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The Role of the Church in Combating Negative Ethnicity in Kenya: A Survey of Mainline Churches in Eldoret, Kenya

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Abstract

It is neither possible nor valuable to eradicate ethnicity from our lives or from our churches. Attempts to do so merely end up privileging one ethnicity over the others. This highlights the need and importance of an appropriate model approach that incorporates ethnicity and embraces its benefits, while also ensuring that the church remains unshaken. The aim of the study was to investigate the effects of negative ethnicity on the church in Kenya. The specific objectives of this study was to: find out the manifestations of negative ethnicity with specific references to churches in Kenya, find out the role of the church in combating negative ethnicity in Kenya, to establish the hindrances towards ethnic cohesion in Kenya and to give possible recommendations aimed at mitigating effects of negative ethnicity in the church with an aim of promoting inter-ethnic cohesiveness. The study utilized qualitative approaches, one hundred respondents were selected using purposive and simple random and interviewed. The findings of the study revealed that the church plays an important role in eliminating the negative effects of ethnicity within the church and country by extension. The study recommends that the church should deliberately integrate different ethnic groups in its organizational structures bearing in mind that we live in a multi-ethnic society.

Keywords: Christianity, negative ethnicity, ethnic cohesion, Church, Mainline Churches.

INTRODUCTION

Negative ethnicity characterises much of the African continent today. It has been argued by religious scholars that European Christian missionaries played a crucial role in the development of ethnic ideologies in Africa. Besides creating written languages, missionaries were instrumental in creating cultural identities through their specification of *custom* and *tradition* and by writing "tribal" histories. They also incorporated into the curricula of their mission schools the lesson that the pupils had *clear ethnic identities*. They educated local Africans who then themselves served as the most important force in shaping the new ethnic ideologies. This, coupled with the dictatorial colonial administration served to create the deep social divisions that are at the root of ethnic conflicts in many African states.

In Kenya as in other countries in Africa and around the world, the church is divided, compromised and at times even silenced. While Christian values are expected to foster national cohesion and identity, more often than not, Christianity has provided a convenient and effective rallying point around which negative ethnicities have thrived. This was evidenced during the 2007-2008 post-election violence in Kenya, which resulted in sharp divisions based on ethnicity and tribal groups, at all levels of society including the church (Katonga: 2008). The entire nation experienced the twin evils of ethnicity and impunity which breed all manner of evils and corruption that characterize our society today. Yet, amid all these, the big question was "where was the church? - "why didn't the church act swiftly to curb the negative ethnicities early enough?"

Nyokabi (u.d.) reports that statistics indicate that Kenya is much more Christianized than the other countries in Africa. She observes that Kenya is a secular state boasting of having an over 80% Christian population but points out that despite this, the expected effect has not been felt. This has been attributed to a silent church, silenced by the political class which has "bought out" some of the evangelical Christian leaders to gain their support.

It is against this backdrop that this study was undertaken. The paper adopted an investigatory approach to examine and eventually attempted to address negative ethnicity and the measures that the Church in Kenya can take to eliminate this vice, using illustrations from Christian Mainline Churches in Eldoret town.

The study aimed to investigate the effects of negative ethnicity on the church in Kenya. The specific objectives of this study were to: find out the manifestations of negative ethnicity with specific references to churches in Kenya; find out the role of the church in combating negative ethnicity in Kenya; establish the hindrances towards ethnic cohesion in Kenya and; give possible recommendations aimed at mitigating effects of negative ethnicity in the church with an aim of promoting inter-ethnic cohesiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Ethnicity

There is no single definition today for the term ethnicity. Various scholars have put forth definitions for ethnicity which carry the same meaning. According to Tarimo (2000:22), ethnicity refers to a group of people sharing a common name, language, symbols, socio-political organization, religious beliefs, cultural heritage, sometimes territory, common ancestry (descent), and a group identity. Another author, Fenton (1999:16) defines ethnicity as an aspect of collective self-recognition as well as an aspect of its recognition in the eyes of outsiders. This study defines ethnicity as social identification based on the presumption of shared history and a common cultural inheritance.

