



# A Critical Analysis of the Roots, Faces and Features of “Tribalism” in Africa

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.103.209>

## Abstract

This article is an in-depth study of the roots, faces, and features of tribalism as it thrives in recent African history and experience during and after colonialism and Western missionary activities, as well as the contemporary state of African societies in general and in Nigeria in particular. The issue of ‘tribe’, ethnicity, and race are fundamental theological concerns in Africa. The paper significantly identifies and defines the roots, faces and features of tribalism in Africa. The four African primordial social factors of ethnicity, land, religion and culture that are foundational to the worldview, ethnicity and tribalism as built by African ancestors are identified and discussed. The African concept of kinship rooted in blood and the analysis of the effects of tribalism in the social, political, religious and economic spheres of contemporary Africa is highlighted here. The goal of this article is to be able to state concisely and clearly what are the roots, faces and features of tribalism in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. The methodology used in this study was the historical research method in which various relevant sources in literature were interrogated.

**Keywords:** Heritages, faces, features, tribalism, Africa, indigenous knowledge.

## Introduction

Tribalism has not been well defined in its roots, faces and a feature in Africa. The goal of this article is therefore to state concisely and clearly the roots, faces and features of tribalism in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. The paper looks at the notions of ‘tribe’ and ‘tribalism’, the debate on whether it is appropriate to use the term tribalism with regard to Africa, the African kinship values, the impact of European colonial presence, the Christian missionaries, and the analysis of tribalism in African society.

## Concept clarification

### Tribe

Waruta (1992:120) has defined the word ‘tribe’ as follows: “A tribe is a social organization or division comprising several local villages, bands, or lineages or other groups sharing a common ancestry, language, culture, and name.” Appiah (1999:703) on his part says a “tribe” is thought of as a group of people who are descended from common ancestors and ruled by a heredity ‘chief’, who shares a single culture (including, in particular, language and religion), in a well-defined geographical region”. Turnbull (1964:23) in his article *Tribalism and Social Evolution in Africa* defines the tribe thus: “It is a community bound together in common allegiance to a common ancestor in whom members believe.”



The issue of “tribe”, ethnicity, and race are fundamental theological concerns in Africa, as LeMarquard (2011:495) shows in *African Readings of Paul*, when he asserts “... In a postcolonial situation in which pain of oppression, slavery, and exploitation are still very fresh, issues of “tribe”, ethnicity, and race are fundamental theological concerns.” He continues that, “The questions they pose are not new for the Christian Church. It might be argued that these issues vexed the apostle Paul more than any other: he spoke of how being in Christ relativizes gender (‘no longer male and female’) and class (‘no longer slave of free’), but he spent most of his time arguing that in Christ there was no longer ‘Jew or Greek’ (Galatians 3:23).”

### **Tribalism**

Nwaigbo (2005:137-139) gives the extent and origin of tribalism as seen in African society as follows:

Tribalism is a negative term that to be an African is to be given over to tribalism. It comes with the family and is passed on from generation to generation. Tribalism has been perceived to be the basic unifying concept of an analysis of an African’s life. This view has been popularized by anthropologists, hence tribalism has been internalized in the African society to such an extent that even African’s themselves now admit the dynamics of their society as being dominated by the phenomenon of tribe/tribalism. The term tribalism connotes tribal consciousness, character and allegiance particularly to one’s tribe or a social group.

### **Tribalism Today**

Tribalism is an old issue, and Nwaigbo (2005:140) believes it is encountered in the Bible, and in various traditional and modern cultures and societies in the history of humanity. Some biblical examples of its usage are inter alia stated below:

Genesis 49:28 “All these [are] the twelve tribes of Israel: and this [is it] that their father spake unto them, and blessed them; every one according to his blessing he blessed them”.

Exodus 24:4 “And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD, and rose up early in the morning, and builded an altar under the hill, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel”.

Exodus 39:14 “And the stones [were] according to the names of the children of Israel, twelve, according to their names, [like] the engravings of a signet, everyone with his name, according to the twelve tribes”.

Some of the assumptions that framed the phenomenon of tribalism in the past have not only changed but the context in which tribalism arises in contemporary Africa and the framework within which it is perceived, have acquired different facets. In the past, the rationalization of tribalism was based on ethnic contrasts. The issue of tribalism today has not only been influenced by ethnic diversities of the people of Africa but unfortunately, the problem has penetrated the Church’s mission, government circles, and villages; on the African continent these have sparked off ill-feelings and negative attitudes among tribal communities and individuals in the Church and society.

