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ARTICLE

The Construction of 'Tribe' as a Socio-Political Unit in Global History

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Abstract

This article explores the construction of 'tribe' as a socio-political unit of global history, revealing an evolution of ideas and practices, both of which actively sought to limit, by co-opting, the opportunities and agency of Indigenous groups. The category of 'tribe' was, and is, co-constitutive of Euro-American empire. Euro-American empires created two interlinked dynamics in the social history of the 'tribe'. One was external, a process of categorization to facilitate and effect conquest and integration. The other was internal, a process of reimagining social relationships through which locals adapted to the threats and opportunities of empire. By mapping British approaches to ethnic Pashtuns and the state of Afghanistan onto imperial engagement with 'tribal' communities worldwide – and highlighting both similarities and differences with the North American examples more prominent in the existing literature – global patterns of 'tribalism', as defined by Euro-Americans, become apparent. The article illustrates some – but certainly not all – of the impacts of being labelled 'tribal' while demonstrating ways that areas and societies seemingly peripheral to each other became interconnected because of shared Euro-American terminology and practice.

The category of 'tribe' was, and is, co-constitutive of Euro-American empire. Pashtuns from across north-western South Asia have provided one of the most dramatic examples of the ways in which a population's 'tribal' dynamics have been turned against it. Across the British empire, from the mid-nineteenth century, Pashtuns came to epitomize the 'noble savage',[1] and this idea was further internationalized and weaponized in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in the context of NATO's 'War on Terror'.[2] Yet equally, local Pashtuns have subverted or adapted their 'tribal' socio-politics to demand autonomy in a world of empires and (nation-)states. In this regard, the history

[1] Akbar S. Ahmed, 'An aspect of the colonial encounter in the North-West Frontier Province', *Asian Affairs*, 9 (1978), pp. 319–27.

[2] Farooq Yousaf, 'The "savage" Pathan (Pashtun) and the postcolonial burden', *Critical Studies on Security*, 9 (2021), pp. 36–9.

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of South Asia's Pashtuns is simultaneously unique and universal: Pashtuns' lived experiences clearly stem from local dynamics and specificities, yet the ways in which outsiders have come to understand Pashtuns as explicitly 'tribal' have their roots in a broader global history through which 'tribe' has been constructed as a socio-political unit by empires.

Scholarship often has unintentionally reified the colonial construction of the 'tribe'. Focusing on the histories of Indigenous groupings has restored a measure of local agency, but it has also over-emphasized historical uniqueness and localism, failing to account for how the term 'tribe' came to be applied in increasingly static ways to a diverse range of societies. By taking a global historical perspective, the paradoxical ubiquity of 'tribes' as socio-political units, often intentionally excluded from (or subjected to violence by) imperial states, becomes evident, with ramifications for understanding imperial actors, their collaborators, and their opponents. 'Tribes' offered imperialists a means of othering Indigenous social groups, isolating them within Euro-American expansion, or forcing them to adapt social relations to fit within a perceived tribal model. Both ideas and practices thus travelled along and across imperial circuits.

In Euro-American context, discussion of this social unit came into vogue as a means of describing early Spanish and Portuguese encounters with Indigenous communities in the Americas, who were labelled 'tribal', initially with biblical and antiquarian reference.[3] 'Tribe' came to embody more pejorative connotations by the nineteenth century, becoming 'the standard term for the political groups of those thought of as barbarians, both in colonial encounters and in historical accounts of antiquity'.[4] Nevertheless, some Indigenous societies continued to find ways to use their supposedly 'tribal' social elements to outmanoeuvre foreign controls.

On the ground, there was (and is) no single 'tribal' society or type of tribal society. Of those societies that have been deemed 'tribal' by outsiders, some are nomadic, some are sedentary. Some are patrilineal, others are matrilineal. Some have hierarchical leadership; some have no obvious authority figure or only choose authorities in times of need. Tribal societies have engaged in a wealth of economic and subsistence activities ranging from pastoralism to agriculture, hunter-gathering, trade economies, or the establishment of specific tradecrafts, and many 'tribal' actors likewise have engaged in socio-economic practices also common in non-tribal societies (healers, merchants, scribes, etc.).[5] Tribal societies also have constituted imperial formations in their own right, participating and forming nuclei within sprawling economic, political, and social networks.[6] Tribal societies can vary hugely in size from

[3] On the etymology of 'tribe', see 'tribe, n.', OED Online (2021); Anthony Pagden, *The fall of natural man: the American Indian and the origins of comparative ethnology* (Cambridge, 1982); Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the world: ideologies of empire in Spain, Britain, and France, c. 1500 – c. 1850* (New Haven, CT, 1995); Karen Ordahl Kupperman, ed., *America in European consciousness, 1493–1750* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995).

[4] David Sneath, 'Tribe', in *The Cambridge encyclopedia of anthropology* (Cambridge, 2016).

[5] Ken Coates, *A global history of Indigenous peoples: struggle and survival* (New York, NY, 2004), ch. 2.

[6] Roberts D. Crews, *Afghan modern: the history of a global nation* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), p. 15; Thomas J. Barfield, 'The shadow empires: imperial state formation along the Chinese–nomad

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Pashtuns spread across swathes of Afghanistan and Pakistan (and abroad through the diaspora), considered one of the largest tribal societies in the world, to small Indigenous communities like the Jarawas, who inhabit the Andaman Islands.

Euro-American colonial officials and anthropologists (many of whom were also former officials) placed emphasis on a 'segmentary lineage system' in identifying 'tribal' societies, focusing on genealogy and common ancestry as the root of both social and political dynamics within a tribe or tribal confederation. According to this view, kinship ties were fundamental to relations within tribal societies. Kinship resulted from sharing the same ancestry or through intermarriages, alliances, and adoption. The other issue of fundamental importance for colonial observers was that, in contrast to most of Western society which from the Enlightenment prioritized the interests and rights of the individual, 'tribes' as social and political groupings or units often retained paramountcy. In other words, social and political roles and functions remained intimately interlinked.[7]

Recent debates reveal obvious tensions surrounding the idea of a 'tribal' society and its limitations. While some communities continue to define themselves as 'tribal' as a means of claiming rights and asserting 'a collective political identity', others have explicitly rejected this terminology as derogatory, colonial, and unrepresentative of local dynamics.[8] Instead, in recent decades, some local communities (and scholars) have adopted the language of ethnicity,[9] while others, in conversation with state and international representatives including the United Nations, have turned to the politics of indigeneity.[10]

frontier', in Susan E. Alcock et al., eds., *Empires: perspectives from archaeology and history* (Cambridge, 2001). On the Mongols as an empire deriving from a tribal confederation, see Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in world history: power and the politics of difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2010), pp. 9–10, ch. 4.

[7] Eveline Van Der Steen, *Near Eastern tribal societies during the nineteenth century: economy, society and politics between tent and town* (London, 2014), pp. 34–6.

[8] Bengt G. Karlsson and Tanka B. Subba, *Indigeneity in India* (London, 2006), p. 4; Bengt G. Karlsson, 'Anthropology and the "Indigenous slot": claims to and debates about Indigenous peoples' status in India', *Critique of Anthropology*, 23 (2003), pp. 403–23. On indigeneity and 'retribalization', see Elizabeth Rata, 'The transformation of indigeneity', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 25 (2002), pp. 173–95.

[9] Richard Waller, 'Ethnicity and identity', in John Parker and Richard Reid, eds., *The Oxford handbook of modern African history* (Oxford, 2013); Carola Lentz, 'Colonial construction and African initiatives: the history of ethnicity in northwestern Ghana', *Ethnos*, 65 (2000), pp. 112–17; Donald R. Wright, '"What do you mean there were no tribes in Africa?": thought on boundaries – and related matters – in precolonial Africa', *History in Africa*, 26 (1999), pp. 409–26; Bruce J. Berman, 'Ethnicity, patronage and the African state: the politics of uncivil nationalism', *African Affairs*, 97 (1998), pp. 305–41; Jean Marie Allman, 'The youngmen and the porcupine: class, nationalism, and Asante's struggle for self-determination', *Journal of African History*, 31 (1990), pp. 263–79.

[10] Francesca Merlan, 'Indigeneity: global and local', *Current Anthropology*, l (2009), pp. 303–33; Karena Shaw, 'Indigeneity and the international', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31 (2002), pp. 55–81; Jérémie Gilbert, 'Indigenous rights in the making: the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples', *International Journal on Minority Group Rights*, 14 (2007), pp. 207–30; Karen Engle, *The elusive promise of Indigenous development: rights, culture, strategy*

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The 'tribe', as either unit or category, clearly does not do justice to the multiplicity of local societies that emerged across much of the world over centuries and millennia, and yet what is remarkable is the term's durability and pervasiveness. 'Tribal' societies have most often been the subject of anthropological and ethnographical rather than historical study,[11] but by applying a transregional and transhistorical approach, what becomes clear is that Western imperialists intentionally, if implicitly, drew comparisons between Indigenous societies across the world, flattened their differences, and created prescriptive policies towards them. Euro-American expansion provided the vehicle for the term's globalization and its application in increasingly rigid forms to Indigenous societies regardless of their local dynamics. Perhaps more than any other term of social difference, the 'tribe' signalled Euro-Americans' global ambitions and hostility to Indigenous agency.

