

The International Dalit Solidarity Network

"Working globally against discrimination by work and descent"

Discrimination based on descent in Africa¹

Summary Paper

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¹ It should be noted that although this paper aims to cover the main indigenous forms of descent based discrimination in Africa, with examples, it cannot be considered as exhaustive

1. Introduction

This paper summarises descent-based forms of discrimination across Africa, covered by the descent limb of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). These forms of discrimination range from the existence of caste systems in many societies across the Sahel region, discrimination and marginalisation faced by the descendents of hunter-gather societies and the discrimination and even enslavement still suffered by descendents of slaves in Western and North-Western Sub-Saharan Africa

2. Caste systems in Africa

Although it is not necessarily accurate to speak of the existence of “caste societies” in Africa, there are certainly societies in which there are sections of the population who are members of caste groups. These systems can be called “caste systems” using the definition of “occupational specialisation of endogamous groups, in which membership is based on ascription, and between which social distance is regulated by the concept of pollution”.² Although the percentage of the population in these societies belonging to a caste is generally low (between 1% and 20%), they suffer from forms of discrimination ranging from mild segregation, forced endogamy and restrictions on commensality to extreme segregation, denial of rights and even violence. Countries in Africa who have societies with caste systems within their borders include Mali; Mauritania; Senegal; Gambia; Guinea; Guinea-Bissau; Ivory Coast; Niger; Burkina Faso; Cameroon; Ghana; Liberia; Sierra Leone; Algeria; Nigeria; Chad; Ethiopia and Somalia.

2.1 West Africa

West African societies have some of the more enduring and well-researched caste systems include the Wolof and the Mande speaking populations, and the people living in the Mandara Hills region of West Central Africa. The similarities between the separate hierarchical social systems with caste peoples are striking. Society is generally divided into three, with the nobles/freemen at the top, caste people at the bottom and a third category of slaves and their descendents. The caste people are usually members of a craft-caste profession such as blacksmithing, tanning, potting, leatherworking, brasscasting and weaving. There are also in most areas bard/jester castes, whose role may have traditionally have been to sing praise songs for the nobles. In many, but not all, of these areas the caste people also perform other specialised tasks ranging from undertaking and message bearing to circumcision and excision, often as a non-paid “duty”.

Concepts of pollution are traditionally strong and have faded little. Generally the ideas that caste people are “dirty” or “impure” are reinforced by myths of their ancestors committing a food transgression or an act that committed his ancestors to be forever impure. They are also backed-up by ideas that the work of caste people, particularly those using fire such as blacksmithing and potting, is polluting. The specialised tasks often fulfil a similar role. In other areas, such as the Mandara Hills on the Nigeria and Cameroon border, there are stories that caste people are descended from unions with animals, helping to dehumanise them in the eyes of the non-caste. These concepts of impurity help to reinforce the segregation and forced endogamy that caste people suffer.

In terms of the effects of being a caste member, there is huge variation in the degree and nature of discrimination. Much of the specifics are geographically and culturally context-dependent. Forms of discrimination include; exclusion from, or segregation within, key initiation societies and cultural events; segregation in housing and also in burial; refusal of burial (Griots in Wolof society); denial of the equal right to bear arms; denial of right to own land and/or animals; refusal of right to marry outside their caste; denial of a role in key political institutions, or a

² A. Tuden and L Plotnicov (1970) *Social Stratification in Africa*, The Free Press: New York

separate but inferior role; practise of “untouchability”; denial of a judicial role, either as witness or judge; and denial of education, or segregation within educational institutions. These are not necessarily all practised in every society with a caste system across West Africa, but all are examples of practices that exist and lead to the marginalisation of caste people.

Although some of these systems are beginning to break down under the pressures of urbanisation, greater contact with other societies and new forms of employment, with some reports of caste-non-caste marriages and reduction in segregation and occupational specialisation, these forms of discrimination do generally persist. Many are taboo subjects and in-built prejudices are hard to overcome. Much work is still needed to ensure an effective end to the practice of descent based discrimination in these areas.

2.2 East Africa

In both Somalia and Ethiopia there are marginalised social groups who are discriminated against on the basis of caste. Somali clans known as Sab, or “low-caste”, are generally denied equal rights amongst clans, forcing them to form patron-client relationships with other powerful clans. They are regarded as impure and polluting, backed up with myths of food transgressions (particularly important in Islamic society) and are viewed with distaste, fear and mistrust. Specialised occupational roles vary but include blacksmithing, leatherworking and hunting. Effects of their Sab status include; denial of right to own land, cattle or horses; no right to claim compensation for murder (diya), a right of all other Somalia clans; social segregation and enforced endogamy; denial of education; and restriction of employment to traditional or menial tasks. These effects persist in Somali society today and amongst the Somali diasporas across the West, Africa and in refugee and IDP camps.

The situation in Ethiopia is similar, with occupational specialisation, concepts of pollution, inferior social position, all ascribed from birth, occurring in some areas of the South West. Tanning, blacksmithing, potting and weaving are some of the occupational specialisations with food transgressions, “falls from grace” and animal union myths used to reinforce the concepts of pollution. Effects include denial of political and judicial rights; segregation in housing; denial of roles in key cultural institutions; and enforced endogamy. The discrimination continues to exist and, as in the other cases, prevents their attainment of equal rights within their communities.

2.3 The Nigerian “Osu” system

The Nigerian “Osu” system is a unique social institution found in Igboland, Nigeria, where certain clans were traditionally dedicated to deities and segregated due to their position. The descendents of these clans still face discrimination due to their descent, with enforced endogamy and severe restrictions on commensality still widely practised against the “Osu”. They are also prevented from holding positions of political, cultural or social responsibility and power. Reports also exist of the use of violence against transgressors to reinforce the system, with the use of sexual violence, murder and arson to prevent “Osu” communities resettling to escape the stigma.

3. Slave descent

Amongst the Tuareg people of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, as well as Mauritanian society and amongst the societies with caste systems in West Africa there exists a marginalised social group of slaves, former slaves and their descendents. The continued enslavement of many of these peoples, leading to severe denial of their rights, mainly continues in isolated areas where the illegality of the practice is ignored and laws hard to enforce. The greatest proportions of these people are not made slaves, but are born this way due to their descent from slaves. Even those who have descended from freed slaves, such as the Haratin of Mauritania, continue to suffer discrimination and economic, social and political marginalisation due to their status. The

situation is an issue of descent as the continued marginalisation and even enslavement of these people is carried out exclusively on the basis of their descent.

4. Hunter-Gatherer societies

Many contemporary African societies make a distinction between their farming and urban populations on one-hand, and the hunter-gatherer groups and their descendents on the other. Although this way of life is in decline and has disappeared amongst many of these people, the fact that they are labelled as hunter-gatherer descendents is often enough to legitimise many forms of discrimination and marginalisation.

The Watta in Kenya and the Twa in Rwanda and Burundi are two such groups. Often viewed as “sub-human” by other sectors of society and discriminated against in employment, political institutions and education, these groups are often the poorest and most marginalised in their societies. Often these groups have made claims to being the indigenous inhabitants of these areas, and many might be thought to be racially or ethnically distinct from the rest of the population. However, these groups are often largely indistinguishable from the larger population but continue to suffer discrimination due to their on-going depressed and marginalised status. This status is largely based on their descent.

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