Routledge Handbook of Islam in Africa

Terje Østebø

Muslim–Christian relations in Africa

Publication details
https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780367144241-11
Shobana Shankar
Published online on: 21 Dec 2021

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

8

MUSLIM–CHRISTIAN RELATIONS IN AFRICA

Tracing transformations on the ground and in a growing field of study

Shobana Shankar

Introduction

In his introduction to *Piety and Power: Muslims and Christians in West Africa,* Lamin Sanneh, the late renowned scholar of missions and world Christianity, described African Muslims' engagement with their religiously plural and dynamic landscapes as "flexible", "intelligent", and "creative" (Sanneh 2015, 1–2). Sanneh drew from his own life growing up in The Gambia as a Muslim and his conversion to Christianity to paint an intimate portrait of Muslims and their disagreements with Christians. One unique example he addressed was "Christians' condescending attitude toward biography" that belittles Muslims' steadfast reverence for the Prophet Muhammad's life (38). Even if some readers might find evidence to contradict Sanneh's detailed delineation of coexistence and conflict, his central argument is difficult to dismiss – Africa holds a special mediating role between religions, and "between the world of Islam and that of the West" (3), all the while preserving its own unique pluralistic personalities.

Sanneh's perspective provides a distinct framework for examining African Muslims' interactions with adherents of other religions, which have garnered increasing attention since the 1990s, with rising Muslim–Christian tensions and, in some cases, violence, in the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sudan, and other nations. Local dynamics – such as Muslim–Christian contention over states' adoption of *sharia* and the rise of the violent secessionist Boko Haram terror network in Nigeria and, in the Central African Republic, ethnic discord – have emerged against the backdrop of interreligious conflicts worldwide, particularly in the shadow of the Global War on Terror. Africanists have arguably provided the most critical voices challenging tendencies to enfold global interreligious – particularly Muslim–Christian – conflicts into a unitary overarching explanatory. African histories, social systems, gender dynamics, styles of religious practices, and methods of mediation reveal how Muslims and practitioners of other religions have coexisted for over a millennium, dealing with episodes of conflict stemming from multifaceted causes that cannot be reduced to differences of beliefs alone.

This chapter aims to review both the longue durée and context-specific cases of interreligious interactions in Africa, with a focus on Muslim–Christian relations. In so doing, several features

of Islamic African societies become clearer than they might have in studying intra-Muslim dynamics: pluralism, competition for converts, distinctive methods of evangelization, and negotiations and management of institutional power – in cultural, governmental, civil society, and legal organizations. Scholars of Muslim–Christian entanglements in Africa have shown the processes of co-constructedness in relation to "others" that is hardly new. Moreover, to complicate Sanneh's juxtaposition of Africa and the West, Muslim interactions with Christians in Africa predate the growth of the church in the West and European imperialism's Christian missionary expansion. Without denying the legacies of Western hegemony as a form of Christian domination in the colonized world and its catalyzing influence on the Muslim world that Cemil Aydin has examined (Aydin 2017), Africa's Muslim–Christian interactions reveal clearly that the West and anti-Western politics are not all-determining. African Muslim negotiations with and agency in relation to Christianity as an African and African diasporic religion challenge the assumption of Christianity as white and Western. African religious dynamics reveal unique formations that this chapter explores by bringing attention to fresh scholarship in disciplines including anthropology, history, and religious studies.

The sections follow a historical chronology from the precolonial to postcolonial eras, highlighting continuities and changes in Muslim–Christian relations as well as the different emphases of scholars studying Africa's religious landscapes. The approaches of historians, anthropologists, religious studies scholars, theologians, and political scientists differ considerably because of the kinds of sources and the vantage points they use. Where state-centered models prioritize control and management of religious difference and boundaries, social scientists and humanists emphasize the everyday lived experiences of Muslims and Christians as formative of their ideas about each other, their negotiations, interactions, and separations. I have also highlighted the increasing interest of economists in analyzing longitudinal quantitative data to assess the impacts of religion and other cultural factors on inequality in terms of access to and distribution of resources. New methods and interdisciplinary methods have exposed a critical question I consider in the conclusion – where the power to regulate religions and religious boundaries truly resides.

Ancient religious history, historicist religious thinking

In 615 CE, the kingdom of Axum (in today's Ethiopia) became the scene of an important opening in the history of Muslim–Christian relations. Followers of the Prophet Muhammad fleeing (*hijra*) persecution in Mecca were given refuge by the Christian king, although at least one of the Muslims became the first apostate outside Arabia, perhaps under Christian duress (Ahmed 2006, 5). In Ethiopian history, this event is held as the start of a kind of coexistence that lasted until the thirteenth century, when rivalry between Christian kings and Muslim princes in southern and eastern Ethiopia which had grown through Muslim domination of long-distance trade intensified. The unification of Muslims under Imam Ahmed bin Ibrahim (nicknamed Ahmed Gragn) in the sixteenth century strengthened "the notion of a Christian empire struggling against Muslim forces" which the Christian empire cultivated over the centuries and lasted into the modern era (Desplat and Østebø 2013, 6). Narratives about the past, including the deep mythological past, conversion of prominent persons, and everyday stories about both Christian and Muslim pilgrims finding protection at shrines, are a critical means by which Ethiopian Muslims and Christians have negotiated inclusion and difference in a nation composed of a dominant Christian state and a significant Muslim majority (Feyissa 2013).