This article begins by briefly exploring evolving usage of the terms, 'tribe' and 'nation', until the mid-nineteenth century. The early fluidity of these terms correlated with more accommodating colonial–Indigenous relations in the Americas, which increasingly hardened in the nineteenth. The article then turns to a specific case-study – the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and north-west India – to demonstrate how the term 'tribal' often failed to encompass dynamic local social, cultural, political, and economic practices, as well as ways in which British officials used 'tribalism' to circumvent local agency. By mapping British approaches to Pashtuns and Afghanistan onto imperial engagement with 'tribal' communities worldwide – and highlighting both similarities and differences with the North American examples more prominent in the existing literature – global patterns of 'tribalism', as defined by Euro-Americans, become apparent. The final section reflects briefly on ways that Indigenous societies adapted to and subverted 'tribal' categorization.

Exploring 'tribal' societies as a unit of global social history reveals the evolution of ideas and practices, both of which actively sought to limit, by co-opting, the opportunities and agency of Indigenous groups. Euro-American empires created two interlinked dynamics in the social history of the 'tribe'.[12] One was external, a process of categorization to facilitate and effect conquest and integration. The other was internal, a process of reimagining social relationships through which locals adapted to the threats and opportunities of empire. By centring South Asia's Pashtuns in this article, what becomes clear is that the identification of 'tribal' populations did not always go hand in hand with settler colonialism, as it largely did in North America.

(Durham, NC, 2010). On recent attempts to develop a global Indigenous history, see Ann McGrath and Lynette Russell, eds., *The Routledge companion to global Indigenous history* (New York, NY, 2022).

[11] See, for example, John H. Bodley, *Cultural anthropology: tribes, states, and the global system* (Mayfield, KY, 1994); Aidan Southall, 'The segmentary state in Africa and Asia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30 (1988), pp. 52–82; Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic groups and boundaries: the social organization of culture difference* (London, 1969); Richard Tapper, ed., *The conflict of tribe and state in Iran and Afghanistan* (London, 1983); Richard Tapper, 'What is this thing called "ethnography"?', *Iranian Studies*, 31 (1998), pp. 389–98.

[12] On the rather different relationship between tribal societies and Ottoman imperialism, see Reşat Kasaba, *A moveable empire: Ottoman nomads, migrants, and refugees* (Seattle, WA, 2009).

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As such, I highlight the need for historians to take a global perspective in studying 'tribes' to understand Indigenous communities' simultaneous geographical specificities and transregional, transhistorical connections in the ages of empire and decolonization. This article illustrates some – but certainly not all – of the consequences of being labelled 'tribal' while demonstrating ways that areas and societies seemingly peripheral to each other became interconnected because of shared Euro-American terminology and practice.

I

The imperial categorization of the 'tribe' as a socio-political unit hardened in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Whereas in the early centuries of European colonization in the Americas, tribal communities were often framed as 'nations' with whom colonists negotiated and recognized as sovereign bodies, by the mid-nineteenth century, Euro-American imperialists no longer conflated 'tribes' and 'nations' and instead worked to isolate supposedly tribal societies within, or on the periphery of, imperial systems and restrict their authority.[13] 'Tribes', in other words, shifted from being potential allies and collaborators to subjects, though often treated as a subject unit rather than a collective of individuals.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century encounters with Indigenous communities in the Americas shaped later Euro-American ideas regarding 'tribal' societies and categorization, particularly focus on kinship ties. The communities and villages of the Iroquois (or Haudenosaunee), who would be among the first to encounter French, Dutch, and British colonizers in North America, revolved around notions of reciprocity and kinship traced through the matrilineal *ohwachira*. The establishment of metaphorical (and sometimes gendered) kinship was a key Iroquois diplomatic tool for engaging with other local groups and European imperialists, for example, calling the French governor *onontio*, or father.[14] Alongside extending kinship, gift-giving and warfare served numerous social, political, spiritual, and economic purposes for Iroquois communities. But rather than recognizing the imperatives of such activities – stricken Iroquois villages, which suffered massive demographic changes due to European diseases, used sixteenth-century wars and raids to repopulate by assimilating captives – French observers saw these practices as evidence of the 'warlike and carnivorous nature' of 'these barbarians'.[15] The idea of

[13] Morton H. Fried, 'A continent found, a universe lost', in Stanley Diamond, ed., *Theory and practice* (New York, NY, 1980). On the shift from 'nation' to 'tribe' as rhetorical imperialism, see Scott Richard Lyons, 'Rhetorical sovereignty: what do American Indians want from writing?', *College Composition and Communication*, 51 (2000), pp. 447–68.

[14] Daniel K. Richter, *The ordeal of the longhouse: the peoples of the Iroquois league in the era of European colonization* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992); Rachel B. Herrmann, *No useless mouth: waging war and fighting hunger in the American revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 2019), pp. 24–5; Jack Campisi, 'The Iroquois and the Euro-American concept of tribe', *New York History*, 78 (1997), pp. 455–72; Nancy Shoemaker, 'An alliance between men: gender metaphors in eighteenth-century American Indian diplomacy east of the Mississippi', *Ethnohistory*, 46 (1999), pp. 239–63.

[15] Richter, *Ordeal of the longhouse*, p. 64.

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barbarism provided a potent means for European observers in the Americas to explain (and dismiss) Indigenous practices that did not align with European expectations.

Yet in the early years of European expansion in North America, the term 'nation' rather than 'tribe' was often used to describe Indigenous communities. 'Nation', alongside references to Indigenous 'kings', 'commonwealths', and 'emperors', created initial parallels for colonists to understand local dynamics, which in turn had consequences for interactions between colonists and locals.[16] This spoke to the fact that early encounters between European empire-builders and 'tribal' societies, even while Europeans employed the language of barbarity and savagery, involved a far greater degree of cross-cultural negotiation and engagement – 'a process of mutual discovery' – and scholars have emphasized the need to look at these encounters from Indigenous, as well as imperial, perspectives.[17] Early British and French settlers in North America initially recognized Iroquois and other Native American nations and took part in the gift-exchange economy and diplomatic language of kinship. In this context, Western imperialists acknowledged and paid lip service to local communities' agency and sovereignty, as well as their significance as potential partners within colonial projects.[18]

Treaty-making reveals one early mode of encounter that placed 'tribal' societies on par with Euro-Americans and allowed Indigenous leaders to guide relations, playing European imperial powers off each other, creating alliances, maintaining peace, or establishing trading partnerships. Iroquois leaders took part in multi-sited negotiations in 1700 and 1701, drawing on the practice of *Gayaneshagowa*, the Great Law of Peace. Iroquois representatives used these talks to get a British commitment of military aid against French encroachment and, while agreeing to share hunting grounds with French allies and accepting a French fort at Detroit, gained access to new sources of trade and 'new opportunities to draw other "far Indians" into their network of alliances and away from that of New France'.[19] To the south-west, political talks in 1752 resulted

[16] Fried, 'A continent found', p. 275.

[17] Michael Witgen, 'American Indians in world history', in Frederick E. Hoxie, ed., *The Oxford handbook of American Indian history* (Oxford, 2016), p. 591; Michael Witgen, 'The rituals of possession: Native identity and the invention of empire in seventeenth-century western North America', *Ethnohistory*, 54 (2007), pp. 639–68; James H. Merrell, 'The Indian's new world: the Catawba experience', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 41 (1984), pp. 537–65; Daniel K. Richter, *Facing east from Indian country: a Native history of early America* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Richard White, *The middle ground: Indians, empires, and republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York, NY, 1991); Herrmann, *No useless mouth*. More broadly, see Ned Blackhawk, *The rediscovery of America: Native peoples and the unmaking of U.S. history* (New Haven, CT, 2023); Pekka Hämäläinen, *Indigenous continent: the epic contest for North America* (New York, NY, 2022); Caroline Dodds-Pennock, *On savage shores: how Indigenous Americans discovered Europe* (London, 2023).

[18] Saliha Bemessous, 'Assimilation and racialism in seventeenth and eighteenth-century French colonial policy', *American Historical Review*, 110 (2005), pp. 322–49.

[19] J. A. Brandão and William A. Starna, 'The treaties of 1701: a triumph of Iroquois diplomacy', *Ethnohistory*, 43 (1996), pp. 209–44, at p. 232; Jon Parmenter and Mark Power Robison, 'The perils and possibilities of wartime neutrality on the edges of empire: Iroquois and Acadians between the French and British in North America, 1744–1760', *Diplomatic History*, 31 (2007), pp. 167–206;

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in a peace agreement between Spanish officials in New Mexico and the Comanches, which also recognized the latter as a sovereign nation and gave them certain trading rights. The 1763 Treaty of Augusta between the British and the Catawba, Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, and Choctaw peoples affirmed peaceful relations and continued discussions of trading arrangements.[20] These instances of negotiation accommodated the interests of both Indigenous and colonial communities.

