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Humanity Made in the Image of God: Towards Ethnic Unity in Africa

by Philip Tachin

Abstract

Ethnic divisions plague Africa and these divisions often lead to violence. This has become a cankerworm in the African marrow, eating away at the developmental and progressive elements within every nation and preventing growth. Ethnic diversity, with all its potential beauty and riches, becomes ugly when various ethnicities hate and destroy one another rather than integrating and complementing one another for mutual growth. This paper critically analyses one of the causal factors of this unhealthy division - a poor view of our own image. I argue that for Africa to progress it must align itself with the biblical concept of man as the image bearer of God. When we see each other as made in God's image, we will see those of other ethnicities as extensions of ourselves and so work together with one another in our national schemes.

Introduction

The colonialists forged many diverse ethnic groups into nations, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. This diversity has often produced negative consequences in African nations: ethnic tension, hatred, struggle, and wars of wanton destruction, especially when the distribution of political power and economic wealth come into play. Whether by deliberate choice or negligence, the colonial powers failed to try to imbue these diverse ethnic groups with a sense of oneness that would diminish or replace the major differences that often characterize them.¹ After the exit of the colonialists, there was an ever-growing ethnic identity that overshadowed national identity. This state of affairs has greatly inhibited the development of individual African nations, and comes, in part, from a poor epistemic view of who and what we are.

One of Africa's greatest challenges is self-realization and the need to advance socio-economic and political stability. Current events in Africa constitute serious theological concerns. For quite some time, Africans have had a serious "battle over image."² This image problem involves how we view ourselves and how we let others view us. Various African scholars have critically analyzed the problem and offered solutions such as Nigeria's National Sovereign Conference.³ But these efforts have not addressed the ontological

¹ Tokunbo Simbowale Osinubi and Oladipupo Sunday Osinubi, in, "Ethnic Conflicts in Contemporary Africa: The Nigerian Experience," *Journal of Social Science*, 12 (2): (2006), 102, also blame the colonial masters for the endemic ethnic problems in Africa.

² Francis Anekwe Oborji, "The Theological Language in Africa: A Missiological Reflection," cited at <https://www.sedosmission.org/web/index> on May 8, 2013.

³ See Osinubi and Osinubi, "Ethnic Conflicts in Contemporary Africa," 111-112.

foundation of humanity, of which ethnic groups need to be well informed. African theologians bring theological concepts to bear on the African situation, but the concept of our being made in the image of God, which has so much to do with changing our intellectual orientation, has not been given an in-depth articulation and application to the African context, nor has there been an examination of how it can positively impact our sense of unity, creativity, self-actualization, and destiny.⁴ This essay tries to fill that gap by urging all the diverse ethnic groups in Africa to see themselves as extensions of one another. This can help Africans develop an attitude of acceptance, love, tolerance, and unity that will ultimately turn Africa from a pariah continent into the pride of its citizenry.

Being created in the image of God gives us a higher status and an integration that is greater than the linguistic and cultural diversities that make us different from one another. It is important for people to know that we all are equally created in the image of God and be sensitive to that fact, rather than simply acknowledging it. Such knowledge and understanding should make every individual and every ethnic group choose to view others with a sense of brotherliness, dignity, and responsibility.

Most of this essay refers to the Nigerian context, as that country has the highest combination of ethnic groups, about 250,⁵ and a Nigerian solution to ethnicism may be a solution for other African nations as well.

The Negative Impact of Ethnicism in Africa

What makes people into a distinct ethnic group and ethnicity is shared “beliefs, values, habits, customs and norms because of their common background.” These qualities usually make them see themselves as “different and special”, superior to others.⁶ Ethnicism has, to some degree, negatively impacted African nations in all aspects of development from annoyances to civil wars. Ethnic groups in Africa have developed such rigid, emotional, and stereotyped predispositions against one another that they resist changing their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours towards one another.

1. Ethnic Superiority

The attitude of superiority over others progressively turns into a cultural mentality that perceives those who are different as peculiar. The idea found in multicultural societies that one’s own culture is superior to all others, more

⁴ Richard Rwiza, argues that the issue of identity and dignity is a struggle for Africans even in the 21st century globalized context. See his article, “Laurenti Magesa: An African Liberation Theologian,” in *African Theology in the 21st Century: The Contribution of the Pioneers*, vol. 2. (Nairobi: Paulines Africa, 2006), 238.