Christian-Muslim dynamics in medieval Nubia, where the Christian kingdom of Makuria successfully resisted Arab Muslim invasion in 652, offer an intriguing counterpoint to the

process of transformation from coexistence to conflict seen in Ethiopia. The military success of the Makurians led to diplomatic negotiations and economic transactions (*baqt*) that ensured the survival of Nubian Christian monarchies for several centuries (Spaulding 1995). The tendency of orientalist scholars focused on Arabic texts to misread the later eclipse of Nubian autonomy back into earlier history has obscured this Nubian Christian-Egyptian Muslim exchange.

In other parts of Africa where the arrival of Islam predated Christianity, the significance of Arabic texts and through them idioms of religious difference can be discerned in local African understandings of history and origins, albeit through the lens of genealogy. The royal dynasty of the Mali empire traced its origins to Bilal, the Prophet Muhammad's faithful companion who was a freed slave and the *umma's* first *muezzin* (Law 2009). In Nigeria, biblical stories connected the origins of different ethnic groups to the ancient Middle East. The Hamitic genealogy – with Noah's son Ham as the progenitor of immigrant peoples who dispersed into Africa – appears in the historiography of the Sokoto Caliphate leader and scholar Muhammad Bello to enumerate different regional groups, for example, he reckoned Yoruba origins to be located in the pre-Islamic Himyarite kingdom of Yemen (Law 2009, 301). Magian, Jewish, and other origins were ascribed to local peoples by Arab and African writers influenced by Islam. In the nineteenth century, African and European writers about early African history were also influenced by Christian historicism. These narratives go beyond mere description and did not have a static or singular meaning – for instance, the Hamitic myth had deep roots within African and European thought separate from one another, and became racialized through their intellectual and political entanglements in the era of the slave trade and imperialism. Discourses of religious difference and interaction gained currency at specific historical moments in response to dynamic factors: dissent and disagreement, resistance to conversion, for example, "pagans" refusal to accept Islam (Law 2009), and pragmatic politics in the interests of integration and cooperation in order to trade or otherwise cooperate (Last 1993, 2010; Shankar 2005).

African Muslims' relationships with non-Muslims – even before encounters with European Christian missionaries – were shaped by diffusions and negotiations of Abrahamic religious ideas and beliefs. In northeast Africa, in Ethiopia as well as Egypt and Nubia, Christianity's early presence meant that Christian-Muslim interrelationships were transformed over a long period of time with moments of coexistence and conflict. Yet even without Christian presence, in western Africa, where involvement in trans-Saharan networks was extensive, Islamic history and texts offered models of interactions with Jews, Christians, and other religious "others" that created imprints on African genealogical traditions, ethnonyms, and other identity-making practices. This "repertoire of concepts" (Pawlikova-Vilhanova 2020, 234) from premodern monotheisms springing from entangled roots have salience even in the modern era, as African neotraditional religions such as Hebraic/Israelite movements demonstrate (Bruder 2008). Such movements remain tied to the question of origins, migrations, and settlement histories, which have, interestingly, become more of a preoccupation with the rise of genetic testing (Parfitt 2012, 25–28). Muslim–Christian entanglements, therefore, with the larger-scale expansion of Christian missions in the era of African-European encounters, must be understood in relation to the complex cultural ecology into which Africans incorporated foreign ideas and the idea of the foreigner.

European and African Christian missionaries and Muslims

Defeating Muslim power in the Mediterranean and further south and east was a critical factor in European Christian interests in the African continent in the 1400s. The papacy in Rome was eager to make an alliance with Ethiopia, which had gained a reputation, through false reports

of holy wars, for military prowess against Muslim enemies (Knobler 2016, 40). Emissaries were sent between Italy and the Horn of Africa, although the Ethiopian emperor, for his part, was more interested in hosting European artisans than in political or military relations (Knobler 2016, 41–42). Meanwhile, the Portuguese, who reached Ethiopia in the late 1440s, were also convinced that Africans held the key to toppling the Muslims. Prince Henry the Navigator's chronicler, Gomes Eannes Zurara, described the king's key reasons for exploring the West African coastline: to search for a haven for Christians, gain more territory, gold, slaves, and Christian converts and to finally find Prester John, the "master of the three Indias" (Newitt 2010). For the Portuguese, Prester John was the "hidden king" whom they believed was to be found in Ethiopia and who would save Christendom (Knobler 2016, 43–44).

In the early part of the age of discovery, most European explorers, seeking wealth and power, viewed Muslim Africans as their competitors, but the situation differed in the Dutch East India Company (VOC) settlement at Cape Town in South Africa. From the 1600s, Muslim Javanese exiles to the Cape were forced laborers who were seen as instigators of rebellion among run-away slaves (Ward 2009). The transmission of Islam through these networks of the Indian Ocean created a powerful idea of political belonging in which difference from and resistance against the Dutch was unifying but also threatening, thereby a useful instrument in Dutch colonial punishment and repression.

These double strands in European posture towards Islam in Africa – admiration and fear – persisted from the age of exploration into the era of imperialist takeover of the African continent that began in the nineteenth century. Yet within that period, African Christians developed their own relations with Muslims that arguably had a greater emphasis on religious – rather than economic or political – power. African Christians acknowledged Muslim control of commerce, militaries, and state-building but also recognized knowledge preservation, education, intercession with unseen forces, literacy, and healing as important activities in which they learned from and competed with Muslims. Most importantly, they saw a need for religious détente as a necessity for Africa's future.

This concern arose from experiences of the Atlantic slave trade which carried more than 12 million African souls from the continent from roughly between 1450 and 1900. Religious differences were deeply embedded in the structures of the slave trade – namely, the participation of Muslims as enslavers and traders in commercial networks and states, non-Muslim peoples being enslaved, and abolitionism's connections to Christian activism, undertaken by African and African diasporic Christians and European missionaries and reformers. This is not to say no Muslims were enslaved nor were abolitionists, but the image of the Muslim slave trader became irremovable from abolitionist discourse, especially that of Europeans (Forclaz 2015).

