

Beyond Citizen and Subject: New Perspectives on Political Thought, 'Tribe' and 'Indirect Rule' in Africa

Abstract:

Despite the extensive literature on 'tribe' and 'indirect rule' in colonial Africa, historians have tended to confine their analyses to the economic and administrative pragmatism of empire-builders, the domination of colonial knowledge, and the mediation of these factors by African culture-brokers who brandished local 'tradition' in order to satisfy a range of local material interests. This essay shows that these arguments replicate colonial views which bifurcated Africa into incommensurable spheres of 'modern' European agency and 'traditional' African response. Placing the existing scholarship of African colonial history in dialogue with Indian intellectual history and African film studies, I propose that dyadic understandings of 'tribe' and 'indirect rule' can be overcome in order to re-position Africa and its institutions at the heart of a global narrative of 'modernisation'. In considering this new perspective, the essay invites students and scholars of African history and political science to recognise that - for some - 'tribe' was a constituent part of a uniquely African vision of future progress rather than a pre-modern anachronism or a tool of Western epistemological dominance.

Keywords: Africa, Tribes, Indirect Rule, Colonial History, Intellectual History, Film Studies

...we may indeed neglect our own history and amuse ourselves with the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe: tribes whose chief function in history, in my opinion, is to show to the present an image of the past from which, by history, it has escaped...
(Trevor-Roper, 1963)

1. Introduction

In many scholarly accounts, Africa's role in the birth of the modern world continues to be side-lined in favour of regions that fit more comfortably within a traditional Weberian modernisation narrative. Scholars have banished the explicitly Whiggish perspective of Hugh Trevor-Roper - highlighted above - and his reading of modernity as exclusively incubated in the 'West'. Nonetheless, the view that traditional African institutions were archaic artefacts that are worked upon by European colonial forces persists. For instance, Osterhammel's hefty account of the *Transformation of the World* not only confines itself to north African, South African and colonial examples but reduces the continent to a field for missionary activity, slavery and capitalism (Osterhammel, 2014). Osterhammel has little to say about the well documented African agency within earlier Christianity, Islamic revivalism or the ways in which Africans contributed to intellectual exchange across the *Black Atlantic*. (Curtin, 1972; Thornton, 1983, 1998; Gilroy, 1993). This preference for Eurasian and American accounts of modernity and the absence of Africans on the stage of world history has been noted by other scholars like Vaughan and Manning (Vaughan, 2006; Manning, 2015). More decentred accounts like Bayly's *Birth of the Modern World* made a concerted effort to include

African examples but always with qualifications that located the initial development of modern institutions like the secular state, civil society, and the market elsewhere in the world (Bayly, 2004).

This paper illustrates how the rich scholarship on 'tribe' and 'indirect rule' (decentralised colonial government through 'tribal' units led by chiefs) has run into a conceptual impasse that prevents us from understanding how Africans had ideational agency that engendered cultural and institutional transformations that signalled the continent's entry in the 'modern' world. In so doing, I recognise 'tribe' as a European construct and acknowledge that numerous non-African cultures engage in 'tribal' politics and self-identify as 'tribal' – not least in South Asia with which this paper engages closely. I do not seek to impute to 'tribe' or 'ethnicity' a privileged role in African politics and recognise numerous other intervening sociological variables, like class (Nnoli, 1978). Moreover, I readily admit that what Europeans have dubbed 'ethnicity' in the non-African world could easily be described as 'tribal' and vice versa (Rodney, 1972). Yet, since nineteenth and early twentieth-century political thought on 'indirect rule' in colonial Africa is the subject of this paper, the construct of the 'tribe' is an indispensable part of the conceptual lexicon.

The next section will show how most historical accounts of 'tribe' have relied on overly materialistic or politically rationalist interpretations of why the institution persisted in colonial and postcolonial Africa – with the importance of economic and administrative expediency for the colonial power and access to state resources for chiefs held up as the most convincing explanations. Section three addresses the attempts to analyse 'tribe' and 'indirect rule' from the perspective of Mahmood Mamdani's intellectual history and the advantages and disadvantages of this approach.

Section four presents the case for a new intellectual history of 'tribe' that will promote South to South conversations between Africa and South Asia. This does not mean deriving inspiration from 'more sophisticated' historiographies; rather, it is to continue the South to South dialogue that characterised much early African and Asian anti-colonialism and anti-racism (Cooper, 1994). Thus, I will draw on recent developments in Indian intellectual history to illustrate how an Afrocentric approach to colonial thought might place the continent and its inhabitants at the heart of global accounts of the birth of the 'modern' world. This approach would extricate us from the colonial binaries that Cooper rightly identified when initiating a dialogue between African scholarship and Subaltern Studies in South Asia in the 1990s.

