The Passing of Tribal Man: A Rhodesian View

by

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In the early part of 1967, I was Professor Gutkind's guest in Montreal. One night we sat till late in the night, discussing many matters. I distinctly recollect the debate on anthropology and anthropologists, during which I rudely told my host that I disliked anthropologists, because basic to their study or discipline, was an attitude of cultural, if not racial, superiority.

The subject of this essay, "The Passing of Tribal Man" is very akin to anthropology in its overtones of cultural superiority. I have no doubt the invitation to write this article arose out of something I said during the debate.

"Tribal Man", must mean the man who is a member of a tribe. "A tribe" is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "a group of primitive clans under a recognized chief". There are probably better definitions. All of them no doubt would reflect an implicit subjective judgement by the user of the word that people he is talking of are "primitive", that is to say, underdeveloped, backward and even inferior—certainly to himself—for whoever heard anyone call himself primitive.

Words in the English language are to varying degrees emotionally charged. The word "tribe" like the word "native" whatever their historical or semantic origin, has come to carry with it in our time an attitude of mind not very different from that accepted as implicit in the word "native" as explained by Arnold Toynbee (1947, vol. 1: 152) in his monumental "Study of History".

"When we westerners call people natives (for native substitute tribesmen) we implicitly take the cultural colour out of our conception of them. We see them as trees walking or as wild animals infesting the country in which we happen to come across them. In fact, we see them as part of the local flora and fauna, and not as men of like passions with ourselves, and seeing them thus as something infra human, we feel entitled to treat them as though they did not possess ordinary human rights. They are merely natives of the lands they occupy and no term of occupancy can be long enough to confer (on them) any prescriptive rights. Their tenure is as provisional and precarious as that of the forest trees which the western pioneer fells, or of the big game which he shoots down. And how shall the Lords of creation treat the human game, when in their own good time they come and take possession of the land which by right of eminent domain is indefeasibly their own. Shall they treat these 'Natives' as vermin to be exterminated, or as domesticable
animals to be turned into hewers of wood and drawers of water. No other alternative need be considered if niggers have no souls. All this is implicit in the word "native" as we have come to use it in the English language in our time".

Another westerner, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966 : 125) has put it even more bluntly.

"If anthropology is typically western, it is to a great extent on account of a very special relationship which our civilization has towards these people. Here there is nothing for us to be proud of. After all it is because we have killed them, exploited them for centuries that it was possible for us to look at them as mere things. We can study them as objects because we have treated them as objects. There is no doubt that anthropology is the daughter of an era of violence".1

The passing of tribal man will be mourned by anthropologists alone. That I should have agreed to write on a subject which raises these emotions and produces these reactions in me, is beyond me now to understand.

However, I can see the Westerner—and the anthropologist—paying some attention to this article. "Here it is—the tribesman will explain how he is passing—what it feels like to be passing". It is like listening to an eloquent poet on his deathbed, lyrically describing how it feels to be dying. No one would wish to miss it.

Those who read this article with the expectation that their curiosity will be satisfied will be disappointed. In any case there is bound to be considerable disappointment at the article because I propose to narrow tribal man to the "tribal man" I know best—if such he is—"the tribal man" of Rhodesia.

We often talk of Rhodesia as inhabited by two major tribes, the Mashonas and the Matabeles. In one sense this is an oversimplification. It stems from a confusion of a language group with a tribe. A number of tribes in what is known as Rhodesia, spoke and speak dialects of the Shona language. The Matabeles on the other hand more nearly represent a tribe. This is so for historical reasons.

The Mashonas have always lived in Rhodesia as they still do. They are largely the same people as those whom the Portuguese explorers found in the old Empire of Monomotapa in the 15th century. They are in one way or another descendents of the Mambo and Rozwi Dynasties.

In spite of their common language, their common culture, religion and system of political organization, I think it is truer to regard them as being several tribes, rather than as a single tribe.

This must be so, if it is accepted that a tribe is a unit of social and political organization which occupies a defined area of land and comprises a defined number of persons. To a greater or lesser extent, there is cohesion in the tribal group or society.

The limits of a tribe are thus set by time and space. People are members

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of a tribe because they live next to one another, are in constant communication, speaking the same language, and sharing the same customs and beliefs, and subject to the same political authority.