Some Christian West Africans, however, like Samuel Ajayi Crowther, saw slavery as a problem of circumstances, not of religious character or belief. Crowther, who was born around 1807 when the British abolished the slave trade, was captured as a child by Fulani and Oyo Yoruba slave traders and sold multiple times before a Portuguese ship captain bought him and attempted to transport him across the Atlantic. A British patrol seized the ship and disembarked Crowther and other African captives in Sierra Leone. Crowther was baptized as an Anglican by the Church Missionary Society (CMS), trained at Fourah Bay College, and undertook missionary work. After studying at the CMS college in England and receiving his ordination in 1843, Crowther returned to Africa to translate religious texts, evangelize in the Nigerian hinterland, and mediate with Muslim political leaders and religious authorities along the Niger River, in Nupe, Ilorin, and elsewhere under the suzerainty of the Sokoto Caliphate. This African Christian relational mode has been cited as evidence of African pluralism and dialogue, but revisionist scholarship also helps shed light on Crowther as a pragmatist working

within Africa's "triple heritage" that Ali Mazrui famously describes – indigenous religions, Islam, and Christianity (Walls 1999; Climenhaga 2014). Reviewed in such a light, Crowther's Christian evangelism among Muslims can also be seen to have had distinct impacts not just on an idealized notion of religious dialogue but also on the region's intellectual history, schooling traditions, book culture, and language studies: particularly Yoruba knowledge-production (Ney 2019). To be sure, Yoruba interreligiosity is distinctive in modern Nigeria, as discussed later in this chapter, with Crowther and his children playing distinct roles in the formulation of a distinct pluralism (Peel 2016).

While men like Crowther have garnered the most attention because of their life stories and their appeal to the arguments surrounding precolonial African religious pluralism, many other Africans – Muslims, Christians, and indigenous religionists – also expressed anxiety about the impact of slavery on African communities and the urgency of ethical and moral remedies, but did so from more polemical and religiously exclusionist perspectives. Some rejected tolerance and relativism for the sake of peace, preferring instead to promote their religion as the antidote to social evils. David Asante, who hailed from Asante royalty and was educated in the Basel Mission in Akuapem and Basel between 1844 and 1862, was an ardent Christian dissenter and antislavery activist (Greene 2015, 650). His agitation in support of the interest of slaves became a thorn in the side of the Asante monarchy, which banished him and sent palace slaves to abuse him when he resisted arrest. His insistent promotion of Christianity as the salve for slavery led him to reject the established Asante government in Gold Coast, similar to the iconoclasm of black Christian evangelists in Sierra Leone and Nigeria. He staked a religious-political position that was not popular in his time but that prefigured the Christian moral politics influenced by abolitionism and used by Africans petitioning for rights even in the twentieth century throughout the continent (Peterson 2010).

This crucial issue of religious relations in relation to slavery and abolitionism suggests that indigenous structural factors of socioeconomic difference, inequality, cultural politics, and struggles for political power need to be recognized in analyses of the impacts of European Christian missionary movements in Africa in the colonial era. To put it another way, indigenous Muslim–Christian conflicts were developing in the context of the slave trade and abolition before the formal European conquest of the African continent and the expansion of white missionary endeavors. Thus, when Christian missionary societies like the Anglican CMS entered Kenya, Nigeria, Sudan, and other colonies from the late 1800s, along with North American church societies such as the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) and the Presbyterians, French Catholic missions in West Africa, the White Fathers in Central Africa, and many others, attempts to convert Muslims and convert non-Muslims living in proximity to Muslims had tremendous effects on social relations, especially in institutions like slavery, marriage and the domestic sphere, agricultural production, and the military (Becker 2018; Cooper 2006; Shankar 2014b; Sharkey 2002; Sharkey 2013b; Soares 2016). Indeed, histories of Christian missions among Muslims all but confirm that evangelical competition for converts had older roots in precolonial and colonial transformations and also occasioned the enormous expansion of conversion to these monotheistic religions in twentieth-century Africa, even after the transition to independence of most African nations around 1960.

Thus, scholars of Muslim–Christian histories in Africa have shifted attention away from the focus on missionaries' power and European imperial control over religion to highlight African negotiations of Christian evangelism and the broader impacts of missionary evangelism in Muslim spheres beyond conversion. For example, while earlier scholarship focused on the divisive effects of the presumed British ban on Christian missions in the northern emirates of Nigeria, in practice, white missionaries and African Christian evangelists found ways to

undertake proselytism activities in Zaria, Kano, and other Muslim areas before the 1930s, the time Christian medical missions were allowed formally into Muslim spheres (Shankar 2014b; Bunza 2007). Indeed, Christian-Muslim interactions took place in the course of itinerant evangelism, trade in books, and other lay activities (Shankar 2014b), but the British colonial authority's efforts to control such relatively fluid relationships through the creation of immigrant ethno-religious enclaves, such as the Sabon Gari (new town) in Zaria and Kano, fostered more competition and failed to plant mediating mechanisms for religious disputes. As missions became even more institutionalized through freed slaves' homes, clinics and hospitals, and schools, competition without mechanisms for conflict resolutions escalated through the era of decolonization. Muslim evangelists increasingly and consciously adopted the strategies of Christian missionaries, from proselytism to and mass conversion of non-Muslim "pagans" with newly invented "born-again" rituals to expansion of English-language Islamic tract circulation. Indeed, the creation of one of the world's largest Muslim missionary movements, the Ahmadiyya, sprang from the reaction of Indian Muslims to Christian missions and helps explain the success of the Ahmadiyya in West Africa (Hanson 2017).

