SOCIAL JUSTICE AND RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN AFRICA: A CRITICAL STUDY FROM CONTEMPORARY SCENARIO

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Abstract
Africa is a geographically expansive landmass renowned for its extensive cultural, linguistic, and religious variations. Nevertheless, the presence of diverse populations frequently gives rise to intricate social concerns, encompassing issues about social justice and religious harmony among diverse religions. This research study critically examines the current state of social justice and religious peace in Africa, analyzing the multiple elements that influence these matters. This paper examines the historical backdrop of religious plurality in Africa, the obstacles encountered in pursuing social justice, and the approaches and endeavors implemented to foster religious concord. The paper further elucidates the significance of education, interfaith interaction, and government policy in tackling these concerns. This study seeks to enhance comprehension of the intricate interplay between social justice and religious harmony in the African environment by analyzing the present state of affairs.
Keywords: Social Justice, Religious Harmony, Religious diversity, Africa, Peacebuilding

Introduction

Africa, renowned for its diverse language varieties, cultural backgrounds, and religions, is a focal point where the intricate relationship between social justice and religious peace unfolds (Graness, 2015). This research piece comprehensively examines the multifaceted interaction between these two crucial aspects within the current African setting. In the context of a long history of religious pluralism and cultural diversity, the continent of Africa is currently faced with a range of complex issues as it strives to achieve fair social justice and religious harmony (Graness, 2015). The study aims to examine the complex relationship between these variables, providing insight into the significant progress and ongoing challenges experienced by the continent.

The religious composition of Africa is characterized by a rich diversity that mirrors its vast geographical expanse, incorporating a wide range of influences from indigenous belief systems, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and syncretic faiths. Nevertheless, diverse religious beliefs and social disparities can create a complex situation, leading to the potential emergence of religious conflicts and societal inequalities (Tan, 2007).

This study presents a comprehensive analysis of the current state of affairs, delving into the historical origins of religious diversity and its implications in the socio-political sphere. Moreover, this article will explore the diverse challenges, including religious conflicts, discriminatory practices, gender inequities, and resource disparities. Additionally, it will critically examine the approaches, endeavors, and crucial significance of education and interfaith dialogue in establishing a trajectory toward social equity and religious concordance in the African context. This comprehensive research aims to contribute to a more profound comprehension of the intricate relationship between social justice and religious peace, both as separate entities and intersecting within the context of Africa.

Religious diversity in Africa

The religious variety of Africa has a long-standing historical foundation, tracing its origins to prehistoric eras. The Indigenous African religions played a significant role as the foundational spiritual systems for numerous ethnic groups, exhibiting a wide range of beliefs that mirrored the different environments in which they resided (Nwadialor, 2016). The presence of animism, ancestor worship, and a deep respect for nature characterized the indigenous faiths of Africa. These religious beliefs and practices were essential in establishing African communities' spiritual and cultural identity, playing a significant role in their development and formation (Dreier, Long, & Winkler, 2020).

Africa's religious landscape underwent a significant transformation due to the introduction of other influences. Islam was introduced to North and East Africa by Arab traders in the 7th century. However, Christianity was brought to the continent by European colonial powers during the colonial era commencing in the 15th century (Kodila-Tedika & Agbor, 2014). The imported religions frequently lived alongside indigenous belief systems, developing syncretic faiths incorporating several traditions. The syncretism that emerged from the interaction of indigenous, Islamic, and Christian beliefs is evidence of Africa's ability to adapt and assimilate novel concepts within its preexisting cultural and religious structures (Carrim, 2016).

In addition, the transatlantic slave trade, characterized by the coerced migration of numerous Africans to the Americas, played a significant role in disseminating African religious customs. In the New World context, enslaved Africans preserved and modified their customary belief systems, leading to the emergence of Afro-Caribbean religions such as Vodou in Haiti and Santería in Cuba. These religious practices amalgamated aspects of African spirituality with Catholicism. The historical background emphasizes the long-lasting impact of African religious variety, both inside Africa itself and in other regions. This discussion highlights the significance of African cultural identity and history (KANU, 2019).