⁵ CIA, *The World FactBook* 2013 ISSN 1553-8133, cited at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> on June 3, 2013.

⁶ Conrad Phillip Kottak, *Mirror for Humility: A Concise Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (Boston: McGraw-Hill Company, 1999), 37.

often than not, turns African ethnicities against one another and results in oppression and other forms of injustice. This often degenerates into serious hatred and violent conflicts. As the African history of ethnic violence can testify, this unhealthy attitude has bred a high level of prejudice and discrimination between ethnicities. But while major ethnicities have often undermined minorities over time, ethnicism has also pushed minorities to develop a survival strategy that usually turns into contests and struggles that become violent at the slightest opportunity. As sophisticated firearms proliferate in Africa, some minorities have been asserting themselves.

When political actions are not geared towards national development but towards ethnic interests, national values are set aside and progressive development becomes a fiction the ruling ethnic group uses to legitimize its privileges. Cacho rightly argues that the main constraint shackling African nations is ethnicism:

Yet tribalism is at the root of these regularly identified development constraints. Tribalism directly affects the quality of governance; it is conducive to corruption, negatively impacts the availability of investment finance, prevents thousands of skilled Africans from returning home and indeed encourages many who are trained in the subcontinent, to emigrate.⁷

2. Bad Governance

In this context, bad governance becomes the order of the day while good governance suffers. The rule of law fails in countries like Nigeria because those who enforce it apply it selectively, in most cases favouring their own kith and kin while victimizing people of other ethnic extractions. The rule of law requires the cooperation of all citizens in the various related sectors, especially in fighting corruption, but there is always mass connivance to defeat justice, prudence, transparency, and accountability simply to safeguard those who belong to a politically connected group. With this unhealthy situation, no magic can make African nations achieve a higher level of development.

Though violent conflicts have been diminishing in some African countries recently, many nations still suffer internal ethnic conflict. And even as there is reduced violence, ethnic tension has always been manifest among the groups over a number of issues. In virtually all aspects of national existence “tribal structures of Africa continue to manipulate politics and control the lives of its citizens.”⁸ This state of affairs subjects African people to indignity, no longer imposed by the colonialists but perpetrated by Africans on themselves. That

⁷ Cornelius P. Cacho, “Tribalism - The Binding Constraint on African Development,” May 21, 2008. This article was cited from the Foreign Policy Association at http://www.fpa.org/topics_info2414/topics_info_show.htm on May 8, 2013. The word, ‘tribalism’ has been disputed and some scholars seek to replace it with ‘ethnicism’ but what obtains in Africa is practically the same whether labelled tribalism or ethnicism.

⁸ George H. Wittman, “Tribalism Cripples Africa,” posted on December 24, 2005 at <http://www.ghanaweb.com>, and cited on May 4, 2013.

ethnic groups inflict humiliation upon others shows that they rate those others as less than human. The chronicle of ethnic clashes in Nigeria alone is overwhelming.⁹ The derogatory attitude and behaviour that ensue among ethnic groups evidences a lack of understanding among Africans of what it means to be human. This epistemic failure is due in part to the mentality that secular anthropology has inculcated in Africans, placing humans alongside animals due to some physiological similarities. Prehistoric fossils serve as the basis for connection between what is called modern man and animals.¹⁰ In this view, humans evolved from lower animals. This question of origin is of fundamental importance because one's view of one's background can have either negative or positive effect on one's self-image. Evolutionary theories contain no cogent or sufficient elements that might change the conceptual orientation and behaviour of those who destroy others simply because they differ in ethnic, cultural, and religious leanings.

Studies have shown that African nations that are more homogenous lean towards unity and stability.¹¹ The more ethnically diverse nations of Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Tanzania, Sudan, Somalia, Central Africa Republic, Ghana, Congo, Ethiopia, and Nigeria all have sad histories of ethnicism and its bitter consequences.¹² Writing on the Kenyan experience, one report laments the constant tribal political struggles between the Kikuyu and the Luo - the groups that dominate the other forty ethnicities - and the increased devastation under Daniel Arap Moi.¹³ A failure of African leaders is that they are generally not

⁹ The recent Fulani invasion of various groups such as Berom, Tarok, Eggon and Tiv in the north central, and the Jukun-Tiv, Hausa-Jukun, Fulani-Eggon, Eggon-Alago, Eggon-Migili, Fulani-Agatu and Fulani-Kataf conflicts all point to this fact. Sometimes these groups also attack the Fulani, generally because other groups devalue their dignity. Also in the past some ethnic groups in the South-South like Ijaw-Itsekiri, Ijaw-Urhobo, Ijaw-Ilajes, Ife-Modakeke, Aguleri-Umuleri, engaged in fierce fights destroying one another. (See *Vanguard*, July 16, 2012; *ThisDay* March 21, 2013; *Gboozza, The African Social News Network*, January 30, 2012; *Vanguard* April 9, 2013; *ThisDay* May 14, 2013; *The Sun News* May 14, 2013; *Guardian* June 2, 2013).

