Problems with indigeneity: Fragmentation, discrimination and exclusion in post-colonial African states

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Abstract

Taking indigeneity and hybridity as opposite theoretical paradigms in the study of religion, this article problematises political discourses and practices that propagate the former view. The post-colonial resurgence of indigeneity is first contextualised with reference to anthropological studies of its political uses in Botswana and Cameroon, and then problematised with reference to its foregrounding in Freedom Park. It is argued that this tendency poses the danger of social fragmentation, discrimination and exclusion in post-colonial African contexts, which is precisely what the South African Constitution and *National Policy on Religion and Education* intend to prevent.

Key words: Indigeneity; ethnicity; discrimination; exclusion; Freedom Park; Religion Education; South Africa

Indigeneity, taken as the essentialist claim of ethnic belonging and ethnic entitlement to a particular territory on the basis of 'having been there first',[1] may serve diverse functions depending on the historical context in each case. Who ascribes indigeneity, in whose interest is the claim made, within which political and economic context is it performed? In Africa, for example, the notion was used by colonisers to contain and keep natives/indigènes in an inferior place; in post-colonial states it has amongst other things been used by political elites in their struggles for power. If the first use was morally problematic, the second may not be least so.

I will first illustrate the problem of indigeneity with reference to two anthropological studies of its political[2] instrumentalisation in post-colonial Africa. These case studies will provide a minimal framework within which we may then understand the emphasis on indigeneity by the post-apartheid South African state. I will finally problematise its prioritisation by the government in Freedom Park from the perspective of the *National Policy on Religion and Education*.

In an article on 'Colonialism', David Chidester (2000), Professor in the comparative study of religions at the University of Cape Town, outlines two opposite approaches in the post-colonial study of religion. On the one hand are indigenists who aim to recover and

cultivate the pure, pre-colonial essence of their traditions. On the other hand are those who view cultures and religions as hybrid constructs that are in flux owing to continuous encounters between people. Although the indigenist paradigm is clearly inadequate for not dealing with the reality of historical change and contingency, Chidester nevertheless defends its legitimacy when it is used as a strategy to recover beliefs and practices that had been suppressed under colonialism and apartheid.

The paradigm of indigeneity in my view not only lacks historical sensitivity, but may also – I will further argue – be morally and politically much more problematic than Chidester would admit in his essay. As examples of indigeneity, Chidester (2000:433) juxtaposes Africanists and Hindutva nationalists, without considering the tragic consequences of the latter's rigid identity politics that should surely warn us to be cautious about the former as well. In positing a homogenous pre-colonial Hindu identity as the only criterion of belonging to the post-colonial nation-state of India, the Hindu right has caused deep divisions and bears primary responsibility for the massacres of members from the Muslim minority in India (cf. Strijdom 2009). In post-colonial Africa the genocidal potential of essentialist ethnic classifications is, of course, evident from ascription of rigid identities to Hutu, as the really indigenous, and Tutsi, as the Hamitic myth would have it, as foreign invaders from the north (cf. de la Cadena & Starn 2007:20).

I turn to two recent anthropological studies for a minimal framework of the political functions of indigeneity in post-colonial African states. One focuses on indigeneity in contemporary Botswana; the other investigates its role in Cameroon, but broadens the scope by including not only other African states, but European states as well, emphasising the tendency of indigeneity to fragment, discriminate and exclude. This framework will provide the context to understand and problematise the prioritisation of indigeneity by the post-apartheid South African government as evidenced in Freedom Park.

First case study: Indigeneity in Botswana

In an essay '"Ever-diminishing circles": The paradoxes of belonging in Botswana', Francis Nyamnjoh (2007) argues that although essentialist constructs of ethnic identity are contradicted by the reality of change, migrations and mixtures, one needs to emphasise that such reified notions have been instrumentalised by colonial and post-colonial state apparatuses resulting in ethnic hierarchies and exclusions.

Under colonialism and apartheid ethnic identities were constructed and classified, often with disregard of local histories, and imposed not only for purposes of indirect rule, but also to justify a civilising mission to 'primitive natives'. In post-colonial African states, tensions among ethnic groups about purity, belonging and entitlements have been ongoing, as he demonstrates in the case of the resurgence of indigeneity in Botswana since the mid-1980s.

