AOSIS

Election violence in Africa: Using John 1:1 'Εν ἀρχῇ' as a remedial solution

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Authors:
Canisius Mwandayi[1]
Martin Mukole[2]

Affiliations:
[1]Institute of Theology & Religious Studies, College of Social Sciences, Theology, Humanities & Education, Africa University, Mutare, Zimbabwe

[2]Department of New Testament and Old Testament, Faculte de Theologie, Universite Methodiste de, Lubumbashi (UML), Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Corresponding author:
Canisius Mwandayi
canisiusm@gmail.com

Whilst the term 'elections' insinuates some democratic space within a given electorate, elections on the African continent have often displayed an opposite trajectory as they tend to thwart that democratic space. Many a time, they have been characterised by sharp divisions leading thus to violence and atrocities of every kind. It is a great concern for unity in our motherland, Africa, which generates interest in this article to proffer a roadmap that can help address challenges that threaten to swirl the continent into a state of constant chaos and locus known for manslaughter. Using a hermeneutic of identification or cultural hermeneutics whereby readers identify themselves with the biblical characters and culture, we make reference to John 1:1 ἐν ἀρχῇ, which speaks unity in the Godhead as our roadmap. The text shows that unity is one of the intrinsic values of the community born out of their ontological unity. In the same way, disciples of the community of God must be characterized by unity while they are still in the world. It is thus our argument that Africans in their interpersonal relationships, including their political interactions, need to mirror the oneness of the Trinity and not follow the dictates of their societies plagued by social classifications.

Interdisciplinary implications: The issue of violence is by definition of multi-disciplinary interest. This contribution addresses the ever-recurring problem of election violence in Africa, which is also of significance within multiple disciplines including biblical studies, gender studies, political theology as well as even history.

Keywords: Africa; believing community; politics; elections; community of God; unity; John 1:1.

Introduction

Since the 1990s, African states have committed themselves to the institutionalisation of democratic governance individually and collectively through regional and continental inter-governmental bodies. One of the institutional cores of democracy which is generally accepted as basic to all forms of democracy is periodic elections often regulated by law (Nkansah 2016:97–131). The problem in Africa, however, is that these elections are in the large reportedly tainted with flaws and irregularities undermining the credibility of the outcome. There have been complaints of bloated voter registers, over-voting and tampering with election figures, among others, whenever elections are held in Africa (Omotola 2010:51–73). There have been cases where losers and their affiliates have rejected the election outcome at any stage in the voting process or at the declaration of the results. Non-acceptance is being registered in several ways ranging from protest, outrage and demonstrations such as the naked-breast women's demonstration by elderly women of Nigeria (Aliuna 2019) and a sex strike in Kenya in 2009 (Ajayi 2010; BBC News 2017) to the perpetration of violence which sometimes leads to civil conflicts. Given that electoral laws at most leave room for appeals that emanate from any aspect of the electoral process through various mechanisms, namely the courts, administrative bodies and alternative dispute resolution bodies (Fall et al. 2011:1–245), parties or individuals often resort to such justice mechanisms for a remedy. Unfortunately, many a time, such mechanisms seem not to alleviate electoral violence in Africa.

The electoral process is indeed a serious challenge in almost all African countries. In fact, we talk of pre-electoral violence, violence during elections and post-electoral violence. For Albert (2007:133), election violence refers to 'all forms of organized acts or threats physical, psychological, and structural – aimed at intimidating, harming, blackmailing a political stakeholder before, during, and after an election with a view to determining, delaying, or otherwise influencing an electoral process'. Thus, electoral violence can take any of the three dimensions referred to by Albert.

Now given that electoral violence has been an ongoing challenge bedevilling the African continent for decades, firstly, this article seeks to challenge African states to rise above their racial, linguistic, political, socio-cultural and ethnic diversities which have often been used as grounds for fragmentation and work rather towards appreciating these diversities as originating from the Trinitarian nature of God whose persons are distinct yet formidably united. To achieve this goal, we shall begin with a brief look at examples of a few African states where political, racial, linguistic, socio-cultural and ethnic diversities have often ushered into electoral violence. Also, in the article we try to remedy this problem by reflecting on the reverberations of the unity in the Godhead on human societies.