The field of Anthropology has studied ethnicity for almost half a century. Barth, (1998) says that ethnicity is created by the establishment of social boundaries. That is to say, ethnic identity is as much an identification of who we are *not*, as it is of who we *are*. Ethnic groups, then, are socially constructed entities, that form a larger taxonomy of people which informs actors within a particular social environment. By contrast, Isajiw (1979:10) defines the ethnic group as "an involuntary group of people who share the same culture or the descendants of such people who might identify themselves and/or are identified by others as belonging to the same involuntary group."

The Old Testament covenant affirms the importance of kinship or lines of descent, while not excluding foreigners from the people of God. It foreshadows the New Testament covenant whose explicit theme is the breaking down of dividing walls. Yet even in the New Testament ethnicity is not dispensed with so much as transcended and repositioned.

The Church

Religions do well to emphasize their quasi-family characteristics, and to affirm their commitment to the protection of real biological families. "Family" is neither the first nor the original meaning of the term "church." The Koine Greek term used in the New Testament, *ekklesia*, refers to an assembly of citizens summoned to consider matters of common interest (Songer, 2003). The English word "church," is a descendent term of the Greek *kyriake*, or "Lord's house" (I Tim. 3:15; I Pet. 4:17). It is true that a house is the residence of a family. But it is also a place of hospitality to non-family members. It is significant that Christians even today meet in "houses" of worship.

A house is also associated with a particular place. The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth and in Ephesus, and the Apostle John prophesies to the church in Smyrna and in Laodicea. Neither refers to the Jewish church or the Greek Church. Naming a house provides it with a kind of identity that is associated with its physical geography independently of the particular inhabitants of the moment. Likewise, the local church can have an identity that outlasts its parishioners of the time. So, the church's identification with a place, rather than a family, causes it to cross social boundaries, incorporating members of different ethnicities, and claiming an authority higher than any of them.

The Impact of Ethnicity upon the Church

Positive ethnicities bring to the church all of the linguistic and cultural benefits of incarnated Christian living. The gospel translated into the "heart-language" of the mother tongue, for instance, can move the soul beyond what any attempt to communicate in a second language can do. And, appreciation of the different culture of a fellow Christian can deepen our own understanding of the nature of the truth and of the Kingdom.

In contrast, negative ethnicity robs the Church of its ability to create a new community. According to Waruta (1992:6) "most religious groups and denominations, closely scrutinized, are very ethnic in their composition and leadership. Those that happen to be multi-ethnic with a national outlook are plagued with internal [interethnic] conflicts". Such a framework shows that the issue of ethnicity operates and creates tension in the Church as it does in the political arena.

Large established churches have bigger problems with democracy than the smaller newer churches. Although the latter are more “fundamentalist”, they are more democratic within, provide more prospects within for internal promotion and are not determined by a striving for supremacy. Warura (1992:7) opines that as far as the history of African Christianity is concerned, this situation is linked to the method applied by certain missionaries of concentrating their effort of evangelization within a given ethnic group, "thus producing a largely one-ethnic denomination. In the process of maintaining their dominance, such ethnic groups tend to conduct their worship services in their ethnic languages, thus keeping out all others".

Concerning power distribution and administration, leaders such as bishops from the Kenyan mainstream churches are often appointed and assigned duties basically on ethnic arrangements as more and more dioceses are created along ethnic boundaries. These churches are threatened by the clamour for each ethnic group to have its own bishop!. In an attempt to unveil the problems facing the church today, Tarimo (2000:25) says that the challenge of the Church is how it can appeal to the gospel values to construct a new community with new social relationships.

