The Contribution of Emmanuel Katongole to the Menace of Tribalism in the African Church

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Abstract

Tribalism hinders justice which is bedrock to peace. This phenomenon has made peace to elude us as a continent in Africa, and as a nation Nigeria, it has to do with the way we relate with others which is based on how we see them, by who we think they are, and who we think we are. Ethnic diversity is a central part of our world and is accompanied by racial and ethnic ideologies, prejudices, hatreds, boundaries, violence, suffering, and hierarchies of wealth and power.

This paper is on the contribution of Emmanuel Katongole to the issue of tribalism which has bedeviled Rwanda. Katongole identified the origin of tribalism in Rwanda which he posits is based on the stories the people were told, Hutu and Tutsi. He also advocated a solution to the problem. The methodology used for this research is the historical method of inquiry, the works of Katongole were examined and conclusions drawn.

Keywords: Emmanuel Katongole; Tribalism; Menace; African Church.

1. Introduction

The African continent, with its rich cultural diversity and vibrant religious landscape, has been grappling with various social challenges over the years. Among these challenges, tribalism has emerged as a persistent menace, affecting communities, institutions, and even religious organizations. In the face of this pressing issue, individuals who have dedicated themselves to eradicating tribal divisions and fostering unity have played a crucial role. One such figure is Emmanuel Katangole, whose remarkable contributions have had a profound impact on combating tribalism within the African Church. Emmanuel Katangole, a renowned theologian, author, and advocate for peace and reconciliation, has soft to address the complexities of tribalism within the African Church context.

Hailing from Uganda, a country deeply affected by tribal tensions, Katangole has experienced firsthand the damaging effects of tribal divisions on communities and religious institutions. This personal experience has fueled his commitment to combating tribalism and promoting unity in the African Church.

The paper therefore seeks to examine the significant contribution of Emmanuel Katongole [1] in addressing the pervasive issue of tribalism within the African Church. Tribalism, a complex social challenge that threatens the unity and harmony of religious communities, has left its mark on the African Church. Drawing upon the influential work titled "Divisive Ethnicity in the Church in Africa" by Barje Sulmane Maigida, this paper first establishes the existence of tribalism within the African church context.

It then delves into the remarkable contributions of Emmanuel Katongole, exploring his insightful perspectives, practical initiatives, and theological frameworks that aim to combat tribalism and promote unity within the African Church. By examining Katongole's work, this paper seeks to shed light on the valuable role he plays in addressing the menace of tribalism and fostering a more inclusive and united African Church.

2. Statement of the Problem

Tribalism [2] poses a serious challenge to the church in Nigeria and Africa in general, and it springs from how people perceive others that are different from them. Paul G. Hiebert states that, "Our everyday relationships with other people are deeply shaped by how we see them – by who we think they are, and who we think we are." [3] Kenton L.

Spark's points out that, "When we speak of ethnicity, we bring into view a particular kind of sentiment about group identity wherein groups of individuals view themselves as being alike by virtue of their common ancestry." [4] As such, whether it is a racial ideology that results in racism, or an ethnic ideology that promotes tribalism, all have threatening consequences. Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L.

Nieves enumerates the problems that tribalism generates as follows, "At the dawn of the twenty-first century, ethnic diversity is a central part of our world and is accompanied by racial and ethnic ideologies, prejudices, hatreds, boundaries, violence, suffering, and hierarchies of wealth and power." [5].

3. Tribalism "Divisive Ethnicity" Exists In the African Church

Barje Sulmane Maigadi [6] has examined the symptoms of tribalism or divisive ethnicity in the ECWA Church. He laments and even concludes, that, "Instead of the ethnic diversity of the church to be a cause for celebration, it appears in Africa and perhaps in the world in general, ethnic affiliations is increasingly becoming an obstacle to the unity and spiritual growth of the church." [7] He points out that the problem of divisive ethnicity in ECWA and in most churches in Africa raises two serious questions. "The first is, why does divisive ethnicity have a pervasive influence upon the lives of Christians in Africa, particularly among ECWA leaders and members? And the second question is has the transforming power of the gospel failed to bring complete change in the lives of the majority of ECWA members and leaders?" [8].