¹⁰ See E. Adamson Hoebel, *Anthropology: The Study of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book, 1966), 7, 97 ff; James Peoples and Garrick Bailey, *Humanity: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (Australia: Thomson-Wadsworth, 2003), 21-24. There are numerous other works on this issue, though the theories conflict. It must be critically observed that the ascription, 'modern man' only serves one perspective which is inappropriate for man has always been what he is today in physiological structure.

¹¹ Calestous Juma, "Viewpoint: How Tribalism Stunts African Democracy," 27 November 2012. This article was cited from the BBC web page at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-20465752> on May 8, 2013.

¹² Nigeria alone accounts for over 35,000 lost lives in the last decade.

¹³ P. Asmussen, A. Brochstedt, L. Jensen, A. Kjær, M. Krogholt, L. Mortensen, *Tribalism in Africa: The Complexity of Ethnicity*, Roskilde University Digital Archive, 53-54; http://rudar.ruc.dk/bitstream/1800/4204/3/PROJECT_til_biblio.pdf, accessed May 12, 2014 at 10:00 AM.

policy driven even though there seems to be available policies, and those who do talk about policies seem never to put them into practice.

Davidson blames the current situation in Africa on the colonial structures that refused to recognize the peculiar sociological and cultural context of Africa.¹⁴ This results in a state of affairs that “flourishes on disorder, is utterly destructive of civil society, makes hay of morality, flouts the rule of law. It is the reverse of the civil society revealed by the records of history increasingly and intensively inspected, since the 1950s, by historians from many cultures and countries.”¹⁵ Although ethnic groups and their differences existed before colonialism, the colonialists exacerbated these to their own advantage.

3. Military Rule

Since independence, Africans have experienced military rule at times in their various countries. The military used their powers to favour their own ethnic groups while at the same time suppressing other groups. Even today, some military personnel generally look upon civilians with the utmost disdain. When democracy returned to some African countries after international pressure, some African civilian leaders replicated the military’s inglorious treatment of their citizens. There has been such vast injustices and massive corruption that socio-economic suffering has become the lot of many Africans. The deteriorating leadership system in Africa, as leaders tend to manipulate their political and economic resources to the advantage of their kinsmen, has bred distrust and made all ethnic groups overly sensitive to their own existence and to seek their welfare at the expense of other ethnic groups. A national identity does not factor strongly in the mentality of ethnic groups as they owe more allegiance to their ethnic interests than to national interests. This further compounds the political situation such that this constant tension among ethnic groups scheming against one another. In Nigeria, this problem manifests during presidential and gubernatorial campaigns and also at the Federal Character Commission, which is supposed to fairly distribute public sector jobs among all ethnic groups.

Some politically, economically, strategically, socially, and numerically stronger ethnic groups believe that certain positions in any country are their exclusive right, while other groups may only have them by privilege. For instance, in Nigeria, the Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, which are the major ethnic groups, have struggled over key positions since independence, and those three groups in turn suppress the minorities. It is as a result of this that Awolowo sees Nigeria, not as a nation but as a geographical expression.¹⁶ Similarly, Tafawa Balewa did not see the ethnic groups in Nigeria as one people but as different peoples artificially lumped together showing no visible

¹⁴ Basil Davidson, *The Black Man’s Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (Abuja: Spectrum Books, 2005), 11, 225.

¹⁵ Davidson, *The Black Man’s Burden*, 11.

