I Kings 12:1-24 and The Challenge of Religion and Ethnicity in Nigeria

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Abstract: This paper examines the account of segregation in 1 Kings 12:1-24, where the Kingdom of Israel divides into two distinct entities due to political, religious, and ethnic tensions. By analysing this biblical narrative, the study highlights the destructive consequences of division based on cultural and religious differences. The paper draws parallels to the contemporary context of Nigeria, a nation marked by diverse ethnic and religious identities. It argues that the story serves as a cautionary tale for Nigeria, emphasizing the dangers of allowing cultural and religious differences to foster division and conflict. This is a qualitative study using the narrative method. Data was obtained from secondary sources and analysed using the content analysis method of analyzing qualitative secondary data. The impacts of the culture of religion and ethnicity reveal that it affects electoral politics, governance and representation, conflict and instability, social cohesion, education and socialisation, and economic inequality. Emerged themes include a) leadership and consultation, b) economic disparities and grievances, c) responses to grievances, d) secessionist movements, and e) the role of mediation and reconciliation. Nigerian leaders might draw a cue from Rehoboam's failures by encouraging communication, attending to the economic requirements of all areas, and using mediators to help settle disputes amicably.

Keywords: Culture of Religion, Ethnicity, 1 Kings 12, Rehoboam

1. Introduction

The narrative of 1 Kings 12:1-24 serves as a poignant and cautionary tale about the perils of division rooted in religious and ethnic differences. This biblical account, detailing the split of the United Kingdom of Israel under Rehoboam, offers valuable lessons that resonate deeply with contemporary issues in Nigeria. Nigeria, a nation marked by a rich tapestry of cultures, religions, and ethnicities, frequently grapples with tensions and conflicts arising from these very diversities. The pericope concerns the cultural segregation that was forced on the people of Israel by Solomon and perpetuated by Rehoboam. According to Boa (2024), Rehoboam was the king of a united Israel. The people who were from the tribe Rehoboam were exempted from forced labour and taxation, but other people who were not from his tribe were forced to pay outrageous tax and indirectly engage in forced labour with no pay. It led to the separation of Israel based on tribal differences. Herron (2021) notes that it was in the 10th century BCE that the great divide,

which split the people into the kingdoms of Israel and of Judah, occurred.

Nigeria is a country rich in cultural diversity, with religion and ethnicity playing pivotal roles in shaping its social, political, and economic landscape. Nigeria is home to over 250 ethnic groups, with the three largest ethnic groups. The most populous and politically influential being Hausa-Fulani 29%, Yoruba 21%, Igbo (Ibo) 18%, Ijaw 10%, Kanuri 4%, Ibibio 3.5%, and Tiv 2.5% (CIFORD, 2016). According to Green (2023), Nigeria has more than 300 ethnic groups, over 500 languages, and many distinct religious and regional differences. He further noted that Nigeria is one of the world's most culturally diverse countries, which is a source of a rich cultural heritage, but when political elites seek to exploit it for their own gain, it can also be a vulnerability. In no order of importance, The Hausa-Fulani are predominantly found in the northern part of Nigeria; the Hausa-Fulani are primarily Muslim and have a hierarchical social structure. Also, the Hausa-Fulani are known for their strong political influence and cultural traditions. The Igbo are predominantly in the southeastern region, are mostly Christian, and are known for their entrepreneurial spirit and vibrant culture, which includes unique traditional practices and a strong sense of community. The Yoruba is located mainly in the southwestern region. The Yoruba are religiously diverse, with a mix of Muslims, Christians, and adherents of traditional religions. They have a rich cultural heritage, including music, art, and festivals. Other ethnic groups are the Tiv, Kanuri, Ibibio, Ijaw, and many others, each contributing to Nigeria's cultural mosaic.

