

Mushrooming Churches in Africa: A Blessing or a Curse?

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ABSTRACT: The mushrooming of churches in Africa has both benefits and challenges. While churches have played a crucial role in providing spiritual and social support to African communities, the proliferation of fake pastors, the decline in traditional African religious practices, religious intolerance and conflict, and the exploitation of natural resources and the environment are some of the challenges associated with church growth in Africa. To address these challenges, a concerted effort is needed from religious institutions, governments, and civil society. Rigorous screening procedures, interfaith dialogue, the adoption of sustainable practices, and the promotion of cultural heritage and religious tolerance are some of the ways in which these challenges can be addressed.

KEYWORDS: Pentecostalism, Charismatic Movements, Religious Proliferation, Cultural Erosion, Spiritual Exploitation, Social Development.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the growth of churches in Africa has been nothing short of phenomenal. While some of these churches have been in existence for many years, many others are relatively new and unknown. While the growth of these churches has been seen as a positive development by many, others believe that it presents significant challenges that need to be addressed. In this article, we will explore the phenomenon of mushrooming churches in Africa and discuss whether they are a blessing or a challenge.

The Growth of Churches in Africa

The mushrooming of churches in Africa is a recent phenomenon that can be traced back to the early 20th century. Christianity has been present in Africa since the 1st century when it was introduced by traders and missionaries from the Middle East and North Africa (Pew Research Center, 2019). However, the growth of Christianity in Africa has been most significant in recent years, with the continent now home to some of the world's largest and fastest-growing Christian populations.

One of the key factors driving the growth of Christianity in Africa has been the work of Christian missionaries. From the early 20th century, missionaries from Europe and North America began to establish churches and mission stations across the continent. These missionaries provided education, healthcare, and other social services, which helped to improve the lives of many Africans. They also translated the Bible into local languages, making Christianity more accessible to people who were previously unable to read or understand it (Gifford, 2009).

Another factor contributing to the growth of Christianity in Africa has been the rise of independent churches. These churches are often founded by charismatic leaders who break away from established denominations to form their own congregations. Many of these churches emphasize the power of prayer and the importance of personal experience and have been successful in attracting followers who are seeking spiritual experiences and answers to life's problems.

The impact of colonialism and globalization on Africa has also played a role in the growth of churches on the continent. Colonialism brought with it new cultural influences, including Christianity, which many Africans adopted as a way to resist colonialism and assert their own cultural identity. Globalization has also played a role in the growth of Christianity in Africa, with many churches establishing connections with churches and Christians in other parts of the world. These connections have facilitated the spread of new religious ideas and practices, as well as resources and funding to support church growth (Okoro, 2019).

The growth of Christianity in Africa has not been limited to any particular region or country. It has been most significant in sub-Saharan Africa, where Christianity has become the dominant religion in many countries. According to a report by the Pew Research Center (2019), nearly 1 in 4 Christians in the world live in sub-Saharan Africa, and the region is home to some of the world's largest Christian populations, including Nigeria, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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In conclusion, the growth of churches in Africa can be traced back to the early 20th century, with the work of missionaries and the rise of independent churches being key factors. The impact of colonialism, globalization, and the search for spiritual experiences and identity have also contributed to church growth on the continent. The growth of churches in Africa has had both positive and negative consequences, which we will explore further in the following sections.

The growth of churches in Africa has been driven by a range of factors. Some of the most significant include globalization, urbanization, and the search for spiritual fulfillment. The rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements has also been a key driver of church growth in Africa, with many churches adopting a more expressive and emotional form of worship that resonates with African culture (Gifford, 2009).

One of the most striking features of the growth of churches in Africa is the sheer scale of it. In Nigeria, for example, it is estimated that there are over 90 million Christians, making it one of the largest Christian populations in the world (Pew Research Center, 2019). Similarly, in Kenya, over 80% of the population is Christian (Pew Research Center, 2019). The growth of churches in Africa has also been characterized by the emergence of new and often independent churches, which are not affiliated with any established denomination.

The Benefits of Church Growth

The mushrooming of churches in Africa has had many benefits for the continent and its people. These benefits can be seen in various areas, including education, healthcare, social development, and economic growth. In this section, we will explore some of the key benefits of the mushrooming of churches in Africa.

Firstly, churches in Africa have played a significant role in providing education to many Africans. Missionaries from Europe and North America established schools and colleges across the continent, which provided education to many Africans who were previously unable to access it. These schools and colleges also contributed to the development of African languages, literature, and culture, as they helped to preserve and promote local languages and cultural practices. In addition, many churches in Africa today continue to run schools and provide educational opportunities to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, helping to improve their future prospects (Hart, 2018).

Secondly, churches in Africa have been instrumental in providing healthcare services to many people on the continent. Many missionary hospitals were established across Africa, providing medical services to people who were previously unable to access them. These hospitals also played a key role in training local healthcare professionals, helping to build capacity in the healthcare sector. In addition, many churches in Africa today continue to provide healthcare services to their congregations and communities, including running clinics and providing access to medical supplies and equipment (Bakari, 2015).

