

Identity Politics

Getting Tribes: A Corrective [Anna Simons](#)

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What Americans misunderstand about tribal cultures, and how it hurts U.S. foreign policy.

Open any national newspaper these days or scroll down a list of recently released books, and you will soon see that it is all but impossible to avoid the word “tribe.” This is true whether we’re talking about book titles—*Political Tribes* (Amy Chua), *Tribe* (Sebastian Junger), or *It Takes A Tribe* (Will Dean)—or headlines—“Can Our Democracy Survive Tribalism?” (Andrew Sullivan), “The Retreat to Tribalism” (David Brooks), or “How to Get Beyond Our Tribal Politics” (Jonathan Haidt and Ravi Iyer)—or texts: “We are tribal primates. . . . We love tribal living so much that we invented sports, fraternities, street gangs, fan clubs, and tattoos. Tribalism is in our hearts and minds” (Jonathan Haidt again).

Some authors contend that we Americans need to foster more tribal feeling as a balm for our increasingly uncivil divides. Others seek the opposite and want us to somehow jettison or ignore our tribal minds. Unfortunately, the more everyone throws around this particular term, the more wrong they get tribes’ inner workings. Yes, we have divides in the United States. But our splits are nothing like those where tribes are the pervasive unit of account, where people’s moral existence, not just their political life, is determined by who they belong to and who they are presumed to belong to. Without question, too, though we Americans would benefit from cultivating (or re-cultivating) a deeper and more enduring sense of fellow-feeling, the kind of tribalism that exists in bona fide tribal societies would never work for us. But then again, our political system, based as it is on electoral democracy, chronically fails them.

In and of itself, “tribe” is a tricky term. Its use is acceptable in reference to American Indians and to people in and about the Middle East; it offends neither those it describes nor the academics who write about them. However, apply “tribe” to Africans and most academics, some journalists, and many aid workers will flinch. One reason self-described progressives balk is because “tribe” used to be synonymous with primitive people; savages, for instance, lived in tribes. So, presumably, did we before we became “enlightened.” Of course, settled people the world over—from ancient Egypt to Greece to Rome to China—have always looked down their noses at nomadic and tribal peoples, though for their part and to this day, nomads pity all of us who stay tethered to particular places, stuck, as the great majority of us are, working for other people.

Tribes endure for a host of reasons. But if we don’t understand what those reasons are, we will not only continue to make major category errors whenever we over- or under-valorize tribal life, but we will continue to err in more substantive ways as well. For instance, consider the places where the United States and other Western allied militaries have been waging or helping others to wage war in recent years: tribal shatter zones. From Afghanistan, through Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, to Somalia, Libya, Niger, and beyond, we have been directly or indirectly tangling with tribes. How effective have we been? The Pentagon has spent ungodly sums on procuring and developing all manner of computational modeling tools, as if analysts can peer at social network splatter graphs and link-analysis displays and see what constitutes tribal allegiance. Software might be able to paint pictures of who seems to be tribally related to whom, who transacts with

whom, and who worships with whom, but none of this tells us anything about the content of human relationships or the depth and shape of social commitments.

One reason for our cluelessness is obvious: We Americans don't connect to one another in anything remotely like a tribal fashion. There are a handful of exceptions: American Indians; recent immigrants who hail from tribal societies and haven't yet shed their tribal bonds; certain self-contained religious communities; and some cults. Otherwise, not even members of closely knit combat units share the same kind of bonds members of tribes do, which are before-cradle-to-beyond-grave.