### **The use of the term ‘Tribalism’ with regard to Africa**

There is an ongoing debate on the use of the term “tribalism.” Some scholars do not see it as a proper term to be used on African’s because it is derogatory and the creation of the Colonial master, while others see no problem using it. Appiah (1999:703) is of the former opinion and he



argues that, first, tribalism is a concept that belongs to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and that is still used to describe some African societies. Second, even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the concept of tribe oversimplified the nature of the African pluralist identities, such as village community, the clan and the lineage. A tribe was, in fact, the gathering of more clans and sub-clans, a clan being a family tree of male descendants. Third, he argues that today's usage of the term does not correspond to what African identities are. During the colonial period, urbanization led to consequent migrations. Civil wars, too, contributed to such phenomena, thus mixing former tribal identities with others. Appiah (1999) asserts therefore, that, "The concept of tribe in modern usage is wrong, because it belongs to 19<sup>th</sup> century colonialism, it does not refer to a homogeneous identity, and because today's African identities do not always share common ancestors and well-defined geographical regions."

However, Turnbull (1964:23) does not agree with Appiah, for he asserts that, "This is neither a popular nor a fashionable idea, but the desire to divorce tribalism from the modern, contemporary Africa with which we have to deal is both unrealistic and misconceived." The fact that tribalism still exists for him can scarcely be denied, though there are many who would have it so. Ukiwo (2005:4) consistently uses the term ethnicity in his work for what analysts have called tribalism or communalism. Therefore his position is that ethnicity is synonymous with tribalism.

Ekeh (1990:660) argues that the terms tribe and tribalism should be used and not discarded, because a problem is created: "With the abandonment of the use of tribe and tribalism has emerged considerable confusion in various disciplines concerned with the intellectual discernment of African social realities in connection with their capacity to probe with persistence issues troubling Africa for decades and their ability to analyze new conceptions of tribalism." He therefore listed three aspects of the problem that will be encountered as follows: First, in discarding the terms tribe and tribalism, social anthropology has created a gap in African studies by rendering years of scholarship concerned with analysis of kinship as virtually irrelevant. Clearly such organized focus on kinship behaviors as social anthropology managed for up to five decades ought to be of continuing benefit and current relevance for understanding modern social behaviors in Africa.

Second, while it now appears that the term "ethnic group" has replaced the disparaged concept of "tribe" in African scholarship, there is no clear statement about the relationship between the two- whether, especially, there has been transition from one to the other and whether there is persistent relevance in the previous analysis of tribes for our understanding of ethnic groups in modern Africa. (Ekeh, 1990:660).

Third, while tribalism seems now abandoned in academic scholarship in African studies- with some proposing and indeed using "ethnicity" as its replacement- paradoxically, the use of the term tribalism is enjoying unprecedented boom not only in everyday interactions among ordinary Africans but more especially among high-ranking Africans in government and university institutions.(Ekeh, 1990:660). Having looked at the debates on the appropriateness of the use of the term tribalism and the various positions, we I take the position that it be used. This informed the use of the term in the title of this article.so that the evil to which it has caused and continues to cause in the Church and society at large such as for example in the Church of Christ in Nations, can be rectified.

### **African Kinship Values**

Turaki (2001:68) asserts that the basic organizing principle of traditional African society is primarily the kinship system. African traditional communities/societies are organized around this



basic social unit: kinship or lineage. This social fact is very important in understanding African morality and ethics and its manifestation of ethnicity and tribalism. Ekeh (1990) has characterized kinship ideology as constituting a body of ideas and practices that have enthroned kinship as a governing principle of private and public behaviors of individuals whose identity thus rests on their kinship associations. Because such kinship ideology defined the individual's relationships to the colonial state, the usual atrophy of kinship in the face of the increasing complexity of socioeconomic development evident in world history elsewhere, has not occurred in Africa. On the contrary, kinship in various manifestations constitutes a major problem for the development of composite national societies and the functioning of national states.

Ekeh (1990) posits that tribalism is not an academic construct suggested or invented by any social science analyst. On the contrary, and to the consternation of African scholars who would prefer to forgo the use of the term, tribalism emerged into wide use in postcolonial Africa as a term apparently borrowed from the vocabulary of social anthropology, and then inverted into a despised meaning. Also in wide use is the associated term 'tribalist', that is, a person adjudged guilty of the practice of tribalism. Both terms have rich connotations in modern Africa, and their contents are suggestive of a teleological meaning of appropriate rules of coexistence in polyglot and multiethnic communities. Ekeh (1990).

### **Kinship Values Rooted in Blood**

The law of kinship derives from communalism, the belief that protection, meaning, identity and status are rooted in kinship community or blood-group. Kinship values rooted in blood are important in Africa and are in fact the root of tribalism. Turaki (2012:163) alludes to this fact when he states:

Africans hold blood-relationship as something sacred. Kinship values are rooted in blood-relationship that develops very strong affinity, obligations and loyalties for the kinship community. The negative values of these are reflected in tribalism or ethnicity or racism. The adverse consequences of these are reflected in communal and social sins as regards the treatment of strangers and outsiders, and spiritual idolatry as regards maintaining loyalty to the ancestors, spirits, divinities and their worship.