Although the nation-state of Botswana guarantees citizenship to all indigenous groups within its territory and has tried to unite all its citizens by means of a national anthem, a sport stadium and other public structures, it has not been able to resolve resurgent ethnic divisions, hierarchies and tensions. Owing to their privileged position under British colonialism (as administrators and converts), the Tswana have become the most prominent group, as is reflected in the name of the modern state itself. This position has been

contested by the minority BaKalanga's educated elite, themselves products of colonial privileging, who demand greater recognition and representation in government structures due to their having been in the area before the Tswana. The response from certain Tswana circles, however, is a stereotyping of BaKalanga as darker-skinned Makwerekwere ('total outsiders') who originate from Zimbabwe and further north and are therefore not authentic citizens of Botswana.

Ironically, the Khoesan (Bushman) minority who can legitimately claim to have been there prior to all other ethnic groups have been relegated to the lowest end of the hierarchy and are the least represented in government structures. They are looked down upon by all these groups as hunter-gatherers who have failed to establish agricultural villages as a condition for entitlement to land. Nyamnjoh (2007:311) aptly summarises the point:

> Although legal provisions might promise civic citizenship to all in principle, in practice inequalities prevail among individuals and groups, especially along rigid lines of politically constructed indigeneity. Being indigenous thus becomes a matter of degree and power relations, thereby making some less Batswana than others, even as they are armed with the same … Identity Card and inspired or protected in principle by the same constitution.

Nyamnjoh, however, continues to show that even the constitution, mentioning only the eight major Tswana 'tribes', was accused by minorities of a 'rigid hierarchy of indigeneity' that discriminates between rather than protects the equality of all citizens. A commission was appointed to investigate, but their recommendations met with resistance from the Tswana majority who wanted to retain their dominant position in the national House of Chiefs. A redraft introduced additional members from districts with minority ethnic groups,

but still privileged the Tswana. It was adopted by parliament, but most minority ethnic groups rejected it as an entrenchment of Tswana domination.

Against such rigid, hierarchical and exclusionary concepts of indigeneity, such 'ever-diminishing circles', Nyamnjoh (2007:323) insists on a more fluid view of indigeneity, by which he means a cosmopolitan vision that would acknowledge the reality of historical change, value diverse and mixed group identities, and be inclusive of and hospitable to 'outsiders'. 'The emphasis', he concludes, 'should be on the freedom of individuals and communities to negotiate inclusion, opt out and opt in with flexibility of belonging in consonance with their realities as straddlers of a kaleidoscope of identity margins' (Nyamnjoh 2007:325).

Second case study: Indigeneity in Cameroon and elsewhere

In his book *The perils of belonging: Autochthony, citizenship, and exclusion in Africa and Europe*, Peter Geschiere (2009) argues that the political construct and instrumentalisation of rigid ethnic identities tend to lead to increasing fragmentation, exclusion and violent conflict. Although he focuses on Cameroon,[3] where he has done fieldwork for more than 30 years, he compares autochthonous discourses and practices in Cameroon with examples from elsewhere in Africa and in Europe. He thus analyses the destructive effect of indigenism not only in the Ivory Coast with Gbagbo's disastrous *Opération Nationale d'Identification*, in the Eastern DRC and in South Africa's xenophobic outbursts, but also in the Netherlands, Flanders, France, and even in ancient Athens as the cradle of the discourse.

As for post-colonial Cameroon, he distinguishes between the role of ethnic belonging during the dictatorship of the 1960s-1980s and its role after the introduction of multiparty elections in the 1990s.

After the Second World War, Francophone Cameroon, under leadership of Ahmadou Ahidjo (from the Muslim North), called for a unification with Anglophone Cameroon in the struggle for independence. Although a northern group within British Cameroon voted to become part of the Nigerian federation, the southern sector decided to join Ahidjo and formed a unified federation in 1961. Independent Cameroon quickly settled into a dictatorship under Ahidjo. Citizens were exhorted to unite behind the president and to enact their loyalty in stiff national ceremonies enforced from above. Expressing local ethnic loyalties was banned and traitors were to be denounced. When Ahidjo unexpectedly stepped down in 1982, he appointed Paul Biya, a Beti from the Christian South, as his successor. Biya continued the suppression of dissidents until 1990, when due to international political and economic pressure (particularly from development organisations like the World Bank and IMF) multiparty elections were introduced.