Such "unintended consequences" of Christian missionary evangelism among colonized Muslims (Sharkey 2013a) were not isolated and had lasting impacts beyond the end of the colonial era. In Senegal, the "heterogeneity" of French colonial practices and postures towards the very small Christian minority and Muslims in urban and rural communities shaped the negotiation of local privileges as critical tool for Africans to seek agency and autonomy on the basis of a diverse set of conditions, not only religious identity (Foster 2013). In Muslim Northern Nigeria, the Christian minority wove into their nationalist narrative stories about their birth from "the despised" – children of slave women and the "unclothed" pagans – to define their place as new citizens (Shankar 2016). In Sudan, although white Christian missionaries had attempted to keep converts out of politics so as not to upset the Muslim authorities who had tolerated their activities among practitioners of traditional religions, the "resistance language" in Christianity became the new language of separatism for Sudanese Christians in the south in the early postcolonial years (Tounsel 2017, 2021). In Mali, where Muslims have always far outnumbered Christians, including Catholics and Protestants, older anti-Christian rhetoric developed by Muslim scholars during the colonial era continues to circulate and separate religious communities, even as some interfaith actors have tried to foster cooperation and dialogue (Soares 2016, 681–683). In Ethiopia, where the experience of Italian conquest was short-lived, Protestant missionary work allowed by Emperor Haile Selassie for the purposes of medical work in Southern Ethiopia (and the borderlands with Sudan) contributed to the sense of ethnic self-determination apart from the Muslim-dominated and the Orthodox Christian areas in northern Ethiopia; indeed, Protestant Christianity became a more significant political presence between Islam and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity after the 1960s, when civil conflict, secessionism, and Marxist movements broke out (Donham 1999; Eshete 1999; Haustein 2011; James 2018).

As studies of Muslim–Christian encounters during the colonial period continue to be written, it becomes clearer that sorting out the chronology and characteristics of coexistence and conflict requires careful attention to local contexts and the sources that go beyond textual sources. It is also clear that studies of newer religious movements like Pentecostalism and Islamism as two sides of a similar coin do not consider the longer history of evangelical entanglements in Africa. Likewise, media studies focused on radio preaching and television ignore the tracts, religious pictures, and other older forms of media that prefigured the struggles for control over religious communication. In the final section examining postcolonial Muslim–Christian relations in Africa, this issue of the sources stands out as an exciting aspect of new

interdisciplinary scholarship that reveals why Africanist studies of religion constitute one of the most innovative academic fields.

Nigeria's religious tensions and the state in postcolonial Africa

The religious divisions facing postcolonial Nigeria, Africa's most populous and wealthiest country, have tended to garner a great deal of scholarly and policy concern and, arguably, establish certain approaches to Muslim–Christian conflict as inherently political, structural, and therefore revealing of certain characteristics of the modern African democratic nation-state more generally (Vaughan 2016; Obadare 2019). Nigeria's interreligious politics is important to understand; it is also essential to explore its uniqueness and compare it with other African situations. One of the clearest factors that the Nigerian situation presents is that hardening and exploitation of boundaries between Islam and Christianity is not merely an analytical problem (Janson and Meyer 2016), but in fact a strategy of power that poses a regular threat to interreligious interactions.

While Nigeria bears some similarities to other African nations, notably Sudan, in terms of ethno-religious differentiation along regional divides that were exacerbated by British colonialism, Nigeria as a case is distinct for its multiple large precolonial states, including the jihadist-founded Sokoto Caliphate, Borno Empire, Oyo Empire, and the Igbo polity, that have sustained nationalisms into the contemporary era. The use of religion as a strategy for political gain ("the manipulation of religion") has been a sustained feature of politics in Nigeria, from its early postcolonial federation to military dictatorships and transition to secular democracy since 1999 (Usman 1987; Vaughan 2016). The British had used religious divisions to make Nigeria "governable", but these divisions were exacerbated in the time of independence, with the federal structuring of the Nigerian nation into three regions which fostered competition for control. After the civil war which ended in 1970, a Christian Northerner, Yakubu Gowon, served as the military head of Nigeria until 1975 when he was overthrown in a coup in which General Murtala Muhammad came to power. States in the north took over Christian schools and hospitals, and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was formed in 1976 in response. Two years later, a major breakdown in religious relations occurred during the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly to negotiate the place of *sharia* in the secular constitution. Amid difficult negotiations over power-sharing in the Nigerian judiciary which had been evolving since independence in 1960 to balance the federal and state courts, Muslim concessions did not prevent Christians, who controlled the Constituent Assembly in 1978, from eliminating the Federal Sharia Court of Appeal, which was meant to harmonize state courts' decisions on personal law (Ostien 2006). The public discourse surrounding *sharia* hardened into an intractable problem. A clash between Muslim and Christian students at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria broke out that same year, leading to the death of six students and bringing the army into managing religious conflicts.

With the end of the oil boom in the 1980s, subsequent dislocations in agrarian production and economic collapse led to mass poverty, increasing inequality, and more insistent calls for redistributive policies. Both popular religious participation and the size of the clergy among both Christian and Muslim communities grew dramatically. International affiliation also became important with Nigeria's membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which was formalized by the military ruler General Ibrahim Babangida. Episodic religious violence became more common. The uses of the media for the purposes of sowing communal mistrust also grew (Kukah 1993). From 1980 to 1985, the followers of the Muslim reformist leader Mai Tatsine carried out attacks that led to an estimated 4,000 deaths and costly property damage

in Kano, Maiduguri, Yola, and other northern areas. Riots in Kaduna, Gombe, Lagos, Sokoto, and Ilorin led to more deaths, destruction, and government crackdowns; university students were increasingly perpetrators of religious violence. In 1987, a conflict between Muslim and Christian students at Kafanchan Advanced Teachers College marked a turning point. The conflict was notable for both the scale of the destruction of houses of worship and personal property and for the political authorities' use of the episode for competition for supporters (Kukah 1993).