Overview of electoral violence in some African countries

The countries that our survey focuses on are: Nigeria, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Zimbabwe and Cameroon. Our choice of these countries is not premised on anything save that they were just randomly sampled. While it was possible to use one African country as a representative sample, it is our conviction that the ubiquitous and different manifestations of electoral violence in different African countries can best be portrayed by a slightly bigger sample.

Elections in the Federal Republic of Nigeria

Generally, elections can be taken as trademarks of democracy. They can also be viewed as the purpose of peaceful change in government and confer political legitimacy on the government. When thus viewed from this prism, elections represent the expression of the sovereign will of the people. The conduct, however, of elections in a plural society such as Nigeria is often fraught with anomalies and violence. At the centre of this bitter contest is the struggle for power by factional elite groups perceived as representing ethno-religious and regional interests. With regards to Nigeria, election periods more than any time else reveal the fragility and soft underbelly of the Nigerian state. The country's electoral history is full of narratives of defective and disputed elections that have turned violent, with a resultant number of fatalities and reversing previous attempts at democratic consolidation (Ashindorbe 2018:93).

From the observations by Orji and Uzodi (2012), physical electoral violence has remained a recurring theme in the five general elections in Nigeria since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1999. In 2011, the presidential election witnessed the height of physical electoral violence whereby more than 800 fatalities were recorded; besides, properties worth millions of dollars were destroyed mainly in the core northern states (Orji & Uzodi 2012:44–45).

Despite even the improved electoral process of 2015, the ugly face of physical violence still reigned as candidates competed for the executive governorship positions. The West African Network for Peace (WANEP) and the International Crisis Group (ICG) in their risk assessment of the 2015 general elections highlighted some of these violent trends on the eve of elections including the disruption of political rallies, negative and inciting statements by political actors, complaints over voter registration, burning and destruction of party campaign billboards, availability and use of small arms and light weapons and bomb explosions as well as shooting at campaign grounds and party primaries (ICG 2015:6–8; WANEP Report 2015:7–11). According to the National Human Rights Commission of Nigeria (NHRN), pre-election violence resulted in the death of 58 people within 3 months (NHRN cited in Olupohunda 2015:13).

The 23 February 2019 presidential election in Nigeria added another phase to the already unfortunate record. This election was characterised by thuggery, vote buying, rigging and so many other challenges. Major contenders and their political parties employed violence as a strategy to influence the outcome of the election. Many lives were lost and properties were destroyed. In a period just covering 104 days, a daily average of 3.5 deaths were recorded. Incidents that resulted in fatalities were recorded in 29 of 36 States (Ojukwu, Okeke & Mbah 2022:133–151; Ominisi & Omelegbe 2019:107–113). It follows from the above that in almost every election year, since independence, electoral violence has become part and parcel of the Nigerian electoral process. Scores of people have lost their lives to electoral violence, and property worth millions of naira has been destroyed.

In 2023, Nigeria held general elections once more. Reports claim that one observer team was prevented from observing by security officials at a polling unit in Abuja. In Rivers state, for instance, violence involving voters throwing rocks and engaging in verbal abuse in two polling units was witnessed by observers. According to the Civil Society, Violence Monitors and News Reports, election day violence and disruption of the electoral process occurred in at least 18 states. In Abia and Bayelsa states, violent disruptions resulted in the suspension of voting in several hundred polling units. Lagos suffered multiple attacks throughout the day, including an attack on a collation centre, potentially excluding a large number of voters. At a ward collation centre in Rivers, observers saw irregularities including direct manipulation of the vote tally forms to disfavour one candidate (International Republican Institute 2023, under 'II. The Nigerian Election Context').

The US Department of State, on 01 March 2023, wrote concerning the 2023 Presidential Election Results in Nigeria:

> We understand that many Nigerians and some of the parties have expressed frustration about how the process was conducted and the shortcomings of technical elements that were used for the first time in a presidential election cycle. Nigerians are clearly within their rights to have such concerns and should have high expectations for their electoral processes. We join other international observers in urging INEC to improve in the areas that need the most attention ahead of the March 11 gubernatorial elections. (n.p.)

