



Theological Understanding of Paul's Vision of the Church and Tribalism in the African Church

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Abstract

The church that Paul envisions is one that transcends tribal boundaries. This paper argues that the church is a vision of a new community of God's people. The paper stresses that the traditional worldview of the believer is intensely real, and the community of Christians also brings a powerful set of new relationships, therefore, the need to understand our oneness in Christ, despite our various ethnic inclinations. The paper looks at tribalism in African churches and Paul's vision of the new community in Christ (church). The paper then examines the church and tribalism in the context of globalization and postmodernism. In conclusion, Peter Burke's central concepts in history and social theory of centers and peripheries, hegemony and resistance, family and kingship, communities and identifications were then used to analyze and integrate issues of tribalism in the African church.

Keywords: Church, tribalism, African church, Paul's vision, theology, social theory.

Introduction

The Church is the community of all true believers of all time. Four key purposes of the Church are quite obvious in the Scriptures, namely, for the worship of God (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 1:12; 5:16- 19), the edification of believers (Colossians 1:28; Ephesians 4:12- 13), to reach the world through evangelism and respond to social concerns in the world (Matt 28: 19; Acts 11:29; 2 Corinthians 8:4; 1 John 3:17), and lastly, She is a vision of a new community where "there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 5: 28). However, this fourth purpose of the Church – the vision of a new community of God's people – which is the focus of this paper, has not been realized in most African societies. This is because of the tribal and ethnic considerations, which often destroy the equality, brotherhood and love that found the divine vision of a new community, namely the Church. In other words, the African view of clan, tribe and community has blurred the Africans' concept of the divine community.

The clan and tribe are formidable structures in the traditional African society. The emphasis on "clan and tribe" could be easily seen in modern Africa especially in the constant allegations of



tribalism against public officers.¹ Close observation will show that in the modern time, this group-/tribal-spirit can be seen almost everywhere in Africa because it cuts across the religious, economic, political, and social divides. Invariably, this effect that the concept of tribe/clan is having on the view of Church is a problem that deserves consideration. Therefore, this paper seeks to state the problem of the research, the methodology, define and trace tribalism in African churches in dialogue with Paul's vision of what the Church should look like. Contemporary concepts like Globalization in opposition to postmodernism as they relate to Paul's view of the Church will also be explored. More so, Peter Burke's central concepts of centers and peripheries, hegemony and resistance, family and kingship, communities and identifications will be used to analyze and integrate the issues and draw conclusion.

Statement of the Problem

Dean S. Gilliland states that the convert (believer) lives in two very real worlds.² The problem is how is the believer to live under a new lordship while the authority of the natural/earthly ties is so pervasive? The traditional worldview of the believer is intensely real, and the community of Christians also brings a powerful set of new relationships. How do we balance between our being Africans – coming with our various ethnic diversities – and our being Christians sharing in a universal bodiliness at the same time?

Why are Christians today not counting their natural identities lost as Paul did in the Book of Philippians for the sake of knowing Christ? African theologians have been engaged and have convinced the intellectual community as having an identity, culture, religion, and so on; we have emphasized the particular but what of the universal? Do we understand our oneness in Christ, despite our various ethnic inclinations?

In a traditional society, the tribe is the authority that defines what is right or wrong. It is the custodian of the traditions, values and beliefs. It helps the education assimilation and incorporation of the newly born African children. It provides the African child with its religion, trade, and cosmic vision. In particular, it provides each individual with the worldview needed for the interpretation of reality. It also provides the individual with the ethnic pride or ethnocentrism that is necessary for the continuous survival of its African beliefs and values... the controlling power of the tribe works to engender goodwill and kinship among people of the same tribe, and help them in their quest for existential survival against opponents or conceived enemies. In this traditional society, the individual places himself at the dictates of the tribe or clan.

The two worlds are: the world of his natural birth, the flesh and the blood world of his parents and of family near and distant. With these attachments, keeping the laws of traditional life comes as naturally as breathing itself. But the converted person is now a changed person in this intimate world that, he will often discover, has not changed at all. How the new convert ought to relate to his biological and cultural environment is a serious problem. The second world with which the converted individual must interact is the Church, the body of Christ. This is the world of spiritual birth. It is a world of new relationships. The believer's new identity carries responsibilities and loyalties that are often at odds with those of the world of natural birth.

