

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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Religion and Ethnicity in Africa

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Major Religions in Africa

In most parts of Africa today one or more among the most dominant religions will be African Traditional religion, Islam and or Christianity. In most cases this is so in environments where religious space is shared by more than one religion especially as most religions of the world have found a home on the continent. In the same way most African countries are multi-ethnic by reason of historical territorial boundaries, by reason of forced people movements across these boundaries or by intentional cross-border people movements.

Ethnicity and Religion as Rooted Identity

Ethnicity and religion are both linked to identity very closely. Human communities group around certain forms of common identity. Aspects of this common identity can be grouped into two broad categories for clearer understanding. Identity characteristics or indicators such as birth, land, upbringing, physical characteristics and family can be categorized as aspects of rooted identity. The concept of roots is used here to communicate their inherent, inherited and inescapable nature.

Ethnicity, with its characteristic indicators of language, common history, customs and physical characteristics is a form of rooted identity. Religion too, in cases where religious awareness, beliefs, values, experiences and behavior are perceived and expressed as intrinsic aspects of ethnicity can be categorized as a form of rooted identity.

Created Identity

On the other hand, identity characteristics or indicators such as political organization, concepts of the ideal community and religious awareness among others can be categorized as aspects of created identity. Unlike aspects of rooted identity, which are inherited and inescapable, indicators of created identity result from education, revelation and organization. It can be argued then that religion and ethnicity are forms of both rooted and created identity.

The Dynamic Interplay Between Religion and Ethnicity

The dynamic interplay between religion and ethnicity and the influence they bring to bear on each other depends largely on socio-political needs and interests of communities as they strive for perpetuity and respond to challenges within their environments. In this regard there are cases where

religion has been pressurized by modern secular forces to the point where it has failed to rise above ethnic tension and conflict.

In fact in such cases, religion has often tended to serve partisan ethnic interests and agendas as religious identity acquiesces to the overriding dominance of ethnic identity.

The Zimbabwe Scenario

The Zimbabwean scenario between 1998/9 to date (2003) where African Traditional Religion and African Initiated Churches have championed the redistribution of former white owned land to Blacks without qualification while churches that were initiated and are sponsored, controlled or affiliated to whites at home or abroad have condemned it unreservedly, is a case in point.

One might argue against interpreting this land redistribution process as a feature of modern secularism preferring to identify it more with traditional religio-political agendas linked to the renowned spirit mediums of the Zimbabwean chimurengas (wars of liberation). It is undeniable however that the rationale for this exercise has been located in the modern secular principles of social justice and rights by those championing it and therefore a suitable case in point here.

Religious Affiliation Encouraging Vicious Exclusion

There are cases where religious differences override ethnic similarities resulting in religious affiliation becoming the most critical category for vicious exclusion. The violent clashes between African Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, who all share key characteristics of rooted identity such as language, land and physical characteristics, are cases in point.

It may be argued that the religious differences in question have developed around ethnic differences as a result of historical Muslim and Christian competitive and polarized missionary activities that concentrated on different ethnic groups in the first place. Investigations into these violent clashes over the years have demonstrated that religious fervor and supremacy and not ethnic ambitions have functioned as the most critical category for vicious exclusion in these cases of violent clashes.

The Rwandan Genocide

In cases such as the Rwandan genocide on the other hand, you have ethnic differences overriding religious similarities to the point where Christian massacres Christian in the service of ethnic supremacy. Stating this does not in any way underplay the propaganda promoting ethnic hostility and hate that has since been demonstrated to have played a pivotal role in this sad chapter of one African nation.

Religion and Ethnicity Re-enforcing Each Other

It must be observed that at other times ethnic and religious forms of identity link together and re-enforce each other, especially in the face of perceived threats to perceived commonly held ontological fundamentals such as identity, security, territorial integrity, perpetuity and sovereignty.

Such religious and ethnic links have in some cases sponsored terrible violence in the form of societal cleansings in pursuit of ethnic purity and supremacy. The history of the religious and political right wing in South Africa is replete with cases in point.

Policized Religion and Ethnicity

Politicized religion and ethnicity are political categories with an inherent logic that must either include or exclude on the basis of certain ethnic and religious indicators. In their politicized form they inform and guide the worldview, the self-understanding and political action of groups.

I will attempt to introduce conditions, which often grow into open conflict and or violence in Africa when religion and ethnicity are politicized.

- Formation of the modern nation-state (e.g. Sudan)
- Ethnicization of political campaigns in search of majoritarian rule (e.g. Zimbabwe)
- Pursuance of dominance in the religious and political sphere by designated religions (E.g. Sudan, Nigeria)
- Resisting and undermining perceived threats to security, identity, perpetuity etc. by threatened communities.
- Resisting modern secular forces.

Equating of the Modern State and the Single Nation

It must be observed that the historical formation of nationalist movements and post-colonial nation-states in most of Africa is associated with the emergence of the modern nation-state in European history. In that post-renaissance and post-French revolution context, the process of state and nation formation saw the equating of the modern state and the single nation.

A Negative Outcome

A major negative outcome of this influence on African countries is the domination of smaller ethnic or religious communities by the groups that are numerically and politically more powerful. The smaller communities resist and undermine such

attempts at being hegemonized or absorbed so they resort to identifying themselves as nations primarily in terms of their own subjective experience and not on the basis of any objective criteria (note Stalin's 4 objective characteristics of a nation i.e., historical continuity; a shared culture; territory and a common language) label themselves distinct communities.

The nation state tends to strive towards a pan-political identity that is territorially unifying and homogenizing.

Emergence of Majoritarian Nationalism

In theory the goal is to build one nation out of all the communities taken together, but in reality it becomes a process of majoritarian nationalism in which smaller ethnic and religious groups are disenfranchised. In real terms some groups are denied power sharing, security and identity, which in turn results in the disintegration of the very same nation. (e.g. Shonas and Ndebeles in post-independent Zimbabwe).

Certain brands of Islam and Christianity fall into a similar vicious cycle by projecting religion as a homogenizing and universalizing dynamic that links spiritual unity and political organization directly. In such contexts religion becomes a function of politics, viciously excluding or exorcising others.

Some Problems of Democracy

It is important also to highlight that the popular modern concept called democracy itself rides on mobilizing popular support, which in turn depends very much on ethnic politics. This indicates that the normal operations of democracy cannot be the panacea of conflicts sponsored by politicized religion or ethnicity. This process in fact creates new minorities and new alienations.

Conscious Effort Is Needed to Avoid Vicious Exclusion

Conscious effort must be exercised with internationality to prevent and control ethnic and religious forms of identity from becoming functions of political and economic vicious exclusion, which leads to tension, hostility and or violence.

Educationists, opinion leaders and influential leaders in business, politics, communities and the media must accept responsibility for the way in which ethnicity and religion are managed by our communities and seek with internationality to facilitate programs, projects, attitudes, speech categories and behaviors that foster accommodation, tolerance and cooperation across ethnic and religious diversity.

Mediation and conflict resolution activities by religious organizations need to be engaged by religious bodies who are seen to have de-politicized religion and ethnicity for them to succeed. Religion must learn to keep a healthy distance between faith on one hand and

political and ethnic identity on the other; this guarantees religious tolerance and ethnic accommodation.

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