The religious beliefs and practices of the various peoples of Africa encompass a diverse range of African faiths. The origins of African religion may be traced back to approximately 1500 BCE. This religious tradition contains various forms of devotion, including the expression of beliefs through myths, folktales, songs, dances, liturgies, and proverbs. It is essential to acknowledge that making generalizations regarding the nature of "African religions" runs the risk of erroneously suggesting uniformity across all African civilizations (Ruele, 2016).

Scholarly sources indicate the presence of Christian communities in Northern Africa dating back to 180 C. In contrast, evidence suggests that Christian communities emerged in Eastern Africa during the sixth century CE. Consequently, both religious traditions possess a legitimate basis for asserting their indigenousness. African communities with a high presence of indigenous religion had a certain level of compatibility with Christianity, as opposed to societies where indigenous religion was weak. This statement challenges the assertions that Christianity has been or remains incompatible with African indigenous religions (S. Ludovic, Lado Tonlieu, 2021).

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that numerous Christian missionaries during the 19th and 20th centuries propagated the belief that a personal encounter with the divine was exclusively attainable via the mediation of Jesus Christ. The legitimacy of African religion has been subject to ambiguity despite evidence indicating its role in shaping individuals' experiences of the divine and upholding ancestral cultural traditions (Rotberg & Rotberg, 2020).

Missionaries frequently portrayed Christianity as superior and characterized it as a more 'civilized' religion. A particular segment of society held negative views toward African religion, perceiving it as a manifestation of paganism. Christianity regards Christ as the final sacrifice reconciling God and humanity. Consequently, adherents of Christianity commonly refrain from engaging in rituals, such as animal sacrifices, practiced among many African religions (Kretzschmar, 2020).

The prevalence of prejudice directed towards African religious practices played a significant role in Africans' widespread adoption of Christianity, which resulted from European colonization. This factor contributed to the ability of European Christian missionaries to advance colonial objectives, sometimes with awareness and sometimes without (Beukes & Beukes, 2023).

Several missionaries implemented a strategy characterized as "religious vandalism," encompassing the deliberate eradication of African practices and belief systems. The public expression of African religion was prohibited. Christian converts were encouraged to renounce the African traditional faith because it was characterized as idolatry, superstitious beliefs, and necromancy. Consequently, specific individuals felt guilt about their African religious beliefs, leading them to engage in clandestine African spiritual practices while openly adhering to Christianity (Conant, 2022).

During the period of apartheid colonialism (1948–1994), South Africa was erroneously characterized as a mono-religious state due to the prevailing perception that the majority of the population adhered to the Christian faith. African religion was prohibited, leading to the compulsory separation of Africans from white people. The theological framework of apartheid rationalized and legitimized white Christians' perceived superiority over Africans (Atabongwoung, Lütz, & Austin, 2023). The teaching of African religion in schools was notably absent. This stands in contrast to the inclusion of Christian biblical teachings in missionary and certain public schools. Consequently, African religion is often perceived as a worldview orientation predominantly embraced by individuals with limited literacy residing in rural areas, where rituals are commonly conducted outside, beneath trees and within natural surroundings (Kasera, 2021).

The systemic segregation and discrimination phenomenon in South Africa was characterized by religious dynamics that fostered divisions between in-groups and out-groups. In-group and out-group segregation can promote and perpetuate discriminatory attitudes among individuals with varying religious affiliations (Burchardt, 2018). In-group and out-group thinking has the potential to sustain divisions among individuals belonging to diverse religious groups. This phenomenon arises due to the tendency of such reviews to restrict opportunities for intergroup contact or interaction, hence hindering the ability of individuals from different religions to engage with one another (Atabongwoung et al., 2023). In-group versus out-group discrimination in South Africa can be characterized as a dividing force that hampers interfaith collaborations. Furthermore, it exacerbated cultural rifts among the African population in South Africa, thus intensifying religious animosity (Freeman, 2017).

