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Religion, Social Cohesion, and Development in Africa

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Abstract:

Today's world is looking at religion as a source of conflict and strife based on experiences from countries like Sudan (North and South), Afghanistan, and Egypt. Social cohesion is declining in many parts of the world despite the public campaigns by politicians, religious leaders, and members of human rights bodies, among others. The said persons and/or bodies' campaigns aim to promote religious values like unity, love, and justice in societies. Issues on lack of solidarity and containing ethnic diversity that sometimes lead to ethnic animosity are very common in public debates in Africa. Trust and participation among members are slowly dwindling in African communities, giving way to ethnic animosity in the form of feuds, clashes, and deaths. This paper looks at religion's role in bringing about social cohesion and development in societies. It majorly relies on content analysis to come up with findings on how religious values work for social cohesion and development in Africa. Research already carried out shows that at the root of social cohesion lies religion, which helps build participation and trust levels among community members. Active participation, trust, and integration among members of any given society are built through religious values that can facilitate development. Furthermore, religion and culture come with shared norms, values, and understandings that result in cooperation among members of a society bringing about an opportunity for upward mobility in the form of development.

Keywords: Social cohesion, development, religion, culture, social solidarity, religious values

1. Introduction

This paper looks at the real link between three key ideas: religion, social cohesion, and development. The idea of religion in this paper is looked at from the point of view of, though not restricted to, African Religion, Christianity, and Islam. The term religion has no universal definition but what is certain is that the bodies referred to as religion seem to share the following characteristics as listed by Sandberg (2018):

- Belief in a god (gods) or goddess (goddesses), a supreme being, a divine or transcendental being, some entity, or a spiritual principle on which the adherents focus.
- A relationship between the believer and the spiritual entity by showing worship, reverence to, or veneration of the spiritual being or entity.
- Some degree of cogency, cohesion, seriousness, and importance.
- An identifiable positive, beneficial, moral, or ethical framework.

The last two characteristics, namely, some degree of cohesion and moral or ethical framework, are directly in line with the postulations of this paper. That is to say that religious principles and or teachings, if followed faithfully and genuinely by the adherents, can bring about social cohesion and moral or ethical living, which greatly contribute to development.

- Social cohesion is defined by Beauvais and Jenson (2002) as an ongoing process with known group structures, levels of solidarity, and shared values between individuals and mechanisms to solve the conflict. According to Budman et al. (1987), social cohesion is about individuals acting together toward a common goal, positive engagements around common goals, and vulnerable and trusting attitudes that foster sharing private materials. These two definitions agree on individuals acting together to achieve a common goal. Emile Durkheim (1893), on his part, described social cohesion as a strong collective consciousness brought about by strong religious ideas of right and wrong. This is to say that social cohesion results when people in a society value right and wrong and desist from inflicting pain on a neighbour or exercise the principle of 'do to others what you want to be done to you'.

According to Adams (2009), the term 'development' means different things to different people. These meanings depend on the point one is defining the term from. For example, the fields of health, economics, sociology, and politics define development differently. These dimensions can be seen in the definitions provided in the paragraphs following.

Development is defined by Abuiyada (2018) as an improvement in a country's economic and social conditions, a way or process of managing an area's natural and human resources in a manner that leads to the creation of wealth and improvement in people's lives.

Seers (1972) defines development as that which results in a better life expectancy, literacy/education, and living standards, a process through which the population can access food, jobs, and equality. Development, therefore, should lead

to high life expectancy, an achievement of adult literacy in which all citizens are well-educated, and a situation in which they all can access an average income in their country. In addition, the achievement of development should realize the human personality by reducing poverty, unemployment, and inequality.

1.1. Problem

Missionary religions, such as Christianity and Islam, are very much present in Africa. They have managed to push African Religion to a corner from which it has not managed to get out. They work day and night to spearhead unity, love, justice, and social cohesion, which should result in development on the African soil. However, many a time, people experience instances of violence, religious or non-religious, divisions between various groups within Christianity and Islam, poverty, corruption, and underdevelopment in Africa. If religion works for social cohesion and development, why do we have rampant corruption, poverty, and underdevelopment in Africa?

