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ETHNO-RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE: A VEHICLE FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA.

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Abstract

Ethnicity is a human concept that expresses the originality of every man. It is the first unwritten human identification before man invented any tribal peripheral mark. This originality is the beginning of human history with all its psychological and cultural common benefits. Theologically speaking, ethnicity is positively included in God's plan of salvation, that is, as instrument of grace and authentic cultural expression of Christian faith. Ethnicity, therefore, is part of a historical process through which God's purpose is being achieved. Furthermore, the mutable goods latent in ethnicity ought to lead us mutually to the divine source of goodness, love, collaboration, communion, communication and human solidarity rather than jealousy, torture, greed, vengeance, hatred, unhealthy rivalry, violence and the proclivity to victimize others. The purpose of this paper is to examine the issue of ethno-religious tolerance as a vehicle for peace and development in Nigeria. Using a historical method with primary and secondary sources consulted, the paper concluded that, it is not a crime and nobody's fault to be born into a racial or tribal or ethnic group, that a well ordered human society requires that men and women recognizes and observe their mutual rights and duties. This will naturally lead to mutual collaboration, peace and tolerance needed for sustainable development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Ethnocentrism, Religion, Tolerance, Nigeria.

Introduction

Generally, the primary concern of development is the improvement of the wellbeing of people. Raising living standards and improving education, health and equality of opportunity are also among the essential components of economic development goal. Ensuring political and civil rights is a broader development goal. Economic growth is an essential means for enhancing development, but in itself is a highly imperfect proxy for progress. Without ethno-religious tolerance, it is impossible to achieve sustainable development. There have been divergent views on what constitutes development. But increasingly, there appears to be a growing consensus that development is not guaranteed by simple infrastructural development or rise in a nation's GDP or other index using economic indices such as the Gross National Product, reduction in the level of inflation, reduction in budget deficit to mention just these, without a positive impact on the masses, amounts to an empty concept. Abudu (2003) noted that part of the problem of productive development in Africa is that even when such objective are claimed to have been fulfilled, they do not yield any improvement on the citizen's quality of life.

Gaining importance and currency is the concept of sustainable development. Sustainable development is defined as balancing of human needs with the protection of the natural environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present, but also in the indefinite future (Adewole, 2008). However, at the heart of the success of the efforts for sustainable development is ethno-religious tolerance. As a people, there must be commitment to the eradication or at least the decreasing of ethnic violence since her very existence is hinged on her ability to cultivate harmony among men and women. Moreover as a body, this does not allow much space for ethnic, religious or social discrimination since every member of the groups lives with, for and pursues the same general interests. The thesis of the paper is that everyone must learn from the Lord Himself who, through himself a Jew in all respect, clearly disassociated himself from a good deal of Jewish narrow tradition, at least as it had been understood and interpreted by the Jewish authorities (Mark. 2:23 – 28; Luke 7: 36-50). This paper examines ethno–religious tolerance as a Panacea for Peace and Development.

Conceptual Clarification

Ethnicity

The word ethnicity is a derivative of the Greek word, *ethnos*, and its cognate words *ethnikos,* and *ethane* both of which were used to refer in general to people; race, tribe, and nation of then derogatorily. In the Hebrew scripture, it is used to refer to the gentile world, which excludes the Jews and Christians. And in the New Testament *ethne* is used as a technical term for gentiles, which corresponds to the Hebrew word *gerim*, a stranger (Ez. 23:9; Gotan, 2006).

The term, therefore, is generally employed to denote that sense of belonging and identification with a particular people which engenders among other things a distinctive sense of identity, cultural renaissance (Kirby, 2000) and common consciousness (Ella, 1983) which inevitably give birth to a share sense of peoplehood (Nnoli, 1978). It is in this sense that Getui (1999) calls it a part and parcel of human existence invaluable and inevitable. Thus, it means that ethnicity is sometimes good; it is not evil and indeed natural and God given.

Ethnocentrism

While ethnicity, as a concept per se, is not negative, it can easily be abused and allowed to degenerate into ethnocentrism, which is negative and potentially dangerous. The problem with ethnocentrism is that it is an emotional attitude that one's own race, nation, or culture is superior to all others often referred to as tribalism, it makes one's culture absolute, and this is accompanied by a strong sense of superiority and a corresponding dislike or misunderstanding of other groups (Gotan, 2006).

