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Religion and Political Turbulence
in Nigeria

by JIBRIN IBRAHIM*

There is increasing evidence that social movements constitute an important repository of Africa's political practice. Émile Durkheim reminds us that although social facts, expressed in thought, feeling, or action, are derived from an environment external to the individual, they impose on him a route that he is obliged to follow. He suggests, therefore, that we study the public law that codifies existing political values and the sanctions that oblige obedience. The problem, however, is that formal institutions are sometimes unable to penetrate and impose their logic on social movements. Christian Coulon argues that the 'religious recomposition' we are witnessing today in Nigeria is neither simply a 'revivalist movement' nor a mechanical response to political and economic crises. The 'sacred domain' is a vital and integral part of popular political culture that the totalitarian and teleological ambitions of the state cannot destroy. He concludes that the more we lose our 'state fetishism', the more we see.

Peter Ekeh has argued that in Africa, due to the conditions introduced by colonialism, there is no single and morally unified public sphere. Reacting to the position taken by the well-known Ibadan school that colonialism was really only a relatively small episode in African history, with little significance for contemporary reality, Ekeh emphasises the crucial rôle played by this epoch in integrating Africa into the modern world-system and thereby designing its present space–time boundaries: 'The moral and social order which formally encased the pre-colonial indigenous institutions is burst by the social forces of colonialism and they seek new anchors in the changed milieux.

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1 See, for example, the work of the new French Africanist school, known as 'Popular Modes of Political Action', in particular Jean-François Bayart, L'Etat en Afrique: la politique du ventre (Paris, 1989).
of colonialism. Ekeh had earlier claimed that colonialism was mainly responsible for the creation in Africa of a ‘primordial public’ that operates on societal morality, and is therefore bound to the private realm, while a ‘civic public’ tied to the modern state is devoid of any claim to morality. Hence individuals find themselves straddled between these ‘two publics’, and the public law obeyed may not always be that of the state.

Colonialism as an historical epoch set in motion various fundamental changes in Nigeria, not least the de-legitimation of traditional religions, thereafter castigated as ‘paganism’, and the rapid implantation of Christianity. These developments have led to the evolution of political strains and conflicts between Nigerian proponents of the two rival universal religions that the Middle East has offered to the world.

KEEPING OUT THE ‘PAGANS’

An essential aspect of the ‘civilising mission’ of the colonial authorities was the concerted effort to eradicate the practices and symbols of traditional African religions. Within a few years countless gods, deities, totems, or ‘idols’, to use the official terminology, were plucked from their sacred repositories only to re-emerge in new shrines in Europe known as museums. So active was the attack on indigenous beliefs and ceremonies that in a few decades most practitioners could no longer publicly admit their adhesion to the religion of their ancestors. Whereas, in the 1931 census, as many (or, perhaps, as few) as 50 per cent of those enumerated agreed to be registered as ‘pagans’, this figure had declined to 34 per cent in 1952 and to only 18·2 per cent in 1963. By way of contrast, during the same 23-year period the number of registered Muslims rose from 44 to 47 per cent, while the corresponding increase for Christians was from 6·2 to 34·6 per cent.

As a matter of fact, most official forms have been constructed in a way that encourages Nigerians to identify themselves as either Muslims or Christians. To complete the picture it needs to be realised that the colonial authorities initiated and/or encouraged a virtual witch-hunt against not only ‘pagans’, but all ‘sects’ that exhibited any signs of non-orthodoxy, usually defined as resistance to existing political authority. This campaign has not abated since independence.

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4 Peter Ekeh, ‘Colonialism and Social Structure’, Inaugural Lecture, University of Ibadan, 1983, p. 11.
The attempt to impose orthodox Christianity and Islam is justified as a strategy for promoting unity in Nigeria. Indeed, President Ibrahim Babangida has argued that the common philosophical and Abrahamic origins of the two religions could lay the basis for happy national co-existence: ‘Each has normative aspects governing behaviour on earth and transcendental ones, on life after death. In these aspects, the two religions are in fact remarkably similar in that they have the same ideas about what is right and what is wrong.’ Unfortunately, the unity that is supposed to emanate from this support for orthodox religion has yet to emerge. The 1987 report of the Political Bureau, which prepared the programme for a return to civilian rule in 1992, concluded in clear and unambiguous terms that ‘The two organised religions have the tendency to delay national integration’ because of their ‘negative tendency’ to ‘create competing social orders’, and to define ‘the most basic community’ thereby challenging ‘the national community of Nigeria’.

While ‘paganism’ may have been kept out of official records, it still exists widely in daily practice. A large proportion of Nigerians retain some allegiance to aspects of their age-old religious practices, a number of which have been interpreted into their observance of Christianity and Islam. According to Canon Edmund Ilogu, the philosophy of traditional religions has remained in popular consciousness. In the past, Africans moved from one deity to another, practising different rituals to appease diverse and elusive gods, spirits, and ancestors.

Today many members of an orthodox church do not find anything amiss in attaching themselves to various prayer and healing-homes or sects in the hope that what they fail to get from their membership in the former they might get from the latter. This again leads the many prophets and the charismatic organisers of sects and prayer houses to include in their teaching, rituals and worship techniques, some unguarded mixture from various religious strands.

This phenomenon is not a simple reflection of syncretism, but rather the outcome of a profound contradiction between Christianity and the African cosmology, as shown by Peter Probst in his study of the Aladura movement in western Nigeria.

Protestantism as the dominant form of Christianity in Yorubaland was in many points incompatible with the traditional Yoruba worldview and the pressing needs of African life. It aimed at an abstract morality and ethics.

