The Threat of a Trousered African: Infantilization, Paranoia and Hierarchy in Colonial Sub-Saharan Africa

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This title is provocative and purposeful. Whilst it may seem confusing and ridiculous, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the 'trousered' or 'detribalised' African was considered a serious threat to social order by colonial authorities. Perhaps, to begin with, we need to set the parameters: what exactly was a 'detribalised' or 'trousered' African?

Spears suggests that 'detribalised Africans' were those who responded most enthusiastically to the colonial 'civilising mission'- an emergent, urban middle class. Spears' definition however, does not quite capture the complexity of detribalisation.[1] Detribalisation is generally understood as the process by which indigenous people and communities are detached from their tribal identity through the efforts of colonialism; becoming westernised, Christianised, 'modernised' even. This is a fundamentally problematic definition: it fails to differentiate between tribalism as a way of life and as loyalty to an ethnic group. Therefore, assimilation did not necessarily reflect 'detribalisation'. The contradictory nature of this term alone provides a useful microcosm of which to explore my argument. Detribalisation rests on an assumed dichotomy between African tradition and European modernity which anthropologists helped to legitimise: Gluckman especially described tribal societies as 'egalitarian economies' with 'relatively simple tools', crystallising perceptions of Africans as savage and incapable of managing life as citizens of a nation.[2] Therefore, the 'detribalised African', that is an African who may at least appear more culturally and politically 'Western', challenged western hegemony on 'modernity' and 'superiority'. Racial structures were intrinsically relational, contingent on the supposed characteristics of different groups. For example, Lugard described Africans as 'better than the Chinese' in regards to labour; thus in putting down Chinese communities he (albeit still very discriminatorily) raises Africans.[3] The 'detribalised African' then, chipped away at the bulwark of European hegemony, the very racial structures that heralded Europeans as 'enlightened'. I will argue that this racial element is deeply rooted within colonial thinking and implicit in arguments concerning social order: specifically, the theory behind indirect rule; resistance and the global precedent in the British Empire; and the contradictory reality of dependence. Ultimately, the 'trousered' African was perceived as a threat to an imagined racial hierarchy, one that was built on hardened racialised perceptions.

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[1] T. Spear, 'Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa', *Journal of African History*, 44:1 (2003), p.4

[2] K. Crehan, 'Tribes' and the People Who Read Books. Managing History in Colonial Zambia', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 23 (1997), p.213

[3] Frederick Lugard, The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa (Edinburgh & London, 1923), p.27

Indirect Rule

Fundamental to the fear of 'detribalised Africans' was the colonial method of indirect rule through chieftaincy and tribalism. The 'detribalised African' therefore demonstrated a threat to social order as it was practised in colonial states. However, I will argue that essential to indirect rule were racial hierarchies that the 'detribalised African' threatened to topple. Ranger's prolific argument for 'invented traditions'- tribes being a systematic colonial invention in order to legitimise what was ultimately a stingy form of ruling with little European manpower - is perhaps best understood as invoking key questions rather than providing sound theory. 'Invention' is far too essentialist, too one-sided and reduces African agency, but it does raise important questions concerning the extent to which colonial authorities used existing structures. In certain cases, as amongst the Fulani in Northern Nigeria, colonial authorities ruled through extant elites whereas in Rwanda, Belgian authorities enhanced certain ethnic groups as an ethnically defined aristocracy with new mythologies. The distinction in colonial methods is important to recognise- clearly Ranger's initial 'invention' glossed over the nuanced approaches of different colonial authorities. European powers were evidentially neither huge monolithic entities, nor unchanging in their perspective and approach. The extent to which the detribalised African was perceived as a threat therefore, was heavily contingent. These 'tribal approaches' of rule are evident in Smuts' work. In 1930, he argued that if the 'bond of native tribal cohesion and authority are dissolved… [there will be] vast hordes of detribalised natives…. For whom traditional restraints… will have no force.. the results may well be general chaos'.[4] The 'detribalised African' simultaneously proved to be a threat to the social order through posing a challenge colonial methods (who would rule these individuals?); as well as destabilizing racial hierarchies by blurring the boundaries between 'backwards'African tradition and European 'modernity.