While the conflation of 'tribe' and 'nation' (a definitional fusion that persists) was initially widely apparent, the term 'tribe' became increasingly dominant in Indigenous encounters in the Americas by the end of the eighteenth century.[21] A key problem that emerged there, and across the world, was the fundamental disconnect between Euro-American definitions of sovereignty as 'a marriage of individual property rights and collective political self-determination' and 'exclusive political authority over a fixed territory' and the very different socio-political visions espoused by nomadic Indigenous communities, for whom land ownership mattered little, or more sedentary Indigenous groups that participated in collective, rather than individual, ownership.[22] 'As it became impossible to ignore and inexpedient to recognize the full sovereignty of Native American rivals with whom the English[-speaking] settlements competed for land and political dominion, "nation" gave way to "tribe" which carried implications of lesser political status.'[23]

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries bore witness to a global hardening of Euro-American imperial attitudes towards Indigenous societies, as well as increasing use of the term 'tribal' to differentiate 'problematic' Indigenous groups. Mutual discovery gave way to increasingly uneven power dynamics and coercion. Colonizers, by the mid-nineteenth century, often treated Indigenous societies as subjects of treaty negotiations rather than participants within a legally enshrined process.[24] In the aftermath of the American war of independence, the Treaty of Paris acknowledged the United States's victory over the British and, by inference, their Native American allies. 'This agreement laid the groundwork for subsequent treaties where representatives of the United States dictated punitive land cessions based on conquest', as they did at the 1784 Treaty of Fort Stanwix. Land ownership, rather than control of trade commodities, became a source of tension. The main treaty that arose

Jon Parmenter, 'After the mourning wars: the Iroquois as allies in colonial North American campaigns, 1676–1769', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 64 (2007), pp. 39–76.

[20] Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche empire* (New Haven, CT, 2008), p. 47; Herrmann, *No useless mouth*, p. 44.

[21] Fried, 'A continent found', p. 276. On persistent terminological ambiguities, see Duncan Bell, *The idea of greater Britain: empire and the future of the world* (Princeton, NJ, 2007).

[22] Witgen, 'American Indians in world history', p. 594.

[23] Elizabeth Colson, 'Political organization in tribal societies: a cross-cultural comparison', *American Indian Quarterly*, 10 (1986), pp. 5–19, at p. 6. On tribal sovereignty, 'tribe', and 'nation', see Amanda J. Cobb, 'Understanding tribal sovereignty: definitions, conceptualizations, and interpretations', *American Studies*, 46 (2005), pp. 115–32.

[24] Anthony Anghie, 'Finding peripheries: sovereignty and colonialism in nineteenth-century international law', *Harvard International Law Journal*, 40 (1999), pp. 1–71.

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from ongoing conflicts over land, the 1795 Treaty of Greenville, merely facilitated American colonial expansion.[25]

As the first wave of European expansion into the Americas melded into hemispheric wars of (often white) independence, European imperialism in Asia and Africa accelerated. In turn, European intellectuals drew links between the Indigenous communities that had been encountered in the Americas and those in Asia and Africa. James Mill compared 'the Hindus' with the 'savages of America', while Alexis de Tocqueville praised the Kabyle tribes of Algeria by claiming 'If Rousseau had known the Cabyles, he would not have uttered such nonsense about…Indians of America' as 'natural men'. European intellectuals and officials made both implicit and explicit comparisons between different Indigenous groups as a way of assessing their degree of 'savagery' and amenability to (European-led) political reorganization.[26] This was a stark move away from recognizing Indigenous societies as their own 'nations', a shift which in many ways correlated with evolving Euro-American understandings of nations as increasingly civic and political, not ethnic or 'natural'.[27]

Treaty-making with Indigenous societies outside the Americas also reflected this change, becoming an uneven means for European imperialists to assert and exert influence. The Port Phillip Association in New South Wales in 1835 used treaties with the Woiwurrung, Boonwurrung, and Daungwurrung peoples 'to buy land in return for gifts', also using and manipulating the gift-exchange economy first encountered in the Americas, as with the Iroquois. They used these agreements 'to stake claims over the land', not as an act of diplomacy and exchange. The British South Africa Company similarly used treaties in the late nineteenth century to exert company oversight of land ownership in 'Greater Manyika'.[28] Imperial officials also doubled down on kinship ties as the key marker of a 'tribal' society. Drawing on earlier engagement with North American Indigenous communities, and the significance of metaphorical kinship as a diplomatic tool, Arthur Phillip, in New South Wales, for example, 'inaugurated a tradition of governors establishing themselves as father figures for Indigenous people'.[29]

At the height of Euro-American expansion in the nineteenth century, imperial officials reinforced the idea that 'tribal' society was an intermediary

[25] Alyssa Mt. Pleasant, 'Independence for whom? Expansion and conflict in the northeast and northwest', in Andrew Shankman, ed., *The world of the revolutionary American republic* (New York, NY, 2014), p. 127; Christina Snyder, 'Native nations in the age of revolution', in ibid.

[26] Jennifer Pitts, *A turn to empire: the rise of imperial liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ, 2005), pp. 127, 209; Gerrit Gong, *The standard of 'civilization' in international society* (Oxford, 1984).

[27] Benjamin E. Park, *American nationalisms: imagining union in the age of revolutions, 1783–1833* (Cambridge, 2017); Jürgen Osterhammel, *The transformation of the world: a global history of the nineteenth century*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton, NJ, 2014), pp. 403–19.

[28] Ann Curthoys and Jessie Mitchell, *Taking liberty: Indigenous rights and settler self-government in colonial Australia, 1830–1890* (Cambridge, 2018), p. 55; Bain Attwood, *Possessions: Batman's treaty and the matter of history* (Carlton, 2009); Terence Ranger, 'Missionaries, migrants and the Manyika: the invention of ethnicity in Zimbabwe', in Leroy Vail, ed., *The creation of tribalism in southern Africa* (Berkeley, CA, 1989).

[29] Curthoys and Mitchell, *Taking liberty*, p. 37.

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step towards modernity, drawing on contemporary scholarship and intellectual endeavours.[30] Henry Maine and Emile Durkheim took leading roles in promoting an evolutionary view of human society, through which societies had to pass through multiple steps of development and modernization. Maine cited the emergence of modernization among German tribes through their interactions with classical European civilizations, while Durkheim relied on colonial reports about Australia's Aborigines published across Europe. Indigenous societies worldwide, many of which remained 'tribal', they argued, lagged behind European societies.[31] Euro-American focus thus turned to identifying Indigenous communities' tribalism not only to justify their takeover but to explain their pasts and presents in terms more familiar to Euro-American audiences.

The consequent invention and application of 'tribal tradition' extended globally, often going hand in hand with the creation of 'frontiers' as specific spaces and practices of encounter.[32] At its height, across Africa, European imperialists failed to recognize 'that far from there being a single "tribal" identity, most Africans moved in and out of multiple identities'.[33] Instead, officials focused on and ascribed tribal identity as a means of firmly rooting a community member in broader colonial social hierarchies: people belonged first to a tribe, and this, in turn, determined how they fitted in colonial governing systems. 'Administrators believed that every African belonged to a tribe, just as every European belonged to a nation…it was the shifting sand on which Cameron and his disciples erected indirect rule by "taking the *tribal* unit". They [colonial officials] had the power and they created the political geography.'[34] Euro-American delineation of an Indigenous community as a 'tribal' society thus took on increasingly rigid forms. In turn, locals revised social relationships, partly to adapt to this categorization and the accompanying threats and opportunities of empire. To reflect on some of these consequences in a specific context, we will turn to the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and north-west colonial India.

[30] Talal Asad, 'Anthropology and the colonial encounter', in Gerrit Huizer and Bruce Mannheim, eds., *The politics of anthropology* (New York, NY, 1979).

[31] Bernard Cohn, 'African models and Indian histories', in *An anthropologist among historians and other essays* (Delhi, 1987), pp. 204–5.

[32] Benjamin D. Hopkins, *Ruling the savage periphery: frontier governance and the making of the modern state* (Cambridge, MA, 2020); Lauren Benton, *A search for sovereignty: law and geography in European empires, 1400–1900* (New York, NY, 2010).

[33] Terence Ranger, 'The invention of tradition in colonial Africa', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 248; Aidan W. Southall, 'The illusion of tribe', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 5 (1970), pp. 28–50.

[34] Ranger, 'Invention of tradition', p. 250; John Iliffe, *A modern history of Tanganyika* (Cambridge, 1979), ch. 10. On revisionist takes on the 'invention of tradition', see Thomas Spear, 'Neo-traditionalism and the limits of invention in British colonial Africa', *Journal of African History*, 44 (2003), pp. 3–27; Paul Nugent, 'Putting the history back into ethnicity: enslavement, religion, and cultural brokerage in the construction of Mandinka/Jola and Ewe/Agotime identities in west Africa, c. 1650–1930', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50 (2008), pp. 920–48.

