Reinventing Africa? The Negotiation of Ethnic Identities in the New African Religious Diaspora

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Introduction

The subject of African identities is as vast as the continent itself. The challenges of defining 'Africa' affect how we identify and analyze African identities, ethnicities, religious cultures; but also the new African religious diaspora. As Africans and their religious communities in diaspora constitute a diverse community, the process of diasporic identity construction and negotiation is complex, sometimes resulting in the ethnicisation of the new African diaspora. Although African immigrants are different in terms of ethnicity, nationality, language and cultures, Africa and immigrants are often surreptitiously dumped into ‘ethnic/tribal’ boxes in ways that easily undermine continental, national, cultural and other identities. First, this chapter sets out to explore how and in what way(s) ethnic identities are constructed and negotiated within the new African religious diaspora. Within the context of the (West) African diaspora in Europe, religion and ethnicity evince ambivalent characteristics as tools for constructing and deconstructing identities; integration and fragmentation; fostering peace or conflict; as tools for social mobility or stagnation; and for empowerment or disempowerment. Associational life in the diaspora, in the form of churches and religious-ethnic associations, provides an important social environment for survival and nurture of immigrants abroad. Second, I explore processes of ethnic identity construction and negotiation as integral to citizenship and nationality discourses in Europe. I demonstrate how current public discourses of citizenship and nationality shape the ways the notion of citizenship is often perceived, constructed and reconstructed by immigrants within the new African religious diaspora.

Making Identity and Identity in the Making

The discourse on identity, its scope, structure and modes of construction and negotiation remain contentious. Is identity a given out there or is it a figment of construction? Is it used as a descriptive or analytical term? How helpful is it to talk of identity in the singular without pluralising the concept?
As a highly contested concept, the identity discourse has even assumed new dimensions especially in post-modernist thinking and epistemology, to the extent that it poses a challenge on whether and to what extent our appropriation of the concept may enrich or blur our object of scholarly investigation and analysis. I do not undertake to fully problematise identity as a concept in this chapter. However, I suggest that it remains, in some sense, a useful analytical category in comprehending the complex demographics of African Christian communities in diaspora. This is against the backdrop that religion is largely at the pivot of African immigrants’ sense of individual and collective identities.

Identity formation(s) rarely exist in a social vacuum. The fluid nature of identities makes them susceptible to construction, contestation and (re)negotiation. Identities can be invoked, used, interpreted with, displayed, performed in particular social scenes. Identities are actively constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. New identities can emerge and dissolve; old identities can re-emerge and be re-invented in space-time. The invention, formation and reconstruction of identity may be understood as ascribed or self-imposed at individual, collective and societal levels. Every individual, such as an immigrant, can lay claim to multiple identities as opposed to one. Thus, we can talk of village, town, ethnic, national, religious, Muslim, Islamic, Christian, Pentecostal, orthodox, evangelical, gendered, sex, race, colour, class, age, inter-generational, and linguistic identities. Stryker (1980) suggests that one identity is of greater importance in the hierarchy of identities that make up the self. When an individual becomes more committed to a given role it will assume higher identity salience. Thus, the most salient identity is the one most likely to be enacted in a given situation or social relationship. In a sense, an individual might talk of one main identity in juxtaposition with other sub-identities. But even this is in itself problematic when subjected to further analysis. Every modicum of identity may be understood in terms of whether it is largely a self-ascribed, self-defined representation or a public-ascribed, reified identity representation of the ‘Other’; what political, social, cultural and other factors galvanise such a construction and for what ends. It is also pertinent to probe into the contextual factors, such as the politics of inclusion and exclusion, necessitating such an identity formation. This leaves us with a resounding note whether there is indeed a fixed identity. Are there any fixed identities? Why do people strive to create one kind of identity while at the same time rejecting another form of identification? In what sense can identity formation be likened to shopping at a supermarket where one can ‘pick and choose’ identities as items on a scale of preference and exigency? How helpful is it when an