Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the potential role of religion as an agent of community development with African communities. I hope to offer a greater clarity of the relationship between religion, personal wellbeing and social action within African worldview (Lunn, 2009).

My hope is that this presentation will be useful for practitioners working with African communities - for reflecting on ways in which we may be able to encompass religion as a factor in community development approaches. Particularly looks at a number of specific fields that are widely considered in the practice of community development to reflect on ways in which religious ideas may be relevant to community development processes.

This paper is drawn from direct experience, more than abstract analysis or research. I am a community development researcher and practitioner with a commitment to working with people at margins of society (particularly young women). I also bring to this article my experience of an African in diaspora (or migrant African). In some respects, therefore, this article recounts a personal intellectual and practical journey.

Historically, religion has proven to be a primary force for social cohesion, motivating individuals and groups to develop qualities which contribute to the betterment of their relationships and their communities. Generally, such qualities include compassion, love, justice, unity, guardianship, and service. At the same time, the ambiguous role of religion in the African continent must be acknowledged. In some countries, religion has been a primary cause of social disintegration, intolerance, hatred, sexism, racism, homophobia, poverty, oppression and warfare. It is thus obvious that if religion is to have a role in community development, it must be free of ignorance, prejudice and animosity.

Nevertheless, religion remains a marker of identity and constitutes a socio-cultural and political reality for the majority of African communities. As observed by most African political theologians, it shows no sign of disappearing or diminishing from the ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres. I use critical theory to explore the possible role of religion in community development with African communities (in Africa, refugees and migrants from Africa, and Africans in diaspora).

**Key words**: religion and community development, African refugees and migrants

Introduction
Why is this an important topic?

Holistic Community Development Approach

This is paper is about holistic community development approach (Marshall, 2001). First, holistic community development, as discussed in this paper, emphasizes cultural knowledge - that is the importance of understanding concepts and processes related to a communities’ culture and how these intersect with community development. Second, it encourages cultural competence - culturally responsive doing. These are the ways in which practitioners appropriately apply cultural knowledge and skills within communities we work with. Third, holistic community development is also about positionality and self-reflexivity - this is the ability of a practitioner to understand how their own life experiences and social locations may influence their interaction with people they work with - in this case African communities. Finally, holistic community development is about respectful engagement - that is practitioners always inspired by spirit of inquiry and collaboration (Crisp, 2011).

As Paolo Freire observed, “One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action programme that fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a programme constitute cultural invasions, good intentions notwithstanding”

What is my approach?

Critical Theory - as a lense

Discussions in this paper is significantly influenced by critical theory. The aim of critical theory is to examine the existing order and question how that order has been formed and then focus on the ways that the order may be transformed. So I question understandings of ‘religion’ which have contributed to the sidelining of religion - and subsequently the role of religion in development. Also, critical approaches explore the potential for alternatives and encourages actions to achieve such ends. In this paper, in presenting a new understanding of religion in an african worldview, I am also encouraging an alternative way of engaging with African communities - one that... . In doing so, as in critical theory, am examining materials that underpin community development orthodoxy and also seeking to reconstruct alternatives to that orthodoxy. Rather than simply adding religion to the ‘secular’ frameworks, I suggest that religion need to be resituated within a ‘secular-sacral’ conception of the spaces of community development (McDuie-Ra & Rees).
Who are the Africans?

In this presentation, I am referring to 2 groups of African communities (Those living in Africa; and those living outside the continent).

Lo Behold......African is a CONTINENT!

Africa is a vast continent - holding immense diversity/and each community/cultural group is unique. Kenya alone has over 48 cultural groups...each with its own dialect and culture. Therefore, it would be deceptive of me or you to assume an ‘African’ culture :-). Instead, I speak of an African worldview - which includes a number of elements shared across the continent. Examples of this include ‘Ubuntu’ (humanity) philosophy, emphasis on
community and relationships (familial and kinship), and the belief that life (or health and well-being) involves the the living, the living dead (those who recently died), and the dead (ancestors - those who have been dead for a while)..... among others. Again, each cultural group will have their own unique interpretations and expressions of these elements.

A second group of African communities are those living outside the continent for a variety of reasons - occupational, as refugees, asylum seekers, and/or migrants. For instance:

You may be wondering why I am concerned about these groups. Migration challenges how we think of culture and identity (particularly the assumption that identity is bounded to a geographical and territorial place).

