging a single Tsonga tribe from the numerous people, the missionaries perceived to be linguistically related, sometimes extraneous reasons took precedence over the realities of the differences among the people. For instance, the European missionary, Henri Berthoud "argued from a pragmatic perspective that a single language with a common grammar and orthography would reduce the mission's printing costs" (Harries in Vail, 1989: 86). It is an indictment that a task of such social and historical implications, as to merge disparate communities into one, could be undertaken for financial reasons. Indeed, centuries after the costs were saved South Africa is saddled with the sticky challenges of 'tribal discrimination'.

What accounts for the tribalisation of the Tsonga people is the fact that missionaries drew on what they wrongly thought to be similarities between the character of European nationalism and that of African people (Harries in Vail, 1989). This is an important point to understand because it shows us how missionary anthropologists universalised European particularity in their approach to the African condition (Serequeberhand, 1991). Insensitive to the variety of the human experience, they blindly imposed their European understanding of 'ethnicity', 'nation' and 'race' on the African world in a way that suggested shared similarities between the two peoples. Aware of this flawed manner of proceeding, Harries contends that "(C)onsequently, when disputes arose between Tsonga and Venda and North Sotho or Venda-speaking chiefdoms, these were interpreted not as clashes between chiefdoms in the way that intra-Tsonga disputes were, but as 'race conflicts'" (Harries in Vail 1989: 90).

Departing from such elementary misconception about different African communities or chiefdoms, missionary anthropologists proceeded to consolidate these different people into one 'tribe', thus laying the grounds for tribal particularity where one never was historically justified. For their side, Africans identified themselves at a clan level 'through the use of a common patronymic', while those they absorbed from outside were assimilated through the

adoption of such patronymic (Harries in Vail, 1989). The cultural force of a patronymic served a cohesive and centripetal purpose, capable of drawing into one common identity disparate people. Once again, we learn that outsiders were volitionally assimilated into their host chiefdoms without their ethnic make-up being the issue for as long as they both adopted and deferred to the prevailing patronymic. At any rate, the illustrative point in this observation is the fact that ethnicity would not have been an issue since both the host community and the in-migrant saw themselves in clan terms and 'belonging to the land of' rather than as a distinctive ethnic entity (ibid).

With the development of mining and agrarian capitalism in South Africa the notion of tribe assumed some practical importance for the interests of both migrant labourers and capital, which has been known to manipulate or occasion social difference to fragment the labour ranks (Chibber, 2013; Myers, 2008). The Native Land Act of 1913 is said to have been meant to undercut the Africans' independent means of living, forcing them to become cheap labour (Magubane, 1979; Wolpe, 1980). This became particularly pointed after the Anglo-Boer War, where wealthy farmers and the emerging mineral revolution agitated for actions against this perceived economic independence of Africans (Harries in Vail, 1989; Terreblanche, 2001). Africans were dispossessed of land in different ways where, "land bought by a combination of more than six Africans had to be purchased on a tribal basis and held by the Minister of Native Affairs for the tribe concerned" (Harries in Vail, 1989: 94). Officialdom was embarking on the strategy of forced tribalisation, while at the same time land dispossession and being pushed into the pre-defined reserves exposed Africans to the insufferable economic hardships, the survival of which called for consolidation of group identities.

With the homogenisation already creating a framework for tribe as a mode of identity, against the background of harsh economic conditions, it was a matter of time before some enterprising individuals exploited these contingent conditions to their advantage. Harries says that '(O)ut of this fluid situation arose a new class of emergent petty bourgeois farmers who, equipped with vernacular literacy, were to lay the basis for the emergence of a Tsonga ethnic consciousness' (in Vail, 1989: 95). With

land dispossession beginning to bite and expulsion from 'white areas' swelling the ranks of the reserve population with little or no chiefly power to provide direction or mitigate their hardships, those with the economic means became natural leaders in the face of the sudden power vacuum in people's lives (ibid). This way tribal consciousness found lush conditions for germination and ossification. Harries tells us that 'the War Office was particularly mindful that if the authorities of the chiefs were to collapse it would be replaced by a wider and more unified political consciousness' (in Vail, 1989: 98), so they made sure that chiefs did duties of civil servants, including collection of tax, supply of labour for public works and so on. As in case of Natal, chiefs were used as an instrument for the entrenchment of tribalism (ibid).

