

## **Religious Faultlines in West Africa**

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“There are half-dozen Muslim countries in West Africa. Several others are, like Nigeria, split between a Christian south and a Muslim north. But only Nigeria struggles with a strong radical Islamist movement, and only Nigeria has Shariah, the strict rule of law based on the Koran, in certain states.” What makes Nigeria so different, the reporter asked pointedly? After brushing aside the legacy of theocratic rule in north Nigeria, the reporter settles on an answer, which, he says rather anticlimactically, “may simply be that everything in Nigeria is exaggerated. Its population of 130 million outnumbers that of the rest of West Africa combined. Its oil has made a few families staggeringly wealthy, while a vast majority are among Africa’s poorest.” In other words, according to the NYT report, the religious faultline in Nigeria is on account of social scale. The size of the country is to blame for religious unrest, with a slice of economic discontent to heat things up. (Matt Steinglass, *NYT*, “Why is Nigerian Islam so Radical?” 1 December, ’02.)

I frankly find that analysis puzzling. For one thing, it skips over the Yoruba region which is relatively peaceful in spite of the Muslim-Christian split there and in spite of widespread poverty. A Yoruba Muslim friend and a senior professor at the University of Ilorin stated at a conference in Dakar that he saw little chance of Shari’ah law being adopted by his co-religionists in the Yoruba states because Islam was still viable without need of state enforcement. (He said he had postponed undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca because he was not yet ready to give up on his favorite Guinness Stout beer, which suggests that, should he so decide, the pilgrimage, rather than Shari’ah sanctions, would dispose him in time to embrace moral reform. It is an important point here: that he, and perhaps a majority of Muslim Africans, glad to acknowledge that they are Muslim in spite of personal foibles, would yet accede to a more rigorous practice of Islam by way of a free personal

commitment, not by way of sanctions and threats.) For another the *NYT* article does not account for religious unrest in countries a fraction of the size of Nigeria, such as Uganda with a small but significant Muslim minority. Then there are cases where a disproportionately small Muslim minority may be involved in serious religious unrest, as has happened both in Africa and outside Africa. The role of Muslim Fulbé/Fulani in the major jihad movements of West Africa is a classic example of the radical tradition as a minority vocation. As a minority community in most of West Africa, the Fulbé *ardoën*, like the Hausa *zango*, were carriers of ideas of social change. Once we start finding such exceptions to the general theory being propounded about radical Islam in Nigeria, we find ourselves back to square one. An important question is posed (“why is Nigerian Islam so radical?”) only for us to be checkmated at the end by a stubborn discrepancy between a lucid problem and a vague answer.

What causes a religious faultline in the first place? It is caused in specific cases by a perceived break between the promises and assurances of a religion in flow and the failures and shortcomings of society in its organized institutions and structures. A religious faultline is characteristic of a polarized worldview, as the literature on *mahdist* ideas makes clear. Ibn Battúta in the fourteenth century noted the circulation of Shi‘í *mahdist* ideas in West Africa, indicating their potency in social and political reform. A faultline presents an idealized past through the short end of the telescope, with historical figures looming as present-day champions and exemplars. (Usama bin Laden, for example, presents his cause as a modern day version of the Prophet’s struggle, and the situation of Muslims under Western influence as corresponding to the situation of the early Muslims under siege in Mecca. He urges a *hijrah*, the drawing of a line in the sand, in imitation of the first *hijrah* to Medina, the prelude to the establishment of an Islamic state. This pattern was little different from that followed by West African jihad leaders.) For the unrest to assume political significance, a religious faultline in that situation depends on a critical mass of followers, usually young, socially deprived, and footloose, coalescing around a charismatic and equally footloose leadership. This was true of the Maitatsine uprising in north Nigeria in the 1980s. Social scale comes into play only when the ideological trigger is in place, and when that trigger has been primed by a messianic ultimatum. Arise and warn (*qum, fa’andhur*), or as the title of a famous jihad manifesto

put it, the radical call is a summons to the uncommitted faithful to join the ranks (*wathíqat ahl Súdán*). That was the theme of the jihad leaders in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, that majority Muslims led by colluding *fuqahá* (*'ulamá al-sú'i*) played fast and loose with the canon, playing to the gallery because they were crowd pleasers rather than God-fearers. The whole point of the faultline for these reform leaders was that the choice it demanded, the polarity it defined, was smoothed over by corrupt nimble-tongued elites, whereas by its very nature choice involves deliberation, not drift.

