ETHNICITY IN NIGERIA TODAY: THE BIBLICAL AND ETHICAL APPROACHES TO SOLUTION
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Abstract

Ethnic differences have caused conflicts and wars in many countries of the world. It has hindered the development of the culture of peace and equity in Nigeria. The objective of this study is to demonstrate the various problems of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria and the effects. Some pertinent questions that this paper addressed regarding ethnicity in Nigeria are: What is the church's view or understanding of ethnic conflict and other forms of conflicts among political factions and religious factions? What is the Bible's view of ethnicity? How should the church and individual Christian respond to oppression or injustice from government or other ethnic groups or even religious groups? To sort these out, this paper looked into the prevalence of ethnic conflict in Nigeria, found that they are generally religiously, politically and economically based. Looked at ethnicity in the Bible, causes of ethnic conflicts, and did a critique of violence as a means of solving conflicts. The paper suggested some Christian ways of responding to these conflicts based on Christian concepts of healing and reconciliation.

Introduction

The world is made up of thousands of "people." The relationship between "people-group" is one of the very serious problems that have faced mankind throughout history and that still do so today (Shields, 2004). People of one group often seem totally unable to tolerate people of another group who happen to live among them or near them. Ethnicity, in Africa conjures the feeling of identity, culture, language, religion, social customs, physical appearance, region of residence, security and protection. Thus, agreeing with Thompson (2006) that ethnicity refers to a group of people who "share a persisting sense of common interest and identity that is based on some combination of shared historical experience and valued cultural traits."

Kunhiyop (2004), making reference to Tumin's work gave a more comprehensive definition of ethnicity as denoting a social group which, within a larger cultural and social system, claims or is accorded a special status in terms of complexity of traits (ethnic traits) which it exhibits or is believed to exhibit. Such traits are diverse, and there is much variety in the complexes that they form, especially those that are drawn from religious and linguistic characteristics of the social group; the distinctive skin pigmentation of its members and their national or geographical origins or those of their forebears. In these one hundred years of existence of Nigeria, ethnicity relates more to communal characteristics, geographical location, linguistic features and cultural traits, which even religion has not been able to curb. Right inside the church, there are different groups and groupings which carries ethnic traits.

A lot of ink has been spilled trying to find solutions to war and armed conflicts: civil and national wars as well as ethnic and religious conflicts. Still, as Kunhiyop (2004) rightly puts it, conflicts and wars continue to afflict human race, a pointer to Thompson's (2003) assertion that our world continues to be a violent and dangerous place. In the Middle East, conflicts continue between Israelis Jews and the Palestinians. Groups within Iraq fight against each other as well as against the US led coalition. There are conflicts between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland and in Europe among the Bosnian Serbs and the Bosnian Moslems. There are also conflicts among Hindus and Moslems in India, tensions between Serbs and Croats in the former

Yugoslavia, Turks and Greeks in Cyrus, Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda that resulted in millions of death, Zulus and Xhosas in South Africa, Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, Russia and Ukraine, and between Celtic Irish and Anglo Scottish people in the northern Ireland, Chechnya conflicts, and the Congo, Kashmir on the boarder between India and Pakistan are but few examples of conflicts across the world. Also, there are ethnic and religious conflicts in Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Angola, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Sudan and even in Nigeria (Niger-Delta struggle over allocation from oil), while North and South squirmishes and the Boko Haram insurgence which has claimed lot of innocent lives in Nigeria could not be overlooked. So, we go back to agree again with Thompson (2003) that our world continues to be a violent and dangerous place. The task of this analytical paper then is to examine the universality of ethnicity especially as it affects Nigeria and the ethicality of violence as a means of solving conflict. The paper analyzes ethnicity in Nigeria and in the Bible, reviews causes of ethnic conflict, it did an ethical critique of violence as a means of solving conflict and recommends solution to ethnic conflicts from the Christianity's point of view.

