

Tribalism in Church and Society – Diagnosis and Prescriptions

by Dr. Gordon Idang, Lecturer in Political Science, University of Ibadan

A basic human instinct is the need to possess a sense of identity, and the way in which this is satisfied is to belong to a group. Through belonging to a group, which is something concrete, one's individuality or sense of identity is publicly acknowledged. This need is a universal phenomenon, but it is manifested differently in various societies. In some societies, particularly the highly developed and homogeneous ones, belonging to a group is based on such things as economic status, educational status, and profession. These groups constitute a cross-section of society, and therefore these attachments are easily subordinated to the political community. In other societies, particularly the less developed and heterogeneous ones, belonging is usually based on immediate ties such as blood, tribe, race or locality. These attachments are stronger than those found in highly developed and homogeneous societies in that they are natural attachments. An individual is born into these attachments; hence they have an innate coerciveness.

In the new African states, the process of modernization demands that these narrow loyalties give way to allegiance to the state. Unfortunately most of these states, because they are economically underdeveloped, cannot provide an effective and satisfying substitute for the peoples' narrow loyalties. Some of them are politically too weak to inspire confidence, and hence the effect of their demand for allegiance is to stimulate people to cling tenaciously to their immediate loyalties. Where formerly they might have been taken for granted, now they are brought into a sharper focus. To an individual the demand to subordinate his familiar loyalties to a super-imposed and alien civil order is a threat to his sense of identity and security. Even worse, there is the fear that a generalized commitment to the civil order may place him under the domination of another group, linguistic or ethnic. In some cases, an ethnic or cultural group may regard itself as a self-contained social unit and hence a possibly substitute for the civil community. Thus, dissatisfaction arising from these loyalties may threaten the territorial integrity of the state itself, with demands for succession, irredentism or merger. In contrast, groups based on such things as economic status or profession are not self-contained social units because they constitute a cross-section of society, and cannot therefore set themselves up as nations. In their extreme moments, they can threaten the political community with revolution, but they cannot undermine the territorial integrity of the state. A major theme of this lecture is the persistence of tribal identification in Nigeria and the kind of protective fears and tensions thereby generated.

Definition of Concept.

The term tribalism in its broadest sense can be defined as the complex set of social relations, institutions and belief systems of any social aggregate large or small. Tribalism so defined can be regarded either as a way of life or as loyalty to an ethnic group. The first implies a cultural affiliation or a sharing of the particular tribal way of life; the second simply asserts one's primordial attachment to a tribe and usually implies a sense of belonging. Thus a person could adopt almost entirely a Western way of life, yet retain great love and loyalty to his tribal group. Some of our Western-educated elites, for instance, have lost some aspects of the traditional modes of behaviour and are becoming increasingly Westernized. Yet this erosion of traditionality does not necessarily entail a diminution of tribalism. It is tribalism as loyalty to a particular tribe (not tribalism as a way of life) that concerns us here.

Tribalism as loyalty to an ethnic group has a pejorative connotation and is generally believed to be the greatest threat to national unity in many of the new African states. The definition of tribalism given by one Nigerian politician and writer, Chief H.O. Davies is particularly pertinent for our purpose here:

Tribalism is to make a fetish of one's own tribe and to support members of that tribe at all times whether they are right or wrong. It follows that the tribalist is the fellow who sees nothing but good in his tribe's people, who supports, defends and encourages his tribesman even if he is palpably wrong, who joins in a fight for no reason than that someone is fighting a member of his tribe, who as a Minister, Board Chairman, or Manager, awarded jobs, contracts or scholarships on the basis of tribal origin and not on merit, efficiency or entitlement. Such a one is a tribalist. To him the highest slogan is my tribe right or wrong.

By preventing popular recognition of the overriding national interest and by prompting an supporting an inglorious rat race for the so-called national cake, tribalism so conceived has been a major factor that impedes the development of cohesive modern states in Black Africa. What is noteworthy here is that predominant identification with one's tribe, accompanied by hostility to other tribes, has increased in Nigeria since independence.

