

# Challenges of Tribal and Ethnic Diversity in Africa

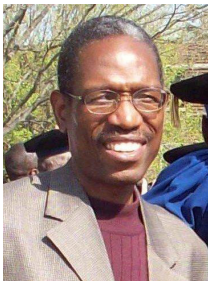
By John Shumba

In preparation for writing this article I interviewed several people at Andrews University from several African countries who have all requested anonymity. They unanimously told of experiences that reveal the presence and the impact of tribal and ethnic diversity on the mission of the Adventist Church in Africa. One pastor indicated how uncomfortable he felt working in a location away from his home region. By virtue of belonging to another ethnic group, he was viewed as a foreigner. Another pastor I talked to, though coming from a different country, also affirmed this reality of ethnic problems and ex-

pressed the need for the church to do something about it.

I have also traveled in some African countries and I have seen both the negative and positive impact of tribal and ethnic affinities. Church growth gurus have attested to the positive impact of tribal affinity when it comes to the spreading of the gospel within a particular people group. However, where Christ does not take root in the hearts of people, the Corinthian saga that the apostle Paul had to wrestle with seems to be the result (1 Cor 3:1). Unfortunately, in Africa not only are there administrative problems in the church due to tribal and ethnic affinities, but also the tragic loss of human life and political and social unrest seem to be the consequences of ethnic factions as illustrated by the cases of Rwanda (BBC 2008), Zimbabwe (Sithole 1998:370), Kenya (Oyugi 1998:308), Ghana (Agveman 1998:196), and Nigeria (Egwu 1998:65).

In one country, I was told that there is an ethnic group, a large tribe, which was quite vocal and very dominant in its attitude towards God's work. This people group created problems until the country's administrative struc-



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ture was divided into two unions. But what happened then was a shift from inter-ethnic friction to inter-clan factionalism within the same people group.

In another country, I was also informed that at the conference level, where the field membership is mainly composed of one major ethnic group, there were administrative clashes between clans. While at the conference level, where there are many ethnic groups, the same type of friction and favoritism existed between differing ethnic groups.

The problem with these ethnic challenges is that an individual may not operate effectively in a conference mainly dominated by believers of a different tribe or in a territory not of his or her ethnic heritage. There is little tolerance for mistakes committed by someone who does not belong to the cultural group of the people he or she is working with, while those of the same tribe are tolerated and forgiven when they do something wrong. Transparency and required faithfulness are not promoted uniformly.

With regards to someone working in a foreign territory (a different tribal area), there is never complete acceptance and unequivocal support from the indigenous people group. For instance, an individual coming from another country or people group generally is not supported fully because he or she is considered as a foreigner (as noted in one of my interviews).

This article will discuss some

of these challenges that the Adventist Church in Africa is dealing with, such as friction between tribal and political parties, favoritism, nepotism, promotion within the church based on tribal affiliation, quotas for positions, and glass ceilings for certain minority ethnic groups.

### **The Underlying Root Causes**

One overriding cause of these challenges relates to the fact that the African assumptions of reality are generally founded on a collective identity; in contrast, Western assumptions are individualistic. According to Marshall Segal, "People hold their own group in highest regard, and social distance increases as perceived similarity diminishes. Likeability of other groups is correlated with cultural similarity, proximity, and opportunity for contact" (Segal 1999:296). Central to this identification is the interdependence between humans and their environment which motivates all relationships and behavior within a community of a particular people group. Theo Sundermeier succinctly observes: "The relationship of the human being to the community goes beyond community life. It involves interdependence: people, animals and environment exchange their strength, and are in a relationship of osmosis" (Sundermeier 1998:18). This interdependence explains the solidarities of the African communities (Thorpe 1991), which translates into ethnic rivalries and ethnocentric attitudinal behaviors towards those of

a different ethnicity. Thus, these ethnocentric attitudes based on collective identity negatively impact tribal and ethnic diversity in Africa.

There are multiple underlying causes of these ethnic challenges and phenomena; however, the fundamental causes are dual in nature. One has to do with human social dynamics, while the other is very subtle in nature. Human social dynamics imply group shared traits that motivate society's good or destructive behaviors. With regards to the subtle causes of ethnic challenges, this underscores the

are buried (for example, in the Bible, Abraham was promised the land of Canaan by God to be occupied by his offspring, thus when Jacob and Joseph died in Egypt their bodies were preserved and buried in Canaan, the promised land (Gen 15:7, 16; 50:5, 13, 25-26). Thus, it is not strange that when an African dies here in America for the body to be shipped home at great expense in order to be buried with the ancestors. Ancestral land, a geographical political area, is viewed as the motherland or homeland. For example, Ile-Ife in Nigeria is "believed by the Yoruba to be

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latent or hidden causative nature of African challenges.

