

WEBINAR SERIES REPORT

JUNE 2026

THE THINK TANK

FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



Reinventing Tribalism To Work For Africa's Development

Overview

The Think Tank for Sustainable Development held the second webinar in its series, titled “Reinventing Tribalism to Work for Africa’s Development.” The presenter, Dr. Chi-Chi Aniagolu-Okoye, explored how ethnic and cultural identities could promote development, accountability, self-reliance, and national progress.

Speakers argued that tribalism is not inherently destructive; rather, the problem is its exploitation by political and economic elites. The discussion called for tribal solidarity to be redirected toward education, enterprise, infrastructure, social welfare, cultural preservation, and responsible leadership.

HIGHLIGHTS



Special Guest Remarks

Professor Eghosa Osaghae, Director-General of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, provided the historical and theoretical context for the discussion. He observed that the terms “tribe” and “tribalism” have often been treated as derogatory when applied to African societies. Although many scholars expected ethnicity to decline with modernization, education, urbanization, and nation-building, it has remained influential in Africa’s political and social life.

Professor Osaghae distinguished between negative ethnicity and positive ethnicity. Negative ethnicity promotes discrimination, exclusion, domination, conflict, and division. Positive ethnicity encourages self-help, community organization, cooperation, responsibility, and development.

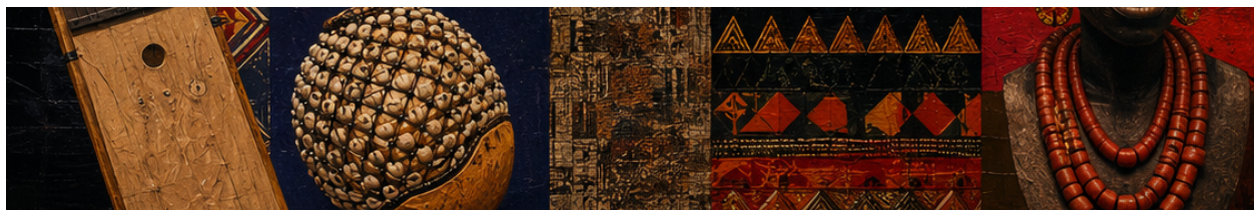
He argued that ethnic organizations should not automatically be regarded as threats to national unity. They can function as legitimate components of civil society and contribute to development. He cited Igbo town unions, women’s August Meetings, and Kenya’s Harambee tradition as examples of institutions that mobilize people and resources for collective advancement. His central position was that ethnic identity can complement the State when it promotes resilience, self-reliance, social capital, and community development.

Keynote Presentation

Dr. Chi-Chi Aniagolu-Okoye clarified that the views expressed were her personal opinions and did not represent the official position of the Ford Foundation.

She argued that Africa should not seek to eliminate tribal identities. Instead, tribalism should be redefined and redirected toward constructive purposes. The central problem is not ethnic identity itself, but its exploitation by elites seeking political power, influence, and protection from accountability.

She defined positive tribalism as organized solidarity based on shared culture, ancestry, history, and identity, directed toward the welfare and advancement of the community. Under this model, cultural pride should be measured through achievements in education, healthcare, entrepreneurship, infrastructure, technology, social welfare, and institutional development rather than through domination or hostility toward other groups.



Reframing Tribalism

Dr. Aniagolu-Okoye distinguished tribalism from practices often confused with it. Appointing friends and associates without regard for competence is cronyism. Directing public resources exclusively to one's locality without considering wider public value is patronage. Supporting an incompetent candidate solely because of shared ethnicity is sentimentalism.

Although these practices may occur within ethnic politics, they do not represent constructive tribalism. Positive tribalism should promote merit, competence, accountability, resource mobilization, and collective progress.

Colonial Origins of Contemporary Tribalism

The presentation traced many of Africa's ethnic tensions to colonial policies and institutions. Dr. Aniagolu-Okoye noted that precolonial African identities were often flexible and overlapping. Individuals could identify with their families, villages, kingdoms, languages, occupations, trading networks, and religious communities.

