

Tribes and Tribal: Origin, Use, and Future of the Concept

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ORIGIN

The term, “tribe” originated around the time of the Greek city-states and the early formation of the Roman Empire. The Latin term, “tribus” has since been transformed to mean,

“A group of persons forming a community and claiming descent from a common ancestor” (Oxford English Dictionary, IX, 1933, p. 339, as cited in Fried, 1975, p. 7).

The range of meanings however, has grown even further over the intervening years, for example, “Any of various systems of social organization comprising several local villages, bands, districts, lineages, or other groups and sharing a common ancestry, language, culture, and name” (Morris, 1980, p. 1369). Morris (1980) also notes that a tribe is a

“group of persons with a common occupation, interest, or habit,” and “a large family.”

Today, the range of groups referred to as tribal is truly enormous.

Not everyone however, can be deemed to be a member of a tribe. Those peoples who resisted joining in larger nation state entities were soon labelled by the nation states themselves to be “tribes.” These people were

“known to the world at large by names that have no relation to their own self-appellations. Worse, a good many are called by derogatory words” (Fried, 1975, p. 31).

Fried (1975) argued that, “the precipitation of tribes, it seems to me, was triggered by the emergence of the state, but did not really get into high gear until the emergence of the ancient empires and, later in a greater burst, after the appearance of colonialism and imperialism” (p. 98).

His observations are useful, for the maintenance of the term “tribe” probably necessitates the existence of nation states or other large political entities that can and do cast aspersions upon smaller and more distinctive groupings of people.

In any case, tribe became a prominent label during the European colonialist era (http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/eurvoya/

sources.html. Those peoples who were fewer in number, recalcitrant and who did or could not follow the “party line” of the various conquering nation states were soon described as different, and then labelled. According to Fried (1975, p. 44) tribes “are the product of specific political and economic pressures emanating from already existing state-organized societies.” The term “tribe” then, was often more than a little bit derogatory, but tribe served to differentiate the minorities and deviants and those only partially colonized from the mainstream or the colonial powers.

“Secondary tribalism is a political phenomenon bearing little resemblance to conventional notions of tribal behaviour. It occurs as already indicated, largely as a reaction to the presence of one or more states” (Fried, 1975, p. 103).

The mainstream, of course, was under elite command and control, and the members within conformed and complied with the customs, style of life, and culture of, or dictated by, the proverbial powers that be. The tribes, on the other hand, were people with special attachments to land, kinship ties, a unique culture, certain religious beliefs, particular activities, or material possessions that differentiated and separated them from the mainstream. The tribes were in subordinate roles, for they had less political power and less access to resources, technology and other forms of power. As a result, secondary tribalism . . .

“is something that may be exacerbated, consciously or not, by the metropolitan power, in its own interest” (p. 104).

However, Fried (1975) noted that tribes served as positive alternatives to the larger systems, without carrying the inherent stresses and problems,

“the distinction between destructive nationalism and a more pacific tribalism, however, is in my opinion, a sound idea.” (p. 113).

USE

We can therefore, look to past studies of tribes and tribal life to better understand already existing alternatives to our current state of affairs on Planet

Earth with one superpower and a world-system composed of a core and a periphery (Wallerstein, 1974). Further, we can actively study and use both past and present day tribal mechanisms of promoting and coping with the sometimes out of control cores or entities called nation-states/corporations. Tribal groups have had long experience in dealing with colonialization, and with strategies or tactics enabling them to co-exist within a larger scheme. We can search among tribes and tribal groups for ideas that may serve as correctives to ever present monopoly power, or corruption and thievery so endemic in modern society. As one example, local tribal people do not need to be warned about abuse to their own backyards, indeed they have frequently begged the powers that be to honor their local environments, traditions, and ways of life. They know in their local situation that their own future, and the futures of their children and grandchildren, depends upon a clean and secure environment, whereas corporations and nation states divide and conquer, pillage and rape, and destroy in the name of progress but in the act of profit (Mander, 1991).

Other examples are many. The mass media, being under the control of the powers that be, typically ignore the local, except to pull out aberrant excerpts that titillate, frighten, amuse, or poke fun at what others of us live by. The military forces recruit from local populations, then train soldiers to follow the dictates of the state rather than the wishes or needs of the local population, and even to kill in the name of "we" or "us" but yet, they refrain from rewarding local populations except with body bags and medals, scars and bad memories, and parades of "honor." The churches not only serve and rip off their local populations in the guise of a supernatural, but also take away the abilities of people to think for themselves. Further the people are made to contribute as sycophants to the grandeur of the church and the nation-state. Education is not about locally usable skills, such as planting gardens, fixing and repairing appliances, getting along with neighbors, becoming self-subsistent, or knowing local history, genealogy, geography, plants and animals. Instead education confuses, obscures, and pulls individuals into supporting distant others – the kings, queens, jet setters, financiers, politicians, sports heroes, and all too often, the thieves and crooks, enabling these so-called royalty to live lives of luxury while local

populations work hard and suffer.