The Heads of the Election Observation Missions of the Commission of the Economic of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Africa Union (AU) noted with concern signs of growing tensions in the country following the 25 February general elections. In response to the tension, part of their joint statement highlighted the following key issues:

> We call on all political parties and their candidates to appeal to their supporters to exercise maximum restraint and refrain from the use of provocative language and the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation, which would only exacerbate political tensions, divisiveness, and violence at this critical stage…, We further call on political parties and their candidates to settle electoral disputes through peaceful means and dialogue, in accordance with the law…. (n.p.)

Behind the exhortation is an indication of the electoral violence Nigeria has been long facing.

Elections in the Republic of Kenya

Kenya has had different levels of violence related to elections since it became independent. The country has been controlled by a strict government for over 30 years. However, the first two governments led by Kenyatta and Moi were seen as undemocratic, oppressive and not willing to listen to the people's needs. There were differences in how power and money were shared in the two systems.

After taking over from the colonial government, Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, had control over the government. According to Nasong'o (2007:20), Kenyatta had control over the space for group associations, got rid of the Majimbo system and used the oppressive colonial administrative system. He changed the law so that he would have control over the state. The *Constitutional Amendment Act No. 16 of 1969* gave the president the authority to oversee and manage the civil service. He gathered all the trade unions together in one group and merged the only party that disagreed with him, KADU, into his own party called KANU in 1964 (Sulley 2016:93).

Most importantly, the opposing opinions were pushed away from having control or influence. One example is Oginga Odinga, who led the Kenya People's Union (KPU) and wanted to rebuild the state. This was stopped in 1969. The *Constitution of Kenya (Amendment No. 2) Act. No. 17 of 1966* allowed the president to create and get rid of government jobs. The civil service was not independent, fair or politically neutral (Mosota 2011:47). People who did not like the government were either killed or put in jail (Throup & Hornsby 1998:77–78).

Some important people were killed, such as Pio Gama Pinto in 1965, Argwins Kodthek in 1966, Tom Mboya in 1969 and Josiah Mwangi Kariuki in 1975. Some people were also put in prison, such as Martin Shikuku, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and George Anyona (Nasong'o 2007:32). This means that because of the unequal distribution of power under Kenyatta's leadership, the government resorted to violence against people who disagreed with the regime and wanted to see a more changed Kenya (Sulley 2016:92).

In 2007, there were problems with Kenya's elections because people did not trust the Electoral Commission of Kenya. In the study by Dercon and Gutiérrez-Romero (2011:731–744), they found that 42% of people believed that violence happened because they thought the election was not fair. They mentioned problems with the election process and a not-very-effective electoral commission as the reasons for this perception. This caused problems after the elections, leading to many deaths, destruction of homes and things, and many people having to leave Kenya for other countries (Kenya: Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence [CIPEV] final report, 2008:28–30).

Mild protests and political tension surfaced in parts of western Kenya and Nairobi on 09 August 2007 following allegations by the opposition leader, Raila Odinga, that the electoral commission's system had been hacked and polling results manipulated in favour of Kenyatta. The protests intensified on 11 August when the electoral commission declared Kenyatta the winner. Odinga challenged the results in court but the court verdict did not nullify Kenyatta as the winner. In Western Kenya, police used teargas canisters and water cannons to disperse protesters, who threw stones and other crude objects at police. Protesters also blocked roads with stones, burned tyres and lit fires on the roads (CIPEV Final report 2008:162–204).

On 08 August 2017, Kenya held its second presidential election since the disputed 2007 election that resulted in the death of more than 1100 people, 650 000 displaced and severe human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch 2017). As for the 08 August 2017 held elections, within hours after the initial results started streaming live on television on 09 August, and before the electoral commission announced Uhuru Kenyatta's victory, the leading opposition candidate, Raila Odinga, expressed concerns that the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission's (IEBC) server had been hacked and presidential results that were streaming in had been manipulated (Matinde 2017), and this sparked protests across the country. According to reports from the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, by 12 August the police had killed at least 24 people nationwide, including one in Kisumu and 17 in Nairobi. Fears were that the numbers could even have been higher as the media were slow in reporting on the violence and families were afraid to speak out (Kenya: Post-Election Killings, Abuse 2020).