The violence grew more frequent in the 1990s and 2000s. In October 1991, the planned revival in Kano involving German evangelist Reinhard Bonnke, organized by CAN, prompted Muslim protestors to approach the emir of Kano and then, dissatisfied, to attack Christians and churches in Sabon Gari, leading to the deaths of some 2,000 and the displacement of over 20,000. Such mass rioting occurred in unrelated incidents in different parts of central Nigeria as well, leading to evermore property damage, displacement, and death. While the federal authorities have tended to quell violence with violence, religiously identified nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as CAN and Ja'amatu Nasril Islam, and in some cases state governments, have acted to broker peace. The search for a neutral peace-broker, however, has proven to be very difficult, even in the democratic transition in 1999.

At the federal level, against this backdrop of increasingly common civil unrest, the debate over the adoption of *sharia* criminal code in the northern states from 1999 forced National Assembly members, even moderates, into taking a position either for or against Islamic law, only to be labeled as "extremists" by their political opponents. While the Northern Nigerian premier Ahmadu Bello had attempted in the 1960s to create a synthesis of legal systems by weaving the national penal code into Islamic jurisprudence, so as to expose his people gradually to both systems, later framers of *sharia* quarreled often about how the Islamic code should look in Nigeria, to the extent that many aspects of this legal system disagreeable to Muslim legal experts themselves crept in by 2000.

As Falola argues, no Nigerian regime has been able to solve ethnic and religious tensions because all have played on these cultural nationalist sympathies for maximal advantage while moving the country steadily towards centralization (Falola 1998). Civil society organizations have provided the most active outlet representing the interests of people versus political leaders. Religious authorities have been prominent in Muslim–Christian peacebuilding, the most famous example being the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna (Roelofs 2020). The Centre for Human Rights in Islam in Kano, headed by Professor Mustapha Ismail, an expert on Arabic studies and Islamic law who helped secure the overturning of Amina Lawal's sentence to death by stoning, has also aided Christians in Northern Nigeria, but organizations that are not explicitly defined as interfaith do not appeal to foreign funding agencies (Mustapha and Ismail 2016; Shankar interview with Ismail 2019). In addition to such legal and political aid, religious organizations also provide well-being – material, spiritual, and social – amid everyday precarity brought about by the rapacious political class (Falola and Heaton 2008). The proliferation of religious organizations under the umbrella of Islamism and Pentecostal Christianity provide but one example of how these newer faith forms are "doppelgangers" of sorts, "whose actions are similar … fates intertwined" (Larkin and Meyer 2006, 287). These modes of religious belonging enjoin adherents in modern living by vilifying the past and tradition and making reformist piety participatory, reflexive, and aspirational for individual attainment.

Beyond the state: religious interaction as practice

Nigeria's religious scene shows that while political actors attempt to manipulate religion for empowerment, control over Islam and Christianity does not really rest with the state (Shankar

2014a). Significantly, many Africans do not rely on the nation-state for creating the means for religious reconciliation. The prevention of religious conflict has galvanized pan-African trans-national cooperation, a good example being the Programme of Cooperation for Christian-Muslim Relations (PROCMURA), based in Kenya (Pratt 2017). Civil society organizations play an important part, as do media outlets (Kukah 2007; Hackett and Soares 2015) as well as innovators leading religious movements – like pastors and imams, and those who even merge Islam and Christianity across boundaries that political leaders try to manipulate (Janson 2016).

This apparent contradiction in the rhetoric and design of a secular state with real and implied freedoms of religion versus religious rights of expression, assembly, and even evangelism/speech has parallels for Christian-Muslim contentions not just in Nigeria but also other parts of Africa. In Ethiopia, from 2012 to 2013, Muslim communities lodged protests against the Ethiopian state for violating its obligation to secularism by interfering in intra-Muslim conflicts between Salafis and Sufis and between Christians and Muslims following incidents of alleged defilement of a Qur'an and attempts to force conversion (Desplat and Østebø 2013; Abbink 2014). The state had constitutional authority to restore order amid violent clashes and destruction of property, but this response only scratched the "surface" relationship of religious communities, particularly the Muslim side, to the state. The Ethiopian government, once engaged in "containing" Islam, has increasingly sought to categorize and "correct" Muslims by defining good and bad religious actors among the minority, even involving the Lebanese "social welfare" organization Al-Abahsh (Association of Islamic Charitable Projects, AICP) in domestic affairs (Østebø 2013). But social factors – self-organization, local claim-making between religious communities, and other negotiations between social actors – can even be exacerbated by constitutionally sanctioned state actions. "The problem might be unsolvable" because the secular state sees religious identity-making, in this case peaceful Muslim identification, as threatening (Abbink 2014, 360). As in Nigeria "state-religion balance is a tightrope" and religious identities encroach on others.