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which greatly differed from the African conceptualisation of evil in terms of real powers such as witches and spirits. Christianity's absolute requirements — including monogamous marriage, male dominance and the emphasis of belonging exclusively to only one denomination — were in contrast with the Yoruba practice of multiple cult membership, polygyny and the acceptance of certain women as religious leaders.\(^9\)

M. B. Abasiattai arrives at the same conclusions after studying the Ibibio independent church in south-eastern Nigeria.\(^{10}\)

This contradiction and the accompanying syncretism means that pre-Christian beliefs persist despite attempts for them to be effaced and replaced by puritan practices. Hence the difficult coexistence of different religious strands within and between people that identify themselves as Christians. Take the case of Daniel Epega, the spiritual head of the West African Episcopal Church, who is also an Ifa priest because he sees no contradiction between his African deities and the Christian God:

I am yet to be convinced that any avatar prophet has come to this world that is more powerful than Oranmila. At the same time, I am yet to be convinced that in love, there is any prophet that exceeded Jesus Christ. Even on the cross with his injury he said, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.\(^{11}\)

The last sentence might have been directed at the 'anti-pagan' faction in his church that has been trying to remove Epega from its leadership following his refusal to renounce his belief in the Ifa religion.

Another example is that of the founder of the Celestial Church of Christ, Samuel Oshoffa, who left behind 34 wives and 150 children when he died in 1985. He had received the grace of Jesus Christ in 1946, following the apparition of 'a white monkey and a short snake',\(^{12}\) and given his claim to have received the power to raise people from the dead and to heal the sick, it is no wonder that hundreds of thousands of worshippers flocked to his church. Finally, the case of Olumba Olumba Obu (OOO), founder of the Brotherhood of the Cross and the Star, a church that is said to be frequented by about half the


\(^{11}\) \textit{The Guardian} (Lagos), 17 October 1988.

\(^{12}\) \textit{Sunday Concord} (Lagos), 27 October 1985.
population of Calabar. When asked why members claimed that he was
God, OOO replied: ‘So if they say I am God, what do you want me
to say? It is written in the Bible that by their fruit you shall know
them.’ When one of his lieutenants, Paul Eyo, died suddenly after
allegations that OOO was actually 666, the biblical sign of the Devil
who drinks blood and turns the human fish at night into ‘mammy-
water’, OOO replied: ‘we should dissociate ourselves from investi-
gating the mysteries of God’.

It is clear that ‘paganism’ has demonstrated exceptional resilience
and innovative capacity. Achille Mhembe claims that orthodox
religions failed to impose their ‘Yalta’ on the indigenous world, and
that when colonialism introduced Christianity, the religion of the
conqueror, it was ‘accepted’, in the African sense, as a new element
to reinforce local paganism in the age-old tradition of using all forces
to confront the objective problems of survival. Conversion, he argues,
was a tactical move to reappropriate and domesticate a new spirit, but
was also a ruse to wiggle through the new configuration of political
forces. In other words, political domination did not lead to spiritual
subordination.

After the Nigerian Constituent Assembly had voted in 1988 in
support of a motion that ‘No government shall overtly or covertly give
preferential treatment to any particular religion’, Justice Buba Ardo
warned members that the orthodox religions would then lose their
official and privileged position: ‘the implication of this decision is that
if Sango, Shafa, Alakuta worshippers and all other religions we have
been hearing about apply for land in Abuja, they should not be
discriminated against’. The spirits of the ‘pagans’ are still haunting
the followers of Jesus Christ and the Prophet Mohammed.

In this regard, Islam is not less affected than Christianity. In his
analysis of Yoruba Islam, Abdorrahman Doi contends that polytheism
rather than total devotion to Allah is the sociological reality: ‘When
Islam spread in Yorubaland, it developed an integrated Yoruba
Islamic culture’ in which ‘The belief and practice in witchcraft, magic,

14 Ibid. p. 21.
15 Achille Mbembe, Afriques indociles: christianisme, pouvoir et état en société postcoloniale (Paris,
16 Mbembe argues, in ibid. pp. 77-85, that the current explosion of religious revivalism in
Africa is another ruse by the common man to create a counter-ideology and alternative political
space in response to the totalitarian ambitions of African dictators. According to a report in West
Africa (London), 21 August 1989, p. 1594, two religious sects were banned in Ghana, and 10
others were not registered, presumably for suspected non-conformity with the régime’s vision of
society.
sorcery and divination persists not only among the uneducated Yoruba Muslims but also among the educated class.\footnote{18}

In the Hausa-speaking areas of Northern Nigeria, the struggle against ‘pagan’ practices is much older than in the other parts of the country. Islam was established as a state religion by the fifteenth century, the epoch when most Hausa rulers became nominally Muslim. The Sarakuna did not, however, completely break from their traditional religious practices, and the influence of Islam in the rural areas was much more feeble than in the walled Hausa cities. In the late eighteenth century, a major Islamic reform movement under the leadership of Usman dan Fodio spread throughout much of Northern Nigeria, culminating in a jihad against the corrupt and repressive administration of the Sarakunas, and the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate. However, although ‘pagan’ practices in Hausaland were thenceforth no longer considered to be legitimate, they were never completely eliminated. Indeed, islands of pagan Hausa-speaking communities, known as Maguzawa, have managed to survive until today, and they create potent linkages between Hausa Muslims and their pagan history. Constant commercial and social relations between the two communities have assured the survival of Hausa gods, such as Magiro and Inna, spirits such as Dodo and Uwanu, and the important possession cult, Bori — all artefacts of resilient paganism that 500 years of Islamisation have been unable to eradicate.\footnote{19}