To begin with I will discuss the human dynamics and then look at the subtle element(s). One phenomenon that characterizes the dynamics of African societies as mentioned above is a collective identity which manifests itself in the attachment to and the sense of ancestral land ownership. This attachment to one's ancestors creates a very strong sense of ethnic or people group solidarity. A territory occupied by a particular people group for centuries is thus considered more like sacred land because it is the land where the ancestors and family members

their ancestral home" (Abimbola 1991:52). Other notable examples are Barotseland belonging to the Lozi ethnic people group in Western Zambia (Kaplan 1979), and Nandiland belonging to the Kalenjin, a Kenyan tribe (Oyugi 1998:309). These motherlands are areas where for many years an ethnic people group has predominated, settled, and owned the land (see also MacGaffey 1986:25).

When missionaries came to Africa, some approached the chiefs who authorized them to establish their denominational schools and medical centers on the chief's land. For example, in

Zambia, Adventists as well as other denominations are mainly found in traditional areas where the early missionaries settled. In Monze, a Tonga area, where the Rusangu Mission and the Zambia Adventist University are located Chief Monze authorized Anderson to build a school there (Kaoma 2009); Chief Lewanika of the Lozi people granted the Plymouth Brethren Missionaries, Fred Arnot and Francois Coillards, to set up schools in Barotseland, while Adventists opened mission stations and the Yuka Mission Hospital (where this author worked as a mechanic and assistant maintenance manager); Mwami Mission Hospital located in Eastern Zambia occupies the land that Chief Mpezeni granted to Adventist missionaries. In Botswana (i.e., Kanye Hospital), Malawi (Malamula Hospital), Nigeria (Babcock University), Uganda (Bugema), Zimbabwe (Solusi University) and Kenya (Baraton University), missionaries opened schools and medical centers as authorized by chiefs or their representatives (see Kaoma 2009:77 and Kellner 2009:17). One of the reasons why the schools and hospitals were built in these locations, in my opinion, was more from a political perspective than from any strategic purpose that would contribute to effective mission.

Eventually, these locations became evangelistic centers when the chiefs or the majority of a particular people group joined the church, which further tied the entire ethnic group to its close af-

filiation with a particular church. In such cases, among the converts there is the sense that these institutions belong to the people group rather than to the country.

It is not strange to find some areas in Africa where the political geography or territorial demarcation are based on people group dynamics because of the treatise that the chiefs signed with the colonial masters in collaboration with the missionaries. Thus, a particular denomination like the Adventists, Anglicans, Dutch Reformed, Catholics, and others tend to have their members largely from a particular ethnic group by virtue of the existing missionary establishment within that ethnic territorial area. There is also a sense of ownership of that church or denomination by a single ethnic group such that individuals from other ethnic groups who come to work in their territory, implicitly or explicitly, are considered as foreigners, though they may be members of the same denomination.

Elsewhere in Africa, when the missionaries were accepted by the chiefs and then went on to establish a church, more often than not the church came under that ethnic group's jurisdiction. This scenario is not isolated to Africa. In the reformation period, many reform movements became state denominations by virtue of the acceptance of a particular reformer's doctrinal position that was embraced by the people in the territory (George 1988). The case of the Church of England provides

a classic example of an entire nation belonging to the Anglican Church by virtue of the king's mandate; whereas Germany, since the reformation is known to be predominantly Lutheran. Also, ethnic tensions based on people groups existed in Europe in the 13th and 14th century such that some ministers denied certain ethnic groups church membership or participation in church functions (McKay, Hill, Buckler, and Elbrey 2004:408). As such, the scenario of ethnic tensions witnessed in Africa is not uniquely African as much as it is a common human social dynamic.

