



# **Beyond Religious Tolerance**

## **Muslim, Christian and Traditionalist Encounters in an African Town**

Edited by

**INSA NOLTE, OLUKOYA OGEN and REBECCA JONES**

**RELIGION IN TRANSFORMING AFRICA**

# **Beyond Religious Tolerance**

**Muslim, Christian and Traditionalist  
Encounters in an African Town**

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Birmingham and Ibadan, May 2016

# Note on Orthography

## Yoruba

Standard Yoruba uses diacritics: tone marks on vowels and sub-dots below particular letters. In this book, we use full diacritics for quotations from Yoruba, and individual Yoruba words (including the names of Yoruba *òrìṣà* or deities).

However, we have made an exception for names of people and places, which are presented without diacritics, not only for the purposes of legibility, but also since these names have now been incorporated into Nigerian English, so full Yoruba diacritics may appear overly elaborate.

Yoruba words are capitalised where they appear as part of proper nouns (e.g. as titles) but not where they are used as common nouns. For instance, ‘*òba*’ (ruler of a town) refers to the ruler in general, while ‘*Ọba*’ is used in the title of a particular ruler.

## Arabic

Arabic words have been spelt in an Anglicised form for words commonly used in English-language speech (e.g. *Qur’an*, *hijab*, *Allah*), and in a local form where commonly used this way in south-western Nigeria (e.g. *Alhaji*, *wa’azi*), but otherwise follow standard Arabic transliteration.

Where some Arabic terms could be translated into English – such as *Allah* or God – we have used the English form.

However, all quotations from Yoruba and Arabic (including survey responses, as well as published texts) are preserved with the writer’s original diacritics and transliteration.

## Interviews

We have endeavoured to provide as much information as possible regarding the interviews carried out in the course of research for this book, but since



interviews were undertaken by many different researchers at different times, the amount of information they recorded about their interviews differs. Where possible, we provide the name of the interviewee, their occupation or role, the date of interview, the place of interview and the interviewer (if someone other than the author of the chapter).

# Glossary of Yoruba and Arabic Terms

Yoruba and Arabic terms are translated into English on their first appearance in this book, and in some cases on subsequent appearances. For ease of reference we also present some of the most frequently used or important terms in this glossary.

*Adhān* – Islamic call to prayer

*Ajágemọ* – an *Ọbàtálá* priest in Ede

*Àlàáfíà* – peace, good health

*Aláàfin* – title of the ruler of the old Oyo empire

*Alfa* – a Muslim cleric

*Alhaja* – title for a woman who has completed the *hajj* pilgrimage

*Alhaji* – title for a man who has completed the *hajj* pilgrimage

*Àṣà* – custom, tradition

*Balógun* – title for a war leader

*Da'wa* – proselytising or invitation to Islam

*Ẹbí* – immediate family (blood relations)

*Ẹḍe yàrá kan* – Ede is one room

*Egúngún* – ancestor masquerade

*Eid al-Fitr* – Islamic festival, the celebration of completion of Ramadan

*Eid al-Kabir* or *Eid al-Adha* – Islamic festival, the celebration of Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice Ishmael

*Hajj* – Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca

*Hijab* – Islamic head covering or veil

*Ifá* – the god of divination, also used to refer to divination itself

*Ijtimā'* – annual gathering of the Tablighi Jamaat

*Ilé aiyé* – the world

*Iléyá* – the Islamic festival of *Eid al-Kabir/Eid al-Adha* (the celebration of Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice Ishmael)

*Imam* – Islamic cleric who leads congregational prayers

*Ìmòlẹ̀* – term for 'Muslim', sometimes perceived as slightly pejorative

*Ipedi* – festival to commemorate the founding of Ede and the Yam season

- Ìyá Sàngó* – priestess of *Sàngó*  
*khurūj* – Tablighi Jamaat missionary tours  
*Markaz* – Arabic word for ‘centre’, i.e. religious centre  
*Mọgbà* – chief priest of *Sàngó*  
*Mọlé* – relatives or extended family  
*Ọba* – king of a town  
*Ọbàtálá* – an *òrìṣà*, the god of creation and the arch-divinity  
*Odò Sàngó* – *Sàngó*’s river  
*Qdún* – festival  
*Ògún* – an *òrìṣà*, god of iron and war  
*Onìbàtá* – *bàtá* drummer  
*Orìkì* – oral praise or attributive poetry  
*Òrìṣà* – any Yoruba deity  
*Ọsun* – an *òrìṣà*, the goddess of the river Ọsun  
*Ọya* – an *òrìṣà*, the goddess of the river Niger and the wife of *Sàngó*  
*Ramadan* – the Islamic month of fasting  
*Ṣalāt* – Islamic prayer  
*Ṣalāt al-‘aṣr* – Islamic afternoon prayers  
*Ṣalāt al-jum‘a* – Islamic congregational Friday prayers  
*Ṣalāt al-zuhr* – Islamic noon prayers  
*Sàngó* – an *òrìṣà*, the god of thunder and lightning  
*Sharia* – Islamic law  
*Shirk* – Islamic term for the sin of idolatry, polytheism or associating others with God  
*Sunna* – the practices of Prophet Muhammed  
*Tìmì* – title of the ruler (*ọba*) of Ede  
*‘Ulamā’* – Islamic scholar  
*Umma* – the global Islamic community  
*Wa‘azi* – open-air Islamic lectures  
*Zakat* – Islamic annual obligatory payment for charity and religious purposes

