

African Churches in Social Transformation

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Introduction

It is an ironic twist of history that Euro-American interests in the "democratization" of Africa accelerated after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, rather than at the establishment of African republics following decolonization in the 1960s. African struggles for national independence in the 1940s and 1950s did not get much support, moral or otherwise, from Western Europe and North America, even though in the North Atlantic nations, freedom was cherished as one of the basic human rights and democracy was championed as the ideal form of government. The rich nations now interested in democratization of Africa did not consider it a priority for the continent in the decades since decolonization: Ideological considerations took precedence over Africa's democratization.

The national constitutions brokered and signed respectively in London, Paris, Lisbon and Washington to end colonial rule in Africa were, in principle, democratic, but the citizens were hardly informed about their democratic rights under the provisions of those constitutions. Civic education campaigns should have immediately followed national independence. Had they, the citizens would have become aware of their rights from the beginning. As it turned out, Africa became a continent of coups and countercoups, of one-party and military regimes. The leaders of those regimes had the tacit support of one ideological bloc or the other. Thus these political convulsions were largely, though not exclusively, shaped by Cold War interests, and Africa became a massive battle-ground for superpower rivalry.

Why, then, was there an interest in democratization during the 1990s, rather than during the 1960s? It seems that western nations did not believe Africans needed democracy in 1960, but did in 1990. Suddenly, after 1990, the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPS) of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) included political liberalization as one of the conditions for receiving loans, whereas during the Cold War, dictatorial regimes could obtain support from Europe and North America, provided they were supportive of the western ideological bloc. The belated interest in democratization leaves open questions as to whether the campaigns now linked with SAPS can and will be sustained in the long term.

Democratization in Africa after the Cold War has come to be associated with multiparty politics and multiparty parliamentary elections. If democracy is broadly defined as "government of the people, for the people, by the people themselves," it is clear that the existence of multiparty politics and regular parliamentary elections do not, on their own, produce democracy. Experience in several African countries since 1990 shows that overemphasis on multiparty electioneering may lead to a limited type of democratization, but it cannot guarantee the full

participation of the electorate. Indeed, in many countries it has increased civil strife, rather than democracy. The overenthusiasm on the part of the rich nations to promote democratization in Africa after the Cold War has led some African countries to conclude that democracy, if imposed from outside, can be a form of imperialism.

Uganda for example, has argued that the decision to have a multiparty political system should be debated by the citizens, not imposed from outside. For that reason, Uganda will have a referendum for or against multiparty politics after a five-year experiment of participatory democracy without political parties. During the multiparty era, the electorates of Tanzania, Kenya and Zimbabwe have returned to power the same political parties that reigned as single-party regimes. The citizens of Benin, in their second parliamentary elections after democratization, chose the former leadership and rejected the newcomers introduced by the multiparty era. These results are useful indicators that more thinking is needed with regard to the campaign for democratization in Africa.

When churches and church-related agencies have joined the campaigns for democratization in Africa, they have done so without critical reflection. Funds have been available for such campaigns through ecumenical partners (donors) in Europe and North America, who have in turn obtained funds from their respective governments or parastatal agencies. Although churches ought to concern themselves with the social and economic welfare of their members in particular, and of people in general, the direct involvement of church leaders in civic education and election monitoring has often created the impression that churches were politically partisan. Consequently, in some areas, the churches became agents of conflict rather than reconciliation.

The objective of this paper is to discuss the involvement of churches and church-related agencies in the socio-political transformation of Africa.⁽¹⁾ Christianity can be discussed as a social phenomenon, and at the same time it can be discussed in the context of the individual churches that constitute this phenomenon. I shall use the terms "Church" and "Christianity" when referring to the phenomenon of Christianity, and the term "churches" to refer to the particular denominational expressions of that phenomenon. In order to make sense of the social role of Christian churches in the post-Cold War period in Africa, it is necessary to briefly trace the history of Christianity globally, focusing on its socio-political impact, then proceed to the local context in tropical Africa.

Throughout most of these past 20 centuries, Christianity has perhaps been the most influential social phenomenon in all continents. The level of impact has varied from one continent to another, from one period to another, and from one region or country to another. In Europe, Christianity had permeated all sectors of public life by the end of the sixteenth century, to the extent that the reformers and counterreformers managed to mobilize the populace towards the denominational orientations which have characterized European Christianity until today. The process of the permanent settlement of Europeans in the Americas between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries facilitated the exportation of European Christianity to those continents. Whereas Roman Catholicism became dominant in South America, Protestantism became the norm in North America, though there were regional variations. In Asia, the numerical strength of Christianity has remained comparatively small, but its ideological influence has been very

significant. Australia and New Zealand became predominantly Christian, having adopted the denominational pluralism of the British settlers.

Africa, during the first six centuries of the Christian era, was the extreme southern province of the Roman Empire, stretching east-west along the southern shores of the Mediterranean sea, but not far inland. Only since the early sixteenth century have Europeans known that Africa extended as far south as 35 degrees latitude.

Within the Roman Empire, African Christianity was greatly influential both in Europe and Africa. The catechistic schools of Alexandria and Carthage were centers of learning with reputations for scholarly excellence throughout the empire. The early ecumenical councils (Nicea, 325 A.D.; Constantinople, 381 A.D.; and Chalcedon, 451 A.D.) were heavily influenced by theologians from Africa. These councils were convened on demand of the emperors who were interested in the Church as a unifying social force. Political realists of that time acknowledged that their empire would not remain united if the church was divided. Unity of the Church (Catholicity) was considered more important than truth of belief (Orthodoxy). The first great schism in the history of Christianity was thus as much political as it was theological. The fragmentation of the Church during the decline of the Roman Empire has never been healed, though today there is a process of negotiations between the Vatican and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.(2)

Christianity has thrived in Ethiopia and Sudan since the fourth century. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is still vibrant today, with a theology, liturgy and ministry that are among the most authentically African in the continent. In southern Sudan, the Church at Meroe thrived until it was destroyed by the onslaught of Islam in the eighth century. The rest of tropical Africa was not exposed to Christianity until the fifteenth century, when chaplains of Portuguese merchant ships baptized a few Africans at their ports of call en route to Asia. This first contact with tropical Africa was incidental and mainly limited to the coastlands, for, in general, the Portuguese voyagers who brought it were not missionaries, but merchants and adventurers, accompanied by their chaplains.

Planned introduction of Christianity into the interior of tropical Africa waited until the nineteenth century, and the arrival of European and North American missionaries. The history of the penetration of Africa by missionaries has been amply documented from the perspective of missionaries and their institutions. However, the perspective of African recipients has yet to be fully explored. Missionary expansion of Christianity into the interior of tropical Africa coincided with colonial expansion, and in many places was used by colonial governments to ...

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