In the most important cases, the faultline started with a table of discontent; a propaganda network is then set in motion to publicize and to spread the cause; a community forms and goes into ritual retreat, sometimes symbolic, sometimes geographical, and sometimes both. At this point the religious faultline remains an inner-directed movement: the fault lies with the believers themselves, and only greater faithfulness will produce the conditions for overcoming the enemy. The stress and uncertainty arising from encounter with the modern West, for example, typically provides the volatile ingredients for a radical prescription. But the political conditions have to be right for radicalism to fester. A certain degree of freedom of mobility and of assembly is necessary for a community of radical religion to emerge. Under colonial rule and subsequent military rule, for example, the cause of Shari'ah penal law remained largely dormant in much of north Nigeria. But both in the period of relative political freedom in the run up to independence in 1960, for instance, and following the return to democratic rule in 1999, the call for Shari'ah law broke surface to popular acclaim. The Sardauna of Sokoto was active in the early phase, while the governor of Zamfara State took the lead in the later phase. One important element missing in the earlier phase but very much present in the later phase was Shi'ite influence emanating from the Iranian revolution. That came to light in 1979, and was a catalyst in numerous cases of unrest subsequently.

We have been in the engine room of the radical movement that comprised the jihads of West Africa, and we have gained invaluable insight into the psychology and intellectual background of the leaders. With the insights gained from knowledge of a contrasting tradition of religious reform of the pentecostal/charismatic type in African Christianity, students of the subject have opened a productive line of comparative inquiry on the faultline in religious change and political radicalism. It is probably fair to credit

the late Thomas Hodgkin of the University of Ghana and of Balliol College as one of the founding fathers of this religious branch of the scholarly enterprise. As was appropriate, when it was my turn to account to him for my study of the impact of a pacific tradition in African Islam, he said he hoped I would see a faultline in terms of the political role of the clerics in question in the decolonization process in French West Africa. I fear I disappointed him. But, in mitigation, and, it turns out, in unwitting vindication of my argument, Jean Suret-Canale wrote a chapter on the topic in a festschrift to him (Allen and Johnson, editors, *African Perspectives*, Cambridge, 1973). Still, Hodgkin's work is seminal in this regard.

The Report of the 9/11 Commission was crystal clear in saying that the religious faultline of the sort exploited by al-Qa'idah is not in any important sense a matter of numbers, logistics, or scale. Nor was it an act by a state. The 9/11 attack, the Report declared, was an event of surpassing disproportion. America had suffered surprise attacks before, such as Pearl Harbor in 1942, and the Chinese attack in Korea in 1950. But these attacks were by major powers. By contrast, the 9/11 attack was carried out by a tiny group of people, not enough to man a full platoon. "Measured on a governmental scale, the resources behind it were trivial. The group itself was dispatched by an organization based in one of the poorest, most remote, and least industrialized countries on earth." (*Report*, 339-40.) What made the al-Qa'idah faultline so menacing was not the resources at its command – they were derisory – or the military capability it could muster – that was virtually non-existent - but the appeal in the wider Muslim world, the Report observed somberly. The appeal arose from the depth and extent of the church-state, religion-politics faultline in the Muslim world at large, the Report says. In the West church-state separation is a more or less benign frontier; for the Islamists, however, it is a controversial threshold, and, with specific anti-American grievances thrown in, it becomes highly incendiary, as Bin Laden has proved and as was demonstrated in widespread riots in Jos, Kano, and elsewhere in north Nigeria. Some 2000 people were killed in the melee. Muslim groups on October 19 organized a public protest against US military attacks on Afghanistan. Aminu Barde, 23, a Muslim youth leader, declared, "I'm prepared to go and fight America" in Afghanistan. Attacks on Christians followed in Kano where Osama bin Laden was claimed as a hero. Said one Kano Muslim leader:

“Anywhere Muslims should love Osama. So I’m happy over what happened to America [on September 11].” (*NYT*, Nov. 1, 2001, p. A14)

In West Africa at large it remains to be seen what impact the internet as a global vehicle will have on religious faultlines. I stumbled at random on *fatwas* posted on the internet that were remarkable for their incoherence but that struck the posture of an authoritative statement because they carried the seal of a Supreme Islamic Council and were otherwise anonymous. Supreme Islamic Councils proliferate on the internet without monitoring and without any obligation to be grounded in established procedures. We are all familiar with the role of Caxton’s printing press in spreading ideas of the Reformation. In an age of religious radicalism today perhaps the internet as a potential faultline online is poised to play a corresponding role, though we remain largely ignorant on the matter.

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