## Beyond Religious Tolerance: Muslims, Christians and Traditionalists in a Yoruba Town

Insa Nolte and Olukoya Ogen

Since the end of the Cold War, and especially since September 2001, religion has been recognised as an increasingly important factor in personal and group identification and mobilisation. In a global environment increasingly dominated by economic neoliberalism, tensions between Islam and Christianity have become especially salient. However, a detailed understanding of the dynamics of religious conflict – and accommodation – is obscured by the overwhelming focus of analysts and commentators on the global North. In this context, attacks by Islamic groups and the perception and treatment of Muslim minorities in the culturally Christian societies in the US and Europe are often seen to confirm the existence of a ‘faultline’ between ‘Western civilisations’ and ‘Islamic civilisations’,<sup>1</sup> which has been transposed somewhat uncritically to different African contexts.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Africa is treated as little more than a ‘reservoir of raw fact’, which is made to fit the theories and truths produced on the basis of European and North American knowledge and praxis.<sup>3</sup>

But although the social and political transformations following the end of the Cold War reflected the politics of the global North, the complexity of their implications reveals itself more fully in the societies in the South. While Africa has its share of Muslim–Christian conflicts, not all religious violence on the continent takes place across a religious divide. In Uganda and neighbouring countries, the Christian Lord’s Resistance Army has terrorised communities for many decades irrespective of religion. In the Sudan, the self-consciously

<sup>1</sup> S.P. Huntington, ‘The clash of civilizations?’, *Foreign Affairs* 72:3 (1993), 22–49.

<sup>2</sup> cf. E. Griswold, *The Tenth Parallel: Dispatches from the Faultline between Christianity and Islam* (London: Penguin Books, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, *Theory from the South or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* (London and Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), p. 1.

Muslim Janjaweed militia has committed large-scale violence against co-religionists.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Islamic insurgent groups in Mali and northern Nigeria have targeted fellow Muslims far more frequently than Christians and other non-Muslims.<sup>5</sup> While the implications of this phenomenon cannot be explored in detail here, the high incidence of intra-Muslim violence certainly challenges the notion that conflict is necessarily associated with religious difference.

But the opposite also applies: even in highly religious societies, religious difference is not necessarily associated with conflict. Thus Africa is also home to several states and regions where Muslims and Christians coexist without large-scale conflict. In South Africa, the country's liberal post-Apartheid Constitution has enabled a diverse Muslim minority to pursue religiously distinctive rights.<sup>6</sup> In West Africa, Muslims and Christians have sought insight and inspiration from debates about the merits and content of their respective religions in different contexts over the course of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Although Ghanaian popular culture has been transformed by the growing influence of Pentecostalism,<sup>8</sup> mobilisation for conflict by Muslims or by Christians purely on the basis of religion alone is rare.<sup>9</sup> In the Yoruba-speaking south-west of Nigeria, including Ede, the town at the centre of this book, Muslims and Christians – and often smaller groups of traditional religionists<sup>10</sup> – also live closely together.

The intricate patterns of Muslim–Christian relations in Africa suggest that here, adaptation to the global changes is far more diverse than in Europe or North America, confirming the Comaroffs' suggestion that 'the history of the

<sup>4</sup> J. Haynes 'Religion, ethnicity and civil war in Africa: The cases of Uganda and Sudan', *The Round Table* 96:390 (2007), 305–17.

<sup>5</sup> A.R. Mustapha, ed., *Sects & Social Disorder: Muslim Identities & Conflict in Northern Nigeria* (Oxford: James Currey, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> G. Vahed and S. Jeppie, 'Multiple communities: Muslims in post-apartheid South Africa', *State of the Nation: South Africa 2004–2005*, ed. J. Daniel, R. Southall and J. Lutchman (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2004), pp. 252–4.

<sup>7</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Piety and Power: Muslims and Christians in West Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> B. Meyer, "'Praise the Lord': Popular cinema and pentecostalist style in Ghana's new public sphere', *American Ethnologist* 31:1 (2004), 92–110.