If the geographical distance between the people is too great to be covered easily, on foot, donkey or oxwagon, tribal cohesion is lost. Hence the tribe must be limited in time and in space.

Mashonaland comprises more than half the area of Southern Rhodesia. In the absence of modern means of communication it would be too large to comprise a single tribe. Hence the assertion that there were more than one tribe of Mashonas, not a tribe of Mashonas.

The Matebeles came into Rhodesia, about 45 years before the white settler tribesmen. Like the white settlers they were largely fortune seekers. One Mzilikazi, a disloyal and discontented general in Tshaka’s army in Natal, fled across the Drakensberg with his men to found a new home. As they moved along, they fought and won battles, and took women with whom they bore children. The journey took several years and ended at Bulawayo where they settled. By that time they had altered somewhat the Zulu language; but they retained the general structure of social and political organization, and their customs and culture.

They occupied to begin with a small area—all were within a radius of 60 miles from Mzilikazi’s Kraal. It was possible in these circumstances to retain the attributes of a single tribe.

It was from Bulawayo, that Mzilikazi, and later his son Lobengula conducted series of periodic raids for cattle and women among the indigenous Mashonas. These raids were later cunningly described by the whites as conquests, in order to give a semblence of legitimacy to their invasion of the land of the Mashonas in 1890.

The history of Rhodesia since the Mashona “the Matebele and the white tribes came together at the turn of the last century” has seen the introduction of a number of factors. Some tended to alter the character of the tribes, others to weaken it.

The most important single factor has been the mixing of tribes brought about by easier communication—by road, rail, telephone and telegraphy, so that Mutasa’s “tribesman” near Umtali travelled to the Makoni area, near Rusape, to Soswe’s and Cluhota’s areas near Marandellas, and even to Gutu’s area near Fort Victoria.

In the process each learnt of the other and in general the chief lesson was the discovery among the Mashona tribes that though their dialects differed, they in fact spoke the same language and understood each other. Though their customs differed in detail, they were in large measure uniform. They were all patrilineal, they encouraged exogamy and prohibited endogamy, so that the general forms of marriage were the same, as was the form of religious practice; though they came under different chiefs, the form of social and political organization was the same in each tribe. There was a chief at the apex, who was assisted by a Council of Elders, who with the chief sat in council both as legis-
lators to make laws for the good government of the tribal community and as judges, to try and to punish offenders, and settle disputes.

It was not only the new easier means of communications which led to this tribal acculturation. It was also economic and social factors which drove men and later women from their tribal areas, into the areas occupied by other tribes. First, the poll tax drove men out to find some way of earning the required cash. Some went out for sheer adventure. Women followed the menfolk. As land hunger grew among the Africans, due to the rigid enforcement of Apartheid—known in Rhodesia as Land Apportionment—many were driven out of their tribal land into other areas by sheer economic necessity.

It is impossible to list all the factors that produced "tribal mixing". It is sufficient to note that the consequence of the tribal mixing was to bring about the realization that in fact all the Mashonas are one, they speak the same language, they have similar customs and live under similar social and political institutions. In short, the effect was the creation, out of the Mashona tribes, of a Mashona nation: that is, a group of people who are bound together by common language, history and traditions and who in consequence feel that they belong together. In other words, the tribes came to unite into one tribe—the "Mashona Tribe"; but, as I have indicated earlier, to talk of a tribe occupying more than half the area of Rhodesia, is to misuse words. What has come in the place of the tribes is a nation, not an "enlarged tribe".

Similar factors were operating in Matabele land. The Matabeles spread farther and farther beyond the original 60 mile radius of Bulawayo. They settled among locals and soon increased in numbers and in influence. Many went deep into Mashonaland, in search of employment, adventure and fortune. A new process of tribal acculturation was set in motion—this time between the Mashonas and the Matabeles. Many Mashonas moved into Bulawayo, took employment and settled. Today probably there are more Mashonas in employment in Bulawayo city than Matabeles.

What had taken place within the Mashona and the Matabele tribes separately, leading to the mistaken identification of a "Mashona Tribe" and a "Matabele Tribe", began to happen between the two language groups—the Mashonas and the Matabeles—and with much the same consequence—a realization that though their languages differed, their social and political organization was the same—they share similar basic ideas about marriage, about land, religious practices, etc.