Our ignorance about the nature of tribal allegiance is especially costly along two dimensions. First, no matter how precise the U.S. military tries to be when it applies force abroad, it still wreaks the havoc that is inherent to the use of force. Though the damage might seem collateral to us, it is not the least bit collateral to those whose lives we are upending. We discount the fact that payback is imperative as far as many survivors are concerned, to include those who can now witness the havoc several steps removed from the situation, on television, computer, and cell-phone screens. No doubt it is too discomfiting for us to acknowledge that we are seeding future security risks in perpetuity. Better to instead believe that people resort to terrorism out of desperation or derangement. But this is clearly not the whole story, as future generations of Americans will end up having to learn the hard way should we serially persist in attacking them "over there" so that we can presumably stay safe here at home. The impetus for revenge for all the havoc we have wreaked will not just magically evaporate.

As for the second dimension along which we are sowing future problems, consider our deepening misperceptions of one another. It is patently absurd to treat attitudes, convictions, heritage, skin color, and class—or political, cultural, socio-economic, racial, and religious differences—as equally immutable characteristics. Some things we can readily change about ourselves; others we can't, though the attributes we can't change rarely bind us together in inescapable ways. Race doesn't. Nor does our biological sex. The same can also be said for being a Democrat or a Republican, though we aren't either of these by birth, never mind for all time.

In the United States, ascription might help shape, but it never dictates, who we end up becoming, let alone who we are drawn to in terms of our associations. This is in stark contrast to the imperative in tribal societies, where everyone's most salient identity is a function of birth, not choice.

If anything, we Americans live in a country that offers too many choices—as in too many freedoms to self-sort according to who we think we want to be around, and who we think we *want* to become. This much liberty can prove paralyzing or, worse, alienating, which helps explain why some social commentators suggest that we should make greater efforts to become more communitarian. Of course, the idea that we could use more solidarity is hardly new. One need only think back to the hippies of the 1960s or the transcendentalists of the 1800s, or settler communities in the 1700s, or Puritans and Pilgrims in the 1600s: The reaction to too much self-involvement, or self-absorption, has always been to retreat or escape into more intense togetherness. Yet few of our "all for one, one for all" arrangements have ever lasted long. Few

American movements do. Instead, they morph, dissolve, or get subsumed. In part this is because true solidarity demands levels of commitment to the group and within-group loyalty that we Americans seem unable to stick with very well. But if you look at tribes, they last for generations. How do they manage this?

### What a Tribe Is—and Isn't

One difficulty with trying to generalize about tribes or tribalism is that every tribe is unique. Even on the surface, the differences are impossible to miss. In some cases, tribes make themselves distinguishable via permanent markers (such as circumcision); others use changeable markers (such as dress), or somewhat concealable markers (such as accent), or hard-to-disguise markers (such as language), or any combination of these. But beyond these surface-level phenomena, the most important set of differences among tribes remains invisible: Every tribe constitutes its own moral and social universe. Each is an entity unto itself, and what its members wear or what they sound like is an epiphenomenon of this. Tribes, in other words, share very few features.

Nevertheless, two features are definitional. First, members marry each other far more often than they marry non-members. Second, members are bound to each other in morally inescapable ways.

Together these two features enmesh members of tribes in a web of obligations. Let someone along one thread transgress, and misfortune will strike, but it won't necessarily strike the sinner. Not only does this mean people are connected in very different ways than we are, but individual behavior matters in ways that are *collectively* meaningful. It is this combination—of how and to whom people belong, along with why they *must stay* connected—that describes the essence of tribes.

Sometimes we can even see the effects of this stamped right into people's faces. I remember learning how to figure out who belonged to which tribe in a small crossroads town in northern Kenya by first paying attention to distinctive dress. But then, after a few days, the friend who was with me and I discovered we could also tell people apart by looking at their faces, since it was evident from the neck up that "down country" Kenyans looked different from northerners. It was even possible to tell Luo apart from Kikuyu (or Meru and Embu), and Turkana from Samburu (or Ariaal). However, Somalis, Borana, and Rendille posed a challenge, and we would have been sunk had it not been for beads (or lack of beads) and dress. In contrast, the local Kenyans we were with were confident that, even if the Somalis, Borana, and Rendille walked by in each other's outfits, they still would have been able to tell who was who.