<sup>9</sup> A. Langer, 'Situational importance of ethnicity and religion in Ghana', *Ethnopolitics* 9:1 (2010), 9–29.

<sup>10</sup> Given that traditional practice includes areas of social life that are excluded from the field of the religious in most areas of academic discourse, we use the term religion reluctantly. As important aspects of traditional practice are considered – and debated – as 'religious' in south-west Nigeria, it would however complicate matters unnecessarily to refuse this description. It is perhaps most useful to understand the 'religiousness' of traditional practice as cultural work in progress.

present reveals itself more starkly in the antipodes'.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore imperative to explore the wide range of Muslim-Christian relationships globally also from a Southern, and indeed African, vantage point. And while religious conflict in Africa deserves attention, it is equally important to study those contexts where different groups live with each other without resorting to large-scale violence. As Shobana Shankar's evocation of early Christianity in colonial northern Nigeria illustrates, the encounter between Muslims and Christians can inspire mutual fascination even where religious hierarchies are explicit and politically legitimated.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Barbara Cooper's study of evangelical churches in Niger shows that even as Islam constrained Christianity, it also helped to define Christian practice and expression.<sup>13</sup> But only a study of successful Muslim-Christian coexistence can show the limits of existing approaches that understand religious difference as inherently problematic, and thus illustrate the possibilities for further reflection and theorising.

In the European context, relations between Muslims and Christians are often understood within the paradigm of tolerance, which has been theoretically developed by the German philosopher Rainer Forst. Forst sets out convincingly that tolerance, derived from the Latin *tolerare*, i.e. to countenance, endure or suffer, only applies with regard to practices seen as wrong or displeasing, but nonetheless considered acceptable. Tolerance is therefore aimed at practices located between that which is 'good' and therefore not in need of toleration, and that which is 'bad', and cannot be tolerated. Forst suggests that the spectrum of tolerance is complex and ranges from toleration by authoritarian permission at one end to toleration on the basis of mutual respect at the other.<sup>14</sup> All forms of toleration are normatively dependent, i.e. reflective of values and norms that define that which is to be tolerated. Aiming to produce mutually respectful dialogue, most academic (and non-academic) engagement with Muslim-Christian and interfaith relations therefore takes place at the liberal end of the tolerance spectrum.

Despite the limited amount of work on non-conflictual Muslim-Christian relations in Africa (and, with important exceptions, beyond<sup>15</sup>), the analytical limitations to approaches highlighting the existence of Muslims and Christians as distinct religious communities are obvious. Benjamin Soares points out that

<sup>11</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Theory from the South*, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> S. Shankar, *Who Shall Enter Paradise? Christian Origins in Muslim Northern Nigeria, ca. 1890–1975* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> B. Cooper, *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> R. Forst, 'The limits of toleration', *Constellations* 11:3 (2004), 315–16.

<sup>15</sup> cf. S. Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

such studies struggle to take into account ‘the broad range of ways in which Muslims and Christians have interacted with each other over time’, because they assume stable religious boundaries and a static social order, which often do not exist in reality. Where African Muslims and Christians live side by side, they do more than tolerate each other: they reject, borrow and appropriate each other’s practices, and sometimes they convert to each other’s religions.<sup>16</sup> In such contexts, the subsumption of largely peaceful religious coexistence under the notion of tolerance obscures the multiple ways in which people engage with religions other than their own.

J.D.Y. Peel’s pioneering study of the interplay between Christianity, Islam and traditional religion in Yorubaland emphasises that religious boundaries in south-west Nigeria crosscut ethnic and communal identities. Peel illustrates that both Islam and Christianity have made important contributions not only to Yoruba social life, language and dress, but also to Yoruba notions of community.<sup>17</sup> While his argument centres on the religions as coherent traditions rather than on their everyday mobilisation by individuals, occasional references to private practices are illuminating. Descriptions of the enthusiastic participation of Muslim guests in the celebration of the New Year in church and the participation of a Christian child in the early breakfast of his fasting Muslim relatives during Ramadan illustrate that exchanges between Muslims and Christians can extend beyond notions of tolerance to joyful, educational, or otherwise beneficial encounters and to different personal and interpersonal strategies and ambitions.<sup>18</sup>

By focusing on the town of Ede, albeit in the context of Yoruba history, politics and practice, this book illustrates in detail the social implications of religious pluralism in everyday life. But how individuals draw on the knowledge and experience of religions other than their own to navigate their lives, authority, gender and social identity more generally cannot be captured by a focus on one religious community alone. Presently, anthropological work on religion and social identity in Africa focuses on either Muslim or Christian societies. It tends to explore the importance of religion in the creation of social roles either in the context of conversion to a world religion or as an aspect of religious change or reform.<sup>19</sup> However, such approaches must also recognise

<sup>16</sup> B. Soares, ‘Introduction: Muslim–Christian encounters in Africa’, *Muslim–Christian Encounters in Africa*, ed. B. Soares (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 1–16.

