

Tribalism, Ethnicity and Nepotism in Sudan – Israel Yohanna Angelo Adeldong

Sudan is the largest country on the African continent, with a large number of tribal groups including the African race and the Asian race (Arabs). Before independence and before Christianity these tribal groups found it very difficult to co-exist. Hostility between the tribes was the order of that period. The slave trade was a hobby and a business of the Arabs. It was a constant threat to Africans. These two factors fuelled hostilities and resulted in a strong spirit of tribalism¹ and ethnicity.² All this added to the highest enmity and hostility between the African and the Asian races. The immediate outcome was suspicion, hatred, conflict, and wars.

There is a sad chapter in the history of Sudan where we look back to past events carried out by tribal groups against each other. We had stories of tribal or ethnic cleansing narrated by the grand ancestors and transferred from generation to generation. The objective of the cleansing was to uproot, eliminate and bring a permanent end to the hostile tribe – to wipe them out completely. These sad stories have caused long-standing grudges, hatred, and many civil wars between tribes in the various regions of the Sudan.

Our history affects our today

This experience has resulted in sharp divisions based on ethnicity, tribal groups, religious groups, and racial groups. Some tensions among tribal groups in Sudan today are transmitted from the ancestors into the present generation. People today express their inherited bitterness and anger against the tribal group or groups which fought against and maltreated their own tribe. Care should be taken to understand this background. Reconciliation should be worked out in order to heal the wounds of the past and to help groups forgive each other if tribalism and ethnicity are to be uprooted from the Sudan.³ Reconciliation with God *and with our fellow human beings* is at the heart of true Christianity, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Ephesians 2:11-22.

¹ tribalism, "loyalty to a tribe (a social division of a people defined in terms of common descent, territory, culture, etc.) or to tribal values". English Dictionary (Glasgow: HarperCollins) 1995.

² ethnicity, "human group having racial, religious, linguistic and certain other traits in common". English Dictionary (Glasgow:HarperCollins) 1995.

³ for forgiveness, consider our Lord Jesus' own words: Matthew 6:12-15; Matthew 18:21-35.

Traditionally tribalism is a product of the search for self-identification and belonging. Every tribe maintains and brings up their children according to the tribal norms and customs accepted and approved by the tribe. Many of the tribes claim their descent from one ancestor or ancestress. Sometimes people within the same tribe would have different identities and they would mistreat each other, for example, Moro from Krwarak versus Moro from Allabu. Moreover Moro from Etogfida would have different identities and mistreat each other, such as, Amchang versus Aynia, Ndria versus Ulba, Wëria versus Lnbua. Sadly, we could cite many more.

Tribalism and ethnicity were regarded as a sign of originality and superiority. In too many cases this is still true. Each tribe claims to be the best and above all other tribes. Thus members of the tribe work hard to keep their originality and superiority at the expense of other groups. This is obvious in nepotism⁴ and favouritism,⁵ practices seen in employment and education in Sudan.

When the boss is from a certain tribe, he or she gives posts to his own tribal men in order to gain money for the group he belongs to. When scholarships are offered, close relatives will be first on the list she awards them to. This spirit of nepotism has brought crises, conflicts and confusion among the ethnic groups working in the public sector, in the churches, and in the private sector. Equal rights should be given to *all* members of the community or group without discrimination. The rights must be based on fulfilling the conditions and regulations set for the post in case of employment, or to meet the entry and graduation qualifications in case of education.

Christian intervention in this wrongdoing

The reality being experienced today in Sudan calls upon the Christian church to have one mind and one message about relationships between us all as Christians (whatever our ethnicity or tribe). It is important to talk to each other across tribal boundaries because the present situation

⁴ nepotism, "favouritism shown to relatives or close friends by those with power or influence". English Dictionary (Glasgow: HarperCollins) 1995.

⁵ favouritism, "the practice of giving special treatment to a person or group". English Dictionary (Glasgow: HarperCollins) 1995.

has gone beyond the political arena. Poisonous problems have entered another level of our ethnic identities and they are threatening our nationhood. While the political situation may have triggered the current mayhem, the ammunition being used by our people against each other in south, west, east, and north is no longer of a political nature. In some parts of the South and the Nuba Mountains the tools of destruction and the driving attitudes are distinctly ethnic and tribal. The current war in the Darfur region is a clear evidence of ethnic cleansing, where the Arabs are fighting the Fur people. The war may be politicised, but the truth is apparent as the Janjaweed forces are mainly supported by and mostly from the Arabs. The Christian church must speak up for *all* people, not just her own people. The Christian message of one people in Christ, with love and respect for everyone else, is a message for everyone to see and to hear, John 13:34-35; John 14:15; John 15:12-21.