Since African societies had developed deeply rooted cosmologies before the arrival of Islam and Christianity, the new religions did not find a tabula rasa. Hence the emergence of an often conflictual syncretism, because despite complementaries at the cultural level, the theological point of departure of the two universal religions is the rejection of polytheism. This dialectic is often resolved in real life by formal declarations of allegiance to Islam or Christianity to satisfy the new theology, while continuing to practise various ancestral rites to satisfy the old culture. There is a sense in which Simon Ottenberg was right when he remarked that those Africans who had changed the most had actually changed the least. This social anthropologist was referring to the rapidity with which the images of Mburi shrines built in honour


of Ala, the earth spirit, and Amadioba, the spirit of thunder, had changed to reflect the new colonial forms of representation – including, for example, a spirit ‘riding a motorcycle dressed in shorts and puttees and with a sun helmet upon his head’.

THE ‘FUNDAMENTALISTS’ AND THE OTHERS

One of the major sociological phenomena in Africa in recent years has been a veritable ‘explosion’ in the number and activities of clergy. This rapid expansion of a social group composed of a multiplicity of harbingers of the true message of God or of Allah, as the case may be, all with the ambition of converting humanity to their specific belief-system, has inevitably led to factionalism. Let us look briefly at these problems within the two orthodox religions before examining the dynamics of inter-faith rivalries, struggles, and manipulations by political power-brokers.

Given the persistence of ‘pagan’ traits in the practice of African Christianity and Islam, the a priori response of the establishments of these orthodox religions is usually total condemnation, followed by puritanical efforts to secure the return/revival of the allegedly only ‘true path’, a process usually referred to as ‘fundamentalism’, albeit often little understood by third parties. In Christianity, for example, Catholics believe that their faith and practices are in direct accordance with the true teachings of Jesus Christ and their institutionalisation in the world-wide church established by St Peter, whereas other Christians firmly believe that Catholics are following the wrong path altogether.

For example, during May 1988, Sommers Deco, an evangelist who described himself in the Sunday New Nigerian as a ‘Christian fundamentalist’ who maintained ‘the accuracy of everything in the Bible’, attacked Catholics for their ‘iniquitous connections with the rulers of the earth’, and claimed that they had started apostasy, closely followed by the Methodists, Presbyterians, and Anglicans, all of whom are ‘bent on not conforming to the teachings of Christ’. Deco was replying to the complaint by a Catholic priest in Kano about being

21 See the plea by Mbembe in op. cit. pp. 92–3, that those who want to study factionalism, patrimonialism, clientelism, etc. in Africa might benefit a lot by focusing on this rising social group.
accosted by some ‘born again’ militants, who had brazenly informed him that he was going to face ‘the fire of hell’ unless he joined their movement. In his article entitled ‘The Fundamentalists and the Rest of Us’, Father Philip Gaiya had expressed his concern that ‘ordinary Christians’ should be left in peace, and not treated as ‘non-believers’ and ‘as enemies’.24

According to Saka Fagbo, a Muslim cleric, although the concept of fundamentalism has its origins in the history of Christianity,

the word fundamentalism has now shifted to Islam not only because the Qur’an cannot be altered from time to time to suit the living standard of some people but because there are no Luthers among the Muslims who can lead a rebellion against the orthodoxy of Islam.25

His main complaint was about the word being used in a negative way to disparage the true followers of Islam in Nigeria, where a number of Muslim groups lay claim to this orthodoxy. They include the two Darika brotherhoods, Quadiriyya and Tijaniyya, to which most Muslims in Northern Nigeria are aligned, as well as the relatively new but powerful Jama’atu Izalat Al-Bidah Wa Iqamat Al-Sunnah, known as Izala, which defines itself as a movement of orthodoxy against heterodoxy, and believes that its principal task is to struggle against the innovations and ‘un-Islamic practices’ of the Darika brotherhoods.26 In Western Nigeria, the Ahmadiyya is quite strong, despite being considered as non-Muslim by a few orthodox groups and by the Saudi authorities, a problem that led some in the movement to adopt the name of Ansar-ul Islam in order to regain recognition, while an earlier breakaway faction had become known as Ansar-ud-deen.

The existence of such splits in the organisation and doctrines of both Christianity and Islam has led each to try to create its own agreed political platform as a substitute for an ever-elusive theology unity. However, although the Muslims formed Jama’atu Nasril Islam (J.N.I.), the ‘Organisation for the Victory of Islam’ in 1962, it was not until 1976, when church schools had been seized and education partly secularised, that the Protestant, Catholic, and African Churches formed the Christian Association of Nigeria as a counterweight to the J.N.I.

While launching the Islamic Advisory Committee in 1963, Ahmadu Bello, the Premier of Northern Nigeria and founder of the J.N.I.,

explained that because ‘All Muslims are brothers… Differences in sects will not prevent us from coming together to look into the things that will improve our religion, just as it has not prevented us from meeting together in Friday… and other mosques’. Since then, this pious wish has hardly been realised. Most Izala members, for example, refuse to pray in the same mosque with the Darika brotherhoods, and disputes have frequently occurred between the two groups, sometimes resulting in serious injuries and deaths.