Christ is most central in multi-ethnic churches. In segregated churches, other agendas can predominate. Culture takes over, as the church becomes an increasingly useful association for ulterior purposes. But multi-ethnic, or multi-cultural, churches have nothing but Jesus to hold them together. It is neither possible nor valuable to eradicate ethnicity from our lives or from our churches. Attempts to do so merely end up privileging one ethnicity over the others.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary purpose of the present study was to investigate effects of negative ethnicity on the church in Kenya. First, the authors conducted a comprehensive literature review and established the effects of negative ethnicity on the church in Kenya. Reflecting both the issues revealed by the literature review and the authors’ subjective experience working at a religious environment, interview schedules were developed for the selected sample population at various religious churches mainly drawn from the main line churches. The churches included the following: Anglican (ACK), African Inland Church (AIC), The Reformed Church of East Africa (RCEA) and the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) The sample constituted one hundred (100) respondents comprising of twenty (20) church leaders who were purposively sampled and 80 Christian who were randomly sampled.

Table 1: Sample Size

| Respondents | Targeted Respondents - Church leaders | Targeted Respondents - Christians | Percentage (%) | Total |
|--------------|--|--------------------------------------|----------------|------------|
| ACK | 5 | 20 | 20% | 20 |
| AIC | 5 | 20 | 20% | 20 |
| RCEA | 5 | 20 | 20% | 20 |
| PCEA | 5 | 20 | 20% | 20 |
| TOTAL | 20 | 80 | 100% | 100 |

Qualitative approaches were used to analyze, present and interpret data.

The interview schedules for various groups of respondents were designed according to the research objectives and contained questions such as:

1. What are the manifestations of negative ethnicity with specific references to churches in Kenya?
2. What is the role of the church in combating negative ethnicity in Kenya?
3. What are the hindrances towards ethnic cohesion in Kenya?
4. Give some recommendations aimed at mitigating effects of negative ethnicity in the church with an aim of promoting inter-ethnic cohesiveness?

FINDINGS

The findings reported here are based on the responses to the face-to-face interviews done using interview schedules prepared by the researcher.

Characteristics of Respondents

The researcher interviewed 100 respondents mainly the church leadership as well as the Christians of the various churches. Therefore, the total population sample was 100 respondents drawn from the following churches:

- i. Anglican Church of Kenya -ACK
- ii. African Inland Church -AIC
- iii. Reformed Church of East Africa-RCEA
- iv. Presbyterian Church of East Africa-PCEA

Church leaders

These categories of respondents were mainly charged with general management and administration of the churches within their jurisdiction. The following is a summary of their duties and responsibilities:

- Officiate holy matrimonies
- Officiate burials
- Officiate baptism
- Marital counselling
- Pastoral visitation such as hospital, prison among others
- Evangelism
- Preaching
- Coordinating various church activities and function among others.

Christians

These respondents were mainly professionals in different fields such as, teachers, administrators, doctors, farmers, business, bankers, principals, deans, among others. Non-professionals were also sampled in the study. The respondents interviewed were Christians who attended the various churches that were sampled in this research. Most of the respondents interviewed reported to have been members of their churches for five years and above. They were therefore able to respond appropriately to the questions posed during the interviews.

Manifestations of Negative Ethnicity in Churches in Kenya

The study sought to find out the instances that Christians had felt marginalized based on their tribes/race. The following was reported:

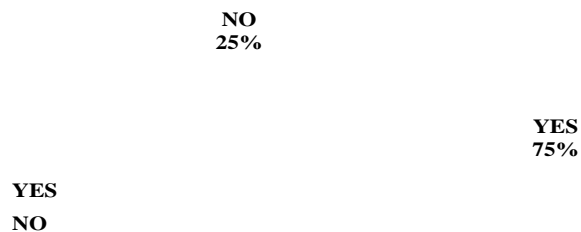


Figure 1. Instances of Marginalization based on Tribe

From the findings in figure 1, 75% of the respondents had experienced marginalization based on their tribes in their various churches. Majority of the respondents reported that they experienced this marginalization especially after the 2007 post election violence that rocked Kenya after the bungled elections. The study further sought to establish the level of manifestation of negative ethnicity in the church today. The following was reported:



Figure 2: Level of Manifestation of Negative Ethnicity in the Church

From the figure 2, 75% of the respondents believe that negative ethnicity exists in the church today. The study sought to find out the forms of manifestation of negative ethnicity with specific reference to the church in Kenya. The following were reported:

- Use of native language
- Sharing of leadership positions
- Sharing of resources
- Performance of songs-use native language at the expense of a mixed congregation.
- Selective transfer of church leaders.

