

# Clientelism, tribalism, and ethnic conflict in africa

[Life](#), [Emotions](#)



In this essay I will firstly examine and break down the components of the question. I will separate and clarify the meaning of Clientelism, Tribalism and Ethnic Conflict and deal with each of these as separate entities. Although I will argue each of them on a separate basis. I aim also to show the complex interlinked relationships between the three themes, and argue that because of this the central argument of the question is not easily agreed or disagreed with.

My main argument however, will be to disagree with the central question and advocate that Clientelism was a part of Africa's tradition long before any notion of modernity and colonial influence was present in the continent. I will provide empirical evidence, which supports the inherent presence of Clientelism, and also show how it has strong links with Tribalism, in both its history and modern perpetuation.

Tribalism however is a different matter and I agree with the central statement and advocate that modern African tribalism and notions of ethnicity were mainly a direct result of colonial imposed modernity restructuring. For the final part of my answer I will provide an argument that African ethnic conflict lies somewhere between the two extremes, that it was present in African society before colonial modernity and it was further exacerbated by the restructuring that colonialism brought about.

In my conclusion I will further justify my arguments and advocate a thesis for future development in Africa on tribalism, ethnic conflict and clientelism.

Whether clientelism, tribalism and ethnic conflict were a product not of tradition but of modernity in Africa and a type of development is a difficult

and complex question in many respects, but one to which I have a strong argument. To study this it would be practical to firstly define what I shall mean by modernity and "the type of development" in relation to the main statement, as it will form the crux of my argument.

By modernity and type of development in Africa I will be focusing on colonialism and justifying whether clientelism, tribalism and ethnic conflict were present before the arrival of colonialization or whether they emerged from the new society that restructuring colonial development brought with it. I believe through looking at African society in its modern context and studying empirical data that it is evident to determine whether the three main themes of this essay were present before or after product. What is not so clear however is the complex linkages between and the contexts they operate in.

I advocate for instance that it is impossible to separate out clientelism from tribalism, and that ethnic conflict is closely related to both of these. Due to this in order to justify and construct my argument I must separate out clientelism, tribalism and ethnic conflict and study them individually.

Clientelism To determine from what circumstances Clientelism in African emanated it is important to define the term itself and what it means in African society. Clientelism is also known as patron-client relations/politics, and in its modern form is highly evident in African society.

This clientelism is an exchange between actors who have unequal balance of power, one being weaker, and the other being stronger. It is the patron who is the more powerful and the client who is normally the weaker of the two.

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The exchange between client and patron is formed when the more powerful patron offers something, be it scarce resources or protection to the weaker client. This weaker client offers something back in return, perhaps support or other services to the patron who is in a more dominant position. " bound up with important ties of reciprocity linking those who are related within networks of vertical relationships.

Clientelism can be viewed on both micro and macro levels as a phenomenon of African society (although it is evident elsewhere), and to assess from where this Clientelism originated from it is necessary to see where it is present in modern society. In modern day Africa these patron -client relationships are most visible in the political arena. I argue that clientelism although it is pervasive in African politics did not emerge as a direct result of colonisation, which most people would view as the birthplace of modern African politics and political institutions as a result of the restructuring of African society.

Instead I advocate that Clientelism, although present in modern day politics was in place well before the colonial era and was present in tradition and the era before any notion of modernity was in Africa. I believe clientelism was evident in the traditional African way of life. Pre-Colonial African society was in terms stateless. There was no formal state. African society was based around a system of patron-client relationships, which were the fundamental core of society.

Where there was no state there was no other system, in a vast continent holding various competing tribes and peoples in order for there to be a

'society' arbitrating, protecting and trade were all centred around these unequal deals between various networks. " The power relations of pre-colonial Africa were typically of patrons and clients. 'Big Men' presided over intricate networks of clientage involving reciprocal but unequal relations with 'small boys', as well as power over women and children and those held in the diverse forms and degrees of servitude of pawnship and slavery.

2 Patron-client networks as evident today I argue are based around extended family (and later as I will discuss) tribal loyalties evident from traditional African life. " African communities were pervaded by relations of domination and dependence, based on patriarchal power exercised across differences of genders and generations, lineages and clans, languages and cultures. " 3 The arrival of Colonialism and modernity had utilised these already existing patron-client relationships and used them for their own ends.