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II

The societies that were called 'tribal' in the long era of Euro-American expansion clearly predated this encounter. Not only that, but they had their own vocabularies to describe their existence, history, and functioning. Indeed, what is remarkable is how a single term – 'tribe' – came to be applied to such a wide variety of pre-existing social groups. While issues of kinship and genealogy were often crucial for shaping hierarchies and power dynamics within and between Indigenous societies and imperial powers, they were not static.

The case of Afghanistan and the Pashtuns of South Asia reveals some of the ways in which the term 'tribal' flattened complex local socio-political dynamics and served as an attempt to erase the region's vibrant and global past. What is now Afghanistan – a country that much of the West has continued to frame as 'tribal' – sat at the intersection of competing early modern empires. 'Afghans' (though such a term did not have fixed meaning) moved between the empires of the Mongols, Timurids, Ming and Qing China, and later the Safavids and Mughals. Afghanistan's Pashtuns were embedded in a vibrant multitude of trade, military, diplomatic, and intellectual networks spanning Eurasia, South Asia, and the Middle East, as were other ethnic groups who resided in what is now Afghanistan. Pashtuns and other local communities worked as merchants and mercenaries along the Silk Road, served as diplomats and envoys, and acted as scribes and writers. Islamic networks also gave locals religious as well as institutional connections spanning South Asia and the Middle East. Afghanistan's cities, such as Herat and Kabul, were centres in broader economic and cultural networks, and Persian and Pashto were key regional languages. Pashto language texts such as the *Tarikh-i Murassa'* (c. 1708) revealed the 'close interactions between peoples of eastern Afghanistan and northern India, leading forms of writing and formulations of identity to circulate widely'.[35]

Ethnic Pashtuns laid genealogical claims to a single ancestor that offered them a clear link with each other and a notional Afghan homeland. Indeed, 'Pashtun Afghans' self-identification' evolved through their encounter with the Mughal empire, and the *Tarikh-i Khan Jahani*, written at the Mughal court, detailed Afghan Pashtuns' ethnogenesis in which 'the tribe (*tayifa*) was presented as the acme of Afghan identity': 'here in the diaspora these distinct groups were reimagined parts of a coherent whole through the organizing principle of genealogy'. Charting tribal genealogies, and patrilineal kinship ties, was an assertion of power within the ethnic factionalism of the Mughal court, one in which Sufi saints also became increasingly embedded 'to blur the boundaries between Islam and kinship'.[36] Beyond the Mughal court, tensions in the region persisted thanks to differences in social organization

[35] Nile Green, ed., *Afghan history through Afghan eyes* (London, 2015), p. 17; Crews, *Afghan modern*, ch. 1. On Afghanistan as 'tribal', see Nivi Manchanda, 'The imperial sociology of the "tribe" in Afghanistan', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46 (2018), pp. 165–89.

[36] Nile Green, 'Tribe, diaspora, and sainthood in Afghan history', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 65 (2008), pp. 171–211, at pp. 185, 188.

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among local Pashtun groups, some of whom were hierarchical while others were egalitarian.[37]

The fall of the Safavid empire, in which Ghilzai Pashtuns played a pivotal role, brought the 'nation of Afghans' to Western attention. So, too, did the subsequent rise of the (Abdali Pashtun) Durrani empire in the mid-eighteenth century, which radiated out from Kabul. Following in the line of earlier regional empires, the Durrani empire was an imperial formation reliant on kinship ties and relationships that often left a significant degree of power and influence among local allies.[38] While Durrani rulers, like Ahmad Shah, built up a military, minted coins, and created an opulent royal court in Kandahar, they governed over a loosely united empire in which economics and warfare were intimately entangled. Military campaigns served to refill the empire's coffers, but the Shah's hold on power also relied on not antagonizing local leaders who could easily mobilize against him. While some Pashtuns were at the centre of imperial power – particularly those belonging genealogically to the Durrani tribal confederation – other local groups, as well as Pashtuns living in more mountainous regions, were well placed to resist the imperial centre with the benefits of difficult geography and links with communities beyond Durrani control.[39]

Pashtuns of South Asia were not alone in participating in ambitious, sprawling societies. In what is now the south-western United States, Comanches in the eighteenth century constructed a parallel 'kinetic empire', 'a power regime that revolved around a set of mobile activities: long-distance raiding, seasonal expansions, transnational diplomatic missions, semi-permanent trade fairs, recurring political assemblies, and control over shifting economic nodes'.[40] Like the Durranis, Comanchería emerged in part through interactions with other imperial formations (French and Spanish) and maintained fluid political boundaries. Its power derived from resource and trading acquisitions, canny alliances, and extensive use of kinship ties to create and strengthen social, political, and economic networks.[41] Similarly, the confederation of Tikna clans of the Wad Nun, on the north-western edges of the Sahara Desert, who claimed a common male ancestor, used long-distance caravan trading to attain, by the mid-nineteenth century, great regional influence and 'a certain cosmopolitanism

[37] Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: a cultural and political history* (Princeton, NJ, 2010), pp. 85–90.

[38] Assertions of Turko-Persian imperial control, also assumed by the Durranis, prioritized direct, tighter control of major centres of power and key trade routes and far looser oversight over less economically significant or more governmentally challenging regions. Barfield has likened empires in Turko-Persia to Swiss cheese, where the holes were intentional, not defective. Barfield, *Afghanistan*, p. 68.

[39] Barfield, *Afghanistan*, ch. 2; Crews, *Afghan modern*, ch. 2.

[40] Pekka Hämäläinen, 'What's in a concept? The kinetic empire of the Comanches', *History and Theory*, 52 (2013), pp. 81–90, at p. 85.

[41] Hämäläinen, *Comanche empire*. On other Native American imperial formations, see Pekka Hämäläinen, *Lakota America: a new history of Indigenous power* (New Haven, CT, 2019); Kathleen DuVal, *The Native ground: Indians and colonists in the heart of the continent* (Philadelphia, PA, 2006); Willard H. Rollings, *The Osage: an ethnohistorical study of hegemony on the prairie-plains* (Columbia, MO, 1992).

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that allowed them to maneuver with great social ease across diverse spaces'. They, too, drew on kinship networks – one could be Tikna 'by blood', 'by name', or through patronage and contractual agreements – local alliances, and Islamic institutions to organize daily life and relationships. Local clans could make agreements that 'were transferable to the larger Tikna confederation', and Tikna became key distributors of European merchandise across their trade networks.[42]

The Durrani and Comanche empires, alongside Tikna trading networks, signalled that Indigenous communities and their members could be imperial and/or global actors and wield great influence across broad territories, an idea that stood in stark contrast to the Euro-American turn to tribalism as a sign of backwardness. Both the Durranis and Comanches posed a substantial threat to Euro-American expansionists eager to assume economic, and increasingly political and territorial, control. Unsurprisingly, then, European observers focused on these societies' supposed lack of civilization and framed both communities as barbarous. Rather than teasing out the different social arrangements that had emerged in the region, or the political and economic links that led Ahmad Shah, for example, to send envoys to Peking and Baghdad, early Western observers focused on Afghans as, in the words of an eighteenth-century Polish Jesuit missionary, an 'unmanageable people' 'that has so much Inclination to War, and that is better form'd and train'ed up to it, their whole Lives being spent almost in one continued Robbery'.[43] Likewise, Spanish reporting in the south-west on the Comanche leader, Cuerno Verde (Green Horn), in 1779 described him as 'leader of the barbarians', claiming he had 'exterminated many pueblos, killing hundreds and making as many prisoners whom he afterwards sacrificed in cold blood'.[44]

Nevertheless, British worries that other European imperialists would engage with the Durranis as a means of undermining the East India Company's hold on the Indian subcontinent necessitated interaction. During the first British diplomatic encounter with the Durrani court in 1809, Mountstuart Elphinstone focused on kinship ties for understanding Pashtun social structures in Afghanistan, comparing them to clan structures in early modern Scotland. As Euro-Americans had done in North America, Elphinstone and his successors also initially wrote of an Afghan 'nation'

[42] Ghislaine Lydon, *On trans-Saharan trails: Islamic law, trade networks, and cross-cultural exchange in nineteenth-century western Africa* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 161, 175, 181; A. Adu Boahen, 'The caravan trade in the nineteenth century', *Journal of African History*, 3 (1962), pp. 349–59. On other non-imperial Indigenous communities that relied on mobility and flexibility in their socio-economic arrangements, see Anatoly M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the outside world* (Madison, WI, 1994); Tracey Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific: Indigenous globalisation and the ends of empire* (Cambridge, 2016), ch. 1.

[43] Crews, *Afghan modern*, pp. 46, 48.