Tribalism and National Unity

Nigeria is perhaps the most heterogeneous country in Africa. Estimates of tribal and linguistic groups ranging from 150 to 248 give some idea of the country's diversity. This striking diversity is not only emphasized by certain amount of physical separation, but is also sharpened by great differences in the rate and level of social and economic development. Given this high degree of heterogeneity, the coming of political independence was bound to intensify tribal distinctions and hostilities since it led to a

reconsideration of the definition of the "we" into whose hands power was passing. In other words, the coming of independence tended to arouse fears of the dominance of one tribe over another. Thus, throughout the political history of the First Republic the North-South controversy, agitation by various minority ethnic groups for their own regions in which they would feel safe from domination by the majority ethnic groups, and rivalries between tribally-based and antagonistic political parties were recurring themes.

Second, the First Republic's political edifice was based not on the welfare of the masses, but on the interest of the dominant tribes that controlled the various Regions. When certain unscrupulous individuals from these dominant tribes decided to take full advantage of their privileged positions, the stage was set for the unrestrained and violent struggle for personal power and influence. Nepotism, corruption, political opportunism, and gross disregard of the interest of the common man became the order of the day, while initiative was stifled and intellect and industry unrewarded. Furthermore, in an attempt to maintain the status quo and perpetuate themselves in positions of affluence and corrupt power, party leaders rapidly set aside all the rules of political conduct and undermined and falsified the electoral process and political representation. This decline of political competition and suppression of political rivals combined with corruption and electoral malpractices not only created widespread political cynicism in the populace but also led to the resurgence of a more militant tribal consciousness. As a result, the rather fragile sense of national identity which had begun to grow under the impact of a shared anti-colonialism and the old ambition to create a joint citizenship in freedom began to decline.

Certain aspects of previous British colonial policy have also tended to limit the development of national consciousness in post-independence Nigeria. Indeed, in many areas of ex-British Africa, Britain has been accused of having governed by "divide and rule" tactics, meaning the deliberate fostering of tribalism and regionalism so that a serious opposition to its authority would not materialize. This is not the place to enter into arguments about the motives behind the British colonial policy. Suffice it to say that regardless of the question of intent, the British, through their mistakes of "omission and commission" (which might have been avoided if they had been more fully aware of the underlying problems) were an important factor in the development of sub-group nationalism in Nigeria. In their desire to keep intact the Islamic purity of the North (perhaps to facilitate the policy of "Indirect Rule" or to insulate the North from the Southern radicalism), the British not only excluded the Christian Missionaries from the North but also limited the introduction of Western education in the region. Furthermore, the Northerners were denied representation in the central Nigerian Legislative Council during the crucial period 1923 - 1947. The overall effect of these policies was not only the limitation of contact between the Northerners and the Southerners, but more important, the perpetuation of the individuality and uniqueness of the North.

By curtailing the amounts of intercourse and integration which normally would have occurred over the years, the British policy encouraged the growing ethnocentricity of the North and the South. The relative isolation of the North from the Western influences that were transforming the South also "left the North backward, fearful and resentful, and the South scornful of the North." Consequently, the struggle between the progressive and the traditionalist became regionalized and was reflected in both the party system and the unique federal structure with unfortunate results. This unevenness in political and economic development tended to sharpen the awareness of tribal and regional differentiation which in turn intensified inter-tribal and inter-regional rivalries and tensions. Thus, against this background of the existence and growing consolidation of tribal loyalties and inter-group tensions. The First Republic was left without a strong national spirit that could animate the political community.

Fourthly, the most conspicuous defects of both the Independent and Republican Nigerian Constitutions were their failure not only to take into account such vital variables as the wishes, needs and aspirations of the people, but also to emphasize those basic factors that could enhance national unity and political consensus. Although they were saturated with abstract legal and moral terminologies, they failed completely to incorporate a national ideology that could spell out in no uncertain terms the goals and objectives of the Nigerian society. What is more, the Federal Government was left with a shadow of authority while the real power rested with the Regions. The Macpherson Constitution of 1951 which first introduced a quasi-federalism in Nigeria was progressively modified in 1954, 1957, 1958, and at independence to allow even greater autonomy and power for the regions.