2. Religion and Social Cohesion

According to Emile Durkheim (1947), social cohesion is grounded on religion. He notes that the religious rituals, values, and beliefs people practice like justice, love, sharing, patience, and care for one another help maintain social solidarity, control, and conformity in society. The indicators of social cohesion have been described by Jenson (2010) as human solidarity in ethnic diversity, social harmony and inclusion, income distribution, trust, and the amount of capital a community has. This implies that where there is social cohesion, there should be elements like social relationships, connectedness, orientation towards the common good, and equality.

According to Catholic Relief Services (2019), social cohesion includes trust, reciprocity, and links between and among citizens and between and among civil society groups-*horizontal*. It also includes a social contract between people and authorities-*vertical* and relations between state and non-state institutions together with relationships between and among market actors, namely consumers and producers.

According to Australian Human Rights Commission (2015) and The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2011), the indicators of social cohesion are further elaborated as a society in which:

- The well-being of all members is taken care of
- Exclusion and marginalization excluded or limited
- A sense of belonging created
- Trust among members fully promoted
- An opportunity for upward mobility created

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2011) notes that a society that is coherent or united

- works toward the well-being of all its members,
- fights exclusion and marginalization of any of their members and their society by others,
- creates a sense of belonging,
- promotes trust,
- Creates an opportunity for upward mobility for members.

The question we can pose here is: Has religion promoted or worked against the above indicators? Does religion offer values that can foster or promote unity, togetherness, concern for others, sympathy, pity, or mercy on others? Let's address these questions from the point of view of African Traditional Religion, Islam, and Christianity.

2.1. African Religion

Mbiti (1975) had a famous statement echoed in many articles in and out of Africa that 'Africans are notoriously religious'. Africans are with their religion everywhere; in the fields, rivers, lakes, forests, and literally everywhere. However, Africans had values that can be described as uniquely African. These included hospitality, sharing, socialism, communalism, children, respect for the elderly, and rites of passage. Africans shared almost everything ranging from food to clothing and work. Sharing food ensures that everybody is taken care of and the greedy are isolated, checked, and reprimanded. These values exist in other non-African communities too, but how Africans expressed them went a notch higher.

Gye Kye (1998) noted that in Africa, people cared about their duties towards the community members more than they did towards the self. One's actions were judged based on how such actions benefitted others and not necessarily the self. Communalism enabled members of a society to share land, water, and pasture without any discrimination. In this way, ancestral land was just for all community members. Water points were never fenced, just as pasture was not guarded so that one could claim a section as his/hers.

According to Del Chinchén (2000), African hospitality is the spontaneous, warm reception of expected or unexpected guests, especially strangers, characterized by welcoming rituals, discourses, feasting, celebration, parting speeches, presentation of gifts, and the practice of accompaniment. This means that a visitor in Africa must not necessarily make an appointment to merit entertainment. Africans are ready with their hospitality at all times. One is thoroughly entertained with food, interrogations about any possible links in relationships, gifts, and escorted on his/her way out.

Wienecke (2005) notes that positive values toward using natural resources were inculcated in traditional African societies from generation to generation through proverbs, stories, songs, and religious ceremonies or rituals. African stories, proverbs, taboos, and songs were used to teach the community about good behavior, concern for others, justice,

love, and care for nature. It was rarely heard that an African has stolen from one of his/her own, killed one of their own, or even conned a member of his/her society.

Osei (2006) adds that Africans have a set of cultic or religious prohibitions instituted by traditional religious authorities as instruments for moral motivation, guidance, and objectivity to protect their shrines' sanctity and other aspects of life. In Africa, the consequences of taboos are automatic. The results are expected here on earth and not later in heaven or hell. Moreover, taboos are the primary source of bonding or social cohesion in all human relations and transactions in traditional societies. With all these in place, any person will agree that African Religion fostered social cohesion.