The colonial administrators sought chief headmen and perpetuated clientelism by supplementing their meagre salaries and earnings they gained from their official positions with monies gained from trade and other bonuses. (Berman) " Chiefs and headmen were the essential linkage between the colonial state and African societies. This relationship typically took on a patron-client form, and had several important and contradictory consequences. " 4 So I argue rather than colonialism creating these patron-client linkages it merely utilised them.

I believe that clientelism as it is today stemmed from the traditional African societies. So to reiterate African society pre-colonial era although traditional

was not so natural and traditionally uncorrupted to be devoid of the practice of clientelism that we so readily see as corruption today. That is was present and a working framework for society. " The other runs the risk, in reaction, of idealising the virtues of a pre-colonial era supposedly devoid of corruption, the growth of which is supposed to have been caused by the perversion of the social order induced by the arrival of the colonialist Europeans. " 5

I argue that modernity and the formation of formal political institutions and frameworks of power merely perpetuated Clientelism and provided new avenues for the patron-client relationships based on new networks of power. What had always gone on before merely was allowed to operate in a new arena. African politics became " politics of the belly", where individuals used public office for private gain. The scarcity of resources in Africa being as it is, if one person holds an office where he/she controls resources or power politics becomes a way of utilising patron-client networks to distribute these resources and gain support and power. made patron/client relations not only the fundamental mode of access to the state and its resources, but also, as in pre-colonial society, the fundamental relationship between ordinary people and those with wealth or power. "

As before in pre-colonial society clientelism formed the basis of a persons power through the number of people he had domination and arrangements over, now in politics a persons political power is based on how many people pledge support through reciprocal client-patron networks in return for favours.

Clientelism hasn't been formed it has merely morphed into a new generation of deals. " Where land was plentiful and populations small, wealth and power were measured in control of people, in having a large following of family and non-kin dependants. " 7 In politics this clientelism has become diverse, not created by modernity but adapted for its use in formal political positions. Peter Ekeh (1975) described this as being the formation in African society of two publics, where Clientelism has been and always is the norm.

That the same political actors act in both systems of a Civic public and the Primordial public. The citizen in the Civic public works in the beaurocratic institutions of the state, in a supposedly amoral system. The citizen takes from his position and gives nothing in return. This is through clientelism and a network of contacts where state resources and power can be distributed in this way. However the same person in his Primordial public, largely associated with ethnic tribalism and belonging to an extended family/ community, gives out and gets nothing in return.

Due to the kinship of this the actor is expected to do good for his own community, by using his political position. The key idea in Ekeh's case then is that the 'good man channels part of the largesse of the civic public to the primordial public. ' This shows the complex links between the old clientelism networks and what I will argue as the more modern artificial tribal relationships in African society. Tribalism Tribalism in its present form in Africa however is not a traditional aspect of Africanculturel argue as Clientelism had been, but a product of the development imposed on the region by Colonialism.

Colonialism and the social and economic changes it brought with it 'created' the sense of tribalism and strong ethnic identities that are present in modern Africa. That tribes were not traditionally based but created in a means to gain power, resources and recognition in the process of colonial modernising. " The accumulating weight of evidence shows that African ethnicity and its relationship to politics is new not old: a response to capitalist modernity shaped by similar forces to those related to the development of ethnic nationalism in Europe since the late nineteenth century. "

This is not to say there were not tribes in the pre-colonial era, but I believe what tribes existed there were, not so ethnically divided. That the tribes were various groups of mixed race and language peoples who were in a constant state of flux, without the fixed ethnic boundaries one finds today. " Pre-colonial political and socio-cultural boundaries were marked by fuzziness and flexibility; and Africans existed within a reality of multiple, overlapping and alternative collective identities. " 9 What created these tribal identities therefore if they were not present in traditional African society was the arrival of colonialism.

Europeans were of the assumption that African tribes were the basis of society. That the tribes had neat compact boundaries and consisted of culturally identical peoples. This assumption I argue was the basis for tribal creation, as the missionaries especially and other state institutions sought to formalise and categorise these tribal units. The recording of culture and the teaching to a whole area of a 'supposedly' local language, which in many cases was merely a local dialect, began to bring differing peoples together.



