

Trans-National Religious Identities and Contemporary “Forms of Exit/Inclusion” in the Nigerian Public Sphere

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Introduction

The study of African societies is replete with accounts of grassroots movements which are anti-state or anti-system in nature, with various political, social and economic objectives which are often beyond the control of the state (Haynes 1997). At another level, there are groups which interact with the state by shunting it and defining themselves in relation to economic, political and cultural systems which transcend the state, thereby, inundating the state with its claims and mobilisations (Bayart 1991; 1997). These processes are viewed as forms of disengagement or retreat from the state by disaffected segments of the society into alternative and parallel social, cultural, economic and political systems which are fabricated in society, and compete with those of the state (Azarya 1988; 1994; Azarya and Chazan 1987; Bratton 1989; Young 1994). These tendencies manifest as strategies for coping with an over-bearing and inefficient state (Du Toit 1995).

Since the 1950s, Pentecostal and Evangelical movements of North American origin have spread their influence throughout the globe, including much of Africa. While earlier Pentecostal movements in Nigeria had indigenous origin, there was a proliferation of these movements in the 1980s and 1990s and the forging of ties with their North American partners. Events since the mid-1980s have shown the emergence of a trans-national religious movement known as the neo-“Pentecostalism” or “Charismatic Christianity” across most parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The manifestations of this movement have occurred under conditions of economic, political and social hardship, which have been characterised by economic reforms, lower wages and quality of life, absence of social services and the withdrawal of the welfare frontiers of the state. Within

this context marked by poverty and the crisis of citizenship, particularly in the urban centres, there has been a proliferation of Pentecostal churches with various strands of the “prosperity gospel”. The “prosperity gospel” maintains that Christians should be wealthy, healthy and successful, and that a ‘believer’ has the right to all these through the positive confession of faith. This brand of Christianity has rapidly proliferated within the context of the decline of African economies through the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the last two decades, and the attendant contestations over scarce resources in urban centres. This paper attempts to capture the changing forms of Pentecostalism as a form of exit and inclusion within the Nigerian public space. The immediate background for these developments relates to the context provided by global forces, and how this impacts on the construction of locality in the Nigerian public space.

The Prevailing Context of Exit: Forms and Character

Whether as individuals or groups, people exit the state for different reasons. First, this could be attributed to indigenous African norms of social organisation which were based on the failure of the state to protect the interests of ordinary people in the pre-colonial era and to defend them in terms of adversity. These then have taken the forms of hometown associations, ethnic solidarity movements, cultural organisations, community development associations, credit societies and so on. Second, withdrawal could be the result of the exclusion, deprivation, oppression, domination and alienation of individuals and groups into parallel systems beyond the control of the state, which offer alternative access to social reproduction, empowerment, self-worth, security, and defence against the ineffectiveness of the state. Third, the inequitable integration of African countries into the global capitalist system have initiated a process where African countries have become susceptible to global forces and trends, which constantly conditions local developments.

The empirical forms of exit from the Nigerian state have taken different forms overtime. The 1980s and 1990s were remarkable for dramatic and unprecedented levels of exit from the Nigerian state. The construction of parallel economic systems, proliferation of ethnic and kinship organisations, grass-roots movements, NGOs, the expansion of the scope of ‘self-help’ efforts performed by these groups, the emergence of secret cults and

other deviant networks and institutions of higher learning, and expressions of religious fundamentalism attested to the high levels of exit within the Nigerian public space (Osaghae 2001). However, in practical terms, economic decline, coupled with foreign debt and demands of structural adjustment emasculated the state and eroded its capacity to provide jobs, subsidise education and health care, maintain social services, protect lives and property, and payments to civil servants. Secondly, there was an unprecedented level of violence unleashed on the society by the unpopular military regimes and self-styled dictators in Nigeria during this era. Existing and potential sites of opposition or the emergence of a counter-public sphere were outlawed and suppressed during this period, thereby, decimating the non-state political space in Nigeria. Thirdly, the capture of state power by regional and religious hegemonies, and the marginalisation and exclusion of others, notably, Southerners, ethnic minorities, and non-Muslims from enjoying the benefits of belonging to the state further fuelled these tensions. Fourth, there was also a high degree of insensitivity to the sufferings of the masses, accentuated by a lack of responsiveness and accountability by successive military regimes in Nigeria. Fifth, there was corruption and the virtual collapse of governmental structures and agencies, giving rise to a situation in the legitimacy crisis confronting the state was aggravated.

As a result of these developments various ethnic associations, pan-ethnic associations, market women's associations, credit societies, farmers associations, secret cults, religious and spiritualist organisations, neighbourhood associations have emerged to replace the state in the provision and supply of basic needs. In Nigeria, the number and variety of these organisations, particularly, the Pentecostal movements have steadily increased over time, suggesting the number of ordinary people retreating from the public sector controlled by the state. As a social movement arising from religious practices, Pentecostalism may be regarded as the single largest social movement existing in Nigeria today. It also represents the most popular form of exit among the ordinary people who base their salvation on self-help efforts.