Maybe. But as we all know, pigeonholing people according to their "looks" is both dicey and dangerous; it can cause us to get identity badly wrong. Even so, we still pay attention to family resemblances, don't we? We can't seem to help it. No doubt that's because there *is* such a thing as family resemblance.

Or to state the (politically incorrect) obvious: When people engage in fairly circumscribed mating for multiple consecutive generations, their progeny are bound to share certain physical

similarities. This might be facial structure, hair type, build, or something else. Or to re-phrase the point somewhat more socio-logically: So long as people marry among the same broad group of families over and over, the group is likely to remain a group; conversely, where we see marriages across families begin to peter out is exactly where the outer bounds of the group (and discernible differences) begin. Or to restate this in still another way: Who people do and don't marry, where they draw these lines, and how consistently they do so over successive generations explain how a group bound by kinship ties persists, and also help explain why groups use kinship: *so as to persist*.

But here two critical caveats are in order. First, just because people engage in assortative mating does not mean that all people who share similar attributes (like brown eyes and dark hair or astigmatism and freckles) constitute a tribe, any more than it means that Bernese Mountain Dogs or Great Danes do. Indeed, one reason why it is categorically wrong to lump together similar-looking people—all “white” people or all “black” people, say—and call them a tribe is because doing so ignores the even more seminal feature of what transforms a group of related people *into* a tribe: namely, *morally freighted belonging*. In other words (caveat number two), kinship is critical, but it is not everything.

## Culture and Trust

Yes, tribal bonds have genealogical roots, and typically family ties stretch far beyond anything we are familiar with, to include second cousins, third cousins, and categories of relatives for whom we do not even have names. Essentially, extended families keep extending—not just laterally and diagonally but also vertically. They connect the living with the dead, as well as with the not-yet-born.

Already this should hint at one major difference between tribal conceptions of who might owe what to whom and our conceptions of fealty, especially since, according to our Western (and monotheistic) worldview, certain very clear distinctions exist between the living and the dead and between the natural and the supernatural. In contrast, to most tribal peoples there is nothing hard and fast (or even real) about such separations. One might even go so far as to say that nothing is more credible than the fact that unseen things *can* affect the living.

Of course, in theory we Westerners don't entirely disagree. Think: germs, electricity, or gravity. We are also the ones who like to insist that “history lives.” Yet among the many ironies that flow from our radically different conceptions of the universe is that, although we Westerners say “history lives,” we treat the past as though it is both impersonal *and* dead. Tribal peoples don't.

Likewise, we Westerners make fairly sharp distinctions between psychic security, social welfare security, and physical security. Not so tribal peoples for whom health, well-being, fertility, and safety co-depend. Consequently, though we don't live in a system that encourages us to believe that the dead can interfere with us, that ill feeling or the “evil eye” can cause misfortune, or that engaging in taboo behavior imperils the collective, tribal peoples do. This is not to say that all Americans are immune to such beliefs (if they were, psychics would be out of business); but *as a society* we refuse to countenance this kind of thinking, except as entertainment.

Meanwhile, tribal peoples make at least one separation that we do not. Because every tribe comprises its own moral universe, most of its rules (and its protections) apply to it and its members alone. Tribe members' sense of moral obligation does not extend to anyone else (except, sometimes, confederated or allied peoples). As for who a tribe's moral universe does include, this would seem to bring us back to biology and marriages, mating and births. But, again, simply sharing blood is not what charges ties with *social* meaning. People do that via socialization and the transmission of culture—which also helps explain how non-kin can be adopted into tribes under the right conditions.

It is largely thanks to how children are raised—what they see, hear, and are steeped in—that a sense of belonging gets engrained before individuals are fully aware and in ways that adults find extremely hard to articulate. As the French sociologist Emile Durkheim pointed out more than a century ago, participating in large religious or celebratory events—harvests, weddings, funerals, and other rites of passage—further instills and then reinforces what belonging means and why it matters. Often such occasions are the only time when significant numbers of tribespeople assemble. Thus, participating in ritually binding events doesn't just reveal to and remind individuals to whom they belong, but *with* whom they belong as well.