The bitter quarrel that erupted on the premises of the Advanced Teachers College at Kafanchan in March 1987 between members of the Fellowship of Christian Students and the Muslim Students Society, mainly over the alleged misrepresentation of the Qur’an, led almost immediately to outbreaks of violence not only in the local town, but also in Funtua, Zaria, Kankia, Daura, and Kaduna. As many as 19 were killed, while 5 mosques, 152 churches, 152 private buildings, 169 hotels and beer parlours, and 95 vehicles were reportedly burnt and/or otherwise damaged. As explained elsewhere, these events marked a turning point in the politicisation of religion in Nigeria.

Following the problems generated by what has become known as the ‘Kafanchan crisis’, the J.N.I. convened a vast national congregation in Kaduna on 2 January 1988 ‘to settle the rift between various Muslim groups’. But although Mahmoud Gumi, a leader of the Izala movement, and Dahiru Bauchi, a leader of the Darika brotherhood (Sufi order), publicly embraced and promised to call off their ‘cold war’, the truce did not last long. In April, during the fasting period, Izala members in Zuru reportedly accused Darika members of being kafirai or unbelievers, a terrible allegation not even made against Christians, who are considered as ‘people of the Holy Book’. A fierce struggle took place between supporters of the two groups for control of, especially, the Zuru Central Mosque, and violent clashes resulted in three deaths and the destruction of 50 houses. So intense was the animosity that the only ‘solution’ proposed by the Emirate Council was for the Central Mosque to be completely demolished.

In an interesting study of the Islamic reform movement in Kano, Ousmane Kane shows that the search for clientele, and especially for external material and financial support, has played a major rôle in creating further schisms. Initially united in the Muslim Students Society, the young anti-Darika reformers split into the pro-Saudi Dawah

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28 Ibrahim, loc. cit.
29 Newswatch (Lagos), 10 October 1988.
30 New Nigerian, 8 June 1988.
led by Aminudeen Abubakar and the pro-Iranian *Umma*, both composed essentially of educated middle-class elements. They remained distinct from the *Izala* movement, which had penetrated Kano relatively late and recruited most of its supporters in the more popular areas of the town such as Fagge. While the three reformist groups do not have major theological differences between themselves, rivalries generated by leadership ambitions and international support keep them apart.31

The same fissiparous tendency is found in Christianity. The ‘Born Again’ movement is really a constellation of small groups unified by a refusal to join the ‘orthodox churches’, and by the insistence of militants that those outside their ‘Fellowship’, just like the Pharisees during the lifetime of Jesus Christ, are not true believers and cannot be saved.32 Sometimes, the differences assume surprising dimensions, as revealed by a teenage boy’s published denunciation of his father and mother because they were not members of his church at Ikom: ‘Dear Mr and Mrs Iyang Samuel Udoh, this is to inform you that with effect from August 1 1988, you are no longer my parents although you are paying my school fees.’33 There appear to be a lot of doctrinal problems not only between the ‘Born Agains’ and those they call ‘Sunday Best Christians’, but also between other denominations. The members of the Pentecostal movement, for example, believe that the Holy Spirit enables them to speak in tongues and to engage in miraculous healing, while others claim such manifestations to be the work of charlatans. Some churches believe that polygamy is in conformity with Biblical teaching, while others condemn those who have more than one wife. Other fiercely contested issues include the ordination of women, and whether or not the Christian holy day is Saturday or Sunday – or even the traditional Ibibio eighth day, as is the case in the independent Ibibio church.34

The antagonism between different religious movements, groups, and sects is so strong that their leaders often drag in the state as an ally to help destroy their rivals. The history of *Izala* by Umar records several occasions when agents of the state were implicated in various factional struggles.35 In Ghana, the régime headed by Jerry Rawlings was able to ban or refuse to register a number of religious sects precisely because

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34 Abasiattai, loc. cit. p. 504.
35 Umar, op. cit.
the orthodox churches had prepared the ground by organising a campaign in the press, in particular *The Christian Messenger*, that accused their rivals of ‘amassing wealth’, building ‘concentration camps’, and committing ‘adultery with married women [and] deflowering virgins in the commune’, etc.36

The turbulence of the religious scene, and the associated agitation in the political arena, is fuelled by a growing battle for the control of ‘theological space’. In order to survive, the ever-growing number of mallams, pastors, sheikhs, and prophets must demonstrate that their competitors are heterodoxical in their religious beliefs and practices. The ‘fundamentalists’ must differentiate themselves from the others, and ‘puritans’ must combat the cultural reality of the existence of multiple sources of divinity. In addition, those contesting for religious authority must try and ‘prove’ that they are supported by God or Allah against the Devil on the other side – hence the constant declarations that this or that group are *not* believers. Temporal questions must also be given spiritual values. For example, in the battle for the leadership of the Methodist Church, Sunday Mbang and Bolaji Idowu raised to the level of high theology the debate over whether or not the head should be called patriarch or president, and wear silk or cotton robes.

Why is there a runaway inflation in the production of clergy? Certainly one of the ‘precipitating factors’ must have been the gravity of economic crises in contemporary Africa. They not only encourage the growth of apocalyptic fears about the end of the universe and the consequent search for salvation, but simultaneously create a significant new arena of capital accumulation. Money is at the root of many of the ‘evils’ confronting religious movements because a number have been started by charlatans for the express purpose of extracting cash from their devoted followers. Certainly the flamboyant lifestyle of certain religious leaders indicates their attachment to the ‘here and now’ rather than the ‘hereafter’.