However, what is seen in Africa today is that some denominations still reflect that early interaction between a particular people group and the missionaries who established churches in their land. What is important to note is that some provincial or regional areas remain politically demarcated along tribal lines such that many tribes share the same religion in a given province with one tribe dominating in most cases. All African countries have regional and political territorial divisions based on ethnic settlements. In Ghana, for example, the Akan (Ashanti Kingdom) ethnic group (49.3 percent of the country) is the largest people group predominantly occupying the Asante region in central Ghana. Other ethnic groups include the Mole-Dagbon (15.2 percent) and the Ewe (11.7 percent) which are found in southeastern Ghana and in the southern parts of neighboring

Togo and Benin. "The Adangbe are found to the east, the Ga-Dangme groups (7%) to the west of the Accra coastlands" (*Africa Guide* 2009; see also Wikipedia, s.v. "Ghana" for statistics). In Kenya the major ethnic groups are the Kikuyu (22 percent), the highland Bantus, the Luhya (14 percent), the Nilotic Luo (13 percent), the Kalenjin (12 percent) who are known as Nandi people groups, and the Kisii (6 percent), a Bantu group settling in the Kisii central district of Kenya (Oyugi 1998:288, 289; see also Wikipedia.com, s.v. demographics under Kenya). Except for migrations due to urbanization, all these ethnic groups live in their ancestral land areas which they have occupied since before the colonization of Africa.

It is these ethnic group settlements located in particular geographical locations which form the contours of each African country's political and often denominational affiliations. Where churches are established, if the majority of the membership is from one ethnic group, then the social dynamics come into play in a way that the minorities do not have a strong voice in the administrative process. Consequently, the ethnic and diversity challenges mentioned above manifest themselves. Unfortunately, some sectors of the church experience favoritism, nepotism, and tribal conflicts leading to a whole host of administrative problems.

With regards to the missionary legacy that impacted the human

social dynamic, by the time most missionaries left Africa, they had neither adequately addressed these ethnic phenomena or the deeper worldview issues in their pursuit to civilize the church based on dualistic Western Judeo Christianity (Nida 1986:182, 257; Parrinder 1985:259). Furthermore, the missionaries perceived that “proper European civilization was Christianity, and the only way to bring about conversion was to establish this cultural framework” (Kirby 1994:61). In which case, “they were ignorant of African institutions and did not care to investigate them,” instead worked towards “suppressing

be that the church in the West also is struggling with its own cultural identity, such that it is not able to critique its assumptions of reality and shape its culture based on a sound biblical worldview that Jesus exemplified in his discipleship and mission to the world (Matt 28:19-20) so as to help the church in Africa?

It is my assumption that the Adventist Church did not do its part in the conversion process effectively and adequately because of its own Western cultural idiosyncrasy. Inferring to the words of Jon Kirby, the Adventist “churches were poorly prepared theologically and culturally to

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traditional rituals and beliefs, thereby preventing an objective, balanced view of African traditional religions” (Kirby 1994:60). Hence, they could not come up with an appropriate paradigm to enable the church to deal with the cultural phenomena that are deeply imbedded in the people’s cultural assumptions about reality (see Nida 1986:55, 259).

Could it be that the global church does not have the capacity to deal with this African problem objectively in order to help bring these tribal divisions into unity as taught and demonstrated in Jesus Christ? Could it

accept any alternatives to their own way of praying, thinking, believing and behaving” (Kirby 1994:61). As such, what is seen in the African Adventist is spiritual immaturity that manifests itself in the ethnic and diversity challenges highlighted above.

**The Impact on the Adventist Church**

The social dynamics prevalent in Africa impact leadership selection, administrative problems, and complete discipleship. The selection of church leaders becomes a very sensitive issue and also the location of the adminis-



trative offices are affected by the social dynamics created when an ethnic group predominates within a given administrative territory. On the other hand, the church may grow numerically within a particular territory along tribal lines, but not necessarily as a result of every believer's complete conversion.

For example, when I was a field president the Zambia Union recommended the merging of our field with another field that had a stronger financial operating position. There was opposition from some pastors who were not willing for the fields to merge

sense of collective identity. This identity impacts attitudes and values and manifests itself in the many challenges mentioned above which the church faces. Tribal loyalty often seems to override spiritual identity. Thus an African Adventist deals with life on two levels: as an African and as an Adventist, and "during times of crisis in a person's life, the common practice is to revert to the traditional [identity] for solutions" (Ndung'u 2008:72).

It is very important to note that the social loyalties, the tribal solidarity, the collective sense of identity as seen in African Ad-

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into one unit. The reason for this unwillingness was that they felt the field belonged to them; it was theirs, and they could not imagine being led administratively by someone from another ethnic group. Unfortunately, the realignment did not take place, largely because of this sense of ownership based on ethnicity.

