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Diversity in Society

Introduction

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Introduction

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“Unity in Diversity” is the motto of South Africa but it could be applied to the whole continent. This special issue of the *Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est* explores the many dimensions of African diversity. Introduced by a thematic article on what means diversity in a time of globalization, this special issue gives a glimpse into the diversity of Africa. African societies are diverse in many ways: peoples, cultures, languages, religions and even sports. Each article offers a specific perspective on diversity and altogether these articles bring the reader to a country of West, East and Southern Africa. This continental coverage goes hand in hand with a focus on Kenya's diversity.

Kenyan society is a good example of the African meaning of diversity. Its population is not only made of more than 40 ethnic groups, it is also made of Kenyan minorities of Indian origin. The Indian Kenyans came at colonial times, stayed on and obtained full citizenship after independence. However, at the start of this century, they still constitute a schizophrenic community. For the beginning of the colonial period, the Indian Kenyans have lived in separate areas and, more precisely, in separate community areas, including housing, schools, temples, clubs, etc. But this legacy of colonial segregation has now turned into self-segregation according to Michel Adam. They stay away from Kenyan politics and tend to be a closed community enjoying considerable economic influence and having overseas connections. Being a rich minority in Kenyan society, they are subjected to criticism by Kenyan politicians and even to xenophobic attacks. In this way, they are part of the Kenyan social fabric but are still not fully seen as such by the majority of Kenyans: they are often described as more cosmopolitan than national. In order to consolidate their integration, Michel Adam suggests that they should go further in multiplying and strengthening social and matrimonial links with the African population.

Kenyan society is not only diverse because of its peoples but also because of its languages. With more than 40 languages, Kenya is definitely a multilingual country. The recent ethnic tensions related to the 2007 elections led to the recent recognition and protection of linguistic diversity by the law. In order to promote national cohesion, the Kenyan government has little option but to pursue policies extensive and rigorous enough to accommodate multilingualism, aid the development of native languages thereby enhancing public participation at both micro and macro levels of the society. Stephen Omondi Owino argues that, in Kenya, multilingualism however still needs a proper policy.

Religion is another factor of diversity in Kenya. Mildred Ndeda demonstrates this with a case study. The Repentance and Holiness Movement is part of the new religious movements that are spreading fast in Kenya. It was invented by

Prophet Owuor who lived in the United States but founded his church in Kenya. Mildred Ndeda analyses the reasons why this spiritual movement is very attractive for Kenyan believers. The anti-corruption stance of the man nicknamed “the prophet of doom” has been quite popular as well as his straightforward accusations against church leaders and politicians. Religious discourse and political demagoguery seem to be quite close in the Repentance and Holiness Movement and this may be related to the collective anxiety following the post-electoral violence.

Joseph Egwurube introduces the reader into one of the most extreme cases of multi-ethnic diversity in Africa: Nigeria, a country populated by more than 390 ethnic groups. Nigerian post-colonial history demonstrates that the management of multi-ethnic society is a very serious political challenge. The Biafra civil war, constant tension between the North and South and frequent violence between communities indicate that it has been a challenge to “keep Nigeria one”. Joseph Egwurube argues that devoting some measure of self-government to duly constituted ethno-regional groupings was key to keep “Nigeria one” but it has not made Nigerian communities more tolerant with each other and has triggered a dangerous and costly process of institutional fragmentation. Since independence, new states and local government units keep being created in the Nigerian federation. What he calls the “zebra model of diversity management” has widened rather than reduced the distance between the component communities of post-colonial Nigeria and therefore the Nigerian unity is superficial.

In South Africa, diversity still means discrimination – at least in sport. Bernard Cros explores a case of hidden discrimination in rugby. By carefully analyzing the South African sevens and fifteens teams, he demonstrates that there are many more White people — 70% to 80% depending on the competition — than black and coloured players, and all seem to occupy specific positions on the teams according to race. His quantitative study outlines the persistence of racial stereotypes in this sport despite the official policy of the South African rugby federation.

A lesson can maybe be drawn from those case studies: there seems to be a constant combination of cooperative and competitive diversity. On the continent, diversity is not only cooperative but also competitive. In instances when diversity leads to violent competition like in Nigeria, there is still an element of cooperation: the federalist state still holds and the various Nigerian communities still regard federalism as the only institutional system that can work in the country. The Indians in Kenya are sometimes seen as being too “cosmopolitan” or too “foreign” but they have not been expelled like in Uganda in the 1970s. In Africa, religious, linguistic, racial and ethnic diversity is neither a curse nor a blessing: it is a challenge to manage.