This wiped out some cultural differences and creating false collectives of tribal peoples often not historically related, but brought together by colonial boundaries. " The ideology and culture of colonialism, especially in the imagining of African societies by colonial officials and European missionaries, provided the dominant cognitive context moulding the invention of tribes and their customs by Africans themselves. " 10 If the colonial rulers and administration could claim links with these tribes then, through working with the 'traditional' ruling groups in Africa they gained legitimacy in their operations and ruling of the area.

By working with these fixed tribes, the colonial rulers could fragment and control the local populace by breaking it down into smaller loyal groups. In reality the creation of tribes made it easier for the colonial beaurocracy to rule. " Each administrative unit ideally contained a single culturally and linguistically homogenous 'tribe' in which people continued to live within the indigenous institutions and were subject to 'tribal discipline' through local structures of authority. " 11

Although this was a key issue in the creation of Africa tribalism however, I believe that the stronger reason for the formation of tribes was for political gain and recognition. Due to this European notion of African tribalism, in order to hold power with the colonial administration actors must be part of a clearly fixed ethnic group. This created political tribalism, which was the creation of ethnicities by elite groups in African society to gain access to resources and to seek the foundations for a conservative modernisation.

In short it was the manipulation of tribal ethnic identities by Africans themselves for political and economic gains in the face of colonial changes. " Ethnic collective action', according to Mozaffar, 'is predominantly a process of strategic political interaction between self-interested actors with divergent interests'.<sup>12</sup> Ethnic Conflict Ethnic Conflict has both strong links with tribalism and clientelism in Africa. I believe its origin is not so easy to pinpoint as it has been for tribalism and patron-client relations but that ethnic conflict is merely a product of the two.

It was evident in pre-colonial society and was heightened and exacerbated by the modern formation of tribes in the colonial era as I have previously described. Ethnic Conflict was present in traditional African society. African society had never been egalitarian in nature, and a society in which there are unequal power relations is ultimately to have conflict in its midst. " Pre-colonial societies were thus full of conflict and competition, instability and change. " What I believe was created by the form of colonial development placed on Africa was the increase in ethnic tensions as new tribes and identities were created.

Resources in Africa are still scarce and the modern beaurocratic frame work and political distribution of power has led to ethnic conflict becoming more fierce and modern in its use of warfare and state apparatus. The tribal divisions between the Hutus and Tutsis and the ensuing Rwandan war and genocide are examples of this. As the colonial era 'created' false country borders this conflict now often seeps out between neighbouring countries, comprising of different tribal identities over land and resources.

I believe the colonial era did not create tribal conflict but merely change the scale that it is played out upon and provided it with state apparatus, militia, armies that now take conflict into a modern era, on a wider and more devastating scale. Conclusion It is clear to see then that tribalism, ethnic conflict and clientelism, although intricately related all have different origins. I advocate however that they were all evident in some way or form before any type of modernity was present in Africa.

Although I believe Clientelism and ethnic conflict were not created by the development in the colonial era they were not solved or prevented by colonial restructuring. They still persist today. Ethnic conflict I argue was present before the arrival of the Europeans in Africa on a localised scale as fighting between the complex and varied tribes on the continent. With the arrival of colonialism I believe it was merely aggravated by the adaptation of formal tribes and the struggle in politics for scarce resources, power and recognition.

I argue that it has merely adapted and become a more serious problem as the apparatus of state have been used to fight wars etc. The conflict now envelops far larger groups of people and even countries constructed by the colonial boundaries of ethnicity and country. Clientelism is pervasive throughout African politics. It is our normative viewing of clientelism today, as corruption in Africa that I believe has led to some believing it was not in existence in pre-colonial society but a product of the introduction of formal politics and modernity in Africa. of idealising the virtues of a pre-colonial era supposedly devoid of corruption, the growth of which is supposed to have

been caused by the perversion of the social order induced by the arrival of colonialist Europeans. "

What I believe we must consider however that we are applying the principles of the old African order rather to a new context of modern development and democratic politics, etc where impartiality is presupposed. This is what makes us view clientelism as a modern phenomenon rather than its rightful place as a traditional form of dealings in African society.

This is the opposite with tribalism, where many suppose it as a traditional part of African society. It was this European view of tribalism that thought of it as such, however closer examination reveals it to be a politically dynamic and deliberately constructed phenomenon. It was not a traditional aspect of society that was carried over into colonial modernity but a means by which if African created a concrete identity they could gain power and resources in a system which colonialism brought about.