Mediations of Islam and Christianity in individual life experience, interpersonal relations, and community dynamics in Africa reveal important patterns that state and violence-centered approaches miss. In the majority Yoruba southwestern region of Nigeria, many scholars note the high rates of interreligious interactions within families and in social intercourse. Close ethnographic study of everyday negotiations of religious difference in marriage, school, work, and worship reveals that religious tolerance is more a practice and less a political ideal (Nolte, Ogen, and Jones 2020). Interreligious marriages show distinct gender patterns that differ by location – with a higher occurrence of Muslim women in Cape Town marrying non-Muslims while Christian women in Nigeria in the northern and southern regions are more likely to marry Muslim men (Bangstad 2004; Nolte 2020; Shankar 2014b, forthcoming). Across these various situations, a clear pattern emerges of the complex interplay of economic considerations, social status, ethnic identification, and gender norms across Islam and Christianity. Gender is a critical factor in Muslim–Christian boundary-breaking and remaking, but it is too often ignored in scholarship concerned with political macro-narratives about religion (Shankar forthcoming).

Africans' conversions between Islam and Christianity, too, reveal hybridity and mobility and the inequalities between religious communities that state discourses of secularism or religious tolerance and equality have never truly erased. The vast majority of Christian converts in Northern Nigeria hail from ethnic minority backgrounds with a relative lack of access to material resources and political power (Shankar 2006; 2014b). While conversion to Christianity could engender a greater loss of status than conversion to Islam would, inequality has generated a sense of political belonging and mobilization for the Christian minority in Northern Nigeria (Shankar 2016; Mustapha and Ehrhardt 2018). By contrast, in Muslim minority areas,

conversion to Islam among Christians has been accelerated because of the alternative belonging the minority offers. In postgenocide Rwanda, survivors perceived that the dominant Catholic church and smaller Protestant ones were not recognizing their roles in fomenting ethnic violence; Islam, on the contrary, was interpreted as inspiring a jihad of healing that offered an escape from historical Hutu-Tutsi divisions (Kubai 2007). In the desire for ethnic change in conversion between Christianity and Islam, Rwanda offers a more similar case to eastern Nigeria, where Igbo have converted to Islam to adopt an ethnic Hausa identity in order to become more successful in commerce, and Igboland is less like other parts of Nigeria (Uchendu 2010). Another example is the Muslim minority in the Central African Republic, where the historical domination of certain ethno-religious groups has shaped both contemporary antagonisms and attractions to conversion (Kah 2014).

Conversion exposes how religious identification is about managing advantage and disadvantage in a system of hierarchies that secular democratic governance predicated on a presumption of equal political citizenship, as opposed to cultural rights, does not address. New evidence from social scientific research, mainly by economists, suggests that religiosity has contributed to inequality shaped by historical forces in Africa. Longitudinal quantitative studies suggest that the presence of Christian missionaries in colonial Africa correlates with high levels of Christian adherence today and that the cultural effects of Christian missions on the distribution of schools and other formal institutions may shape differential levels of economic development (Nunn 2010, 2012). What this means for religiously plural African regions where missions were distributed by a colonial political logic predicated on the presence of Muslim political authorities remains to be seen. Similar methods of analysis have found that Christian missions have also been associated with lasting gender inequality. One study found that Tanzanian women in Christian mission networks and later indigenous churches have been largely confined to domestic roles since the era of German imperialism (Montgomery 2017).

Alongside inequality, mutual distrust has become a more common feature of contemporary Muslim–Christian tensions around the African continent. Terrorist acts of violence heighten fears of secrecy and unpredictability that disproportionately have affected Muslims negatively, even when the known terrorists are not African Muslims. Following Islamic networks' terror attacks in Kenya in 1998 and 2002, local anti-Muslim feeling became intense, and world events were used to foment even more fear. Community efforts to promote interfaith relations did not work when certain Christian clergy misled their congregations about issues such as *sharia* courts to play on the mistrust of Muslims' assumed hidden agendas (Mwakimako 2007). On the highly ethnically and religiously diverse Jos Plateau in Nigeria, distrust of the other is refracted through fear and hatred of the state security forces, which mete out differential treatment of Muslims and Christians and pastoralists and agriculturalists (Higazi 2016). Thus, neither casting blame on governments nor relying on them to fix religious affairs sees the whole story. Social activism related to religious differences – including narratives that positively assert religious identity and appeal to tolerance as well as those that are negative expressions of rumor and misinformation about religious others – needs to be studied in historical and contemporary Muslim–Christian dynamics.

The malleability of interreligious relations in Africa is one of the distinctive features of the continent. Sanneh's insistence on the importance of Muslim–Christian narrative-making made this precise point. In the span of four decades, South Africa's Muslim–Christian relations have changed dramatically from a fierce competition for converts to pluralism in which difference is understood as an asset in social rehabilitation (Haron 2006). In the postapartheid era, through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), for example, the participation and narrativization of representatives from different faiths about the process

signified a collective moral agreement and acceptance of the TRC outcomes. One of the most important measures South Africa has undertaken to develop the religious understanding created through such forums has been to develop religion education curricula with a nonconfessional approach that seeks to lessen the proprietary and exclusivist nature of religious schooling (Tayob 2018).

Conclusion

Across examples from different moments in history around the African continent, it is clear that religious differences and cultural interactions are fundamental to how Africans understand themselves and their changing societies. Through the lens of Muslim–Christian histories in Africa, it is also possible to see why practitioners of indigenous African religions have feared the erasure of difference and loss of cultural autonomy in their interactions with both Christians and Muslims and in their comparisons of the two monotheisms. The long view of Muslim–Christian entanglements in Africa demonstrates that merely celebrating religious diversity past and present is not enough. The power of religious actors to shape society is real and may even be greater than that of political actors in many contexts. Therefore, religions and religious differences need to be understood not only in idealized terms predicated on Western notions of religious freedom and tolerance but also through the rise of factors like inequality and disinformation conditioned by historical factors like aggressive evangelism and educational control. Such antisocial and divisive aspects of religious politics should be recognized alongside cohesive and idealistic features in order for pragmatic and proactive responses to the problems of religious conflict can be found.