The final section will attempt to overcome the dyadic 'tradition versus modernity' and 'the destructive imperialist versus sustaining community of victims' approach (Cooper, 1994) that too often renders concepts within constellations of colonial knowledge – like 'tribe' – as exclusively 'traditional' weapons of European epistemic violence. There are, however, instances of meaningful political *acts* by Africans and Europeans in which 'tribe' became a 'modern' tool for an African epistemic counter-insurgency against lazy metropolitan ethnography. In order to illustrate such occasions, this paper suggests the mutual constitution of 'tribe' be demonstrated via the inclusion of amateur film as a source for African intellectual history. This will enable historians to examine moments of European and African interaction in which the production of the visual sequence is a combination of meaningful acts contingent on the creative and purposive direction of both Europeans *and* Africans.

2. The Historiography of Tribe and Indirect Rule

In the immediate aftermath of decolonisation, when nation and state-building was firmly at the forefront of the political agenda in much of Africa, the continued existence and claims of 'tribes' and their leaders posed a challenge to African leaders and academics alike. The continent's first independence leader, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, constantly struggled to subordinate chiefs to government authority in the 1950s and 1960s in the name of 'reconstruction and development'. However, after Nkrumah was deposed in 1966 the chiefs made a swift return to the political scene by having their rights enshrined in the constitution (Rathbone, 2000; Brempong, 2001). Concurrently, in the academic discourse of the time the label of 'tribalism' gave way to the less politically charged term of 'ethnicity'. The literature of the 1950s and 1960s mirrored Nkrumah's nationalist perspective of 'tribe' as a primordial and archaic institution, reinvigorated by an historical consciousness that was tied to the emergence of capital and new political identities in Africa, but that would surely disappear with time and state-led modernisation.

Among the most prominent theorists of 'tribe' on the eve of decolonisation was the French sociologist Georges Balandier. Balandier's ethnographic studies of the Fang peoples of central Africa offered an account of external material pressures on passive African populations, concluding that the formerly complex entanglement of Fang clans only coalesced into a coherent ethnicity in more recent times (Balandier, 1955). The reason for this, Balandier opined, was that a modern Fang idealisation of 'tribal fraternity, common origin, consanguinity and religious respect for tribal unity' emerged as a means of coping with the new political and economic pressures wrought by colonialism and capitalism (Balandier, 1966). This description of intruding external pressures motivated by an instrumentalist rationality marks the beginning of a model of 'tribalism' that relied on a dialectic between a traditional society in equilibrium disordered by colonial modernity. This was a riff on a particular strand of nineteenth-century colonial liberalism, closely associated with Henry Maine (see section 3), that regarded indigenous societies as defined exclusively by kinship and custom and in need of protection from the alien forces of individual contractualism that characterised Western 'modernity'.

Balandier's perspective significantly influenced successive generations of scholars. For instance, theories in the 1960s and 1970s attempted to find common factors in colonial and postcolonial Africa that might explain the persistence of 'tribal' pluralism and conflict. The shared variable that emerged was the modern state and its role in upholding a capitalist framework. Many theorists, drawing on Marxian modernisation paradigms, scrutinised the African elites that controlled the state and the intellectuals that gave the former's 'class domination' a veil of nationalist legitimacy. They concluded that control of state institutions by a particular ethnic group was a form of class-building as much as state-building (Apter, 1955). 'Tribe' and ethnicity were mobilised in the name of legitimacy and stability in a rapidly changing world and, ultimately, as a means to power. The latter facilitated the capture of the state and its networks of patronage. In this way, 'tribe' became a sort of substitute for class when scholars were trying to understand the power structures underpinning African nationalism. Thus, scholars like Southall insisted that the historically-conscious and

cohesive tribe could only be found alongside the modern state in a dialectic of creative destruction (Southall, 1970). Once the state and urban centres were captured, 'tribes' became a mechanism for extracting resources or subduing the dissent of other constituencies, themselves 'tribal'. Although not exclusively penned by Marxist scholars, this literature is reminiscent of Marxist materialism, with 'tribe' emerging as the cultural superstructure for the nexus of interests that constituted the political economy of the state. Through the colonial state, metropolitan capital is seen to preserve tradition but re-make it in its own image, thereby conscripting 'tribe' as a mediator between the realm of capitalist circulation and the wider populace (Gellner, 1969; Lonsdale, 1981; Chibber, 2013).