Ethnicity and Ethnic Crises in Nigeria

About three hundred ethnic groups comprised the population of Nigeria. This count overwhelmingly enumerates ethnic minority groups. Those which do not comprise a majority in the region in which they live, usually do not have a political voice, nor have access to resources. They therefore often consider themselves discriminated against, neglected, or oppressed. There are only three ethnic groups which have attained "ethnic majority" status in their respective regions: Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Igbo in the Southeast, and the Yoruba in the Southwest. This is a pointer to the pluralistic characteristic of the Nigerian society.

From time to time, there ensue ethnic conflicts among these different groups resulting from religious as well as economic and political clashes. According to Mason (2010), there has been outbreak of clashes in Sagamu – a town in the southwest of Nigeria – the fighting took place between the Yoruba and Hausa. The conflict was sparked off after several days of a traditional Yoruba festival "Oro" and

the killing of a Hausa woman increased the tension. Further ethnic conflicts occurred in the northern city of Kano as a retaliation against the Yoruba for the attack on Hausas, when the victims of the violence in Sagamu returned home to Kano.

Renewed clash took place in Ondo State between the minority Ijaw and Ilaje people over ownership of land reputed to be rich in oil reserves. Same is the clash between the Ife and Modakeke over who owns the land (Mason, 2010).

According to Shields (2010), human relationships are at the heart of these problems. Jealousies over the ownership of land or over the way resources are distributed by a national government are frequently cited as causes of what became known as "ethnic cleansing" in the late twentieth century. Examples are the Jos crises and Kaduna/Kataaf crises. People simply want their immediate neighbours to be people of their own groups and are, sadly, prepared to expel or kill anyone belonging to or supporting a rival group. The most recent in Nigeria is the incessant bombing by the group that says education is contrary to what their religion approves (The Boko Haram).

Ethnicity and the Bible

Ethnicity differences span the pages of the Bible. Ethnic divisions emerged in the chapters 10 and 11 of Genesis that record events following the flood. This shows the descendants of Noah dividing into three streams (Genesis 10:2-11:26), the Shemites, Hamites and Japhethites. The tower of Babel incident (Genesis 11:1-9) introduced two new factors in human relationship: language differentiation and geographical division. These two factors contributed greatly to the separate development and the differing culture of the various people groups. This is a pointer to the fact that ethnicity is not a strange thing in the Bible.

The Early Church

The early church too was multi-ethnic. In the early years of Christian era, a dispute arose that threatened to divide the Jerusalem church. We might think of it as a "social class issue," but it had "tribal or racial" biasis and had real destructive potentials. The church had instituted a ministry for the support of widows. Greek-speaking Jews were

complaining that their widows were being discriminated against, while the Aramaic-speaking Palestine widows were favoured (Acts6:1). Whether there was or was not actual discrimination was not recorded, but clearly, that was the perception of the minority group. Most often, in Camara's (1971) opinion, perception rather than reality is what influenced people. Seven helpers were thus appointed to oversee the matter of distributing alms to widows, so as to solve the problem and calm the tension.

When Peter was sent to Cornelius, a Roman officer, he was told that God does not show favoritism but accept men from every nation (Acts. 10:34-35). Later on, Peter was withdrawing from his relationship with the Gentile believers when the people of his own group was around (Galatians 2:12). This became a serious debate as to how should the Jews relate with gentiles once they are converted. Like it is in most nations, when conflict arises based on religious ground, it degenerates to ethnic feud and vice versa.

Causes of Ethnic Conflicts

There are several causes of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. Most of the time, ethnic and religious conflicts are inseparable. Some causes of conflicts are religious division, decline in economic growth, political change, spatial mobility among ethnic groups, and real or perceived injustice (Sithole, 1985).

Religious Divisions

Inter-religious as well as intra-religious conflicts have been observed to be at the nip of ethnic divisions in Nigeria today. Many times, as it has been observed by Dzurgba (2007), it is religious divisions and conflicts that either initiate or intensify ethnic divisions and conflicts rather than the reverse. This clearly shows that a church can use ethnic differences negatively just as ethnicity can employ Christian or any other religious identity. Making references to reports from some Nigerian newspapers, Dzurgba(2007) affirmed that Christian institutions have sometimes demonstrated to be a reflection and carrier of the divisive elements in the Nigerian social order, especially in the areas of ethnic divisions, conflicts and discrimination that characterize the Nigerian society. An example of this is the establishment of three tribal

associations in the Kaduna Diocese of the Anglican Church in Nigeria. The associations based on Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo ethnic groups were later banned and disbanded by the Diocesan Bishop, Rev. Titus Ogbonyomi, in 1991 (Dzurgba, 2007). According to the Bishop, these ethnic associations: the Northern Nigerian Igbo Anglican Association (Igbo), the Northern Action Committee (Hausa), and the Association of Concerned Members (Yoruba), carried their ethnic interests into the church.