Increasing criticisms of the clergy are only to be expected when/if worldly ambitions replace their spiritual objectives. As recalled recently in *Politique africaine* (Paris), Cardinal Malula, the Archbishop of

37 According to *The African Guardian*, 5 September 1988, Bernard Idahosa started his Ministry with N419 and turned it into ‘a multi million naira project’, while the Gbagada Deeper Life Ministry nets a minimum of N20,000 every Sunday and has investments in land and other properties. The magazine also quotes accusations by Mahmoud Salga that Mahmoud Gumi’s militancy is the outcome of monies received from Saudi Arabia.
Kinshasa, made a stinging attack in 1987 on the decline of moral standards among young priests in Zaire when regretting that too many of them were motivated by a yearning for money and an easy life, a search for power, and a propensity for liking the company of women.38 C. M. Tou labor’s profile of the Archbishop of Lomé in the same journal suggests that moral degeneration may not be limited to the new generation if the leader of the Catholic Church in Togo is really tribalist, authoritarian, and corrupt.39 Even honest priests are forced to orient their work in the direction of material considerations according to Pastor Fabien Ouamba of the Evangelical Church of Cameroun, who admits that he himself had to cut back on his ecclesiastical duties because ‘parishes were...applauded for the amount of money they get for the church, not for their spiritual, social, or educational activities’.40

On the other hand, the expansion of certain types of religious movements in today’s Africa seems to be the outcome of the positive services that they render to their members. Many congregations operate as social security groups by seeking jobs for the unemployed, assisting those in distress, organising marriages and naming ceremonies, etc. Such everyday helpfulness is extremely useful in difficult times, as is the emphasis placed by some on the need to adopt a more modest and economical style of living. The ‘Born Again’ movement disparages those who go to church in their best dresses and ornaments to show off in the ‘Pharisee tradition’ of worldly vanity. They therefore call on their members to lead simple lives, to avoid ornaments and exhibitionism, and to beware of carnal pleasures. The Izala movement is also opposed to ostentation, and condemns all forms of feasting, including those associated with age-old family traditions, and even the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday – timely condemnations in a period of unprecedented escalation in the costs of such festivities. These ‘material conditions’ do not nullify the importance of spiritual beliefs and practices, they simply locate them in the concrete reality in which human beings live.

The religious sphere is, in addition, a major arena for political struggle. We have already mentioned that it could be an instrument for combating and/or avoiding the imperatives of the colonial and post-colonial state. It could also be a weapon for revolutionary struggle, the

creation of personal empires, the building of utopias, and the pursuit of retrograde political objectives. Danielle Hervieu-Léger is right in contesting the views expressed by Durkheim in his 'social division of labour' that as political, economic, and scientific functions gain their liberty from religion, the latter’s omnipresence is eroded, while God becomes bigger and higher, leaving human beings to their own disputes. She argues that, contrary to this analysis, there is a ‘paradox of modernity’ in which the process of secularisation reimposes the religious problematic of a utopian belief system as long as society remains incapable of resolving human needs. It follows that religious beliefs and practices reflect the concrete responses of people to their material and social conditions of life. But then, since belief-systems operate also at the level of credulity, manipulation and obscurantism often become fellow-travellers.

THE MANIPULATION THESIS

The transformation of Nigeria’s economic base from agriculture to petroleum, a process which led to the centralisation of the country’s financial resources, was an important factor in the exacerbation of all forms of struggle for political power and consequently for economic resources. As an effective weapon of social mobilisation, religion was bound to play an important rôle in what Nigerians call ‘the distribution of the national cake’, and hence the debate that arose over the politicisation of religion. The manipulation thesis posits that religious differences are amplified and that confessional conflicts are provoked as part of a wider strategy for the acquisition of political influence and/or for enhancing the assets of groups involved in the process of power brokerage. According to Y. B. Usman, the series of religious conflicts that have been occurring in Nigeria since 1977 are a direct result of the manipulation of religion by the ‘intermediary bourgeoisie’ in an attempt to mystify the way in which they are exploiting the masses. Certainly there is evidence that the ‘Kafanchan crisis’ assumed its alarming proportions precisely because of the manipulative rôle played by certain political cliques.

Christian Coulon has argued that although the above thesis is useful

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44 Ibrahim, loc. cit.
in exposing the connections and political networks of dominant groups who use religion for their political ends, it does not answer the important question – Why do people allow themselves to be manipulated? He maintains that the religious arena provides meaning for a wide group of actors by constituting an ideological space with symbols, morality, aesthetics, historical references, and codes of action, in which dominant and non-dominant classes and groups engage in ‘cultural negotiation’. It is this easy access to the religious arena by all social categories, and the nebulous all-embracing nature of this form of ideology, that helps to explain why its dynamism in contemporary Africa reflects reality in contradictory ways, often as concrete as they might be obscurantist. All aspects of social life can be reduced to the narrow path determined by the so-called ‘dictates’ of God. Ruling and dominant groups, conscious of the instrumental rôle of religion, sometimes attempt to use it for their own ends, and in the process they are often unable to ‘close the door’ on the people.

The manipulation of religion is, of course, at least as old as the colony of Nigeria. When the forces of Lord Lugard defeated those of Aliyu Babba, the Emir of Kano, in April 1903, the latter’s replacement, Wambai Abbas, was obliged to swear ‘in the name of Allah and Mohammed his Prophet’ that he would ‘serve well his Majesty King Edward VII and his representative the High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria’, and that he would ‘obey the laws of the Protectorate and the lawful commands of the High Commissioner... provided they are not contrary to my religion’. This act dramatised the way in which religion was to play a critical rôle in the political strategies and manipulative tactics of the two competing ruling classes.