References

Abbink, Jon. 2014. "Religious Freedom and the Political Order: The Ethiopian 'Secular State' and the Containment of Muslim Identity Politics." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8 (3): 346–365.

Ahmed, Hussein. 2006. "Coexistence and/or Confrontation? Towards a Reappraisal of Christian-Muslim Encounter in Contemporary Ethiopia." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36 (1): 4–22.

Aydin, Cemil. 2017. *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bangstad, Sindre. 2004. "When Muslims Marry Non-Muslims: Marriage as Incorporation in a Cape Muslim Community." *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 15 (3): 349–364.

Becker, Felicitas. 2018. "The History of Islam in East Africa." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.151.

Bruder, Elizabeth. 2008. *The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bunza, Mukhtar. 2007. *Christian Missions among Muslims: Sokoto Province, Nigeria, 1935–1990*. Trenton: Africa World Press.

Climenhaga, Alison Fitchett. 2014. "Heathenism, Delusion, and Ignorance: Samuel Crowther's Approach to Islam and Traditional Religion." *Anglican Theological Review* 96 (4): 661–681.

Cooper, Barbara M. 2006. *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Desplat, Patrick and Terje Østebø. 2013. *Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics, and Islamic Reformism*. New York: Springer.

Donham, Donald. 1999. *Marxist Modern*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Eshete, Tibebe. 1999. "The Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) in Ethiopia (1928–1970)." *Northeast African Studies* 6 (3): 27–57.

Falola, Toyin. 1998. *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.

Falola, Toyin and Matthew Heaton. 2008. *A History of Nigeria*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Feyissa, Dereje. 2013. "Muslims Struggling for Recognition in Contemporary Ethiopia." In *Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics, and Islamic Reformism*, edited by Patrick Desplat and Terje Østebø, 25–46. New York: Springer.

Forclaz, Amalia Ribi. 2015. *Humanitarian Imperialism: The Politics of Anti-Slavery Activism, 1880–1940*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Foster, Elizabeth. 2013. *Faith in Empire: Religion, Politics, and Colonial Rule in French Senegal, 1880–1940*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Greene, Sandra E. 2015. "Minority Voices: Abolitionism in West Africa." *Slavery & Abolition* 36 (4): 642–661.

Hackett, Rosalind I.J. and Benjamin Soares, eds. 2015. *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Hanson, J.H., 2017. *The Ahmadiyya in the Gold Coast: Muslim Cosmopolitans in the British Empire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Haron, Muhammed. 2006. "The Dynamics of Christian-Muslim Relations in South Africa (circa 1960–2000): From Exclusivism to Pluralism." *The Muslim World* 96 (3): 423–468.

Haustein, Jörg. 2011. *Writing Religious History: The Historiography of Ethiopian Pentecostalism*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

Higazi, Adam. 2016. "Farmer-Pastoralist Conflicts on the Jos Plateau, Central Nigeria: Security Responses of Local Vigilantes and the Nigerian State." *Conflict, Security and Development* 16 (4): 365–385.

James, Wendy. 2018. "Remembering Chali: The SIM in the Sudan-Ethiopian Borderlands (1938–64) and Its Social Legacy." In *Transforming Africa's Religious Landscapes: The Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), Past and Present*, coedited by Cooper, Barbara M., Gary Corwin, Musa Gaiya, Tim Geysbeek, Tibebe Eshete, and Shobana Shankar, 171–198. Trenton: Africa World Press.

Janson, Marloes. 2016. "Unity through Diversity: A Case Study of Chrislam in Lagos." *Africa* 86 (4): 646–672.

Janson, Marloes and Birgit Meyer. 2016. "Introduction: Towards a Framework for the Study of Christian-Muslim Encounters in Africa." *Africa* 86 (4): 615–619.

Kah, Henry Kam. 2014. "Anti-Balaka/Séléka, 'Religionisation' and Separatism in the History of the Central African Republic." *Conflict Studies Quarterly* 9: 30–48.

Knobler, Adam. 2016. *Mythology and Diplomacy in the Age of Exploration*. Leiden: Brill.

Kubai, Anne. 2007 "Walking a Tightrope: Christians and Muslims in Post-genocide Rwanda." *Islam–Christian Muslim Relations* 18 (2): 219–235.

Kukah, Matthew Hassan. 1993. *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.

———. 2007. "Christian–Muslim Relations in Sub-Saharan Africa: Problems and Prospects." *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations* 18 (2): 155–164.

Larkin, Brian and Birgit Meyer. 2006. "Pentecostalism, Islam and Culture." In *Themes in West Africa's History*, edited by Emmanuel Akyeampong, 286–312. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Last, Murray. 1993. "History as Religion: De-constructing the Magians 'Maguzawa' of Nigerian Hausaland." In *L'invention religieuse en Afrique: histoire et religion en Afrique noire*, edited by Jean-Pierre Chrétien, 267–296. Paris: Karthala.

———. 2010. "Ancient Labels and Categories: Exploring the 'Onomastics' of Kano." In *Being and Becoming Hausa: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Anne Haour and Benedetta Rossi, 59–84. Leiden: Brill.

Law, Robin. 2009. "The 'Hamitic Hypothesis' in Indigenous West African Historical Thought." *History in Africa* 36 (1): 293–314.

Montgomery, Max. 2017. "Colonial Legacy of Gender Inequality: Christian Missionaries in German East Africa." *Politics and Society* 45 (2): 225–268.

Mustapha, Abdul Raufu and David Ehrhardt, eds. 2018. *Creed and Grievance: Muslim–Christian Relations and Conflict Resolution in Northern Nigeria*. Oxford: James Currey.

