

Tribe: Chimeric or Polymorphic?

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KEYWORDS Anthropological concepts of tribe; Morton Fried; secondary tribe

ABSTRACT The essay is an attempt to circumscribe the commonly used concept of tribe by anthropologists. History has shown that, either through conquest or contact, the term has been equivalent to "The Other." The most satisfactory approach to the concept has been offered by Morton H. Fried. His perspective is that all tribes are creations of a more politically powerful entity, viz., the state. However, Fried himself has not succeeded in finding a suitable substitute for "tribe," which is essentially a derisive term, in that he concludes that all such units are "secondary tribes."

INTRODUCTION

It would be fair to state that anthropology appears to be burdened with a four-letter word and a five-letter word, both of which have caused consternation and heated discussions. The former is "race." It seems to be agreed that there is no agreement on what constitutes race, and perspectives on the concept have often changed with the political and economic times, not to mention advances in science and technology. A term almost as elusive, but perhaps not quite as contentious, is "tribe," the five-letter word. In examining this concept, however, one is at a disadvantage because one cannot fall back on the rigorous techniques of biology and chemistry such as in the field of genetics, DNA, and the like to back up the arguments.

One of the clearest definitions and delineations of tribe that I have come across happens to be in a book by two Indian social anthropologists who authored a textbook that was widely used (and its revised version might still be in great use) in India as an introduction to the field. It is Ram Nath Sharma and Rajendra K. Sharma's *Social Anthropology and Indian Tribes* (1983). They characterize tribes as having these eleven features: 1) Definite common geography; 2) consciousness of unity; 3) common language; 4) endogamous group; 5) ties of blood relationship; 6) experience of need for protection; 7) political organization; 8) importance of religion; 9) common name; 10) common culture; and 11) organization of clans (1983: 177-178). Each of the eleven sub-topics is followed by detailed information.

On its surface, their definition seems to be not only comprehensive but also reasonable and acceptable. However, eight years earlier, Morton H. Fried of Columbia University had written what I consider to be a seminal study on the notion of tribe (Fried 1975)¹. As though anticipating the approach to the concept of tribe by the Sharmas (and, incidentally, of many American anthropologists as well), in coming to grips with this concept in general anthropology textbooks, Fried first carefully examined the etymology of the very term, tribe, a term that came into use in the English speaking world during the 17th and 18th centuries to designate "the other." Then he examined tribes as: "breeding populations," linguistic groups, named groups, economic and political systems, "ideological" groups, and cultural units. In his analyses, he found much wanting in each of the categories owing to such things as the interminglings of peoples, fuzzy boundaries both geographically and linguistically, the ever dynamic situation in which the world operates, which includes impacting those "tribes" supposedly quite isolated from the nation-state in which they are found, etc.

Although it is fashionable now to attribute many phenomena (including the term tribe) to Western imperialism/and or colonialism, as an expert on Chinese history and culture, Fried ably pointed to eras when China as an expansionist state the peoples conquered were given pejorative terms on par with "tribe" (Fried, 1975: 36-38). The same may be said of other empires (e.g., The Roman Empire, The Ottoman Empire, The Japanese Empire, etc.) but also of stronger groups conquering weaker ones where state

systems were non-existent or were in their nascent state conditions (cf. Suzuki, 1973)². Indeed, this seems to have been and continues to be a near universal phenomenon of the human condition.

Fried's words in the penultimate paragraph of his last chapter bear quoting because they summarize admirably his conclusion.

"there is one usage that is in excellent accord with our knowledge and experience; this is tribe as a secondary sociopolitical phenomenon, brought about by the intercession of more complex ordered societies, states in particular. I call this "secondary tribe" and I believe that all the tribes with which we have experience are this kind. The "pristine tribe," on the other hand, is a creation of myth and legend, pertaining either to the golden age of the noble savage or romantic barbarism...(Fried, 1975: 114).