Although the legitimacy of the Emirate aristocracies was derived from the Islamic jihad conducted by their forebears, they were constrained to obey a Christian ruler in order to protect their dynastic powers, albeit having negotiated a compromise whereby the Emirates would not be Christianised. Although the British imperialists may have had the idea of ‘liberating’ the Hausa masses from the ‘tyranny’ imposed on them by the Fulani ruling class, notably by the process of Christianisation, they soon decided, as explained by the Governor, Cited in Sule Bello, ‘State and Economy in Kano: a study in colonial domination’, Ph.D. dissertation, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1982, p. 103.


Sir Hugh Clifford, that ‘our truest safeguard lies in the identity of the Emir’s and Native Administration’s interests with our own’. The British were willing to allow the kin of the conquered Emirs to ‘remain in power’ because the system of ‘indirect rule’ enabled the colonial administration to take the most important decisions. However, although it had been agreed that Christian proselytisation would not be allowed in the Emirates, an intensive programme in the ‘pagan’ areas led to a rapid rise in the ‘Christian’ proportion of the population, thereby containing the centuries of Islamic expansion in the region. It needs to be stressed, however, that the pact to disallow Christian proselytisation in the Emirates was not respected consistently. When therefore Ahmadu Bello started an intensive scheme to promote Islam in the ‘pagan’ areas of Northern Region in 1963, his actions must have been influenced by certain historical precedents.

GOD VERSUS ALLAH, OR THE BATTLE OF HUMAN CLIQUES

In 1959, a new Hausa translation of the Bible was published, and in order to test its efficacity an amicable reading session was organised with Muslim students of the School of Arabic Studies in Kano. In October 1982, by way of complete contrast, students from the same institution participated in burning down some Christian places of worship in Kano in protest against the construction of a new Hausa church within its own walled premises. Worse was to follow because, as already mentioned, the religious quarrel in March 1987 between Muslim and Christian students in Kafanchan led to widespread rioting and destruction in several towns in Kaduna State, as well as to nearly a score of deaths. Shocked by this violence, a gifted cartoonist wanted to know why God and Allah could do such terrible things to each other after years of ‘peaceful coexistence’. And in the same vein a magazine correspondent later bitterly complained as follows:

All religions reek with the blood of human carnage, not because God is blood thirsty but because in the primordial irony, man created a god limited by man’s own weaknesses; lust for a political power base, economic domin-

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49 The Sudan Interior Mission, for example, was able to establish 30 stations within the Emirates, according to Oshatoba, op. cit. p. 40. An interesting debate between Beitzel and Giles as regards the tactics used by Christian and Muslim propagandists in colonial Nigeria has been documented in the Gaskiya Corporation Confidential Files, Rhodes House, Oxford.
51 Ibrahim, loc. cit.
ance... It is no wonder that by way of generalisation, the God of the ‘Christians’ or the Allah of the ‘Muslims’ in Nigeria who now seek for political constituencies are the God or Allah they created for themselves.  

Given that there is more to ‘religious space’ than manipulation by dominant groups, the hidden hands of men become discernible because of the cyclical nature of the related disastrous conflicts that occur during periods of political transition.

In the course of the struggle for power during the 1977–8 constitutional and political preparations that heralded the coming of the Second Republic, Muslims and Christians were suddenly ‘re-organised’ into opposing camps, either strongly for or against the proposed sharia court of appeal. And this damaging nationwide controversy re-emerged during 1987–8 before the creation of the Third Republic. Ironically, the immediate purpose of heightening such confessional discord is to create unity within each religion as internal conflicts are subsumed in order to intensify the struggle against the ‘external enemy’. Izala and Darika Muslims stop fighting each other in order to conserve their forces against the followers of Jesus Christ, while ‘Born Again’ and ‘Sunday Best’ Christians jointly fight all who put their faith in the Prophet Mohammed. This kind of ‘ecumenical’ strategy is actively promoted by political entrepreneurs who hope to gain dividends from religiously consolidated constituencies.

This form of manipulative politics is very dangerous because it unleashes emotional forces that go beyond both the wishes and the control of those who instigate such divisiveness. It sets in motion a process of brinksmanship that poses serious threats to the very existence of the Nigerian state, because complex, multiple, and overlapping divisions and contradictions are reduced to two mutually exclusive primordial camps. Nigerians who in their real lives combine their Christianity or their Islam with ‘pagan practices’, and who are ideologically ‘progressives’ or ‘conservatives’, nationalists or tribalists, fundamentalists or even atheists, are all pushed into two neat and opposed camps – soldiers of either God or Allah. The potential dangers of such mutually exclusive mobilisation stem from the tendency to marginalise those in favour of compromise and progress, leaving the field in the hands of apocalyptic forces.

Let us look at (i) the May 1988 brouhaha in the Constituent Assembly, (ii) the June 1988 crisis at Ahmadu Bello University, and (iii) the attempted coup d’état in April 1990.

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52 The Punch (Lagos), 30 August 1988.
1. Warrior Politicians

The Constituent Assembly inaugurated in May 1988 had an Igbo chairman, a Hausa-Fulani deputy chairman, and a ‘minority’ secretary, so in the spirit of the ‘Federal Character’ of Nigeria it was agreed that an additional seat at the ‘high table’ should be created for the Yorubas. When nominations were called for the new post of Assembly ‘leader’, the Muslim members proposed Lateef Adegbite, a good Muslim, while the Christians proposed Olufemi Olutuye, a good Christian. Daggers were quickly drawn, so much so that the major religious and political leaders throughout the country rushed to Abuja, the seat of the Assembly, to mobilise their troops. The Assembly was paralysed for days as everybody lined up behind his/her religion. Finally, the Head of State, General Ibrahim Babangida, had to order the Assembly not to elect a Yoruba leader so that Christians and Muslims could stop fighting each other and commence their proceedings.