Furthermore, it was reported on the feud that transpired between the Igbo and Yoruba factions of St. Savior's Anglican Church, Lagos, in 1990 (Vanguard, 1991). This feud arose over the refusal of the Archbishop, Rev. Abiodun Adetiloye, to license Rev. Canon S.K.E. Okeke as the minister of that congregation. Interpreted as an act of ethnic prejudice, the Igbo members sought for and obtained a court injunction which ordered the Archbishop to license Rev. Canon Okeke (Vanguard, 1991). This shows how a church can become an effective tool in fostering ethnic interest. Between Religions too, especially between Christians and Muslims, conflict has been very high. A good example is the Boko Haram bomblast battle with Christian community. The Osama Bin Ladin attack on the American as well as further attack on neigbouring nations which later spread to Nigeria is not an exception of such inter-religious conflicts. This position has been aptly expressed by Ali Mazrul when he said, and Dzurgba (2007) quotes: In contemporary Africa, tensions between religions are never purely religious, religious tensions are usually an aspect of either racial or ethnocultural conflicts between different tribes and communities.

Decline of Economic Growth

According to Sithole (1985), "If the rate of economic growth declines, ethnic identity becomes more salient. This is due to competition over scarce resources, or sometimes a shrinking pie." Lloyd (1974), also affirming this said:

> People do not fight simply because they are culturally different. The reason for that intense struggle which may lead to outbreak of violence lies elsewhere. It is to be found in most cases, in the competition for two forms of scarce resources – power and wealth: wealth being one

of the principal modes of reward in a society and the allocation of such rewards being one of the main elements of power. Tension within society is likely to be exacerbated under two conditions: firstly when new resources hitherto unallocated, are to be disbursed; and secondly, when the new pattern of distribution creates alterations in the existing ranking of individuals.

Lloyd goes on to note that in the poorer nations of the world, violent struggles are most of the time between groups defined not in terms of some precise political or economic interest, but of some primordial qualities, cultural, linguistic or religion. Inflation also worsens the situation. In Nigeria for example, in the Niger/Delta region, people have continued to demand more money from the oil deposits in their area. As Sithole(1985) notes, the problem is not that of the booming economy but that of even distribution; an experience of economic disparity among citizens, where the rich become richer and the poor become poorer. A good example is the experience of the indigenes versus the Fulani in Benue State. In some situations in Kenya for example, there are some ethnic groups that are wealthy, own businesses and occupy top governmental positions more than others (Kunhiyop, 2004). In the events of ethnic conflicts, rich people from these ethnic groups are targeted, just like Nigeria too have witnessed in recent time in the Niger/Delta region of Nigeria.

Political Change

According to Sithole (1985), change in political power is also a major cause of division. If political change becomes more likely, then the salience of ethnic identity increases. Increased ethnic salience is associated with periods of political change i.e. from the time that political change is first muted, it increases the probability of ethnic salience as each group anticipates incumbency into the emerging new structures of power. Many African states can testify that the desire for political control and occupation has raised ethnic consciousness. More often than not, Nigeria has witnessed failed political leadership at critical times. The leadership often becomes very corrupt by selfishly amassing wealth for itself or its ethnic group or class. In Nigeria, there has been a cry for allocation of power to the four major regions of

the country, made up of Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa and the Middle Belt groups (Kunhiyop, 2004). Other ethnic groups also request a role in the government. So, the cry for equal allocation goes far beyond the four major regions
mentioned.