2. Dean S. Gilliland, *Pauline Theology and Mission Practice* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 122.



Methodology

The methodology to be used is that advocated by Yusufu Turaki³ in his manuscript “Christianity and African Traditional Religion” Volume One, which aims at using biblical teachings, worldview and Christian theology as tools for understanding, interpreting and transforming both the traditional and modern values in Africa. The challenge of both traditional and modern values must be addressed using biblical and Christian theology. This approach is different from that which uses traditional and modern values to understand, interpret and apply the Holy Scriptures. It is different from beholding the Bible and Christianity from eyes of African tradition and religion.

The study on the whole, enriches and deepens our understanding of traditional religion, worldview and biblical teachings on religion, culture and Western modernism. It also shows how to engage biblical teachings and Christian theology with the realities of Africa, whether traditional or modern. We shall address the issue of tribalism using biblical and Christian teaching of the Apostle Paul as regards to the Church. . Paul G. Hiebert proposes this methodology also, when he posits that, “In seminaries we need to begin by examining the worldview of the culture in which we ourselves live and how it shapes the way we think. We need to compare this against a biblical worldview in order to transform ours in the light of the gospel.”⁴

Tribalism in African Churches

The *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* defines tribalism as referring “... to the conception of a tribe as the central focus of all things and tribal identity above all else. It is also a belief which places ones tribe superior and others’ inferior.”⁵ P. Cornelius defines tribalism from a specifically social and ideological sense, as follows:

Tribalism is both a social phenomenon as well as an ideology. In its traditional sense it refers to a social system in which human society is divided into groups, independent of each other. Each of these groups has its own recognizable cultural norms and commonalities which form the basis of its identity as a tribe. This is manifest in the basic and instinctive sense that human beings are divided into “us” and “them”. These divisions are based on traits acquired at birth or upbringing, race, language, religion, clan or caste membership.⁶

³ Yusufu Turaki, *Christianity and African Traditional Religion* Volume 1, 95.

⁴ Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 320.

⁵ *The Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, 778.

⁶ P. Cornelius, “Tribalism,” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundation* (ed. John Corrie; Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 395.



Cornelius continues that "... in this regard tribalism is fundamentally opposed to universalism, with parochial ethnic identity as its goal."⁷ If carefully considered, tribalism as a concept is in direct contrast with the universalistic "tenets" of globalization. Therefore, while globalization does not respect boundaries, tribalism seeks to redraw national, religion, and ethnic boundaries. This, however, is a coin of two sides, a positive and a negative. Cornelius gives the positive and negative aspects of our tribal lineage when he asserts, "Positively, ethnicity celebrates diversity. It finds value and identity in being different. It is here that local cultures and values find their voice and are appreciated. Negatively, tribalism promotes a double standard of morality where those on the inside are more deserving of better treatment than those outside. Such an attitude breeds violence."⁸

Synonymous to tribalism is ethnocentrism, which Enoch Wan defines "as the belief that one's own people group or cultural ways are superior to others."⁹ To show how tribalism is rearing its ugly head in our churches, the case in point is what Wilbur O'Donovan in *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* paints as what was obtained in a Bible school where pastors, teachers, evangelists of the Gospel of Jesus Christ are trained when he states:

The married students at the Bible College had been given a large piece of land to grow grain and other crops for their families. Part of the land was especially good for growing rice in the rainy season. As expatriate staff member of the school had been assigned the oversight of the farming needs of the married students. He had appointed a student assistant to divide up the farm land each year. The student assistant had secured two student helpers to help him with the land division. Unknown to the expatriate staff member, all three students on the farming committee came from the same ethnic group. During the three year of the farming committee, some of the married students came to the staff member and complained about the division of the farm land. They asked him if he was aware that the best land for growing of rice had gradually over the three years been assigned to students from one particular ethnic group? Did he realize that the best farmland was now assigned to members of the same ethnic group as the members of the farming committee? The embarrassed staff member admitted he was unaware of the problem. He dismissed the existing farming committee and appointed a new committee of three men, each from a different ethnic group and a different part of the country. The land was re-divided

⁷ Cornelius, "Tribalism," in Corrie, *Dictionary of Mission Theology*, 395.

⁸ Cornelius, "Tribalism," in Corrie, *Dictionary of Mission Theology*, 396.