By the late 1970s, scholarship focussed even more closely on the relationship between state, capital and 'tribe'. However, the existence of 'tribe' as a political identity was attributed increasingly to influences external to Africa. The rationalising mind-set of the European official and missionary, and the process of colonial knowledge creation through amateur histories, professional ethnographies, and legal codification were thought to have instrumentalised and rigidified what were a plurality of overlapping African ethnic and social affiliations (Iliffe, 1979). John Iliffe noted that the result of this 'Western' misrepresentation was that colonial officials 'wrongly believed that [Africans] belong to tribes', confining them to 'tribal' units governed by chiefs within the colonial system of indirect-rule; in turn, Africans 'created tribes to function within the colonial framework' and gain access to the state's resources (Iliffe, 1979). Similarly, this line of enquiry led Terrence Ranger to refer to the colonisers' 'invention' of 'tribe' and its 'traditions' (Ranger, 1983). Ranger noted that unlike Asia, which provided European empires with pre-existing imperial structures, rituals and symbols, Africa seemed to offer a patchwork of 'dozens of rudimentary kings' which could be integrated into invented British monarchical traditions which had developed by the late Nineteenth Century. In turn, African chiefs accommodated themselves to new imperial rituals and pageantry in order to cultivate favour, honour and largesse.

Revisionist accounts emerged in the 1980s and 1990s that gave Africans wider scope for agency in the formation of 'tribe'. Colonial extraction and knowledge creation continued to feature in these interventions, but African motivations were nuanced beyond the jostling for position by chiefs seeking access points to the colonial state. Leroy Vail's edited volume on the *Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, offered a series of complex accounts of how Africans acted as 'culture brokers' between the governors and the governed. This ongoing interface and historical consciousness allowed tribal and ethnic identity to be mobilised for a number of different purposes, in different regions, and at different times. Ethnicity could be called upon by African elites in places where class consciousness was weak; it could serve as a moral community in times of crisis; or to combat the social dislocation wrought by urbanisation and labour migration (Vail, 1989). As Willis and Gona rightly note, however, this did not account for the popularity of ethnic and 'tribal' identity in day to day life, unmoored from historical events and processes (Willis & Gona, 2013). Moreover, Vail continued to offer an essentially Namierite account, in which African elite and bourgeois interests underpinned the creation of tribe, ignoring its ubiquity as a popular discourse and a constituent part of lived experience in Africa (Lentz, 1995; Lentz & Nugent, 1999).

The popular appeal of 'tribe' and ethnicity has received ever more attention since the 1990s. The work of Sara Berry and others has softened our view of the colonial

state's epistemological hegemony when instrumentalising 'tribal tradition'. Instead, Berry has recast custom as a site of contestation between Europeans and Africans (Berry, 1992). In this scenario, pre-colonial 'traditions' are constantly moulded and recast by both parties in an attempt to cement their authority and gain access to resources (Berry, 1992; Pels, 1996). The contested nature of customs was built into the model of 'indirect rule'. Studying colonial rule in Asante, Berry demonstrates how colonial authorities had to interpret and codify swathes of indigenous custom – a process that inevitably resulted in ongoing debates with Assante notables and a proliferation of narratives and interpretations (Berry, 2001). Berry appropriately reimagines colonial rule as a 'hegemony on a shoestring', one that was dependent on the intellectual resources of - and sustained dialogue with - indigenous brokers for access to useable colonial knowledge. In a similar vein, Thomas Spear has taken issue with the one-sidedness of invention stating that it 'neglects the economic, social and political factors that help shape identities and the complex processes of reinterpretation and reconstitution of historical myths and symbols to define them' (Spear, 2003). For Spear, the language is a form of embodied and inherited tradition that circumscribes conceptual innovation *ex nihilo*. Nonetheless, if 'tradition' is linguistically constrained it must also be subject to discursive contestation that allows agents to debate meaning and thereby engage in the subtle refashioning of historical narratives – a process that European agents could readily engage in even as they were constrained by the limitations of culture, tradition and co-operation from indigenous interlocutors. As a result of this revisionist scholarship, the local origins of the colonial state came more and more into view. Rather than a metropolitan imposition on Africa, the two-way bargaining over access to resources and political power between Europeans and Africans resulted in 'local patterns of state formation', with African chiefs having more agency in mediating and contesting the significance of colonial intrusion (Leonardi, 2013; Vaughan, 2013).