Thus, his "pristine tribe" is the *chimeric tribe*, and the "secondary tribe," it can be recognized, are those that anthropologists have been studying, and the ones that lay people often can also readily identify in terms of named units. And this is what the Sharmas had in mind in their delineation of tribe but, technically speaking, to the degree that they were positing the ideal situation, had a chimeric tribe in mind. Parenthetically, as regards India, the magisterial volume by Moonis Raza and Aijazuddin Ahmad, *An Atlas of Tribal India* (1990), which focuses on "Scheduled Tribes," makes a formidable point in the following sentences.

It is, however, interesting to note that tribal studies [in India] have been generally considered to be the preserve of the anthropologists or the sociologist only. Social scientists from other disciplines have tended to accord too much respect to this colonial tradition and have generally shied away from an analysis of the tribal ethos (P. 5).

They might have also added that they themselves were embedded in a colonial frame because many of the peoples they designate as tribes were originally identified as such by colonial administrators.

However, the problem that anthropologists have frequently encountered or have not duly noted adequately in their publications are the dynamically changing situations each group has been undergoing and the relationship of the group to the larger whole, which, in modern times has been the nation state. Often implicit in this,

too, is their failure to recognize the units they are studying or have studied are what Fried calls secondary tribes, which, he feels, is a *sine qua non*.

Although Fried takes cognizance of the term tribe as being a pejorative, the irony is that he himself cannot escape this term but tries, by virtue of simply adding a modifier before the term, i.e., *secondary* tribe.

Now, anyone who is familiar with even a smattering of United States history knows that the native populations were subjugated and the vast majority put on special lands, reservations (or in places like California, termed *rancherias*, or in the Southwest, *pueblos*), with a long history that can be traced to the eighteenth century. Today there are more than five-hundred officially recognized Indian tribes, meaning that the U.S. Government through its Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) makes available to them certain goods and services, jurisdiction, and duties that tribes not officially recognized would not receive or have (e.g., Castile and Bee, 1992). Accordingly, one could not find a more clear-cut case of secondary tribes as in the situation that obtains among American Indians.

In most cases, owing to specific boundaries established for reservations and the equally specific tribes placed on them (however, in places like Oklahoma, rather than reservations, those areas inhabited by Indians are simply designated as Indian Country), there are thus identifiable geographic units. Nevertheless, many of the reservations were established on arbitrary bases so that those within given linguistic groups, or cultures were separated in a willy-nilly fashion. As an example, the Omaha and Winnebago Reservations in Nebraska share a common border. However, the latter, speaking Chiwere Sioux, originally from Wisconsin, some 600 miles away, historically were a Woodland culture people while the Omahas, speaking Dhegiha Sioux, were part of the Northern Plains culture³. (Because of their close proximity to each other, there have been many intermarriages.) And thanks to rapid mobility through transportation or communication, along with the migration of reservation Indians to urban places since the BIA encouraged the movement through its 1952 Voluntary Relocation Program (VRP), resulting in more Indians in cities than on reservations, the criteria cited by the Sharmas, and the commonly held constituent features about a tribe

that Fried has effectively desolated, the concept of tribe nevertheless prevails.

In part this is because the BIA has not abandoned this term (and the BIA gets its marching orders from the U.S. Congress, which is the only body that can legislate affairs pertaining to Native Americans) and, most importantly, the Indians themselves have not yet abandoned it, although there is a small movement away from it, which will be brought out below.

The power of the modern state and tribes within its borders can also be brought out in two other U.S. examples. The first has to do with Indian identity and definition of Indian. In 1887, the U.S. Congress passed the Allotment Act, by which Indian land (typically 160 acres) was parceled out to individuals but only those who had one half or more Indian blood. Then this blood quantum approach and mentality carried over into the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 that made Indians U.S. citizens, but only those that met the blood quantum criterion (Jaime, 1991:124-127). Such moves have necessitated the establishment of enrollment offices by tribes. The official assigned to run the office records the blood quantum of tribal members and when births occur, the parents register children at such an office. Here too one receives an enrollment card that looks like a typical driver's license that an American might hold except it contains the quantum blood of the card holder, his/her enrollment number, tribe name, picture, official seal and signature, birth date, etc⁴. The second and equally cynical approach to Indians was in the Termination Act of 1953 that literally "detrIALIZED" 109 officially recognized tribes so that all of the services and benefits that they had enjoyed prior to detribalization were immediately withdrawn. More tribes would have come under this ax had not the tragic consequences of this movement not been brought out, perhaps most dramatically in the case of the Menominee of the State of Wisconsin Peroff (1982)⁵.