<sup>17</sup> J.D.Y. Peel, *Christianity Islam and Orisha Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction* (Oakland CA: University of California Press: 2016), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Peel, *Christianity, Islam, and Orisha Religion*, p. 134.

<sup>19</sup> Exemplary studies of different approaches in this field include R. Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997); D. Maxwell, *African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism & the Rise*



**Map 1** Ede in south-west Nigeria

that where members of different religions are intimately familiar with important aspects of each other's religions, meaning is created both by religious expression and by the absence of other forms of expression.

This book's focus on the different ways in which Ede's citizens put religion and religious difference to work resonates with Jane Guyer's argument that Yoruba societies actively foster and encourage their members' potential for originality and difference. She suggests that this reflects both the practical importance of adaptability and potentiality, and the moral and aesthetic

*of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement* (Oxford: James Currey, 2006); J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).



pleasures associated with the creation of diverse life trajectories.<sup>20</sup> In the context of religious plurality, this implies that religious difference is valued in itself, as difference. Shaping the town beyond appearances at first glance, the religious diversity of Ede confirms the town's cosmopolitanism, attractiveness and complexity, conferring status both on the community as a whole and on its individual members.



1 The view over Ede from the south, towards palace, central mosque and river

Guyer's emphasis on the intrinsic value of multiplicity helps us explain not only the widespread acceptance of Ede's religious pluralism but also the fact that Ede's citizens manage and engage with religious difference in multiple ways, often depending on context. Thus different forms of traditionally legitimated authority in the town – especially *obaship* and the power of Ede's deity *Ẓàngó* – partly rely on the ability to transcend or even transgress religious boundaries (chapters 2–4). In such contexts, reference to tolerance, as the 'suffering' or acceptance of the other, obscures the fact that transcendence and transgression draw their symbolic and political power from difference.

Yet on a different scale, some extended families, associations or churches that define themselves as distinctly Muslim or Christian police their boundaries closely and try to limit the influence of religious others (chapters 5–7). Even in the ostensibly secular space of Ede's polytechnic, the management of

<sup>20</sup> J. Guyer, 'Traditions of invention in Equatorial Africa', *African Studies Review* 39:3 (1996), 1–28.

inter- and intra-faith relations is intrinsically linked to institutional authority (chapter 8). Here an engagement with how others are tolerated is helpful in understanding the degree to which religious boundaries are put to social use.

But as chapter 7 illustrates, the usefulness of the tolerance paradigm as an objective measure must take into account that toleration itself has its own competitive appeal: while Ede's Christians rely on the 'tolerance' of the predominantly Muslim townspeople, they assert their moral (and spiritual) superiority by exceeding their hosts in tolerance. Moreover, even as the coexistence of Muslims with traditionalists and Christians at the private level is sometimes conflictual, it enables individuals to navigate religious difference in the pursuit of individual ambitions (chapters 9–11). Private participation in multiple religions and mediation between different religions are linked to particular political or gendered identities, and therefore they clearly complicate notions of tolerance as forms of engagement based on abstract normative values.

As the chapters of this book offer an insight into the many ways in which both religion and religious difference are invested with social meaning 'beyond tolerance' in Ede, they offer a tentative and fluid categorisation at best. Where we, and other authors of this book, are drawn towards macro-sociological arguments in order to step back from the complexity of local practice and debate, such arguments do not imply the existence of a stable social order based on clear categories of religious practice. This is perhaps best illustrated by the different roles played by religion in Ede's Muslim compounds (chapter 5) and in the locally prominent Adeleke family (chapter 9). Here individual chapters, read in the wider context of the book, illustrate that engagement with religion at different levels of social practice reflects a capacity for creative adaptation and ongoing change.

Importantly, the personal navigation of a shifting and complex religious landscape is not primarily driven by an instrumental engagement with religion. While not all citizens of Ede consider religion equally important (chapter 8), it is more than a categorical identity or an ideological tool. But just as religion is not 'a message about something else', it is not primarily a site of action in the realm of the political either.<sup>21</sup> Most people engage with religion as a frame of reference that enables individuals to understand, manage and recast their relationships with others, but also with themselves and the truth. Thus personal engagements with the religious enable – and perhaps require – a high degree of both self-examination and recognition of others.<sup>22</sup> As all

<sup>21</sup> R. Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

our chapters illustrate, religious practices in Ede are intricately bound up with social hierarchies and political agency, but they are also mobilised in earnest debates about the meaning of life.