The questions of poverty, corruption, and underdevelopment that are rampant in Africa can be explained from history. Swart (2006) and Agbiji (2012) agree on the fact that colonialism and the takeover of African Religion by missionary religions are to blame. However, they continue to note that other reasons for the rampant poverty and corruption in Africa include: reliance on welfare and material aid in the form of poverty relief programs which the same religious institutions also distribute. Another issue contributing to problems in Africa is the transfer of punishment from one's life here on earth to the hereafter by missionary religions.

Gifford (2009) adds another dimension: the African political elite should also be blamed for poverty and corruption on African soil. This is because they, together with the religious leaders who are part and parcel of the African elite, condone corruption and have consistently failed to pinpoint corrupt deals since they too benefit from such deals.

2.2. Islam

The term 'Islam' is derived from the Arabic word 'salam', meaning 'peace'. In the religious context, the word 'Islam' means submission to the will of Allah-God. Islam as a religion demonstrates peace and tolerance. All the sources of Islam, namely the al Quran, the Hadith, Sunnah, The Qiyas, and Ijma, talk about the importance of social cohesion.

- Hadith – sayings of the prophet (s.a.w.)
- Sunnah – actions of the prophet (s.a.w.)
- Ijtihad -/ijma – consensus of the Muslim Jurists
- Qiyas – reasoning by analogy

The Quran has several verses that talk about building a united community. Some examples include:

- 3:103 *'Hold fast to the rope of God, all together, and be not divided' Remember the blessings of God upon you, when you were enemies, and he joined your hearts such that you became brothers by His blessing....'*
- Al Hujurat verse 10 reads, *'The believers are nothing but brothers, so make settlement between your brothers. And fear Allah that you may receive mercy.'*
- 6:159 reads, *'as for those who divide their religion and break up into partisans, you have no part in them in the least.'*
- The Hadith also contains several statements on unity from the prophet (s.a.w) as recorded by renowned Muslim writers. Some examples include:
 - *'None of you will have faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself' (Al Bukhari)*
 - *'Verily the believers are like a structure, each part strengthening the other' (Al Bukhari)*
 - *'Allah helps his slave as long as he helps his brother' (Sahih Muslim)*

Ayaz & Hafiz (2018) note that a series of non-stop indiscriminate killings and bloodshed has been initiated and bonfires of hatred have been inflamed in the name of Islam, which is the key to affection, brotherhood, and unity of the Ummah. He continues to confirm that this prevailing situation is due to evading the Quran's teachings. Terrorist groups, extremists, Islamists, radicals, or fundamentalists as they are called, have misinterpreted certain verses of the Quran to justify their anti-Quranic beliefs. These groups misinterpret the idea of jihad to perpetuate their violence.

Zahrah (2015) notes that the Quran, Hadith, and Sunnah all promote human dignity (Al Isra: 70), human cooperation (Sahih Muslim), and freedom of religion (Al Baqarah 2:256), and tolerance (Al Hujurat 49:13).

Islamists, extremists, terrorists, Muslim fundamentalists, or radicals who go against the true teachings of the Quran include, among others:

- Al Qaeda, based in Afghanistan
- Boko Haram, based in West Africa
- Hamas, based in the Gaza strip
- Hezbollah, based in Lebanon
- Taliban, based in Pakistan
- Al Shabaab, based in Somalia
- ISIL/ISIS Islamic state of Iraq and the Levant/Syria, based in the Middle East

These groups have been involved in most of the attacks experienced since the 1970s.

- On 25/12/2011, 41 people were killed and 57 injured by Boko Haram in Nigeria in the so-called Christmas attacks in Madalla, Jos, Gadaka, and Damaturu areas.
- On 21/9/2013, 67 people died in an attack by Al Shabaab in Nairobi, West Gate shopping mall.
- On 14/4/2014, Borno massacre by Boko Haram in Nigeria left 200 dead.
- On 28/11/2014, Kano bombings in Nigeria left 120 dead and 260 injured by Boko Haram.
- In 2014, over 1100 people were killed in Iraq in the Camp Speicher massacre by ISIL.
- In 2014, over 700 Shua'ytat men were killed in Deir-ez-Zor Governorate in Syria by ISIL.

