

RESPONSE TO ‘SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE, CONTEXT AND TRADITION, IN CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN WEST AFRICA’ BY J. D. Y. PEEL

Ebenezer Obadare

In the immediate aftermath of ‘9/11’, it took very little for the axiom that adherents of evangelical Christianity and reformist Islam inhabit discrepant, permanently warring publics to solidify. With the very air laden with ‘the clash of civilizations’, the dominant narrative quickly became one of mutual antagonism, in which both religions were positioned as irreconcilably foundational in major global conflicts. As is often the case in such moments of heated contention, it was easy to overlook the counterintuitive fact that, in various parts of the world, especially in those communities where adherents of both faiths have lived in close proximity, there has always been a direct sharing and transfer of experiences in religious practices and evangelizing stratagems. Such ‘spiritual economies’ (cf. Rudnykyj 2010) do not imply that theological differences are erased; they suggest, rather, that competing faiths, in their attempts to expand and preserve themselves, frequently cross boundaries to appropriate the other’s devotional and conversionary strategies.

J. D. Y. Peel’s analysis of the similarities and differences between contemporary religious movements in West Africa is symptomatic of a new bend in the intellectual river, a refreshing scholarly shift from the noted emphasis on ‘cosmologies in collision’ (Kifleyesus 2006) in favour of new and interesting convergences in their ‘dialogic constitution’ (Larkin 2008: 103). Read as part of his larger examination (Peel 2016) of the interaction of three religious traditions (Christianity, Islam and Oriṣa religion) in south-western Nigeria, Peel’s effort is a major contribution to socio-anthropological theorizing on ‘appropriation’, seen here as a ‘hermeneutic practice’ (Schneider 2003: 226) in which symbols and artefacts from one ‘culture’ are imported into another.

My interest in the same phenomenon started three years ago when, under the auspices of the Social Science Research Council’s (SSRC’s) New Directions in the Study of Prayer (NDSP) research initiative, I began researching new forms of Islamic prayer whose modalities – such as all-night prayer sessions, Sunday services, personal testimonies and a new emphasis on good and evil – bear a striking resemblance to those of Pentecostal Christians in south-western Nigeria. I have argued (Obadare 2016) that these new forms of Islamic prayer, especially when seen as part of a general acceptance and intensification by (Yoruba) Muslims of the kind of ‘all-embracing enthusiasm’ (Ojo 2006) normally associated with Pentecostalism, are indicative of an emergence of a ‘Charismatic Islam’.

EBENEZER OBADARE is Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, and Research Fellow, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa. Email: obadare@ku.edu

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I use the case of these new dramatizations of Muslim prayer to pose broader questions, such as: how does the transformation of Islam, betokened by new expressions of prayer, help us to understand the shifting boundaries between Islam and Christianity, particularly in ecologies where both remain socially, economically, politically and ideologically competitive? Further, to the extent that nascent modalities of worship symbolize or anticipate doctrinal transformation within faiths, how does a study of prayer provide an analytic platform for an understanding of critical shifts and tensions within and between Christianity and Islam, primarily within the cultural context of Western Nigeria? In a national context in which the state is delinked from ordinary people's lives, prayer has become a central element in the rearrangement of personal and interpersonal regimes, and in the composition of ordinary people's selfhood. Using prayer transfers and imitation, which are important components of how the two faiths relate in Western Nigeria, my work interrogates the role of these emergent forms of Islamic prayer in the deeper transformation of the totality of the religious culture in the area.

This is the immediate pedigree I have brought to my appraisal of Peel's article. Because we both work within the same conceptual paradigm – that is, appropriation as 'hermeneutic practice' and a constant feature of religious practices in context – I am in general sympathy with his overall approach. With that in mind, my comments here are addressed to two of the themes that are privileged in his article, and a third potentially productive theme which, for some reason, is elided – the place of women in both traditions.

For all the similarities between Christianity and Islam, or more precisely between the Pentecostal movement and Salafism in West Africa, there endure, as Peel notes, significant differences in what, alluding to Larkin and Meyer (2006), he describes as 'matters of substance or religious orientation'. These are: (1) 'Prosperity – or the more inclusive Yoruba concept of *Alafia*'; and (2) 'Politics'. I take up 'Prosperity' and 'Politics' in succession.