¹⁶ Obafemi Awolowo, *Path to Nigerian Freedom* (Lagos: Faber & Faber, 1947), 47-48.

willingness to grow together in unity.¹⁷ Greed for political control along ethnic lines has been so exacerbated that the majority ethnic groups accuse one another of marginalization, whereas the ethnic minorities also have their own tales to tell, first, against one another and then against the majority groups.¹⁸

4. Language Divisions

Language is one of the most divisive features in ethnicism. In Nigeria, for instance, English is the lingua franca, but in many public offices, including academic institutions, native languages dominate. In many cases, the native languages determine whether one can get a job or any favour in government establishments. For instance, if one speaks Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, or any of the local languages in a public office where the person in charge speaks the same language, the chance of getting one's desired favour is about 80%. Those who are not able to communicate with the person in charge in his or her own language are often at a disadvantage, no matter how highly qualified they may be. Another feature that heightens the spirit of ethnicism is the question of the "indigene":¹⁹ no citizen is qualified to work in a state government outside of one's original home state. Even federal agencies in particular states are dominated by indigenes of a state in which such agencies are established. Thus ethnicism has been a great hindrance to national development.

5. Conclusion

The causes of ethnic disputes are mainly land disputes, cultural differences, religious bigotry, economic manipulation, and political interests.²⁰ Fighting seems to be everywhere, and it affects the stability of the continent at all those points of conflicting interests, so that it is apparent that tribal or ethnic politics will die hard on the continent. The nature of ethnicism is to suppress other ethnicities by undermining their potential to contribute to the overall good of society. There is no continent on earth in the twenty-first century where people of similar cultures would hunt down and kill fellow humans as they do animals, except Africa. Africans apply the same hunting mood for animals to their fellow Africans in all kinds of violent conflicts. While secular anthropology has not helped to change such negative attitudes of Africans among

¹⁷ Tafawa Balewa in his Legislative debate in March 1948, cited in Dan Agbese, *Nigeria Their Nigeria* (Lagos: Newswatch Books, 2008), 69.

¹⁸ Jude Uwalaka argues against the marginalization of Igbos in *The Struggle for an Inclusive Nigeria: Igbos to be or not to be?* (Enugu: Snaap Press, 2003), 29; see Simon A. Rakov, "Ethnicity in Nigeria," Fall 1990, and cited at <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/nigeria/ethnicity.html> on May 1, 2013; Jibrin Ibrahim argues that the Hausa/Fulani have been marginalized in "Hausa/Fulani oligarchy and the marginalisation of Nigerians," *Daily Trust*, 05 November 2012. Recently, Yorubas accused Jonathan's government of marginalizing them (see *The Punch*, Dec. 16, 2012; *The Sun*, Feb. 24, 2013).

¹⁹ The US Report on Nigeria also suggests scrapping this ethnic element. "NIGERIA: U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: 2013 Annual Report," 106.

²⁰ See Mwendaga Jibo, A.T. Simbine, H.S. Galadima, *Ethnic Groups and Conflicts in Nigeria: The North-central Zone of Nigeria* (Ibadan: The Lord's Creations, 2001), 15 f.

themselves, Christian anthropology offers a better perspective that should be accepted and inculcated into younger generations to prepare them for a better future for African nations. The task we have today is to rediscover ourselves by going back to the fundamentals of the creation ordinance that gave us equal status and the potential for self-development and growth.

The Image of God as the Basis for Ethnic Integration in Africa

The question of human origin is of critical importance to the value we place on human life and to our behaviour towards one another. God created us in his own image: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:26, 27). This idea of man being created in the image of God appears repeatedly in Scripture (Gen. 5:1; 9:6; Jas. 3:9).

1. What does it mean to be made in the image of God?

This concept is the exclusive preserve of the Jewish and Christian religions; it is not found in other religions. Though Christian theologians have argued over other details of what the image of God in man is, many exclude the idea that the image of God in humanity has a physical aspect. For example, Lutheran theology sees the concept in terms of the gifts that were implanted in man such as "knowledge of God, fear of God, and trust in God."²¹ Some see the image in the sense of man's intellectual and moral capacity and his spirit or soul. This is patterned after God's nature and is the ground for man's religious ability to connect with God.²² The human body is excluded in all these definitions. Machen argues, "The 'image of God' cannot well refer to man's body, because God is a spirit; it must therefore refer to man's soul. It is man's soul which is made in the image or likeness of God."²³ More pointedly, the similitude lies in the fact that God is a person and man is also a person.²⁴

This view, however, is inconsistent with what human personality means; human personality takes all that humans are into account, namely body and soul. So other scholars believe that the whole man constitutes the image. "Scripture never makes a distinction between man's spiritual and bodily attributes in order to limit the image of God to the spiritual, as furnishing the only possible analogy between God and man."²⁵ Moreover, God has revealed

²¹ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord*, trans. Charles Arand and others (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), Art. 2, 115.

²² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 96-7.

²³ J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian View of Man* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 145.

²⁴ Machen, *The Christian View of Man*, 145.

²⁵ G.C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 77.

himself in various anthropomorphic ways in Scripture without which it would be difficult to know that he is a person and capable of personal relationship. Such descriptions as God seeing, hearing, acting with a mighty hand, and having emotions such as anger and compassion show that the human body conveys some truths about God, though not necessarily in physical terms. Ursinus highlights the knowledge aspect of the image, but argues that “the spiritual and immortal nature of the soul,” the “purity and integrity of the whole man,” as well as the “dignity and majesty of man” are comprehended in this concept.²⁶ Ursinus believes that the image lost its glory or its conformity to God in the fall, but the “incorporeal, rational, and immortal substance of the soul together with its powers” still remains even in unregenerate souls.²⁷

It is more sensible and logical not to split human personality in search of the image of God in humanity, but to view the image as comprehensive in scope, including our ontological and functional aspects, that is, the gifts that we are endowed with and the tasks we are to perform.²⁸ In this view, the image expresses itself in man’s volitional powers, aesthetic and artistic ingenuity, and the sense of divinity by which he relates with God.²⁹ Man possesses certain qualities of God that make him unique. Such uniqueness is drawn from the glory and honour that the image bestows upon man in contrast to animals. It was because of this distinctive aspect of man that he was given dominion over the whole universe, which is part of the *cultural mandate*. This dominion was an important characteristic that resulted from being created in the image of God.

2. Why is it important that humans are made in the image of God?

The importance of this image concept is illustrated when God gives the reason for the prohibition of murder in Gen. 9: 5-6: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” On this note, God requires man to be accountable for the life of his fellow man. The prohibition of murder implies the protection of one another.

The reason that murder is here said to be such a heinous crime that it must be punished by death is that the man who has been murdered is someone who imaged God, reflected God, was like God, and represented God. Therefore, when one kills a human being, not only does he take that person’s life, but he *hurts God himself* - the God who was reflected in that individual. To touch the image of God is to *touch God himself*; to kill the image of God is to *do violence to God himself*.³⁰

²⁶ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G.W. Willard (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1852), 30.

²⁷ Ursinus, *The Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 31.

²⁸ A. A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 69, 73.

²⁹ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 69-70. The special ability to relate with God underscores humanity’s essential nature of divine awareness or *sensus divinitatis* (Calvin’s language: *Institutes*, 1.3.1, 88) which forms the bedrock of human religiosity.

³⁰ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 16. [Emphasis mine].

This requirement is reflected in the sixth of the Ten Commandments, which involves preserving the image of God in man. The prohibition of murder or killing in the sixth commandment takes into consideration all internal and external causes that bring about the act. When Jesus explained this command (Matt. 5:22), he did not restrict it to the very act of killing itself, he also pointed to the internal causes such as anger, envy, hatred, and desire for revenge. Ursinus explains that “in removing the effect he may at the same time remove all the causes which contribute to it, and that embracing under the term murder, all the sins which are connected with it, he may, by showing its aggravated character, the more effectually restrains us from these sins.”³¹

3. How does an African traditional worldview value humanity?

The traditional worldview of African people upholds the integrity of the human person, especially in that the “dignity, inherent worth, the value, the moral status and rights of every human person in society has to be respected and honoured.”³² In this respect there is reciprocity between people which seeks to protect and preserve life rather than exterminate it. If human dignity is anchored in the nature of the person as the image bearer of God, then any act of violence against any person on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, class, or religion is an assault on the very dignity that person bears. The African worldview agrees with this biblical truth and for this reason needs to be strengthened in the African context.

Many people today are clamouring for the integrity of creation, but this can only be truly achieved on the foundation of a proper view of the integrity and sanctity of human life.³³ Many people have also coupled a conscious resolution to protect animals with a high-level commitment of resources to ensure their rights and safety. How much more should they also work to protect human dignity, given that humanity bears the image of God?³⁴ Human dignity is far greater than that of animals. Scripture accords humanity higher glory, setting it at the helm of all created things (Ps. 8). Humanity as the caretaker of the creation must first value human life, and from this conviction it can proceed to guarantee the integrity and preservation of creation.

³¹ Ursinus, *The Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 583-584.