These kinship values create division between insiders and outsiders:

The sphere of influence of moral kinship is bounded by a defined kinship community, a territory, a group, or a tribe, or a race. Self-interest, kinship-interest, group-interest, territorial-interest, tribal-interest or racial-interest takes precedence over all other social and ethical considerations. Those who are not part of the kinship community or the blood group are all strangers or outsiders. Outsiders cannot expect to be treated in accordance with the same moral and ethical principles that prevail within the kinship community. In all matters, the moral kinship community takes precedence over outsiders and strangers, who do not belong (Turaki, 2012:168)

The law of kinship defines, usually in unequivocal terms those who are "insiders" and "outsiders". Outsiders and strangers do not belong, for this reason, they are not entitled to (1) equal treatment; (2) ownership; (3) affinity, loyalty and obligations; (4) community rights and protection; (5) they



are not a people, they are outside of the commonwealth, they are strangers. Kinship systems, families, clans, ethnic groups and tribes or races do however exhibit these characteristics (Turaki, 2012:61).

Shack (1979:38) is of the opinion that in the vast majority of African societies, and virtually all simple societies with meagre subsistence economies, kinship norms inform the nature of political structure. Not only that, rights of citizenship are almost invariably based upon land ownership, which itself has a kinship referent. In such societies, ritual is seen to define more clearly the character of social relations and often brings resolution to conflict. The emphasis on blood ties to the ancestors has made full incorporation in the host community difficult; but there have always been mechanisms for the assimilation of strangers who chose to become members.

Indeed, for Ekeh (1990:683) under colonialism the notion of kinship was considerably expanded into the construction of ethnic groups and kinship ideology, which thus became central elements of any meaningful definition of the public realm. This persistence of kinship in Africa must be seen as a product of the craft of colonial rule, which by and large, built its methods of governance on the dominance of kinship in pre-colonial Africa.

### **The Natural History of Kinship in Africa**

Ekeh (1990:672-673) is of the view that the scope and persistence of kinship in Africa have their beginnings in the exigencies and imperatives of the slave trade. Under colonialism, kinship registered its revised presence in the form of kinship systems studied by social anthropologists. In colonial and post-colonial Africa, (1890-1963), kinship has been transformed into ethnic groups whose members are bound together by new moral definitions. In this postcolonial representation, kinship behaviors have given rise to the concept called tribalism.

The slave trade (from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE) led to another form of abnormal development in Africa. By encouraging the growth of kinship institutions, the slave trade led to the fragmentation of moral perspectives, with the segmented and nucleated kinship entities serving as sanctuaries for moral practices. Rather than develop an inclusive world view defining common morality under the aegis of an inclusive deity, African states of the slave-trade era presided over societies with differentiated moral definitions in many instances celebrated in the sacrament of ancestral worship. The Nigerian historian Peter Ekeh concurs when he argues that the spread and reinforcement of kinship ties and manipulations- what we think of today as “tribalism”- became a dominant mode of political life in Africa in the major slaving years, in the eighteenth century or earlier, when the existing states either failed to defend citizens from violence and enslavement or collaborated with the slave traders.

Fos (1971:129) while writing on kinship asserts that, “Kinship withers away as society passes from primitive to complex. Familial etiquette gives way to class relationship.” He seems to suggest that kinship is still strong in societies that are primitive. Morton Fried on his part defines the state as the conquest of kinship: “A state is better viewed as the complex of institutions by means of which the power of the society is organized on a basis superior to kinship.” As another reason why kinship persists according to Crusemann (2002:63) is the fact that the state is young or weak: “The kinship connections remain, wherever a state is young or weak, the basic framework of order.” Plotnicov (1970:66-67) has contrasted the effect of kinship in the West and in Africa and comes to this conclusion, “Within the process of modernization in the West, the features of intensive urbanization, extensive migration, and geographical and social mobility have been associated with a concomitant decline in the importance of wide kinship ties... by contrast, in





Africa strong and extensive kinship ties... have altered little. Ethnic associations have not only persisted, in many cases they have increased in importance in the new towns and cities.”

The reason why kinship ties persist according to Ekeh (1990:124) is the fact that, “In Africa, the absence of strong and reliable state institutions has led to the strengthening of kinship ties. The political sociology of Africa is distinct in this respect because, rather than disappearing, kinship has had to be integrated into the existence of the modern African state. This uniqueness translates very boldly into the everyday language of politics and society in Africa.” This is very true of Nigeria as seen in the political and economic spheres of life. The quota and character commissions have not deterred selfishness and tribalism in thriving.

