
This book analyses the influence of Islam on the traditional structure of some 20 selected tribal communities in the so-called "Middle-belt" of Nigeria. These are communities which have had a long contact with Islam and larger Muslim communities, mainly Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri. The author also mentions the progress made by Christianity in this region and its impact on the religious configuration of the country's population and on the position of Islam.

In writing this book the author draws on his own observations during his thirty years' association with Nigeria, part of which (1956-1976) he spent in the country as a Christian Missionary as well as a teacher. Much of the material for the book comes from interviews for which, he says, he relies on his good knowledge of the Hausa language.

The first five chapters are devoted to a study of the interaction between Islam and traditional religion.

While hesitating to make generalizations about African traditional religions, the author concedes that they have three common features: their self-containment, the naturalistic form of their outlook and ritual, and their 'community realism'. It is these common features which bring traditional religions in conflict with the universalistic outlook and strictly monotheistic nature of Islam. Tribal religions also have a sense of "immediacy", an expectation of quick results from their rituals, which is lacking in Islam and which, for them, renders Islam's concern with reward and punishment in the hereafter as irrelevant.

The author classifies the communities into three categories according to the level of their resistance to Islam. The categories are: (1) The "Active-Resistant", consisting of the Tiv, Jukun, Kutep, etc; (2) the "Open Traditional", such as the Bachema, Gwam and Kilba; and (3) the "Open" as for example the Maguzawa, Fabir, Bura and Nupe.

What is it that determines a tribe's response to Islam? The author rejects the idea that time is the only relevant factor; that long contact with Islam leads automatically to assimilation. He rather sees a more basic factor firstly in the elements of "compatibility (to what extent does Islam "fit" into the traditional structure), secondly in the ability of Islam to break the "archaic circle" (and thereby deprive the community of the centre around which its traditional religious life revolves), and lastly, in the "negative or positive image which the Hausa and Fulani have as a people".

The two contrasting examples of the Tiv and the Bura could show how important compatibility is: the concept of a "divine king" among the Tivs inhibits acceptance of Islam's belief in the supremacy of God; while Islam finds better reception among the Bura whose traditional god, Hyel "belongs to a type which fits admirably into a concept of the Unity and Self-existence of Allah".
The author then observes that among the "Active Resistant" category the retaining of a strong traditional centre has minimised the impact of Islam. The various social, psychological, economic and political elements have played a role in the interaction between Islam and the traditional religion, including the impact of these elements on the Muslim's image. Many of these elements have tilted the balance in favour of Islam, but some have had a rather negative effect.

Social and economic forces of change threaten and disrupt traditional society. The individual and community have to adjust. What is the role of Islam in this context? While Islam certainly does not help to maintain the strength and integrity of the tribe, it nevertheless offers a refuge to the individual and becomes a new organising centre for his life. The author sees this as a major factor of conversion to Islam in the cities of the North where he sees the rich among the Muslims as dominating the economic life and using their influence in favour of Islam. The individual may also convert to Islam for prestige because being a Muslim is considered "progressive" and being a pagan is "backwardness". Again Islam may gain a convert, when an individual seeking remedies to the anxieties and misfortunes of daily life fails to find them in the traditional system and therefore turns to the Muslim method.

Some political and economic factors have however had a less than positive effect in the way they have built up the "Muslim image". The author traces the formation of the "Muslim Image" to the 19th century Jihad and the periods of colonial rule and post-independence politics. The Jihad had a "positive" side in creating an enlightened class of Muslim teachers and raising the power and prestige of Islam, and a "negative" side in making pagans resent the Fulani because of slave trade. Colonial rule favoured Muslims through Lugard's indirect rule system, but this has also "taken a toll on the Hausa image".

The part on post-independence politics in devoted to a discussion of "the effect of Ahmadu Bello's policies for the religion of Non-Muslim tribes." Ahmadu Bello, leader of the ruling party and a descendant of the Jihad leader Usman Danfodio, "saw himself as one to fulfil the theocratic ideal of his noble family" by Islamizing the pagans. He made this ideal part of his political campaigns. The author however, finds Ahmadu Bello's success of little, if any, lasting value: the quality of the conversions is suspect, and much of the response to Ahmadu Bello's overtures depended on the tribe's level of resistance to Islam. It may be commented here, however, that some people saw Ahmadu Bello as such a great threat that they made him pay with his life.

In the last two chapters the author looks back over the period since the assassination of Ahmadu Bello. He finds that a great shift has taken place and religious change has taken new forms and directions. While Christianity has experienced rapid growth, traditional religion, though its elements persist, has all but been submerged. Islam has suffered reverses. Muslims fell into a demoralised and leaderless state after the assassination of Ahmadu Bello in 1966; they suffered defeat on the "Shariah Issue" in 1979 in the Constituent Assembly, the Maitatsine uprisings exposed their disunity, and the creation of states shattered the myth of a united North as a Muslim bloc.

