

NAIROBI INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

AN INVESTIGATION OF CHURCH LEADERS' RESPONSE TO ETHNIC
CONFLICT: THE CASE OF BUNIA EVANGELICAL CHURCH LEADERS IN
THE ITURI DISTRICT OF DRC

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER
OF ARTS IN LEADERSHIP STUDIES

BY
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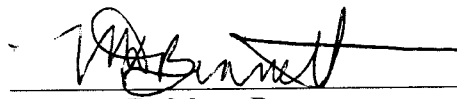
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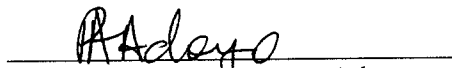
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AUTHORIZATION AND SIGNATURES

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Bennett', written over a horizontal line.

Dr Marta Bennett
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Dr Priscilla Anyango Adoyo
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To my beloved late mother and mentor Akiki Evanissi Tubugambwa, a fallen heroin
in the Ituri ethnic war

and

All other victims of violent conflicts worldwide.

Dear beloved Congolese brethren,

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer (Romans 12:12).

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To the multitude of friends, relatives, colleagues, church leaders and brethren in Christ that I can't mention by name, thank you from the bottom of my heart for your contribution in my life. May God remember and reward each one of you.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAC	Communauté Anglicane au Congo
CECA	Communauté Evangélique au Centre de l'Afrique
CE	Communauté Emmanuel
CEP	Communauté des Eglises Pentecôtes
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ECC	Eglise du Christ au Congo
FNI	Front des Nationalistes et Intégrationnistes
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
FRPI	Front Patriotique de Resistance Iturien
MRC	Mouvement de Resistance Congolais
LORI	League of the Oppressed and Rejected of Ituri
UN	United Nations
UPC	Union des Patriotes Congolais
ODM	Orange Democratic Party
PLW	Party of Liberation of Walendu

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“In more than fifty places around the globe, violence has taken root among people who share the same terrain but differ in ethnicity, race, language or religion...Conditions seem ripe for more Bosnias, Rwandas or Sri Lankas, for more cities and villages to be destroyed, for more people to be left destitute, for more blood to flow. Along with other concerned groups, the church of Jesus Christ must reflect on this issue. And we must act.”¹ Indeed, ethnic conflict is a persistent feature of modernity. In the last decade alone thousands of lives if not millions have been lost through the Sarajevo and Sri Lanka ethnic conflicts, the Rwandan Genocide, the Bahema-Balendu conflict in DRC and lately the Kalenjin, Luo, Gikuyu conflict in Kenya.

Elie Buconyori states, “Tribalism can be considered as basic to several conflicts which are tearing up the African continent. This evil affects so many people that some analysts think that all Africans are affected in one way or the other.”² To a large extent this observation is true since ethnic conflicts are present in most African nations such as Burundi, Nigeria, Liberia, etc. In the Congolese context for instance, not a single part of the country remains untouched by the effects of tribal conflicts.

Though William Hendricks observes that conflicts are facts of life and inevitable in the relationships of life, that humankind always struggles with conflicts, that

¹ Theo Tschuy, *Ethnic Conflict and Religion* (Geneva: WWC Publications, 1997), 150.

² Elie A. Buconyori, *Tribalism and Ethnicity* (Nairobi: The AEA Theological and Christian Education Commission, 1977), 1.

wars have been waged throughout the centuries and that one can scarcely imagine a day without a conflict and the stress it causes³, this does not mean that every conflict must turn violent and destructive as we have witnessed lately. Something may have utterly gone wrong to cause tolerance and amicable resolution of conflict going missing in our society.

Since revenge and bloodshed seem to be the current trend of resolving even petty conflicts, then understanding the root causes and consequences of ethnic conflict may give us a huge boost in its transformation and prevention. However, the begging questions remain: What can be done to arrest such conflicts in the future in order to heal the present devastation? What role should church leaders play to bring healing and reconciliation among warring communities?