Nigeria is roughly evenly split between Islam and Christianity, with a minority adhering to traditional African religions. Islam is most prevalent in the north and among the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Kanuri ethnic groups (Brann, 1991). Islamic practices and the implementation of Sharia law in some northern states significantly influence the region's culture and politics (Kendhammer, 2013). Christianity is predominantly practiced in the southern and central regions among the Yoruba, Igbo, and other ethnic groups. Christianity's presence has led to the establishment of numerous churches, schools, and social services. Religion and ethnicity in Nigeria are complex and multifaceted, shaping individual and collective identities, influencing social interactions and political dynamics, and presenting both opportunities for unity and challenges for cohesion.

Unfortunately, in Nigeria, leaders engage in ethnic and religious politics during campaigning campaigns in order to mobilize support. During elections, they use these two variables to gain followership by inciting one religion against the other. Politicians have taken pleasure in using religion to divide Nigerians against themselves for political or selfish reasons (Vanguard, 2018). The mixing of religion and politics is an impediment to progress and development because religion and ethnicity can also be used to mobilize ethnic

support against political competition from other groups (Balogun, 2023). Nigeria is not only multireligious but also multiethnic. The country has witnessed many incidents of conflicts along an ethno-religious line. It is on this premise that this study would examine these issues from the lens of 1 Kings 12:1-24.

This is a qualitative study using the narrative method. The narrative method is important because it allows for the exploration of personal experiences and captures the complexity of lived experiences, highlighting diverse perspectives, and is especially useful in understanding cultural, social, and psychological dynamics. Data was obtained from secondary sources such as newspapers, magazines, journals, and periodicals. The collected data was analysed using content analysis. First, this study explores segregation in 1 Kings 12:1-24. Second, it examines the culture of religion and ethnicity in Nigeria. Third, it analysed the implications of culture, religion, and ethnicity in Nigeria. Fourth, it discusses I Kings 12:1-24 in the Nigerian context.

2. Segregation in 1 Kings 12:1-24

The narrative of 1 Kings 12:1-24 encapsulates a pivotal moment in the history of Israel, where political, social, and spiritual factors converge to precipitate a significant division. It gave the narrative about the events leading to the split of the United Kingdom of Israel into two separate entities: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. It was around 930 B.C. that Israel divided, with the kingdom split into a northern kingdom, which retained the name Israel, and a southern kingdom called Judah, named after the tribe of Judah that dominated the new kingdom (Jarus, 2022). The segregation depicted in this passage provides a profound commentary on the consequences of leadership decisions driven by a lack of empathy and the disregard for collective unity.

Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, ascended to the throne. According to Bongoyok (2019), when Rehoboam succeeded his father around 729 B.C., he had everything at his disposal to bring Israel to a higher level or, at the very least, preserve the national achievements and thus maintain a very high level of peace and prosperity. Unfortunately, despite the apparent political and socio-economic achievements, a social cancer threatened the health of the nation. One of the root causes of that problem was that Solomon had subjected the people to enormous taxes (1 Kings 4:19, NIV; Shaw, 1997) to maintain the lifestyle of the palace and the monarchy. The people of Israel, led by Jeroboam, approach Rehoboam with a request, which is to lighten the heavy yoke imposed by his father.

The negotiation scene contains no personal criticism against Jeroboam, whereas in his speech, Abijah

uses the disparaging title of "slave of Solomon" (Selman, 2008). In chapter 10, the people of the north are presented with a legitimate party, and shortly after, the prophet Shemaiah describes them as "brothers" (11.4), while Abijah describes them as "worthless scoundrels" (13.7). Abijah's description of Rehoboam as "young and irresolute" contradicts Rehoboam's behaviour in ch. 10 (Amar, 2017). Solomon's reign, though marked by prosperity and grand architectural achievements, was also characterised by forced labour and high taxes. The people seek relief from these burdens, hoping for a more compassionate and equitable rule under Rehoboam.