Tribes, cults and minorities create modern day ripples in social homogeneity and symmetry. Given a society, the central powers that be find it easier to deal with those who will automatically comply. The core wants everyone to be homogenized and similar for that suits their needs for control. If any individual or group or portion of the population is not similar, then the powers that be are free to label that individual or group, and often to add a slightly derogatory name. Medical doctors do that with patients by using the International Classification of Diseases, and psychologists do that with clients with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. As a result, people with disabilities have had an enormous range of strange names added, such as maimed, crippled, disabled, handicapped, impaired, and so on. Church people call those who do not believe as they do, pagans or heretics or occasionally witches. These days they have their own problems such as paedophilia, however. The United States has gone through cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, law enforcement and drug abusers, and more recently, home security and terrorists.

Janis Joplin's line about freedom is just another word when there is no freedom left might fit well, for being labelled as a member of a minority and having rights means that the majority has effectively taken control and power, used that power to define the role and situation of the others, and furthermore, set an agenda to assure that the others, the minority, have few or no or precisely limited rights. Similarly with cults and social movements, whereby typically, a majority defines them and eliminates or limits their freedom to do as they want. Instead, they must comply with the will of the majority and face an on-going struggle for limited resources and self-control or empowerment.

In world systems theory (<http://www.emory.edu/SOC/globalization/theories01.html>), the periphery (tribes) has been overpowered by the core (colonial powers), and subsequently, the strength of the core has been rarely challenged, whether it is the power to use force, tax, rule by military might, promulgate and maintain sometimes strange beliefs, or enforce only certain ways to think. The result has been unprecedented destruction, by physical force in the past, and not surprisingly, by physical force in the present. "Either you are for us or against

us” claims George W. Bush, President of the United States. The label of “terrorist” is remarkably similar to the label, “drug abuser,” as attached to those who used non-approved or non-sanctioned chemical or botanical drugs.

The biological, psychological, social, and economic damage done by alcohol or tobacco is ignored or discounted as the majority of people and particularly those in powerful positions approve certain drugs and therefore made that okay. Further, tobacco and alcohol, when taxed, provides money to the powers that be and the government. That financial reward makes dangerous substances approved, and that made them okay for populations to create, sell, and consume. The terrorist label preceded the “drug abuser” label, and the so-called war on drugs. Terrorists, drug abusers, and tribes all constitute similar terms to address those peoples whose behavior and lifestyles do not comply and conform to the interests of a powerful majority. Labelling theory (Becker, 2000) although sometimes questioned as a framework (Petrunik, 1980), indicates that self differentiates from others and once differentiation occurs, then a name or label may be attached to further encourage separation. In the same way, tribes emerge, then resist, withstand, or withdraw from the interests of a powerful majority, and therefore earn their enmity. But there is more to the story than just resistance.

FUTURES

The nation states and their governments, bureaucrats, administrators and sycophants, have proved themselves less than fully capable of looking after the needs of the global human population and the environment. Intent on wars, personal gain, careerism, graft and corruption, the environment and people around the world have suffered. The political elite is matched by the open class warfare carried out by the trans-national corporations. Under the illusions of profits and control, these boards and executives, such as at Enron, Worldcom, Arthur Andersons, Xerox, and others, amass personal wealth for a few at the expense of loyal workers, staff, shareholders, and the public. Their greed knows no bounds, and their rampant destruction of the environment has already been virtually unlimited in scope, extent, and quality. No place on earth or in the skies above, has been left untainted or undamaged.

The take through taxes, graft and corruption, sleight of hand, inflation, and outright lies has been enormous. The poor, honest, and good peoples inhabiting the planet have been nearly destroyed by these modern day vandals. Tribal peoples are well aware of this situation, and they have often banded together for mutual support to survive in this unfavorable and hostile climate.

Great interest in the many tribes and tribal groupings around the world is emerging from quite remarkably diverse arenas and with major differences in focus or theme. For example, Native Americans, scheduled tribes of India, minorities in China, hippies in the United States, and others may be deemed “tribes” in the media, by anthropologists, and by governments.

On a personal level, the notion of tribes appeals at a deep emotional level. Like others, I grew up with the notion that tribes were Native Americans, called Indians, who lived differently from the way in which I was raised (<http://www.csulb.edu/projects/ais/>, <http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/ssrg/adams/shortcu/amind.html>, <http://www.nativeculture.com/lisamitten/nations.html>). Indian tribes lived differently because of their unique history, culture, ancestry, beliefs, and ways of life. Their knowledge of plants, animals and ways to survive led them to hold wise ideas about how to relate to Mother Earth. Tribes were often scattered about in less preferred locations, and they had strange behaviours and beliefs only in relationship with the majority culture. Further, many tribes had a deep attachment to particular pieces of land, a bond dating from pre-colonial days. That strong link to the land was a key factor in maintaining tribal status. The government had, of course, taken the best land, and tried to take the land left over. Only when the government could not take the land, for legal, cultural, religious, physical or other reasons, would they make the Indians the possessors and therefore they were constituted as and called tribes. Now, many Indians live in cities, yet are busy developing new forms of tribalization, according to Fixico who “has written the first ethnohistory of modern urban Indians” (<http://www.ur.ku.edu/Nws/00N/DecNews/Dec20/fixico.html>).