⁹ Enoch Wan, "Ethnocentrism" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Word Missions* (ed. A. Scott Moreau; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 324. He further asserts that an ethnocentric person generally has an attitude/opinion of prejudice (prejudging others as inferior). This internal orientation may be manifested in individual action or institutionalized policy towards others as in the case of anti- Semitism, apartheid, bigotry, fascism, and racism. See also L. Pachuau "Ethnicity/ Ethnocentrism" in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations* (ed. John Corrie; Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 112-114.



and impartially reassigned to the married students. Peace was restored.¹⁰

This presents a serious problem that troubles the Church. Seeing this among future leaders of the Church becomes more worrisome as shown by O'Donovan. These strong tribal ties have entered the Church with terrible consequences. Yusufu Turaki asserts that "ethnicity and tribalism are currently the most pervasive and powerful destructive forces in Africa."¹¹ Turaki further states that "In spite of the presence of Christianity, Rwanda and Burundi have been torn apart by ethnic/tribal tensions, violence and conflicts, while Somalia has been balkanized by the Somali clan warlord."¹² A popular slogan in Africa goes, "Blood is thicker than water." What it simply means is that ethnic, racial and tribal loyalty and affinity take precedence over what Christianity or Islam or modernity teaches. Turaki raises the following issues and asks the following questions which we believe are relevant as we discuss the implications of tribalism to the African Church: Can the water of baptism of Christianity be thicker than the blood of ethnicity/racism/tribalism? How deeply rooted is Biblical Christianity in the hearts of Africans? Are people in the Church representing their ethnic/tribal groups or the new messianic community? To what extent have Christian and Biblical values and principles transformed the heart of the African ethnicity/racism/tribalism?¹³

He concludes that "if Christianity and Biblical truths are not deeply rooted in the hearts of Africans, then their expressions of Christianity would reflect the dominating influence of African worldview, especially, of ethnocentrism and tribalism."¹⁴ Unfortunately, the commitment towards tribal interests dominated their commitment towards the Christian faith. To confirm Turaki's conclusion, in a community research the writer undertook in the course "Issues facing the Church of Christ in Nations, (COCIN), Local Church Council Kabong," one of the problems confronting the church mentioned by those interviewed was tribalism; they said:

That we have not seen ourselves as one, united in Christ, members of one body is another issue confronting the Church in LCC Kabong. Elections into various positions of leadership are done sometimes based on tribe, ethnic lineage, not as led by the Spirit. Members are curious to know where you are coming from so they can place you as their own or not. This is tearing the church apart and hinders the work of God among his people.¹⁵

¹⁰ Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992), 265-66.

¹¹ YusufuTuraki, *Tribal Gods of Africa: Ethnicity, Racism, Tribalism and the Gospel of Christ* (Jos: Crossroad Media Services, 1977), 3.

¹² Turaki, *Tribal Gods of Africa*, 3.

¹³ Turaki, *Tribal Gods of Africa*, 4.

¹⁴ Turaki, *Tribal Gods of Africa*, 4.

¹⁵ Caleb D. Dami, "Community Research" Term Paper, Course: Issues in Theological Studies. ECWA Theological Seminary, Jos. August-December, 2011.



The implication of tribalism as seen in the COCIN Church is not different from that of the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) as shown from the work of Barje S. Maigadi. He pointed out that despite the laudable claims of the Church, "...ECWA seems unable to manage its ethnic diversity biblically. For instance, elections of leaders in ECWA at all levels of its administrative structures are characterized by nepotism, ethnic, and regional bias or sentiments. As noted below, the Bible is considered irrelevant when it comes to appointment or election of leaders in ECWA."¹⁶ He labels this problem caused by ethnicity as "divisive ethnicity." He argues that "Divisive ethnicity manifests not only during elections of officers in ECWA but also in the areas of employment and the creation of administrative units."¹⁷

Paul's Vision of New Community in Christ (Church)

Wayne Grudem in his book *Systematic Theology* defines the Church as, "the community of all true believers for all times."¹⁸ This definition understands the Church to be made of all who are truly saved. Paul says, "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5: 25). Here the term "the Church" is used to apply to all those whom Christ died to redeem, all those who are saved by the death of Christ. "The church, as a new people of God who respond from every culture, is predicated on the fact that the gospel is for all, and reaches into every place."¹⁹

Paul's statements about the reality of the Christian community are some of the most profound in the writings of the New Testament. While no one is more realistic than Paul about the frailties of humankind and the flawed nature of human relationships, nevertheless he continually sets before churches a vision of what their life together ought to be.²⁰ A new way demands a new people who will walk that way. Paul's understanding of this new community of believers is a departure from anything the Jew's had ever known. The passing of the old age of Israel and the formation of a "new Israel" are what Paul believed and thought.²¹ His theology of the church declared that the true Israel of God is now a spiritual fellowship of all those who have faith in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3: 26-29). Only one condition of entry is required of all, whether circumcised or not, and that is stated simply in Galatians 3: 29: "If you belong to Christ, then you are the descendants of Abraham and will receive what God has promised."