Durkheim's further critical insight was that, once people participate in something sacred, something that makes them feel like they are part of a collective that is greater and more enduring than themselves, they carry this feeling of solidarity away with them no matter where they go. Tweaking Durkheim just a bit, we could say that, once internalized, this collective consciousness (also referred to as a collective *conscience*) doubles as a moral compass. With what people now *know* they share, individuals can gauge who they should be able to count on (and for what), no matter where they wind up.

What tribe members implicitly recognize in one another gets us closer to the content of tribal relations in several ways. The first way has to do with how belonging reinforces trust, and trust reinforces belonging. Essentially: If you are a member of my tribe, I consider you trustworthy until you prove yourself untrustworthy; if you are not a member of my tribe, I consider you untrustworthy until you prove yourself worth trusting, and because I am scrutinizing your every move, chances are good I will find reasons not to trust you.

Second is the degree to which tribes, though they might seem (or even feel) closed, remain open. Warfare and trade—or the need to engage in exchange—preclude total closure, as do time-honored practices like “we marry our enemies.” As for how tribes square the circle of inclusion, they do so based on inclusivity rather than exclusivity. This too is somewhat tautologous, since who determines who can be a member? The group. Who makes up the group? Its members do.

Not surprisingly, the ways tribes constantly renew themselves is of a piece with what they prize: social harmony. Again, thanks to the fact that anyone's and everyone's well-being can be affected by others' behavior means social relations are laden with moral (not just “feel good”) significance. Academics who teach about Durkheim often cite football games or rock concerts as venues where we Americans momentarily lose ourselves in a greater whole and experience the collective effervescence Durkheim described. But this isn't true, since nothing that occurs during a sporting event or a concert reminds spectators that they now and forever have inescapable

moral obligations to everyone else present. Not even the players on the field or in the band connect to one another in before-birth-to-beyond-grave ways.

As for who among us might come closest to attaining tribal levels of trust, how about co-religionists or, better still, co-congregants? Presumably, people who share the same religious beliefs abide by the same moral code, and thus should be able to implicitly consider one another trustworthy—except, as Bernard Madoff and numerous other con men have recognized, no one is easier to cheat than co-religionists *precisely because they are so trusting*.

In contrast, tribes have a built-in mechanism for deterring those who would cheat fellow tribe members (leaving everyone else as fair game): Do something bad and harm will befall someone you care about. Transgressions *will* boomerang, victimless crimes don't exist, and there is no statute of limitations on punishment. As with a curse, punishment can skip a generation, and can land anywhere along the skein of your relations; disaster can affect your livestock, the fertility of your fields, the fertility or sanity of your offspring, or the health and well-being of who-knows-who, who will then point their accusatory finger at you and yours. In fact, because this is how cycles of ill will often begin, thereby jeopardizing not just the integrity of the community but subsistence and even survival, a great deal of emphasis is placed on preventing enmity and competition from getting out of hand. As important as not rocking the boat is, even more important is that all parties reconcile after a breach. Either that or the tribe schisms.

This is about as different from our system of law, order, and justice as it is possible to get. Once we turn 18, our system treats us as interchangeable singletons and metes out punishment accordingly. Moreover, we draw our morality from an increasingly attenuated set of sources: religion, whose purview these days is individual souls; and government, which could care less about us as specific individuals. For all intents and purposes this means we have both de-collectivized *and* de-personalized what we use to maintain comity, law, and order. For us, morality is little more than a means by which to ensure individual well-being in the here and now, as well as the welfare of select family members. Maintaining (or restoring) harmonious social relations across the entire social collective (which we don't have anyway) is hardly an end in and of itself, as it is for tribes.