Buhlman (1992) defines ethnocentrism as that attitude of the mind in which a group of human beings takes itself for the center of everything and judges and categorizes other people only with reference to themselves. It conditions us to see everything wrong with peoples of other tribes and race or ethnic group and everything right with ours (Badejo, 2002). Thus, the abuse of ethnicity breeds suspicion, bias, distrust and hatred. Everyone in the system not from one's ethnic group is a suspect. He always does not like "our people". Any perceived wrong is attributed to him/her. Such sentiments beep up sentiments and heat up the system with tension mounting and no meaningful progress recorded.

Religion

Scholars find it difficult to frame a definition that will include every aspect of religion, past and present. From any analysis of religion, as soon as people begin to discuss whatever is to them "religion" the tendency will be to end up invariably with a moral consciousness and commitment to whatever they find themselves believing. According to Umoh (2010) Religion is more than simply a belief in a transcendent deity or a means to an afterlife. It is rather, an orientation to the cosmos and our role in it. Thus, it is Religion that connects humans with a divine presence, with the human community and with the broader earth community, it links humans to the larger matrix of mystery with which life arises, unfolds and flourishes. More so, the term "Religion" also refers to faith in a divinely created order of the world, agreement with which is the means of salvation for community and thus for each individual who has a ole in that community. In this sense the term applies principally to such systems as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which involve faith in a creed, obedience to a moral code set down in sacred scriptures, and participation in common practices.

Tolerance

According to *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary (Revised Edition)* is the ability to be fair towards and accepting of other peoples' religious, political, beliefs and opinions. The New International Webster Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language (Encyclopedia Edition) shows tolerance as forbearance in judging the opinions, customs, or acts of others; freedom from bigotry or from racial or religious prejudice.

Ethnicity Worldwide

According to Gotan (2006) ethnicity has presented a worldwide, fearsome and destructive face with which we are very familiar. It is Arabs against Jews, Hutus against Tutsis, Irish against British, Basques against Spaniards, Kurds against Iranians, Croats against Serbs, Ukrainians against Russians, Tamil Nadir against Sri Lankans. Where religious differences fuel ethnic hostility the problem is doubly difficult. Examples leap to mind: Northern Ireland where the British Protestants face off against Irish Catholics; Pakistani Muslims against Indian Hindus; Croatian Catholics against Serbian Orthodox. In these cases religion adds fuel to existing ethnic rivalries.

In the African continent, Southern Nilotic tribes in the Sudan have fought freedom from the Arabic Muslim north almost four decades. Nigeria also has a predominantly Muslim North and a Christian South. The ethnic differences between north and south in the country are increasingly obvious. The religious differences follow cultural fault lines. Sierra Leone and Liberia split along tribal lines. Somalia tore itself to shreds along ancient clan lines. Eritrea seceded from Ethiopia. In the centre of the continent, tribal fear, hatred, and greed have pushed Rwanda, Burundi, and large sections of the Republic of the Congo over the brink to chaos. Ethnicity has reached such a pitch that when something dramatic happens in Africa; the thoughtful observer looks intuitively for underlying ethnic causes (Gotan, 2006).

Nigeria is not really a novice in the art of ethnic hatred and violence. We have our own ugly tales of massacres from clannish, ethic or sectional reasons. We lost nearly one million people in the 1967 – 1970 civil war. In the last couple of years, Nigeria have also lost tens of thousands of lives in the Ife/Modakeke crisis, the Ijaw/Urhobo crisis and lately the

Langtang/Wase crisis in the Plateau. There are still trouble spots in Nigeria where violence of unimaginable proportion can erupt any time, if each of us does not make a unilateral commitment against violence as a means of expressing our dissatisfaction with the social realities of the land and seeking greater justice and equity. There is today a potentially more complex situation in Nigeria, when one thinks of the strong religious sentiments that are threatening to make today's Nigeria a very volatile environment. Is it the Maitatsine crisis of Kano and Yola in 1981/1982, the Kafanchan religious riot of 1987, the Kano religious riot of 1991, the Kaudna religious ruthless nature and the horrible dimension of massacres witnessed in the places, show frightfully that Nigeria may be only a few steps away from the ultimate insanity of genocide. If urgent steps are not taken to demobilize the psyche of our religious bigots and ethnic warlords, and if we do not immediately put in placethe process of dialogue and collective bargaining that will ensure greater equity, justice and peaceful co-existence (Ehusani, 2002), development in Nigeria will be a thing of the past. This seems to be the reason why Adamu (2004) opines that people are blind to the beauty in our rainbow collection of tribes and tongues and we find mutual suspicions, hate and fear in other tongues and tribes.

Ethnicity and Religion

It is a tragedy that religion, which in its very essence should breed peace, togetherness, love and tranquility turns out to be the very opposite that breeds division and chaos. Down through the history of man, many wars and violence have been committed in the name of God, where religious differences fuel ethic hostility the problem is doubly difficult.