Paul turns on the fact that lives are changed by the living Christ, creating communities of converted people who have broken through the barriers of race, class, and cultural prejudices to

¹⁶ Barje S. Maigadi, *Divisive Ethnicity in the Church in Africa* (Kaduna: Baraka Press, 2006), 8.

¹⁷ Maigadi, *Divisive Ethnicity*, 10.

¹⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Zondervan, 1994), 853.

¹⁹ Gilliland, *Pauline Theology*, 54.

²⁰ Gilliland, *Pauline Theology*, 187

²¹ Gilliland, *Pauline Theology*, 52.



form a body of Christ. The Church, therefore, is not a newly established institution; it is not an institution at all. It is a people, God's people, assembled, worshipping, and pledged in loyalty to Jesus Christ. With respect to relationships within, the Church can and must learn to understand her unity and diversity, her limits and universality from the fact that she is the body of Christ. It is in that sense accordingly that the concept body of Christ functions especially in Pauline paraenesis. Because all believers are one body in Christ, the dividedness is in conflict with its being, for Christ is not divided (1 Corinthians 1: 13).²² At the same time the universality and catholicity of the Church are not implied when Paul said that there is a neither male nor female, slave nor free in the Church. For this reason they all form one body, and within the body of Christ all discrimination is excluded; and on the other hand the boundary of the body of the Church is situated in this unity in Christ.

Paul in chapter two of the Book of Ephesians addresses the question of the stranger. The Gentiles who were considered as uncircumcised, without the law, strangers (aliens), without God and his covenants of promise, without Christ and outside the commonwealth of Israel have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:11-13). The dividing wall/barrier/enmity between Jews and Gentiles has been abolished and destroyed through the cross of Christ.²³ One of the central messages of the letter is that Christ has effected a reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles by incorporating them into one body through his work on the cross (Ephesians 2:16; 3:6). Christ has removed all of the obstacles that resulted in hostility and separation between the two groups (Ephesians 2:12-18). What matters now is the unity of the body of Christ, the Church, composed of Jews and Gentiles who have equal access to the Father.²⁴

In Christ's Law, ethnicity, racism and tribalism have been abolished and transformed into a new humanity where all ethnic groups, races and tribes become one and united in Christ. Their hostility, enmity, divisions, prejudices, discriminations, biases and stereotypes have been annulled by the Law of Christ. In Christ Jesus, no human being is to suffer discrimination or hostility from others, for they are all one and live in unity. Kinship or race or tribe has been transformed by the cross of Christ. For this reason, in Christ, ethnic groups, races and tribes are no longer strangers but brothers and sisters.²⁵ Nowhere else in the New Testament does the basic equality of all people before God come so vividly into focus as with Paul. All distinctions of sex and nationality and social status are swept away. Admittedly this happens only in Christ, but the fact that it happens points to an important element in Paul's basic conception of man. Such distinctions were powerful divisive factors in Paul's world, but he recognized them as unacceptable. In this he showed remarkable insight into the true nature of man, which has become blurred through human prejudices.²⁶

²² Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 393.

²³ Turaki, *Tribal God's of Africa*, 65.

²⁴ C. E. Arnold, "Ephesians, Letter to the" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne & Ralph P. Martin (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 247.

²⁵ Turaki, *Tribal Gods of Africa*, 65.

²⁶ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 1981), 177.