To be sure, no tribe can police all of its members all of the time any more than it can make any one individual live up to his or her moral obligations. Tribes are also becoming increasingly diffuse, with members scattered around the world. Even where tribes remain regnant, urbanization and inter-tribal marriages are further diluting tribalism's pull. However, just because people might like to think they have left tribalism "behind" doesn't mean others agree, or will let them escape being identified as belonging to this *or* that tribe. We see this especially clearly during eruptions of ethnic violence. Then, individuals' identity will get them raped, maimed, killed, or spared. Also, during times of personal crisis people can find themselves with little choice but to fall back on "familial" connections; they may also do so when the prospect of gaining certain advantages proves too hard to resist.

The point here is not to catalog all the ways in which tribal ties remain instrumentally useful. Instead, it is to highlight that anyone raised with these ties, who then tries to divest him or herself of them, can never really be sure their choices *won't* affect others, any more than they can be

sure others' choices won't eventually affect them. Given such uncertainty, the most prudent course of action becomes to hedge one's bets—particularly when one realizes the universe is full of forces beyond any one individual's control, be these political, economic, moral, or spiritual.

Consider Africa

And to think, our caricature of tribalism has been that it is *inflexible*.

To further underscore how shallow our understanding and wrongheaded our assessments have been, let us take a look at sub-Saharan Africa, where politics is nominally democratic but inescapably tribal. Why Africa? Because more different forms of representative government existed there prior to colonialism than anywhere else in the world, yet today more states are dysfunctional there than anywhere else in the world.

Three sets of factors help explain what has transpired in Africa to politicize tribes and tribalize politics. First, neither missionaries nor European imperial powers ever fully dismantled indigenous social structures. They simply overlaid them with imported bureaucratic institutions. Basically, in taking advantage of the multiplicity of separate societies (many of which also sought to take advantage of them), Europeans aligned themselves with certain tribes over others. By dividing, conquering, and then stitching together spaces-*qua*-colonies, Europeans constructed entities that they ensured (wittingly or not) would remain ungovernable by anyone but themselves.

Second, they drew borders in such a way as to slice through and weaken various peoples. Sometimes they did this deliberately and split numerically large tribes among multiple countries, thereby relegating them to minority status in marginal areas remote from capital cities—like the Tuareg, divided among five-plus countries today. But even more pernicious than how borders were used to divide people is how borders came to contain *peoples*, plural.

Most of Africa's 54 countries are home to multiple tribes, in each one of which members remain duty-bound to preferentially look out for one another. Again, colonialism didn't create these divisions any more than Christianity or Islam dissolved them. What colonialism did was turbocharge them, especially since virtually every former colony inherited a Western-style government, complete with *a* capital city and *an* overarching (not decentralized) administration. The soon-to-be-independent states were also bequeathed the trappings of "electoral democracy," which further guaranteed that governance—and who might gain control over the levers of power and government coffers—would be a zero-sum contest.

Because democracy asks voters to elect the candidates who we think will best represent us (as in those who will most closely promote our interests), it should come as no surprise that tribal ties were easily repurposed in Africa, particularly once it became clear who *wouldn't* look out for voters' interests: namely, politicians from other tribes at the national level, and from other clans or lineages more locally.

To this day, tribal demographics make it easy to predict who is likely to win in a national contest or, if not win outright, who is destined to lose. Separately, this helps explain the frequency of

coups as an alternative means of attaining power, and why authoritarian leaders invest so much energy in rigging the system when they come from minority groups. But then, combine with demographic realities the unshakeable moral imperative that *you are either in my moral universe or you are not*, and electoral democracy becomes not just a charade but an obstruction. We see instances of evenly sized tribes (or coalitions) swapping power on occasion, but systemic change *will never be forthcoming* from within the electoral framework itself.