Colonial rule transformed many of these identities into rigid political categories. The boundaries established during the Berlin Conference brought different communities together within new states while separating groups with longstanding cultural ties.

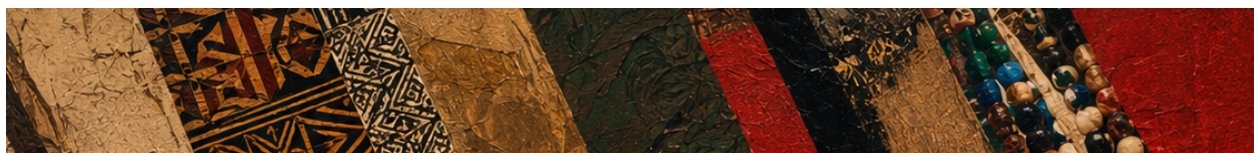
Colonial administrators also used "divide and rule" strategies, favored certain groups, and distributed education, employment, infrastructure, and political influence unevenly. These policies created lasting suspicion, inequality, and competition.

Through censuses, indirect rule, and regional political arrangements, colonial systems encouraged communities to view access to state power as essential for survival and control of resources. Examples from Nigeria, Rwanda, and India illustrated how colonial institutions converted social differences into adversarial political identities. Their effects remain evident in elections, governance, regional inequality, citizenship disputes, and resource allocation.

Positive Tribalism As A Development Strategy

Dr. Aniagolu-Okoye argued that tribal identity can become a powerful development tool when directed inward toward community improvement rather than outward toward rivalry or exclusion. Communities should compete through education, entrepreneurship, innovation, healthcare, infrastructure, employment creation, social protection, and cultural preservation.

Communal pride should be judged by measurable outcomes: access to quality education, support for vulnerable members, opportunities for young people, and the effectiveness of local institutions.



The speaker maintained that people are often more willing to contribute money, expertise, time, and professional skills when development is presented as a shared responsibility and source of communal honor. She highlighted the Igbo apprenticeship system and town unions, Yoruba traditions of character and communal responsibility, Northern Nigerian traditions of trust and cooperation, Kenya's Harambee movement, Tanzania's Ujamaa philosophy, and community-led initiatives in India and Bangladesh.

These examples demonstrated how cultural solidarity can promote enterprise, mutual support, local investment, and social resilience.

Governance And Accountability

Dr. Aniagolu-Okoye observed that many African communities historically maintained accountability through councils of elders, age grades, women's organizations, religious institutions, traditional assemblies, and professional associations. Reviving and adapting these institutions could help communities monitor leaders, demand transparency, and resist the misuse of ethnic loyalty.

Positive tribalism should involve evaluating leaders by competence and performance, monitoring public projects, resisting corruption, rewarding integrity, and sanctioning conduct that undermines the common good.

The speaker emphasized that ethnic solidarity should never be used to defend incompetent or corrupt leaders. Politicians should not invoke cultural loyalty while neglecting the communities they claim to represent.

Strong local accountability mechanisms could therefore make communities effective watchdogs against corruption, poor governance, and misuse of public resources.

Implementing Positive Tribalism in Nigeria

During the interactive session, participants asked how positive tribalism could be implemented within Nigeria's political system. Dr. Aniagolu-Okoye argued that Nigeria's federal structure could function more effectively if leaders adopted a development-oriented communal mindset. Progress could begin at state and local levels without waiting for comprehensive constitutional reform.

Town unions, professional associations, traditional institutions, religious organizations, diaspora groups, governments, and private citizens could collaborate to identify priorities and coordinate resources.

She also encouraged wealthy individuals to move beyond isolated projects and monuments. High-net-worth citizens could work collectively with governments and communities to transform regions through investments in education, healthcare, infrastructure, technology, enterprise, and social welfare.

According to the speaker, the greatest obstacles are mindset and political will. Communities must stop celebrating personal wealth and access to power while neglecting collective development.

