

Religion and Media in Development: Changing the Nascent Narrative

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Never before in African history have major conflicts had religious differences at their roots. We are told that communities that for ages intermarried and fused are now at odds with each other: pockets of Muslims are at war against their Christian neighbours; practitioners of indigenous African religions are ruthlessly killed, and while new movements are flourishing, religion has gradually come to mean fear and tears.

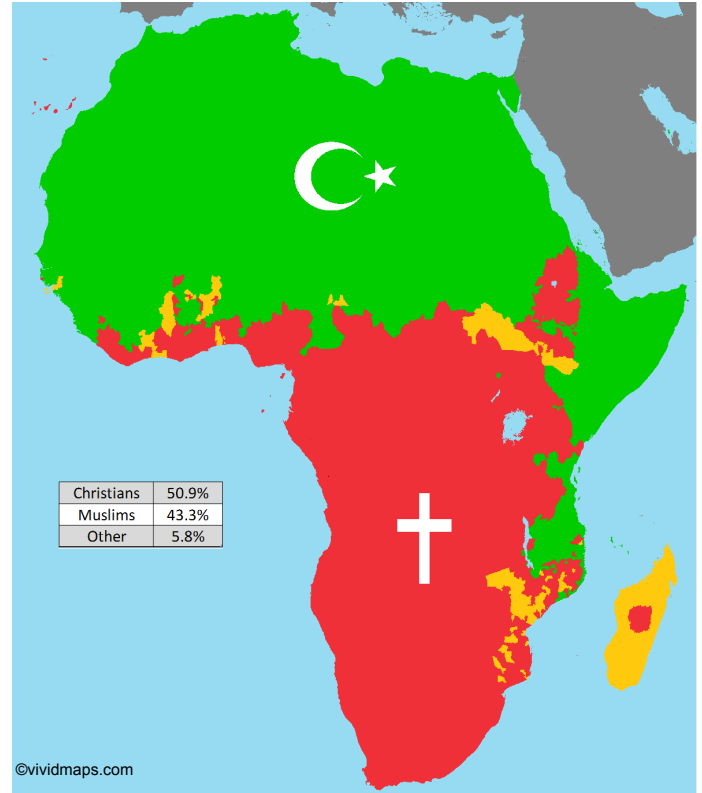


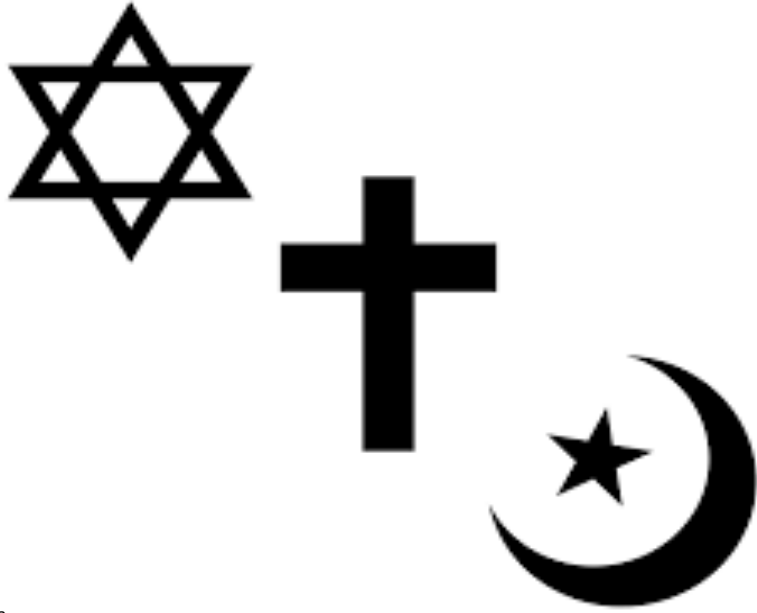


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The latest trend in the narrative on Africa is that religious divisions are the most imposing and intractable source of conflicts. But this confused discourse is factually and scientifically incorrect because religions like humankind originated in Africa. Hence such distortion has to be dismissed at its earliest stage and condemned in the strongest possible terms, for it spreads the seeds of hate, prejudice and discrimination.

In fact, it is fair to say that religion was Africa's first and most valuable commodity exported to the world, for within it stems the power of creation and organisation of life. Religion dictates every aspect of who we are, and as humans, we celebrate the holy in and around us by producing architecture, agriculture, art, banking, education, environment, healthcare, law, literature, music, justice, science, trade, war - are all direct expressions and solid manifestations of our core religious beliefs.





Judaism, the indigenous religion that Abraham - the Iraqi economic migrant - exported out of Egypt, has been quietly re-emerging among its long hidden African communities. Yet it is experiencing great pressure from Jews of East European heritage who tend to have their own ideology on what real Judaism is. On the Muslim side, tension has been rising since the mid 1950s and is now at its height between the ancient Sunni societies, the Iran-influenced Shia populations and the more conservative interpreters of the Qu'ran, the Salafis and their radical reformist the Saudi-styled Wahhabis.

Like all religious missionary enterprises, teachers, preachers, money, prestige, privilege and political ideologies are poured in to influence the indigenous forms practised they see as not proper Judaism or Islam, unlike traditional Christianity - as still practised in Ethiopia and Egypt - that did not bring chaos and destruction the way missionary Christianity with its strong Eurocentric ideas did. So when religions came back to Africa, they had been infused with the strongest exclusivist predisposition, a tendency that is completely alien to our fundamental African values.