- On 2/4/2015, 148, mainly Christian students, died in the Garissa University College attack by Al Shabaab.
- On 15/1/2019, at least 21 people were killed in Nairobi, Kenya, when Al-Shabaab militants attacked the DusitD2 hotel.

From the above examples, it is clear that Islam is a religion of peace. However, various groups mentioned above take advantage of some of the teachings in the Quran, Hadith and/or Sunnah wrongly to justify their deeds. Therefore, they do not represent true Muslim teachings.

2.3. Christianity

Jesus Christ taught about mercy, sympathy, and compassion and summarized the Ten Commandments into two major areas, namely, 'love your God above all else and your neighbor as you love yourself'. He put new standards into behavior that were very strict. In the gospel, according to Mathew (5:38), He taught about forgiveness and reconciliation when he said, 'offer the wicked man no resistance. On the contrary, if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well...' He noted further thus: 'So then if you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering' (Mt 5:23-24).

The Christian scriptures contain verses that teach unity, justice, love, and concern for others. In the gospel, according to John (17:6f), the writer presents Jesus praying for the oneness of the people God gave him, the ones to whom he had preached. Jesus prays, 'May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us as you are in me and I am in you...' (Verse 21-22). According to Luke, the gospel presents a story of a Good Samaritan proving to be a neighbor to an Israelite in need (Lk 10:25-37).

In first Corinthians (12:12-30), Paul uses the classical analogy of society as a single body with many parts that require the services of one another to function. The way the human body gives unity to all its component parts is the way Christ, as the unifying principle of his Church, gives unity to all Christians in his body. In his letter to the Romans (12:10-13), Paul encourages the Christians to 'love each other as much as brothers should, and have a profound respect for each other'. He encourages these Christians to make hospitality their special care. In Philippians (2:2), Paul again encourages Christians to be united in their convictions and united in their love, with a common purpose and a common mind.

It is undoubtedly evident that Christianity encourages unity, justice, and love among members of society. Dearborn (2009) notes, 'for Christians, the pursuit of social justice for the poor and oppressed is the decisive mark of being people who submit to the will and way of God'. This is to say that one who submits to the will and ways of God must be concerned about the poor and disadvantaged in the society. The book of Isaiah (1:17) observes that people should cease to do evil; instead, they should learn to do good, search for justice, help the oppressed and be just to the orphan. Furthermore, Psalm (82:3) notes that the weak and the orphan should be given justice, people should be fair to those who are unfortunate, and the weak and needy should be rescued and saved from the wicked.

So many Christian organizations or Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) work for justice, fairness, and unity worldwide. Nkuthah and Gathogo (2015) carried out research in Mbeere, Kenya, on overcoming poverty through faith-based organizations and came up with findings that: Faith-Based Organizations have instilled a sense of belonging, purpose, and meaning in life to people in Mbeere by offering skills, promoting relationships, health, good morals, spiritual and pastoral guidance, reformed dimensions of development and the creation of a viable and socio-political environment for development in the region. They mention Christian Child Fund (CCF) and Christian Community Services (CCS) as the best examples of faith-based organizations (FBOs).

Christian Aid is another FBO working in Kenya among people in semi-arid areas like Kitui, Moyale, and Narok. This organization assists in health and nutrition by improving health financing and governance to advance the progress of health systems towards universal health coverage. They also spearhead the development of climate resilience in Kenya, help smallholder producers, micro-enterprises, women, and young people and also help in humanitarian disasters. (<https://www.christianaid.org.uk>).

3. Religion and Development in Africa

We have seen from the above sections that the three religions being considered here, namely, African Religion, Islam, and Christianity, all advocate for peace, unity, love, justice, and hence social cohesion among the adherents and between them and others. According to Agbiji & Swart (2015), African Traditional Religion has remained strong in all aspects of society. They give the case of the Ololumo community of Nigeria, in which care for all the members of society was ensured through religiously informed traditional norms. A stranger in Africa was allowed to harvest food from another's farm, eat and get satisfied or drink to satisfy his/her need for food.

