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Before I begin, a brief clarification. The word "tribe" is a colonial inheritance, one that has often been used to simplify and sometimes diminish Africa's complex social systems. Our societies were, and still are, far more layered: kingdoms, clans, lineages, and cultural communities with sophisticated governance and identity structures. I use the word here for ease of communication, not as an endorsement of its historical framing.

There is a persistent mistake in how we explain Africa's development challenges. We have bundled together tribe, tribalism, and tribalism and turned them into a single accusation. In doing so, we have misdiagnosed the problem, and perhaps more dangerously, misdirected our anger.

Let us begin with a simple but uncomfortable question: Is it wrong to be a tribalist?

If by tribalist we mean someone who identifies with and values their people, language, customs, ancestry, then there is nothing inherently wrong with it. Every society has its own version. Identity is not a defect; it is a foundation. It is how people locate themselves in history and community. Africa did not invent this. It simply never abandoned it.

The real issue begins when identity becomes a tool of access. Tribalism, in its problematic form, is not about belonging; it is about exclusion. It is when opportunities begin to follow identity lines rather than merit. Jobs, contracts, protection, and privilege start to flow not on the basis of competence but connection. At that point, identity ceases to be cultural and becomes operational. It becomes a system.

But even here, we must go further because this is where the conversation is often cut short. If tribalism were truly about benefiting entire communities, then all members of a "tribe in power" would be thriving. Yet across Uganda and the continent, we see the

Don't blame tribe: How nepotism fuels divisions

But nepotism, quiet, adaptable, and deeply embedded, is the real villain.



Gertrude Kamya Othieno

Tribe



opposite. Even within groups perceived to be privileged, many remain marginalised, struggling, and excluded. This exposes a deeper reality: what we call tribalism is often something else.

It is nepotism. Nepotism is narrower, more selective, and far more insidious. It does not benefit the tribe as a whole; it benefits networks within it; family, friends, loyalists, and insiders. It uses identity when convenient, but it is not bound by it. It moves easily across elite circles, professional groups, and political patronage systems.

In truth, nepotism is not tribal; it is structural. And yet, its effects are felt socially, not structurally. When opportunities appear captured, citizens begin to interpret inequality through identity. They assume that entire communities have advanced at their expense. And from that assumption, resentment grows.

We have seen how quickly this can erupt.

Moments of tension—like those witnessed in Kayunga in 2009, do not emerge in isolation. They are symptoms of a deeper misunderstanding. When systems fail quietly, societies react loudly and often wrongly.

Ordinary citizens become stand-ins for systems they do not control. This is the danger of misdiagnosis. By blaming tribes, we risk turning society against itself. We punish the many for the actions of a few, while the real mechanism, nepotism, remains untouched.

And yet, identity itself is not only defensible; it is necessary. It carries memory, belonging, and continuity. To erase it in the name of progress is not modernisation—it is dislocation.

The challenge, then, is not to abandon identity but to discipline its use. Can we build systems where identity enriches society without determining access? Can we create institutions strong enough to resist favouritism, whether tribal, social, or elite-based? Can we shift from a culture of connection to a culture of competence?

Because development is not about eliminating differences. It is about managing it fairly. The tribalist is not Uganda's problem. Tribalism, when it becomes systemic, is a distortion. But nepotism, quiet, adaptable, and deeply embedded, is the real villain.

Until we name it as such, we will continue fighting the wrong battle while the divisions we fear grow deeper beneath us.

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