The debate over the sharia immediately overshadowed the work of the Assembly, because Muslim members of Committee 16 on the Judicature complained that they were outnumbered by Christians. The appointment of more members by the Assembly chairman in order ‘to balance the figures’ meant, of course, that no decision could be arrived at because all Christians voted for the removal of the sharia provisions, while all Muslims voted for their retention. To sidetrack the excess zeal of the ‘Young Turks’ in Committee 16, a ‘Committee of Elders’, composed of senior Christian and Muslim leaders, was established under the chairmanship of Justice Buba Ardo, but even they were unable to agree on a solution. The sharia issue was by now generating such widespread hysteria in the country that the President not only ordered the Assembly to stop this damaging controversy, but also announced that he would take the necessary decision. The tragedy of the debate was that the members of the Assembly who had earlier tried to reach a compromise agreement were all forced into taking the ‘extremist’ sides of their God or their Allah.

There is no doubt that the difficulties experienced in trying to resolve the sharia issue amicably had been compounded by the way in which aspiring politicians had exaggerated genuine religious concerns and fears in order to create their constituencies. Indeed, the December 1987 local elections, held shortly after the ‘Kafanchan crisis’, were heavily marked by religious voting, especially in the North, and the councils
that emerged were the electoral colleges used to choose the members of the Constituent Assembly.

The election of a Yoruba ‘leader’ became very contentious because of the fact that the members of that ethnic group are influenced much more by communal ties than by religious alignment. Although there are about as many Muslims as there are Christians in Yorubaland – and both are to be found in many extended families – inter-confessional conflicts are rare. In addition, most Yoruba Muslims and Christians maintain their attachment to their traditional Ifa religion.\footnote{For an excellent analysis of religious tolerance and non-politicisation of religion in Yorubaland, see David Laitin, ‘Hegemony and Religious Conflict’, American Political Science Association, Denver, Colorado, 1982.} It is this community spirit that too many politicians in the past have tried to break by dragging Nigerians into the binary religious conflict. In May 1988, during the inauguration of the new Lagos Central Mosque, Northern religious leaders ‘welcomed’ Yoruba Muslims into the fold. In the same year, for the first time, efforts were made to co-ordinate the activities of Northern and Southern Muslims, including the celebration of religious feasts on the same day, and the campaign to extend the sharia to Western Nigeria was intensified. The hope of some of the political entrepreneurs was that the pro-Northern and pro-Islamic party then in formation would be able to generate Yoruba support, unlike in 1979, when most Yoruba Muslims voted for a ‘Yoruba’ rather than a ‘Muslim’ party.

2. \textit{Warrior Students}

Young Nigerians have for long been a major target of denominational activists of every kind. The ‘Kafanchan crisis’ started as the result of a campus-organised revivalist meeting in March 1987, and two months later female students of Queen Amina College in Kaduna engaged in what can only be described as a ‘free for all fight’, and they had to be separated and dispersed by riot police. The issue that led to this squabble was the demand by Muslim students that they should be allowed to wear ‘Islamic uniforms’.\footnote{For details, see Jibrin Ibrahim, ‘Les Uniformes des lycéennes nigériennes’, in \textit{Politique africaine}, 29, May 1988, pp. 101–104.} Hence the decision by the Federal Ministry of Education in July 1987 that Muslim and non-Muslim uniforms should be provided in all the 41 ‘unity secondary schools’ in the country.

In Zaria, from 9 p.m. on 13 June 1988 to 7 a.m. the following
morning, thousands of students at Ahmadu Bello University (A.B.U.) fought each other with knives, sticks, and petrol bombs to determine which ‘religion’ had won the Students Union elections held two days previously. When the casualties were counted, one student had been killed and over 100 seriously wounded. This tragic event was a sequel to an electoral campaign for Students Union posts that had degenerated into a fight between Christians and Muslims in which interested external parties had given the protagonists large amounts of money and campaign materials.

Since the mid-1970s, the Muslim Students Society had been campaigning against the sale and consumption of alcohol on the campus, and both Muslim and Christian evangelical organisations had been involved in active ‘purification’ crusades and *jihads* for their respective believers. Following the ‘Kafanchan crisis’, the Christian Chapel on the A.B.U. campus had been burnt by rioters, thereby generating a lot of tension in the University. However, the unrest could probably have been contained but for the way in which ulterior political motivations led to the active aggravation of the crisis. The strong radical tradition at A.B.U. helps to explain why the militant socialists in the Movement for a Progressive Nigeria (M.P.N.) not only won most elections to the Students Union on the campus, but also consistently played a prominent rôle in the struggle against the unpopular and allegedly oppressive policies of both the University and the Government, in spite of all sorts of intimidation, including the ‘massacre’ of students by soldiers in 1978 and 1986.

Disturbed by what the state called the ‘undue radicalism’ of A.B.U., the University authorities gradually encouraged the establishment of conservative and/or religious organisations in the hope that they would weaken the M.P.N. In 1984, the Gamji Memorial Club was inaugurated, mainly in order to defend the combination of Islamic and conservative ideals that had been held by Ahmadu Bello, the assassinated Northern leader and founder of the University. Hence those that belonged to Gamji were encouraged to displace ‘militants’ from control of the Students Union by putting up and securing support for their own candidates.