Narayan (2001) notes that to be wealthy or affluent in Africa means being surrounded by community members, being healthy and ethically sound, and having a good relationship with one's creator, ancestors, and the community. Tsele (2001) & Kalu (2010) observe that religion achieves development through values like honesty, integrity, openness, forthrightness, and tolerance. Religion also offers hope and optimism, which are key to development. Furthermore, religion propagates solidarity and human respect, which are indicators of social cohesion and development. It also motivates people to act, prevents conflict, and promotes peace-building.

Despite attempts by both Christianity and Islam to initiate some developments on African soil, not much is being realized. The majority of Africans remain poor, corrupt, and underdeveloped. This is a product of history. Colonialism and the introduction of missionary religions changed the African's thinking. This is because Africans were not allowed to be themselves. They were systematically and intentionally orientated to ignore their religion and culture. Africans must be

truly African in all their interactions with missionary religions. Christianity, particularly the Catholic Church, has tried inculturation, contextualization, or indigenization of the Christian faith to make it more appealing to Africans. These have not yielded much because, in all instances, the yardstick has been Christianity, not African Religion and culture. Christianity is considered superior in all these undertakings, and African Religion is considered inferior.

It should be noted that no African can be 100% Christian. This is a fact that many religious leaders do not want to accept. African Christians remain with half African names and half Christian or Jewish names. For Africans to develop, there must be a movement toward '*Africanism*' or what we call '*a true African identity*'. We must stop thinking in foreign languages since people usually think using concepts and ideas in the languages they speak. We must think of a true African identity by starting to insist on using African languages. Why would an African student starting his/her studies in Germany, France, or Italy have to learn the languages of these countries in the first semester before embarking on his/her studies? It is because these countries insist on learning their own languages. This never happens in any African country. Visitors come and find us using their own languages for education here on African soil. The local language is essential for a country's development, whether we like it or not. It makes people form ideas, concepts and solve issues in their own culture as contained in the language.

Secondly, Africans must go back to African oathing or swearing systems. These oaths had more meaning to an African than the use of either a Bible or the Quran. It has been witnessed on many occasions where Africans swear using the Bible in the Kiswahili words: '*Naapa ya kwamba maneno yote nitakayosema mbele ya korti hii ni ya kweli, kweli kabisa, ee Mwenyezi Mungu nisaidie*' meaning; '*I hereby swear that the whole witness I will give in this court or in front of this crowd is nothing but the truth, so help me God*'. Immediately after putting down the Bible, they start by giving a false witness and do not care about what follows. Africans fear swearing the African way or style since they know that the consequences are likely very serious to their lives or those of their children.

Third, the idea of punishment in Africa must be as it was: 'here on earth and not in the next world in heaven or hell'. Postponing the punishment of offenders to the next life has made many Africans become less serious about specific moral issues like cheating, adultery, stealing, or murders. Today, these issues have increased in Africa due to the idea of punishment being postponed to the next life. Curses due to violation of taboos had effects here on earth. Somebody or his/her children became mad, died, or led some confused or incomprehensible life here on earth.

Elders, and leaders, both religious and political, should endeavor to work for these changes if we have to realize development in Africa. We need to work away back to a true African identity by championing practices like African swearing, African cultural foods, African languages, African medicine, African education, whether informal or formal, African names, art, and dance, just to mention a few. Unfortunately, most African elite, including religious leaders of some churches, still insist today that African Religion is primitive because they have been taught to say so. They argue that returning to true African identity is impossible in the 21st century because they have been taught to believe so. However, it is possible with goodwill from our leaders. How have the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Indians, and others achieved it? Where are they in terms of development?

Countries like Malaysia and Indonesia started with Kenya on the same footing at independence; today, they are far ahead of Kenya as far as development is concerned. Why? According to Geo-ranking, Indonesia is today (2021) the 16th largest economy in the world with a GDP of \$1Trillion, whereas Kenya is 66th with a GDP of \$87.9 Billion. On the other hand, Malaysia has a GDP of \$358.6B, ranked 37th largest economy in the world.

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