Migration does involve an on-going process of self-making and socio-political interactions; transnational movements generate ‘nomadic identities’ (identities in a temporary and liminal state)’ or ‘hybrid identities’. However, ‘homeland’ identity is not buried - but in fact - in the
majority of cases still shape the ‘primary’ identity and continue to shape the present. Distance generate a sense of loss - African communities of migrant, refugee, and diasporic backgrounds sustain their identity through their homeland culture (language, rituals, beliefs, values, and practices). Religion is one of these markers of identities that is never buried.

Why the exploration?

Ogbonnaya (nd) observes that “Africans eat religiously, dance religiously, trade religiously and organise their societies religiously”. According to (Parrinder (1976), this is because Africans are “incurably religious” (27-28). The major question is whether religion in the life of Africans helps or hinder sustainable community development.

The secularisation discourse

There has been an assumption that ‘secularisation’, described by some as a process by which ‘sectors of society and culture are removed from the denomination of religious symbols and institutions’ and/or; and by others as ‘the process by which religious institutions, actions, and consciousness lose their social significance’ took the same form in all parts of the world (Baker & Smith: 2010). In other words, ‘the meta narratives of modernisation and secularisation saw/has seen religion as a conservative and traditional force, destined to withdraw and eventually disappear from public life as part of life as part of societal progress towards an increasingly modern society’ (Jones & Pettersen, 2011). Few people would contest the suggestion that this is not the case in Africa. In Africa, religion show no sign of disappearing or diminishing in public importance, as developmental theorists have generally supposed (Haar & Ellis, 2006). Religion is important in African life, in terms of not only numbers of adherents, but also the vast scope of religious experiences and the links between religion, identity, and day-to-day life (Abbink, 2014).

In 2010, The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John Templeton Foundation, conducted a major public opinion survey involving more than 25,000 face-to-face interviews in more than 60 languages or dialects in 19 countries, representing 75% of the total population of sub-Saharan Africa.
Findings showed that 69 to 98 per cent of inhabitants (depending on the country) were believers in God, the literal truth of the scriptures and Biblical or Qur’anic rules, went to mosque or church regularly, and followed most other religious injunctions. Nine out of ten said that religion was “very important” in their lives (Pew Forum 2010: 3). Practices like sacrifices to spirits and ancestors were seen as important by approximately 27 per cent of all people, reflecting the continued relevance of such so-called “traditional” religious practices (Pew Forum 2010: 2). From 66 to 93 per cent of people wanted their political leaders to have strong religious beliefs; most even agreed to their being of a faith different from their own (Pew Forum 2010: 52).
Of interest to me in the survey is participants’ response to the question: “But how do sub-Saharan Africans themselves view the role of religion in their lives and societies? Below is a diagram showing the percentages by country.
Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa
These are all telling figures – despite the methodological critiques that could be directed towards the Pew surveys. One could hypothesize that religion has even become the primary identity for most Africans (Abbink 2014: 85).

The survey showed that there are varieties of religious experiences in Africa (or within an African worldview) - which for analytical purposes may be divided into four major categories. These include religious ideas (what people actually believe), religious practices (ritual behaviour), religious organisations (how religious communities are formed and function), and religious experiences (such the subjective experiences of change or transformation) (Haar & Ellis, 2006). All these elements I believe produce knowledge which is beneficial to community development purposes.

Religion manifests itself in multiple contexts - family law, constitutional preferences, civil and personal rights (relating to religious dress and gender relations among other things), the scope and extent of political participation and expression is public media. Some of the
religious elements especially striking in African religious life are “its strong performative, publicly enacted presence and its explicit series of practices - ceremonies, participatory rituals and prayer gatherings, religious services (some acoustically enhanced) (Abbink 2014:)

So why is religion often sidelined/excluded from community development discourses and approaches?

A misunderstanding of ‘religion’?

I would suggest that, for the most part, religion has been viewed with suspicion and sidelined because it has been misconceptualized. “Religion tends to be given a narrow definition and seen as an institution of society - either a single entity or a group of large entities (such as Muslim, the Christian Church etc). As such, it has been regarded as one of the institutions which are an obstacle to community development (or development). A report by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation observed that such an understanding of religion is Eurocentric - or at least results from a West European historical route. A survey done by the organisation reveals that, in fact, in most African cultures, the term ‘religion’ has no exactly corresponding equivalent, either semantically or as regards its content (Holenstein, 2005).