Sudan needs this message to influence situations for good

In our current situation, after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, (C.P.A.), a group of ethnic communities can feel threatened politically, socially and economically by other communities. The group that feels marginalised may subsequently exert its right to self-determination against another group that is viewed as dominant in the political, economic and social arena. The results of such feelings are too often expressed through members of the marginalised group terrorising members of the dominant group, invading land, raiding cattle, etc.

During colonial rule over Sudan and over the forty plus years after independence, the Sudanese people were regrouped based on ethnicity and religion. This has resulted in today's struggle, promoting competition for power and resources. The disputed dividing line for many conflicts between tribes, (and between the Sudanese government and Sudanese people in the South, the Nuba Mountains, the Blue Nile and the Darfur regions), concerns who owns and controls which God-given resources.

To help improve the situation, to minimise conflicts, and to bring tribalism to a commonly understood and acceptable level,⁶ the Church should take upon herself the challenge and stand against all types of tribalism and nepotism.

What the Bible says we can do Christians in Sudan need to become a “missionary society” even from the position of seeming weakness that we have.⁷ The New Testament messianic groups chose to see themselves from this viewpoint. And they chose to live accordingly.⁸ Within the tribal conflicts of Sudan, the Christians should join hands to develop a new society. The Church should propagate one message—“For God so loved *the world*”, John 3:16 (*italics mine*). God so loved the world, not a particular tribe nor a particular family. *God's love is world embracing*. Since God's love is world embracing, so must Christ's love through me be offered to everyone without distinction.⁹

Let me put Colossians 3:9-15 alongside the situations I have already described. By doing so we will see clearly what we can do – how Christians must live, even within such conflicts. The words in italics are my comments:

“Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices” *of tribalism, racism, and nepotism* “and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator”. *Every human being is created in the image of God. Thus there is no favouritism or division among the groups.* “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience”. *This is personal responsibility.* “Bear with each another and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another”. *Whatever is a very big meaning word.* “Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them

⁶ we may think of “acceptable tribalism” as tribalism with a positive outcome for everyone, enriching everyone. It is tribalism under self- control, or for the Christian, under Holy Spirit control.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 12:10.

⁸ see Acts 2:14-24 (especially verse 17); Acts 4:8-12; Acts 4:32-35; Acts 5:40-42; Acts 8:26-40; Acts 9:1-28; Acts 10:1-48; Acts 13:1-3; etc.

⁹ see Luke 6:27-36 (especially verse 32).

all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful”.

In the light of the verses above, our churches must apply this biblical teaching and encourage their members to accept one another. We must unite as One Body of Christ. At the same time we must help unbelievers to join the Christian Church. This will be easier when we are showing a good example of brotherhood and oneness. In the genuine Christian church there is not Nubian and Southerner, Arab and African, Fur and Jaali, Dongolawi and Shaygi, Bagari and Fallati, etc. Each and every person is Christian – living, true disciples of Jesus Christ! There is no distinction between circumcised and uncircumcised, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, man and woman, slave and free; black and white, old and young, etc. Jesus Christ is Lord of all. And Jesus Christ is seen in all being together.

Conclusion

The Christian church in Sudan should exercise her God-given prophetic role and be the voice of the voiceless, and the vision of the blind. We must protect all Sudanese people against injustice, oppression, exploitation, racism, marginalisation, and nepotism.

The spirit of tribalism and racism will only disappear from our societies, our Christian churches and our communities if all of us submit to God and offer ourselves as living sacrifices to Him.¹⁰ Paying the price, we can live as new creations in Christ Jesus.¹¹ United *with* Jesus Christ and united *in* Jesus Christ, together we can change today's Sudan.

Discussion guide

Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:

1. What are the greatest obstacles to reconciliation between people in Sudan today?

How does 2 Corinthians 5:16-6:13 speak into the situation?

¹⁰ Romans 12:1-3.

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 5:16-17.

2. What does the Bible have to say about any person's (or tribe's) "superiority" over another?

Romans 12:1-5; Philippians 2:1-5; Galatians 5:19-26; 2 Timothy 3:1-5.

3. "The Christian message of one people in Christ, with love and respect for everyone else, is a message *for everyone to see and to hear*".

Describe how *this* can be done. Use Scripture and use practical examples.

4. Share what you think "acceptable tribalism, under self-control or Holy Spirit control" might look like in everyday life. Give one example from the work place, another from church life, and a third from home life. Keep Colossians 3:9-15 in mind as you think about this.

5. Since "God so loved *the world*", John 3:16, and Jesus' blood has bought people into His kingdom from "every tribe and language and people and nation", Revelation 5:9, what should a Christian attitude be to people of a different background to themselves?

List at least ten key descriptive words. Use Scriptures if you can.