Mustapha, Abdul Raufu and Mustapha Ismail. 2016. "Shari'a Implementation in Northern Nigeria Over 15 Years: The Case of the Hisbah." Policy brief no. 2, Oxford Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme.

Mwakimako, Hassan. 2007. "Christian–Muslim Relations in Kenya: A Catalogue of Events and Meanings." *Islam–Christian Muslim Relations* 18 (2): 287–307.

Newitt, Malyn, ed. 2010. *The Portuguese in West Africa, 1415–1670*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ney, Stephen. 2019. "Samuel Ajayi Crowther's Journeys in Christian and Islamic Book History." *Social Sciences and Missions* 32 (1–2): 31–53.

Nolte, Insa. 2020. "'At Least I Am Married': Muslim–Christian Marriage and Gender in Southwest Nigeria." *Social Anthropology* 28 (2): 434–450.

Nolte, Insa, Olukoya Ogen, and Rebecca Jones. 2020. *Beyond Religious Tolerance: Muslim, Christian, and Traditional Encounters in African Town.* Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer.Nunn, Nathan. 2010. "Religious Conversion in Colonial Africa." *American Economic Review* 100 (2): 147–152.

———. 2012. "Culture and the Historical Process." *Economic History of Developing Regions* 27 (Suppl. 1): S108–126.

Obadare, Ebenezer. 2019. *Pentecostal Republic: Religion and the Struggle for State Power in Nigeria.* London: Zed Books.

Østebø, Terje. 2013. "Islam and State Relations in Ethiopia: From Containment to the Production of a 'Governmental Islam'." *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 81 (4): 1029–1060.

Ostien, Philip. 2006. "An Opportunity Missed by Nigeria's Christians: The 1976–78 Shari'a Debate Revisited." In *Muslim–Christian Encounters in Africa,* edited by Benjamin Soares, 221–55. Leiden: Brill.

Parfitt, Tudor. 2012. "(De)constructing Black Jews." In *African Zion: Studies in Black Judaism*, edited by Elizabeth Bruder and Tudor Parfitt, 12–30. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press.

Pawlikova-Vilhanova, Viera. 2020. "Islam and Christianity in Africa." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Islam in Africa*, edited by Fallou Ngom and Toyin Falola, 233–251. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Peel, J.D.Y. 2016. *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa-Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction.* Oakland: University of California Press.

Peterson, Derek R., ed. 2010. *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic.* Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

Pratt, Douglas. 2017. *Christian Engagement with Islam: Ecumenical Journeys since 1910.* Leiden: Brill.

Roelofs, Portia. "Contesting Localisation in Interfaith Peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria." *Oxford Development Studies* 48 (4): 373–386.

Sanneh, Lamin. 2015. *Piety and Power: Muslims and Christians in West Africa.* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.

Shankar, Shobana. 2005. "Religion, State, and Society in Hausaland: History and the Politics of Incorporation in the Kano Chronicle." In *Pre-Colonial Nigeria: Essays in Honor of Toyin Falola*, edited by Akin Ogundiran, 281–300. Lawrenceville, NJ: Africa World Press.

———. 2006. "A Fifty-Year Muslim Conversion to Christianity: Religious Ambiguities and Colonial Boundaries in Northern Nigeria, c. 1906–1963." In *Muslim–Christian Encounters in Africa*, edited by Benjamin Soares, 89–114. Leiden: Brill.

———. 2014a. "Civil Society and Religion." In *The Handbook of Civil Society in Africa*, edited by Ebenezer Obadare, 25–41. New York: Springer.

———. 2014b. *Who Shall Enter Paradise: Christian Origins in Muslim Northern Nigeria, c.1890–1975.* Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

———. 2016. "Race, Ethnicity, and Assimilation: The Influence of American Anthropology on Christian-Muslim Relations in British Northern Nigeria." *Social Sciences and Missions* 29 (1–2): 37–65.

———. Forthcoming. "Women and Evangelical Revolutions in Nigeria." In *Evangelical Christianity and the Transformation of Africa*, edited by Jacob Olupona. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Sharkey, Heather J. 2002. "Christians among Muslims: The Church Missionary Society in the Northern Sudan." *Journal of African History* 43 (1): 51–75.

———, ed. 2013a. *Cultural Conversions: Unexpected Consequences of Christian Missionary Encounters in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

———. 2013b. *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Soares, Benjamin. 2016. "Reflections on Muslim–Christian Encounters in West Africa." *Africa* 86 (4): 673–697.

Spaulding, Jay. 1995. "Medieval Christian Nubia and the Islamic World: A Reconsideration of the Baqt Treaty." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28 (4): 577–94.

Tayob, Abdulkadir. 2018. "The Representation of Religion in Religion Education: Notes from the South African Periphery." *Education Sciences* 8 (4): 1–12. www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/8/3/146.

Tounsel, Christopher. 2017. "Race, Religion and Resistance: Revelations from the Juba Archive." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 11 (2): 249–265.

———. 2021. *Chosen Peoples: Christianity and Political Imagination in South Sudan.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Uchendu, Egodi. 2010. "Being Igbo and Muslim: The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria and Conversions to Islam, 1930s to Recent Times." *The Journal of African History* 51 (1): 63–87.

Usman, Y.B. 1987. *The Manipulation of Religion in Nigeria, 1977–1987*. Kaduna: Vanguard.

Vaughan, Olufemi. 2016. *Religion and the Making of Nigeria*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Walls, Andrew F. 1999. "Africa as the Theatre of Christian Engagement with Islam in the Nineteenth Century." *Journal of religion in Africa* 29 (2): 155–174.

Ward, Kerry. 2009. *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company*. New York: Cambridge University Press.