



**RELIGION AND ETHNIC POLARIZATION IN AFRICA: CASE STUDIES OF
SENEGAL AND GHANA**

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ABSTRACT

Religion and ethnic polarization in Africa are not a strange or in-familiar phenomenon, the Ethnonationalism that is inherent in Africa is an outcome of its ethic and tribal pluralism. For Africa and for the Africa this narrative is common but not totally acceptable across all tribal groups and ethnic formation.

The Famously carved phrase “Religion is the opium of the masses” was not merely an exaggeration. Karl Marx’ position was due to the intoxicating effect religion had on the populace. The Marxist school of thought admonishes that religion is merely an instrument for exploration that further deepens the effect of social class groups and class stratifications in the society.

This article aims to establish an appraisal on the concept of Religion and ethnic polarization in Africa using Senegal and Ghana as case studies.

KEYWORDS: Ethnic, Religion, Polarization, Senegal, Ghana.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of religion and ethnicity or ethnic polarization cannot be separated from the context of Africa. The ethnocentric nature of the continent defined the process of its communal development as well as the sequence, phases, and trajectory of state formation in Africa. Ethnic groups are the landscape of culture in Africa which in turn defines the foundational precepts of nation-building. Thus, it is essential to note that Africa is what it is due to its multi-ethnic pluralistic nature. The vast array of cultural, traditional, and religious customs allowed the continent to thrive amidst its diversity. Religion on the other hand especially as it pertains to Africa cannot be over-emphasized.

Africa was built on the philosophies and doctrines of religion through its art, crafts, language, folklore, morals, ethics, and its use of various symbolisms. Africans have always been in tune with nature with a deep consciousness of a higher power, influence, and authority who divinely controls the affairs of men. For this reason, and the purpose of this research; I will adopt Senegal and Ghana as case studies in hopes to establish numerous empirical and scientific juxtapositions on the role of religion and ethnic polarization in Africa; which begs the question, what is religion? What is ethnic polarization? While there exist no universally accepted definitions of what religion is or at least what it is perceived to be; at least as it applies to the context to which we situate it.

The familiarity with the concepts of religion and ethnic polarization often misleads scholars, intellectuals, and social scientists on what religion and ethnic polarization are. For some, religion connotes spirituality, for others faith or morality. Religion is typically described as the

supernatural and metaphysical series of activities designed to engage a deity or sacred beings (Horton, 1960).

There however remains a misguided search for both the definitions of religion and ethnic polarization in Africa and the world at large. The modernization of these concepts in the 21st century makes it all the more cumbersome to adopt a historical presupposition of what both terminologies mean, and how we arrived at such positions (Freeman, 1982).

Amongst all existing continents of the world, ethnicity or ethnic polarization is most applicable to Africa. Conventional positions suggest that ethnicity poses some sort of distortion which has proven and still proves to be phenomenally problematic in Africa. The reason is the fact that this has produced inhibitions for any form of political stability as well as ensuring the establishment of weak national identities. This makes the question of historicity one that is flawed as no one is adequately able to define the scope of Africa's multi-ethnic pluralism most especially from a historical point of view without making a flawed argument (Ake, 1993).

To my mind, Claude Ake's position is factual and verifiable. The issue of national identity has always been a dilemma for African countries. This has resulted in nepotism and tribalism in the state of affairs of most African countries. The descriptive, evaluative, and normative assessment of the concept of ethnicity has further aided in the marginalization of Africa and Africans.

These primordial and constructivist concepts of ethnicity according to Lentz have further deepened the African crisis as it pertains to or relates to the subject of ethnicity (Lentz, 1995).

There remains however the need to revisit the idea of nationalism amidst the multi-ethnic pluralism in Africa. How do African countries maintain a unified sense of identity without disregarding the complexities associated with having numerous ethnic groups in the makeup of an independent state. With that in mind, equity has to be at the forefront of all discussions.