It is precisely this discursive contestation of 'tradition' by interested parties that makes the colonial period in Africa so generative of novel forms of political community, as Willis and Gona rightly suggest (Willis & Gona, 2013). However, echoing Comaroff, they still regard the colonial motivation in this dialogic process as tied overwhelmingly to 'the practical management, and often, the production of difference' (Comaroff, 2002; Willis & Gona, 2013). Given their simultaneous commitment to 'progress' and racial superiority, many colonial officials found themselves constantly arbitrating between what they saw as 'modernity' and 'tradition' in the construction and management of 'tribal' administrations (Cooper and Stoler, 1997). With 'tradition' perceived as defining African society - custom and kinship came to be identified as the delimiting factors of African political agency - denying 'tribal' peoples entry into the realm of a 'moder'n individualist civil society. Conversely, this discourse was used by Africans themselves to 'evade or subvert the demands of officials' and, crucially, to imagine an alternative set of political futures (Willis & Gona, 2013). However, has the ongoing focus of scholars on the intellectually dyadic nature of the relationship between the colonial state and tribe blinded them to the range of political futures this implies?

3. An Intellectual History of 'Indirect Rule'

With regard to the institutional management of difference in colonial Africa, it was the political scientist, Mahmood Mamdani's seminal *Citizen and Subject: The Legacy of*

Late Colonialism in Africa, that made the pathbreaking intervention in 1996. The author claimed that the colonial domain had purposefully been 'bifurcated' into the 'modern' urban realm of citizens consisting of the small elite of European administrators and African bourgeoisie and the traditional rural realm consisting of the bulk of African subjects (Mamdani, 1996). While rural populations were assigned to 'tribal' administrations headed by chiefs in the system of 'indirect rule', the urban centres were subjected to developmentalist and modernising policies aimed at assimilating them into a more European style of civil society and political economy. Mamdani acknowledges the materialist necessities of colonial exploitation - like the scholarship addressed above - whereby 'indirect rule' and puppet chiefs served the purposes of resource extraction by connecting the rural hinterland with urban centres of international trade. However, Mamdani's key contribution was ideational: Africa's colonial and postcolonial dependence was due to the 'decentralised despotisms' and political subjectivities created by the bifurcation of colonial governance into 'modern' and 'traditional' logics. The creation of 'tribal' administrations was an intellectual project as much as it was a compromise between the needs of imperial and indigenous interests.

In a more recent iteration of his theory, Mamdani posits that colonial intellectuals relegated the 'native' to eternal traditionalism in response to a series of imperial crises like the 1857 Indian Mutiny (Mamdani, 2013). In order to stop such a seditious contagion spreading in Africa, Mamdani claims that colonial officials, inspired by the legal historicism of scholars like Henry Maine, sought to stabilise empire by evoking history to racialise and 'tribalise' colonial subjects. Maine's predominant contribution was that the universalism of Utilitarianism had blinkered the perspective of nineteenth-century liberals who did not take due account of the cultural and institutional particularities of 'native' peoples. Whereas the transition from custom to contract had occurred under the auspices of Roman civil law, Maine contended, the non-West had undergone any such historical process whereby law was disentangled from religious and customary authority. The sociological implication of this was a binary view of 'modernity', in which all progress lay with the freely contracting individuals of the 'West', and the non-Western 'native' whose communities governed by custom and kinship had stagnated. As colonial 'modernity' threatened the logic of customary societies, it was the job of the colonial state to maintain the fragile equilibrium between the two. Consequently, amateur histories were used to construct genealogies of various 'tribes' that racialised colonial subjects. Equally, 'modern' technologies of rule like the census were used to enumerate and map 'native' populations, and finally, legal frameworks were devised to define racial groups and impose identities on individuals. This would create a system of depoliticised racial pluralisms, designed to head off political rebellion and nationalism.