There was serious unrest especially after the Kenya Supreme Court nullified the Presidential Election and by the constitution ordering the presidential election to be rerun within 60 days. The presidential elections were annulled because of illegalities and irregularities. The government and the main opposition seemed not to agree as much, and the whole process appeared to be dividing Kenyans more than ever along tribal lines. Kenya appeared to be in a worse

ethnic mobilisation than it did in 2007 and even in the past elections including the transition from a single-party to a multi-party country. The tribal division in Kenya appeared to be growing deeper, and any continued growth was bound to affect the relationships between the Kenyan people. Political tribalism appeared behind people picking up sticks or even doing worse things against each other (Kimani 2018:3–8).

Kenya went to the polls again on 09 August 2022 after a 5-year cycle, marking the third general election since the promulgation of a new constitution in 2010. This represented the end of the second and final term of the Jubilee Alliance party government under President Uhuru Kenyatta and Deputy President William Ruto. The presidential campaign was between Raila Odinga, a legacy candidate who has previously run four unsuccessful presidential campaigns and Ruto who experienced some local troubles, but the focus during this campaign was whether the Kenyan electoral landscape had shifted to emphasise class, demographic and elite divisions. Reported rioting and protest activity in the lead-up to the 2022 elections far exceeded the level of activity reported ahead of the 2017 elections when nearly 110 peaceful protest events and 160 riot events were recorded. During a presidential debate on 26 July 2022, Ruto attributed the violence to politics meant to punish his supporters (Akello 2022). This allegation was dismissed by Interior Minister, Fred Matiang'I (Raleigh & Wafula 2022). Six months later after Ruto had been declared president, Raila Odinga felt he still had a bone to chew with the electoral board, accusing it of gross irregularities and this sparked a fresh wave of election-related violence around mid-March 2023.

Elections in the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire

Making reference to the 31 October 2020 presidential elections in Ivory Coast, Human Rights Watch stated that the Ivory Coast's authorities were urgently supposed to investigate the killing of more than 50 people in the political and inter-communal violence that accompanied the elections and ensure that anyone responsible for unlawful killings was prosecuted (*Côte d'Ivoire: Post-Election Violence, Repression* 2020). The same report added that the security forces failed to adequately protect civilians and in at least one case used excessive force to disperse opposition-led protests, shooting dead at least two demonstrators and beating a man unconscious.

President Alassane Ouattara was re-elected for a third term with a reported 94% of the vote in the controversial election, which the main opposition parties boycotted. The poll triggered confrontations between opposition and government supporters in the capital, Abidjan, and at least eight other towns, resulting in brutal street clashes fought with machetes, clubs and hunting rifles. 'The killings of the past month pushed Côte d'Ivoire toward a deadly spiral of violence, a decade after the 2010–2011 post-election conflict left over 3000 dead', said Jim Wormington. Wormington further added, 'Respecting the right to freedom of expression and

assembly, including for opposition leaders and their supporters, will be a key ingredient to a peaceful resolution of the current crisis' (*Côte d'Ivoire: Post-Election Violence, Repression* 2020).

Côte d'Ivoire's National Human Rights Council said that 55 people were killed and 282 injured between 31 October and 10 November 2020 (Koaci 2020). The Ivorian government said that 20 people were killed on election day and an additional 3 in the days that followed. Human Rights Watch documented 13 of these deaths, including 2 people killed during violence between government and opposition supporters on election day, 9 during clashes in the following days and at least 2 who were killed by security forces. The U.N. Refugee Agency says more than 3200 Ivorians have fled post-election savagery in their nation to Liberia, Ghana and Togo and more supposedly are on their way (Schlein 2020). This is another example of another country where elections were marred by violence in all its forms.

Election violence in Zimbabwe

The 1980 elections which saw the ushering of independence from British rule became almost the blueprint of election violence that characterised subsequent elections in Zimbabwe. During the 1980 elections, wartime methods of coercion and intimidation against opponents were carried over and became a defining *modus operandi* in future elections in favour of ZANU PF (Mwandayi & Chirongoma 2023:3). While almost every election in Zimbabwe is marred by episodes of violence, the June 2000 and June 2008 elections are arguably the worst. A detailed follow-up to the election violence in Zimbabwe can be gleaned from Mwandayi (2018:57–80) and Mwandayi and Chirongoma (2023:1–7).