[44] Hämäläinen, *Comanche empire*, p. 103. While 'pueblos' could have a variety of meanings, in this instance, the description framed Comanches as not only barbaric but also as exterminators of ostensibly non-barbarian, civilized peoples. Ophelia Marquez and Lillian Ramos Navarro Wold, eds., *Compilation of colonial Spanish terms and document related phrases* (2nd edn, Midway City, CA, 1998), p. 37.

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(drawing on the Turkic term *ooloos*, or *ulus*), demonstrating that 'tribal' communities were being read through increasingly globalized systems of knowledge. He also concluded a treaty of 'friendship and union' with Shah Shuja that pledged mutual respect and non-interference (and the barring of competing French travel through Durrani territory).[45]

Reflecting the terminological ambivalences of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Elphinstone married the notion of the Afghan 'nation' with that of the 'tribe', though he struggled to identify obvious social structures in an era of swift change in the declining Durrani empire. Elphinstone wrote of independent tribal 'republics' – derived from British encounters with Pashtun elites – praising them in Enlightenment terms for protecting the Afghan people from 'tyrants'. In subsequent decades, however, rhetoric swiftly changed. The British defeat in the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839–42) hardened Western attitudes, and colonial language increasingly reflected bitterly on the 'most warlike tribes of the Afghan nation'. This focus on 'Afghan tribes' became tied to a geographical imaginary of 'a rugged, barren, and unhospitable country' and excluded, in British perspective, Afghanistan's other ethnic communities. This, in turn, would shape British policy towards the state of Afghanistan, the socio-political dominance of Pashtuns within Afghan state structures, and Pashtun communities residing in the boundaries of colonial India.[46]

III

As Euro-American imperialists expanded the territories and peoples under colonial rule, Western ideas of tribalism continued to circulate. This led to specific yet globalized modes of colonial governmentality towards 'tribal' societies, some of which are explored in this section. In turn, in encounters with Euro-American expansion, Indigenous societies adapted, both through necessity and local entrepreneurship, to being categorized as 'tribal', in some instances resisting and in others adopting or subverting this labelling.

One particularly salient form of Euro-American policy towards 'tribal' societies was to root them in a specific territorial space. In Pashtun country, this tribal-territorialization took the form of international and internal border demarcations. At a macro-level, British officials recognized their inability to conquer the 'Afghan tribes', but they still sought to exert influence over Afghanistan and use it as a buffer to the colonial project in India. Thus, using treaties, the threat of force, and economic incentives, British officials

[45] Crews, *Afghan modern*, p. 58; B. D. Hopkins, *The making of modern Afghanistan* (Basingstoke, 2008), ch. 1.

[46] Martin J. Bayly, *Taming the imperial imagination: colonial knowledge, international relations, and the Anglo-Afghan encounter, 1808–1878* (Cambridge, 2016), pp. 82, 90, 190, 193; Martin J. Bayly, 'The "re-turn" to empire in IR: colonial knowledge communities and the construction of the idea of the Afghan polity, 1809–1938', *Review of International Studies*, 40 (2014), pp. 443–64. On the ways that British encounters with Pashtuns came to shape (and 'Pashtunize') British understandings of Afghan society and politics, and the Afghan state itself, see Hopkins, *Making of modern Afghanistan.*

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pursued the demarcation of Afghanistan's international boundaries, most notably the 1893 Durand Line which bisected Pashtuns between Afghanistan and colonial India. Afghanistan's border demarcations, in which British imperialists took the lead, often occurred with Russian agreement and only at times with Afghan government representatives. (Indeed, later Afghan rulers would dispute these demarcations, arguing the Durand Line represented a shared, blurry frontier, not an international border.)[47] In other words, British officials denuded themselves of the Afghan 'tribal' problem by using borders to ostensibly separate Afghans, and Afghanistan, from colonial India, though they intentionally retained their grip on Afghanistan's foreign relations.

Not only that but within India, colonial officials further hived off the North-West Frontier Province from Punjab in 1901 and divided it administratively between the settled districts and 'tribal areas'. Whereas the settled districts (and Pashtuns living there, some of whom were more sedentary agriculturalists) were governed alongside other provinces in colonial India, British leaders opted for indirect rule for 'tribal' Pashtuns.[48] Negotiations with Pashtuns in the tribal areas resulted in agreements that left local tribal leaders, as identified by the colonial state, in charge.[49]

Decreased mobility, displacement, and (forced) settlement thus became a defining feature for many 'tribal' societies across the world. Forced resettlement became particularly widespread in the Americas, as Euro-American conquerors used military force, political negotiations, victual warfare, and disease to force Indigenous communities out of their homelands and into less-desirable peripheries. This came to be epitomized in the nineteenth century with government policies establishing tracts of land, or reservations, in which tribes settled.[50] These practices persisted into the twentieth century: during the interwar years, British officials debated the sedentarization of Bedouins in the Middle East as part of the 'tribal question', hoping to limit their ability to revolt against the colonial state.[51]

[47] Francesca Fuoli, 'Incorporating north-western Afghanistan into the British empire: experiments in indirect rule through the making of an imperial frontier, 1884–87', *Afghanistan*, 1 (2018), pp. 4–25; Bijan Omrani, 'The Durand line: history and problems of the Afghan–Pakistan border', *Asian Affairs*, 40 (2009), pp. 177–95.

[48] Robert Nichols, *Settling the frontier: land, law and society in the Peshawar valley, 1500–1900* (Karachi, 2001).

[49] Lal Baha, *N.-W.F.P. administration under British rule, 1901–1919* (Islamabad, 1978); Christian Tripodi, *Edge of empire: the British political officer and tribal administration on the north-west frontier, 1877–1947* (Farnham, 2016). For a French colonial North African comparison, see Brock Cutler, 'Believe in the border, or, how to make modernity in the nineteenth-century Maghrib', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 60 (2017), pp. 83–114.

[50] Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the land: Indians and empires in the early American West* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Cole Harris, *Making Native space: colonialism, resistance, and reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 2002).

[51] Robert Fletcher, *British imperialism and 'the tribal question'* (Oxford, 2015), p. 35. The late Ottoman empire also saw this shift in tribal governance, attempting to 'civilize' 'tribal' societies through the rule of law, limiting nomadism, and cultivating local leaders to co-operate with Ottoman imperial aims. Selim Deringil, '"They live in a state of nomadism and savagery": the late Ottoman empire and the post-colonial debate', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 45

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But affiliating people with place was not enough, and Euro-American officials remained intent on defining and overseeing these societies. In the frontier conjoining colonial India and Afghanistan, British officials wrestled with conceptualizing and applying policy to Pashtun inhabitants. British officials presupposed that Pashtun *jirgas*, or councils, were a permanent body of leaders that represented the broader will of Pashtun society across time and space, rather than infrequent phenomena with limited remits. In reality, *jirgas* provided an opportunity for Pashtun communities to partake in representative discussions but had little decision-making power. In British eyes, however, the *jirga*, like the *panchayat* elsewhere in India (and many of the councils of Indigenous North America) represented the tribal will. Thus, it became the key body with which colonial officials engaged in overseeing Pashtun societies. From the mid-nineteenth century, British officials actively sought out and tried to form *jirgas* with which to negotiate. 'In relying on "tribal tradition" for local governance, the colonial state radically altered, and in places imposed, that "tradition" on the frontier's inhabitants.'[52]

The experiences of South Asia's Pashtuns were mirrored across the world. The figures of the tribal 'chief' and 'council', a leader or body with clear political authority, were exported from the context of the Americas and applied globally, as imperial expansionists encountered new 'tribes'.[53] In Australia, British colonial leaders made a point of identifying and providing gifts to local 'chiefs'.[54] And much as the *jirga* became emblematic of Pashtun tribal tradition for British observers, so did colonial officers assert and largely redefine Embu *nduiko*, a ceremonial process of generational succession in Kenya, as a means of political change in which authority rested with elders. (In fact, the 1932 *nduiko* served to shift gender dynamics among Embu in favour of men and instead formed a new tradition, as did British focus on male leadership across many 'tribal' societies.)[55] At an extreme, in the Gold Coast, British officials described the Dagomba and Mossi as 'semi-barbarous tribes with a form of organized government', in turn leading local leaders to 'devise "tribal" histories for themselves' to maintain authority.[56] Such local entrepreneurship extended across many societies in Africa, where Indigenous leaders formulated

(2003), pp. 311–42; Reşat Kasaba, 'Nomads and tribes in the Ottoman empire', in Christine Woodhead, ed., *The Ottoman world* (Abingdon, 2011).

[52] Hopkins, *Ruling the savage periphery*, p. 38; Benjamin Hopkins and Magnus Marsden, *Fragments of the Afghan frontier* (London, 2012), pp. 69–72; Hugh Beattie, 'Negotiations with the tribes of Waziristan 1849–1914: the British experience', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 39 (2011), pp. 571–87.

[53] Colson, 'Political organization in tribal societies', p. 16.

[54] Curthoys and Mitchell, *Taking liberty*, p. 37. On further examples of gift-giving, see Alison Bennett, 'British material diplomacy in precolonial Uganda: the gift exchanges of John Hanning Speke, 1860–1863', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 16 (2021), pp. 166–74.