Peel's observation that 'unlike Salafist movements such as Izala', the Pentecostal movement in West Africa has, in recent years, 'been dominated by churches that emphasize individual empowerment through prosperity, healing, deliverance from enemies seen and unseen, and so on' is mostly accurate. But what is the proper relationship between prosperity and *Alafia*, the latter correctly translated as 'an all-round state of ease or well-being, including health, sufficiency, freedom from worries, and so on'? Peel obviously assumes that the Pentecostal quest for prosperity is equal to – or at least is not in conflict with – the search for *Alafia*. I am not so sure. Not only am I dubious about the equivalence of prosperity with *Alafia*, I am convinced that, in its essence, Yoruba Pentecostal prosperity is at cross purposes with, if not inimical to, *Alafia*.

In West Africa, especially in Nigeria, Pentecostal hankering after prosperity is materially inextricable from the generalized precarity that is the prolonged aftermath of structural adjustment. With state abdication more or less a fact of everyday life, and with opportunities for legitimate employment drastically reduced, if not totally foreclosed, the tenor of social interaction has come to be defined by money, or rather the scarcity of it. Pentecostal obsession with personal (hardly social) prosperity is, I would argue, a plangent echo of this reality, one that speaks more to the ensuing logic of '*owo ojiji*' – that is, 'instant wealth' (cf. Barber 1995) – than to a proper imagination of *Alafia*, which seems perfectly

attainable without ‘prosperity’, insofar as the latter is defined, Pentecostally speaking, as ‘being rich’.

I am arguing that, for the Yoruba, there is no reliable correlation between prosperity and *Alafia*, and that Pentecostal valorization (functionalization?) of the former has to do with the social reality in post-adjustment West Africa. Contra Pentecostal prosperity, which seems to involve a perpetual process of material expansion, *Alafia* is a state of spiritual, physical, psychic and medical *wholeness*. *Alafia* cannot exist without contentment (*Ìtélórùn*), which seems alien to contemporary Pentecostal movements’ theology of barbarous accumulation.

That said, Yoruba metaphysics is notoriously steeped in ambiguity, which leads me to think that one way in which the current conversation can be productively extended is by considering the subtle but powerful differences among the following related Yoruba word phenomena: *Owó* – money, *Orò* – wealth, *Dùkià* – property, *Ìfòkànbalè* – satisfaction, and, of course, *Alafia*.

With regard to ‘politics’, Peel argues, validly I think, that the fact that ‘Salafism has less time-depth in Yorubaland than Pentecostalism’ means that they ‘are not on an even footing for comparative purposes’. Rather, he offers: ‘A fitter comparison for Yoruba Pentecostalism is with Salafism in its home base, Northern Nigeria, since that allows us to compare the two movements at full expression, each in its “home” context.’ For Peel, drawing on Ruth Marshall (2009), both Salafism and Pentecostalism in Nigeria, being ‘embedded in radically different ideological and institutional complexes’, possess significantly different socio-political characters. Accordingly, while Salafism ‘seeks to realize itself through capturing and reforming the state according to its conception of justice’, ‘Pentecostalism, by contrast ... emerged in the social space outside the state, and seeks to influence the public sphere in similar ways to any other voluntary association in civil society’.

I want to propose that, although (Yoruba) Pentecostalism may indeed have emerged in the social space outside the state, it has failed to settle the nagging question of how to engage with the state, and what constitutes the ‘proper’ ‘ideological’ distance from it. In this struggle, the tensions both among Pentecostals and between Pentecostals and other Christian denominations are of equal interest. At all events, Christian success in ‘capturing’ the Nigerian state (since the return to civil rule in May 1999, two Christian leaders, Olusegun Obasanjo and Goodluck Jonathan, have been at the helm for a combined total of thirteen years) has led to a more accommodating attitude towards that state.

Has accommodation resulted in incorporation? The answer hardly matters, if only because Pentecostal politics has certainly become more interesting. For one thing, in a nascent pastor-clientelism, the deepening intimacy between the Pentecostal elite (led by the General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Enoch Adeboye, Ayo Oritsejafor of the World of Life Bible Church, Tunde Bakare of The Latter Rain Assembly, and David Oyedepo of the Winners’ Chapel) and the Nigerian political class has been fascinating to watch: not only because it has resulted in huge divisions within a Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) that prizes structural discipline, but also because of its implication for the socio-spiritual agency of the Pentecostal elite itself.