Mamdani's consideration of the influence of metropolitan ideas on colonial governance was a necessary balance to the narrowly materialist exploitation models that characterise much of the historical scholarship. Indeed, McClendon noted how in the early Nineteenth Century British officials imported ideas of colonial governance from South Asia in order to 'civilise' South Africans. Here, the goal was not to depoliticise indigenous peoples but to transform them into black Englishmen (McClendon, 2010). Outright Eurocentrism only gave way to managing progress through indigenous 'traditions' when the colonial government was unwilling or unable

to bankroll the project. These intellectual histories have allowed for a broader range of European motivations to be taken into account. Nonetheless, unlike Berry, Spear and Willis, Mamdani's theory relies overmuch on abstracting an intellectual programme and giving it causative weight well into the postcolonial era with little regard for how the African context shaped this ideology over time. For instance, Mamdani's theory cannot account for moments of inter-'tribal' unity in the 1950s and 1960s (Cooper, 1997). Equally, McClendon's account insists that the intellectual kernel of 'progressive' African governance is external to the continent. If ideas are adapted it is due more to a lack of resources and conflict with African interlocutors than a careful engagement with Africans' cultural and institutional specificities. Moreover, as mentioned above, the ways in which Africans shaped late nineteenth-century 'tribe' and 'indirect rule' in Berry et al's accounts were limited by local political and economic interests and linguistically embodied 'tradition'. The implication is that Africans themselves were invested in the bifurcation of 'modernity' and 'tradition' and that their linguistic resources may have prevented any hybridisation of the two realms. In some ways, this is a bottom-up perspective on Mamdani's top-down account of bifurcation.

By contrast, recent African intellectual histories have indicated that indigenous actors attempted to bridge local and national politics in colonial Sudan in the 1950s – that is to say the rural realm of 'tradition' and the urban realm of 'modernity' – by explicitly evoking 'tribal' affiliation in order to justify to the national legislative assembly their demands for liberal rights and citizenship (Leonardi and Vaughan, 2016). The idea of a liberal multi-ethnic nation united in its diversity would be echoed in South Sudan's 2011 constitution. Even in the twilight years of empire, both Europeans and Africans were sensitive to multi-ethnic 'tribal' claim-making in a liberal vocabulary, suggesting that we cannot reduce colonial motivation to the creation and management of difference between ostensibly pre-national 'tribal' units. Moreover, this hybridisation of 'tradition' with liberal political rights sits uneasily alongside Mamdani's intellectual history and its rigid demarcation of incommensurable political subjectivities. What we need is a more sensitive and contextual intellectual history of 'tribe' and 'indirect rule' that reveals the African context – its institutional, cultural, economic and linguistic particularities – moulded both European and indigenous understandings of modernity (Hunter, 2013; 2017). We must scrutinise the various contexts in which state formation took place, how colonial thought was formulated in relation to it and how Africans themselves responded to these new ideas. In turn, this will revise our understanding of how 'traditional' institutions like 'tribe' and chiefship were not hermetically sealed from – or the products of – an intrusive 'modernity' but were part of Africa's understanding of what it meant to be 'modern'.

3. Indian Intellectual History

The same year that *Citizen and Subject* made a splash by explaining how European ideas had transformed African political identity, the anthropologist Bernhard S. Cohn published his account of how British ideas and governance transformed Indian social relations. Cohn's premise was that colonial officialdom's command of Indian vernaculars and law allowed it to carry out a top-down categorisation, inferiorisation and reorganisation of Indian society so that it might be more easily managed (Cohn, 1996). In the following years, however, African scholars sought to offer a more participatory account of colonial state-making, as noted above, by focussing on chiefs

as politically interested knowledge-brokers who placed limits on the hegemony of colonial rule. In Indian historical scholarship, more credence was given to the notion that the contextual specificities of the Subcontinent led to intellectual innovations. Bayly's *Empire and Information* challenged the supremacy of the colonial state's capacity for knowledge creation. Bayly noted that the British intelligence gathering depended on pre-colonial Indian practices and the know-how of clerical elites that were never fully subordinated to imperial command. The result was the frequent absence of knowledge and periodic information panics – revealing the fragility and *ad hoc* nature of imperial ambition (Bayly, 1996).

Postcolonial works and contributions from the Subaltern Studies Collective on South Asia also foregrounded the need for imperial history to better understand the specificity of the non-Western context. Dipesh Chakrabarty's social history of working class communities in Bengal pushed back against the metropolitan state and capitalism's ability to remake India for their own ends. India's feudal social relations were not so easily translated into the individualist and contractual relations of the western proletariat. On the contrary, the Indian labourer was not reified into his public and private self and he remained anchored in his religious, familial and rural moorings. Consequently, the language of the Indian working class was very much of pre-capitalist modes of institutional coercion and the disciplining of an urban peasantry rather than the self-regulation of modern market agents (Chakrabarty, 1989). While some contributors to Subaltern Studies overemphasised the way in which the 'authentic' life-world of the Indian countryside was quarantined from the heteronomy of European capital, Chakrabarty continued to strike a pragmatic note. In *Provincializing Europe*, he warned against the overextension of historical lines of enquiry which exclusively fetishized connection and derivation from Europe. European concepts were indispensable in representing non-Western political 'modernities'; yet, they were inadequate in 'helping us think through the various life practices that constitute the political and the historical' in these regions. That is to say that political 'modernity' in the non-West must be considered in the 'universalism' of European thought but also in the particulars of non-Western cultures. Thus, 'Western' ideas did influence India but their 'global currency [could] no longer be taken for granted' since Indians were decoupling them from their European discourses and reinventing them in accordance with South Asian needs (Chakrabarty, 2000).