[55] Charles H. Ambler, 'The renovation of custom in colonial Kenya: the 1932 generation succession ceremonies in Embu', *Journal of African History*, 30 (1989), pp. 139–56; Dorothy L. Hodgson, 'Pastoralism, patriarchy and history: changing gender relations among Maasai in Tanganyika, 1890–1940', *Journal of African History*, 40 (1999), pp. 41–65.

[56] Lentz, 'Colonial construction and African initiatives', p. 116.

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'tribal' customary laws, histories, and associations to access the power of the colonial state.[57]

Colonial assumptions regarding hierarchies within tribal societies underpinned the idea of 'indirect rule' across much of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The incorporation of tribal societies into colonial administration was often restricted. In many instances, colonial leaders used what they assumed to be existing tribal leaders and structures to oversee local society, frequently with the help of political agents responsible for monitoring tribal activities and ensuring that local leaders enacted policies agreed upon between them and colonial representatives. This system was made particularly famous by Lord Lugard in colonial Nigeria, though it had precedents in British policy towards Pashtuns in north-west colonial India.[58] In French Soudan, officials co-opted local religious leaders as part of their *politique musulmane*, alongside 'natural' local chiefs from among the Tikna, using them in the creation of colonial Mauritania and to gain control of local caravan and trading networks.[59] Officials lauded these systems for limiting the burdens of colonial rule while also framing indirect rule as a clear demonstration of imperial understanding of, and engagement with, local traditions.

British officials turned to legal codes to simultaneously assert influence over India's Pashtuns and keep them isolated from other Indigenous communities that were not labelled 'tribal' and thus ruled directly. The Frontier Crimes Regulation demonstrated one form of 'lawfare' that originated in north-west India and spread across the world, applied in areas where tribes and colonial administrations met. First enacted in 1872 and revised subsequently, the regulation legalized a 'Council of Elders' – the *jirga* – as a tribal judiciary.[60] Tribal societies also became legally categorized elsewhere, relying on colonial assumptions regarding tribal tradition. In implementing indirect rule, British officials used the District Administration (Native) Ordinance in Malawi to

[57] John Lonsdale, 'States and social processes in Africa: a historiographical survey', *African Studies Review*, 24 (1981), pp. 139–225; Derek R. Peterson, *Ethnic patriotism and the east African revival: a history of dissent, c. 1935–1972* (Cambridge, 2012); Steven Feierman, *Peasant intellectuals anthropology and history in Tanzania* (Madison, WI, 1990); Kate Crehan, '"Tribes" and the people who read books: managing history in colonial Zambia', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 23 (1997), pp. 203–18.

[58] Hopkins, *Ruling the savage periphery*. Histories of indirect rule are well documented. See Michael H. Fisher, 'Indirect rule in the British empire: the foundations of the residency system in India (1764–1858)', *Modern Asian Studies*, 18 (1984), pp. 393–428; Peter P. Ekeh, 'Social anthropology and two contrasting uses of tribalism in Africa', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32 (1990), pp. 660–700; Vikram Visana, 'Beyond citizen and subject: new perspectives on political thought, "tribe", and "indirect rule" in Africa', *History Compass*, 17 (2019), e12525.

[59] Ghislaine Lydon, 'On trans-Saharan trails: trade networks and cross-cultural exchange in western Africa, 1840s–1930s' (Doctoral thesis, Michigan State University, 2000), ch. 7.

[60] Benjamin D. Hopkins, 'The Frontier Crimes Regulation and frontier governmentality', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 74 (2015), pp. 369–89. Hopkins has traced the Frontier Crimes Regulation's duplication in north-eastern India, Kenya, Basra, and Palestine, as well as the expansion of a corresponding 'frontier governmentality' that justified violence and extralegal measures towards 'tribal' populations in Natal, Nigeria, Argentina, and the United States. Hopkins, *Ruling the savage periphery*. On 'lawfare', see John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Law and disorder in the postcolony* (Chicago, 2006).

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appoint and delegate responsibilities to 'headmen and chiefs'.[61] French colonial officials codified the tribe (*tribu*) as an administrative unit in New Caledonia in 1868, subsequently modifying the term's territorial and social parameters as part of the *code de l'indigénat*.[62] And in the United States, the Supreme Court upheld decisions in the 1830s that defined American Indian tribes as 'domestic dependent nations', recognizing them as units apart from, but also largely subordinate to, American expansionist society.[63]

At its most extreme, the British colonial regime in India also sought to establish the legal category of the 'criminal tribe', supplementing British fascination with caste and tribe in South Asia. The 'criminal tribe' embodied everything dangerous about the tribe as a social unit. In the words of one colonial official, 'It means a tribe whose ancestors were criminals from time immemorials who are themselves destined by the usage of caste to commit crime and whose dependents will be offenders against the law, until the whole tribe is exterminated or accounted for in the manner of the thugs.' The criminal tribe clearly exhibited 'tribal' tendencies, with its basis in genealogy, and colonial officials equated kinship with criminality. In other words, it typified the threat of tribal society to empire's civilizing mission. The 1871 Criminal Tribes Act not only allowed for the registration and surveillance of those identified as belonging to criminal tribes, but also authorized colonial officials to move and resettle whole communities, punish them for criminalized activities, and police gender roles and 'sexual deviancy'.[64]

The violence of imperial policy towards 'tribal' societies across the world was readily apparent, as further Indigenous practices were criminalized or policed by colonial regimes. Not only did the Frontier Crimes Regulation keep 'tribal' Pashtuns beyond the scope of colonial courts, but it also embedded

[61] Leroy Vail and Landeg White, 'Tribalism in the political history of Malawi', in Vail, ed., *Creation of tribalism*, pp. 158–9.

[62] Pierre-Yves Le Mur, 'Locality, mobility and governmentality in colonial/postcolonial New Caledonia: the case of the Kouare tribe (xûâ Xârâgwii), Thio (Cöö)', *Oceania*, 83 (2013), pp. 130–46. French colonial officials likewise used the term *indigène* to draw links between their encounters with North American Indigenous societies and colonial subject populations in North Africa. Benjamin Claude Brower, *A desert named peace: the violence of France's empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844–1902* (New York, NY, 2011), pp. 19–20.

[63] Sarah Krakoff, 'Inextricably political: race, membership, and tribal sovereignty', *Washington Law Review*, 87 (2012), pp. 1041–132, at p. 1064; Cobb, 'Understanding tribal sovereignty'.

[64] Sanjay Nigam, 'Disciplining and policing the "criminals by birth", part 1: the making of a colonial stereotype: the criminal tribes and castes', *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 27 (1990), pp. 131–64, at p. 135; Anastasia Piliavsky, 'The "criminal tribe" in India before the British', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 57 (2015), pp. 323–54; Jessica Hinchy, 'Gender, family, and the policing of the "criminal tribes" in nineteenth-century north India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 54 (2020), pp. 1669–711. While there was some blurring of 'criminal tribes' and 'criminal castes', colonial officials chose to emphasize their 'tribal' nature. Members of criminal tribes have subsequently used this legal category to make demands against the colonial and post-colonial state and to ensure special rights under the Indian constitution. Sarah Gandee and William Gould, 'Introduction: margins and the state: caste, "tribe" and criminality in South Asia', *Studies in History*, 36 (2020), 7–19; Sarah Gandee, 'The "criminal tribe" and independence: partition, decolonisation, and the state in India's Punjab, 1910s–1980s' (Ph.D. thesis, Leeds, 2018).

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practices of individual and collective punishment. For many 'tribal' societies across the world, raids had provided key opportunities for economic and political gain. Pashtuns raided settlements across north-west India to accrue weapons to use against Europeans and to reshape power dynamics among local groups. In central Africa, Tonga and Lozi raiding activities helped create patronage networks and tribute systems, shifting relations among different groups in the region. Raiding success underpinned the clout of elites in Tuareg social structures in the West African Sahara and Sahel. Utes in New Mexico and Colorado raided Paiutes and Shoshones for slaves, who served both economic and political purposes (labour and a bargaining tool). In contrast, Euro-American imperialists saw such activities as epitomizing the 'savagery' of tribal society – even while they served clear political and economic strategies for raiding communities – and disruptive of colonial society. The kidnapping of a young British girl, Molly Ellis, by a Pashtun *lashkar*, or war party, in 1923 brought home colonial fears of tribal savagery. Colonial regimes refused to tolerate such activities and responded with brute force.[65] Under the Frontier Crimes Regulation, if one tribe member transgressed agreements with the colonial state, then the entire tribe would suffer the consequences. The sheer violence of this practice became particularly clear from the 1930s, when the ready availability of air power allowed for the wholesale bombing of Pashtun villages and settlements.[66]

IV

In all of this, 'tribal' societies and members were not passive recipients but demonstrated numerous ways to resist, subvert, or adapt to shifting regional and global circumstances due to Euro-American expansion. The British defeat in the First Anglo-Afghan War was a case in point. While this defeat solidified, in British minds, the tribal and warlike nature of Afghan (specifically Pashtun) society, for Afghanistan's leader, Dost Mohammad, it provided new opportunities to reinforce and expand his rule, cementing certain territorial gains and the power of ruling Pashtun elites, and playing Russian and British interests off each other. Even when the Second Anglo-Afghan War created new treaties giving Great Britain control of Afghan foreign policy, Abdur Rahman Khan married elements of kinship and ethnic-based politics with attempts to create a more centralized, authoritative state. He settled Pashtun *maldars* in north-west Afghanistan (formerly Turkestan) to strengthen the region's ties with the Afghan centre, encouraging sedentary agriculture rather than pastoral

[65] Colson, 'Political organization in tribal societies', p. 14; Andrew Alesbury, 'A society in motion: the Tuareg from the pre-colonial era to today', *Nomadic Peoples*, 17 (2013), pp. 106–25; Blackhawk, *Violence over the land*, p. 7; T. R. Moreman, 'The arms trade and the North-West Frontier Pathan tribes, 1890–1914', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 22 (1994), pp. 187–216; Kate Imy, 'Kidnapping and a "confirmed sodomite": an intimate enemy on the Northwest Frontier of India, 1915–1925', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 (2017), pp. 29–56.