Despite Ede's clear Muslim majority, then, Ede is a religiously plural town both because it is home to a multiplicity of religious practices, and because the difference between the religions takes on very different forms and meanings. In some contexts, an emphasis on religious boundaries is strong and sustained, in others it is fleeting, and in others the importance of celebrating and transcending religious difference is emphasised. The complexity of these meanings is condensed in the local proverb, '*Èdẹ yàrá kan ni*,' meaning 'Ede is one room'. Often used to remind quarrelling or complaining parties to consider the other side's interest, the proverb suggests that Ede constitutes a community both *despite* and *because of* its religious diversity.

The next two sections of this introduction bring in two discussions relevant to this book, namely the study of religious multiplicity and coexistence, and debates about Yoruba Islam. The final part of the introduction includes an overview of Ede's religious landscape as local context for the following chapters, a description of the genesis of this book, and a short outlook.

### Religious Encounter and Pluralism in Yorubaland

The Yoruba validation of multiplicity and difference has historical roots both in religious and in political practice. In 1939 the sociologist N.A. Fadipe described traditional Yoruba religious practice as a 'veritable welter of objects of worship apportioned out among individuals and extended-families on no very clearly defined principles'.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the worship of ancestors, many deities – locally known as *òrìṣà* – are linked either to natural phenomena (hills, rivers, thunder) or to important personalities. However, categories of divine beings are loosely defined. Thus, *òrìṣà* also include material objects such as royal crowns or, in the case of *orí*, the worshipper's own fate (literally, her or his own head). Even the deities themselves often exist in loosely defined conceptual categories, such that a deity that is male in one context can be female in another.<sup>24</sup>

Although the complex and fluid web of ancestors, deities and other spiritual forces does not reflect a hierarchical or clearly categorised cosmology, it

<sup>23</sup> N.A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970 [1939]), p. 261.

<sup>24</sup> J.D.Y. Peel, 'A comparative analysis of Ogun in precolonial Yorubaland', *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, ed. Sandra T. Barnes, 2nd edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 263–89.

is nonetheless understood as part of a greater system of belief. The very multiplicity of the divine is brought together and celebrated in the *Ifá* divination system. Based on the understanding that all events have roots and precedents in the past, *Ifá* offers guidance in the present by accessing a large oral corpus of stories, songs and riddles about gods, spirits and cultural heroes, all of which are anchored in past divinations. Assuming the position of a mediator between human beings and spiritual forces, *Ifá's* advice to its patrons often includes suggestions about the deities and cults they should worship.<sup>25</sup> While the long presence of Islam in West Africa has likely influenced the shape of *Ifá*,<sup>26</sup> Islam (and more recently Christianity) also appears explicitly in its corpus. Thus, when the pattern called *Odù Òtura Méjì*, also known as *Odù Ìmòlè* or *Odù* of Muslims, appears during the divination held for a newborn child, this child should be brought up as a Muslim.<sup>27</sup> As the early history of Islam in Ede illustrates, this link between *Ifá* and Islam contributed both to the spread and the legitimacy of Islam (chapters 2 and 3).<sup>28</sup>

Like *Ifá*, the spiritual power of Yoruba kings, or *obas*, is associated with their ability to stand above the many spiritual practices within the town. In historical Yoruba discourse, *obas* are understood as the founders or conquerors of towns. The emergence of centralised urban settlements is therefore inextricably linked to *obaship*.<sup>29</sup> Political power tended to be anchored in the spiritual, and *obas*, established their political superiority partly by emphasising their independence from local cults. But at the same time, as long as land for new settlements remained available, the rulers of Yoruba towns could not prevent the emigration of disenfranchised groups and individuals from their towns. Because the inability to maintain consent among a diverse population could lead to the decline or death of a community, rulers needed to acknowledge the

<sup>25</sup> W.R. Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), pp. 11–12.

<sup>26</sup> L. Brenner, 'Muslim divination and the history of religion of Sub-Saharan Africa', *Insight and Artistry in African Divination*, ed. J. Pemberton III (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), pp. 45–59.

<sup>27</sup> T.G.O. Gbadamosi, '"Odu Imale": Islam in Ifa divination and the case of predestined Muslims', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 8:4 (1977), 77–93.

<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed presentation of the argument presented in this paragraph, see I. Nolte 'Spirit: Histories of religion and the Word', *West Africa: Cultures of the Word*, ed. G. Casely-Hayford, J. Topp Fargion and M. Wallace (London: British Library, 2015), pp. 48–71.