Maigadi believes that historical, cultural, political and spiritual factors do contribute to divisive ethnicity in ECWA and in the church in Africa in general. But his studies reveal that two factors appear to be prominent in ECWA. The first factor is the fact that the gospel which ECWA members and leaders received from SIM missionaries was obscured by western culture, and such a gospel is incapable of minimizing divisive ethnicity. The second is the institutionalization of ECWA. ECWA began as a non-institutional mission movement; but with the passage of time it became an institutionalized church, a process which exacerbates divisive ethnicity. [9]

He further identified six factors contributing to divisive ethnicity in ECWA as follows:

a. Spiritual poverty or immaturity;
b. the principle of ethnic representation;
c. cultural differences;
d. consolidated salary scale;
e. loss of vision; and
f. a democratic principle. [10]

He thus challenges the institutionalization of the church and the way leaders emerge through democratic means and the issue of representation as causes of divisive ethnicity.

He gave the following suggested solutions for divisive ethnicity in the Church in Africa:

a. Biblical teaching on the nature of the church;
b. Prayer for revival;
c. Leadership by example;
d. Decentralization of the organizational structure;
e. Inter-District transfer of Chairmen;
f. Application of the Spirit of ECWA constitution [11] .

He recommends that ECWA or the Church in Africa develops a model of the Church as the family of God as a solution, with the following as developing principles: 1) to develop deeper Christian communities by discipling

its leaders and members; 2) to train servant-leaders; 3) to develop an organizational structure that supports inclusion; 4) to abide by the biblical requirements for leaders; 5) to expose divisive ethnicity as a sin and invite repentance; 6) affirming and celebrating ethnic diversity and 7) to develop a community of prayer [12] .

Maigadi's work reveals that tribalism exists in the Church in Africa with its many faces and ugly consequences. It is a reality. He defers from scholars such as Emmanuel Katongole who sees tribalism as the creation of the colonial masters who give a dog a bad name so as to be able to hang it. The fact is tribalism exists in the African church. However, this work deals with the symptoms of tribalism, which is seen as the result of what is happening in the inside. This book goes beyond symptoms to the root of tribalism in the African Church, the origin of differences which is as a result of the fall of humanity and the solution that is found only in the work of Christ on the Cross. This will deal with the first of the two questions that the book has asked that is, why does divisive ethnicity have a pervasive influence upon the lives of Christians in Africa? And has the transforming power of the gospel failed to bring complete change in the lives of Christians?

4. The Contribution of Emmanuel Katongole to Menace of Tribalism

Emmanuel Katongole (an expert in the study of Africa), who is the author of books on the Christian social imagination, the crisis of faith following the genocide in Rwanda, and the Christian approaches to justice, peace, and reconciliation. His most recent book is, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*. For Katongole, the question of identity is important for the African, and he highlighted this point as follows: "In Africa, when you meet someone for the first time, you ask, 'Who is your family?' In Europe, they ask, 'Where are you from' But in America, I never cease to be amazed that people almost always ask, 'What do you do?'" [13] .

Katongole states that, "all identities are formed over time and shaped by the stories we live into." [14] For him it is the politics of nations that have formed us into distinct identities. In other words the identities we often assume to be our natural identities are formed identities. As we participate in the political and historical processes and institutions of our countries, our identities are formed. He submits that, "Our mission is to be a community that bears witness to the fact that in Christ, there is a new identity." [15] .