Rehoboam's response to this critical request becomes the turning point of the narrative. He initially seeks counsel from the elders who had served his father. They advise him to be a servant to the people and to speak kindly to them, suggesting that such an approach would ensure their loyalty and service in return (Shaw, 1997). However, Rehoboam rejects this wise counsel. Instead, he turns to the younger men who had grown up with him, and they advise a harsher stance: to increase the burdens and discipline the people with scorpions instead of whips. When Rehoboam delivers this harsh message to the assembly of Israel, it ignites a rebellion. The northern tribes, feeling disregarded and oppressed, seceded from the house of David, proclaiming Jeroboam as their king. This act of segregation resulted in the formation of two separate kingdoms: Israel in the north, with its capital eventually in Samaria, and Judah in the south, with Jerusalem as its capital.

The division of the kingdom is not merely a political split but also signifies a deeper social and religious segregation. The northern kingdom, under Jeroboam, establishes alternative centers of worship in Bethel and Dan to prevent the people from going to Jerusalem. This move institutionalises the separation and sets the stage for divergent religious practices, further entrenching the divide between the two kingdoms. The story of 1 Kings 12:1-24 underscores several key themes related to segregation (Gill, 2023). Firstly, it highlights the role of leadership in either bridging or exacerbating divides. Rehoboam's failure to heed wise counsel and his choice to adopt a divisive approach underscore the destructive potential of insensitive and authoritarian leadership. Secondly, it illustrates the socio-economic dimensions of segregation, where heavy burdens and unequal treatment can lead to societal fractures. Lastly, the narrative points to the lasting impact of religious and cultural rifts, which can become institutionalised and perpetuate division over generations.

The segregation depicted in 1 Kings 12:1-24 serves as a stark reminder of the consequences of divisive leadership and the importance of empathy, equity, and unity. This ancient narrative continues to offer valuable lessons for contemporary societies, emphasising the need for inclusive governance and the dangers

of allowing socio-economic, cultural, and religious differences to drive wedges between communities.

3. Religion and Ethnicity in Nigeria

Nigeria, often referred to as the "Giant of Africa," is a nation of remarkable diversity, with over 250 ethnic groups and a myriad of religious beliefs coexisting within its borders (Olayiwola, 2019). This rich tapestry of cultures and faiths is both a source of strength and a potential flashpoint for conflict. Understanding the place of religion and ethnicity in Nigeria is crucial to comprehending the complexities of its social dynamics, political landscape, and ongoing challenges.

Nigeria's ethnic diversity is one of the most striking aspects of its cultural identity. The three largest ethnic groups are the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Yoruba in the southwest, and the Igbo in the southeast. Each of these groups has its own distinct language, customs, and traditions. Beyond these major groups, there are numerous smaller ethnic communities, each contributing to the country's cultural mosaic. This ethnic diversity has historically played a significant role in shaping Nigeria's political and social structures. During the colonial era, the British implemented a policy of indirect rule in northern Nigeria (Reynolds, 2001), but implemented direct rule in southern Nigeria, especially in southeastern Nigeria. When the British tried to establish indirect rule in eastern Nigeria, it brought about the Aba women's riot of 1929 (Uchendu & Okonkwo, 2021). These historical divisions have continued to influence Nigeria's post-independence politics, where ethnic identity often intersects with political allegiance and competition for resources.

Religious pluralism is another defining feature of Nigerian society (Ogunleye, 2021). Nigeria's religious diversities feature mainly Christians, Muslims, and adherents of various forms of African traditional religions (ATRs) (Atsenuwa, 2016.). The country is predominantly split between Islam, practiced mainly in the northern regions, and Christianity, dominant in the southern and central parts. Additionally, there are numerous adherents of Indigenous African religions, which are often syncretised with the major faiths. Religion in Nigeria is not just a matter of personal belief but a powerful force in public life. This is because religion draws its strength from its potency to induce or bring about change in the attitudes of its adherents, either positively or negatively (Casimir vd., 2014). It influences social norms, educational systems, and even political affiliations. Religious leaders often wield significant influence, and religious institutions play critical roles in community life and social services (Onapajo, 2012; Ajetomobi, 2018). However, this deep-seated religiosity also has the potential to fuel sectarian tensions, particularly when political and religious interests intersect.