Religion, Identity, and National Unity

The webinar examined how ethnic and religious identities can support national development. Dr. Aniagolu-Okoye observed that both have often been manipulated by colonial authorities and politicians, despite religious values such as compassion, justice, honesty, and service aligning with African communal principles. Religious institutions should therefore promote ethical leadership, peaceful coexistence, education, welfare, and community service while resisting political manipulation.

The discussion also emphasized that individuals can hold multiple identities without conflict in an equitable society. National unity should not require the suppression of languages, traditions, or cultural identities, as forced assimilation often creates resentment and instability. Examples from several African countries illustrated the dangers of exclusion, while Tanzania and South Africa were presented as models of unity within cultural diversity. Strong nations, the speaker concluded, protect equal citizenship, dignity, representation, and opportunity for all groups.

Technology And Community Institutions

Participants also discussed how technology could support community development. Technology can help communities maintain databases of professionals, connect diaspora members with local initiatives, mobilize and track contributions, monitor projects, provide online education, support entrepreneurship, and improve communication.

Town unions, trade associations, women's groups, age grades, alumni bodies, professional networks, religious organizations, and cultural institutions were identified as useful platforms for implementing positive tribalism.

For these institutions to succeed, they must adopt transparent financial systems, accountable leadership, inclusive participation, measurable objectives, and clearly defined development priorities.

Key Recommendations

1. Tribalism should not automatically be equated with conflict or division.
2. Communities should direct cultural pride toward measurable development.
3. Ethnic and community organizations should be strengthened as development partners.
4. Merit, competence, and accountability should replace cronyism, patronage, and sentimental loyalty.
5. Ethnic solidarity should never be used to defend corruption or poor leadership.
6. National unity should be based on pluralism, fairness, equal citizenship, and mutual respect.
7. Local and state-level development should begin without waiting for complete national reform.
8. Technology and diaspora networks should be used to coordinate resources and improve transparency.

Conclusion

The webinar offered a thoughtful reinterpretation of tribalism and its role in Africa's development.

The speakers demonstrated that many destructive outcomes associated with tribalism result from political manipulation, colonial legacies, cronyism, patronage, weak institutions, and exclusionary competition rather than from cultural identity itself.

The central message was that genuine love for one's heritage does not require hostility toward others. Ethnic identity can coexist with national loyalty when grounded in fairness, accountability, merit, and mutual respect.

When directed toward education, enterprise, social welfare, infrastructure, technology, cultural preservation, and transparent leadership, communal solidarity can become a valuable instrument of sustainable development.

Africa's cultural diversity should therefore be viewed not only as a challenge to be managed, but also as an asset capable of strengthening communities, improving governance, promoting self-reliance, and advancing inclusive national development.



Meet The Presenters



Dr. Chi-Chi Aniagolu Okoye

Dr. Chi-Chi Aniagolu-Okoye is a Nigerian development expert, public health strategist, and civic leader. She serves as Regional Director for West Africa at the Ford Foundation, leading initiatives on social justice, governance, and inclusion. Her career spans public health, philanthropy, gender equity, and sustainable development across Africa.



Prof Eghosa Osaghae

Professor Eghosa Emmanuel Osaghae is a distinguished Nigerian political scientist and Director-General of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs. A former Vice-Chancellor of Igbinedion University, he is renowned for scholarship on ethnicity, federalism, governance, conflict, and African politics, with numerous influential books, articles, fellowships, and international academic appointments.

About Us

[The Think Tank for Sustainable Development](#) is an international policy and civic platform dedicated to advancing sustainable development, democratic governance, social justice, and national transformation through research, dialogue, and public engagement. The organization convenes thought leaders, professionals, and citizens to address pressing national issues, promote evidence-based solutions, and foster inclusive conversations that strengthen institutions, civic participation, and long-term development across Nigeria and Africa.

If you have any questions or suggestions for future topics, please contact us at: webadmin@thethinktanksd.com