The study revealed that 80% of the respondents view use of native language in the church today as a manifestation of negative ethnicity in the church. This is because they believed the region was quite cosmopolitan and thus it was fair to use a language commonly understood by most Christians i.e. Kiswahili or English.

Other respondents believed that ethnicity manifested itself in sharing of leadership positions. They reported most of the leadership positions were given to a specific tribe and that they felt sidelined in the whole processes. Other respondents reported that although they had leadership interests they were not very comfortable to contest for the position especially after the 2007 post election violence that rocked Kenya with the hardest hit region being Eldoret town.

The study further reported that 50% (50) of the respondents felt that ethnicity manifested itself in the church during sharing of resources especially those meant for the needy people. It was reported that most church leaders gave first priority to people from their own ethnic background. This was again evidenced during the distribution of relief to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) following the post-election violence. Respondents reported that this was done along ethnic lines.

The study further revealed that 20% (20) respondents believed that performance of songs-use of native languages in a mixed congregation was also a manifestation of negative ethnicity in the church. Furthermore 60% reported that people did group themselves according to their ethnic backgrounds.

Selective transfers from one church/ region to another was reported to be another form in which negative ethnicity manifested itself in the church. Priests were posted to the regions that they were ethnically inclined. Although in some cases this was meant to bridge the problem of low literacy level that was still being experienced in Kenya, a number of respondents felt strongly that some priests were transferred selectively.

Role of the Church in Combating Negative Ethnicity in Kenya

The other objective of the study was to find out the role of the church in combating negative ethnicity in Kenya. The following was established:

- **Peace building:** The study found that 98 % of the respondents believed that the church played a paramount role in peace building in the region. Church leaders mostly preached and emphasized on the need to stay harmoniously and to love one another despite the various different ethnic background.
- **Healing and reconciliation:** the study established that 100% respondents reported that the church played a paramount role in reconciling warring communities and members of different congregations. This role was mostly felt during national elections and especially after the 2007 post election violence in Kenya.
- **Redress:** the church also played a vital role in conflict arbitration and in the processes providing redress to conflicts that existed between warring members of a community.
- **Education:** the respondents further reported that indeed the church had played a role in educating people and Christians to view each other as members of one body in Christ and not different Christians with different ethnic groupings.
- **Evangelism:** This was reported to be actively undertaken towards peace building in all the churches sampled. Many of the respondents said the church played a big role in spreading the Gospel of Christ which carried the message of salvation and belonging to one big family-the family of Christ.
- **Weekly prayer meetings:** A number of respondents reported that the Christian churches in Eldoret had earlier on been holding weekly overnight inter-denominations prayer meetings (*Keshas*) to pray for the town of Eldoret. They were in agreement that the meetings helped to unify the body of Christ in the town. However, the study established that the overnight prayer meetings have not been taking place in the recent past.
- **Home Churches:** Many of the sampled respondents reported that they were active members of home churches/Cell Groups in their churches. They said that these were helpful in creating a bond of togetherness and a sense of belonging-to-one-family amongst the members irrespective of their tribal affiliations.
- **Church Visitations:** Some respondents reported that this was a serious Christian activity in their churches, in some cases involving the pastors and priests. The respondents felt that visitation programs in churches helped to create harmony and unity in the church where members were concerned about the welfare of one another.