Africans generally share this dynamic phenomenon. Ancestral land ownership and ethnic solidarity seem to shape the behavior of many people. People value the homeland as territory they own. They have a very strong

ventism are not in and of themselves the major root cause of the problems that the church is facing; however, this phenomenon is symptomatic of the underlying bigger problem that the church needs to investigate and discuss openly in order to formulate a strategy to deal with it.

In my opinion, compounding this African Adventist identity is the subtle element of sin and evil. The challenges witnessed in Africa are merely a manifestation of this sin problem that operates at the deeper level of each African Adventist's worldview (Rom 3:10).

The problem in Africa is similar to the problem that the Church at Corinth faced: factions based on favorable preachers (1 Cor 1:10). The common denominator is the “carnal mind” which is the fallen and corrupt nature of all humanity (1 Cor 3:1). As in Corinth, leaders are voted into office because they belong to Apollo’s ethnic party or Paul’s. The apostle Paul contends that such brethren are not spiritual, but are *carnal*, just babes in Christ (1 Cor 3:1). Paul further addresses the issue of the flesh as manifested in hatred, strife, emulations, wrath, rivalries, *dissensions*, and sects (Gal 5:20, emphasis mine). Consequently, when there is conflict between differing ethnic groups, an Adventist may side with those whom she or he shares the same ethnic identity with.

It is this spirit that permeates the African affinities fostering a spirit of division and hate towards other ethnic brethren and a preference for one’s ethnic group to lead the church of God over others at the expense of effective and holistic mission “to every nation, tribe, language and people” (Rev 14:6).

It is my hope that the church in Africa as well as the global church will consider these questions seriously and come up with tangible solutions to adequately address these ethnic and diversity challenges. The implications to the aforementioned challenges as discussed below will further reveal the need for urgency in addressing these situations in Africa.

## **The Implications of These Challenges**

The primary challenge that the Adventist Church in Africa faces because of the tribal loyalties can be summarized in Obama’s words: “No person wants to live in a society where the rule of law gives way to the rule of brutality and bribery” (Joseph 2009). The church is not immune to such brutality. The situation that Obama spoke to relates to Kenya, where tribal politics, it was suggested, was the reason why he chose to go to Ghana rather than to Kenya, the land of his extended family. In Africa, as in other parts of the world, too often what you see in the local culture socially overflows into the church.

What struck me the most was the testimony offered by an Adventist on BBC lamenting that the people who attacked him and his family during the Kenyan saga were fellow Adventists whom he grew up with and went to school with. They attacked him just because he was from the wrong tribe. Another terrible illustration is what happened in Rwanda where Adventists attacked and killed Adventists. How can it be that Adventist believers can be killed in Kenya and Rwanda by fellow Adventists just by virtue of belonging to a minority tribe! With the prevalence of such tribal loyalties throughout Africa, who knows where and when a similar tribal time bomb might explode next.

Even in the absence of atrocities there are other ways that tribal loyalties interfere and hin-



der the mission of the church. Constituency meetings and church elections are areas where tribal loyalties rather than biblical standards for church leadership seem to clash.

There are fields in Africa where pastoral leadership from another ethnic group is not welcomed by those from the majority group of pastors or by many of the church members. These tribal affinities rob the church of spiritually gifted and skilled men and women. Instead spiritual leadership selection is too often based on tribal affiliation instead of spiritual merit. Most tragic in these situations is the fact that the church has failed to communicate basic biblical truth about the oneness in Christ and has failed to become salt and light to the community.

Another negative impact is the loss of qualified leadership as some become so discouraged and disgusted with such a system that they migrate to the West or in that some find it hard to return to their home countries after studying abroad because of the glass ceilings imposed on them because they are from a minority group.

It seems that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has focused most of its attention on teaching the doctrines of the church rather than working to continue the process of discipleship and nurture whereby new believers become a new creation living under the lordship of Jesus Christ. There is nothing wrong with the doctrines, but they must be lived out, they must transform the old loyalties,

they must replace the old allegiances with an awareness of the oneness of the body of Christ. Too often the implications of living in Christ have not been discussed or addressed, so by default members are left to follow the messy, sinful cultural practices. This has the following tragic consequences for the church:

1. *Lack of total conversion.* Christ is not the Lord of every believer's life and his love has not become the motivation for mission and personal behavior. The ethics of the kingdom as taught by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount are too often not witnessed in the believers' lives and daily practices (Matt 5-8). With this tragic reality the church has no moral ability to bring lasting change to the world for it acts too much like the world. A lack of total conversion means no salt, no light, which cripples the very mission of the church (Matt 5:13, 14-16).