Spatial Mobility Among Ethnic Groups

There is tension when ethnic groups from one area move and settle in areas already occupied by different groups. For example, when diverse ethnic groups settle in Nigerian urban centers, tensions may develop. One would have expected that as ethnic groups move into the cities, there would be melting of cultures and groups. However, rather than a melting of cultures, various ethnic groups begin to have their own tribal meetings, political pressure groups, interest clubs and so on. Kunhiyop(2004) also observed that there are areas of the town that have a higher concentration of certain ethnic groups than others. This situation does not encourage unity of the nation but emphasizes and highlights the differences of the groups. These differences Sithole(1985) defines as social stratification.

Social stratification is a social system of structure whereby position of power, status and prestige are assigned according to one's membership in a particular ethnic group. This is true in many African countries where two dominant ethnic groups control government at one time or the other and this often leads to resentment and violence. For instance, the Hausa-Fulani in Nigeria have occupied key governmental positions since independence. The Yorubas and the Igbos, the other two major ethnic groups, have had their share of governmental control. Other smaller groups in the nation are also trying hard to occupy important government position. Same is true with Kenya, Liberia, Congo, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda and many other Africa countries. It has been observed that ethnic struggle for power often result in violence when one group does not get what it desires (Kunhiyop, 2004).

Real or Perceived Injustice

Camara (1971) observes that severe injustice exists in many countries in the world, including Africa. In the underdeveloped countries,

these injustices affect millions of human being, reducing them to a sub-human condition. These sub-human conditions as Camara identifies them include lack of portable water, political oppression and degradation, unemployment, insecurity and what Camara(1971) called a "heritage of poverty" which does not only kill. It goes beyond killing, it leads to physical deformity (like it happened during the Biafran war) to psychological deformity, mental sub-normality (for which hunger is responsible), and to moral sub-normality (those who through a hidden situation of slavery are living without prospects and without hope), foundering in fatalism and reduced to a begging mentality. Camara rightly observes that these injustices are indeed a form of violence, that which is everywhere the basic violence- violence No.1.

Critique of Violence as a Means of Solving Conflict

The application of force and violence has been a major means of dealing with conflict in the world and Nigeria in particular. There are many instances of using violence to deal with conflicts, beginning from biblical times. There is an instance of Cain who murdered his brother because he could not reconcile himself to rejection from God nor repent of the cause of that rejection. Also, many other wars were recorded in the Bible. Even the reaction of Jesus' disciple (Peter) to the attack against Jesus, that made him to cut off one of the attackers' ear which earned Peter a rebuke. These and many other instances of violence were recorded in the Bible.

People give a variety of reason to justify the use of violence as a means of solving conflicts. First, there is the argument that violence is the most natural thing to do. "Hitting back at your enemy" as Kunhiyop (2004) puts it, is very human. In other words, it is easy to pay the enemy in the same coin. If the government uses violent means to change government and deal with citizens, the natural thing to do is to respond violently. Little wonder the frequent experiences of strike action by workers, students unrests, as against dialoguing with the government of the day. Another justification is that violence provides an immediate and clear response and is result oriented. Violence is a form of communication which is loud and clear and forces a response (when the people in government are human). And violence and force in the hands of the oppressed arguably gives immediate relief, while

non-violence, which is often equated with passive non-resistance and capitulation, is perceived to be simply inadequate, too gentle and too patient.

According to Everett Tidson (2003), around the world, oppressed people have had to endure long miserable years of severe torture and hardship. Sometimes, violence is seen as the only option left when dialogue and diplomacy have failed. In Nigeria, the voice of the people is often rejected, growth is stunted and many believe that the only course of action that remains open to them is violence. It is considered to be the only message that the oppressive government and leaders understand. The use of violence has the backing of philosophical and theological traditions. Anthony Hoekema (1986) comment on these traditions:

> The just war traditions rooted in the ethnical theories of Plato and Cicero and formulated within the Christian tradition by Augustine, Aquinas and the protestant Reformers, defend military force as a last resort against grave injustice. According to the view, when the innocent are threatened by an unjust aggressor and all other remedies have failed Jesus' command for sacrificial love may require us to use lethal force. What an irony.