The interplay between religion and ethnicity in Nigeria creates a complex web of identity politics. Ethnic and religious identities often overlap, leading to situations where conflicts are perceived through both lenses (Thaut Vinson, 2020). For instance, clashes between different communities can be seen as both ethnic and religious disputes, complicating resolution efforts. This dual identity can also be manipulated by political actors seeking to consolidate power or undermine opponents. Politicians may exploit ethnic and religious sentiments to rally support or discredit rivals, further deepening societal divides (Bamidele, 2020). This politicisation of identity has been a recurrent theme in Nigeria's electoral processes and governance.

Religion and ethnicity in Nigeria present both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, the potential for conflict remains a significant concern. Ethno-religious violence, such as the clashes between different communities in the Middle Belt region or the insurgency in the northeast led by Boko Haram, highlights the volatility that can arise from these divisions (Faluyi vd., 2019). Since gaining independence from the British in 1960, the country has experienced numerous religious crises, which have continued into the 1990s and 2000s. Examples include the Kafanchan-Kaduna dispute of the 1980s and 1990s; the Kaduna Sharia riots of 2000 and the Bauchi riots of 2001, both caused by the implementation of Sharia law in those states; and the Jos riots of 2001, which were sparked by a governmental appointment. Hundreds of people were killed during these battles, and the consequences extended beyond national borders (Fox, 2021). Since 2008, Boko Haram has been an increasing threat to national security. The terrorist organisation is ranked the 4th deadliest terror group in the world and aims to establish an Islamic state in northern Nigeria. It opposes the Westernisation of the country, to which it links Christianity (Fox, 2021).

On the other hand, Nigeria's diversity also offers a wealth of opportunities for cultural exchange, innovation, and growth. The country's vibrant arts, music, and literature scenes are a testament to the creative potential that arises from its diverse cultural heritage. Moreover, interfaith and interethnic initiatives aimed at promoting dialogue and understanding can serve as models for peacebuilding and social cohesion. Religion and ethnicity in Nigeria are multifaceted and deeply ingrained aspects of the nation's identity. While it poses challenges, particularly in terms of conflict and political manipulation, it also enriches Nigerian society and offers pathways for building a more inclusive and harmonious future.

4. Implications of Religion and Ethnicity in Nigeria

Religion and ethnicity in Nigeria have profound implications for various aspects of the country's life. These implications can be seen in the political sphere, social interactions, economic development, and efforts toward national unity.

4.1 Electoral Politics

Religion and ethnicity play significant roles in electoral politics in Nigeria. Political parties and candidates often align along religious and ethnic lines to garner support from specific communities. Thus, religion is a major factor in presidential elections, while ethnicity is a major factor in gubernatorial elections in Nigeria. During the 16 April 2011 presidential election in Nigeria, there was a religious divide. Southerners were willing to vote for a Christian candidate, while northerners were willing to vote for a northern candidate. It is the first time in Nigeria's recent history (Fourth Republic) that the election result has exposed the huge division between the Muslim north and Christian south (Jameel, 2011). This alignment can lead to the marginalisation of minority groups and the perpetuation of regional divisions. For instance, political campaigns at the federal level frequently exploit religious and ethnic sentiments to rally votes, sometimes at the expense of national unity and democratic principles. Lamenting on this menace, Isiaq, Adebiyi, & Bakare (2018) lamented that elections in highly polarised Nigeria are a mere ethnic and religious census, where ethnic and religious groups with a high population are exploiting politicians for political gain. At the state level, we see this challenge. For instance, in Benue State, Idoma people are politically second-class citizens. They are not given the opportunity to be the governor of Benue State by the Tiv ethnic group.