Ethnicity and Indigenous Religion

The indigenous religion is not missionary or evangelical in orientation. What this means is that it does not go out to win converts and to recruit followers. Indigenous religion is embedded in its ethnic enclave. It is the religion of the group and many others who are outside of the group do not belong. In the indigenous religion, no one outside the group can aspire to be a religious specialist in the religion. Indeed, most of the religious functionaries inherit their position from their fathers. The religious patterns are determined by the cultural patterns of the group.

With some dint of Ethnocentricism, adherents of indigenous religion tend to see their own form of religious practice as the best. The religious practitioners of the various indigenous religions tend to hide their expertise and talents from those of other groups and in terms of the healing ministry which they sometimes combine with traditional medicine; they refuse to reveal the powerful herbs to outsiders.However, depending on the power and popularity of the deity, people from other groups can go to consult (Helm, 1968).

Ethnicity and Islam

Perhaps what many people are most unaware is that the Muslims belong to various tribes or ethnic groups. And the Muslim religion is not homogenous in the sense that there are different sects. One of the sects is Sunni-Salafi whose doctrine is that the "temporal proximity to Prophet Mohammad is associated with the truest form of Islam" On the other hand, contrasting approaches to returning to this original way of practicing Islam has given rise to Salafi Jihadis that believe in the use of violence, even against other Muslims.

As Boko Haram continues its fight in northern Nigeria, Atta Barkindo examines the cultural and ethnic ties of the insurgency. He argues that the group's ideology is ultimately

religiously focused, but draws on deep ethnic and cultural roots to recruit members and sustain its momentum, Getui (1999).

Conflicting narratives have been applied to explain the rise and transformation of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. Particularly baffling is its ability to maintain the momentum of its Islamic insurgency for more than a decade. It is important to realize that Africans today still keenly feel the legacy of colonial interference by European countries. These memories are refreshed by neo-colonial alliances and loyalties, as countries try to adjust to the reality of nation-state and multi-party democracy. These adjustments have left in their wake accumulated and unaddressed grievances against individuals, modern institutions and state.

For thousands of years before colonialist policies were implemented in Africa, empires and chiefdoms rose and fell. The colonial boundaries established by Europeans, that have been perpetuated by modern African nation-states, bear little to no resemblance to pre-colonial empires, ethnic or cultural territories. In this context, we have seen different kinds of resistance across the African continent. Many reached back to pre-colonial shared identity markers as rallying points for post-colonial conflicts. North-eastern Nigeria for example, which is historically linked to the Kanem-Borno Empire but divided between the British and French, has seen the emergence of Boko Haram.

Boko Haram manipulated the historical narrative of the Kanem-Borno Empire in its fight against the Nigerian state.

Evidence suggests that Boko Haram has been very effective in using Islamic ideology to recruit, organise and sustain its battle against the Nigerian state. Boko Haram ideology is a spillover from the Sunni-Salafi doctrine that the "temporal proximity to Prophet Mohammad is associated with the truest form of Islam" On the other hand, contrasting approaches to return to this original way of practicing Islam has given rise to Salafi Jihadis that believe in the use of violence, even against other Muslims. Victims of this approach include Salafi purists and activists who denounce violence and advocate participating in political processes. Boko Haram appears to associate with the Sunni-Salafi Jihadis who call for the use of violence to ensure a return to the original form of Islam, and the rejection of everything deemed un-Islamic. Thus Boko Haram's ideological propaganda for recruitment and structural and strategic organization has hinged on the principle of rejecting western civilization – characterized by the modern Nigerian government – building a society based on Islamic values and structured around the immediate establishment of an Islamic state.

To accomplish this, Boko Haram also manipulated the memory and historical narrative of the Kanem-Borno Empire in its fight against the Nigerian state. Historically, the Kanem-Borno Empire conquered other kingdoms, controlled sub-Saharan trade routes and entered into diplomatic relations with kings from Cairo to Turkey. Furthermore, the consolidation of Islam as a state religion enabled the expansionist policy of the empire to succeed. Islamic scholars from Sudan and North Africa came to study at the then famous Birnin Gazargamo Islamic Centre. Birnin Gazargamo was the capital of the Kanem-Borno Empire from 1460 to 1809, situated 150 km west of Lake Chad in Yobe State, Nigeria.