Thirdly, churches in Africa have contributed to social development on the continent. Many churches have been involved in social development initiatives, including poverty alleviation programs, disaster relief efforts, and community development projects. These initiatives have helped to improve the lives of many Africans and have contributed to the overall development of the continent (Ogbonnaya, 2020).

Fourthly, the mushrooming of churches in Africa has contributed to economic growth on the continent. Churches and other religious organizations have been involved in economic activities, including running businesses and investing in various sectors of the economy. In addition, churches have also been involved in job creation and skills development initiatives, helping to improve employment prospects and build human capacity on the continent (Adegbite, 2017).

The growth of churches in Africa has brought with it a range of benefits for both individuals and communities. One of the most significant benefits is the sense of belonging and community that churches provide. In a world that is becoming increasingly fragmented, churches provide a space where people can come together to worship, socialize, and support one another. This can be especially important in societies that are undergoing rapid change, such as those experiencing urbanization and globalization (Gifford, 2009).

In addition to providing a sense of community, churches in Africa also provide a range of social services that can help to improve the lives of those living in poverty. Many churches operate schools, health clinics, and other forms of social outreach that provide vital services to marginalized communities. For example, the Catholic Church in Nigeria operates over 5,000 schools, which educate over 2 million children (Catholic Relief Services, 2021). Similarly, the Anglican Church in Kenya runs a range of social programs, including hospitals, schools, and orphanages (Anglican Church of Kenya, 2021).

In conclusion, the mushrooming of churches in Africa has had many benefits for the continent and its people. Churches have played a significant role in providing education and healthcare services, contributing to social development and economic growth. Churches in Africa have also contributed to the preservation and promotion of local languages and cultures. Despite some challenges, the benefits of the mushrooming of churches in Africa cannot be ignored, and they continue to play a significant role in shaping the continent's future.

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Challenges of Church Growth

While the mushrooming of churches in Africa has brought many benefits to the continent, it has also brought with it several challenges that cannot be ignored. In this section, we will explore some of the key challenges associated with the mushrooming of churches in Africa.

Firstly, the mushrooming of churches in Africa has led to the proliferation of fake pastors and religious charlatans who use religion to exploit vulnerable individuals. Many of these pastors engage in fraudulent activities, including selling fake miracles, engaging in financial improprieties, and promoting dangerous and untested medical practices. Such practices have contributed to the loss of life and the erosion of trust in religious institutions (Gifford, 2019).

Secondly, the mushrooming of churches in Africa has led to a decline in traditional African religious practices and the erosion of cultural identity. The rapid spread of Christianity has led to the loss of traditional religious practices and cultural heritage, including the loss of traditional religious festivals and rituals. No practical inside the foreign faith, people join out of fear, blind faith which at the end the future for the young generation is unseen. This loss of cultural identity has contributed to the erosion of African cultural heritage and has left many Africans feeling disconnected from their roots (Mkandawire, 2005).

Thirdly, the mushrooming of churches in Africa has contributed to the spread of religious intolerance and conflict. The proliferation of churches has led to the emergence of new religious groups and sects, some of which view other religious groups with suspicion and intolerance. This has led to religious conflicts, including violence against religious minorities, and has contributed to the erosion of social cohesion (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2016).

Fourthly, the mushrooming of churches in Africa has contributed to the exploitation of natural resources and the environment. Churches have been involved in the acquisition of land for religious purposes, leading to the destruction of natural habitats and the displacement of indigenous communities. In addition, some churches have been involved in the exploitation of natural resources, including the illegal mining of minerals, leading to environmental degradation and the loss of biodiversity (Gondwe, 2017).

Superstition: Some churches promote harmful practices such as exorcisms, witch hunts, and miracle based healing that can be detrimental to the well-being of their followers.

In conclusion, while the mushrooming of churches in Africa has brought many benefits to the continent, it has also brought with it several challenges. These challenges include the proliferation of fake pastors and religious charlatans, the erosion of cultural identity, the spread of religious intolerance and conflict, and the exploitation of natural resources and the environment. It is essential that these challenges are addressed to ensure that the mushrooming of churches in Africa contributes positively to the continent's development.

The mushrooming Individual Churches in every small town in Africa

The establishment of individual churches in small towns across Africa has become a common trend, with many churches competing for followers and influence. While some may view this trend as a blessing due to the provision of spiritual guidance and social support to communities, others view it as a challenge due to the potential for abuse and exploitation by some church leaders.

On the one hand, the establishment of individual churches in small towns can be viewed as a blessing. These churches provide a place of worship for communities that may have limited access to formal religious institutions, and they offer spiritual guidance and support to members of the community. These churches also provide social support to their members, including access to healthcare and education, which may not be readily available in some small towns. According to a study by Owusu-Ansah and Agyekum (2016), small churches in Ghana have played a crucial role in providing social support to their members, including access to microfinance and employment opportunities.