### **Impact of European Colonial Presence**

A seminal work on Ethnic Politics in Nigeria has been conducted by Nnoli (1978:22) in which he views ethnic rivalry as a product of the colonial contact situation. Ethnicity may be seen as the latter-day version of the concept of tribalism in Africa. The term “tribalism” has its roots in the colonial experience and was used pejoratively to denigrate Africans and things African. The use of this term lacked intellectual purpose and scientific leaning. Its main purpose was to represent African people in the colonial myth as primitive and barbaric, needing the “redeeming” influence of colonial experience to embrace civilization. He was inspired by the Marxian class perspective of the dependency movement and asserts further that ethnicity was developed from colonialism. The provenance of ethnicity according to Nnoli (1978:26) was the colonial urban setting where:

The exploited Africans soon experienced the colonizer’s racial prejudice and discrimination in the fields of jobs, remunerations, housing, sports, and even churches and burial grounds. Having been uprooted from the pre-colonial setting which had valid meaning for him, in which history had produced salutary patterns of interactions with others, the African migrant found the door to the colonizer’s glorified world securely barred to him. The resultant anomie and alienation affected his socio-economic and political activities. Even in interactions with his fellow Africans, he experienced tension, anxiety, and insecurity. Disoriented, subjugated and humiliated by the colonizer he directed his aggressive impulses against other colonized ‘natives’ with whom he competed on the basis of equality. Ethnic group membership was useful for this competition.

He defines ethnicity as a social phenomenon that is associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups. This includes the culture of people in a specific geographic region, including their language usage, heritage, traditions, religion and general customs. Ethnic groups, from his perspective, are social formations distinguished by the communal nature of their boundaries. Such groups may be distinct in terms of language, culture, or both. According to him, language has clearly been the most crucial dividing factor in Africa.

Mafaje (1975:253-262) in the article *The Ideology of Tribalism* sees tribalism “... as an anachronistic misnomer which impedes cross-cultural analysis by drawing individuals and highly suspect distinctions between Africans and other people. Therefore, it over-simplifies and obscures the very nature of economic and power consolidation among Africans and between Africans and others.” Tribalism, as it were, referred to distinct socio-cultural groups in pre-independent Africa, but also implied that these groups were living a brutish, short, nasty and barbarous existence reminiscent of the dark ages. In this light, Magubane’s assertion that because tribalism is rooted



in human nature and primordial identities, African societies will always be wrecked by irremediable, internal conflicts becomes suspect (1975:529-554).

As to the use of the terms tribalism and ethnicity in the academia, Anugwom (2000:15) asserts as follows: "The use of the term "tribalism" is now considered to be unacademic and as implying neo-imperialistic revisionist tendencies. The term 'ethnicity', on the other hand, tends to cut across continental boundaries and capture contemporary African realities and socio-cultural processes. The concept of ethnicity is therefore preferred in any attempt to capture the nature of differences and conflicts among socio-culturally distinct groups in Nigeria." Ethnicity which he sees and understand as a modern form of tribalism, should be seen as arising in any situation where a group of people, no matter how small, with different cultural and linguistic attributes from those of its neighbors, uses this as the basis of solidarity and interaction with others. In so doing, the group sees itself not only as distinct, but as a group in itself and for itself. That is to say, socio-cultural consciousness of oneness develops and forms the basis of interaction with and participation in other socio-cultural processes, especially in power and resource allocation, within a larger social group or state. And this consciousness is most crucial in the definition of an ethnic group.

He further states that, ethnicity implies the fact that the group feels ethnocentric towards others; that is, it sees other groups as relatively inferior and more or less as rivals. This feeling brings about certain attitudes, which distort reality and breed subjectivity in the evaluation and perception of events. Ethnicity is also characterized by a common consciousness of being. And this factor more than any other, defines the boundary of the group that is relevant for understanding ethnicity at any point in time.

As to the root of ethnicity, Sklar (1979:6-7) views ethnicity as implying the fact that in Africa, ethnic movements may be created and instigated to action by privileged men in a bid to further their own interests. Such men of power may be seen as the emerging elites of society who may use ethnic sentiments to consolidate their power base and further their own selfish interest. Berkeley (2001:83) asserts that, "Ethnic conflict in Africa is a product of tyranny. By product it means in both an immediate sense- it is a tactic that tyrants use to divide and rule as well as in a deeper, historical sense: ethnic conflict is a legacy of tyranny."

However, Nnoli (1978:5) sees ethnicity as a class phenomenon, which emerged from the desire of the colonizers to exploit the colonized. In his words, "Ethnicity in Africa emerged and persisted either as a mechanism for adaptation to the imperialist system or as an instrument for ensuring a facile and more effective domination and exploitation of the colonized." Spickard (2012:14) concurs when he writes on the colonial justification of their domination and slavery as follows: "We know from the historical record that Linnaeus, Blumenbach, Gobineau, Ripley, Keane, and the rest made up the ideas of race, tribe, and so forth that are widely accepted around the world today. We can be pretty sure that they did this, wittingly or not, in order to justify European colonial domination of places like Nigeria, and also to excuse slavery." For Anugwom (2000:64-65) the end of the colonial era, however, does not mean that the realities upon which ethnicity was built have disappeared. The selfish need for the privileged classes to further their interests and subjugate the underprivileged by instigating and intensifying ethnic sentiments, still abounds. At best, one privileged group, the white colonizers, has been replaced by another privileged group, the indigenous agents of neo-imperialism.