In India, the situation of many tribes was brought to the attention of the larger world as a result of the IUAES conference (Singh and Bhandari, 1980). Rich descriptions of the lives of various Indian tribal groups provided a

fascinating window into their worlds, and also, to a greater understanding of their strategies of co-existing with the modern state of India and with the even larger forces of globalization. This rich tradition has continued with dozens of publications about the scheduled tribes and various other minority groups throughout India (<http://www.vedamsbooks.com/anthro.htm>, http://members.tripod.com/~dkpd/booksonindian_sociology).

China offers still another example for consideration. China has had a policy initiative with ethnic minorities, guaranteeing them rights (Information Office of the state Council of the People's Republic of China, 1999). According to Fried (1975, p. 36)

"China provides a wonderful example. The manipulators of the Chinese state through the ages have used names as tools in governance. One of the central concepts in Chinese political thought has been the notion of orthodoxy as a source of strength and stability, with consequent fear and disdain of heterodoxy."

In China, minorities are those who are not "Han" or the particular ethnic group called Han. The Han total 91.96 percent of the population, while ethnic minorities live sometimes in concentrated areas, other times spread over vast regions. As a policy, the People's Republic "opened up a new era in which all ethnic groups in China enjoy equality, unity and mutual assistance" (p. 5).

The Chinese government "has adopted special policies and measures to effectively realize and guarantee the right to equality among all ethnic groups" (p. 7). It is important that the ethnic minorities have not self-defined, but the central Chinese government has defined who they are and further, how they will be regarded and treated. Though presumably beneficial as a long-term strategy and policy, the minorities are in somewhat the same situation as tribes and tribal groupings elsewhere.

The label, "Hippies" was placed on Western young people with long hair, a penchant for using marijuana, and a mistrust of the powers that be and their world system perspective. The term was mildly disparaging by those at the top of the system, perhaps at times, a bit envious of the freedom the hippies demonstrated and maintained. Many of the so-called hippies sought a return to the land, engagement in small rural

groups, and a disconnect from the global political and economic system (Brand, 1981). These individuals wanted an opportunity to live a meaningful life and did not feel they could obtain that while being part of the "system."

Like Native Americans, tribes in India, minority groups in China or many others, self-governance is often wanted by people virtually around the world, but in the absence of self-governance, negotiated settlements and working arrangements have to be created. This may well be the time for the re-emergence and further spread of tribes, a global social movement of retribalization, to offer a counter to the world economies, international politics, and organized religion that sometimes lack honesty as well as fail to create a transcendental spirituality. Interestingly, some entrepreneurs are coming up with brand new approaches to tribes and tribal living. Barber ([wysiwyg://16/http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/foreign/barberf.htm](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/foreign/barberf.htm)) contrasted Jihad against McWorld, claiming that, "two axial principles of our age – tribalism and globalism – clash." The Burning Man project located on the West Coast of the United States (<http://www.kellogg.nwu.edu/faculty/kozinet/htm/Research/BurningMan/ritual.htm>) represents an episodic, ephemeral, alternative to contemporary society, complete with tribal gatherings, rituals, and spontaneous events. Local groups, whether united by kinship as in the past, or in symbols, leaders, and participants, may yet emerge as a counterweight, corrective, and new vision asking once again, "how DO we want to live as humans on this planet?"

The Internet also offers another example that might be surprisingly appropriate as a model for the future of tribes and tribal. The Internet provides information and communication that allows or encourages formation of purposeful groups, made up of individuals with similar interests but scattered all over the world (Sanchez, <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dabrent/380/webproj/mstsl.html>). These groups, enabled, empowered, and focused by the Internet, look for solutions and provide attention to issues that may lead to less reliance upon and therefore less reverence for the core of power, and in the longer run, these resulting networks of people may seek avoidance of taxes, may resist the powers that be as refugees, and may seek self-definition. They will certainly create ripples in social homogeneity. Net-based groups, though located in virtual

reality, may become similar to “tribes”. The proverbial powers that be may not be able to offer rewards sufficient for maintaining allegiance so that these futuristic groupings will self perpetuate and grow.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this is an auspicious time for the emergence of tribes and tribal and of a new journal that deals expressly with these ever intriguing peoples scattered around the planet. This journal will offer ideas and information to record, analyze, guide, stimulate, promote, change and encourage mainstream and alternative perspectives about tribes and all things tribal. Acknowledging, reporting, reflecting, critiquing and educating, articles that will appear in the future will lead thinking and action about tribes and tribal into the 21st century.

KEY WORDS Tribe; world-system; strategies; definitions; futures

ABSTRACT Nation-states seized positions of political power a long time ago, and like corporations more recently with their economic power, label and disparage those who are left out from participation and involvement. The word “tribe” is one such label, and the term fits a wide diversity of people, most of whom never regarded themselves as being a member of a “tribe.” Still, those people have conceptualised, designed, and experienced strategic and tactical relationships with the proverbial powers that be and managed to survive, and frequently, thrive. We can learn much from tribes, the origin, use, and futures of tribes, and their rich experiences in living.

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