It would appear that co-operation among and between chiefdoms of different ethnic make-up was anything but tribal. More than anything, this political engagement was driven by self-interest, common interests and other forms of self-preservation. Delius (in Bonner et al, 1989: 237) reports that "(I)n 1882 the Pedi pretender Mampuru sought refuge amongst the Ndzudza after having murdered his brother Sekhukhune", and that Nyabela, the Southern Ndebele chief, 'refused to hand him over to the ZAR (Zuid Afrikanse Republiek)...'. While various reasons could be adduced to explain the consent of the Southern Ndebele chief's agreeing to Mampuru's request for sanctuary, the former's refusal to hand him over to the colonial authorities despite the risks such refusal entailed to himself, points to mutual compassion and fraternal relations between the two chiefdoms. The most striking aspect of this episode is the appearance of inter-ethnic solidarity.

It could be plausibly argued that whatever expediency induced Nyabela to accommodate Mampuru could not override ethnic resentment, had the two chiefdoms had a history of ethnic rancour. In fact, there would have been all the more reason either to rebuff Mampuru's request, or give him away to the colonial authorities when the chips were down. Even at the level of commoners, one finds instances of inter-ethnic solidarity. For instance, after being subjected to forced labour on Boer farms following their defeat by ZAR, some of the Ndzudza Ndebele managed to escape and found sanctuary among other African societies, not necessary of Ndebele origin (Delius in

Bonner et al, 1989). Delius states that Zebediela, the Northern Ndebele chief, 'was issued with a stern warning' after two escapee Southern Ndebele women were seen in his jurisdiction (ibid).

While there have been debates among historians as to the reasons for the survival of the Southern Ndebele's cultural distinctiveness into modern day South Africa, Delius attributes this phenomenon to the Southern Ndebele's reaction to conquest (Delius in Bonner et al, 1989). In this regard, Delius (in Bonner et al, 1989: 248) submits that:

The experience of the Ndzudza serves as a reminder that while ethnic identities and traditions may be moulded or even invented by elites, they can also be crafted from below by men and women working with available elements of culture to fashion ideologies and identities which help to sustain them in a harsh and changing world.

According to Delius (in Bonner et al, 1989), the foregoing leads to the compelling inference that people tend to develop or consolidate group identity because of the unique, harsh conditions they experience collectively. Given their shared ethnic background, the Southern Ndebele people reacted to the destruction of their chieftdom by the ZAR through consolidating group solidarity and identity expressed through material culture. The only way of rebuilding their lives was through cementing common group consciousness which manifested itself in their artistry. Nonetheless, this conclusion in no way implicates a conscious effort on the part of this language community to set themselves apart by reason of exclusionary identity.

Among the Zulu people ethnic consciousness was just as much forged by the hand of the colonial authorities. Shula Marks argues that "...twentieth century ethnic consciousness has been the product of intense ideological labour by the black intelligentsia of Natal and the white ideologues of South Africa, designed to confront new and dangerous social conditions" (in Vail, 1989: 217). Thus, Natal saw the emergence and intensification of ethnic consciousness among the Zulu people following the political calculations of those who saw an existential threat to the status quo as a result of the processes of proletarianization (ibid). Atavistic and primeval appeals to ethnic identity, in order to corral the growing black working

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class into conservative and backward-looking form of consciousness, become a rallying point that would help maintain and perpetuate the prevailing colonial power relations. Alarmed at the high rate of militarisation, especially among the African working class, the colonial authorities saw tribalisation as an efficacious means of stemming the tide of radicalisation and shoring up colonialism (ibid). Marks cites G.N Heaton Nicholls, whom she describes as 'an architect of segregation', as the clearest evidence yet that tribalisation was a blatant official policy. Nicholls intones that "(I)f we do not get back to communalism we will most certainly arrive very soon at communism" (ibid)" Class-based politics and nationalist impulse among Africans in Natal in the 1920s therefore saw 'reactionary' measures against the formation of several black traditionalist organisations.