Meantime these similarities in indigenous mores and rites, were being accentuated by other forces. The White Administration had determined to kill the institution of chieftainship because they preferred direct to indirect rule. Indirect rule they feared was likely to enhance the chief and an enhanced chiefly status could be a threat to direct White rule.

Very shortly after White self-government was granted in 1923, the all-White Parliament passed a law—The Native Affairs Act—which provided inter alia that:

1). the Governor shall appoint chiefs over tribes;
2) the chiefs shall be paid such remuneration as may from time to time be prescribed by regulation;
3) the chief shall rank in his area as a police constable
4) he shall remain in office during pleasure and may be removed from office for unfitness or failure to carry out government policy.

The chiefs who were appointed under this law were not always the traditional ones. Large tribes were broken up into two or three chieftainships in order to weaken them. New chieftainships were created to oppose others.

These chiefs were required to carry out the policy of land apportionment, which produces landlessness and misery among their people, the policy of the Native Land Husbandry Act with its concomitant land and stock limitation—leading to untold poverty; the policy of White supremacy in all relations between White and Black.

They were shed of any criminal jurisdiction and such civil jurisdiction as they had, was subordinated to that of the local White boss—the Native (now District) Commissioner.

In short, the policy of the White Administration was to whittle down chieftainship. With this went the destruction of the tribe.

The use of chiefs by the Administration to enforce unpalatable “Native” policies destroyed any confidence that the people might have had in the chiefs, who came to be identified by their people with the oppressive White Administration. In return for this the chiefs got literally nothing. Their salaries until UDI were generally under £120 p.a. Most earned £60 p.a.

All these factors tended to drive the former Mashona and Matabele tribesmen into unity under common subjection to White minority rule. Nothing creates unity more surely than common apprehension or common danger.

Tribal man in Rhodesia is indeed passing, in fact, has passed into history. Anthropologists may regret this, but I understand that most of them are learning to merge anthropology into sociology as more and more tribal communities disappear in the world.

The forces which have led to the passing of tribal man in Rhodesia are largely the creation of the White foreigners.

Recently we have seen a vain and belated attempt by the same foreign minority Administration to recreate the tribe and the chiefs out of the rubble heap to which these institutions had been reduced by their own previous laws, policies and practices.

In 1961 when Sir Edgar Whitehead realized that Africans had evolved into a united nation, he sought to divide their unity by rebuilding the chiefs in opposition. So he invited chiefs to the Constitutional Conference table—to counter-balance the National Democratic Party delegation whose party he later banned and whose leaders he later arrested and restricted without trial.

Sir Edgar Whitehead was succeeded by Mr. Field and Mr. Ian Smith, the current leaders of the rebellion. Both of them learned the Whitehead strategy, and have steadily mounted propaganda that the chiefs more than the nationalist represent the Africans of Rhodesia. Their position featured at the Tiger
Talks and they have remained the chief instrument of the Rebels to sow confusion in the Rhodesian crisis.

Meantime Mr. Smith has done precious little to give meaning to the claim that the chiefs are the natural leaders of the African people. They remain civil servants, appointed, paid and dismissible by the government. They remain responsible for carrying out government policy, however obnoxious to and opposed by their people. Because their position has become so obviously irreconcilable with the wishes of the people, he has had to give them armed police protection and increase their pay by way of acknowledgement of the risk involved in chieftainship.

None of these schemes and devices will turn the clock back. The chiefs were made as anachronism by deliberate government policy. They could never be resuscitated by any form of artificial political respiration. The break up of the old tribal societies and their regrouping into new language groups—the Mashona and the Matabele—and a new nation of Zimbabweans, has come to stay and will stay for all time. A new nation has been born. Nothing can turn the tide. Mr. Smith would be well advised to adjust to these facts, rather than attempt, like Canute, to order back to the sea the advancing tide of African Nationalism.

That in Rhodesia there is now a single African National consciousness is clear. The present differences between the two banned political parties in Rhodesia are not tribal. Each of the parties embraces the whole country and is supported by former Matabele and Mashona tribesmen—now nationalists of Zimbabwe.

There is a new force at work, a new vision and a new imperative. The people see a new hope and a new society in front of them. They have embraced it and they will inexorably follow the vision to its end.

LITERATURE CITED