For instance, the vast Democratic Republic of Congo has rarely enjoyed peace or stability since Belgium's King Leopold II grabbed the entire central Africa region and made it his private property that became an epitome for greed and brutality. The country's independence never brought any substantial change either.

The late Mobutu Sese Seko's dictatorial regime which lasted 32 years left the country on its knees and in unprecedented chaos. DR Congo is today split into personal territories loosely controlled by various rebel factions, countless groups of roving armed bandits from within and without, and a government unable to regain its grasp on nationhood. A chief example of such mayhem is the current fight in the Kivu Province where over five different armed groups want to control this single province. Ironically, the main belligerents often claim to be fighting for the sovereignty and reunification of the country. Sadly, individual and tribal interests have taken prece-

³William Hendricks, *How To Manage conflict* (Kansas: National Press Publication, 1991) 1.

dence and the net result for over 60 million Congolese people is more poverty, extreme suffering and ultimately countless deaths.

In the rise of such unparalleled disarray, one is left wondering if the church really sees what is happening within and around her, and how long she will take before breaking her silence and start exercising her biblical mandate in full. As Priscilla Adoyo put it, "The role of the church can only be fully realized if she sees herself as a community living within a larger community as salt and light."⁴ True! Any failure to act as the salt and light in the midst of present confusion and conflict can greatly jeopardize the church's biblical mission. In a rather appealing and challenging way Bill Hybels describes the beauty of the church in the following terms:

There is nothing like the local church when it's working right. Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breathtaking. Its potential is unlimited. It comforts the grieving and heals the broken in the context of community. It builds bridges to seekers and offers truth to the confused. It provides resources to those in needs and opens its arms to the forgotten, the downtrodden, and the disillusioned. It breaks the chains of addictions, frees the oppressed, and offers belonging to the marginalized of this world. Whatever the capacity of human suffering, the church has a greater capacity for healing and wholeness.⁵

Hybels' observation is incontestable, and it is high time the church of Christ in Congo woke up and took her biblical mandate seriously. Yes, conflict is an unavoidable fact of life, but violence is not the best way to resolve any conflict. Since the church has a God given mandate to reconcile the world to Him and reconcile people to one another, she can neither afford to shy away from this urgent assignment nor brush it off using other excuses. Unfortunately, the church of Christ in Ituri did not only fail her assignment, but also was compromised through both her appalling si-

⁴ Priscilla Anyango Adoyo. *The Application of Biblical Principles of Conflict Transformation in Ethno-Religious Situations in Jos and Kaduna, Nigeria: A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the School of Intercultural Studies Fuller Theological Seminary, December 2007, 190.*

⁵ Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 2004), 24.

lence and direct involvement in the ethnic conflict. This has today left her wounded and paralyzed. But, there is still hope.

Background to the Problem

Since 1996, the Democratic Republic of Congo has been experiencing civil wars which have claimed over 6 million lives. As part of that, the Ituri District, one of the 144 districts in the country, has undergone untold violent ethnic conflict between the Bahema and Balendu tribes. This tribal war claimed over 80,000 innocent lives, hence being called a War within a War. The Human Rights Watch report delivered late 2003 states:

Ituri is often described as the bloodiest corner of the Democratic Republic of Congo...In early May 2003, hundreds of civilians were slaughtered in the town of Bunia and tens of thousands of others were forced to flee... Based on information gathered by its researchers and on other reports, Human Rights Watch estimates that at least 5,000 civilians died from direct violence in Ituri between July 2002 and March 2003. These victims are in addition to the 50,000 civilians that the United Nations estimates died there since 1999. These losses are just part of an estimated total of 3.3 million civilians dead throughout the Congo, a toll that makes this war more deadly to civilians than any other since World War II.⁶

The Ituri District is located in the North Eastern part of the DRC, bordering Uganda and South Sudan. Its population is currently estimated at 6.5 million people from 18 native ethnic groups. An average of 400,000 of its population lives in Bunia town, the capital city of the district. It is important to note that DRC has over 450 ethnic groups freely living in any part of the country. Nevertheless, in the Ituri District, the Bahema and Balendu tribes form a major portion of the population. Both tribes are ethnically divided into two sub-tribes and each sub-tribe lives in a separate geographic location and speaks a different language (see Ituri Map, Appendix A).