Under this new dispensation Biya, however, found new strategies to stay in power, one of them being the use of autochthonous discourse and policies to divide the opposition. Three main parties emerged, each with its own regional and associated ethnic strongholds:

- Biya's party in the Centre, South and East Provinces (with the Beti ethnic group as majority)
- the opposition led by John Fru Ndi in the Anglophone North-West and South-West provinces as well as in the Francophone West Province (with the Bamileke as the main ethnic group)
- the main party in the Muslim north (associated primarily with the Fulbe).

These regions do not form homogenous blocks, but are internally deeply divided, which Biya exploited in his favour by supporting specific ethnic groups. In the north, Biya supported the Kirdi who never converted to Islam and sought liberation from the Fulbe. In the western part, there was a divide not only between Anglo- and Francophones, but also amongst Anglophones themselves caused by northern highlanders migrating to the richer south-western coastal and forest areas for job opportunities. Biya's government exploited these tensions by siding with the coastal minority of Bakweri and Douala, who claimed autochthony and complained about being swamped by Bamenda migrants from the Anglophone North-West and Bamileke from the Francophone West. Participating in funerary rituals in one's village of origin became the ultimate test of belonging, of deciding who autochthons were and who allochthons were, contributing to suspicion, fragmentation and conflict.

Like Nyamnjoh, Geschiere would consider as crucial alternative the cultivation of a historical sensitivity open to change and a cosmopolitan attitude that values diversity and mixtures. He concludes:

> This drastic exclusionary tendency and this quest for purity make autochthony discourse problematic in Africa as well as in other parts of the globe. Already in the classical Athenian example this implied a view in which staying in place is the norm and migration the exception. All the more important to emphasise that migration is as old as human society and that autochthony's 'Otherless universe' is therefore an impossibility. There may be considerable wisdom in Kwame Appiah's plea for a combination of cosmopolitanism and identity, or, to put it more concretely, in his idea that we need common stories, in order to live together but that these stories must address diversity and allow for conversation across differences (Geschiere 2009:224).

Third case study: Indigeneity in post-apartheid South Africa

If these two anthropological studies have convincingly shown just how problematic the political instrumentalisation of indigenous identities in post-colonial Botswana and Cameroon (and elsewhere) have become, we should ask about the political function of indigeneity in post-apartheid South Africa and whether we should be attentive to its potentially dangerous consequences here as well.

In his article 'Indigenous authorities and the post-colonial state: the domestication of indigeneity and African nationalism in South Africa', Federico Settler (2010) argues that, although the post-apartheid state has introduced legislation to limit the powers of traditional leaders, it has also drawn on indigenous symbols in its creation of a new African nationalism.

As elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, indigeneity in South Africa was constructed in an essentialist way and used by the colonial and apartheid state to rule through traditional leaders and by means of a bifurcate legal system – one applicable to white settler citizens and another of customary law for black natives.

Given this history of racial division and colonial use of traditional leaders, the ANC tended to be critical of the role of traditional leaders and defended the protection of individual rights for a long time, but in their 1988 guidelines for a post-apartheid constitution proposed that 'the institution of hereditary rulers and chiefs shall be transformed to serve the interest of the people as a whole' (Settler 2010:55). Their stance changed, however, with the arrival of multiparty elections in 1994, when the ANC realised that they needed the support of traditional authorities in rural constituencies.

What followed was a number of legal provisions that acknowledged the legitimacy, but limited the power of indigenous leaders culturally and politically. Culturally they were to guard traditional customs, which were ideally not to transgress the fundamental values of non-discrimination in the Constitution, and politically their power was limited to their rural locations, but always subject to the authority of the state. With the establishment of the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Rights after 2002, the Council for Traditional Leaders lost its earlier function as primary advisors to government on indigenous matters, but is still crucially consulted by the Commission. In response to the restriction of their power, indigenous leaders have been cultivating alliances with transnational groups for the protection of indigenous rights.

Settler (2010:60) argues that in spite of the post-apartheid state's anxiety about and legal domestication of the power of indigenous authorities, it has nevertheless instrumentalised the 'sacred link to primordially African origins' that the institution provides them with in order to 'produce its own brand of African nationalism'. He finds this position already reflected in Nelson Mandela's 1997 speech at the inauguration of the Council of Traditional Leaders, when he exhorted them 'to assert the Africanness of our new democracy' and to 'promote and assist continuing research so that we know who we really are' (in Settler 2010:60).