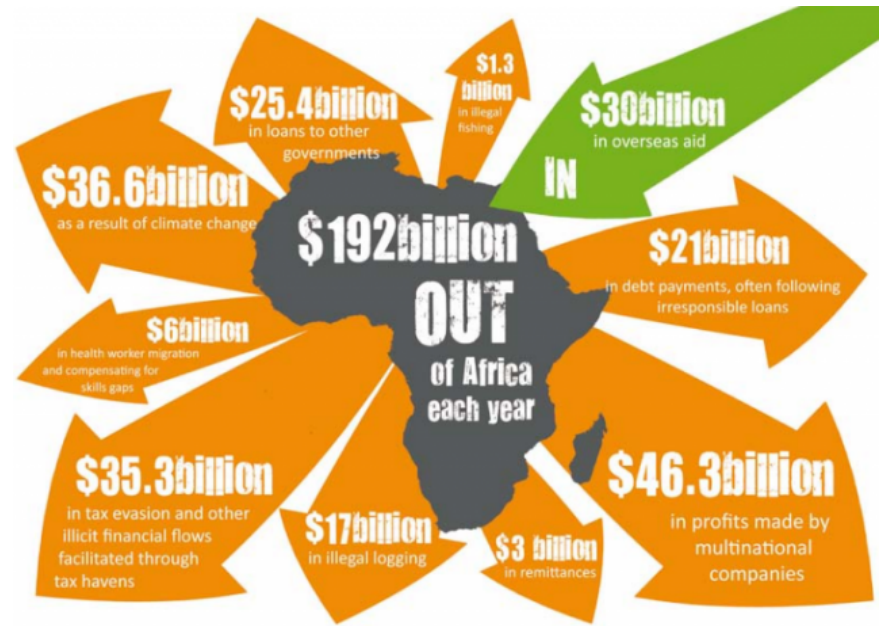


As it happens, it is a newcomer from America that toppled the long established European Christian Catholic and Protestant hegemony: Pentecostalism or Evangelism that counts seventy percent of Africa's Christians is the new force to be reckoned with in the African religious landscape. The modern discourse has located the evil on the indigenous African background, labelling as "demonic" entire aspects of African cultural traditions.

But how can we disengage from our own cultures? How would we install a chief if we don't engage in ritual ceremonies? How would we outdoor a baby if we don't engage in these traditional celebrations of life?



Perhaps it is not a coincidence that indigenous religious traditions are powerfully re-surfacing from underground. In a post-colonial experience, practitioners of indigenous religion just like Muslim Jihadists are trying to get rid of the vestiges of colonialism. They are fighting back what they perceive as new forms of neo-colonial powers: Nigeria, Somalia and Mali for example are - in other words - hotbeds of ideological rebellion.



All these religious movements are happening in the context of an Africa that is suffering from a good deal of marginalisation in the global community.



Of late, we see that a modern brand is rising, led by indigenous African priests who believe that it is high time indigenous religious make their presence on the global stage. Their message is that African religions are equally as modern as any form of religions. These priests run hugely successful shrines in New York, Amsterdam, Paris or London where they see to the health needs of their clientele base, and then reinject the proceeds of these shrines into their home countries.



Malidoma Somé
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"Dagbani people's main job is to look the dead in the face, to treat their bodies not as remains but as temples of grace and beauty continuing from this world to the other. In this five-day event, we will address this issue of fulfilling our duties toward the dead in the interest of transforming restlessness into rest, discontinuity into continuity and homelessness into homecoming." Malidoma



Regardless of our religious beliefs, we as editors have to echo the success of Sierra Leone for tapping into its indigenous healers to tackle the Ebola plague and for publicly thanking and praising them for their persistent efforts. Such homegrown, organic and cost-efficient solutions that generate employment and enhance dignity for thousands ought to be loudly commended and emulated. As critical agents of change, we as journalists have to make a better job at monitoring, shaping and denouncing any divisive conversations around religions.

As the producers of the narrative, we need to better craft it for our consumers: how many more films on witchcraft and sorcery do we really need on our markets? Through its magnifying lens, media reinforced people's clichés and significantly contributed to the current witch-hunt and demonology obsession.

YouTube





Far too often, instead of healing we the media in Africa are hurting: how do we miss the stories of the rural worker and urban newcomer who joined the evangelic circuit to break the soul-crushing isolation of his new life?

How much more coverage do we have to give presidents and their entourage if it means not reporting on the fate of our mentally ill who spend days chained in dark rooms, fed porridge, denied human warmth and gentle touch only to die illiterate because they are seen as devils? How much more hate do we want our powerful media platforms to echo?



The amount of time that religion takes away from people can be deployed into materially tangible results; it can be used into productive labour. But where are we going to find manpower to sustain economic growth when our children, women, men and disabled are alienated in the name of religion?





New streams of religiosity have undeniably always been linked to a fast upward mobility, a certain modern identity and access to resources: affiliation with the growing inclusive Ahmaddiya, Baha'i and Hare Krishna movements has undeniably bettered the lives of millions of Africans



We also know that the future of religions in Africa is one that will enhance peace and growth, a combination of universalism and syncretism in a fiercely competitive religious free market. We know this because in the words of the late Kenyan scholar Ali Mazrui:



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“We are the people of the day before yesterday
and the people of the day after tomorrow.”
--The late Prof Ali Mazrui

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