Although arrived at from quite different intellectual perspectives, it is Bayly and Chakrabarty's conclusions on regional specificity and the ensuing contingency of the colonial order that has offered valuable insights into non-Western and global intellectual history. For instance, Kapila's emphasis on 'rupture' in Indian political thought demonstrates how modern thought distanced itself from the western episteme, disembedding and disaggregating the constituent concepts from their European contexts, refiguring them, before inserting them into an explicitly Indian constellation of ideas (Kapila, 2014). Moreover, it is argued by recent scholarship that Indian radicals, like B. G. Tilak and M. K. Gandhi - to name but two examples - drew on Indian texts wholly unmediated by the West and based their political acts on the exemplars of dutiful and desireless action presented in the Bhagavat Gita (Kapila, 2007; 2010; Devji, 2012; Kapila and Devji, 2013). One cannot escape the conclusion that figures like Gandhi and Tilak also derived much of their outlook from selective engagement with non-Indian antecedents. Gandhi, from Zulu chiefs withholding rent from the British and from Henry David Thoreau on civil disobedience (Gandhi, 1927; Bilgrami, 2011;

Presbey, 2015). Tilak, from European social theorists like J. S. Mill and Herbert Spencer (Upton, 2017). However, when we provincialize Europe, it is not simply the provenance of texts but the lived practices of the non-Western world, in which texts are received and actualised through meaningful political acts, that is important. For instance, revisionist accounts have suggested that the most outwardly occidental of India's nationalist leaders, Muhammed Ali Jinnah, adapted his liberal constitutionalism to South Asia's unique multicultural make-up. His claim for a Muslim homeland was not based around the Western norms of 'majority' and 'minority' nor was it a bargaining chip to force concessions from a Hindu dominated Indian National Congress (Jalal, 1985). Rather, Jinnah's liberal contract envisioned legal *parity* between two numerically disparate cultural groups which he regarded as being comparable in their contribution to the political and cultural fabric of South Asia (Shaikh, 1989; Devji, 2013). Thus, the cultural 'authenticity' of the idea – if such a thing can be established – ought not be the concern of the historian. Instead, we should focus on the specificity of the context in which that idea has a meaningful political actualisation.

Of particular note and relevance to the history of 'indirect rule' and 'tribe' in Africa is that this new intellectual history has not simply focussed on the rupture of the political thought of Indians themselves but also of European officials in India. Recent literature on colonial state formation in South Asia has not merely focussed on the dependency of Europeans on local knowledge brokers but has also emphasised how European ideas of governance were themselves transformed by the cocktail of official concerns British officials faced. In Jon Wilson's take on early colonial Bengal, a desire for progress, anxieties of distance and cultural unfamiliarity led to 'an anxious search for semantic coherence', all of which served to wrench political concepts and legal norms from their metropolitan contexts and refigure them for India (Wilson, 2008). Equally, Sartori's consideration of the 'object orientation' of concepts, and their 'denotative capacity' (what they seek to describe and explain in a given place and time) is particularly useful when thinking about ideas as becoming meaningful in 'argument' (Sartori, 2008; 2014). Cumulatively, the theme that emerges from these works is that the colonial world was a web of liberal commitments attuned to different circumstances. However, typical of the liberal mode of thinking, the adherents of these various strains all appealed to history to evidence their claims, allowing for hermeneutic flexibility (Koditschek, 2013). Thus, despite considerable conceptual overlap there was also ample room for argumentation, intellectual manoeuvre and the imagining of a range of futures for India. It is this disaggregating of liberal ideas and the intentionality behind them that the history of political thought in Africa has neglected. As a consequence, the conceptual contours of 'tribe' and 'indirect rule' remain obscured by a fixation with the bifurcation between metropolitan 'modernity' and African 'tradition'.