⁶ www.reliefweb.int: *Ituri: "Covered in Blood"- Ethnically Targeted Violence in North-DR Congo*. Source accessed Tuesday 22 April 2008.

The Two Tribes

Balendu

Pilo Guna states that the Balendu are subdivided in three major clans namely Rutsi, Tsiritsi and Bindi. The Rutsi and Tsiritsi clans are constituted of the Balendu Pitsi, Balendu Tatsi, Balendu Djatsi and Mabendi that form the Bale sub-tribe. Each of them is grouped in an administrative entity called "Collectivité" (county) in the Djugu zone. They all speak Kilendu or Batha language. The Bindi clan detached itself from the rest and travelled far south in the Irumu zone where it has constituted itself to a separate sub-tribe called Bangity living on one vast administrative entity.⁷ They speak Kingity or Ndruna language.

In other words, the Balendu ethnic group is subdivided into two sub-tribes namely Bale and Bangity, terms which will be used in this research when reference is made of each separate group. The appellation Balendu will generically refer to both sub-tribes combined. The Balendu are believed to have migrated from South Sudan in the seventeenth century.⁸ They are chiefly agriculturalists, but also practice small scale businesses and cattle keeping.

Table 1: Balendu Tribe Table

Bale	Bangity
Balendu Pitsi	Bindi
Balendu Tatsi	
Balendu Djatsi	
Mabendi	

⁷ Pilo Guna. *Appercu Historique de la Situation Conflictuelle de l'Eglise Locale Blukwa-Mbi : Ses Origines à 1989*. (Présenté et Soutenu à l'Institut Supérieur Théologique de Bunia, Juillet 1990), 8.

⁸ Ndjango Pierre Claver et Lossa Innoncent. *Le Conflict Interethnique Hema-Lendu en Ituri: Les Tenants et Les Aboutissants* (Kisangani: Unpublished, 1997), 2.

Bahema

The Bahema are said to have migrated from the South-East of Ethiopia, and on their way moved in three different directions. The first group moved and settled in Kenya and Tanzania. The second group moved through Uganda and settled in Toro, in Western Uganda before one section crossed Semliki River to settle in the Irumu Zone, South of Ituri District. This group is referred to as Bahema South or Banyoro, the name which shall be frequently used in this research. The Banyoro are subdivided in four administrative entities namely Bahema South, Bahema d' Irumu, Bahema Mitego and Bahema Boga. They all speak the Kihema or Kinyoro dialect which is closely related to Rutoro dialect spoken by the Batoro in Uganda.

The third group of Bahema moved through Bunyoro in Northern Uganda before crossing Lake Albert to settle in the Djugu plateau where they found the Balendu.⁹ This group is commonly called Bagegere, the appellation which will be used in this research. The Bagegere are also subdivided in four administrative entities namely Bahema Badjere, Bahema North, Bahema Banywagi and Bahema Baguru.

Upon their meeting in the Djugu zone, the Bagegere and the Bale developed a deep relation with each other which led to the adoption of the Kilendu or Batha (Bale dialect) dialect as common language of communication between them and the adoption of cows for dowry (Bagegere culture) in replacement of the hoe for dowry (Balendu culture).¹⁰ The Bahema (generic for Banyoro and Bagegere) in general are largely pastoralists and business people, while the Balendu (generic for Bangity and Bale) are largely agriculturalists.

⁹ *Aggression des Bahema par les Balendu en Territoire de Djugu* (Unpublished, Bunia, 29 juillet 1999), 6.

¹⁰ Pierre Claver Ndjango Ogombi. *Pour une Nouvelle Ere de Cohabitation Intercommunautaire en Ituri* (Kisangani: Butrad, 2005), 4.