Drayton (1996:8-13) verifies Anugwom's position when he declares, "In fact, the selective access to education which colonialism favored, created as elite which was able to collude with the colonial power even after colonial rule. And this may be the case in many African nations now." Nnoli (1978:22) alludes to the above assertion when he points out that the exploitative tendency of the



colonizer and the scarcity of socio-economic and political opportunities in the colonial period generated intense elite competition. He argues that the colonial administration deliberately promoted ethnicity through policies of indirect rule, categorization of African's by 'tribes', and promotion of separated settlements between natives and settlers in urban centers. The outcomes of the divide and rule oriented policies that led to the rise, spread and consolation of ethnicity include: socio-economic competition, regional inequalities, lack of economic unity, rivalry in provision of amenities, low class consciousness, intemperate utterances and factional politics, among others.

The negative impact of the British Colonial Legacy has been investigated in Northern Nigeria by Yusufu Turaki, and the summary of his findings are in total agreement to Nnoli's and Drayton's positions. Turaki (1993:217) states: "The colonial social order was not founded upon the principles of justice, equality and freedom, but colonial social order was characterized by tribal inequality and racial injustice, differential treatment of ethnic groups, stratified inequality and the denial of some ethnic groups equal participation, representation and opportunities in the colonial system." He points out that the outcome of this colonial legacy led to the following social practices in the Nigerian society:

1. Prescribed inferior-superior statuses and socio-political roles to ethnic groups and regions.
2. Practices of racial or tribal injustice and inequality against certain ethnic groups and regions.
3. Practices of prejudice and discrimination against certain ethnic groups and or regions in educational, judicial, political and religious matters.
4. Provisional unequal opportunities to ethnic groups or regions in economic matters, social access and mobility, and recruitment into civil service.
5. Denial of full participation or representation in the government, political freedom, equality and human dignity to certain ethnic groups and region.
6. The general neglect and failure to develop certain ethnic groups and regions.

He concludes that the root causes of most of our socio-political problems can be traced back to how the Nigerian social order was established by the colonial administration and also what we have added to it or how we have modified it. "Overt ethnicity is most evident under economically difficult circumstances and is often used for political and defensive purposes."

The colonial racial prejudice for the Non-Muslim groups in Northern Nigeria was at two levels: the claim of innate intellectual and cultural superiority of Europeans over the "primitive pagans" and Africans in general, and the differential treatment of the ethnic groups by Europeans based on racial and cultural differences. Given these two levels of discrimination- contemptuous treatment of the non-Muslims and the preferential treatment of the Muslim Hausa and Fulani- Colonial Administration was bound to develop policies and attitudes that would be laden with prejudices and discriminations. Nothwehr (2008:4) concurs when he states the devastating effects of colonialism as follows, "Throughout Africa, colonialism's legacy of devastation is manifested in favoritism, exclusion, and corruption in all aspects of society and government."

### **European Colonial Transformation of Africa's Social Reality**

The transformation of African kinship systems by modernizing forces and processes have heightened and raised the level of ethnic, racial and tribal consciousness in Africa and compounded the nature of interactions and relationships(Turaki,1999:68). Whereas missionaries were preoccupied with contrasting civilizations, especially in matters of culture and religion, the





colonial administrators were, generally, preoccupied with the demonstration of British superiority and civilization in their institutions. He has stated that the root causes of our socio-political problems are rooted in the Colonial legacy.<sup>1</sup> Ethno-regional and religious politics, biases, prejudices, discriminations, stereotyping and all kinds of negative sub-national values and interest took root from such colonial policies as they transformed the already existing pre-colonial primordial values and institutions. Colonial rule altered social and spatial boundaries, both symbolically and in reality...One effect of the imposing of external authority over indigenous African societies was the creation of social systems which were more “open” than those that had existed in the pre-colonial era. Strangers and their previous hosts were viewed by European administrators in the same social terms of reference. But more often than not, strangers enjoyed distinctive economic advantages over indigenous members of the host society, who often consider themselves to be relatively deprived of economic and political power.

Shack (1979:37-47) in the introduction to the book *Strangers in African Societies* has contrasted the situation of the stranger before colonization and during colonization and comes to the same conclusion as Turaki. He says, “In the main, both before the imposition of colonial rule in Africa and during the dependency period, indigenous African and non-African strangers were left virtually free to move from one traditional African polity and temporarily resettle in another.” He argues that, “This was not the case during the colonial era in Africa. By and large, colonial rule stripped traditional African polities of their political sovereignty and denied them the right to control the movement of individuals and groups from one territorial- political boundary to the next.” Discrimination, differences, and walls were always present between one tribe/clan/people and the other. They were never treated on the same level even before colonial rule, but the colonial rule heightened and increased the tempo.