[66] Alan Warren, '"Bullocks treading down wasps"? The British Indian army in Waziristan in the 1930s', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 20 (1997), pp. 35–56. For a French Algerian comparison, see Brower, *Desert named peace.*

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nomadism.[67] And while the war also allowed British officials to take a leading role in demarcating Afghanistan's borders, Rahman monitored and attempted to control transborder movement, for example putting in place the Rahdari Department to issue passports.[68]

Abdur Rahman and his successors implemented a vision of state-building that fundamentally clashed with European insistence on Afghan primordialism. Even while power continued to be exerted unevenly within Afghan territory, they established centralized institutions while negotiating with local leaders who continued to hold great sway. Afghan elites and intellectuals, meanwhile, debated the nature of Afghan society and its place in the world and asserted their fundamental modernity. The Afghan state's ability to evade formal colonization allowed Afghan leaders to place themselves at the forefront of global anti-colonial struggles. In the face of Western disdain, Afghanistan's leaders retained political independence for a country that married (not always successfully) nation-state institutions with a society in which kinship, ethnic, and community ties continued to hold great influence.[69]

Afghans were not alone in attempting to meld local social and political practices with those encountered in ongoing exchanges with foreigners. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, before their forced resettlement by the US government, Creek Indians in what is now the deep south also adopted new, more centralized modes of politics and turned to property ownership (including slavery), drawing on both Indigenous precedents and encounters with Euro-Americans, in which many Creek *mestizos* played an active role. So, too, 'the Cherokee reordered their society in order to make themselves recognizable as a sovereign and civilized Indian nation to the citizens of the United States'.[70] In this regard, Afghan social remodelling, drawing together older local practices and foreign ideas and systems, stood out not for being unique but for enduring, thanks in part to the lesser threat of settler colonialism.[71] While many Indigenous societies were encircled, overseen, or resettled by Euro-American imperialists, Afghanistan, even if weak, demonstrated that social forms that did not fully adopt or adapt to Western models of authority and organization could persist.

[67] Nancy Tapper, 'The advent of Pashtun "maldars" in north-western Afghanistan', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 36 (1973), pp. 55–79; Neeladri Bhattacharya, 'Pastoralists in a colonial world', *South Asian Chronicle*, 9 (2019), pp. 17–50.

[68] Crews, *Afghan modern*, p. 97.

[69] Ibid., ch. 4; Green, ed., *Afghan history through Afghan eyes*; Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, *Connecting histories in Afghanistan: market relations and state formation on a colonial frontier* (Stanford, CA, 2011); Faiz Ahmed, *Afghanistan rising: Islamic law and statecraft between the Ottoman and British empires* (Cambridge, MA, 2017).

[70] Witgen, 'American Indians in world history', p. 604; Claudio Saunt, *A new order of things: property, power, and the transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733–1816* (New York, NY, 1999); Steven Hahn, *The invention of the Creek nation, 1670–1763* (Omaha, NB, 2004); Theda Perdue, 'The conflict within: the Cherokee power structure and removal', *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 73 (1989), pp. 467–91; William G. McLoughlin, *Cherokee renascence in the new republic* (Princeton, NJ, 1986).

[71] Both the 'violent geography' and the economic costs of military and political campaigns in the region mitigated against extensive colonial controls. Bayly, *Taming the imperial imagination*.

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On both sides of the Durand Line, which often was more cartographic myth than fact, 'tribal' Pashtuns remained embedded in not just ethnic and kinship networks but also global religious, intellectual, and economic spheres. While scholars have pointed to ways that Indigenous women took advantage of, adapted to, or subverted Euro-American–'tribal' encounters, the impacts on Pashtun gender dynamics remain noticeably underexplored.[72] But male Pashtuns continued to participate in maritime and overland trading networks, much like the trans-Saharan Tikna traders, who actively negotiated with French colonial officials to secure and sustain their commercial activities and continued to adapt and innovate within the colonial economic framework.[73] In the 'tribal areas' of colonial India, local leaders like Mirza Ali Khan, the Faqir of Ipi, framed their demands for autonomy in terms of Islam and anti-colonialism, taking part in global, not just local, debates in the early to mid-twentieth century about revivalist Islam and alternatives to Euro-American imperialism. They also took an active part in international politics: the Faqir of Ipi, for example, sought Axis support for his anti-colonial activities during the Second World War.[74] Indian intellectuals, in turn, reclaimed the idea of the tribal areas and Afghanistan as *Yaghistan*, 'Land of the Free'. Rather than employing the term's older affiliations with unruliness and lawlessness, they framed *Yaghistan* as a symbol of independence because its societies had stayed beyond direct colonial rule.[75]

[72] Scholarship on North America is particularly revealing on the complex relationships between gender, 'tribe', and empire. See Theda Perdue, *Cherokee women: gender and culture change, 1700–1835* (Omaha, NB, 1998); Nancy Shoemaker, ed., *Negotiators of change: historical perspectives on Native American women* (New York, NY, 1995); Saunt, *New order of things*, ch. 6.

[73] Crews, *Afghan modern*, pp. 82–4; Hanifi, *Connecting histories*. On more recent trends, see Magnus Marsden, 'From Kabul to Kiev: Afghan trading networks across the former Soviet Union', *Modern Asian Studies*, 49 (2015), pp. 1010–48; Lydon, 'On trans-Saharan trails', ch. 8; Mehdi Sakatni, 'From camel to truck? Automobiles and the pastoralist nomadism of Syrian tribes during the French mandate', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 39 (2019), pp. 159–69. On other 'tribal' peoples as global actors, see Joshua L. Reid, *The sea is my country: the maritime world of the Makahs* (New Haven, CT, 2015); Nancy Shoemaker, *Native American whalemen and the world: Indigenous encounters and the contingency of race* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015); Lynette Russell, *Roving mariners: Australian Aboriginal whalers and sealers in the southern oceans, 1780–1870* (Albany, NY, 2012); Jace Weaver, *The red Atlantic: American indigenes and the making of the modern world, 1000–1927* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014). On the idea of 'Indigenous Atlantics', see Caroline Dodds Pennock, 'Aztecs abroad? Uncovering the early Indigenous Atlantic', *American Historical Review*, 125 (2020), pp. 787–814.

[74] Milan Hauner, *India in Axis strategy: Germany, Japan, and Indian nationalists in the Second World War* (London, 1981); Elisabeth Leake, *The defiant border: the Afghan–Pakistan borderlands in the era of decolonization, 1936–1965* (New York, NY, 2017), ch. 1. On other instances of intersections between 'tribal' and religious mobilization, see Julia Clancy-Smith, 'Saints, mahdis, and arms: religion and resistance in nineteenth-century North Africa', in Edmund Burke and Ira Lapidus, eds., *Islam, politics and social movements* (Berkeley, CA, 1988); Jonathan Wyrtzen, 'Colonial state-building and the negotiation of Arab and Berber identity in protectorate Morocco', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 43 (2011), pp. 227–49; John Thomas, *Evangelising the nation: religion and the formation of Naga political identity* (Delhi, 2015).