This observation has huge practical implications. The moral imperative of tribes means that anything that threatens to atomize tribes and turn individuated members into independent citizens is bound to lead to conflict, not only because it poses a direct threat to those in power but because any such effort will be construed and received as *tribally* (and thus both individually *and* collectively) *morally imperiling*.

As for those rare individuals who try to buck the system, who seek to behave more nationally and less tribally, they face a different impossible challenge: to somehow earn trust from those they aren't related to while *still* fulfilling the moral imperative of keeping faith with kin.

In other words, the decks are totally stacked. If we were honest, this should lead us to admit that it is *democracy* that is locking citizens into a system that is incapable of providing them with security (in all senses of that word). Nor does this only hold for sub-Saharan Africa. The same can be said for numerous places where tribes persist.

Back to Us

We, on the other hand, have been spared having to worry about the integrity of whatever groups we belong to. Our system of governance has also been constructed in such a way as to liberate us from having to worry about preserving social harmony among ourselves. This, after all, is what we have a justice system for. We have courts, lawyers, police, and jails, which we need, for better or worse, since virtually all parts of our collective life are predicated on competition, the antithesis of harmony.

Think about it: We cooperate in the face of crisis; otherwise, we contend. Even in disasters, as soon as the triage phase begins to subside, we quibble and engage in finger-pointing. Truth be told, there isn't much that we don't turn into a contest: from box office receipts to beauty pageants to sporting events to politics.

One might think, when it comes to politics, that at least principles would offer us something steadfast to latch onto. But it turns out that everything having to do with politics is mutable. Take President Trump. His election demonstrates this in spades. His candidacy cross cut all sorts of affiliations, and his presidency continues to scramble ideological alignments. Thus, no matter how divided we think we are, red versus blue is not all that meaningful. It turns out our labels really don't lock us in, certainly not in ways that resemble "identity politics" elsewhere.

The truth is that virtually nothing snares us in identities or obligations we can't escape. Without question, some Americans end up more trapped than others—namely, the poor. But the fact that the poor often marry (and/or have children) across racial, religious, ethnic, political, and other



lines means class is not congealing with other identities. Again, for us to tribalize, this would have to happen. Then, our fused identities would have to stay fused. Then, they would need to be reproduced in their entirety over the course of several generations.

This most definitely does not describe us, with our ever-shifting, endlessly expansive means of defining and re-defining ourselves. Or, to cite two final sets of attributes that should put to rest the notion that we Americans are tribalizing in the ways so many pundits suggest: Look at how wedded we are to change, impermanence, and individual autonomy. Everything about our system makes flightiness and dissociation easy (arguably too easy). Moreover, our social contract is with a welter of bureaucracies, not with specific other people.

Of course, what should be equally obvious when we look at tribes and then iteratively at ourselves is that the very institutions that prevent tribalism from taking root in the United States are exactly the structures that prevent our system from working effectively where the underlay *is* tribal. In countries where webs of social relations are paramount, and where people need them to remain paramount, something other than our brand of “one man/one vote” democracy, or our version of bureaucracy, is required.

Unfortunately, because no one thought hard enough more than half a century ago about the kinds of political arrangements or forms of representative government that might best accommodate tribes, it will take hard thinking and a radical reset now both to come up with formulations that can help repair the damage done and to prevent further injury. And though it should not be up to us in the West to weigh in on what these new socio-political forms might be, nothing we attempt to assist with where tribes exist will improve life sufficiently for those we say we care about—or mitigate threats to us—until more people in Washington and other donor capitals “get” tribes. Again, this is true not just across Africa, but also the Middle East, Central Asia, and beyond. And it is also true regardless of whatever forms of power we apply: hard, sweet, soft, or so-called smart power.

This is because the challenges tribes raise are *moral*. And while none of the incompatibilities identified here prevent us from being able to co-exist—after all, tribes have co-existed with each other and with the West for millennia—moral differences do run deeper than others. We need to understand this, too.

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