<sup>29</sup> P.C. Lloyd, 'Yoruba myths: A sociologist's interpretation', *Odù: Journal of Yoruba and Related Studies* 2 (1955), 20–8.

validity of local practices.<sup>30</sup> Addressing the town both as a collectivity and as a locus of difference, *obas* were (and remain) recognised as the ‘heads’ of all religions. This claim represents both an ideology of power that projects the *oba*’s authority over all sections of the community, and a reminder of the need to respect, and even empathise with, all those who share in its making.<sup>31</sup>



2 The royal palace of Ede

Below the level of *obaship*, the validation of diversity and difference remains important for men and women who hold positions of power within society. While such leaders may be strict regarding their own religious adherence, they are aware that actions perceived as violent or as discriminating against others tend not to attract popular support beyond the short term (cf. chapters 2 and 6). The widely shared ethos of diversity is closely linked to an appreciation of enlightened progress, or *òlàjù*. As Peel has argued, *òlàjù* is associated with different forms of knowledge, but it is perhaps most strongly associated with education and trade or other links to the world beyond the town. Emphasising

<sup>30</sup> For a more detailed description and analysis of these processes, see E. Renne, *Population and Progress in a Yoruba Town* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), pp. 26–39; and I. Nolte, *Obafemi Awolowo and the Making of Remo: The Local Politics of a Nigerian Nationalist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the International Africa Institute, 2009), pp. 58–88.

<sup>31</sup> cf. I. Nolte, ‘Transformations of the customary: Christianity, Islam and traditional rulers in Yorubaland, Nigeria’, *Chiefship and the Customary in Contemporary Africa*, ed. J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming).

the importance and moral value of carefully considered choice, *òlàjú* reflects the ability to locate the self, and one's own community, in the context of wider networks of knowledge and practice in order to increase one's own power and wellbeing.<sup>32</sup> Thus *òlàjú* shapes agency both at the political and at the private level, because it offers an understanding of 'otherness' not as a threat but as a potential resource.

Certainly the openness towards others associated with *Ifá*, and the emphasis on consent and *òlàjú*, helped the establishment of Islam and later Christianity in Yorubaland. In many towns the first arrival of Islam is associated with protection or healing through prayer.<sup>33</sup> As Muslim communities expanded, they were usually organised at the town level under the leadership of a Chief Imam. T.G.O. Gbadamosi explains that like a Yoruba *oba*, the Chief Imam held a life-long office of religious as well as political significance, in which he would not only lead the community in prayer but also resolve disputes between different factions of the (Muslim) community. Often the chief imam was drawn into the circles that advised the *oba*, enabling Yoruba Muslims to maintain a close engagement with town politics and civic life.<sup>34</sup> While Muslim scholars seldom took traditional offices, all communities appreciated the contribution of Muslim rulers to the cause of Islam. Beyond the town, Muslims offered *òlàjú* by linking the town to wider Muslim networks in Nigeria, West Africa and the world.

The early links between education, modernity and mission Christianity in Yorubaland meant that Christianity was associated with forms of orientation that transcended town politics. As most converts were attracted to Christianity through the establishment of local schools, they became part of the community of their individual mission churches and the wider networks formed by literacy and education. Early Christian converts often acted as cultural brokers between Europeans and local culture. Drawing on the vast archive of local practices and traditions, they imagined and confirmed a Yoruba nation that could stand in opposition to European culture.<sup>35</sup> Building on enlightenment values within the European tradition as well the local appreciation of *òlàjú*,

<sup>32</sup> J.D.Y. Peel, 'Olaju: A Yoruba concept of development', *The Journal of African Studies* 2 (1978), 139–65.

<sup>33</sup> I. Adebayo, 'The role of traditional rulers in the Islamization of Osun State (Nigeria)', *Journal for Islamic Studies* 30 (2010), 60–77.

<sup>34</sup> T.G.O. Gbadamosi, *The Growth of Islam among the Yoruba, 1841–1908* (London: Longman, 1978), pp. 5–6, 37–8.

<sup>35</sup> K. Barber, 'Discursive strategies in the texts of Ifá and in the "Holy Book of Odù" of the African Church of Òrúnmilá', *Self-Assertion and Brokerage: Early Cultural Nationalism in West Africa*, ed. K. Barber and P.F. de Moraes Farias (Birmingham: Birmingham University African Studies Series, 1990), pp. 196–224.



the imagination of the Yoruba nation relied on widely shared values to transcend the town level.<sup>36</sup>