City as a Site of Religious Expressions

Charismatic forms of Christianity, as represented especially by the Pentecostal churches have become mainstream phenomenon in Nigeria. These tendencies have been particularly pronounced in urban centres which have come to serve as centres of cosmopolitan exchanges, and have become salient sites for analysing the current re-negotiation of citizenship and identity politics. Religious identities are now using “cities” and “urban centres” which are supposed to serve as the melting pot of parochial identities as centres of self-affirmation against dominant interest and ideologies. Although, the Habermasian concept of the ‘public sphere’ provides the general framework for different forms of engagement within a social space (Habermas 1989), in the Nigerian case, particular attention is focused on the emergence of a “counter-public sphere” as a space for the invention and circulation of “counter-discourses’ by members of a religious identity.

Since the intense economic crisis of the 1980s, Pentecostalism has made considerable inroads into the Nigerian public space. This new form of Christianity characterised by a gospel of faith, healing and prosperity have become the mainstream phenomenon. In the urban centres of Nigeria, Pentecostal churches like the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Winner’s Chapel, and Christ Embassy have gained a large number of followers from long-established Christian churches, such as, Catholics and the Anglicans; they have also built a large following internationally. These developments have served to provide Pentecostal churches with a remarkable visibility in Nigeria’s public sphere, with their banners and sign-posts featuring prominently along Southern and Central Nigeria’s roadsides. The prominence of Pentecostal churches in the Nigerian public space has further been underscored by a comparative study of ten countries conducted by the BBC in early 2004, resulting in the emergence of Nigeria being noted as the “most religious nation in the world” (BBC News 2004).

From Exit to Engagement: The Changing Dimensions of Pentecostal Expressions

Adogame (2005) has accounted for the larger process of ‘Christianization’ of the public space in Nigeria by highlighting a Christian scramble for public role in Nigeria. At the

heart of this engagement with the public sphere is what Kalu (2004) refers to as the “theology of engagement”. Within this context, Pentecostal churches and their followers have come to constitute a major factor in Nigeria’s social, economic and political life. They have engaged in building businesses, and establishing institutions that supplement or replace the weak public infrastructures, especially, in the area of education. The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) also makes political statements in a heated inter-religious public space.

The relevance of the Pentecostal movement beyond the “ordinary” religious sphere poses a challenge to the understanding of the Nigerian public space as one of outright political expressions. The Pentecostal movements tend to adopt a different meaning of what is ‘political’ by raising moral questions geared towards the transformation of individuals and institutions within society. The presence and visibility of Pentecostals in the Nigerian public space grew visibly since the country’s return to civil rule in 1999. They have played an increasing role in the debates and conflicts that have characterised the Nigerian public space since then. This relates to debates on good leadership, corruption, public accountability, and religious conflicts within the country.

The engagement of Pentecostalism with the everyday tissue of the Nigerian life was further heightened by the advent of a civilian administration in 1999. The emergence of President Obasanjo in the polls and his swearing-in ceremony on May 29th, 1999, was heavily immersed in the traditions of Christian Pentecostalist symbols (Obadare 2006: 669). For many Christians within the Pentecostal fold, the emergence of Obasanjo was an ‘act of God’ which forced a compromise between the hegemonic ruling elite in Northern Nigeria to hand over power to the South. This was after the June 12 debacle and the need to bury the ghost of that era. Obasanjo at this time was transformed into messiah overnight on account of his spiritual rebirth while in the gallows of Nigeria’s erstwhile dictator General Sani Abacha. As Ojo (2004) confirms, Christian Pentecostal leaders collectively “adopted Olusegun Obasanjo as a symbol of Christian control of the political sphere, believing that he was an answer to prayers about the ending of oppression and mis-governance, and the ending of a Muslim political dominance”. On assumption of office, the Obasanjo administration quickly moved to recover lost grounds by organising

a regular Christian service to pray for Nigeria, a Christian chapel was built and a Baptist chaplain was appointed. The observance of regular morning devotions with prominent public leaders in attendance was a symbolic gesture which testified to the need to construct the Presidential Villa as a bastion of Christianity against contrary forces.

With reference to the role played by prominent Pentecostal leaders in engaging the public space, it is pertinent to mention the impact of the RCCG. The obvious influence of the overseer, Enoch Adeboye, was crucial in the government's quest for political and spiritual legitimacy. The RCCG remains one of the fastest growing Pentecostal churches globally. With a membership base that spans over 90 countries, 5,000 parishes, with most of them (about 4,000 in Nigeria) the church has remained crucial in political developments in Nigeria (Sengupta and Rother 2003). Other influential Pentecostal leaders in Nigeria, like Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy, Matthew Ashimolowo of Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC), Mike Okonkwo of The Redeemed Evangelical Mission (TREM), David Oyedepo of Living Faith Ministries (Winner's Chapel), and Taiwo Odukoya of the Fountain of Life Church all played significant roles in providing the spiritual façade that masked the Obasanjo administration.

Conclusion

What emerges from the foregoing is the innovation undertaken by Pentecostal movements in Nigeria to adopt a new theology of engagement within the Nigerian public space. Within the broader discourses of belonging and marginalisation, the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria has been able to negotiate its identity and carve out niche for itself within the prevailing socio-political and economic terrain. Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria affirms the claim that Nigeria is a secular state. This has not gone down well with religious communities who argue that the apparent secularity of the Nigerian state does not mean that same thing as a total rejection of the validity of religious practice. Nevertheless, the burdens and prospects of Pentecostal religiosity in the Nigerian will depend to a large extent on how religion is employed as a veritable tool for the promotion of good governance of the Nigerian public sphere.

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