In the book *Paul Unbounded: Other Perspectives on the Apostle*, Charles H. Cosgrove in the article “Paul and Ethnicity: A Selective History of Interpretation” reports Badiou’s words on Paul’s view of the Church saying, “Paul engages the two master discourses of his day: the discourse of the Jewish particularism and the discourse of Greek universalism. Rejecting both, Paul affirms a new discourse: the equality of sons, the true universalism in which human beings become co-workers with God.”²⁷ Cosgrove states further that Badiou extended this interpretive framework to all the major topics in Paul: Jew and Greek, law and grace, Spirit and flesh, the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ, first and second Adam, and so forth. Paul affirms a universalism in which the subject is confronted ever anew by the resurrection event.²⁸ Nevertheless, Paul does not negate differences but rather takes them for granted and seeks to bring the process of truth into an ever-widening frontier of differences. In this mission, Paul cultivates “an indifference tolerant to differences.”²⁹ This means that dialectic has been worked out in which Paul both affirms and transcends differences, including ethnic difference.

In response to ethnocentrism, Paul does not regard Jews as morally superior to Gentiles just because the Jews possess and practice the law. Yet one thing that most Jews prized as central to their cultural identity – specifically, the way of life specified by the law – is no longer a defining mark of Paul’s own identity. For proof, one has only to look at Philippians 3:2- 11, where he says that he now counts his former Jewish identity in the law as “garbage” because of the superior value of knowing Christ.³⁰ A genuinely Christian community was meant to be as perfect a community as possible. It was meant to be profoundly unique – unique in concept, its oneness and solidarity, its source of life and strength, and in purpose. When applying anthropology to Christian community building, this uniqueness must remain in focus.³¹

The Church and Tribalism in the Context of Globalization and Postmodernism

Having defined tribalism and Paul’s vision of the Church, we shall now look at globalization and postmodernism as they relate to the former concepts. The rapidly spiraling changes in technology, finances and economic practices are deeply and broadly influencing our societies and making people very insecure. There are many predictions today of economic and social collapse and even of the end of the world (the final judgment). Many have condemned the entire process of globalization as a demonic endeavor leading people to the abyss. In the contrary, Bob Goudzward decries this position and has given three arguments for doing so, which we summarize here:

²⁷ Charles H. Cosgrove, “Paul and Ethnicity: A Selective History of Interpretation” in *Paul Unbounded: Other Perspectives on the Apostle* (ed. Mark D. Given; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 93.

²⁸ Cosgrove, “Paul and Ethnicity,” in Given, *Paul Unbounded*, 94.

²⁹ Cosgrove, “Paul and Ethnicity,” in Given, *Paul Unbounded*, 94.

³⁰ Cosgrove, “Paul and Ethnicity,” in Given, *Paul Unbounded* 96.

³¹ Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 377.



The first is that the Christian Church – the body of Christ – was, from the start, also meant to become a global community. While some of Jesus’ disciples wanted to restrict the Gospel message to the Jewish people, the Holy Spirit made it clear that all nations of the world should hear the Good News and participate in the new life. Long before the present process of technological and economic globalization began, God’s message of global Good News went forth and began its work. The idea of globalization, therefore, is not foreign to the Bible (Ephesians 1:10: “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ”). Thus, we might say that God’s economy entails its own style of globalization, oriented to the coming of his Messiah King. The question then is not whether Christians should be for or against globalization. Instead, the question is, what kind of globalization should we be supporting?

His second argument has to do with the “fullness” of life, as the word is used, for example, in the Psalms. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof “(Psalm 24:1, KJV). Scientific results, technological breakthroughs and worldwide economic developments represent dimensions or sector of creation’s fullness. In attempting to assess the times in which we live, let us, therefore, honor the Lord both for the intrinsic goodness of creation as well as for his guidance of human history. However critical we may be of human irresponsibility and disobedience in these sectors of society, we must never become doomsayers about technology as such, or about government as such, or about markets as such. We may not demonize what God has given us. All these gifts have their own intrinsic calling and dignity before the Lord.

The author states a third important reason why globalization should not be demonized by asserting that Christians must be careful to use selective normative criteria to make judgments about such complex developments. Some economic changes might be positive while certain political changes are negative, and vice versa. We must not confound categories or make sweeping judgments of approval or disapproval when we should be making more precise and distinct judgments. At the same time, we may not isolate different aspects of life as if they have a complete life of their own apart from the rest of life under God’s authority. The Reformation stressed the principle that no part of life may be understood as standing outside the directives and commandments of the living God, for he is not only Sovereign, he is also the lawgiver and life giver. Economic life is meant to deliver the fruits of human labor in a way that satisfies the needs of the people of this earth; and so, it presupposes care or trusteeship of everything, including everyone entrusted to our responsibility.³²

Concerning postmodernism, Albert E. Greene states that “the troubles that have devastated Rwanda in Africa and the former Czechoslovakia in central Europe illustrate the return of tribalism characteristic of postmodernism.”³³ He continues:

Community, which is denied by postmodernism as an unreality, is found in its true form in the church of Jesus Christ, where his disciples

³² Bob Goudzward, *Globalization and the kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2001), 25.