The Yoruba encounter between Islam, Christianity, and local spiritual and political practices has inspired a number of distinct scholarly arguments. While David Laitin's study of Ile-Ife highlights the differences between Yoruba Muslims and Christians, he argues that these are subsumed under more important forms of local belonging, both to the hometown and to the Yoruba (ethnic) nation. However, his suggestion that while religious cleavages are real, other forms of belonging and identification primarily reflect colonial manipulation, simply does not ring true.<sup>37</sup> As Wale Adebaniwi has convincingly demonstrated, the notion of a Yoruba culture has certainly been subject to political and other forms of manipulation. However, this has only been possible because Yorubanness remains crucial to Yoruba self-perception and political agency.<sup>38</sup>

Peel's analysis of the historical encounter between mission Christianity and the Yoruba illustrates that beyond providing the spark for the imagination of the modern Yoruba nation, the introduction of Christianity offered converts a complex perspective on local traditional practices, which could be understood either as culture or as religion. While the 'making of the Yoruba', led by the region's educated elite, privileged the former, the growing importance of religion since the 1970s and 1980s has also encouraged more negative views of traditional practice.<sup>39</sup> This is exemplarily highlighted in a more recent study of Yoruba religious interaction by Jacob Olupona, who explores the pressures of the two monotheist religions on the adaptation and reform of traditional practices.<sup>40</sup>

Taking up the imperative to consider all three religious practices in the Yoruba context, Peel's most recent book focuses on the relationship between Christianity, Islam and traditional practice. Emphasising the importance of both Muslim and Christian contributions to the making of community in Yorubaland, Peel suggests that conversion to the monotheist religions was compatible with the Yoruba belief that order existed within diversity, as expressed in the logic of *Ifá*. Tracing appropriations and adaptations that

<sup>36</sup> J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

<sup>37</sup> D.D. Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>38</sup> W. Adebaniwi, *Yorùbá Elites and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria: Obáfemi Awólowo and Corporate Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Peel, *Religious Encounter*.

<sup>40</sup> J. Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

have transformed Yoruba Islam and Christianity over the twentieth century, he argues convincingly that the monotheist religions are shaped both by their own foundational practices, texts and traditions of interpretation, and by the cultural context in which they are realised.<sup>41</sup> Peel's magisterial study provides the context and foil for our own study of the cultural embedment of religion in Ede.

Importantly, the study of religious coexistence and multiplicity in Ede shifts the primary point of view away from the cultural realisation of religion and instead illustrates how the existence of these religions is put to work in one particular locality. In Ede, the emphasis on strict adherence and clear boundaries and distinctions in some contexts challenges the suggestion, sometimes implicit in the focus on larger patterns visible at the ethno-regional level, that because the practice of Islam and Christianity was included into a framework that celebrated diversity, it was subject to processes of processes of 'blending', i.e. the incorporation of non-Muslim or non-Christian practices. While critics of such approaches have pointed out that the implicit assertion of the existence of 'pure' forms of religion is normative rather than objective and reflects a Western bias towards belief rather than practice,<sup>42</sup> this book also avoids such assessments because they privilege the study of Islam and Christianity as clearly circumscribed practices.

In the context of Ede, the realisation of both monotheist religions takes numerous, and sometimes contradictory, forms. Thus the ability of Yoruba *qbas* and *òrìṣà* to transcend religious difference contrasts with the grassroots practices through which Ede's Muslims tolerate Christians (and vice versa) in other social contexts, and with the bridging of religious gaps in mixed-religious families, in marriage and in friendships. While such forms may be locally discussed in terms of 'mixing' or 'blending', this book explores such discourses in the context of social reproduction and meaning-making. Illustrating that the religious life of a Yoruba town is shaped both by strict adherence to religion in some contexts, and by the transgression, transcendence and mediation of religious boundaries in other contexts, this book emphasises that both forms of engagement with the other – tolerance and practices beyond tolerance – have multiple meanings. The drawing of clear religious boundaries is not a denial but a recognition of the religious agency of others, and transgression or transcendence do not imply that religious boundaries do not matter: in fact,

<sup>41</sup> Peel, *Christianity, Islam, and Orisha Religion*.

<sup>42</sup> cf. A. Talal, 'Anthropological conceptions of religion: Reflections on Geertz', *Man* 18:2 (1983), 237–59; and R. McCutcheon, 'The category "religion" in recent publications: A critical survey', *Numen* 42:3 (1995), 284–309.



the agency that derives from such practices is only meaningful as long as religious boundaries exist.

