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Preface

ETHNICITY AND TRIBE

Africa has always been a collection of tribes, goes the conventional refrain. The speaker will point to the multitude of language groups on the continent, their numbers more or less constant over time. But is a language group the same as a tribe? This book argues otherwise: a language group is a cultural community, an ethnic group. An ethnic group becomes a tribe when politicized, and identified with a fixed territory ("homeland"), a hierarchical authority ("customary authority"), and a set of laws that apply only to members of the tribe ("customary laws"). A tribe is a political community.

In the African countries, the politicization of culture took place over the colonial period. Modern colonialism created the tribes of Africa. It is colonial power that translated linguistic boundaries into political ones, and language groups into "nations," claiming that these were really a carryover of premodern units.

To see through these claims, we need to focus on three critical changes under colonialism. First was the creation of a power structure in the new units: "traditional authorities" were empowered by colonial authorities to run the newly bounded "traditional societies." Second was the creation of "customary law." This law claimed to be a continuation of precolonial custom, but at the same time distinguished between two kinds of residents: indigenous and migrants. Traditional authorities were said to be empowered by customary law to discriminate between those indigenous and those not—the former tracing their genealogy to the time before colonialism and the latter to colonization or after. Even when colonial migrants had come to speak the language of the locality ("culture"), they were considered not indigenous to the area. And even when culturally assimilated, they were treated as political strangers. They were considered not part of the tribe. Finally, in a continent where most ethnic groups had historically been mobile, moving in search of productive land and water

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sources, these same ethnic groups were now fixed to a territory ("tribal homeland") and said to have been fixed to it eternally.

Colonial power built the colonial state on tribal building blocks. Recruitment into all colonial institutions was based on tribal identities. Every institution—from the army to the police to the prisons, even plantation or factory or domestic labor—was identified with particular tribes. When members of a tribe demanded increased representation in any institution, their calculation was inevitably based on a tribal arithmetic. Tribalism was a representation of colonial logic.

Idi Amin and Yoweri Museveni have been defined by their opposed relationship to tribalism: Amin as the father of the nation, and Museveni as one who has sought to resurrect tribe as a political identity and make it permanent.