Deng (2000:367) asserts very strongly that ethnic identities in themselves are not conflictual, just as individuals are not inherently in conflict merely because of their different identities and characteristics. Rather, it is unmanaged or mismanaged competition for power, wealth, or status broadly defined that provides the basis for conflict.

Contributing to the impact of colonialism on the African continent, Paglia (2015:20) summarizes six main ways in which it shaped the postcolonial state:

Colonialism shaped the postcolonial state in six ways: it left it with fragile economies; it left it with weak political institutions; it legitimized patterns of violent coercion and exploitation; it disrupted the African geopolitical scenario by introducing artificial borders; it created or consolidated ethnically homogeneous elites, despite multicultural heterogeneity of societies; and it set in motion mechanisms of identity awareness, such as pan-

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<sup>1</sup> According to Turaki Colonial legacy refers to the colonial philosophy of nation-state building which used racial, ethnic or tribal, religious and cultural values to establish a colonial social order. Religion, culture and social status were used by the Colonial Administration as a means of social stratification, differentiation and recruitment into colonial service. Under colonialism, the Nigerian social environment was nurtured under religious and cultural intolerance, racial (tribal) inequality and differential and preferential treatment of ethnic groups. Colonial policies of stratified inequality and ethnic or tribal hierarchy led to the institutionalization of superior-inferior status and socio-political role to different ethnic groups within the colonial hierarchical structure. Colonial policies also led to the development of negative social values, such as, elitism, greed, dominance, aggressiveness, exploitation, social status, parochialism, tribalism, regionalism, etc.



Africanism and pan-Arabism, in response to a Western imperialist domination based on racial and cultural superiority.

Nigeria is arguably a British creation, where for the convenience of administration, as in all of Africa and in other global 'realms of Empire, colonial powers distorted natural boundaries that were based on homogeneous societies and created new African nations that are not only multicultural and multiethnic but also overlapping peoples(Williams,2010:170).

### **Christian Missionaries**

Having looked at the impact of European Colonial presence and how they transformed Africa's social reality. We shall in this section examine how the Christian missionary attitude affected the status of Africans amongst whom missionaries worked. Turaki(2001:68-69) submits that, "The introduction of Christianity into Africa has been a major cause of social and religious transformation of Africa." But what was the attitude of the European missionaries when they came with the gospel as regards Africans and their culture? In response, Turaki (1999:54) says, "It is not necessary to ask whether a European missionary in Africa ever felt that he had 'a spiritual superiority' over the African to whom he ministered. It is a sad given. In Africa, enormous barriers existed between Europeans and Africans in terms of colour, habitat, industrial and social organization, as well as religion." He asserts that these social facts tended, somehow to give a European missionary a feeling of "superiority." Turaki's view is shared by Crafford (1993:165) who says, "Christianity was brought to Africa by Western missionaries who for most of the time had a negative approach to African culture. In most cases they did not only reject elements of culture that contradicted biblical principles alone, but African culture in totality." Although a missionary draws his missionary ideals from the principles of Christ, he might nonetheless, have been profoundly influenced by the socio-political values of his society. Stephen Neil (1964: 259) makes this observation on this sort of home influence when he writes: "Missionaries in the nineteenth century had to some extent yielded to the colonial complex. Only western man was man in the full sense of the word; he was wise and good, and members of other races; in so far as they became westernized, might share in this wisdom and goodness. But western man was the leader, and would remain so a very long time, perhaps forever."

In the case of the Sudan United Mission, its founder Karl Kumm in (Boer, 1979:125) has this to say on the Sudan land and the people: "darkness" was the key concept he used to describe the essence of Africa. He wrote, "There is a land in this wonderful world, called The Land of Darkness, ... dark are the bodies of the people who live there, darker are their minds, and darker still their souls, -the great land of darkness." Boer (1979:142) asserts that increasing racial theories of superiority influenced Europe:

The testimony of a large number of authors has it that towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe came to be afflicted with heightened form of racism. Accomplishments at home, at least in the technological and organizational aspects, had made unprecedented strides. When these were contrasted with the disarray found in Africa, Europeans began to lose their perspective and increasingly imagined themselves a race of supermen, while Africans came to be regarded as children who hardly knew their own good.

Similar missionary views about Africa and Africans have been enunciated in missionary publications and writings, such as, *The Sudan Witness*, *Africa Now*, *The Light Bearer*, *The*



*Evangelical Christian and Christian Witness, and the Annual Reports and Resumes from mission stations.*

Flint (1969:187) captures and summarizes the missionary view of the African which has been influenced by the wider culture of his society in the following way:

All aspects of African culture were to be cast down, drumming was an abomination, nakedness sin, African music praised the Devil; the true convert will show his mettle by casting away all wives but one, observing the Sabbath and no other day, eschewing nakedness and wearing European dress, speaking, reading, and writing English, and paying little or no attention to the social obligation of his tribe, clan, or extended family. Such converts, cut off from the society in which they had grown to adult years, naturally developed a relationship of dependence towards their new missionary mentors, a relationship which, because these people were undergoing processes of re-education, took on a child-like quality. It was easy for missionaries (especially when gathering funds from Britain) to simplify the situation, and create a picture of the African as child-like.

