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-- CNS/Reuters/Peter Andrews

Members of the Kisii tribe prepare to fight a battle with those in the Kalenjin tribe in the town of Chepilat, west of Nairobi, Kenya, Feb. 3. The Red Cross in Nairobi said more than 1,000 people have died and 304,000 have been displaced in Kenya's postelection crisis.

Evangelizing gone awry

The church in Kenya has fostered the tribalism it new deplores

By MARK FAULKNER

In early 1985, with the oil of ordination barely dry on my hands, I arrived in Kenya's Ngong diocese to serve as a missionary among the nomadic Maasai. I was quickly introduced to the "Maasai Apostolate," the ministerial priority of reaching out to these unevangelized pastoralists while affording the Catholic members of other ethnic communities who had migrated into the area the pastoral crumbs that fell from this table.

I witnessed efforts at inculturation, which, for example, saw the abandonment of white altar linen (white being the color the Maasai associate with death) in favor of black drapes that were intended to be redolent of the sacred Maasai color: the hue of thunderclouds. The thunderclouds brought the rain that caused the grass to spring up and upon which the Maasai's cattle grazed. The cattle provided the Maasai food, wealth and prestige. Black was the color the Maasai were understood to associate with their god, E'Ngai.

Bead-encrusted liturgical vestments served as a badge of honor and conferred status. The wearer was understood to be exempt from the daily drudge of pastoral care to the non-Maasai Catholic community and committed, instead, to the rarefied task of planting a Maasai church. The Bible and liturgical texts were being translated into Maasai; hymns composed that respected Maasai musical sensibilities; development projects initiated for the exclusive benefit of the Maasai.

Twenty-two years later, Kenya erupts into bloodshed after an election that is widely considered to have been fundamentally flawed. Ethnic violence spills onto the streets of Nairobi and other towns and cities across the country. Church leaders wring their hands and pastoral letters are hurriedly written condemning the violence and calling for peace. But how far have the pastoral policies of the church in Kenya, the legacy of the missionary enterprise and the interference of Rome contributed to the current crisis?

In his book *Africa: A Biography of a Continent*, John Reader posits that "tribalism is the most pernicious of the traditions which the colonial period bequeathed to Africa." Tribalism has a distinctly African flavor (the conflagration in the Balkans was never expressed in terms of a "tribal" conflict, nor that between the Israelis and the Palestinians) and was used by the colonial authorities as part of their divide-and-rule policy. Previously, boundaries had been porous, and languages and identities shaded into one another. The new narrative saw communities such as the Maasai and Kikuyu, which had a long history of trade, intermarriage and shared social and religious practice, fictionalized in the colonial discourse as sworn enemies.

Subsequent colonial administrations acquiesced in this construct, identifying clearly demarcated and discrete boundaries between various ethnic communities even if the situation on the ground did not warrant such a concise definition or was more fluid than the line on a map would suggest. In his book *Swahili Origins: Swahili Culture and the Shungwaya Phenomenon*, James Der Vere Allen points out that the British administrators "liked their Africans to be racially 'pure' " and the construction of "native reserves" facilitated such a conceit. However, as Daniel Stiles makes clear in his article "The Past and Present of Hunter-Gatherers in Kenya" in the journal *Kenya Past and Present*:

> There is no such thing as a "pure" tribe. Except for the most recent immigrants, it is safe to say that all tribes in Kenya contain a mixture of Bantu, Kalenjin, Eastern Nilotic and Eastern Cushitic elements, with a small amount of Southern Cushitic and Hadzan thrown in.

One of the consequences of independence in many African countries was the effort on the part of the newly installed government to try to instill a sense of national identity in the face of the "tribal" motif advanced by the colonial authorities. In countries crying out for money to be spent on the better provision of health care and education, vast sums were earmarked annually to celebrate Independence Day and other national commemorations in the hope of forging an identity that transcended the tribal appellations designated during European rule. However, although the church interpreted independence as a need for white missionaries to assume a somewhat lower profile and consequently elevated a few black persons to the ranks of the ecclesial hierarchy, for the most part it was business as usual and the church experienced great numerical growth within the tribal mindset.

Indeed, it is true to say that the church had taken "tribal" identities to heart. (Alfons Eppink's otherwise excellent piece, "Kenya's Great Rift" in the Jan. 12 issue of The Tablet, is still couched in the language of "tribalism.") Missionaries were appointed to a given tribe, and with them they frequently worked for years, learning the local tongue and often being the first to commit the languages to paper, writing

the histories of the local communities, introducing a regional flavor into their religious practice.

In Kenya, the original three ecclesiastical administrative areas coincided with the missionary groups that first established themselves in this part of Africa -- the Holy Ghost, Mill Hill and Consolata missionaries. These areas were gradually subdivided, imposing a checkerboard pattern on the map that corresponds to the tribal boundaries established by the secular authorities. As dioceses became smaller, frequently one language and culture came to predominate in each, diocesan priests were recruited from this ethnic community and the bishop, too, was likely to have been drawn from its ranks, with the exception of the more remote dioceses where missionary bishops were still appointed since these were expected to have access to financial support from their home countries.

The dreams of a local church had been unwittingly reduced to a tribal church. As people became more mobile, they abandoned the reserves of the colonial era and settled elsewhere in the country, but the Catholic church they encountered was one in which they felt themselves to be outsiders, not able to understand the language and idiom of the liturgy. Local priests and bishops frequently assumed a mantle of cultural as well as religious leadership, often having been installed as chiefs at the time of their ordination. They became champions of local issues, enjoying a respect that was not accorded to politicians, who were frequently viewed as merely pursuing their own selfish interests. Such ethnic sentiment could easily polarize into an “us and them” mentality.

The tribal mentality that informed the operation of the “Maasai Apostolate” finds echoes throughout the country. The church’s social teaching is frequently expressed in a manner that articulates the interests and concerns of the local ethnic community to which both priest and congregation belong. This thinking has penetrated even the hierarchy in Kenya, with the Kenya Bishops’ Conference giving way to a body fractured along ethnic lines.

The events of the last few weeks should serve as a wake-up call to the church in Kenya and, perhaps, to other local churches on the continent. While respecting and preserving local culture and language is laudable, it can also have the effect of bolstering narrow local self-interest over and against the national good. Ethnic violence has blighted much of postcolonial Africa and after the orgy of bloodletting that was a feature of Kenya’s neighbor, Uganda, during the Amin years, Kenya has had to acknowledge that it is not impervious to such developments. Interestingly, the one country of the former East African community that has escaped descending down such a route is Tanzania. Is it just coincidental that one of the policies advanced by President Julius Nyerere in the early years was to promote the use of the Swahili language? As a consequence, all citizens of that country can talk to one another, people can work wherever they choose, and the Mass is celebrated in a language accessible to all.

Rome needs to consider abandoning the policy of establishing dioceses that are contiguous with ethnic boundaries and to reconsider the appropriateness of appointing bishops who readily assume the position of tribal chiefs. The promotion of fidei donum priests, which has witnessed priests from Britain serving the Kenyan church for a set number of years, could be extended to allow priests in Kenya to serve outside their diocese.

Fr. Mark Faulkner teaches at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. His book, *Overtly Muslim, Covertly Boni: Competing Calls of Religious Allegiance on the Kenyan Coast*, was published by Brill in 2006.

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