³³ Albert E. Greene, *Reclaiming the Future of Christian Education: A Transforming Vision* (Colorado: Association of Christian Schools International, 1998), 25.



are joined to Him and to one another by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The multicultural perspective of postmodernism results only in tribalism and in the contradiction of any commonality among the various peoples of the race. Christianity, on the other hand celebrates the union of people from every tribe and tongue and nation, a union created by the common indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the infusion of Christ's love.³⁴

Postmodernism denies the possibility of a common humanity and advocates, instead a new kind of tribalism. Therefore, while globalization does not respect boundaries, tribalism seeks to redraw national, religion, and ethnic boundaries. The Church is like globalization in its reaching out to the whole world, while tribalism seems to align with postmodernism as we have shown in this section.

Central Concepts in History and Social Theory that help to Analyze and Integrate Issues of Tribalism in the Church

The first central concept proposed by Peter Burke that we want to analyze and integrate in the issue of tribalism in the Church is "communities and identities" for the African. As John Mbiti says, "I am because we are."³⁵ Without the community there is no individual. S/he exists because there is a community, and they see, hear, understand, and interpret the world through their community. Her/his community is paramount to her/his identity. Therefore, their allegiances are to their tribe and ancestor.

The concept of community has come to play an increasingly important part in historical writing. Peter Burke states that, collective identity, like ethnicity, is a concept which has become increasingly prominent in the last generation, in the academic world as well as in politics. On the other hand, the question of the conditions under which national identities were formed, especially in the nineteenth century, remains controversial. Similar problems are posed by the revival or re-emergence on to the political scene of other collective identities: regional (in the north of Italy, for instance, or south of France), religious (in India, Bosnia or Northern Ireland) and "ethnic" (in Africa, or the Americas).³⁶ Burke has rightly identified our problem as Africans as being ethnic.

He further asserts that the definition of ethnicity is controversial, but Max Weber's characterization of ethnic groups remains useful: "human groups (other than kinship groups) which cherish a belief in their common origins of such a kind that it provides a basis for the creation of a community. One important clue to the understanding of these revivals has been emphasized by three anthropologists: Pierre Bourdieu, Arjun Appadurai and Anton Blok. Burke reports that Bourdieu argued that "social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, which represents the greatest threat," while Appadurai links ethnic violence to "uncertainty about categories." For his part, Blok, using Freud's concept of "the narcissism of minor differences" to

³⁴ Greene, *Reclaiming the Future of Christian Education*, 41.

³⁵ John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 105.

³⁶ Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory* 2nd Edition (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2005), 58.



analyze recent events in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Rwanda and Sri Lanka, concludes that violence is often sparked by fear of “the imminent loss of differences.”³⁷

The way in which the identity of one group is defined against, or by contrast to, others – Protestants against Catholics, males against females, northerners against southerners, and so on – has been illuminated in a remarkable work of historical anthropology which studies the relationship between African and African American. In Brazil in the late nineteenth century, some freed slaves of West African descent decided to return to Africa – to Lagos for an example – a decision which suggests that they considered themselves as Africans. On their arrival, however, they found themselves regarded by the local community as outsiders, as Brazilians. This example reminds us of the importance of studying both individual and collective identity from two angles, from inside and from outside. It cannot be assumed that others see us in the same way as we see ourselves.³⁸

What Bourdieu argued for in terms of *social identity*, which lies in difference, is what tribalism thrives on; and in application, it is what Africans cherish closely, which serves as a form of protection. In our churches today, members will rather go for their tribal meetings on Sunday than to come for Sunday evening services, because their interest is protected there, which is their source of pride and distinction. But in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, and male nor female. This lack of division between male and female is what the Africans also struggle with.