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation conducted a survey with a group of African Communities living outside the continent - where participants were asked about their religion and its significance in their lives. To the question ‘tell me how you feel about religion’: one participant responded as follows:

“You have asked me to tell you how I understand myself as a Hindu. I have responded to this request to my very best. But, please, do not understand all that as if I have talked to you about my ‘religion’. I have passed through a Western system of education..., and I think I know quite well how you Western people are used to think about man and God and about ‘religion’. So I talked to you as if ‘Hinduism’ were my ‘religion’, so that you may be able to understand what I mean. If you were a Hindu yourself, I would have talked to you in quite a different fashion, and I am sure both of us would have laughed about the idea that something like ‘Hinduism’ does even exist. Please, don’t forget this when analysing all the stuff you have on your tape.”

My intention is not to engage in a debate contesting definitions of religion, rather to emphasize the importance of understanding religion in context - without any particular understanding claiming superiority or universality.

It is also important to note that the reluctance to consider the role of religion in community development also stems from the divisiveness and intolerance among various religious groups. This occasionally results in violence conflicts which hampers, or even destroy,
community projects and initiatives. However, it is important to differentiate between religion as an ideology and religion as a way of being (Nandy, 2002). Religion as an ideology takes the form of a sub-group identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious/religious interests. Consequently, religion is often sidelined in community development discourses because of the focus on the use of religion (specifically religious language) by some groups to rationalize opinions and actions - particularly harmful ones (Lichterman, 2008). For example, religious justification for male dominated gender roles, human rights violations against collectivities such as women, children, youth, people living with HIV, fanatical fasting and self sacrifice is often based on ambiguous basic religious texts and used to push through power interests (Holstein, 2005). Additionally, Abbink (2014) rightly observes that, in a African worldview, religion is not necessarily a discourse of morality and the way that it been used by the elite (such as political leaders) is often highly dubious and opportunistic - a way to keep power and influence over others.

In this sense, (French Philosopher) Pierre Bourdieu saw religion as functioning in a way whereby institutionalised specialists (the elite producers of meaning) guard and maintain their power in the religious field by means of their ability to “modify...the practice and worldview of lay people” (Bourdieu, 1987: 127).

So how may we understand/define ‘religion’ - from an an African worldview….????

Defining religion and spirituality

Religion is multifaceted and not only includes institutionalised religion but also personal beliefs and practices, spirituality and faith(Lunn, 2009).

This broad conceptualisation of religion goes beyond the more specific, Western, ‘theological' definition...such as religion as an “equipment for living” (Burke…) or a “system of symbols” (Geertz, 1973; Haar & Ellis, 2006). As such, “religion is often equated exclusively with it institutional expression which arise from the history of Christian churches in Europe”. Presumably, for this reason, traditional development work with African peoples generally consider religion - if at all- in the form of organised religion, focusing for example on the role of the church in state politics, the role of Faith-Based organisations, or the link between developmental agencies and faith institutions (Jones & Pettersen, 2011). While is an important focus....

Notably, from the Horn of Africa, religion includes belief in the existence and workings of spiritual beings or divine forces, and the recognition of an invisible order or reality that affects humans and their behaviour” (Abbink 2014: 85). Religion in this sense is often seen as (primarily) a fact of being in the world. Tyndale (2011) states that,

   Religion is an omnipresent and seamless part of daily life, taking an infinite variety of forms that are part of the distinctive quality of each community. Religion could thus not
be seen as something apart and personal. It is, rather, a dimension of life that suffuses whatever people do (Tyndale, 2011: 216).

Based on the statement above, for most Africans, life is an intricate web of the sacred and the secular. There is no division between religion and life, body and soul, natural and supernatural. What this means is humanity (and nature) is best seen as life-force interacting harmoniously with life forces in the universe namely: God, the deities, the ancestors, and the living dead (Ogbonnaya, nd). According to Mbiti (an African philosopher and religious studies author),

It is religion, more than anything else, which colors their understanding of the universe and their empirical (and experiential)\(^1\) participation in that universe, making life profoundly religious phenomenon. To be is to be in a religious universe. That is the philosophical understanding behind African myths, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals, actions and social relationships (Mbiti, 1969).

Therefore, religion is much more broader than institutions and is best understood “when its entire range of expression is recognised. This means taking into account the embodied practices, the behavioural routines and the objects and images meant to evoke the presence of the divine or non-visible forces” (Abbink, 2014:99). This broad understanding of religion, I suggest, creates the potential for religion to be transformative in community development - particularly as social capital.