Elections in the Republic of Cameroon

On 06 November 2018, the 85-year-old Paul Biya, president of Cameroon since 1982, was sworn in for his seventh term in office after complaints arising from multiple allegations in polls held a month earlier were dismissed by Cameroon's constitutional court (Nsongan 2018). Just weeks before the presidential election which was scheduled for 07 October 2018, thousands of people began to flee the Southwest and Northwest regions, fearing an escalation of violence as clashes between secessionists and the army intensified. During that year, the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon deteriorated, with armed secessionist groups and Cameroonian armed forces both perpetuating brutal attacks and human rights violations. Given the state of things, Autorité de Contrôle des Assurances et de la Prévoyance Sociale (ACAPS) projected that the pending election of that year, coupled with the lack of political dialogue to solve the conflict, was likely to fuel further displacement and continue disrupting basic services, livelihoods and the economy (ACAPS Risk Report 2018).

After the election, violence continued. Violent clashes between the Ambazonian separatists and the Cameroonian

government were witnessed during the post-election period. Both the Cameroonian government and the armed separatists were using violence to screen civilian populations and punish them for the perceived support of their opponents (Matfess 2020). While mechanisms for dialogue and peaceful resolution were put in place through international and national peace and resolution agencies, such violence is likely to occur in future elections because such mechanisms do not solve problems at the pace expected by the population. It is against the backdrop of such election violence bedevilling almost every African nation that we move on now to propose a roadmap that may help curb future scenarios of election violence and ensure lasting peace on the continent.

Unity in the Godhead and African elections

Centrality of the Bible

Christianity is arguably the major religion in numerous African countries. According to some statistical data, in 2020, Christians accounted for around 60% of the sub-Saharan African population. In numerical figures, this translates to approximately 650 million Christians and this figure is projected to increase over to 1 billion by 2050. As of 2023, African countries with the highest share of Christians are as follows: Zambia – 95.5%; Seychelles – 94.7%; Rwanda – 93.6%; DR Congo – 92%; Republic of the Congo – 90.7%; Namibia – 90%; Lesotho – 90%; Cape Verde – 89.1%; Uganda – 88.6%; Gabon – 88%; Zimbabwe – 87%; Liberia – 85.5%; Kenya – 85.1%; Central African Republic – 80%, Malawi – 79.9% and South Africa – 79.8% (Saleh 2023). While we picked only countries within the range of 80% and above, Christianity is also prevalent in many other African nations. What all this translates to is that the Bible is interacted with by a vast majority of people in Africa and it is undeniably true that the Bible is the heartbeat of African Christianity. As it is appealed to by many as solace to many dilemmas of life and a guide too even in matters related to politics, we feel vindicated to draw our roadmap from this precious age-old document.

Unity in the Godhead – John 1:1

John 1:1a needs to be understood in relation to the tradition behind the Gospel of John itself. While the Gospel has traditionally been attributed to John, the disciple is nowhere identified by name. The Gospel, in other words, does not provide explicit internal evidence regarding its author (Burge 2024). The lack of unity in its structure and style as well as the lack of consistency in its sequence of events have led to a considerable discussion among scholars on the actual identity of the author with a number coming to conclude that it was the work of more than one author. A generally shared position is that an original shorter gospel was added to and edited by later writers to produce the now-canonised version (eds. Zinkuratire & Colacrai 1991:1782). Be that as it may, the Gospel exudes a deep theological meditation on the person and mission of Jesus and his oneness and perichoretic relationship to the Father and the people to whom he is God's