That a modern nation state such as the U.S. can also create a non-Indian tribe out of a group of widely scattered people but racially from one stock with literally a stroke of pen is evidenced in Executive Order 9066 signed by President Roosevelt on February 19, 1942. This executive order, which by-passed the U.S. Congress, enabled the removal of some 120,000 people of Japanese descent from their homes on the West Coast into camps (initially 16 temporary camps).

The permanent camps, "relocation centers," were the equivalents of Indian reservations. Indeed, one of the largest, Poston, Arizona, was on an Indian reservation despite the protest of the Tribal Council of the Colorado River Indian Reservation because the Council did not want the Japanese to be meted out the same treatment that Indians had received, but was overruled by the BIA. The ten internment camps, all situated in isolated parts of the states in which they were placed (Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming) differed from Indian reservations because each camp was surrounded by barbed wire fences and guarded by armed U.S. Army personnel, and ingress and egress were possible only by special permission. If one were to examine the criteria established by the Sharmas, many would accord with their list (this named tribe, the internees, became commonly known as "The Japs").

Like reservations, anthropologists and sociologists were based in the camps, but hired by the War Relocation Authority, to study the inmates. And one large research project, based at the University of California at Berkeley, the Japanese Evacuation and Resettlement Study, a *covert* research project, had its own anthropologists in several of the camps. To the everlasting shame of American anthropology and sociology, many of these professionals, which included some of the most prominent figures in their field, turned out to be informers and intelligence gatherers for U.S. Government agencies such as the FBI and the Office of Naval Intelligence (Suzuki, 1976, 1981, 1986a, b, 1989)⁶.

Returning to the case of American Indians, as can be imagined, many American Indian tribes' names were assigned to them by Whites. Also as has been the experience in the majority of the cases throughout the world where a dyadic relationship existed between stronger groups against weaker ones (not necessarily Whites on one side and natives on the other), the weaker groups became the recipients of new names. Not surprisingly, the assigned names have often been inaccurate, less than flattering, derogatory, or innocuous but just plain wrong. Ethnographically speaking, one of the most well known peoples throughout the world among both social scientists and lay people must surely be the Eskimos because of their traditional culture. Anthroponymically, it is interesting that it was the Cree and Abenaki Indians who labeled them

Eskimos, a name which has stuck, but in reality, means “those who eat raw meat.” Incidentally, I believe Fried cited this example because of the degree to which these people are known throughout the world (1975: 34); but, of course, they were never viewed nor analyzed as a tribe because of their traditional nomadic culture and the fact that they moved about as a single family or small groups of families. It must be noted too that in Canada they are officially referred to as Inuit (“Human Beings”) a self-designated term. In the U.S., although the term is not official, increasingly Inuit is being used instead of Eskimo.

As a follow-up on the issue of assigned tribal names, a national policy for American Indians could be implemented to rectify any anthropomorphic injustices by the following proposed method (with the backing of the U.S. Congress, of course, because it could be an expensive program). A name-changing program would ask each tribe by which name they would like to be known. After a consensus has been reached by the tribes, the new names would then be officially changed by edict. Some of these changes have been going on informally among some tribes. For example, the Oglala Sioux now prefer to be known as Lakota. There are several signs that the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska are going to start referring to themselves more and more as *Hochungra* (“People of the Parent Speech”) vs. Winnebago (“People of the Salt Water”; one interpretation of salt water is “dirty water”). Equally important, the term tribe is being substituted for “nation” (e.g., The Winnebago Nation; The Omaha Nation, etc.) because the U.S. Government made treaties with tribes as sovereign entities, and under President Ronald Reagan, affirmed a “nation to nation” relationship. Even with such changes, commonly used terms as tribal council, tribal police, tribal office, etc., would experience a slow death.