So, while one takes Peel’s point on the sociological uniqueness of the social milieu in which Pentecostal movements emerged, it is important to call attention to the way in which they have managed to separate themselves from the rump of

agents and institutions ‘in the social space outside the state’ (this is true at least of the most prominent Pentecostal leaders); they have done this by becoming standard bearers of the kind of politics that is contrary to the enunciations of mainstream civil society. In this way, the problem with Pentecostalism’s political theology becomes not so much its ‘negativity’ (cf. Marshall 2009) as its positive reaction. What started out in the 1980s as a ‘theology of engagement’ (Kalu 2004: 252), in which Nigerian Christians under the umbrella of CAN sought to counter the perceived Islamization of the country with a more proactive attitude towards politics, has steadily morphed into today’s scenario in which key figures within the Pentecostal movement are widely identified with the state, and more or less parade their newfangled status as agents with direct access to the political nobility.

Peel concludes his paper with a note on the contrasting attitudes of Salafism and Pentecostalism towards politics and the Nigerian state. I find it intriguing that while Abdul-Fattah Olayiwola, whom Peel uses as a representative of the Salafist sensibility, ‘treats the idea of Nigeria as a nation as a chimerical distraction from the only identity that has value for him— membership of the Muslim *umma*’ – and Nigeria as a state as ‘a mere political space that he wants to see filled with the Islamic content of sharia’, Ayodeji Abodunde, his theoretical Pentecostalist interlocutor, ‘is a nationalist who has nothing to say about the state’. One looks beyond the state in its current incarnation, the better to replace it with a religiously monochromatic alternative, while the other, overcome by the global success of Yoruba Pentecostal creativity, hardly thinks about the state. These attitudes feed off each other – the global success of Pentecostalism (both real and imagined) within the state paradigm stiffens the Salafist determination to disestablish it and inaugurate an alternative based on a contrary normativity.

The treatment of women offers an interesting lens for pursuing a comparison of Salafism and Pentecostalism. Peel gives it scant coverage, but I think it deserves greater attention, if only as a further illustration of his (i.e. Peel’s) overarching insight that ‘[r]eligions are always realized in practice through the interplay of context and tradition, of the social and the cultural, of the present and the past’. The key question then becomes this: given the male-centric bias of the Yoruba cultural context, does Salafism or Pentecostalism reinforce historical patriarchy? And if it does, to what extent does it do so? The many instances of women rising to prominent positions notwithstanding, Pentecostal obsession with the occult, witchcraft and ‘evil forces’ tends to translate into the pathologizing of women; and in a context of acute material deprivation, gender can combine with class to exacerbate ‘gendered misfortune’ (Pfeiffer *et al.* 2008). Hence, within Pentecostal movements, women mostly continue to bear the brunt of authority exercised predominantly by men.

In contrast, and quite unexpectedly, the scope for female agency appears to have widened in tandem with the rise of ‘Charismatic Islam’ in Yorubaland. For instance, the emergence of popular preachers such as Hajia Kafila Hamadu Rufai in Ibadan and the Alhaja Khadijat Imam Olayiwola in Ilorin as legitimate entrepreneurs has disturbed seemingly settled norms around gender relations, hierarchy, authority and Qur’anic interpretation. Being relatively independent of male domination, female preachers serve as role models to other women, and appear to strengthen the case for the emergence of a ‘female ulama’ in Nigeria (Umar 2004).

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that mutual appropriation and borrowing between Islam and Christianity in Western Nigeria is enabled, in part, by what Peel (2011: 13) once described as ‘the religiously-unmarked cultural repertoire of the Yoruba’, and in part by a social imaginary that assigns pragmatic criteria to religious value (Danmole 2008). The power of this imaginary is evidenced not only in the inflection of Islam by ritual performances normally associated with Christian Pentecostalism, but also in the infusion of both by elements from Yoruba ‘traditional’ religion (Olupona 2000). Meyer’s (1992) work on the apparent diffusion of ‘pagan’ memes into Christianity among the Ewe of south-eastern Ghana shows that this dynamic is not exclusive to south-western Nigeria.

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