5. New Possibilities and Perspectives: Film and Political Thought

One of the most innovative ways that recent Indian and African cultural and intellectual history has shined a light on meaningful and epistemologically creative acts in different regions and culture is by supplementing traditional source material with visual evidence. Significantly, adherents of the 'visual turn' are not just using images to supplement analysis but are also showing how the interface between the 'viewers' and the 'image' allows wider audiences to engage in knowledge production than texts do. In addition, the 'senses of place' that visual sources rely upon tie narratives of meaning and identity to the constantly changing local contexts of their production. This allows

the scholar to trace 'the range of creative and innovative re-workings of social and cultural configurations' (Freitag, 2014). I propose that analysing and evaluating visual sources, especially films produced in Africa during the colonial era, will give us a more nuanced picture of the multifaceted environments in which Europeans and Africans conceptualised 'tribe'. This will be a boon for Afrocentric scholarship in prioritising place and contingency in the development of both British and indigenous ideas of governance and 'modernity'. However, one of the major issues with the treatment of colonial images is that those produced by Europeans are merely contributing to monolithic orientalist misinterpretations of the non-West through a commitment to spectacle, exoticism and racialised performance (Chowdhry, 2000; Chapman & Cull, 2009; Grieveson & MacCabe, 2011). Below, I consider how we must understand the production of visual sources in a more open-ended way that shows how Europeans could conceptualise diverse African futures in dialogue with the indigenous environment.

The 'Cambridge School' still looms large in the history of political thought. Beginning in 1966 by lambasting historians' claims that great thinkers were 'influenced' by others Quentin Skinner questioned whether the author was merely invoking a 'fashionable authority' in order to disguise...some dangerous ideological commitment'. (Skinner, 1966). This is pertinent when investigating British thinkers in the colonial context since they would undoubtedly have been tempted to attach their ideas to scions of the British intellectual establishment in order to veil themselves in legitimacy. To this extent, we do not need to search for the 'invocation' of canonical thinkers when interpreting colonial thought; rather, Skinner's method of looking for the ideological context in which the argument was made is essential. Thus, Skinner's contextualist approach of focussing on the 'illocutionary force' (the combination of the meaning of the utterance and what the author is doing in making it) is an apt interpretative method.

The illocutionary force is only garnered from an appreciation of the 'linguistic context' for it is here that the prevalent ideological attitudes of the day are to be found and whether the author is endorsing or challenging them (Skinner, 1969). However, where the history of colonial thought is concerned, we must remember that as political practitioners, district officials and governors were not engaged in the sort of abstract argumentation within a narrow philosophical canon in the way that major theorists like Hobbes were. Skinner's methods are at their most useful when observing how conceptual argumentation works in rather neat European political and institutional contexts. For instance, Hobbes's *Leviathan* was addressed to early-modern politicians who were also erudite and educated theorists. These ideas were not addressed to the public at large, modern professional politicians or bureaucrats, and certainly not to colonial subjects from another culture. The canon of colonial thought in Africa would need be reconstructed from the various textual mediums in which administrators worked; nevertheless, as per Skinner, if these ideas achieved meaning in a specific debate, we need to do more as historians to unravel the environmental specificities of the interaction between colonial administrators and Africans and how this shaped colonial thought at the very moment of that encounter.

How might colonial film illuminate this encounter? Visual sources are helpful if we accept recent corrections to how political and social thinking operates, not as a process of abstract reasoning, but as purposive action in concrete contexts. As the Indian historiography admits, in the colonial world these contexts were often

characterised by anxiety, the attempts to overcome cultural distance, and the search for common material ground. Here, Hans-Georg Gadamer's understanding of how cultural horizons can be momentarily bridged due to transient contextual factors is an important signal to scholars that we cannot rely on linguistic context alone when examining political thought in multiple regional contexts. Gadamer posits the purposive relationship individuals have with the world as prior to the act of abstract theorising. Thus, Gadamer suggests that encounters between cultures that lead to co-operation of any kind go beyond subjective recognition of observable similarities and differences between people; instead, it relies on 'historically contingent manifestations of particular things that are shared, rather than with recognition that others are 'like us'. Essentially, this idea is based on the recognition of common goals and it is in this practice that the 'Other' and her ideals for the future become momentarily and partially a part of 'Us'. Practice is constituted by the reality of everyday life prior to abstract theorising – the human faculty of reason enables us to make choices about what is good and in order to do so we must draw on shared norms, convictions and acts. Therefore, a Gadamerian conception of 'understanding' entails *coming* to an understanding with each other - it is an agreement. People *make* themselves understood with a view to reaching an agreement on a specific subject. It is the subject matter that is itself the path to agreement (Gadamer, 2013). In the case of tribe and indirect rule this could include a wide range of subjects from taxation, customary and territorial rights, economic development and so on.

