Spaces for Pluralism in ‘Ethnically Sensitive’ Communities in Uganda

This qualitative study addresses possibilities for living with differences in communities which are prone to ethnic conflict. Its primary empirical focus is on the perceptions of the residents of Kibaale district in Uganda. An analysis of the problematic history of the district shows that multilayered factors have been at play. These factors include identity politics, a rapid increase of new migrant residents, active ethnic pressure groups, the influence of local radio broadcasts and cultural contestations. In this social context, ethnic identities were transformed and inter-ethnic violence broke out.

A number of pluralism initiatives at different levels were taken to redress the situation. These initiatives point in two directions: assimilation and pluralism. Assimilative tendencies were especially noted in intermarriage. Pluralist initiatives include inter-ethnic friendships, learning each other’s languages, community peace dialogues facilitated by religious bodies and other civil society organisations (CSOs), sensitisation by CSOs and the Government through mass media, political cooperation across ethnic lines, plural representation of ethnic groups in the appointment of district positions, splitting political constituencies to create more space for ethnic representation, and creating a Ministry of Bunyoro (regional) Affairs. The study shows that these different pluralism initiatives synergistically reinforce each other in their attempt to improve inter-ethnic relations. However, the sustainability of these initiatives remains unclear since it is also possible that they could aggravate identity politics by providing incentives for ethno-territorial claims and contestations of belonging.