**Religion as social capital**

Religion, for the majority of African communities, is a social capital. The concept of social capital is now well established in theoretical and practice-based discourses, although there are various formulations and contestations around its use and measurement. A common definition suggests that social capital refers to networks between people that lead to cooperation and beneficial outcomes (Putnam, 1995a, 1995b). Social capital is associated with collaborative efforts, collective action, cooperation, and joint action. Its stocks include trust, norms, and networks, which tend to be self-reinforcing and cumulative. This working definition of social capital identifies religion as a subset of social capital and is there, “the effect of religious and spiritual practices, beliefs, networks and institutions that have measurable impacts on individuals, communities and societies” (Baker & Smith, 2011: 8) attitudes, relationships, behaviours and over well-being. A more precise definition of religion as social capital is “the power, influence, knowledge and dispositions created by participation in one or more religious traditions (Berger & Hefner, 2003:3).

**Way of being in the world**

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\(^1\) My own words
Religious beliefs and values shape the way the majority of Africans live and act in the world. For example, the principles and values stemming from a belief in the interconnected between the visible and invisible worlds, the living, the living dead and the ancestors encourage a spirit of harmony between people, and their natural environments. Such principles may be foundational for promoting respect and care for the environment.

In view of its common belief in the dignity of the human person under a supreme being, Africans are generally committed to the promotion of the human good so as to provide basic needs, guarantee protection of human rights and promote integral development of the communities. Tyndale (2001) observes qualities such as respect for relationships, compassion, pursuit of equity and justice are empowering. Empowerment gives people personal dignity, self-worth and connectedness which in turn inspires vision and social action (Lunn, 2009).

Religion has an effect on many people’s attitude to everything, including such matters as savings, investment and a host of economic decisions. It also influences areas we have come to see as vital for successful development, like schooling, gender quality and approaches to health care. In short, religion could be an important driver of change, even as it could be a break to progress (Tyndale, 2011:216). Therefore for african communities, religion is an integral part of life and should not be compartmentalised or seen as an ‘optional exta’ for community development.

Religion is beneficial in providing metaphysical meaning and expectations of well being. Religious faith may open a route to serenity and meaning - in times of crisis - such as illness, bereavement, and/or exclusion.

To give a specific example, the belief in the interconnected of the material and the spiritual realms could be translated into a strong communal-based approach to health and well-being. However, attention has been drawn to this facet of religion by Amartya Sen - who notes that instead of grumbling some people (such as the extreme poor) have reconciled themselves with their lot and seem ‘grateful for small mercies’. Sen is right to point out how religion may be used as an ideology to promote unnatural happiness. Still, religious beliefs and practices stand alongside and complement other aspects of human flourishing that are intrinsically valued - such as safety, health, knowledge, and self-direction.

In summary, the essence of religion’s contribution to communities is that; it shows wisdom, prompts people to service; gives values; provides a foundation for life; leads to practical action; shows people beauty; leads to forms of transformation; involves human connection; and calls followers to selflessness (Barker & Smith, 2011:17).

Conclusion
This holistic vision of community development transcends the ‘assumed’ dualism common within the Western mindset that have seen the sacred separated from the secular, and the material from the spiritual. As such, a holistic approach to community development is one in which religious world-views is an integral part. As Lunn (2009) observes, it is in the process of self-determination that communities will find emancipation from current conventional models of community development and engage with community development which is culturally appropriate and sustainable. Moreover, such approaches to community development offer a framework for bringing about a more people-centered, transformative and sustainable development.

Community work is far more likely to be successful if it involves all stakeholders from the very beginning. This is the principle that derives from the value concerning the fairness of involving everyone affected by an issue. It’s stated as a principle because it is a practical statement: planning, intervention, and evaluation all simply go better if there is input and participation by everyone involved. This participatory process results in more ideas, more widespread support, the possibility of avoiding errors because of ignorance of community history or past performance, and ownership of the resulting action by everyone affected.

Leadership from within the community should be encouraged and nurtured. Positive community change is more likely to occur, and more likely to continue, if it is built from within. The leaders for this work should come from the community, because they know the community so well, because they have the credibility that community membership brings, and because they have so much interest in success. It is also a matter of fairness – it is only right that people should control their own fates. For outsiders to impose solutions and leadership may be effective in the short term, but it hinders the community’s ability to develop and evolve.

Again, this paper does not deny that religion has and always will have some negative and destructive aspects, but rather I prefer to focus on embracing its positive values. I am by no means claiming that religion present a solution to all issues within African communities, nor that religion is entirely a force of good (the understanding of it though).