Practiced Social Justice and Religious Harmony in Africa

There is a firm conviction that the church's missionary endeavors to convert black folks in Africa to Christianity have inadvertently negatively affected social relations and justice within the region. The specific areas have undergone a misrepresentation of sacred texts concerning essential human connections and societal equity due to the Christian Crusades, the advancement of civilization, and the colonization of African populations. The colonial viewpoint regarding the right to conquer and seize land from individuals of African descent led to a departure from the core tenets of Christianity, which prioritize the adherence to Christ's teachings of love and the cultivation of harmonious relationships with one's fellow human beings (Olagunju, 2013).

The perception of Africa as the epitome of human progress in South Africa resulted from the dominant influence of white racial superiority and the subjugation of black Africans. As a result, the endeavor to achieve social justice within this framework yielded a more considerable number of adverse consequences than favorable ones. The prevailing comprehension and observance of Christianity among the white demographic in South Africa during the era of apartheid did not correspond with the tenets of social justice and harmonious cohabitation (Aihiokhai, 2020).

The individual's religious convictions encompass refraining from participating in political affairs and yielding to the ruling party while prioritizing spiritual endeavors that ultimately result in salvation. A theological perspective emerged, rooted in Christian ideology, which emphasized escapism. This perspective gained support from white religious devotion and the global Pentecostal movement, promoting a concept of salvation that disregarded the importance of social justice (Wangila, 2010).

In Western academic discourse, discussions exist surrounding the perceived resurgence of religion inside the public sphere. Conversely, in Africa, it is evident that religion has consistently maintained a presence within the public domain despite the rhetoric surrounding the notion of a "secular" state. Faith exhibits its presence within the public sphere and actively seeks to assert its influence in policymaking. In addition to actively participating in humanitarian services, education, health,

human rights, and civic education, religious organizations in Africa have also addressed the three elements of social justice: violence prevention, conflict management, and conflict transformation (Baskin, 2016). Thomas Banchoff aptly acknowledges the sometimes-overlooked role of religious groups in promoting peace. He highlights that while their efforts may not always be readily apparent, they are substantial and noteworthy (Banchoff, 2008). Religious communities actively engage in peaceful endeavors within contemporary global affairs. However, it exhibits a pacifist nature. It is less probable that this particular event will receive coverage in newspapers, but it possesses extensive and significant consequences that often need to be more valued (Atabongwoung et al., 2023).

Religious diplomacy has proven effective in some notable instances, surpassing the efforts of state actors and international organizations in restoring social justice within conflict-ridden communities (Haynes, 2009). The exemplary achievement in social justice by the Catholic laity movement of Sant'Egidio in Mozambique is a compelling demonstration of religious organizations' dedication to fostering peace. By employing a tactful and discreet approach to diplomacy, characterized by multiple rounds of negotiations among conflicting factions, they successfully achieved a peace accord in October 1992. This deal effectively ended a prolonged civil unrest spanning several decades involving the parties FRELIMO and RENAMO (Anouilh, 2005).

In the preceding three decades, religious leaders in various African nations have been summoned to fulfill the role of mediators, particularly during periods characterized by political transitions and hostilities. In the early 1990s, religious leaders were approached to oversee sovereign national conferences in various countries, including Benin, the Republic of Congo, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Their involvement proved highly effective in promoting gradual shifts from one-party systems to political pluralism. The contribution above made a significant impact in fostering peace and stability (Phiri, 1999).

In nations like Zambia, where a national conference did not occur, churches facilitated a comparatively smooth transition to multiparty politics during the early 1990s. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, certain groups made a concerted effort to apply public pressure on Kenneth Kaunda's dictatorship to advocate for a transition towards a pluralistic political system. Religious leaders have also been summoned to assume leadership roles in national truth and reconciliation commissions. Archbishop Desmond Tutu assumed leadership of the inaugural commission of its nature on the African continent, overseeing the reconciliation efforts in post-Apartheid South Africa. Subsequently, some clergymen have been designated to serve on similar commissions in several nations, such as Togo and Côte d'Ivoire (Aihiokhai, 2020).