While the justification for the use of violence may seem logical to some, the problems related to the use of violence as a legitimate means of responding to conflicts must also be pointed out. Kunhiyop (2004) identified some of these points: Firstly, violence begets violence. In other words, violence attracts violence and not peace. Secondly, quoting Walter Winks (2003), he says, "If we resist violence with violence we simply mirror its evil. We also become what we resist." Martin Luther Jr. (1981) also noted this and he said:

> Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness in a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descend spiral

destruction. The chain reaction of evil – hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars – must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.

Thirdly, violence produces more casualties and bloodshed than non-violent approaches, and fourthly, violence is counterproductive and even self-defeating. It does not solve conflicts but actually creates more problems than existed before (Kunhiyop, 2004). In view of these, there is need to look into what is supposed to be the Christian way of finding solution to ethnic conflict.

Way out of Ethnic Conflict

Here are some components that are needed in order to develop solution to ethnic conflicts. First, there is need for a development of a Christian concept of healing and reconciliation. Even when Jesus was unjustly arrested by the enemy with swords, and Peter had the opportunity to use his swords, Jesus said, "put your sword back unto its place (Mathew 26:52)." The story of the Good Samaritan has given what has become a universal moral principle in responding to victim of hatred and death. Jesus commended the caring and exemplary attitude of the "Good Samaritan." In Miller's(1996) thoughts, non-violent approach asks Christians to keep the door open to reconciliation and to keep the issue in view.

Second, there is need for development of an intensive ecclesiology. The church should be a place where all are welcome and cared for equally. This Thompson(2003) was agreeing with when he said:

An ethnic faithful to the Gospel must be universal in scope extending love to each and every person. Since all of humanity shares a common Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, we are one human family, brothers and sisters. Christian love cannot discriminate; it must embrace every person, near and far.

Third, there is need to allow Christian principles to guide the approach to politics. The church comprising of faithful Christians

should approach politics according to Christian principles, not according to ethnic or tribal interests. Opinions should not be shaped by ethnic prejudices or perceptions. Chrisitan politicians should be fair to all ethnic groups, irrespective of their political or religious ideologies.

Fourth, race must be irrelevant in church life. There is need for followers of Christ, whatever their race, tribe or color of skin, to accept each other fully as brothers and sisters in Christ. This does not mean, however, that differences of race, culture or language is ignored or that they have to be suppressed (Shields, 2004), but that each person is to be respected with the national and ethnic identity of his or her birth and of the culture and language that belong to that identity. In essence, it is important that warm fellowship with believers from other language groups in maintained and that no group is regarded as inferior to another.

Fifth, according to Shields(2004), all human beings need be given full respect. People who belong to a minority group in a community often feel under siege and are forced to defend themselves and their culture by blaming the adjacent majority for discriminating against them. In such a situation, the dominant majority group has a duty to care for the numerically weaker group, and a great responsibility to foster social justice and good inter-racial relations.

Sixth, according to Miller (1996), evangelism must target all peoples. The great commission commands that all nations be evangelized and then taught the command of Christ "Make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Thus pointing to it that evangelism must be free of racial prejudice and with equal zeal. Christians must reach out to people of every tribe and every tongue. Difference of tribe, race or language must not be allowed to reduce or eliminate the spiritual reality of respect for all people of all race. This Wink (2003) states so well that it cannot be stressed too much. Love for enemies, for our time has, become the litmus test of authentic Christian faith. Love of enemies is the recognition that the enemy too, is a child of God. This further opens the Christian sensitivity to it that it is only in loving the enemies that one is behaving like the heavenly father (Matthew 5:4-5).

Conclusion

This paper has been able to establish the universal reality of ethnicity, most especially as it affects Nigeria these one hundred years. The fact is that it is even grounded in the Bible, both in Old and New Testaments. The causes of ethnic conflict has been examined, and violence which is the most common reaction to ethnic conflicts has been critiqued. It is obvious that mankind, often have to face and handle animosities and conflicts arising because of differences of race, culture and religion. It is therefore needful that Christians as well as Muslims genuinely try to contribute to the creation of peaceful environment in their communities by not allowing their actions to be controlled by racial or religious prejudice, but give respect to human being.

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