The impressive remains of the Islamic Centre and some parts of the town are still visible to date. Outside the empire, a poet from Borno was renowned in the court of al-Mansur (1190 – 1214) in Seville, Spain, for his praise songs of the Sultan. Mai Dunama Dabalemi (1221 – 1259) built a Maliki madrasa-hostel called Ibn Rashiq in Cairo for Borno Pilgrims and students. Since more than 70 percent of the inhabitants of this empire were of the Kanem/Kanuri descent, by the time of the el-Kanem of Borno, Kanuri identity had permeated the social, religious and political fabric of the society.

The el-Kanemi dynasty, from which the current ruler of Borno is drawn, was the ruling family that emerged around 1751 after the Tuareg of Air revolted against the first rulers of the Kanem-Borno Empire, the Sayfawa. More importantly, the Kanuri and Islamic identities merge, so that to be Kanuri was synonymous with being Muslim. In their recruitment and organizational drive, leaders of Boko Haram alluded to the Islamic historical dominance of the Kanem-Borno Empire, arguing passionately about why Islam has to reclaim the land. According to former-leader Mohammad Yusuf, "Our land was an Islamic state before it (sic) was turned into a land of kafir (infidel), the current system is contrary to true Muslim beliefs." The current colonial –era political boundaries "that cut off Niger and Chad and amalgamated Borno with infidels" should not be recognized by true Muslims, claimed Yusuf.

The manipulation of the memory and historical narrative of the Kanem-Borno Empire and the use of Kanuri identity resonated with the communities Boko Haram preached to, enabling them to recruit thousands of young people. However, this very narrative also contributed to the factions that later emerged within the sect. In recent times, factions within Boko Haram have emerged fundamentally due to differences in religious ideology, conflict strategy and ethnic identity. Abu Qaqa who led one of such faction was captured in 2013. He revealed during interrogation that Shekau's selection of non-Kanuris for suicide missions – the refusal to agree to which resulted in the "death penalty" – had served to alienate Boko Haram members from other ethnic groups which led to the formation of Abu Qaqa's faction. It is fair to say that Islamic ideology, Kanuri identity and the memory and historical narrative of the Kanem-Borno Empire all played a part in the establishment and expansion of Boko Haram. However, it is difficult to separate the three aspects as independent factors in understanding the Boko Haram phenomenon.

Ultimately, while Boko Haram's inception may have been in the ashes of the Kanem-Borno Empire's heritage, the expansion of the sect was inspired by the radical Islamic ideology of its leaders Muhammad Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau. With the alleged death of Shekau, Boko Haram may be in a new phase of its history.

Ethnicity and Christianity

It is bad enough, atrocious and scandalous when there are religious rivalries between one religious faith and another, as in the case of the conflict between Muslims and Christians. The situation is appalling and out of this world when the disunity is between Christians and Christians. That is the reason it is often said that the disunity among Christians is a great scandal to their faith. This is evident in the way various denominations tear each other apart in a bit to make converts. On the pulpit, on radio and television broadcast, some Christian denominations preach hate and division in a bid to be different and exceptional. Even the proliferation of Churches is caused by the intervening variables of materialism, the desire to

have a Church for one's ethnic group, hatred and attendant conflicts. The current romance between church and state has also fueled religious bigotry and hate thereby blocking right thinking and creation of a consciousness of the common good. With the advent of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the law put in place that the state president of the Association must be an experienced clergy who has risen to the rank of a Bishop, even churches that had no Episcopal tradition are now inventing positions of Bishops and Archbishops and all that they need is a miter and crosier, declare themselves Bishop thereby becoming potential presidents of CAN. And for some to get there, they must lobby, sing praises of government, push others aside, and grab the object of their desire, notwithstanding their lack of expeirnece and competence. Such acts do not only block national consciousness, but eclipse the prophetic mission of the church and compromise the message of salvation meant for all.

Unfortunately, the primary Christian denomination, the Catholic Church, is not left untouched by the problem of ethnicity. It has equally become infested with the same ethnic virus. As Moti (1995) has put it, it has travelled beyond the borders of politics and economics and has now reached the church. It's dangerous impact and influence on the clergy is evident. Ethnicity has become the dominant criterion for the selection of leaders and candidates into the priesthood, it has introduced class interest among the clergy and the consequent exclusion and alienation of those who do not belong. The posting of some priests to some parishes and appointment of Bishops to some dioceses have been opposed by the people of such parishes and dioceses mainly on ethnic grounds. The clergy has boycotted their newly appointed bishop and in order cases missionary administrators have been appointed because of incurable ethnic rivalries among the diocesan clergy.

Problem of Ethnocentrism in the Socio-religious and Political Life among African Peoples

Ethnicity is real religious and political construct in Africa. Most of the problems and conflicts in the African continent are as a result of ethnic and religious factors.