Hindrances towards Ethnic Cohesion in Kenya

The study further sought to establish hindrances towards ethnic cohesion in Kenya. The following were reported:

- **Lack of Sensitization:** Prior to the post-election violence in Kenya, the threat of tribalism and ethnicity was more theoretic than practical, hence it was largely ignored. Sensitization efforts were not aggressively undertaken.
- **Low literacy levels:** 76% of the respondents reported that the low literacy levels especially in the rural places contributed to the continued manifestation of negative ethnicity in the church today. This is because church leaders were forced to preach and convey messages in native languages at the expense of other members in the congregation from different tribes. And this was a big obstacle to the spread of the gospel especially when there was no interpreter to translate. Further, this impacted on the transfer of pastors in the region especially in the rural areas.
- **Political interferences:** The study also revealed that political interferences posed a great obstacle to combating negative ethnicity in the church in Kenya today. The study established that most senior church leaders from the region were mostly from the host community, further political inclinations especially in the region and Kenya as a whole was also tribally inclined. As a result some Christians were afraid to take up leadership positions in some regions.
- **Population dispersal:** Most regions in Kenya are mostly dispersed along tribal lines. Most inhabitants in the counties and provinces are predominantly from one tribe thus this contributes to use of local dialects especially in rural places at the expenses of other minority tribes.
- **Lack of funds:** Financial constraints are a problem in most churches. This has had the effect of undermining church efforts towards combating negative ethnicity, such as organizing for outreach programs, peace building efforts, among others.

CONCLUSION

The African church in the 21st century is faced with a lot of challenges that are ethnically oriented. As a nation, Kenya is struggling to overcome nepotism and tribalism that are deep rooted in our society today. This study has demonstrated that ethnicity can become a blessing as long as it enriches social life. On the contrary, it can become a

curse when it becomes the source of division and hatred between ethnic groups. The church in Kenya therefore has a lot to do in combating negative ethnicity. As human beings we are all made in the image or likeness of God. This is the biblical foundation on which, as Christians, we evaluate cultures and political, theological and other expressions of identity. Conversion to Christ is meant to be a liberating experience. It means freedom from self-righteousness. Our common identity is formed and repeatedly questioned by our calling to be true to the reign of God. The vision of equality expressed in Gal 3.28 demands that every kind of dualism leading to segregation or discrimination must be rejected. The church in Kenya is the driving force towards this end.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from the findings of the study, the study makes the following recommendations aimed at mitigating negative ethnicity in the church:

- i. Church leaders need to entrench inter-ethnic peace and reconciliation committees in the church to ensure that negative manifestation of ethnicity in the church is mitigate.
- ii. Church leaders and Christians should be involved in inter-ethnic Christian exchange programmes especially with other religions/tribes/regions to promote peaceful coexistence among various tribes since the society we live in is homogeneous. In addition, Inter-ethnic cooperation and dialogue should therefore be promoted as a Christian ideology.
- iii. There is a need to develop educational and cultural programmes at the grassroots level through which ethnic and cultural diversities can be appreciated and integrated into national unity. The Church, can play a significant role in developing these programmes.
- iv. Church leaders should be more principled and committed to their work. This will be important in combating political interferences in the church today which is one of the major hindrances towards combating negative ethnicity in the church.
- v. The church leadership should ensure fair and equal distribution of resources that they receive for example donations to needy/ deserving members of the congregation irrespective of their tribal orientation.
- vi. The leadership in the various churches should also facilitate enactment of leadership structures that are reflective of the national outlook. The leadership structures should incorporate various tribes to give a sense of belonging in the church and society at large.
- vii. Church leaders should continuously instill patriotism based on nationalism rather than tribe.
- viii. The church leadership is encouraged to promote pulpits by different denominations as well as tribe to promote harmonious coexistence. For example, the overnight inter-denominational weekly prayer meetings in Eldoret should be revived.
- ix. The National Council of Churches in Kenya (NCCCK) which is the umbrella body for Christian churches in the country should propose new ways of integrating ethnic identity into the structure of State, especially in the wake of the implementation of the new constitution.

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