A LIST OF SOME ETHNIC REPRESENTATIONS IN SENEGAL AND GHANA

SENEGAL	GHANA
The Wolof people	The Asante people
Fula people	The Fante people
The Toucouler people	The Ewe people
Serer people	The Bissa people
Mandinka people	Soninke people
Lebu people	Mossi people
Jola people	Anyi people
Soninke people	Gurunsi people
Koraninka people	Anio people
Yalunka people	Sefwi people
Bainuk people	Bono people
Bambara people	Nzema people
Balanta people	Evalue people

THE CONCEPTS OF RELIGION AND ETHNIC POLARIZATION

Religion has shaped the fragment of human civilization. There has been a conscious belief in a divine deity or a supernatural phenomenon that defined the character, attributes, attitudes, and dispositions of an individual. For instance, the diffusion of religion into human life was responsible for shaping moral laws and life in general. Religion became the backbone for most primitive societies, as conflicts and issues of governance, administration and leadership were often resolved through religious laws. While this is not the case today, the role of education, civilization, globalization, science, and technology has helped re-modeled modern society and its

belief systems creating some sort of moderation in the practice of religion as against that of prior, older pre-existing societies. With this in mind, there is a consciousness of the need to separate religion from government and vice versa for clarity, independence, and unism in the political process and affairs for stability and maintaining the status quo.

In an attempt to humanize religion, William Schweiker at the University of Chicago drafts a report in his article that attempts to navigate the numerous moral and political challenges posed by religion. He highlights a common worry or bone of contention between religion and the human future. In his mind, the need to emphasize the humanistic recommendations of a particular religion is an ethical or fundamental issue that eradicates all forms of pre-conceived, extreme, and excessive traits, customs, or beliefs that are peculiar to or with such religion. For instance, some groups in Islam, believe in the forceful adoption of power, William Schweiker's view is that such small groups should not serve as a representation of Islam. Also, whatever stereotypes exist about any particular religion, it is essential as social scientists to assess and examine a double entendre that is meant to name a current worry about religion and its impact on the future of humanity (Schweiker, 2009).

Some scholars, academic and social scientists have established various definitions of religion or to an extent, have through empirical analysis defined a set of parameters that define what religion is. What helps to motivate a sense of categorization for what religion is or isn't. The various existing schools of thought hold some form of bias or prejudice in an attempt to project their self-driven perspectives, aims, goals, and objectives. These thoughts such as communism, capitalism, Catholicism, monotheism, monogamy, and imperialism all draft their definition of religion based on internal and inherent principles, philosophies, and ideologies in a manner that protects and advances their objectives. Thus, their conceptualization of what religion is and what it stands for is flawed. Which begs the question, what isn't a religion? Are there general

characterizations that determine what isn't religion and can these characterizations set the basis for a universally acceptable definition of religion that cuts across the division, variations, and misconceptions of religion? (Schilbrack, 2013).

But perhaps there is a need to re-work the definition of religion. According to sociologists, the most acceptable definition for religion is Emile Durkheim's definition of religion which is principally the adoption of a sacred system that ensures the integration of people into a moral community. But what defines morality and on what premise do we say something is moral? Morality is the dichotomy of positivity, Genuity, truth, and peace, especially with all that pertains to good. Religion on the other hand is practiced for humans to flourish. Within the context of these elements, doesn't that make religion the same as morality, or does the practice of traditional and religious rights make both elements distinctively different is so, such should not be the case, as both entities seek to advance humanity; if applied correctly. The Marxian school of thought believes that religion is the opium of the masses; that is when abused, people become vile, lawless, and adversely progressive and these variables work against human growth and overall development (Steensland, 2019).

ETHNIC POLARIZATION

Ethnicity has predominantly been associated with power. Ethnic groups were historically shaped by the pursuit of power and conquest which in turn birthed a national identity. An identity that if systematically entrenched went through a series of catalysts that led to nation-building or the subsequent creation and establishment of a sovereign state. This process is peculiar to all societies and independent states respectively but particularly with regards to state formation in Africa. Measuring ethnic polarization can be somewhat complex but very much achievable. Categorical variables of such measurements are typically limited to two;

- Ethnicity
- Religion

The variables help to understand the relationships between religion, social economics, corruption, social cohesion, ethnic diversity, deprivation, and exclusion. Polarization is generally an issue of inquiry and investigation in hopes to help proffer a lasting solution (Chakravarty, Maharaj, 2011).