³² E. M. Conradie, “On the integrity of the human person and the integrity of creation: Some Christian theological perspectives,” *The Integrity of the Human Person in an African Context: Perspectives from Science and Religion*, ed. C. W. du Toit (Pretoria: Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, 2004), 107.

³³ George E. Tinker, “The Integrity of Creation: Restoring Trinitarian Balance,” in *Constructive Christian Theology in the Worldwide Church*, ed. William R. Barr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 202-213.

³⁴ See movements like “People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals,” at <http://www.peta.org/> and “Virginia Beach SPCA,” at <http://www.webcrawler.com/info.wbcrlw1.305.04/search/web?q=virginia+beach+animal+control&cid>. Although some people question the credibility of some of these organizations, it still shows some intent for conscious preservation of animal life.

4. How does an Islamic worldview value humanity?

Balogun argues a version of Islam that agrees with the biblical injunction stated above: “The Quran teaches that whoever kills a soul has killed a nation and whoever saves a soul has saved a nation.”³⁵ This shows the connection between human souls and national development that everyone should know irrespective of religious and ethnic divides. But the level of contradiction to this truth, which we experience everyday is quite alarming as people commit mass murder in the name of ethnicity or religion. Murder stems from a conscious hatred of someone. Therefore, to contain murder we must eliminate all forms of hatred of others.

5. How does God value humanity?

This image of God in human beings is a “special characteristic of the human race, which distinguishes us from other creatures and makes our salvation a matter of supreme concern to God.”³⁶ Kline highly values the image concept, especially its likeness to God, as man’s commission to dominion means his participatory “judicial function” with God in ruling the universe.³⁷ Genesis 1:26–28 shows the close affinity between the image and dominion that is the definitive characteristic of humanity. The image and glory of God are at the base of this theological concept. For this, “man is a royal son with the judicial function appertaining to kingly office.”³⁸

This importance of this concept can also be understood when we correctly grasp how it applies to Christ. Scripture says that Christ is the express image of the invisible God and the effulgence of the Father (Col. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4; Heb. 1:3). Because he is divine, the nature of his being the image of the invisible God is not precisely the same as ours; Christ nevertheless conveyed all this image of God in his humanity. Some theologians believe that the image of God in man was lost at the fall,³⁹ but such positions have neither explicit nor implicit support in Scripture. On the contrary, some passages (Gen. 9:6, 1 Cor. 11:7, and Jas. 3:9) attribute creation in the image of God to all humanity and are too bold to be dismissed or interpreted as saying that the image was lost.

Calvin affirms that though the image of God was badly corrupted and the supernatural gifts were stripped from Adam’s posterity at the fall, that image was not completely lost.⁴⁰ Calvin understands the image to be the “glory of

³⁵ Ishola Balogun, “Amnesty and the Quran,” *Vanguard*, April 5, 2013.

³⁶ Gerald L. Bray, “Image of God,” *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 2008), 576.

³⁷ Meredith Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 27.

³⁸ Kline, *Images of the Spirit*, 28.

³⁹ T. Camelot, ‘La théologie de l’image de Dieu,’ *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 40 (1956), 459, 464.

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. F.L. Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1961), 2.1.12.

God which peculiarly shines forth in human nature.”⁴¹ Although it was by God’s love and grace that he sent his Son to become incarnate that he might redeem humanity, it is not out of place to see that humanity was so important to God that he could not abandon it to destruction. It is for this reason that Christ came to redeem the image and restore it to its original glory. Jesus voluntarily chose to do this through adoption of the human nature, which shows how important we are to God. By appearing as God’s image in human form even as we are also in God’s image, Christ reconnects us with God in a remarkable way that further heightens the importance that God bestows upon us.

“When, therefore, thou hear that the Son is the brightness of the Father’s glory, think thus with thyself, that the glory of the Father is invisible until it shines forth in Christ, and that he is called the impress of his substance, because the majesty of the Father is hidden until it shows itself impressed as it were on his image.”⁴²

That Christ is the firstborn of all creation and we all are connected to him as his brothers to be conformed to his image (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15) shows that our image is also the effulgence of God at the creaturely level, especially for those who are redeemed in Christ. Calvin is aware that human language is inadequate to explicate the glorious divine truths, but adds that this should not deter us from expressing them in human language. In our image too, the glory of God is hidden, and what pertains to Christ also pertains to us. Though through us the effulgence of God’s glory is relative and imperfect, Christ’s own is absolute and perfect. Calvin argues that Christ brings us immeasurable benefits: through Christ, the “very majesty of God” descended to us, since we are incapable of ascending to God, and he took “what was ours” in order to “impart what was his to us.”⁴³ This expresses how God assigns great significance to our humanity. This idea of the image of God in man is worth presenting to all African peoples irrespective of ethnicity, religion and gender.