How did the issue of race originate? Katongole believes very strongly that, **"**along with their philosophy of history, Europeans brought to Africa the idea of race." [16] He uses the example of the Hutu and Tutsi as support Katongole, for his assertion. He says, "The Hutu and Tutsi existed in pre-colonial Rwanda as roles that determined people's place in society. But Europeans ascribed biblical explanations to these roles, insisting that they could see in Tutsi's physical features that they were descendants of Semites. What had been a fluid system of complex relations quickly turned into a set of simplistic racial categories that defined the Tutsi minority as superior and the Hutu majority as inferior?" [17] In keeping with their theory of the Tutsi's racial superiority, the Belgians discarded the three-chief system of "*mwami-ship*" [18] and said that every chief has to be a Tutsi. Meanwhile, European schools were run by Christian missionaries, but only the Tutsi were invited to hear the good news of Jesus Christ and receive the highest education [19]. Therefore, what had once been a social role and then a racial category was now an essential part of every Rwandan's identity, frozen in time by a piece of

paper that told each person who they were [20].

Katongole concludes, "This means theirs is not a story about Rwanda. It is a story rooted in the imagination of Europe, told by the European colonialists, rooted and deepened over centuries by the church's missionaries, and accepted by convert's to the Christian faith." [21] In charging Africa not to accept such stories that have been told to them, Katongole presents the case of Jesus as an example to follow. Jesus was born into a story that said Jews were the legitimate heirs of Abraham and Samaritans were an inferior mixed breed.

Those were the accepted categories of His day. [22] Jesus knew a different story about who we are and what we were made for. He spoke to the Samaritan woman – as He speaks to each of us- about a Father who loves us. [23] Katongole believes and rightly too that, "Our mission is to be a new community that bears witness to the fact that in Christ there is a new identity. It is only by such a unique people and nation (Rev 5: 9) that we can both name and resist the spells that would have us live as tribalized people." [24] .

So Katongole recommends that, 'What we need is a new sense of Christian identity that will cause a much-needed confusion of tribal loyalty. Unless this happens, all our singing and proclamations about Christ are empty words. Unless we are defined by a new identity, all our Easter celebration is nothing but a haunted liturgy, with death, genocide, and betrayal lurking in its shadow." [25] In attributing all to the colonialist and the missionaries for forming us, we do want to state that while they influenced us heavily, we also had our rivalries and communal issues as pointed out by Turaki, "Within African states, the existence of rival and antagonistic communities abound.

Before European colonization of Africa, Africans existed in different communities and conflicts between them existed in wars of territorial expansion, slave-raiding and slave trade." [26] However, "Under colonialism, some of these historical social and cultural conflicts between various communities were somewhat incorporated and institutionalized by the new colonial social order: As a result, the colonial powers institutionalized a potential of ethnic/racial/tribal tensions, violence and conflicts." [27].

While looking at, Christianity, Tribalism and the Rwandan Genocide; Katongole asserts that, "the underlying problem behind Rwandan genocide is one of tribalism." [28] He shows that tribalism is a distinctively modern problem, which has to do with the role of stories in the political imagination.

This is to say that a tribal identity and the violence associated with tribalism are wired into the imaginative landscape of nation-state politics. [29] More importantly, Katongole suggests that since tribalism is connected with the issue of political imagination, the urgent Christian challenge of responding to tribalism is one of political re-imagination. [30] This task, he shows, is possible to the extent that the church is able to conceive of itself as "wild space" within which alternative forms of social existence can be engendered. [31] For Katongole, what this conclusion confirms is the fact that what we are- our identities- are in great part a function of stories and assumptions operating within the politics of our societies. To the extent that a Hamatic vision of Hutu and Tutsi as fundamentally different people was the assumption behind Rwanda's social, political, and cultural institutions; Rwandans, in effect became Hutu and Tutsi. [32] Moreover, what the genocide of 1994 confirms as

far as Katongole is concerned is the fact that stories do, in fact, kill. For once a vision of Hutu and Tutsi as fundamentally different had become entrenched into the collective imagination of Rwandans, such a story could easily be called upon to carry out and justify the killing of Tutsis. At the heart of this imagination is a story or set of stories –one that was initially told by the first colonial settlers and is now reproduced through the post-colonial state- namely, that Africans incorrigibly live in tribes that are always at war with each other [33].

The effect of tribalism is much, as he points out that tribalism succeeds in dividing people, between us and them. At independence, rather than challenging and pioneering a way beyond tribally shaped identities and politics, the independence movement just locked African nations within this imagination, thus helping to both naturalize and confirm the tribal identities created by colonialism.