Polarization occurs for various reasons, for medieval societies, such reasons could be but were not limited to scarce resources, power tussles, post-war or conflict crises, the balance of power, and land amongst other factors. Some other factors may be due to ethnic classification. This is when a majority of other ethnic groups perceive or view a certain ethnic group as inferior to them. Or in a case where there are no common grounds or linkages such as religion, culture, tradition, belief system, value system, customary principles or laws, or way of life amongst others. These aforementioned factors are some basic rationale or characterization for all forms of polarization and marginalization and are very much applicable today. The only difference is that in present-day societies like ours, all forms of polarization, marginalization, and segregation are much more organized and structured systematically. For instance, through the adoption of constituted laws that favors one people group over the other which makes it all the more cumbersome to tackle.

Coupled with the blatant disregard of these listed indications but polarization goes beyond segregating a particular ethnic group or people group. It also comes with the adversity of deprivation. Because these ethnic groups are marginalized, they are therefore denied equal access to societal rights and communal privileges such as food, resources, and the equal distribution of the commonwealth in all shapes, forms, and sizes. Which makes it all the more difficult for these said groups to compete and resist the injustice experienced by such a degree of polarization.

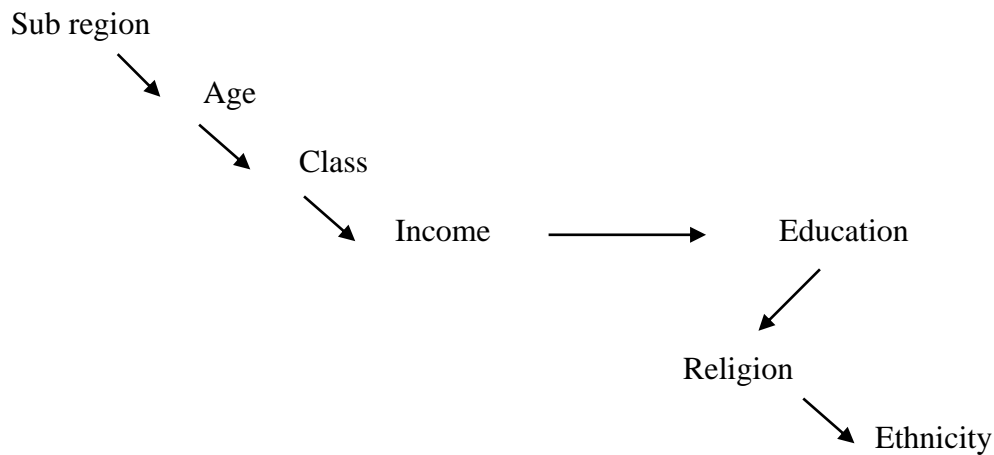
Many a time they are conformed to agree to the existing status quo in an attempt to leverage both their existence and their survival. These elements and analogies are simple appraisals of the harsh realities of polarization, especially at the ethnocentric levels of affairs and these elements are further played out in politics and international relations where nations bargain chiefly for numerous rights and privileges which is often to the detriment of others. The psychology of polarization is very complex which makes the cycle all the more difficult to break for those at the receiving end.

In light of this, it is clear that polarization; I mean the very act of polarization is degrading, dehumanizing, abusive, exploitative, and outrightly negative. The perpetrators merely seek to employ either their numerical, military, intellectual or social advantage over others to exploit them and in the process enrich themselves. It is on this very premise that ethnic groups particularly in Africa have thrived over the centuries and decades through the use of this very methodology.

More importantly, in an attempt to situate the reality of ethnic polarization in Africa, more of these elements and traits would be examined with emphasis on Senegal and Ghana which for this paper serve as respective case studies. How does ethnic marginalization or polarization play out in Senegal and Ghana and does religion or pre-existing belief systems play any distinct roles in this process? Will this now impact the outcomes of ethnic relations in these countries now or in the future? And if so, to what degree are these outcomes negative or positive?

CASE STUDIES OF SENEGAL AND GHANA

Ethnicity and Ghana politics in Ghana are intertwined as it is in most African countries. The incessant wave of various regime types and political inclinations made it all the more complex. The relevant cleavages for the manifestation of the Republic of Ghana today are as follows:



The disproportionate Northern representation particularly in the third republic and “The Ewe based ruling clique in the provisional national council” are all examples of the extent of ethnicity in the fabric of Ghanaian polity. This historical appraisal goes to prove that ethnicity in Ghanaian politics is not a recent phenomenon but rather one with its history and eventual political stability as Ghana was one of the few countries to attain independence, especially in Western Africa.

