
THE WORD OF GUEST EDITOR: RELIGION, MEDIA AND POLITICS IN AFRICA

In 2008, I co-directed the first major international conference dealing with media and religion in Africa, held in Abuja, Nigeria. The main goal of the conference was to cast a critical look at African's rapidly evolving religious media scene. It was particularly interested in the challenges of balancing freedom of expression and freedom of religion and belief in Africa's fast growing media sector. The conference also aimed at encouraging the study of the expanding range of religious media, as well as coverage of religion, in a globalizing Africa.

As part of the on-going discourse on media, religion and culture in Africa, this special edition focused on Religion, Media, and Politics in Africa. The aim is to examine current issues related to religious praxis in the context of the media and their political implications to the continent. As the Abuja conference made clear, there is a lot happening in the ambience of religious media within the African continent.

This edition thus throws an academic searchlight on three issues which have marked the current history of the continent as a whole: the second wave of democratization which swept through many countries of the continent from the early nineties; the liberalization of the airwaves which were hitherto under the hegemonic control of autocratic governments; and the upsurge of charismatic movements, especially in the Christian religion, one of whose defining characteristics is the massive use of the mass media.

The contributors to this special edition tackled among other issues: how government media policies in the West African sub-region affect the development of religious media; how religious media affect political changes in the sub-region; how religious media are creating new religious and political communities, and how these communities are relating to the existing socio-political order; ways through which newer religious organizations such as the Pentecostals use the media to advance political and economic agendas; how the older institutional religions like Catholicism and Islam are negotiating socio-political relevance in the face of the massive presence of the newer religious groups in the media; African Traditional Religion in the new world of the media; how traditional forms of power and communication are incorporated in the new religious media; and the nexus between religious media and socio-political conflicts in the sub-region.

In my lead paper, I examined the subtle contest going on between religious and political leaders in the continent. This contest hinges on the redefinition of the categories of power and status, which cease to be primarily tied to material wealth or political connection, but rather to spiritual authority and revelation. This is a struggle for the hegemonic control of the society in the Gramscian sense of the term. Using the Italian concepts of *autorita*; (physical or raw power), and *autorevolezza* (moral power) as metaphors, the paper presents a general explanation of how the contestation between religious and political leaders plays out in the public sphere of the new media.

Asonzeh Ukah's paper, Banishing miracles: Politics and policies of religious broadcasting in Nigeria, focuses on the practices and policies of Nigeria's media regulatory

body, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) vis-à-vis religious broadcasting. , The paper investigates the politics, policies and processes of regulating deregulation within the industry which have raised some controversies in recent times, particularly with reference to what the NBC calls “unverified miracles” in some programmes run by some Pentecostal churches in the country.

A different perspective on Pentecostal media was undertaken by Godwin Okon. His paper, Televangelism and the socio-political mobilization of pentecostals in Port Harcourt metropolis: a *kap* survey; sought to ascertain the extent to which televangelists in Port Harcourt, Nigeria deploy media content towards issues that border on socio-political development. His findings showed a disconnection between knowledge on the potential benefits of televangelism and the deployment of such benefits towards socio-economic mobilization by televangelists.

Moving away from Christianity, Innocent Uwah considered the rituals of African Traditional Religion, which despite the influence of westernization and scientific developments in Africa, still hold meaningful implications in people’s everyday life. Through a nuanced textual analysis of some Nigerian home based films, he showed that religion is the root paradigm of African cultures and the channel to the construction of African identity.

In contrast to Okon’s findings with regard to Nigerian televangelists and political mobilization, Esha Faki Mwinyihaji and Fredrick O. Wanyama in their paper on Kenya’s Muslims and socio-political mobilization, showed that the emergence of Muslim media have influenced the increasing visibility of Muslims in the political scene. They contend that through this mediated mobilization, Muslims in that country are moving from their previous peripheral status, they are now entering national political alliances that can protect their interests and in doing so, Muslims are edging towards influencing national politics in Kenya.

These papers clearly show a clear nexus between religious praxis, political activism and mass mediation. This is not peculiar to Africa, but is evident in other parts of the world. Religion and politics are thus important variables in determining the outlook and character of the mass media in particular societies.

In all, the papers in this edition have shown that neither religion nor politics can operate completely independent of the other. The mass media provide one of the meeting points for these two important components of social life.

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