Settler (2010:61) concludes:

> In the context of South Africa, indigenous authorities have demonstrated how, through the production of narratives of the sacred, both the state and indigenous communities have drawn on resources of legitimation from manufactured notions of Africa(ness), be it colonial, apartheid or contemporary nativist. These narratives of

the sacred emerge from the periphery of the post-colonial state, where the indigenous is reconfigured in such ways as to infect nationalist narratives and embed themselves firmly within South Africa's post-apartheid democracy.

The foregrounding of indigeneity at Freedom Park

It is within this political context, as exemplified by the case studies above, that the prominence of indigenous symbols at Freedom Park should be understood and problematised. I will develop my argument in dialogue with Chidester again.

In a chapter on 'Heritage' in *Wild religion: Tracing the sacred in South Africa*, Chidester (2012:91-111) locates the pedagogical function of Freedom Park in relation to the *National Policy on Religion and Education* (2003). Freedom Park, as a governmental construct, functions as an extended classroom to the broader public, he says. It is clear to me, however, that there is a real tension, even contradiction, between the national policy's promotion of multireligion education in public schools and the state's prioritisation of indigenous religion at Freedom Park.

In his historical survey of the conceptualisation and design of Freedom Park, Jonathan Noble (2011:213-217) argues that it was Mbeki's fashioning of Afrocentric ideals around the turn of the millennium that inspired the emphasis on indigeneity at Freedom Park. He admits that this caused an ethical tension with the objective of building and reconciling a multicultural society into a unified nation (*i.e.*, I will add, with the original rationale of the TRC to negotiate a compromise between the racially divided black majority and white minority). When the poet and indigenous healer, Wally Serote, took over as CEO of Freedom Park in 2004, the final

stage was set for showcasing authentic African indigenous knowledge and religion. Although international submissions for Freedom Park were invited and received, those that were not considered to be authentically African, were dismissed by the adjudicating panel.[4] Eventually it was decided that the complex would include three main sections:

- at the centre a **shrine** (known by the isiZulu term *Isivivane*), consisting of stones from South Africa's provinces around an area that symbolise the final burial site (*lesaka* in seTswana) of ancestral spirits who died in the struggle for human freedom. Before entering this most sacred circular area in the complex, with mist being emitted from the floor of the *lesaka* to create a sense of aura, visitors are expected to remove their shoes.
- a **memorial** (using the siSwati word *Sikhumbuto*), consisting of a wall with the names of fallen heroes in this struggle (admittedly a Western form of memorialisation), a sanctuary with a hall of heroes, a gathering space for public events ('amphitheatre') and a stylised sculpture of stainless steel poles symbolising reeds from African indigenous creation mythology.
- a **museum** (the //hapo after the San word for 'dream') tracing the history of South Africa since primordial times. Faced with the problem that the museum is a Western colonial construct, the Africanist intellectuals had to think hard to come up with an authentically African indigenous design. A delegation visited the sacred healing garden of the Zulu sangoma Credo Mutwa in Kuruman in the Northern Cape, were advised by him about the primacy of rocks in African indigenous creation mythology, and resolved that the museum would be constructed in the form of seven connected boulders around an Indigenous Knowledge Systems garden.

Noble (2011:252) concludes:

> The crucial point here is to note how the discourses that produced Freedom Park have wished to determine the essence of things. The Park has wished to promote the authenticity of indigenous forms to document and thereby to fix – through commissioned research – the significance of indigenous myths and practices, and ultimately to use this material as a motivation for the design of the Park.

The National Policy on Religion and Education

How does this ambitious governmental construct of Freedom Park relate to the *National Policy on Religion and Education*? (2003). In what sense does Freedom Park as extended public classroom in my view crucially deviate from the policy on religion education in public schools?