4.2 Conflict and Instability

Ethno-religious tensions often manifest in conflicts and violence. Regions like the Middle Belt and the Northeast have witnessed violent clashes rooted in religious and ethnic differences, exacerbated by competition over resources such as land and political power. According to Uroko & Obiorah (2024), women and girls are the most affected by these violent conflicts. These conflicts undermine national security and pose significant challenges to peace and development. In the southeast of Nigeria, there are the troubling activities of the indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB), who claimed to be fighting for the emancipation of the people of eastern Nigeria. Their activities have led to the destruction of lives and property (Chukwu vd., 2023). In the Western Part of Nigeria, there are the activities of Sunday Adeyemo

Igboho armed groups fighting for the secession of western Nigeria due to the encroaching of activities of Fulani herdsmen of northern Nigeria. Aliyu & Kaffi (2024) relate that the year 2021 was the peak of the agitation for the Oduduwa Republic, championed by Igboho and strongly backed by Prof. Banji Akintoye-led Omo Ilana Oodua, formerly known as the Yoruba World Congress (YWC). This led to some level of unrest in western, eastern, and northern Nigeria.

4.3 Cultural Preservation and Expression

Nigeria's cultural diversity is a source of rich heritage and artistic expression. Ethnic and religious traditions contribute to a vibrant cultural scene, including festivals, music, dance, and art. These cultural practices help preserve historical identities and promote tourism, fostering national pride and economic opportunities.

4.4 Economic Inequality

Economic opportunities in Nigeria are often influenced by ethnic and religious affiliations. Disparities in resource allocation, employment, and business opportunities can exacerbate tensions and fuel perceptions of marginalisation among certain groups. This inequality can hinder inclusive economic growth and perpetuate cycles of poverty and underdevelopment in marginalised regions.

4.5 Regional Development

The concentration of certain ethnic and religious groups in specific regions can impact development patterns. For example, the oil-rich Niger Delta, predominantly inhabited by ethnic minorities, has faced neglect and underdevelopment despite its significant contribution to the national economy. Fortunately, all the oil-producing states in Nigeria receive an additional allocation separately during the monthly allocation subvention. The 13 percent derivation is the establishment of the Niger-Delta Development Commission (NDDC). Funds earmarked to nine oil-producing states as the 13 percent derivative from oil and gas revenue rose to about N85bn in February 2024 (Channels Television, 2024). Unfortunately, all the money pushed into NDDC in the Ministry for Niger-Delta, which is enough, has had nothing to show that the oil-producing state was not neglected by the Federal Government on ethnic or religious grounds. The governors and local government chairmen of the affected regions have to be blamed also for the misappropriation of resources.

4.6 Identity Politics

The prominence of religion and ethnicity in Nigerian politics and society often leads to identity politics, where individuals prioritise their ethnic or religious identity over national identity. During the regime of Muhammed Buhari, people were given positions more based on their religious and ethnic foundation. More people from northern Nigeria were given positions of leadership in civil and military spheres. Buhari is on a project in which he is fast turning Nigerians from other parts of the country into subjects of the Hausa-Fulani (Fasan, 2019). This can weaken the sense of national unity and hinder efforts to build a cohesive national identity.

5. I Kings 12:1-24 in the Nigerian Context

1 Kings 12:1-24 provides a profound lens through which to examine the issue of tribalism in Nigeria. The passage, detailing the division of the United Kingdom of Israel into the northern and southern kingdoms, offers valuable parallels to Nigeria's struggles with religious and ethnic divisions. In 1 Kings 12:1-24, Rehoboam becomes king after Solomon. The people of Israel, feeling overburdened by Solomon's heavy yoke, ask Rehoboam to lighten their load. Rehoboam first consults the older advisors, who suggest he ease the burdens. However, he dismisses their advice in favour of the younger advisors, who recommend he increase the burdens. Rehoboam's harsh response leads to a rebellion, causing the ten northern tribes to secede and form their own kingdom under Jeroboam, leaving Rehoboam to rule over Judah and Benjamin.

5.1 Ethnic and Tribal Divisions

Just as Israel was divided into different tribes, Nigeria is a nation of over 250 ethnic groups, with significant historical and socio-political divisions among them. The tribes of Israel had distinct identities and grievances, much like Nigeria's ethnic groups, which often have competing interests and demands. The divided Israel kingdoms headed for disaster. Judah's heavy-handed Rehoboam no longer desired to serve the people, and Israel's Jeroboam led the people backward into spiritual idolatry with the worship of golden calves (Capps, 2019).