### Studying Yoruba Islam among Ede's Muslims

By focusing on a predominantly Muslim town, this book addresses the study of Yoruba Islam; a topic that has been shockingly under-researched. Most research on Islam in the region has been focused on northern Nigeria. And despite the significant presence of Islam in south-west Nigeria, most research on Yoruba religion has concentrated on the Yoruba deities, the complex *Ifá* divination system,<sup>43</sup> and Christianity.<sup>44</sup> While some scholarly attention has focused on the Yoruba town of Ilorin,<sup>45</sup> Yoruba Islam outside of Ilorin has only attracted limited research.<sup>46</sup>

T.G.O. Gbadamosi, the only historian to produce a book on Islam that does not centre primarily on Ilorin, discusses the emergence of the Muslim community at the town level. He suggests that the inclusion of the chief imam into the traditional hierarchy in most Yoruba towns reflects a permeation of Islam by 'Oyo [Yoruba] custom'.<sup>47</sup> This description has been taken up by other authors, and Islam in south-west Nigeria is often described as having been subject to a 'Yorubacisation'.<sup>48</sup> This assessment is problematic both because it suggests that there is such a thing as a 'pure' Islam, and because it assigns ontological

<sup>43</sup> For *Ifá*, see W.R. Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969); W. Abimbola, *Ifa: An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>44</sup> Outstanding examples include J.A. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841–1891: The Making of a New Elite* (London: Longman, 1965); H. Turner, *History of an African Independent Church: The Church of the Lord (Aladura)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967); and Peel, *Religious Encounter*.

<sup>45</sup> S. Reichmuth, *Islamische Bildung und soziale Integration in Ilorin (Nigeria) seit ca. 1800* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1998).

<sup>46</sup> The most widely read texts on Yoruba Islam are Gbadamosi, *The Growth of Islam among the Yoruba*; and P. Clarke, *Mahdism in West Africa: The Ijebu Mahdiyya Movement* (New York: Weatherhill Incorporated, 1995). For a contextualised discussion of Islam in Ibadan politics and Igboho ritual practice respectively see K. Post and G. Jenkins, *The Price of Liberty: Personality and Politics in Colonial Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), and J.L. Matory, 'Rival empires: Islam and the religions of spirit possession among the Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá', *American Ethnologist* 21:3 (1994), 495–515.

<sup>47</sup> Gbadamosi, *Growth of Islam among the Yoruba*, p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> See Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture*, p. 41. This term is also quoted in H.O. Danmole, 'Religious encounter in southwestern Nigeria: The domestication of Islam among the Yorùbá', *Ọ̀rìṣà Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture*, ed. J.K. Olupona and T. Rey (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), pp. 202–17: 205–6.

primacy to a non-religious 'Oyones' or 'Yorubanness' without exploring in what ways conversion to Islam has itself shaped Oyo and Yoruba practices.

Beyond academia, such views sometimes find expression in engagements between northern and southern Nigerian Muslims. Rivalry between northern Nigerian and Yoruba Muslims has a root in historical conflict. When the jihadist Sokoto Caliphate expanded southwards from northern Nigeria during the first half of the nineteenth century, it contributed to the collapse of the powerful Oyo Empire and the destruction of many of its towns. While the Yoruba town of Ilorin became part of the Caliphate, most Yoruba Muslims converted only after the local defeat of the Caliphate's (Ilorin) armies in the battle of Osogbo in 1838. As the experience of Ilorin remained both exceptional and subject to resentment from the rest of Yorubaland, it is certainly possible that the conflict between Ilorin and the rest of Yorubaland played a role in the widespread adoption of Islam as a predominantly private religion in south-west Nigeria.<sup>49</sup>

However, the fact that (apart from Ilorin), Yoruba towns did not adopt Islamic structures does not mean that Muslims were unable to draw distinctions between themselves and non-Muslims. As explained in chapter 5, the creation of explicitly Muslim compounds enabled Ede's Muslims to live largely separately from non-Muslims. Important especially in Oyo towns like Ede, where Islam has played a significant role since the nineteenth century, compounds are large areas or sections of the town, often populated by many hundreds of people, which belong to, and are controlled by, extended families or lineages. As forms of corporate identity beyond the town level, compound leaders play a central role in facilitating access to land and housing, and also in town politics. The social and religious lives of compound members tend to be shaped by the compound's history and leadership. As the existence of different Muslim compounds illustrates, the compound system also accommodated the existence of difference within the Muslim community.

Additionally, many Yoruba Muslims explain their ability to coexist with non-Muslims with reference to Surah 109 (al-Kāfirūn), which is understood as legitimating the existence of religions other than Islam, and as allowing Muslims to live in non-Islamic societies and communities. Such interpretations resonate with the Islamic tradition of the late fifteenth-century Malian scholar *Alhaji* Salim Suwari, whose influence extended across West Africa.<sup>50</sup> As there is some evidence for contact between Yorubaland and Mali, the

<sup>49</sup> Gbadamosi, *Growth of Islam among the Yoruba*, pp. 1–110.

<sup>50</sup> R. Launay, *Beyond the Stream: Islam and Society in a West African Town* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).