Whilst Ghana is not as ethnically saturated as its West African counterpart (Nigeria). It is imperative to come to terms with the dual concepts of politics and ethnicity especially as it pertains to the intensification of ethnic politicization and Ghana was able to more or less harness the mutuality of ethnic participation and contentions. Such administrative and managerial endeavors ensured one of the smoothest democratic transitions for Ghana. Some perspectives believe that the consolidation of democracy in Ghana was fueled by a more potent nationalistic spirit rather than the apparent manifestation of ethnicity which was most potent in the history of Ghana in the 1970s. In the views of Chazan and I, quote “The ethnic composition of Ghana's seven regimes have varied. Control of state power moved from Southern Akan groups during the

Nkurumah Years: through a Ga-Ewe coalition under the National Liberation Council (NLC) (Chazan, 1982).

SENEGAL

Does the ethnicity of leaders matter in Sub-Saharan Africa? And is the concept of democratic ideals with regards to voting viable in Africa seeing that ethnic groups with the numeric advantage often seem to come out on top in the voting process of electing a leader, especially in Africa? The Wolof ethnic group remains the largest ethnic group in Senegal. The Wolof make up a rough estimate of the Senegalese population and although French is the most spoken language in Senegal, Wolof remains the most widely spoken language even by non-Wolof people. Unlike Its Ghanaian counterparts, Senegal's colonial experience was peculiar as it had more than one colonial influence or experience. From the Dutch, the British, the Portuguese, and the French. The most potent of these forces was the French. Irrespective of these, Religion was more or less a binding force for the Senegalese people, even to date, Islam remains the most practiced form of religion in the entire country making up about 85% percent of Muslims in Senegal. Senegal's internal stability is premised on the values of its religion which has altogether helped to mitigate the tendencies for tribalism and nepotism. The provisions of Islam view men as equal and as such should be treated as so irrespective of their creed, culture, tribe, and nation so long he believes in and acknowledges Allah in all their endeavors.

On a broader spectrum of things, Senegal has been said to suffer from Wolofisation. The uneasiness of ethnic sentiments in Senegal is premised on the fact that the Wolof people always seem to attain political power and this has led to numerous ethnic frictions. This said ethnic frictions have since the political inception of tribal societies and African states characterized the classic interpretation of African states but this has remained remarkably absent in all of Senegalese Society. The various types or denominations of Islam have somewhat deepened the

tendencies for the interpretation of moral life, political life, and social relation in Senegal (Keese, 2016).

RECOMMENDATION

Much of the political, economic, and socio-cultural challenges in Africa to be precise are inherent outcomes of religion and ethnic polarization. It is hard to ascertain the degree to which the colonial experience has played or continues to play in these societies (Arinze, Eke, Temitope & Moses, 2021).

These crises have made it possible for imperialist powers to influence the political economy of these states. The China syndrome for instance is not only peculiar to the South Pacific but is also evident in Africa as instruments such as religion, tribalism, and ethnic polarization are now being weaponized to influence Africa's political economy and her developmental processes (Moses, 2020).

For Africa and Senegal, the problem goes beyond regional integration but rather the need for internal cohesion, nationalism, and unity. Senegal needs to overhaul its policies to accommodate the diversity that is so evident in the country. For instance, when China faced the challenge of rapid population growth, the one-child policy was designed to tackle the issue, similar policy framework should be adopted by Senegal to address the issue of religion and ethnic polarization (Ige, 2022).

Senegal must also seek collaborative efforts from richly diverse African states such as Nigeria to replicate policies, efforts, and structural programs that facilitate peace and unity (Moses, 2023).

Senegal as a nation must also be conscious of the repercussions of failing to maintain the status quo of peace and unity; as the tendencies of war become most posed by ethnicity and religion (Moses, 2022).

Senegal's socioeconomic and political relations with undemocratic societies; and cling to more democratic and liberal societies that could help facilitate internal peace and unity (Moses, 2022).

There is a need for joint military integration policies that would provide Senegal with the much-needed capacity to not only curb internal threats but also external influences. As evident in Nigeria, religion was the instrument adopted by the terrorist group Boko Haram. There was much reconstruction with regards to NATO under the Trump administration, Senegal which is principally an African state can lobby for membership in the long run (Moses, 2021).

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