Socio-economic change

However, 'detribalised Africans' may have been more threatening to colonial authorities than they realised, or even admitted. Ranger's revised argument pushes for the notion of 'imagined tradition' that 'lays stress upon ideas and images and symbols'.[5] 'Imagined' is perhaps not as dissimilar to 'invention' as he would like us to believe. 'Imagined' also fails to recognise, or at least fails to emphasise, the role that local discourse and broader socio-economic changes played in allowing Africans to continually reinterpret and reconstruct tradition.[6] However, detribalisation should not be conflated with Ranger's

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[4] J.C. Smuts, 'Native policy in Africa', *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 29:115 (1930),

[5] Terry Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa', in T. O. Ranger and O. Vaughan (eds), *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth Century Africa. Essays in Honour of A. M. H. Kirk-Greene* (London, 1993), 81

[6]T. Spear, 'Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa', *Journal of African History*, 44:1 (2003), 121

'invented tradition' - exploring broader socio-economic changes is key. The 'detribalised Africans', as an emerging (usually) educated, middle class in urban centres, were surely products of socio- economic changes. Not only were they in themselves an anomaly amongst fixed racial perceptions of Africans, but they were also questioning colonial rule and could even become symbols of aspiration, by which individuals could reinterpret and construct customary laws. Tshekedi Khama, who inherited the chieftaincy of Bamangwato, in what is now central Botswana, wrote in 1951, that 'it is necessary, in order to form democratic councils... chieftainship be terminated '.[7] Though Khama might not strictly be understood as a 'detribalised African', given his elite status, he was part of an emergent group of highly educated individuals. He studied at a Church of Scotland school and therefore, if not genuinely 'Westernised', at least had access to Western principles and ideas allowing him to reinterpret 'tradition'. Thus, as will be found again, colonial authorities would create the very 'detribalised Africans' they would later come to fear.

Global Precedent

The fear that 'detribalised Africans' would cause 'general chaos' as Smuts suggests was not entirely unfounded.[8] It is also important to recognise the global precedent that had been set affected how Africa was ruled and in effect why 'detribalised Africans' were feared. Governance of India was particularly influential. In the early 1820s, aspirations for colonial rule in India changed: moving away from promoting economic profitability and towards an assimilationist policy encouraging education and religion which were not always widely celebrated. Notable British offences included outlawing 'sati', the practice of Indian widows jumping into the fire after their husbands, as well as child marriage.[9] Though this may have been done in good faith, it was unsurprisingly enacted with little understanding or regard for Indian culture. Amongst other factors, discontent with the assimilationist policy alongside growing education helped to facilitate the Indian Rebellion in 1857. This weighed heavily on the British imperial mindset, especially Lugard who wrote with serious contempt about 'Europeanised Africans'— whom others called 'detribalized blacks'—and stressed the need to avoid making more of them.[10] There was a clear conscious desire to avoid assimilation, and in effect 'detribalised Africans' may have been viewed as symbolic representations of resistance and disorder just as Smuts imagined they would be. However, British fears of assimilation and subsequent anxieties concerning detribalisation should not be generalised to demonstrate colonial fear. For example, following the 1848 revolutions, certain French thinkers, suggested that Africans could be assimilated into European culture.[11] Although this

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[7] Tshekedi Khama, 'The principles of African tribal administration', *International Affairs*, 27:4 (1951), p.456
[8] J.C. Smuts, 'Native policy in Africa', *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 29:115 (1930)
[9] 'The Invention of Tradition', Hobsbawn and Ranger
[10] J. Parker and R. Reid (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Modern African History* (Oxford, 2013), p. 156
[11] Reid, "Governing Colonial Africa", 2020

did change throughout the late 19th century, it illustrates the changing perceptions of colonial authorities concerning 'detribalised Africans'. The anxieties of the colonial state were dynamic, contested and, crucially, historically contingent.