In a nutshell:

Africa is a continent of considerable size, characterized by significant geographical variety and a wide range of cultural traditions. Each of the over 50 contemporary nations that inhabit the continent possesses its distinct historical narrative, and each, in turn, encompasses a multitude of ethnic groupings characterized by diverse languages, customs, and beliefs. The religious traditions in Africa exhibit a remarkable diversity that mirrors the vast array of cultures and societies on the continent. However, extensive cultural interactions encompassing various degrees of engagement, such as trade and invasion, have developed certain shared characteristics among faiths in specific subregions of Africa. Consequently, it is possible to draw some broad conclusions regarding the distinctive attributes of indigenous African religions.

The majority of conflicts commonly categorized as "inter-religious" tend to have underlying causes that extend beyond religious factors. Religion frequently serves as a means to express perceived instances of political, social, and economic marginalization, as well as the accompanying sentiments of frustration. In the Sub-Saharan African region, despite occasional instances of terrorist acts, religious intolerance is predominantly manifested through peaceful means. The norm in Africa is the peaceful cohabitation of its religiously diverse people, a state that has persisted for decades. When utilized strategically, this cultural practice has the potential to enhance the establishment of a peaceful and socially unified society in Africa. Furthermore, religious leaders held in high regard by their communities may possess a greater capacity for promoting peace, particularly in mediation

efforts, compared to secular authorities. It has been stated that local religious actors, who are deeply integrated within communities, possess the unique advantage of tapping into a pool of trust that is not accessible to secular players.

Key recommendations

Promoting social justice relies on inclusiveness, social fairness, and human rights. Religious leaders and organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa advocate for social justice and peace (S. Ludovic, Lado Tonlieu, 2021). Social justice includes advocating for natural resource justice in some Christian circles. Muslim traditions use sulpha (or such) for social justice, while African traditional religions have several reconciliation rituals to restore societal harmony. Build on these resources (S. J. Ludovic, Lado Tonlieu, 2021). This article addresses some crucial policy issues for policymakers for social justice.

1. Policymakers focus on violent religious intolerance. More attention should be paid to how community, school, and faith-based media attitudes spawn such violence. Transnational networks fund intolerant views by spreading unfavorable portrayals of the "other" at the grassroots level. Thus, fighting prejudice and building community cannot be limited to the wealthy. Community-level inter-religious and inter-ethnic contacts will strengthen society and avoid bigotry (Laue, 2000).

2. As radicalized conceptions of faith-based customs have garnered attention on social media, Africa has increasingly associated religion with horrendous acts of terrorism from Somalia and Kenya to the Sahel and North Africa. Communities most affected by misunderstandings and disproportionately attacked deserve more attention. Some experts say that avoiding such radical and violent voices is to work with and improve the peacebuilding skills of Muslim actors who focus on Islamic ways of resolving conflicts and making peace (Abu-Nimer & Kadayifci-Orellana, 2008). In order to propagate the Islamic culture of peace and conflict resolution, it is necessary to support these players directly, which "requires understanding specific characteristics of Muslim peacebuilding actors, their strengths, and the challenges they face."(Abu-Nimer & Kadayifci-Orellana, 2005)

3. Foster interfaith dialogue and peace leadership. Interfaith efforts are growing across Africa but need more organization and networking. Future organizations must incorporate inter-religious initiatives in a preventive manner to promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Inter-faith projects are usually ad hoc responses to increasing conflicts. Centralizing interfaith peacebuilding peacebuilding activities in offices would be more sustainable. Continental entities like the African Union and subregional bodies should participate. Religious peacebuilders should also receive excellent conflict resolution training because they know the local landscape and are more influential than "outsiders." Spiritual peacebuilders will work better with secular groups when they become professionals (Laue, 2000).

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