self-revelation. As reflected in a classic commentary by St Thomas Aquinas, after other evangelists had written their Gospels, heresies had arisen concerning the divinity of Christ to the effect that Christ was viewed simply as a man, as Ebion and Cerinthus falsely taught. To guide his audience in the maze of these false teachings, John thus makes known the divinity of the Word drawing the truth from the very fountain-head of the divine breast, thereby refuting all heresies (St Thomas Aquinas, translated by Weisheipl 1998). Such a unique Johannine portrayal of Jesus is rooted in the early Gospel tradition of the church and owed its subsequent development to the eyewitness testimony of John and the Spirit-led life experience reflection of the Johannine church. In other words, the gospel to a greater degree is a product of a developed theological reflection (USCCB 2019–2023) and it does present an interpretation of Jesus that reflects ideas and situations that prevailed in the Christian community towards the end of the 1st century AD, a time when Christianity was under attack from several quarters including Romans, Jews, sceptics, heretics and many others who were making charges against it (CliffsNotes 2023).

The immediate context of the text – 'Εν ἀρχῇ'

The Gospel's opening phrase – *in the beginning was the Word* – attests to the existence of the Word before creation. In Jewish understanding, the Word of God was the way God communicated himself and in Greek thought, Logos 'Word' referred to the central idea that held the universe together (Ngewa 2006:1277). Both understandings connote an identification of this Word with divinity and in John 1:17, the writer clearly associates this Word with the person of Jesus.

John's opening verse: έν αρχη ην ό λόγος καί ό λογος ήν προς τον θεόν καί θεός ην ό λόγος [*in the beginning was the Word and the Word with God and God was the Word*] indicates that the Word existed already at that point in the past labelled herein as έν αρχη 'in the beginning'. As rightly noted by Boaheng (2021:74), the expression, 'the Word was with God' informs us that the Word is a separate person or personality. The Word was with (pros) God, but not in (en) God. Only in John is the Word (Jesus) explicitly identified with God (Carson 1991:25). Thus, in accordance with John's revelation, God the Father and God the Son who is Jesus, enjoy eternity and coeternity as they are both ontologically equal. The oneness and the perichoretic relationship that they enjoy, however, does not denote the sameness of persons; rather it is a relationship that allows the individuality of the eternal distinctions to be maintained while sharing in the life of each other. John, in other words, hereby stresses the beginning of what some commentators refer to as the timeless eternity similar to what we find in Genesis 1:1 when God created the heavens and earth (Ngewa 2006:1277).

What John meant when he said 'and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' set the foundation to what Tertullian of Carthage came to coin as the doctrine of *Trinitas* 'Trinity'.

In his AdversusPraxeam (AP2), Tertullian argues that the Godhead is of *unius autem substantiae, et unius status, et unius potestatis* 'one substance, and of one condition, and of one power' (Tertullian ca.213 CE). According to McGrath (2011:240), Tertullian carefully chose the term *substantiae* 'substance' to articulate his idea of a fundamental unity within the Godhead but not compromising the distinct identity of their persons. In as much as Tertullian had emphasised the idea of fundamental unity, so too was Irenaeus who argued:

> For Him were always present the Word, and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things, to whom also He speaks, saying, 'Let Us make man after Our image and likeness'. (Against Heresies 4:20:1 [A.D. 189])

Formulations about the Trinity which started with Church Fathers in the likes of Tertullian, Origen, Irenaeus, Augustine and Athanasius were pursued by Scholastics, mystics of the Middle Ages, theologians such as Schleiermacher, Rothe, Dorner as well as even by philosophers such as Bohme to Hegel. A closer follow-up on each of these pursuits lies beyond the scope of this article. Commenting, however, on all these efforts, Philip Schaff (1997:149) was right to say that the Trinity, though the most evident, remains the deepest of mysteries, and cannot be adequately explained or exhausted till we reach beatific vision.

Unity in the Godhead and its reverberations on the believing community

When it comes to the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity on the believing community, the article gives credence to an insightful observation by Boaheng. Firstly, Boaheng (2021:78–81) articulates that the Trinity demonstrates the equality of the Godhead's three persons. Despite playing various roles, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all equal in terms of their essence, dignity, power and other attributes. The fact that all humans are God's image bearers consequently implies that each person is connected to God through the concept of *Imago Dei*. Since God's image does not vary from person to person, it means therefore all persons are equal irrespective of their varied backgrounds and circumstances.