In the election for the presidency of the Students Union, the members of Gamji put up Lawal Usman as a ‘conservative’ representative of the Muslims, while the Christians met and fielded Steve Awobi as the candidate for their own ‘silent majority’. When the M.P.N. nominated Salihu Lukman Mohammed, his ‘progressive’ label became ‘irrelevant’ because he was immediately regarded as a
communist traitor by the Muslims, and as just another ‘enemy’ by the Christians. Although he refused to withdraw in order not to split the Muslim vote against the only Christian candidate, his ‘platform’—namely, improving student welfare and struggling against the I.M.F.-imposed structural adjustment programme—lost its political significance, and the elections were conducted on religious lines. Muslim students were said to have disrupted the counting when it appeared that the Christian candidate was going to win. Because of the riotous situation that quickly developed, the University authorities cancelled the elections despite the protests of the Christians that they had already won and should be duly declared winners. Hence the attempt by both sides to resolve the dispute by resorting to the so-called ‘battle’ of 13 June.

The original objective of the University authorities had been to bring peace to A.B.U. by dislocating radical unionism. They succeeded in redefining the political agenda of the students, but ended up with an even more destructive religious war on their hands. This illustrates the limitations of ‘cliques’ that try to manipulate social movements. It has seemed all to easy in Nigeria to channel existing emotions and tensions into new directions, but the results are often very different from the expectations of the ‘manipulators’.

3. War Threat?

Religious brinkmanship has seriously damaged Nigeria’s body politic, and appears to be more dangerous than previous ethnic and regional political conflicts. Early on Sunday morning, 22 April 1990, Nigerians were woken up by the sound of martial music on their radio sets, followed by the declaration of an attempted coup d’etat that millions immediately realised could easily lead to another civil war. As claimed by the rebel spokesman:

On behalf of the patriotic and well-meaning peoples of the Middle Belt and the southern parts of this country, I, Major Gideon Orka, wish to happily inform you of the successful ousting of the dictatorial, corrupt, drug baronish, evil men, sadistic, deceitful, homosexually-centred, prodigalistic, unpatriotic administration of General Ibraham Badamasi Babangida.
... This is not just another coup but a well conceived, planned and executed revolution for the marginalised oppressed and enslaved peoples of the Middle

55 In the December 1987 local government elections in Kaduna, the single Christian candidate for the chairmanship won easily against his numerous Muslim rivals, thereby generating an outburst of polemics.
Belton and the South with a view to freeing ourselves and children yet unborn from eternal slavery and colonisation by a clique of this country.\textsuperscript{56}

The announcer also relayed the ‘temporary decision to excise the following States, namely, Sokoto, Borno, Katsina, Kano, and Bauchi, from the Federal Republic of Nigeria’.

The revolt appears to have been sponsored by a 36-year old civilian and multi-millionaire, Great Ogboru, described as ‘a born again Christian who is known to attend the Pentecostal Household of God Fellowship Church, Ikeja’.\textsuperscript{57} There is little doubt that the actual leader, Major Orka from Benue State, and his supporters were motivated by the conviction that the distribution of political power and resources in Nigeria is heavily weighted against Christians in the South and the Middle Belt. During the previous régime, headed by Muhammadu Buhari, similar complaints had been made, and it is generally believed that the \textit{coup d'état} that brought General Babangida to power in 1985 was partly motivated by a desire to correct the perceived imbalance.

The membership of the initial Armed Forces Ruling Council was weighted in favour of the Middle Belt, so much so that its influential leaders were usually referred to as the ‘Langtang Mafia’. Since 1986, however, Babangida has on several occasions dissolved, reconstituted, and reshuffled the A.F.R.C., the Federal Executive Council, the National Council of State, and command posts in the armed forces. Even so, most analysts of ‘federal character enumeration’ are agreed that political posts are weighted against Southerners and Christians.\textsuperscript{58}

In addition, the widespread arrests and executions after the attempted coup have strengthened the impression of sectional oppression. The danger for Nigeria is to push certain groups into the belief that their only ‘salvation’ is secession and civil war, not least because the country may not survive a second tragedy of this magnitude.

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God and Allah have been established as central elements of the Nigerian cosmology. Thanks to man, the principal victim has been

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Newswatch}, 7 May 1990. \hfill \textsuperscript{57} \textit{Newbreed (Lagos)}, 14 May 1990. \hfill \textsuperscript{58} ‘Federal character enumeration’ and associated canvassing have been some of the most important activities of prospective candidates for political and professional posts, government contracts, development projects, etcetera. It needs to be stressed that Section 13 (3) of the 1979 Nigerian Constitution ruled that ‘The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity’, and Section 14 (4) made the same provision for states and local governments.
tolerance, that characteristic virtue of the traditional African 'paganism' so much chastised by all and sundry. By way of contrast, the universal religions have always seen things in a binary and reductionist fashion – good and evil, God and the Devil, the correct and the wrong path, the damned and the saved, be they Catholics or Protestants, 'Sunday Best' or 'Born Again' Christians, or Darika, Dawah, or Izala Muslims.

To escape the tyranny of these imposed paradigms, Africans could benefit by listening to some of the voices of their ancient gods even if English stylistics prevents us spelling them with a capital 'G'. If the religions want peace, and if humanity wants peace, the plurality of the world of man and the world of the spirits must be respected. Was it not Karl Marx who reminded us of the famous words of Epicurus: 'Not he who rejects the gods of the crowd is impious, but he who embraces the crowd's opinions of the gods.\(^{59}\)

\(^{59}\) Karl Marx, 'The Difference Between the Natural Philosophy of Democritus and the Natural Philosophy of Epicurus', in A. Selsam and H. Martel (eds.), Reader in Marxist Philosophy (New York, 1963), p. 283.