Ironically, among such cultural formations was the 'Zulu Cultural Society', formed by no less a nationalist figure than Chief Albert Luthuli in 1937. Luthuli's motif was rather noble in that he had sought to help ordinary people through cultural affirmation (ibid). On the whole, however, the Zulu Cultural Society would be used as a bulwark by the colonial segregationists to blunt the sharpening political consciousness of the Zulu working class.

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twin phenomena of uncontrollable urbanisation and proletarianisation, which “were acting to transform African ‘ancient habits and customs, their beliefs and modes of being’”(Marks in Vail, 1989: 219). Yet if the white rulers feared the shifting sands of time, so did African chiefs, headmen and homestead chiefs (ibid). While it may not be given that urbanisation negates traditional modes of rule, it would seem as if it does carry within it the seeds of such antithetical culture wrought by the inexorable modern, urban conditions. With their grip on power sliding, the Zulu traditional leadership threw in their lot with the colonisers--- or perhaps their interests just happened to converge. Marks says that as a result of these menacing developments the Natal Native Affairs Commission of 1906-7 heard torrents of such complaints from the Zulu chiefs, headmen and homestead headmen (ibid). In this mix, the black intelligentsia also featured prominently. People like John Langalibalele Dube, leader of the African National Congress Natal faction and intellectuals such as H.I.E and R.R.R Dlomo and many others of modernist cast and upper social crust, sought to restore what they saw as disintegrating Zulu ways (Marks in Vail, 1989). Importantly, formations such as Zulu Society also aimed to push for the recognition of the Zulu monarchy (ibid). Traditionalists could not come to terms with their loss of power as modernisation decomposed fossilised modes of being in which they had been comfortable.

At an objective level, one could argue that even the ordinary (but mostly traditional) Zulu men began to feel the effects of these social changes, especially as poverty and social dislocation took effect, ‘undermining patriarchal social relations’ (Marks in Vail, 1989: 221). Under these fertile historical conditions, the consolidation of ethnic consciousness was not going to be a hard task. At the same time, it is equally not inconceivable to see how such deeply entrenched processes of Zulu ethnic self-awareness would eventuate in morphing into permanent social forms. With a plethora of related developments, Zulu ethno-nationalism would linger on into the post-apartheid era. Evidence of such discriminatory instances, fuelled by Zulu tribal particularism, were recorded across many areas of Natal. Among these are the experiences of Professor Zeke Mphahlele, who encountered Zulu discrimination in Adams College, and reports of Zulu antagonism towards South Africans of Indian

descent (Marks, 1989: 233).

The colonial politics of divide and rule did not stop at the level of creating ‘tribalism’. It also racialized society within the same context of divide and rule. According to Ian Golding, “a distinct Coloured identity...is the outcome of the history of divide and rule” (in Vail, 1989: 241). Pre-colonial ‘South ‘Africa’ was never burdened by inter-ethnic strife between the Khoi, the San and the Bantu, contra post-Apartheid claims to that effect (Peires, 1981; Ngcukaithoni, 2018). Ehret (2016) emphasises the peaceful co-existence among the three language communities, while Legassick (in Elphick and Giliomee, 1979) explains that where frictions erupted between any two of the three groups, resources such as grazing and livestock was invariably the cause. Post-apartheid narratives about the history of Bantu domination, usurpation and dispossession of ‘the land belonging’ the two other communities may very well be the function of post-colonial historical memory (Phillips in Seixas, 2004).

In fact, it would appear that their relations did not differ from those among Africans, who, instead of ethnic loyalties, related to each other as clans and people belonging to chiefs rather than distinctive ethnic groups. For instance, “in 1799 a rising of Khoi and Xhosa under Ndlhambi shattered the complacency of the first British administration (1795-1803)” (Goldin in Vail, 1989: 241). There were several such inter-ethnic co-operation alliances to head off colonial domination. For example, the Khoi and the Tembu collaborated through military alliance against colonial military attacks in 1851 (ibid). One would not expect two antagonistic communities to readily enter into some alliance when it could have suited one of them, especially the weaker one, to exact revenge through aligning with the intruding external forces. This is exactly what happened when the amaMfengu community, which had been at odds with amaXhosa and amaTembu chieftaincies before colonial arrival, readily embraced colonial intrusion as force multiplier to their cause.