Coming down to the African continent, southern Nilotic tribes in the Sudan have fought for freedom from the Arabic Muslim north almost four decades. Nigeria also has a predominantly Muslim north and a Christian south in the ethnic differences between north and south in the country are increasingly obvious. The religious differences follow cultural fault line. Sierra Leone and Liberia split along tribal lines. Somalia tore itself to shreds along ancient clan lines. Eritrea seceded from Ethiopia. In the centre of the continent, tribal fear, hatred, and greed have pushed Rwanda, Burundi, and large sections of the Republic of the Congo over the brink to chaos. Ethnicity has reached such a pitch that when something dramatic happens in Africa; the thoughtful observed looks intuitively for underlying ethnic causes.

And in Rwanda and Burundi, the Hutu and the Tutsi ethnic groups cannot see eye to eye because of endemic and long-standing conflicts. The problem between the Tutsi and Hutu has foundation in colonialism. Naturally, the Tutsi and the Hutu come from the same stock. The only difference is in their physical structure. The Tutsi are tall, with long beautiful faces, which appeared attractive to the colonial masters. The Hutu, on the other hand are short, stout, with rounded faces and not very beautiful. As a deliberate policy, the colonial government gave western education to the Tutsi and denied the Hutu the same type of education.

With western education, the Tutsi invariably became the elites of soceity, occupying important positions in the political, commercial and religious spheres of life, while the Hutu remained the servants of the Tutsi as fetchers of water and hewers of woods. With Western education and attendant enlightenment, the Tutsi was the first to rise against imperialism, demanded for their right to govern themselves and asked the colonial masters to leave their land for them. This was more than the colonial government could bear and so they had to do something about it.

For the fact that the Tutsi had bitten the finger that fed them, the colonial government instigated the Hutu to rise against the Tutsi. And this has been the genesis of what appears to be an endemic ethnic conflict that has culturally, politically, religiously and socially devastated the neighbouring countries, Rwanda and Burundi, which themselves were the same people, artificially divided as a deliberate colonial construct (James, 2001).

The Way Forward for Peace and Development in Nigeria

1. Anyone reading the Old Testament is made to be aware of how seriously God take ethnicity. God created a tribe with whom he made his covenant. Life in Egypt weakened the tribal nature of the Jews because there they mingled with the Egyptians who had their own ethnicity and religion (Ex. 12:38) Thus, as Christians we should live exemplary lives without prejudice with tribal sentiments.
2. In the period just before the coming of Jesus Christ, the Jews in Diaspora were busy evangelizing gentiles. They absorbed gentiles into their culture one by one, thus making them Jews. We as Christians should be opened to others and receptive to each other even those outside our ethnic affiliation.
3. The Gospel, while critical of ethnic pride and ethnic strife; does affirm culture. Its central theme is the incarnation, God taking on human "Flesh". The messiah was a Jew. Even though he was a Jew, Jesus refused to carry ethnocentric pride in all of his ministries, he affirmed people in none Jewish cultures and following his death the apostles continued that good work. As Christians, we should do away with our ethnocentric pride.
4. From the parable of the Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 and the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4:7-30; 39-42; Jesus broke the ethnic and religious-cultural barriers between the two ethnic group. Christians should follow suit so as to reach out to others and offer them the message of salvation.
5. It is imperative that every prophetic witness of the gospel, pressure for a fundamental change of the present witnesses of the gospel, pressure for a fundamental change of the present system. We must math words with actions.
6. As Christians, we must be opened to see the pain in other people's eyes, open to hear the cry in other people's voices, our hearts open to become involved in other people's hurts.
7. As Christians the interests of every citizen, according to Kwame Gekye, irrespective of ethno-cultural background are expected to be given equal consideration, a society in which merit, achievement and credentials, rather than cultural background, are considered the basis for the offer of a job or rank.
8. The church's social doctrine on the common good and the principle of subsidiarity must be more vigorously preached and promoted. Only that kind of society which promoted shared value as justice, fairness, equity, values of life can help people to

downplay ethnic feelings and begin to truly believe in a common destiny, land and nation.

Conclusion

It is not a crime and no body's fault to be born into a racial or tribal or ethnic group. The Divine Architect created all these different groups of people for his own purpose. All the various cultured groups are important before God and are relevant for the development of our society. None of them is superior to the other. Most of the conflicts in the world today have their cause in ethnocentrism, suppression of other cultures, cultural prejudice and biases in the society. Therefore, a well ordered human society requires that men and women recognizes and observe their mutual rights and duties. This will naturally lead to mutual collaboration, peace and tolerance needed for sustainable development in Nigeria.

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