

Book Review

Tribes: How Our Need to Belong Can Make or Break the Good Society David Lammy, Constable (Little Brown). 2020. 352 pages.

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Introduction

In an era marked by heightened polarization, populist resurgence, and the fracturing of democratic discourse, David Lammy's *Tribes: How Our Need to Belong Can Make or Break the Good Society* arrives as a timely intervention. Rather than generating another diatribe on identity politics, Lammy, Member of Parliament for Tottenham and a prominent voice on race and social justice in the United Kingdom, delivers a hybrid text that is part memoir, half sociological study, and part political reflection. His core focus is the human desire toward group affiliation, an instinct that can either reinforce the social fabric or accelerate societal breakdown.

The book is solidly grounded in the transatlantic context, wrestling with the repercussions of Brexit, the racial anxieties propelling Trumpism, and the historical responsibilities of empire. Yet, its analytical lens reaches considerably beyond Britain and the United States. Lammy's insights give conceptual and empirical tools for understanding plural, postcolonial cultures attempting to reconcile ethnic difference with national coherence. For Malaysian scholars, politicians, and readers attentive to the complexities of multicultural governance, *Tribes* provides a powerful lexicon with which to analyze the dynamics of belonging, exclusion, and solidarity in a varied society.

The Argument: Benign versus Malign Tribalism

Lammy's central thesis rests on a crucial distinction: tribalism is not inherently detrimental. It is a fundamental feature of human psychology rooted in our evolutionary past that shapes our emotional and social worlds. What matters is whether tribalism manifests in benign or malign forms.

Benign Tribalism

Benign tribalism encompasses the positive expressions of group belonging. It includes civic pride, neighbourhood solidarity, cultural identity, and the emotional anchoring provided by religious communities, sports teams, and familial networks. In its benign form, tribalism fosters cooperation, mutual support, and shared purpose.

Malign Tribalism

Malign tribalism emerges when group identity turns exclusionary, adversarial, and weaponized. It rests on zero-sum assumptions, where one group's advancement is perceived as another's threat. Driven by fear, grievance, and misinformation, malign tribalism feeds polarization, racism, conspiracy thinking, and the "us versus them" politics that have become emblematic of contemporary democratic decline.

Lammy attributes the rise of malign tribalism to several interlocking developments:

- **The erosion of traditional community institutions**, such as unions and local civic associations, which once served as sources of purpose and cross-class solidarity.

- **Digital echo chambers**, where algorithmic curation reinforces existing biases and isolates citizens from dissenting views.
- **Economic precarity and loneliness**, which intensify the appeal of hard-edged identities promising certainty and protection.

His proposed remedy is the cultivation of an “encounter culture”, a deliberate creation of spaces and systems that bring disparate groups into meaningful, humanizing contact. For Lammy, overcoming polarization requires neither colour-blindness nor the erasure of identity, but the construction of a broader, more inclusive “tribe” grounded in civic values.

Critique and Analysis

Tribes is at its strongest when tracing the psychological and sociological underpinnings of tribal conduct. Lammy’s personal narratives, particularly his profound interest with genealogy and heritage; serve as stunning illustrations of the intricate, interrelated structure of human identity. His depiction of his multi-ethnic DNA composition undermines the entire notion of racial purity, shattering the essentialist myths commonly exploited by nationalists.

However, the book’s analytical lucidity sometimes sits awkwardly with its political ambitions. Lammy’s assessment of right-wing populism is crisp and compelling, but his examination of the ideological splits within the Left, including call-out culture, performative activism, and the rigidity of identity-based politics that feels comparatively underdeveloped. Moreover, his policy suggestions, such as rejuvenating community spaces or implementing national civic service, are well-meaning but probably insufficient to confront the underlying structural reasons underpinning contemporary tribal animus.

Despite these faults, the book’s greatest value resides in its empathic attitude. By refusing to ignore the emotional relevance of tribal affiliation, Lammy offers a more humane and sophisticated framework for understanding why identity continues to impact political life so powerfully.

The Malaysian Perspective: A Mirror to the Archipelago

Although *Tribes* is situated in a Western socio-political context, its insights are strikingly applicable to Malaysia, a nation whose institutional and historical landscape is deeply entwined with the management of ethnic and religious diversity. Lammy’s framework of benign and malign tribalism provides a useful lens through which Malaysian scholars and policymakers can reinterpret longstanding debates on national integration, communal identity, and political discourse.

1. Institutionalized Tribalism and the Search for National Belonging

Malaysia’s political architecture is, to a large extent, built upon ethnicity-based institutions and party structures. Lammy’s argument that tribalism becomes malign when the state fails to cultivate a compelling national identity resonates deeply here. The *Muhibbah* ethos of earlier decades exemplified benign tribalism, a cultural pluralism coexisting with national loyalty. Today, however, the increasing politicization of the “3R” issues (Race, Religion, Royalty) risks transforming communal identities into defensive fortresses. Lammy’s framework reminds us that without an inclusive national tribe, identity competition intensifies.

2. The Decline of “Encounter Culture” in a Segmented Society

Lammy’s emphasis on shared social spaces mirrors Malaysia’s challenge of educational and social siloing. The coexistence of national schools, vernacular schools, international schools, religious institutions, and private academies has unintentionally reduced opportunities for meaningful interethnic contact. A Malaysian child may grow up academically successful yet socially disconnected from peers of other communities. Lammy’s call for structural, not symbolic, encounters is particularly relevant for policymakers concerned about long-term national cohesion.

3. Grievance Politics and the “Left Behind” Communities

The economic and cultural anxieties of Britain’s white working class parallel the sentiments of Malaysia’s *Bumiputera* heartland communities. Lammy’s insistence that such grievances must be understood, rather than mocked or dismissed, offers an important corrective. In Malaysia, rural Malay anxieties regarding economic displacement, social mobility, and cultural preservation cannot be addressed solely through developmental rhetoric. They must be acknowledged as legitimate precursors to political behaviour, lest malign tribalism expands unchecked.

4. Reimagining Identity Through the Fluidity of Ancestry

Lammy’s reflections on DNA deconstruct the rigid racial boundaries historically embedded in Malaysia’s constitutional and administrative frameworks. While race categorization remains central to policy design, the book invites a more nuanced understanding of Malaysian identity, one that embraces hybridity, cultural overlap, and plural loyalties. Such perspectives align with the ongoing discourse around *Bangsa Malaysia*, not as an assimilationist project but as a tapestry of interwoven identities.

Conclusion

Tribes is not a flawless book, but it is a profoundly important one for societies navigating the complexities of diversity in the 21st century. Lammy’s central insight, that tribalism cannot be eradicated but must instead be consciously rechannelled toward broader, more inclusive forms of belonging which offers a constructive pathway forward. For Malaysia, a nation perpetually negotiating between pluralist aspirations and ethnocentric pressures, the implications are clear. Diversity is not inherently a strength; it is a demographic reality that must be cultivated, negotiated, and managed. Without sustained efforts to foster an encounter culture, build inclusive national narratives, and address the socioeconomic roots of tribal grievances, the nation risks drifting toward the malign tribalism that Lammy warns against. In this light, *Tribes* deserves careful engagement from sociologists, political analysts, educators, and policymakers seeking to understand how identity shapes public life, and how belonging, when wisely nurtured, can strengthen the very foundations of a good society.

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