[75] Nile Green, 'The trans-border traffic of Afghan modernism: Afghanistan and the Indian "Urdusphere"', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 53 (2011), pp. 479–508; Sana Haroon, 'Competing views of Pashtun tribalism, Islam, and society in the Indo-Afghan borderlands', in

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As negotiations for South Asia's decolonization accelerated, Pashtuns in the tribal areas used *jirgas* as intended by the British – as representative bodies – but to make demands about the future of the tribal areas. They rejected both Muslim League and Indian National Congress representational claims and instead forced colonial administrators to take local views into account.[76] Because of indirect rule in the region, 'tribal' Pashtuns were positioned to negotiate their political future, not merely accept wrangling in Delhi and London. Instead, according to the independence bill that resulted in the partition of India and Pakistan, British officials acknowledged that 'agreements with the tribes of the North West Frontier of India will have to be negotiated by the appropriate successor authority'. In a great irony, the last British secretary of state for India observed to the viceroy,

> The effect of that Clause is to place the Jirgas, or tribal assemblies, (who are the Treaty-making bodies empowered to enter into agreements on behalf of the tribes) in the same position in relation to the Constituent Assemblies of the new Dominions as the Indian States will be after the appointed day.[77]

While British colonial officials continued to dismiss 'the Pathan tribesman' as 'unstable and anarchic by nature',[78] in fact, by taking control of this colonially constructed forum, Pashtuns in the tribal area maintained a degree of autonomy and resisted imperial decline's slow crystallization into a world of independent nation-states.

V

The societies that came to be known by Euro-Americans as 'tribal' were complex and diverse, and represented numerous modes of asserting authority and social, economic, and political practice. Yet, they all increasingly fell under the umbrella term of 'tribal', thanks to Western imperialism. The ways in which Euro-American expansion both popularized and globalized the term 'tribe' and created the infrastructures (political and academic) to embed this idea in practice and in popular understanding derived not just from Euro-Americans looking to their own premodern past but from early encounters with Indigenous communities in the Americas. Initial processes of mutual cultural accommodation and adaptation, evident in North America, gave way to a hardening of social forms and ideas that were exported globally. Identifying tribal councils and chiefs, performing treaty-making, imposing different social, political, and legal categories, and, of course, employing systemic and

Nile Green, ed., *Afghanistan's Islam: from conversion to the Taliban* (Berkeley, CA, 2016); Amin Tarzi, 'Islam, shari'a, and state building under 'Abd al-Rahman Khan', in Green, ed., *Afghanistan's Islam.*

[76] Leake, *Defiant border*, ch. 2.

[77] The earl of Listowel to Rear-Admiral Viscount Mountbatten of Burma, 5 July 1947, in N. Mansergh and P. Moon, eds., *The transfer of power*, XI (London, 1982), no. 539.

[78] Government of India, External Affairs Department, 'The tribes of the North-West and North-East Frontiers in a future constitution', 1946, in ibid., VIII (London, 1977), no. 15.

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militarized violence, became the hallmark of Euro-American engagement with 'tribal' societies. By defining certain social groups across the non-Western world as 'tribal', imperialists created a rationale for their simultaneous incorporation and isolation. Tribes were framed as backwards and primitive, a steppingstone on the way to the enlightened, modern societies embodied by European countries (and their North American and Commonwealth cousins). It is no coincidence that former colonial officials also served as experts on Indigenous societies and cultures well into the twentieth century.

Of course, Euro-American assumptions did not match Indigenous realities or histories, and imperialists assigned 'tribal' characteristics to dynamic, powerful societies because of mismatches in social and political practices and expectations and, increasingly, intentional politics of exclusion. The fact that a state like Afghanistan managed to persist and continue redeveloping itself in the face of European expansion highlights the ways in which local leaders could draw on kinship ties and genealogy – supposed hallmarks of tribalism – while adapting different social and political forms to remain independent and assert alternative forms of modernity. Likewise, even under colonial subjugation, local communities could subvert Euro-American expectations regarding tribal or ethnic practices to take control and reshape social dynamics. While British colonial officials may have justified indirect rule of Pashtuns in colonial India's tribal areas because of their supposed backwardness, those same Pashtuns used colonial institutions to retain autonomy. That the British colonial state frequently turned to violence to suppress local resistance shows the unexpected degree of influence that these Pashtun 'tribes' continued to exert.

In the twentieth century, the terminology of the 'tribe' became controversial, as former empires and formerly colonized states wrestled with colonialism, neocolonialism, and their legacies. Much as the 'nation' gave way to the 'tribe' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the twentieth, 'tribe' gave way, in many parts of the world, to terminologies of indigeneity or ethnicity.[79] This shift in terms has mirrored the tensions of decolonization, postcolonial state-building, and the rise of international institutions like the United Nations. Where many state leaders have acknowledged tribal, Indigenous, and ethnic communities in order to embed them as minorities within states, peoples from these 'minority' communities have alternatively used their status as 'tribals' or 'Indigenous' to demand rights, representation, and even more potently, political, not just social, self-determination.[80] Indigenous communities have not only brought individual claims to federal governments and bodies like the League of Nations and the UN but also have crossed social boundaries to participate in transnational efforts to gain sovereign recognition.[81] In the

[79] Frederick E. Hoxie, 'Ethnohistory for a tribal world', *Ethnohistory*, 44 (1997), pp. 595–615.

[80] Douglas Sanders, 'Indigenous peoples: issues of definition', *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 8 (1999), pp. 4–13.

[81] Ellen Lutz and Nicole Ledema, 'Addressing Indigenous rights at the United Nations', *Cultural Survival*, 28 (2004); Jonathan Crossen, 'Another wave of anti-colonialism: the origins of Indigenous internationalism', *Canadian Journal of History*, 52 (2017), pp. 533–59; Alexandra

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wake of South Asia's partition, the Faqir of Ipi spearheaded ethno-nationalist demands for the formation of 'Pashtunistan', an independent Pashtun state, rather than this society's submission to Britain's successor state, Pakistan. The government of Afghanistan supported this initiative, trying time and again unsuccessfully to bring the issue of Pashtun self-determination to debates in the UN General Assembly. Pakistan, in turn, argued that Pashtuns could be, and were, an ethnic and tribal minority within the state of Pakistan and thus an internal issue.[82]

The failed demand for Pashtunistan pointed to the fact that in an era where the nation-state became the standard unit of national and international politics, 'Indigenous participants had to concede that theirs was not a right of secession nor a demand for full independence; and states had to admit that indigenous peoples existed…and were owed protection and reparation.'[83] Thus, the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, while acknowledging the human rights of Indigenous peoples across the globe, did not concede the right to political self-government.[84] While the international community has recognized ways in which Euro-American empire undermined and discriminated against the societies that imperialists deemed 'tribal', these communities' recourse to reparations remains limited (and political sovereignty off limits). Only in 2010 did Pakistan rename the North-West Frontier Province, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, recognizing its ethnic Pashtuns, though the Federally Administered Tribal Areas were not merged with the province until 2018.

The 'tribe' largely emerged as an imperial category, but as a social unit – even a contested one – it has outlived the formal empires that adopted, refashioned, and exported the term. While Indigenous claims-making demonstrates that some local communities have managed to reclaim agency and use their historic exclusion and suppression to demand renewed rights and representation, the fundamental power imbalance between states and Indigenous communities often persist. Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas has remained a site of prolonged state violence. In the twentieth century, the government of Pakistan turned to bombing campaigns to quell the Faqir of Ipi's demands for Pashtunistan, while the colonial-era Frontier Crimes Regulation was only repealed in 2018. In the twenty-first century, Western media remained focused on Pakistan's tribal areas, in the context of the 'War on Terror', as a 'lawless', 'wild', and 'savage' hideout for members of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. This, in turn, has justified state violence against

Zanthaki, *Indigenous rights and the United Nations standards: self-determination, culture and land* (Cambridge, 2010).

[82] Leake, *Defiant border*.

[83] Miranda Johnson, 'Indigenizing self-determination at the United Nations: reparative progress in the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples', *Journal of the History of International Law*, 23 (2020), pp. 206–28, at p. 217.

[84] Karen Engle, 'On fragile architecture: the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the context of human rights', *European Journal of International Law*, 22 (2011), pp. 141–63; Siegfried Wiessner, 'Indigenous sovereignty: a reassessment in light of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples', *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law*, 41 (2008), pp. 1141–76.

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local communities because of their ostensible difference. Afghanistan, too, has continued to be framed by Western observers as 'backwards' and 'tribal', thus justifying foreign intervention and externally led state-building.[85]

Placing 'tribal' societies at the forefront of global social history thus reveals one way in which imperial ideas and practices have extended far beyond the moment of decolonization and political independence. Exploring 'tribes' as social units entangled with, manipulated by, and in competition with Euro-American empires allows reflection not only on the global impacts of Western expansion but also an opportunity to excavate potential alternatives and foreground interconnected Indigenous histories of resistance and adaptation. Rather than leaving the study of 'tribes' to anthropologists and social scientists, historians need to critically examine and unpack the ways that Euro-Americans deemed certain societies 'tribal', recognizing the ways that ideas and practices circulated worldwide, as well as considering the ways in which Indigenous actors thought and acted both locally and globally. In turn, this will historicize, deepen, and complicate current debates on Indigenous rights and sovereignty, while also providing ways of foregrounding societies in the past whose dynamics, potentials, and agency were intentionally flattened through the Euro-American medium of the 'tribe'.

[85] Leake, *Defiant border*; Abubakar Siddique, *The Pashtun question: the unresolved key to the future of Pakistan and Afghanistan* (London, 2014); Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan: the history and politics of imperial knowledge* (Cambridge, 2020).

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