The effect has been that tribalism becomes an ever-present and volatile aspect of political and social life. The author suggests that, if the Church, particularly the Church in Africa, has to face the challenge of political imagination, it needs to view its social mission not particularly in terms of "social responsibility", but in terms of the need and formation of Christian communities, which can be both a challenge and an alternative to the tribalism of nation-state politics [34] .

Katongole suggests that we focus on allowing the church to become a "wild space" within (or at the margins of) the dominant culture.

A wild space according to McFague, is whatever does not fit the stereotypical human being, or the definition of the good life as defined by conventional culture. [35] For him, the Eucharist is a good place to start in thinking about the church as a "wild place" within modern-states.

For it is within and through such a practice like Eucharist that Christians might be able to open cracks within- and thus interrupt- the story of nation-state politics. Such an interruption, however, is not so much an individual accomplishment, but is in fact possible to the extent that Christians are part of a community-ecclesia- that is grounded in another story: a different imagination [36].

He concludes strongly that, only a community so remembered or so constituted by a practice such as the Eucharist can stand as a witness and an alternative to the politics that would have us live as tribes, each set against the other [37]. But for the Church to be capable of such witness, the story of the body of Christ must already have become the primary way of seeing the world and thus of shaping everyday attitudes and expectations [38].

Katongole identifies at least three biblically-inspired ecclesiastical visions: the Pious, the Pastoral, and the Prophetic church.

A. The Pious Church feels that her competence lies in the deep, internal, spiritual realm from which she provides motivation for the Christians in her struggle in the world. Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:22; Matt 27:32; Luke 23:26) best exemplifies the ethical posture of this Pious church [39].

B. The Pastoral Church is the Church as healer and servant of the poor. In the Bible, we can identify this

church with Joseph of Arimathea (Matt 27:57; Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50-53), a simple and sincere man who walked across tradition with compassion and quiet. He never sets out to question or change the system. He exemplifies the pastoral work of the church [40].

C. Finally, there is the prophetic Church of Mary of Bethany (John 12:1-8) - the woman who made a fool of herself by publicly wiping the feet of Jesus with her hair and anointing them with oil. In the risky endeavor of prophetic action, she envisioned change, an alternative witness and a new social order made possible by the life and story of Jesus. She typifies the prophetic church- a church that cares for the coming of God and its obligation to bring it about now [41] .

Katongole argues that while a vision of the Pious and Pastoral churches underlies Bediako and Mugambi's theological reflections respectively, what African Christians need if they are to face and survive the twenty- first century is theological reflection and practice which can inspire and is at the same time sustained by a vision of the Prophetic Church.

The author underscores the need for social imagination in general and the imagination of prophetic ecclesial communities in particular. He advocates that the only hope for our world after the Rwanda Genocide is a new kind of Christian identity for the global body of Christ. [42] We have examined mainly the works of two theologians to see how they addressed the issue of tribalism in Africa.

5. Conclusion

Indeed, tribalism is a complex issue with various contributing factors. While colonialism and missionary activities have had a significant impact on shaping ethnic identities and exacerbating tribal divisions in Africa, it is essential to acknowledge that communal rivalries and inherent human fallenness also play a role in fueling tribalism.

Tribalism is not limited to a specific continent or race; it is a global problem rooted in the fallen nature of humanity.

The church, however, can play a crucial role in addressing and mitigating tribalism by emphasizing the new identity found in Christ and promoting the universal unity of its members. Authors like Katongole have highlighted the potential of the church's new identity in Christ, as well as the practice of the Eucharist, to combat tribalism.

By focusing on God's Word, fostering Christian love, and symbolizing unity in the body of Christ through the Eucharist, the church can actively work towards curbing the negative effects of tribalism and promoting a sense of universal unity among its members, both globally and locally.

Recognizing our shared identity as believers in Christ and the transformative power of His work on the cross can help transcend ethnic divisions and contribute to a more unified and inclusive community within the church and beyond.

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