Besides corrupt and selfish politicians and other unscrupulous elements, there were also the professionals, intellectuals and religious leaders who directly or indirectly contributed to the collapse of morality and integrity in Nigeria's national life. Either through connivance, or avarice, or inaction, these influential individuals who could have stood up for the right of the society failed to make their voices and positions clear and unmistakable. Instead of preaching their acclaimed doctrines of universal human brotherhood and immutable moral principles, many religious bodies evaded their important responsibility and teamed up openly with corrupt and tribalistic leaders. Even the academicians, most of whom are now expounding what went wrong in the past, had before this time either closed their eyes to the many evils that afflicted Nigerian society for fear of jeopardizing their privileged positions or allowed themselves to be used by politicians for their selfish ends. The upshot was the chain of crises which led to the 1966 military coups and later to a long-drawn-out ghastly and most destructive civil war.

With the above sketchy attempt to analyze a problem as complex in its contextual manifestations as tribalism, the question now arises whether we are prepared to put the past crisis behind us and redefine our own concepts of federalism and national unity. Given a poly-ethnic society like Nigeria, the central problem is how to build these ethnic and cultural diversities into a stable, integrated national community with one national purpose and one destiny. It is important to note at the outset that although General Gowon's decision to create twelve states in 1967 was a courageous act of statesmanship and a huge step in the right direction, we must guard against putting blind faith in the twelve-state structure or being so enamoured of it as to be completely bewitched by it. For while the twelve-state structure has enhanced an atmosphere of unity, co-existence and stability among Nigeria's tribal groups and eliminated power-blocks and personality-cults which led to the past crisis, the greatest threat to national unity is the ethnic parochialism of which the new states issue is one aspect. Besides, a federal system that makes state boundaries coterminous with tribal groups is bound in the absence of other centripetal factors to generate narrow loyalties. Thus, for the twelve-state structure to be successful, there must be other formal constitutional and political safeguards to reinforce and consolidate it.

First, we must try to do away completely with the First Republic's unstable political equilibrium, that depended upon and institutionalized tribalism and ethnic hostility, by heavily loading the electoral system against the rise of tribally-based political parties. This may require making the Second Republic either a non-party state (e.g. Ethiopia) or a one-party state. There is a general tendency among some people to equate a one-party system with totalitarianism. A country with one-party system is not necessarily totalitarian, or on the road to becoming so. Indeed, a single-party set-up may involve a good deal of internal democracy and widespread participation in the selection of candidates and programmes. Perhaps, it is a paradox in multi-national and developing states that democratic government functions best in a one-party system while multi-party systems often result in unstable coalitions, opposition for the sake of opposing, and political opportunism. Besides in a highly heterogeneous society such as ours, a one-party framework offers the best auspices under which the masses can be united and governed with some measure of popular participation and consent.

Second, to provide the country with effective and dynamic political leadership, we should adopt a presidential system of government with independent tenure and partial separation of powers between the executive and the legislative branches. The President should be popularly elected and should not be allowed to remain in office for more than two terms. In a society ridden by centrifugal forces, such a Presidency would not only provide a steady focus of leadership, but it would also constitute a common reference point for social effort. The Presidency would be looked up as a countervailing force of unity

and harmony. As the Head of State and Head of Government, the President would both symbolize the people and run the national administration while the restriction on the number of terms he could serve would prevent him suffering delusions of indispensability and drifting into unqualified dictatorship.

Third, since the stability of the Nigerian First Republic was greatly undermined by the uneven development of the country, especially the relative poverty and educational backwardness of the numerically predominant Northern Region, the post-civil-war development programme should neither be based on a haphazard policy of appeasement nor be left to the whims and caprices of various institutions and powerful individuals. In order to be able to remove permanently the past areas of frictions and promote the welfare of every Nigerian, a national development programme that would promote a balanced and accelerated economic growth and do justice to all the twelve states should be adopted. Furthermore, no one single unit of the Federation by nature of its higher economic development, larger size, or population should be left in such a position that it could in any way hold others to ransom. Development, whether economic, political or social, must reflect such qualities of interdependence and co-operation.