The author sees these developments as having had an impact on the position of Islam in the communities he studied as well as in the overall situation in Nigeria. Among the communities he studied the "Active Resistant" have become even more resistant to Islam while at the same time opening themselves to Christianity. The "Open Traditional" Communities have experienced a noticeable shift towards Christianity and a hardening attitude against Islam. The "Open" group, while maintaining its attachment to Islam, still allows its tribal interests to predominate.
The author finally considers his study to have established the necessity to redraw the religious map of Nigeria and correct wrong assumptions. He considers it erroneous to regard Nigeria a "Muslim country" because his own computations show a Christian majority by 1985, or to regard five of the northern states (Kaduna, Bauchi, Plateau, Gongoki, Benue, Niger) as northern states, if "northern" is taken to mean simply Islamic.

It is to the author's credit that he is able in the first five chapters of this book to examine closely the very complex process of change in such a difficult setting, and to discern various interesting patterns and reach enlightening conclusions. His look at the classes of priests and Malama who dispense medicine and cures in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies, as well as their practices and interactions, is one of the most informative parts of the book. His distinction between various classes of priests and Malama and the levels at which integration has taken place between the two tells us a lot about the levels at which Islam "integrates" with or "accomodates" traditional practices.

Author's methodology has however led him sometime to conclusions which do not agree with facts. He, for example, gives unduly disproportionate significance to "compatibility" as a factor of Islamic influence. It has to be realised that he is dealing with communities whose contact with Islam is of varying length, degree and quality. What the author perceives in their existing religious attitudes of tolerance or resistance to Islam as elements of compatibility/incompatibility in Islam itself may well be only the indices of this difference in the intensity and quality of their contact with Islam.

The analysis of political developments in Nigeria, therefore, is reduced to Christian grievances against former Heads of State. And so we come to know that Christians resented Gowon (a Christian himself) for his policy over Mission schools and hospitals. Christians were alarmed by Murtala (a Muslim) for establishing Shariah Courts and building a mosque in the State House, and Christians were displeased with Obasanjo (a Christian) for not paying attention to them as he should.

The methodological weakness also comes from the fact that those whom author interviewed were mostly Christians. It may also explain other parts of the book; for example where we find that motives for conversion to Islam are all too often described as "for political appointments", "to marry Hausa of Fuhi women", "as for political expediency", "to be seen as progressive", and never "for the religious appeal of Islam". Even Christian women who marry Muslim men do so because "they do not have convictions and are attracted to promises of money and material things". But pagans convert to Christianity as a result of "education" and "rising self-consciousness as a people".

It is not the obvious one-sidedness of such a presentation that is a weakness but the tendency it causes to retain factual errors and inaccuracies. Here are examples. The "Shariah issue" is presented as a controversy over the application of Shariah: "By this arrangement court cases would be conducted under the Islamic law", and then reasons are given why Christians would not accept Shariah being applied to them. This is, of course, how the opponents of
the proposal for a Federal Shariah Court of appeal argued their case in the newspapers. But what the constitution Drafting Committee proposed was simply a Federal Shariah Court of Appeal whose jurisdiction was limited to hearing appeals over matters which were already governed by the Shariah as personal law of Muslims and dealt with by other Courts. A reference to the Draft Constitution could have prevented this error. It is also erroneous to say that the Shariah courts in the 10 Northern States were established by Murtala. The fact is that the Shariah Court of Appeal of Northern Nigeria was established at Independence in 1960, and each state got its court when the North was divided into states.

There are also what are perhaps inadvertent errors. This will include the reference to Ahmadu Bello as "the Sultan of Sokoto" which he never was. Another is in the quotation from Ahmadu Bello's reported speech: "The father of enlightenment and good in this land was the prophet, Usman Dan Fodio, and the work of salvation for all the people. Which he so nobly undertook has now been handed to me...." Describing Dan Fodio as "the Prophet" is almost certainly the author's error of translation from Hausa. The normal epithet for Dan Fodio in Hausa is "the reformer" (Mujaddadi), and the words "the Prophet" (annabi) are always limited to describing the Prophet.

But what promises to generate controversy the most in this book is the astounding claim it makes that Christians form a majority in Nigeria. The author also finds inaccurate the description of Nigeria as the "Muslim North" and the "Christian South". He prefers "Muslim North" (meaning far North) "Christian South" and "Mixed Middle Belt" because there are large numbers of Muslims and Christians in the Middle belt. But since the "South" shares this common feature with the "Middle belt" many will wonder: Why "Christian South"?

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