Following Fried, if one accepts, as I do, his position that secondary tribes are the only “real” tribes (and those few anthropologists who do not, in a manner of speaking, would be dealing with “chimeras”), we will not “... succumb to an easy, conventional use of the concept of tribe” (Fried, 1975: 114). In other words, anthropologists may still use the concept of tribe provided that cognizance is taken of the primacy of another, larger political entity, the modern nation state. In the words of Fried again, “...you may still use the

term tribe...but it will be with a twinge of alarm and a new shock of recognition” (1975: 114)⁷. Hence, beyond accepting the concept of secondary tribe, is the acceptance of tribal *polymorphism*, which has long been in each anthropologist's “tool kit,” as it were, anyway. That is to say, for the most part, anthropologists indeed have been circumscribing carefully the groups (“tribes”) that they have studied by delineation of their geographic, linguistic, population, cultural, etc., boundaries because they know that secondary tribes come in all shapes, forms, and sizes and do not fit any one particular mold⁸.

A vigorous and stimulating attestation to what has been stated in the previous paragraph may be found in a set of essays between the covers of *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (Khoury and Kostiner, 1990). Six of the thirteen (46.2%) contributors are anthropologists; the others represent political science and history. Although it would be beyond the scope of this paper to go over each article, because of the salience of Iran in contemporary world affairs, a precis of the contribution by the anthropologist Lois Beck follows. After a long and detailed discussion of the characteristics and categories of tribes in Iran, which includes definitions that occupies almost 16 pages (typical of an anthropologist's approach to tribe, much of this part of her discussion centers on lineage and kinship), the author encapsulates Iran's history with reference to state and tribal relations. One would be hard put to find a more apposite statement on what I have attempted to get across, in part, in this essay than the following paragraph by Beck, although she has Iran in mind.

Many social scientists and others have traditionally viewed tribes as bounded, self-contained, autonomous, often isolated entities created by autochthonous factors. Tribes, however, were formed and sustained within the context of broad external forces. The resulting tribal formations [i.e., “secondary tribes”] were ways of integrating people into state structures, while at the same time preventing these peoples' subordination to, or assimilation into, the state (Beck, 1990: 215; also, cf. Hart, 2000).

In a brief but incisive overview of tribe, Gingrich after having duly noted the most recent critics of the term, “feminists, postmodernists, deconstructionists, post-colonial theorists, et al.

— by taking into account the turmoil in such places where the state has become weakened” (e.g., Afghanistan), arrives at a most interesting conclusion.

It would amount to a strange paradox if anthropologists limited themselves defensively to deconstructing completely the concept of tribe, while many parts of the world in fact go through retribalization (sic) of some sort. In view of these developments, an active reformulation of the concept seems to be a more productive alternative. With this alternative, ideological movements of ‘tribalism’ will have to be distinguished more clearly from ‘tribe,’ parallel to concepts of nationalism and of nation. (Gingrich, 2001.)

To this observer, it is apparent that anthropologists for some time indeed have been “reformulating” the concept of tribe by virtue of rigorous and meticulous definitions that critics would find difficult to fault (for example, see the article by Gellner (1990) in the same collection that contains Beck’s). (Nevertheless the critics might not be satisfied in so far as tribe implies the Other.) If, however, he means by this coining a new term or using another term, I would suggest looking at the concept of “ethnic group.”

This term has no pejorative implication, can transcend racially based groups, and yet can be defined in a way that would satisfy traditional anthropological concerns. Elsewhere, I have applied this concept to the Omaha and Winnebago Indians of Nebraska owing to their growing sense of ethnicity (vs. “tribalhood”) (Suzuki, 1996, 1999). In many respects, anthropologists seem to be hesitant in using this term and appear to leave this term to sociologists because it is the latter who, historically, “discovered” it and have continued to use it to good advantage to analyze situations in modern society⁹. As globalization, urbanization, and modernization march on, should a time come when “tribe” becomes totally anathema to anthropologists, it might make sense to substitute ethnic group for tribe or to at least examine this concept.