Secondly, the Trinity must also guide human–divine, human–human and human–environment interactions. God made people so that they could have relationships with him, one another and other living things. People must uphold excellent relationships with other people while simultaneously upholding good relationships with the divine. Injustice, prejudice, discrimination and the like, which exist in contemporary cultures, are thus abhorrent to God.

Thirdly, if God is the Trinity and humankind is made in his image, then humanity has a communitarian ontological structure. The social relationship of the Trinity serves as a model for earthly human societies. As a result, all human societies, including the Christian society, must demonstrate some degree of interdependence and oneness that is consistent with the unity that is innate in the Trinity. While the Trinity reveals the reality of diversity in the Godhead and humanity, this does not amount to fragmentation. Thus, Africa's racial, linguistic, political, socio-cultural and ethnic diversities emanate from God (whose name can be taken to mean the Generator Of Diversity).

Building on Boaheng's (2021) ideas, we find that the Trinity's social relationship and the bearing this has upon human societies finds an echo in Jesus' exemplary life and teachings. In John 17:11, Jesus prays to the Father for the protection over his disciples so that they may be one as he and the Father are one. This emphasis on unity among communities of believers is enforced in John 17: 20–22 where Jesus prays not only for his present disciples but for all those who will believe in him through the disciples' work that they may all be one just as the Father is in the Son, the Son is in the Father. Speaking of the relationship between the Father and the Son, David Ford (2023:3) characterises it as a relationship marked by mutual love and it reaches out to the whole world. For him, the Father's purpose in sending the Son was that those who trust him could be embraced in this love and, in turn, sent in love for others and for the creation God loves. It is only when, in their daily manner of living, the community of believers wash each other's feet that they can fully participate in God's image.

In the previous selected verses of John 17, Jesus envisioned the great multitude before the throne of God of every nation, race, language, age, culture, class and social level (Rv 7:9–10). Jesus prayed that these people might rise above their different backgrounds and understand their unity. His deepest desire expressed in the climatic initiative on the cross: 'Woman, behold your son', and to the disciple 'Behold, your mother', (Jn 19:26–27) was for this coming together in trust and love, a creation of an ongoing community of trust and mutual love, something that was beyond family ties (Ford 2023:9). Jesus broadened the sense of 'behold your mother' and 'behold your son' to all believers that they may be one. The oneness Jesus had in mind was the unity that comes from the shared life both in God the Father and God the Son. Milne (2009:62) was thus right to say, 'the entire fabric of Christian redemption and its application to human experience depends wholly on the three-in-oneness of God'.

This unity among communities of believers is not to be perceived in the form of uniformity but oneness just like we can have children who are not uniform, but they make one family. Jesus indeed did not pray for uniformity or institutional unity among believers, but for unity rooted in love and a shared nature, bringing together the many different parts of Jesus' one body. This is not a legislated uniformity seeking to unite wheat and tares, nor is it the unity of institutions. Jesus had in mind the true unity of the Spirit (Eph 4: 3). Within the same verses in John 17, Jesus made a remarkable statement that 'the world may believe that you sent me' (vs. 21). Jesus basically gave the world

permission to judge the validity of his ministry based on the unity of his people and this must be a serious concern for believers today. Based on the verses in John 1 and 17, it is a requirement from Jesus that his disciples and those who shall follow them emulate the unity existing between the Father and the Son. It is this message of unity modelled against unity between the Father and the Son that we are putting forward given our continent of Africa which continues to be rocked by disunity even among people of the same country. The Gospel of John was in fact designed to invite readers to meet Jesus and consequently to see and experience God (Van der Merwe 2019:1). It is a call to trusting him and maturing in their relationship with Jesus and with each other through habitually rereading its message. The thrust of the Gospel is thus not only to draw readers into a relationship with Jesus but it is also to send them deeper into the world to which he was sent in love, 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you' (Jn 20:21). Just as he was sent into the 'darkness' of his world, so in the same way, contemporary readers are being sent into the darkness of the 21st century (Ford 2023:6). The darkness of our times includes election violence, disunity, greed, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), environmental crisis, atrocities of every kind and so on. Addressing the darkness of the 21st century involves calling African rulers to accountability, standing against corruption of every kind, voting out corrupt leaders and political parties and amicably resolving conflicts. Thus the call for unity should not be just understood in its abstract terms but people ought to live it. This finds echo in the words of Burge (2024) who says that living the Gospel of John in a postmodern culture demands that Christians understand and internalise the truth about God and his plan for the world.