### **Analysis of Tribalism in African Society**

In today's political and religious events in Africa, tribalism has influenced quite a number of people in the Church and society, leaving the faith and professional ethic of many, wanting. This phenomenon is not only corrupting but is eroding the mission of Christ's Church on the continent giving rise to criticism of and discontentment with the authenticity of the Church in Africa. Tribalism is inseparably related to political, religious, economic and other social views which constitute its important ingredients. In the African context, the concept of tribalism has a strong political, socio-economic and juridical character (Nwaigbo, 2005:140). We shall now look at these various impacts of tribalism on the political, economic, social and religious aspects of the society.

### **Tribalism and Politics in Africa**

Tribalism has invaded African politics. In terms of tribal consciousness, this had developed over several generations of the colonial and neo-colonial history of Africa. Mahmood Mamdani asserts in *Define and Rule*:

"Did tribe exist [in Africa] before colonialism? If we understand by tribe an ethnic group with a common language, it did. But tribe as an administrative entity that distinguishes between natives and non-natives and systematically discriminates in favor of the former against the latter – defining access to land and participation in local governance and rules for settling disputes according to tribal identity – certainly did not exist before colonialism."

Nnoli (1978:1) notes that "... it is common to interpret African politics in tribal terms." In politics the overwhelming quest for power and position has animated those who are in leadership positions to exploit tribalism in order to intimidate political opponents or win political elections. In Africa today, the issue in most political elections is not the quality or credibility of the leader to be elected that counts but the tribal group he/she belongs to. Furthermore, the firm declaration of a tribe for a tribesman/woman implies different ventures of interests for instance, the attraction of



national currency, road networks, increase in the number of schools and other development/profitable projects for one's tribe (Nwaigbo, 2005:140).

As a result many politicians become tribalistic and misuse their privileged positions in government to create advantages for themselves and to enhance job opportunities for their tribesmen/women. Such people are ready to support their tribal groups to the end whether for a worthy cause or not. This trend characterizes leadership in all human circles in many African countries today. Close observation shows that in the modern time, tribal-spirit can be seen almost everywhere in Africa because it cuts across the religious, economic, political, and social divides. There are many examples in Africa where fragile political unities constructed by post- colonial nationalisms have broken down with bloody consequences.<sup>2</sup> Another example is seen in Nigeria, where President Mohhamadu Buhari a Fulani has been in power for the past seven and a half years, and the Fulanis are still interest in voting Atiku Abubakar as the next president in next year 2023 elections. Tribalism is used as a political instrument for maintaining positions of leadership and privileges indefinitely in the government(Nwaigbo, 2005:140).

The effect of tribalism in the political sphere of society is indeed devastating, as stated by the Catholic bishops of Cameroon in 1996: "Tribalism endangers both the peace and the pursuit of the common good of the entire society, tribalism hinders open and constructive dialogue among different ethnic groups and tribalism encourages ethnic hatred and impedes the construction of national unity; it may even produce political disorder and cause civil war" (Nothwehr, 2008:130).

### **Economic Pitfalls of Tribalism**

The quest for the domination of economic resources has shaped tribalism into an ideology for the advantage of the rich and the powerful over the poor and the weak. Tribalism which is closely associated with economic powers plays a negative role in the lives of the African people. It has served as an instrument of exploitation and manipulation in the unfair distribution of the economic resources and the other opportunities amongst individuals, Church and societal groups (Nwaigbo, 2005:140).

### **Social Plague of Tribalism**

We shall consider the social plague of tribalism under three sub sections namely, exclusiveness, social conflicts, and tribalism as a social sin.

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<sup>2</sup> Tribalism also remains a source of death and destruction. There are two notable examples from this century. 1. Rwanda (Central Africa)-1994. Over a period of 100 days, beginning April 6, 1994, up to 800,000 members of the Tutsi tribe were killed by another tribe, Hutus. Hutus used clubs and machetes to kill. As many as 10,000 were murdered each day. 2. Afghanistan-1989-present-1.2 million killed due to civil war, 2 million permanently disabled. When the last of the colonial empires, the former Soviet Union, invaded Afghanistan in 1979, most Afghans were united in their fight against this oppressor. However, with the withdrawal of the former Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989, things have worsened with bitter warfare amongst the country's various tribes. The Taliban group controls the capital of Kabul and approximately two-thirds of the country including the predominantly ethnic Pashtun areas in southern Afghanistan. Opposing factions have their stronghold in the ethnically diverse north. Racism, Nationalism, Tribalism and the Caste System: What they've done to the world in the last 100 years. Some statistics and facts by Sound Vision's Staff writer.[www/statistics.facts.fromsoundvisions.html](http://www/statistics.facts.fromsoundvisions.html). Accessed 12/August,2022.