5.2 Leadership and Consultation

Rehoboam's failure to heed wise counsel reflects the challenges Nigerian leaders face in balancing the diverse needs of various ethnic groups. Decisions influenced by a narrow circle of advisors can exacerbate ethnic tensions, as leaders may prioritise the interests of their own ethnic or tribal groups over national

unity.

5.3 Economic Disparities and Grievances

The request for a lighter burden parallels the economic disparities among Nigeria's regions. The northern Israelites pleaded with Rehoboam to lighten their burden. This is similar to the same plea that some sections of Nigerians are pleading with the federal government. The harsh economic policies are biting hard on the poorer section of the masses. The people are crying for a better living; however, it seems the more they cry, the more tyrannical the Nigerian government becomes. Also, some regions, such as the eastern region, have long been complaining of unfair treatment in the allocation of human and material resources at the federal level. This has fuelled contemporary ethnic grievances and calls for greater autonomy or even secession by the people of eastern Nigeria.

5.4 Responses to Grievances

Rehoboam's harsh response led to division, similar to how heavy-handed or insensitive responses by Nigerian authorities to ethnic grievances can intensify divisions. The Nigerian government's approach to addressing (or failing to address) the demands of different ethnic groups can either mitigate or exacerbate tribalism. The cry of the people of Israel in Rehoboam's day may provide a key to a major underlying cause of the division. When Rehoboam, Solomon's son, refused to listen to the plea of the people for an easier burden, they said to him and to each other, "What portion do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse; to your tents, O Israel! Now look after your own house, David!" (1 Kings 12:16, NIV; Brindle, 1984).

5.5 Secessionist Movements

The secession of the northern tribes of Israel is reminiscent of Nigeria's history with the Biafran War and ongoing calls for independence by groups like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Such movements often gain momentum when groups feel their voices are unheard and their needs are unmet.

5.6 Role of Mediation and Reconciliation

The intervention of Shemaiah, urging against civil war, highlights the role of mediators in preventing conflict. In Nigeria, religious leaders, traditional rulers, and civil society play crucial roles in mediating disputes and fostering dialogue among ethnic groups to promote peace and unity. The story of Rehoboam's

mistakes and the resulting division of Israel offers a powerful analogy for Nigeria's struggles with tribalism. By embracing inclusive governance, addressing economic inequalities, and fostering dialogue, Nigerian leaders can work towards overcoming the deep-seated ethnic divisions that challenge national unity. Reflecting on these biblical lessons can help Nigeria navigate its complex ethnic landscape and build a more cohesive and harmonious society.

5.7 Recommendation and Conclusion

Nigerian leaders can learn from Rehoboam's failure by ensuring their decisions are inclusive and considering the perspectives and needs of all ethnic groups to foster national cohesion. Reducing economic disparities through equitable resource distribution and development initiatives can address some of the root causes of ethnic tensions. Engaging in dialogue with ethnic groups, listening to their grievances, and responding empathetically can prevent escalation and promote unity. Leveraging the influence of neutral mediators can help resolve conflicts and build bridges between divided communities. The narrative of 1 Kings 12:1-24, depicting the division of Israel under Rehoboam's reign, serves as a poignant allegory for the challenges of religion and ethnicity in Nigeria. Rehoboam's failure to heed wise counsel and his harsh response to his people's grievances led to a significant schism, much like how insensitive leadership and economic disparities can deepen ethnic divides in Nigeria. Drawing parallels between the ancient tribes of Israel and Nigeria's myriad ethnic groups reveals the importance of inclusive leadership, equitable resource distribution, and empathetic governance. Nigerian leaders can learn from Rehoboam's mistakes by fostering dialogue, addressing the economic needs of all regions, and leveraging mediators to resolve conflicts peacefully. Ultimately, reflecting on this biblical story underscores the necessity of unity in diversity. By prioritizing collective well-being and promoting a sense of shared national identity, Nigeria can work towards overcoming tribalism and building a more harmonious and cohesive nation.

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