The *National Policy on Religion and Education* (2003) came about after lengthy negotiations between religious stakeholders, scholars of religion and the post-apartheid government. The result was an alternative to the apartheid state's promotion of Christianity in public schools. Instead, a new inclusive policy was promulgated, based on progressive human rights values enshrined in the constitution, which guarantees the equal treatment of all religions by the state and before the law. The policy explicitly distinguishes between religious instruction which is the responsibility of the home and religious institutions on the one hand and religion education as the teaching about religions as task of the public school on the other. Teaching and learning about religious diversity, without promoting any one religion, became part of the compulsory subject field of Life Orientation. The intention has been to cultivate democratic citizens with sufficient knowledge of and respect for different religions to live responsibly in a multicultural world.

Chidester (2012:95-96, 109-110, 199-200) correctly observes that this policy has been rejected by Christian fundamentalists, who desire to maintain the assumed purity of their religion. Thus, for example, the ACDP and Irmhild Horn, a Professor in primary education at the University of South Africa, hold that the policy is based on a secular humanism that would not only relativise and undermine Bible-based Christianity as the sole truth by introducing children to different religions, but would also – in Horn's argument – expose children to and even let them participate in the dangerous beliefs and practices of indigenous African religion that centres on ancestral spirits, magic and eventually Satanism. These conservative Christians similarly oppose Freedom Park, since its foregrounding of African indigenous practices and beliefs is considered to be in conflict with the Christian truth in the Bible.

The concern raised by secular critics against the tendency of monuments like Freedom Park to create uniformity and conceal diversity and bury debate should, in Chidester's (2012:107-108) view, be taken more seriously than the opposition from Christian conservatives. What we witness according to these critics is the manufacturing of a new public consensus by means of propagandistic monuments. What we need instead, according to them, is more critical thinking about diversity and complexity. Chidester (2012:108) finally admits that Freedom Park as public pedagogy is complicit in creating such unacceptable uniformity, and suggests that religion education will need 'to resist these pressures for artificial uniformity' by being 'more like the heritage project of the *Sunday Times*, decentralised and dispersed, than like the national heritage fixed in time and space at Freedom Park'. The *Sunday Times* initiative of 2007 is exemplary for not having manufactured a single

national narrative (the struggle for freedom at Freedom Park), but for promoting critical thinking by commissioning and sponsoring diverse memorials and multiple narratives in local histories.

What Chidester unfortunately fails to recognise, is precisely the conflict that I have tried to understand and problematise here: the directive of the policy not to promote any specific religion in public schools on the one hand and the prioritisation of African indigenous religion at Freedom Park on the other hand. It is the constitutional responsibility of the state to create a space in which all religions and cultures can flourish *but without promoting any one*, that the governmental construct of Freedom Park has contradicted in its foregrounding of African indigeneity.

I started this article by showing the consequences that the political instrumentalisation of indigenous identities in post-colonial Botswana and Cameroon has had, especially since the advent of multiparty elections in the 1990s: the potential to fragment, to create hierarchies and to exclude. I asked whether this should serve as a warning for South Africans. My answer should be clear. In the case of Freedom Park as an initiative of the post-apartheid state, the foregrounding of African indigenous religion has not respected the diversity and changing nature of South Africa's cultures and religions. It is therefore a failed state attempt to bring about multicultural understanding, equality, reconciliation and peace. One's best hope would be that citizens educated about the constitutional responsibility of the state not to promote one religion or culture at the expense of any other would enter the public debate and put pressure on government to consider the dangers of essentialist discourses and governmental propaganda of indigeneity within a multicultural and multireligious society.

Notes

1   Both the United Nations (1986) and the International Labour Organization (1989) define 'indigenous' in terms of place and time, specifically the claim by a group to have distinctive cultural continuity with ancestors who had lived in a particular area before Western colonial intervention (cf Dove 2006:192). Niezen (2003:3) argues that the term became prevalent only since the 1980s, when indigenism became a global movement with the United Nations' active promotion of the rights of indigenous peoples.

2   This article focuses on uses of indigeneity in post-colonial African power politics. The commodification of indigenous and ethnic identities is explored by Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) and the role of indigenous peoples in environmental politics is analysed by Dove (2006), but these aspects of indigeneity are not explored in this article.

3   Pelican (2009) similarly argues that indigenous and autochthonous discourses in post-colonial Cameroon have had political consequences that the United Nations has not foreseen in its propagation of indigenous rights.

4   Noble (2011:224) notes that international jurors on the 2003 panel tended to prefer designs that express universality, whereas the South African jurors supported submissions that were considered authentically African indigenous. At this first round, the jury failed to agree and no winner was announced.

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