6. How does the image of God in humans and humanity apply in Africa?

The importance of this image concept extends from the individual level to the whole of humanity. While every human being holds that unique dignity, its scope comprehends the entire human race so that every ethnic group stands equal before God. Hoekema rightly argues that “we can only see the full riches of the image of God as we take into account all of human history and all of man’s diverse cultural contributions.”⁴⁴ Similarly Bavinck: “The image of God is far too rich to be completely represented by a single human being, no matter how gifted he might be. That image can only be disclosed in its depth and riches in the whole of humanity with its millions of members.”⁴⁵ The force and

⁴¹ Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis* (Albany: Ages Digital Library, 1998), 47.

⁴² Calvin, *Commentary on Hebrews* (Albany: Ages Digital Library, 1996), 32.

⁴³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.12.1-2, 232-233.

⁴⁴ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 100.

⁴⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2 God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 621.

strength of any multi-ethnic nation lies in its corporate entity, as no single ethnic group, no matter how large, can carry all the responsibilities of a nation. This perspective is critical in shaping the mentality of ethnic groups in Africa to appreciate one another. The fact that every human being and every group of people are made in the image of God should make ethnic groups see themselves as extensions of one another. It is also because every person carries the likeness of God that James warns against insulting anyone (Jas. 3:9). This means that whether or not someone holds beliefs, values, practices, and social interests similar to yours, you should treat him with dignity. In Africa a self-destructive tendency makes ethnicities undermine what God has planted in all of them.

Conclusions similar to those of Hoekema and Bavinck above may have been the view of those who fought against the enslavement of Africans.⁴⁶ Before the abolition of slavery, a number of Westerners believed that Africans were inferior and only worthy of being slaves whereas whites were superior and worthy of being masters or slave owners. This perspective seriously undermined their ability to understand that Africans were made in the image of God and so scorned the dignity of Africans. Africans themselves became disoriented when they accepted the same unbiblical thinking such that even after the slave trade, the effort to perform better in the continent has been embarrassing. In a sense, some Africans today have been taken over by neo-colonialists who dictate the state of African development to which we have been enslaved.

The idea that man is made in the image of God means that all humanity was imbued with potential even before it came into existence. Wisdom in humanity is patterned after the wisdom of God. This wisdom has been displayed in human endeavours in the sciences and the arts. Africans have developed such great artistic creativity and skills that Europeans could not resist the temptation to vandalize their creations and export them to Europe. This clearly implies that if Africa works hard to overcome ethnic distractions and to create an enabling environment, it would be at a highly competitive global level in all aspects of life.

The unity required of humanity by virtue of the image concept is similar to that of the triune God who manifests both unity and diversity ontologically and functionally. In eternal wisdom and counsel, God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit puts the economic functions of the three Persons together in creation and

⁴⁶ According to Guy Duqella and others, the Quaker Christians championed the fight against slavery in America as early as the 1600s because they believed that everyone is human and Africans were human. http://cghs.dadeschools.net/slavery/anti-slavery_movement/quakers.htm, cited on May 8, 2013. When William Wilberforce also came to the Christian faith, he saw every human being as the image bearer whom God loves and shows mercy to despite sin. See Rusty Wright, "William Wilberforce and Abolishing the Slave Trade," cited at <http://www.probe.org/site/c/> on May 8, 2013.

redemption to his own glory. When God the Son became human, he did not arrogate everything to himself; instead, looking away from himself to another, namely the Father, he said expressly that he came not to do his will but the will of the Father (Jn. 4:34). And Paul follows this understanding by affirming that despite his humanity, Christ had the same substance or form with God but he nevertheless freely chose subjection to the Father (Phil. 2:6). The Father sends and reveals the Son, the Son comes and reveals the Father by doing his will, and the Spirit comes in the name of the Son and teaches all truth according to what the Son has done (Matt. 11:27; Jn. 14:26; 17:1-6). Therefore it is incumbent upon us (including and perhaps especially Africans) as God's image bearers to mutually submit to one another in the same way, thus demonstrating the wondrous potential of God as we govern the whole creation on God's behalf. Mutual submission helps Africans to see ourselves as one, and to serve one another in love and humility without discrimination.