## **Exclusiveness**

Exclusiveness is an attribute of tribalism. Tribalism has always come with grievous effects to the church in Africa. Turaki (1997: 3) rightly asserts that “Ethnicity and tribalism are currently the most pervasive and powerful destructive forces in Africa.” Turaki (1997: 3) 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 warlords.” A popular slogan in Africa states, “Blood is thicker than water.” What this simply means is that ethnic, racial, tribal loyalty, and affinity take precedence over what Christianity or Islam or what modernity teaches. In-group and/or out-group boundaries emerge with tribalism and with time this is marked with jealousies between and among tribal groups. Acceptance and rejection on linguistic-cultural grounds characterized social relations with those outside the group. These are expressed inevitably through tribal discrimination in employment, housing, admissions into educational institutions, promotions, appointments, marriages, business transactions and in the distribution of social welfare services. The element of exclusiveness is usually accompanied by favoritism, nepotism and corruption in public offices. Merits are sacrificed at the altar of tribal chauvinism and solidarity (Nwaigbo, 2005:141).

## **Social Conflicts**

Social conflicts are other dimensions of tribalism. These are inevitable under the situation of inter-tribal competition for scarce resources especially in societies where inequality is endorsed and natural wealth is glorified as the highest human value. The fear of being relegated to the bottom of the inter-tribal ladder of inequality generates divisive and destructive socio-economic competitions with anti-social consequences. Under such circumstances it is easy for the in-groups to appropriate the attitude of hostility towards the out-groups. Aggressive behaviors may then be used to limit competitions in favor of the in-groups. Inter-tribal demonstrations, rioting and various types of violent agitations are used to obtain justice (Nwaigbo, 2005:141).

## **Tribalism as a Social Sin**

Tribalism is a social sin and this is acutely felt at the bottom and top of the social pyramid of the African continent. The social order has become top-heavy, dominated by the powerful tribal groups. In public offices and institutions, tribalism is used as a tool of dehumanization. In many African societies, the rights of people are infringed upon, crossed or removed because of some domineering tribal attitudes. In majority of African communities, the ideology of the chosen few, expressed in exclusiveness, becomes a dogmatic pseudo-religion. What is said of the civil society is to an extent applicable to the confines of some circles of the Church in Africa as well (Nwaigbo, 2005:142). When the Church is divided because of tribalism, O'Donovan (1992:273) states that, “Its witness will be weak, its prayer will be powerless and it will accomplish nothing for God. Its members will easily fall into temptation, sin and defeat.”

## **Theological Difficulties of Tribalism**

From the internal perspectives of human beings in a society, tribalism is subjectively experienced and does not extend into God's transcendent future because tribalism is a temporal concept. Tribalism contradicts basic Christian values such as the dignity of the human person, the Fatherhood of God, the unity of humanity in virtue of creation and redemption, and the Church as a *koinonia* of believers (Nwaigbo, 2005:142). Divisions in the Church of God due to tribalistic tendencies have been scandalous to the witness of the Gospel. In the Church today, alongside





faith, there is the myth of tribalism, alongside grace, there is the sin of tribalism and alongside truth of the Gospel, there is the error of tribalism. In our time, our eyes have not cared to see the needs of others in the family of God; rather they have been blindfolded by tribalism (Nwaigbo, 2005:142).

## Conclusion

This article has dealt with the reality of tribalism in Africa. It has looked at the definition of tribe and tribalism, and the ongoing debate of the use of the term tribalism. We have seen that tribalism is rooted in the blood ties of the African society which is very strong. We have traced and discussed the impact of colonialism and the Christian European missions on the people and traditions of Africa. We have come to the conclusion that they also impacted negatively vis-a-vis the issue of discrimination, prejudice, and preferential treatment which, has further heightened the problems of tribal, ethnic differences and tensions experienced between various ethnic groups in the African society. Tribalism has invaded African politics; as a result many politicians become tribalistic and misuse their privileged positions in government to create advantages for themselves and to enhance job opportunities for their tribesmen/women. The quest for the domination of economic resources has shaped tribalism into an ideology for the advantage of the rich and the powerful over the poor and the weak. Social conflicts are other dimensions of tribalism. This paper has limited itself to analyzing the roots, faces, and features of 'Tribalism' in Africa. I wish to recommend for further study in the area of proffering solutions that will address this monster that has retarded our growth in Africa. Tribalism has invaded African politics; as a result many politicians become tribalistic and misuse their privileged positions in government to create advantages for themselves and to enhance job opportunities for their tribesmen/women. The quest for the domination of economic resources has shaped tribalism into an ideology for the advantage of the rich and the powerful over the poor and the weak. Social conflicts are other dimensions of tribalism. This paper has limited itself to analyzing the roots, faces, and features of 'Tribalism' in Africa. I wish to recommend for further study in the area of proffering solutions that will address this monster that has retarded our growth in Africa.

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