John 1:1; 17:11, 15, 21–22 as a roadmap for future African elections

During the pre-incarnate stage, Jesus was 'with God' and the incarnation enabled him to become an agent of reconciliation between God and fallen humanity, propagating thus a heavenly culture in a human context. As argued by Anderson (2011:26–27), the heavenly Jesus became earthly so as to transform the world. Jesus, in other words, appeared in human form so as to transform people, making them both earthly and heavenly. As heavenly and earthly natures were part and parcel of his identity, Jesus thus became the perfect model of humanity. As noted by Thomaskutty (2021:3–4), when Jesus told his listeners 'you are my friends if you do what I command' (Jn 15:14), he showed that the friendship he intended would result in the perfect restoration of humanhood and such friendship could only be restored in relation to the creator. When reading therefore from the perspective of humanhood, the Johannine message is that humans can only overcome all sorts of human-made boundaries, including racial, linguistic, political, sexual, socio-cultural and ethnic boundaries through the mediation of Jesus.

In African politics, human-made boundaries often manifest themselves when it is election time. The same community which at one point claims being bound together in faith in Christ often finds itself torn apart along ethnic and linguistic lines, thus losing all attributes of humanhood. African elections, in other words, have often been sources of extreme violence in all its forms to the extent that people tend to forget that they are believers and belong to the same nature and have the mandate to attain perfect humanhood and remain united as recommended by Jesus. Candidates continue to be chosen along ethnic, tribal, and social class and linguistic lines as evident in discussed countries such as Nigeria, Kenya and others. It is against this backdrop that we strongly argue that John 1:1 is a real and utmost dependable edifice upon which to build a pathway for Africa's future elections; a reference point whereby Africans in their interpersonal relationships, including the political exchanges imitate the oneness of the Trinity and not use social classifications to dictate elections in their societies. Instead of viewing racial, linguistic, political, socio-cultural and ethnic diversities as grounds for fragmentation, there is a need rather to work towards appreciating these diversities as originating from God (who is the Generator Of Diversity). Unity is a mark that proves not only that we are true disciples of Jesus but it is a sign to the world that Jesus' message is indeed valid. What Jesus required from the disciples and those who were to follow them was that they imitate the unity existing between the Father and the Son. Interestingly, most African states where elections have been marred by violence are Christian states or the Christian community is the majority. Therefore, believers are urged to remain one and work towards justice as one even in cases of electoral mismanagement to avoid violence which continues to leave our countries stranded with no future for our children.

Conclusion

In the foregoing discussion, we attempted to raise to attention the ever-recurring challenge of election violence in Africa. We explored several manifestations of election-related violence in selected African countries and raised alarm on how such violence was continuing to swirl the continent in a state of constant chaos and a locus known for manslaughter. Worried about a torn-apart continent, with no development and no future for our children, we moved on to proffer a roadmap for future elections using a hermeneutic of identification. We argued that such violence can be reduced or eliminated especially if communities of believers identify themselves with the Triune God in whose image they were created. As highlighted in the article, the social relationship of the Trinity serves as a model for earthly human societies. Human societies therefore are called to demonstrate some degree of interdependence and oneness that is consistent with the unity that is innate in the Trinity. While the Trinity reveals the reality of diversity in the Godhead and humanity, this does not amount to fragmentation. The call for unity should not be just understood in its abstract terms but people ought to live it through washing each other's feet. Just as he was sent into

the 'darkness' of his world, so in the same way contemporary believers are being sent into the darkness of the 21st century. In as much as the Johannine Jesus stood his ground against the antagonists of his day so also to address the darkness of the 21st century, there is a need for African Christian believers to break human-made boundaries by calling their African rulers to accountability, speaking against divisions along ethnic lines, standing against the corruption of every kind, voting out corrupt leaders and political parties and amicably resolving conflicts.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

Authors' contributions

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, C.M., on reasonable request.

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