Legal action

These anxieties however, did not exist outside of racialized perceptions and are best exemplified through the contradictory, colonial restrictions on 'detribalised Africans'. This group emerged out of the educated urban middle class- the intermediaries, clerks, translators and teachers. Their unique ability to bridge the cultural and linguistic gap gave them a huge sense of power by choosing not only who could access the colonial apparatus, but how it would be disseminated. However, as bureaucracy solidified, this power declined and positions held by Africans became more strictly codified with duties, ranks and status regulated.[12] This was of course highly contradictory given that Africans were necessary to colonial authorities who repeatedly failed to understand those they governed, but was justified through a supposed increase in the abuse of power. In certain regions in Sudan for example, around ⅓ of the region's prisoners were former employees who had allegedly abused their power. Similarly, in late 19th century Dakar, Senegal, the number of Africans employed by the colonial authorities declined by a factor of two. However, we must be careful in statistics concerning imprisonment. A.K. Shutt demonstrates that legal terms such as 'insolence', specifically in Northern Rhodesia, were purposefully left vague, and combined with the rights that Native Commissioners had to arrest and punish offenders on the spot - this might suggest that such statistics are questionable at the very least.[13] The use of 'insolence' is especially telling; it suggests insubordination and again reinforces this racialised hierarchy. Furthermore, it is often attributed to children, presenting an almost infantilization of Africans, who were unable to be viewed as equals to white settlers. Implicit in this legal structure therefore, is a clear enforcement of a racial hierarchy which privileged white settlers at the expense of Africans. Not only were they privileged with certain rights, but this enforced a racial hierarchy that systematically presented Africans as unruly and disorderly. Returning to the notion of racial hierarchy as contingent on itself- disempowering Africans in such a way helped to elevate settler status- allowing settlers to appropriate ideas of honour and prestige. Essentially, 'detribalised Africans' were signs that the racial structure so fundamental to colonial authorities was being dismantled. The contradictory actions taken to stunt their growth serves as a reminder that colonial authorities could not handle this.

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[12] B.N. Lawrance, E. Osborn and R. L. Roberts, 'Introduction: African Intermediaries and the Bargain of Collaboration', in B. N Lawrance, E. Osborn and R. L. Roberts (eds), *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* Madison, 2006)

[13] A.K. Shutt, '"The Natives are getting out of Hand": Legislating Manners, Insolence and Contemptuous Behaviour in Southern Rhodesia, c. 1910-1963', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 33, (2007), p. 673

I have thus far argued that the perceived threat of 'detribalised Africans', though historically contingent, was fundamentally rooted in upkeeping a rigid racial hierarchy that promoted European superiority. To conclude, I would like to set up three key ideas. Firstly, although the assumed dichotomy between African tradition and European modernity was certainly a powerful one, which fuelled resentment and confusion over seemingly Westernised Africans; it was a dichotomy which colonial powers recognised could be bridged. Their employment of clerks and intermediaries, and the later stemming of their power, demonstrates an interesting paradox of dependency and government. Secondly, this dichotomy was considered differently by different colonial powers: French imperial logic after the 1848 revolutions and early British thinking actually promoted 'detribalised Africans' . For example Samuel Ajayi Crowther promoted the 'civilising mission'. Thirdly, racial structures were at the heart of arguments concerning 'social order'. Enmeshing these ideas leaves a stark image of Africans who were, albeit to varying extents, used to reinforce a European sense of superiority. However, 'detribalised Africans' did not dissolve under this pressure. In fact, they would become more difficult to control; 'rightfully so attending, and indeed, demanding education and all the benefits that went with learning, including better-paying jobs and respect.'[14]

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[14] ibid p.659-60

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