This unity in action stung the British into reverting to their time-tested strategy of divide and rule. One result of this political calculation was a move to draw the San and the Khoi into the colonial administration through job incentives, while shutting the doors in the face of the amaXhosa (ibid). In time, this led

to discernible social differentiation among these language groups. The same strategy was extended to the amaXhosa and the amaTembu on the one hand and the Mfengu on the other (ibid).

In the early colonial period, the designation 'coloured' was used interchangeably with the term 'black' or 'negro', throughout the colonial world and especially the British dominated political geography. In South Africa matters changed in 1904. The ethnic distinctions emerged in the 1904 census which included 'White', 'Bantu' and 'Coloured'. White parties serenaded Coloured communities during the introduction of qualified franchise in the Cape, with the object of not only numeric preponderance marginalising Africans (ibid).

A conscious effort was made to sensitise the Coloured communities to the political advantages of dissociating, as well as ethnically differentiating themselves, from Africans (ibid). For good measures, material incentives were introduced to buttress the social differentiation between these two communities. The form these material incentives took included training in artisan skills, to be monopolised by Coloured communities, thereby ensuring that even at the level of working class these racialised differences endured. Tragically, once people are differentiated for material incentives, in a few generations this artificial separation seems 'natural'.

The colonial entrenchment of tribal consciousness sometimes came in both direct and indirect ways, as in the case of the Xhalinga District between 1865 and 1883. Heavily influenced by the colonial ways, including both western style education and religion, the amaMfengu, or 'school people' as they were known, were consciously differentiated from the 'red people' or amaqaba, made up of amaXhosa and abaThembu. Ntsebeza makes the case that 'missionaries were instrumental in the creation of these divisions' (2005: 40). Distinguishing the two ethnic groups was the extent to which each accepted Western influences, while cultural borders proved permeable on each side. The self-perception of the 'school people' was one where they were disposed to bypass the local chiefs in favour of the local commissioners for their disputes. Again, ethnic tensions arose in Qumbu after what the local population saw as the sub-colonisation

by the amaMfengu immigrant community, who were distinguished by being 'Christian and literate', and were to some extent 'forged in the process of colonisation' (Beinard and Bundu, 1987: 108). Such had been the historical depth of the colonial inspired divisions between the amaMfengu and all other ethnic groups in the colonial Cape Colony that by the time of Bantustans in the 1970s, hostilities between Lenox Sebe (Xhosa) and Justice Mabandla (Mfengu) assumed an open ethnic barrier. 'Anonymous' explains the historical roots of these durable ethnic divisions by ascribing them to the 1835 influence of the missionaries who persuaded amaMfengu 'to desert their Xhosa patrons and seek Colonial protection' (in Vail, 1989: 396).

It is abundantly clear from the historical record that ethnicity was deliberately introduced in South Africa, and indeed to the whole African continent, as a strategy of divide and rule. Prior to the onset of colonialism there is no cogent evidence of ethnically defined conflicts. Instead, in Southern Africa especially, there is strong evidence of many chiefdoms being receptive to in-migration from people who may or may not be of their same cultural affiliations, as the survival of many chiefdoms depended on their numeric strength. The Basotho under Moshoeshoe thrived as a conglomerate of refugees from following the advent of Difeqane. Essentialising the notion of a tribe, as well as imbuing it with political and economic utility, was the insidious stratagem of colonialism.

It is true that there are instances where there appears to be ethnic consciousness in the absence of the colonial authorities. In such cases, such as that of the Southern Ndebele people, the historical context would still suggest that people were reacting to a specific situation. In any case, the Southern Ndebele people did not so much differentiate themselves from the 'others' or engage in invidious comparison as to draw closer together in the face of overwhelming odds. There were also cases where the African intelligentsia, petty bourgeois, and traditionalists sought to return to pre-colonial 'African mores and customs' as a rear-guard and indeed last-ditch effort to prevent the inevitable - the inexorable hand of modernisation that was sweeping aside all the cultural norms that used to constitute their world. For their part, the

emergent African petty bourgeois sought to seize the moment by playing to the ethnic gallery for their own economic self-interests.

Lastly, it is worth bearing in mind that some social processes take on a life of their own--- once the seed has been planted. Today, most ethnic challenges draw inspiration from these historical roots, where the notion of a 'tribe' is accepted passively as if the concept is part of the natural order of things. Such is Africa's history!

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