The second central concept to be considered as regards to church and tribalism is *centers and peripheries*. One of the problems raised by the use of the concepts of center and periphery is that of the relationship between the two: is it complementary or conflicting? Church and tribe should be complementary rather than in conflict. Church should be the center while the tribe is periphery. Unfortunately, however, the commitment towards the tribal interests dominates our commitment towards the Christian faith, the Church. Consequently, the Church is divided on tribal and ethnic grounds. It is to this that Michael asserts that “there is a miniature Rwanda in almost every church across Africa with people committed to tribal sentiments in the church rather than to the binding vision of a new community in Christ.”³⁹ The understanding of the Church is blurred because often it is tribal considerations that dominate and control the decisions of the Church. He continues that “the church has become a tribal organization with many tribal churches springing up whose commitment to Christ is often questionable because they perpetuate their ethnic agendas.”⁴⁰

The third is *family and kinship*. The most obvious example of an institution composed of a set of mutually dependent and complementary roles is surely the family. In Africa the distinction between nuclear and extended family is not strong; everyone in the clan is seen as a brother and sister. Africans live as a community; however the problem arises in dealing with others outside the clan. But this is not how the Church should be approached. The Church as a people of God, who

³⁷ Burke, *History and Social Theory*, 59.

³⁸ Burke, *History and social Theory*, 60.

³⁹ Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions*, 313.

⁴⁰ Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions*, 313.



respond from every culture, is predicated on the fact that the gospel is for all, and reaches into every place. Paul turns on the fact that lives are changed by the living Christ, creating communities of converted people who have broken through the barriers of race, class, and cultural prejudices to form the body of Christ, the family of God, which comprises all families.

The fourth central concept and the last we shall consider is the concept of *hegemony and resistance*, one of the problems raised by the use of the paired concepts of center and periphery as we have seen, is that of the relationship between the two, which is either complementary or conflicting. Burke⁴¹ introduces two more concepts into the discussion, “symbolic violence” and “negotiation.” “Symbolic violence,” another concept launched by Pierre Bourdieu, refers to the imposition of the culture of the ruling class on dominated groups, and especially to the process by which these dominated groups are forced to recognize the ruling culture as legitimate and their own culture as illegitimate. The challenges Western missionaries faced in Christianizing Africa stems largely on their approaches to Africans and their culture, religion and society. Christianity in modern Africa is facing all kinds of crises and it seems unable to cope because certain African features were not utilized in establishing Christianity in African soil. Not everything was bad in African culture, religion and institutions. The good ones could have been adapted and modified as foundation pillars for social grounding of Christianity in Africa. Missionary Christianity has been criticized for throwing away the good aspects of African culture, religion and institutions. Christianity has to engage Africa in terms of its culture, religion and institutions if it is to be relevant and have impact in modern Africa. This is the second part of “negotiation,” originally used by sociologists in a literal sense to analyze “plea bargaining” by lawyers and their clients; it has been adapted to discuss the silent process of give-and-take between elites and subordinates.

The process by which saints were canonized in the counter-Reformation church was the result of such a process of negotiation between the periphery, in other words, the region in which the cult of a local hero grew up, and the center, Rome, where the ecclesiastical lawyers decided whether to accept or reject it. In the mission field it has been argued that the indigenous populations, in the nineteenth-century Madagascar, for instance, were often able to influence the process of evangelization. They were active agents, not just passive receivers of a new message. In other words, the form of Christianity that they adopted was the outcome of a process of negotiation. Resistance may take the defensive form of outward conformity plus concealment. This seems to be the situation of those who engage in tribalism in the Church of Jesus Christ. They conform outwardly, but inwardly they are still giving their allegiance to their tribes above the family of God, the Church.

Conclusion

The Bible is not against our ethnicity in its positive sense, but it is against divisive ethnicity which is equated to tribalism. Creation presumes diversity and differences. The thesis of this paper has been that the African Church must rediscover its relevance in challenging the tribal sentiments that have now entered into the African Church. We must realize that the Church is both local and global; the “us” and “them” spirit must be discouraged. Our tribes must be the periphery, while the Church the center. In Christ Jesus, no human being is to suffer discrimination or hostility from

⁴¹ Burke, *History and Social history*, 90.



others, for they are all one and live in unity. Kingship or race or tribe has been transformed by the cross of Christ. For this reason, in Christ, ethnic groups, races and tribes are no longer strangers but brothers and sisters.

In order to give undivided loyalty to Christ, a person must understand that in becoming a Christian, he or she becomes part of an eternal community of brothers and sisters from every culture in this world. The extended family of God will live together in heaven, worshipping the Lamb of God (Revelation 7:9-10).

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