2. *Lack of unity* (John 17:11, 21). Jesus prayed for all his followers to be united as he is united with the Father. Unity in the church is fundamental to the proclamation of the gospel. This unity is not based on ethnicity or cultural affiliation but on the belief that all are made in the image of God and all are one in Christ.

However, what is seen too often in the African Adventist Church is ethnic solidarity which operates under the influence of sin, the carnal nature, and cultural practices. This ethnic solidarity quickly identifies with those outside the church and the result is

the type of brutality witnessed in those African countries where ethnic political differences in the world overflow into the church.

3. *Lack of transparency and openness* in church operations. The absence of transparency or openness in the operations of the church is characteristic of any organization that operates based on ethnic loyalties. This practice amounts to unfaithful stewardship and often results in brutality serving as the way of solving cultural differences. When all workers are not treated equally or when the allocation of responsibilities are based on ethnicity rather than on giftedness and talents as

### **Possible Solutions**

I believe that it is time for spiritually mature and well-informed missiologists and theologians to establish a think-tank where reflection and a thorough review of the situation in Africa can be undertaken in order to objectively identify the root causes of the problem in African Adventism. The goal of such a group would be to come up with cultural sensitive strategies to combat the ethnic loyalties and the underlying sin problem.

I also believe that African Adventism needs the gospel in its power, for the gospel has power to save to the uttermost those

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outlined in the Word of God, the church suffers. Lack of transparency can also result in minority groups not being given adequate resources or scholarships to allow them to advance their education just because they come from the *wrong* tribe and do not belong to the same ancestral region. This ethnocentric spirit destroys the morale of those viewed as foreigners and affects their productivity and effectiveness in ministry.

How then can the Adventist Church in Africa break away from these tribal loyalties and take advantage of the unique diversity prevalent in the church?

who come to Christ (Rom 1:16, 17). Therefore the gospel must be preached more effectively in the power of the Spirit (Acts 1:8). Most importantly, it must cover the whole life of every individual believer (Ndung'u 2008:72) and transform the underlying assumptions of African reality into a biblically shaped worldview (Rom 1:17).

There is need for a new approach to evangelism to complement the old doctrinal approach that dealt with the cognitive aspects of the Christian faith while often leaving out the affective nature of faith. My opinion

is that the doctrinal approach to evangelism that characterizes our mission operations may have contributed to the nature and quality of African Adventism. This approach does not objectively address the deeper and core values of African identity, such that as observed by Jon Kirby when he says “conversion to Christianity may mean very little or no change at all” (Kirby 1994:58). Therefore, many Adventists in Africa need total conversion resulting from a spiritual birth that fosters a biblically shaped worldview empowered by the teachings of Jesus Christ (John 3:3, 5; 1:12; Matt

needs to address the core African assumptions of reality for a paradigm shift to take place at the underlying deeper levels of African beliefs and values if the believers are to act and behave as the Bible demands and establish Jesus as the Lord of their lives. The loyalty of every believer must be valued through the lenses of Scripture to see whether it aligns with the biblical values as communicated by Jesus Christ or with the ethnic traditional values as taught by the local culture (Matt 5-7). Fundamentally, the Lordship of Jesus in the life of every African Adventist must be paramount and the

## **Adventist Church doctrines ought to become practical theology.**

5-7). Empowered by the Word of God, the believers will be able to critique their ethnic loyalties that may be attributed to strong preference for cultural identity and authenticity (Kirby 1994:58); in which case, an Adventist may be able to check on nepotism and favoritism towards one’s ethnic group over other fellow Adventists of a different people group.

Adventist Church doctrines ought to become practical theology fostering strong morals and effectively impacting every believer’s emotional well being. When it comes to the deeper levels of actions, the sinful flesh should be under the control of the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:13).

Therefore, the church in Africa

objective mission purpose for the entire Adventist Church. Christ owns the church, he purchased it by his own precious blood, and it belongs to him (1 Pet 1:19). Consequently, all loyalty is to Christ Jesus the Lord and not to one’s ethnic affinity group.

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