However, until such time arrives, it is my opinion that the concept of tribe can be productively used with certain strictures such as the recognition of tribes as secondary phenomena and of the total neutrality of the term. Of course these would go in tandem with careful circumscriptions of the constituent elements that are being examined as a tribe. But then, for the most

part, anthropologists have been doing these things all along anyway.

CONCLUSIONS

It is my view that the following conclusions are warranted.

1. Historically, tribe was used to designate The Other, especially during colonial expansion. This phenomenon, however, was not restricted to Western colonialism/imperialism in that non-Western empires have used its equivalent to designate those not of their kind. This labeling appears to be a human universal because of simple contact (e.g., the Algonkian Cree and Abenaki Indians in labeling the Inuits Eskimos) or by conquest.
2. Tribes are chimeric when, in the minds of anthropologists they conceive of an “ideal” in circumscribing the concept of tribe.
3. In recognition of the roles of states and tribes, Fried’s concept of “secondary tribe” is important but this does not obviate the use of the word “tribe”. It does, however, take cognizance of the polymorphic nature of tribes.
4. The situation of the U.S. and its America Indians is instructive in showing the power of a modern nation-state and its relations with its native peoples. However, certain remedies can be corrected such as name changes of tribes. The proposal presented for the U.S. could also be a template for other nations with tribes within their borders.
5. The internment of people of Japanese descent by the U.S. Government during WWII created a tribe in the technical sense and clearly limns what Fried has termed the concept of tribe as a secondary phenomenon.
6. Although anthropologists have been troubled by the concept of tribe, with some of the severest criticisms coming from postmodernists, deconstructionists, *et al.*, a satisfactory substitute term has not been proffered.
7. It is quite possible that “ethnic group” might be a viable substitute.
8. More extended essays by anthropologists on the concept of tribe will be an exercise in futility.
9. There is no reason to shy away from using the term tribe provided that the user take into consideration some of the caveats noted in this essay.

NOTES

1. Fried was my instructor for several of my graduate courses at Columbia. Although labeled a Marxist by Gingrich (2001: 15908), all his writings indicate that he was a neo-evolutionist, who was greatly influenced by Julian H. Steward, under whom he studied at Columbia.
2. Although identified as miniature Nias states with virtually all of the features of a regular state, Fried perhaps would have seen them as Acommunal" (Fried, 1975: 105).
3. Siouan is a large language family somewhat parallel to Indo-European.
4. An enrollment card gains entry to any Indian Health Service hospital in the U.S. Some tribes have lowered their blood quantum requirement to 1/32; another, the Lakota, have abolished it. As more and more intermarriages take place among members of various tribes and with non-Indians, a logical progression of such events would seem to indicate that the blood quantum criterion of other tribes would eventually have to be lowered. The Onandega of New York, on the other hand, historically a matrilineal society, in the 1970s expelled all those who had married members other than their own tribe, as a measure to keep the tribe "pure." In reaction to all this, one of my Winnebago informants, a lady of 55 in an interview that took place in July 2002, put it this way as a negative reaction to the demands of blood quantum: "I'm not a measuring cup."
5. Fried cites the Menominee case while the tribe was seeking restoration as an officially recognized tribe (1975:112).
6. The anthropologist Weston LaBarre after only ten days in the camp in Utah as Community Analyst, came up with a list of 19 neurotic features of the Japanese; he then sought and found all 19 features among the internees of that camp. His total stay in the camp was 42 days (+ 2 days; the day of arrival and the day of departure) In his way, he justified the internment to policy makers because, after all, the internees were mentally ill anyway (Suzuki, 1980).
7. Gingrich makes a similar point (2001: 15908).
8. Fried describes secondary tribes as being "heterogeneous" (1975: 103).
9. Fried gingerly mentions ethnic group but does not delve into its implications (1975: 104).

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