This means that we must not look down upon the contributions of different groups of people from various nationalities and races; rather, we must welcome these contributions as adding to our enrichment. A proper appreciation of the doctrine of the image of God, therefore, should rule out all racism - all denigration of races other than our own, as if they were inferior to us. God made all human beings in his image, and all of them can enlighten and enrich us.⁴⁷

The problem of discrimination based on ethnic group is deeply rooted and universal in humans. It tends to work against humanity itself rather than against what should have been alien to humanity. Even those who practice ethnic discrimination it cannot be totally free from its effects, as they perpetuate it when their victims retaliate. This maggot in the heart of humanity is a result of sin. We need to make a deliberate effort to break away from this mentality and tear down the human walls of hostility that ethnicism builds.

Christ broke down the walls of hostility between Jew and Gentile so racial, ethnic, and gender differences are dissolved (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:10). Confessing Christians of various ethnicities should champion this redemptive reality by living it out in practical ways. In this way all African ethnicities would come to their true nature as God originally intended it to be, in which "true community is no longer threatened, in which one man is no longer a danger for the other."⁴⁸ Nigerian Chris Mamman's cry against ethnic cleansing must be heard and heeded everywhere in Africa: "We make bold to say that God in his wisdom created the Akyes, Alagos, Eggons, Fulanis, Gwandaras, Hausas, Kanuri, Milgilis and the Tiv. He created us not to fight and exterminate one another but to harness our diversities for the growth and progress of humanity."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 100.

⁴⁸ Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 99.

⁴⁹ Chris Mamman, <http://pointblanknews.com/pbn/press-releases/recent-attacks-on-the-eggon-people-by-other-ethnic-groups/>, posted May 2, 2013, cited on May 9, 2013.

Africa can be different from what it is now. Africa can progress to higher levels of development and technological advancement, equalling those levels reached by nations across the Atlantic in the twenty-first century. But African ethnicities need to overcome the self-centeredness that blinds them from appreciating what God has invested in other groups. Our age is one of globalization, and it is time for all nations to deliberate on socio-economic cooperation. Despite the cultural and linguistic differences across the globe, nations are seeking ways of getting closer to one another in order to work out modes of enhancing life. This explains why nations outside of Africa show genuine interest in what is happening in other nations, and seek to invest in one another. When we bring this attitude closer to home, African ethnicities will be proactive in ways of including and integrating with one another to map out socio-economic and political vistas that will propel our nations forward and build a well-developed continent that will draw more foreign investments. Each ethnic group needs the potential of other groups for the collective interest of all, since no group has a monopoly on abilities and resources.

The attitude of giving appointments by ethnic affiliation should be totally discouraged. Rather, there should be conscious identification of the best brains among all ethnic groups, people who are competent to take sensitive responsibilities that can transform nations within short- and long-term plans. This principle of integration requires enacting robust economic policies that would spread out infrastructural development evenly among all ethnicities. Such economies can be sustained by factual anti-graft pursuit that spares no sacred cows, whether ethnic or fraternal.

Conclusion

This paper advocates that ethnic groups in Africa should see themselves as extensions of one another because all of them bear the image of God. The language and cultural differences are a result of long historical and geographical separation; their genus is the same. While ethnic identity remains a reality of human existence, we can instil a sense of national consciousness that will eventually provide ground for such identities to have more meaningful existence in view of our connections with one another and how we complement one another. An alternative to this solution is further fragmentation, African nations breaking into smaller nations according to their ethnicities, but they will still fail to actualize themselves. The beauty of human diversity can only be appreciated if we use that diversity to uphold one another without prejudice. This issue is of critical importance to our development as people in Africa. Therefore, its pursuit requires the efforts of every citizen in every nation. It should be a cultural movement that would see ethnic groups overcoming their boundaries, and integrating themselves as essential parts of each nation. This needs an aggressive campaign at all levels of human existence through family instruction, schools, all media, adverts, traditional and cultural associations, seminars, and conferences. Leaders of various positions

should assume responsibility for this in order to effect this most desirable change, so that ethnic distinctions can be overtaken by national identity on the basis of the fact that we are all created in the image of God.

In Revelation 7:9-10 we see the beauty of human diversity as people from every nation, tribe, people and language are represented before God who created them all. This is ethnic diversity and globalization in their highest forms, collapsing into unity as everyone has one thing in common – worshipping in the blessed presence of God.

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