One of the primary challenges of the proliferation of individual churches in small towns in Africa is the lack of regulation and oversight. In many African countries, there is a lack of regulatory frameworks governing religious institutions, leaving them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation by some church leaders. As a result, some pastors have taken advantage of their positions to engage in fraudulent activities, including the sale of fake oils and other things deemed to be miracles. For example, in Nigeria, some pastors have been accused of using their influence to amass wealth through the exploitation of their followers (Ojo, 2015).

On the other hand, the proliferation of individual churches in small towns also possess significant challenges. One of the primary challenges is the potential for abuse and exploitation by some church leaders. Some pastors have been accused of engaging in fraudulent activities, including the sale of fake miracles and financial improprieties. Gifford (2019) notes that the rise of charlatan pastors in Africa is a growing concern, with some pastors using their influence to exploit vulnerable members of their congregations. Another challenge associated with the establishment of individual churches in small towns is the potential for conflict and division within communities. The competition for followers and influence among churches can lead to the fragmentation of communities along religious lines, with some communities becoming divided based on their affiliations with different churches. Asamoah-Gyadu (2016) notes that the rise of Pentecostalism in Africa has led to religious intolerance and conflict, with some Pentecostal pastors promoting intolerant and extremist views.

In conclusion, the establishment of individual churches in small towns in Africa has both benefits and challenges. While these churches provide spiritual guidance and social support to their members, they also pose a significant risk of abuse and exploitation

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by some church leaders, and the competition among churches can lead to conflict and division within communities. To ensure that the benefits of these churches are maximized and the challenges are addressed, a concerted effort is needed from religious institutions, governments, and civil society to promote ethical standards, religious tolerance, and the protection of vulnerable members of the community.

Addressing the Challenges of Church Growth

The challenges associated with the mushrooming of churches in Africa can be addressed in several ways to ensure that the growth of the church on the continent is both sustainable and beneficial. In this section, we will explore some of the ways in which these challenges can be addressed.

To address poverty and unemployment problem; many people join charismatic churches in search of hope, jobs or miracles. Solving economic issues can reduce vulnerability. Encourage churches to focus on education, health, and job creation not just prosperity gospel. Invest in academic and theological training to increase knowledge to pastors.

To address the challenges associated with church growth in Africa, it is important to focus on regulation, education, and interfaith dialogue. One of the most important steps that can be taken is to establish regulations and standards for churches, particularly those that are independent and not affiliated with any established denomination. These regulations could include requirements for transparency in financial reporting, qualifications for pastoral leadership, and mechanisms for resolving disputes.

Education is also an important tool for addressing the challenges of church growth. This includes educating church leaders on ethical and responsible practices, as well as providing education and training to congregants on their rights and responsibilities. This could include education on issues such as financial management, child protection, and human rights.

Firstly, to address the proliferation of fake pastors and religious charlatans, there needs to be stricter regulations and accountability measures put in place for religious institutions. The government and religious bodies should work together to create guidelines and standards for religious practices and leadership, including measures to prevent financial improprieties and the sale of fake miracles. Religious institutions should also be required to register with the appropriate authorities and undergo regular audits to ensure compliance with regulations (Gifford, 2019).

Secondly, to address the erosion of cultural identity, there needs to be a greater appreciation and recognition of traditional African religious practices and cultural heritage. This can be achieved through the promotion of cultural events and festivals, the inclusion of traditional religious practices in religious education, and the preservation of cultural artifacts and heritage sites (Mkandawire, 2005).

Thirdly, to address the spread of religious intolerance and conflict, there needs to be a greater emphasis on interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Religious leaders should work together to promote tolerance and understanding among different religious groups, and governments should create policies that promote religious freedom and protect religious minorities (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2016).

Fourthly, to address the exploitation of natural resources and the environment, there needs to be greater awareness and education on the importance of environmental conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources. Churches should be encouraged to adopt environmentally-friendly practices, such as the use of renewable energy and the promotion of sustainable agriculture. Governments should also create policies that promote sustainable land use and protect natural habitats and biodiversity (Gondwe, 2017).

In conclusion, the challenges associated with the mushrooming of churches in Africa can be addressed through a combination of stricter regulations and accountability measures, greater appreciation of cultural heritage, interfaith dialogue and cooperation, and greater awareness and education on environmental conservation. It is essential that these measures are put in place to ensure that the growth of the church on the continent is both sustainable and beneficial.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the mushrooming of churches in Africa has had both positive and negative impacts. While churches have provided spiritual and social support to African communities, the proliferation of fake pastors and religious charlatans, the decline in traditional African religious practices and cultural identity, religious intolerance and conflict, and the exploitation of natural resources and the environment are some of the challenges that need to be addressed urgently.

Religious institutions, governments, and civil society must work together to address these challenges through the adoption of sustainable practices, the promotion of cultural heritage and religious tolerance, and the implementation of laws and policies that protect the rights of citizens and promote interfaith dialogue. The challenges associated with church growth in Africa require a multi-faceted approach that recognizes the importance of cultural heritage, religious tolerance, and environmental conservation. By working together, we can ensure that the benefits of church growth in Africa are maximized, while the challenges are addressed to promote the sustainable development of the continent.

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