Therefore, by adopting this perspective - rather than understanding film as a simple 'illustration' of a preconceived notion of reality - it has been suggested that we could view film as a form of 'visual rhetoric' that considers essential cognitive, affective and phenomenological factors when we are trying to make sense of our social world (Jeandrée, 2012). Gilles Deleuze, for instance, insists that films are not an image of unchanging social reality or models for perception; rather, they destabilise the very idea of representation, doing away with discursive notions of signification and replacing them with the prospect of images of thought and creative acts (Deleuze, 1986; 1989). In this sense, film is a contingent form of 'pre-sentation' that bestows cultural and political meaning to an observed object at the moment of its observation.

How film-makers, amateur or otherwise, navigate this contingency is precisely what politicises their acts. 'The foundation of politics', Rancière observes, is the 'lack of foundation, the sheer contingency of any social order' since it is contingency which opens a space for purposive future-orientated action to bring about change (Rancière, 1999). This need to navigate contingency through the serialisation of disjointed images also creates a space for Africans themselves to engage in politics and visual rhetoric rather than 'perform' a prefabricated orientalist trope imported from the metropole. For Rancière, the potential for 'dissensus' that emerges out of the contingency of the social order, is what constitutes authentic politics. The prior assignment of custom, cultural coherence and static tradition imputed to 'tribe' by conservative-minded ethnographers and African elites can be ruptured on camera to 'litigiously' make a range of claims and, in so doing, create a new political subjectivity that had previously been buried under a 'police order' of consensus (Rancière, 2010). Echoing Gadamer, Rancière also makes the observation that 'political acts' on film are not simply drawing attention to the problems faced by the subject of the movie but they also direct the attention of the observer, in this case the district official armed with his camera, to the incompleteness of that system of consensus. It is not

difficult to appreciate how films documenting material and institutional novelties to African norms (like irrigation schemes or road construction) could be used to highlight both European and African responses – some of which might take the form of the ‘disensus’ of Africanising these developments – conceptualising them as organically a part of ‘tribal modernity’.

While many scholars are correct to insist that much film-making in colonial Africa is dominated by the ethnographic gaze (Sawadogo, 2018), other African scholars have made valuable contributions to our understanding of African agency in film-making during the colonial encounter. Sanogo has proposed that an African directorial debut could be dated as early as 1896. In the French short film, *Danse de jeunes filles* (Young girls’ dance) captured in Ghana with a Lumière camera, Sanogo recounts how the Ashante school teacher, Mr Oko, intervenes in the European project in order to choreograph the ethnic dances himself. Moreover, he beckons to other men in the frame instructing them how to enter and leave the shot – wresting control of the artistic and dramatic aspects of the film from European ‘experts’ (Sanogo, 2009). Similarly, Shaka points to colonial films from the 1930s and 1940s like *Men of Africa* and *Daybreak in Udi* to isolate examples of instructional films in which Africans position themselves not as passive recipients of ‘modernity’ or as ‘customary’ societies protected from capitalist incursion by British benevolence but as engineering their own development in line with their own culture (Shaka, 2004). Naturally, the British film-makers present the empire as a magnanimous nursery for such organic ‘modernisation’. Asymmetries of power notwithstanding, these examples offer tentative glimpses into the mutual imagining of ‘tribal’ and ‘ethnic’ ‘modernity’ in Africa.

Evidently some Europeans, ‘tribes’, and chiefs being filmed used their capacity - consciously or unconsciously - to challenge the way in which their more conservative minded peers presented the colonial social order. In so doing, Africans awakened and transformed the latent normative ideals that some British officials had about citizenship, ‘progress’, and ‘modernity’. Consequently, the European observer may have turned his gaze expressly onto aspects of African ‘tribal’ society that were now rendered useful within a crucible of ‘progress’. If the abundance of colonial film housed at locations like the British Film Institute, the British Library, and the Sudan Archive can be marshalled, we may upend Trevor-Roper’s analysis cited at the beginning of this paper. Perhaps the chief function of ‘tribe’ in early twentieth-century Africa was to show the present an image of its future which, by history, it could realise.

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