Fourth, the spheres of government between the centre and the federative units should also be re-divided to ensure the ascendancy of the Federal Government over the State Governments. In many federal systems, there has been a significant shift from Wheare's model with its emphasis on autonomous and co-ordinate governments to co-operative federalism.

Fifth, we must not only do away with our out-dated colonial educational system but we must evolve an educational philosophy that will promote national cohesion and mutual understanding. In addition, civics courses should be offered in our primary and secondary schools as an important instrument of political socialization. As for our universities and institutions of higher learning, the Federal Government should be made to assume full responsibility for all of them. These should not only be merged into one system under a very powerful National University Commission, but arrangements should be made to site some faculties and colleges in other states. Such a new arrangement would contribute to national unity and mutual understanding, and would permit division of labour and specialization of functions among our various institutions of higher learning. It would also allow for efficient realization of our educational goals with the use of scarce means by preventing the springing-up of poorly-staffed, poorly-equipped and under-utilized state universities.

Sixth, the new constitution should incorporate a coherent and inclusive national ideology that will weld together the multiplicity of our overlapping and competing ethnic and cultural groups into a strong and viable federal structure with broadly-based political consensus. Without such a national ideology to bind them together...

back to the old days of permanent national crisis and inter-group tensions and animosities.

Seventh, the institution of Ombudsman or Permanent Commission of Inquiry should be firmly entrenched in the new constitution to fight all types of corruption, mal-practices and nepotism. This Permanent Commission of Inquiry should consist of a few individuals (who hold or have held high judicial offices) appointed by the Federal President on the advice of the Judicial Service Commission for a specific term of office. This institution which has appeared in various constitutions such as those of Sweden, Denmark, New Zealand, Tanzania, Guyana, Ghana and Mauritius is not only set up to prevent mis-use of power and abuse of public office but also to investigate the grievances of members of the public against the arbitrary actions and decisions of the wielders of political power.

Eighth, although it is difficult to develop a crisis-proof fiscal system, a serious attempt should be made to incorporate in the new constitution a rational and equitable system of revenue allocation that will emphasize national unity and balanced national development. Generally speaking, revenue allocation is closely related both to the political structure and to the functions of the various governments. In our search for national consensus and political stability, revenue allocation, far from being purely an economic exercise, should be employed as a conscious instrument in the politics of integration. So far, our defective fiscal system with its over-emphasis on derivation principle has helped to intensify inter-group rivalry and conflict. A united Nigeria formula for revenue allocation must aim at one integrated economy and socio-political consensus and stability.

Lastly, the Church as a neutral and articulate body of detribalized men and women joined together in Christian brotherhood will have much to gain from not being identified with particular regimes or allowing themselves to become associated with those aspects of injustice that characterize a regime. Indeed, the most important contribution that the Church can make towards solving problems of tribalism in Nigeria is to work to awaken that awareness of the love and justice of God in men's hearts that makes them solicitous for the good and well-being of their fellow men. If the Church links itself to a particular group in the country it does so against the logic of its spiritual doctrines of universal human brotherhood and oneness in God, and at great practical peril to its continuing freedom of action.

These and other similar proposals, it is hoped, when combined with the twelve-state structure will not only enable us to achieve genuine unity in diversity, but will also help us in our difficult task of post-war reconstruction and reconciliation. An important thing to note here is that for a

country in search of unity and for people in search of material well-being, a constitution must not only be seen as a blueprint or a standard which both authorizes the work of governors and permits that work to be evaluated, but must also aim at satisfying the needs, hopes and aspirations of the people. Daniel Webster's oratory - one country, one constitution, one destiny - expresses forcefully the close relationship between a constitution and the political spirit of a nation.

Produced by the Institute of Church and Society.

Further copies available at 6d each, from

Institute of Church and Society, P.O. Box

4020, Ibadan.