

The Clergy, Culture, and Political Conflicts in Nigeria

Wale Adebawwi

Abstract: This article explores contemporary manifestations of the politicization of culture by the Christian clergy in the determination and resolution of political conflicts in Nigeria in general and Yorubaland in particular—against the backdrop of what has been called “the civilizational hegemony of Christianity.” The article approaches religion and the practices it enables as part of a cultural system through which we can capture the specific ways in which religious authorities pursue political and ethnocultural interests to justify a particular social order.

Résumé: Cet article explore les manifestations contemporaines de l’infiltration de la politique dans la sphère culturelle à l’initiative du clergé Chrétien dans l’identification et la résolution des conflits politiques au Niger et en particulier dans la région du Yorubaland. Le contexte est celui d’un phénomène appelé “l’hégémonie de la civilisation chrétienne.” Cet article considère cette religion et les pratiques qu’elle encourage comme partie prenante d’un système culturel à travers lequel nous pouvons percevoir les moyens spécifiques utilisés par les autorités religieuses pour poursuivre des intérêts politiques et ethnoculturels afin de justifier un ordre social donné.

In February 2003, a couple of months before the general elections in Nigeria, Chief Abraham Adesanya, the leader of Afenifere, the pan-Yoruba sociocultural and political organization, asked two prominent Yoruba clerics—Bishop Emmanuel Gbonigi, the retired Bishop of Akure Diocese of the Church of Nigerian (Anglican Communion) and Bishop Ayo Ladigbolu, then the Bishop of Ilesha Diocese of the Methodist Church of Nigeria—to

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Wale Adebawwi is an assistant professor in the Program on African American and African Studies at the University of California, Davis. His articles have appeared in the *Journal of Historical Sociology*, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, the *Review of African Political Economy*, *Media, Culture, and Society*, *Citizenship Studies*, and *The African Anthropologist*. He co-edited *Encountering the Nigerian State* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010). E-mail: anadebanwi@ucdavis.edu

join him for an urgent meeting with President Olusegun Obasanjo at his Ota Farm House in Ogun State. Others invited included the governor of Ogun State, Chief Segun Osoba, a traditional ruler and a former Yoruba public officeholder.

Afenifere, along with its Alliance for Democracy (AD) political party (which the group had formed in line with the political ideas of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the late premier of the defunct Western Region), had entered into a secret political pact with the president over the forthcoming elections. In the confidential Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that Adesanya had sent to Obasanjo, Adesanya stated that “following my previous discussions with you and meetings with our [AD] Governors, there is a measure of understanding between us now for which reason the group has ensured that our party would not be confronting you with an opponent in the forthcoming elections. The Group therefore hopes that we can have agreement... [on a number of] essentials as the basis of our collaboration... While ensuring the quantum of votes for optimal advantage for you in our zone, there should be reciprocal respect for our hold on all the states in our political space” (MOU, Feb. 16, 2003).¹

Adesanya had summoned the clerics as witnesses to the meeting, where he told Obasanjo that he had “credible information”—as one of my respondents described it—that the president was planning to renege on a “critical” condition of the agreement, in favor of massive rigging that would lead to the electoral defeat of the Afenifere/AD candidates in the six Yoruba states. If this were to happen, the Afenifere leader feared a mass uprising that might lead to the collapse of the Fourth Republic—a repeat of what had happened in the First and Second Republics. This was partly why he had invited the clerics to join the emergency meeting with the president: to act as “God’s and posterity’s witnesses.”

Ladigbolu recalls that he and Gbonigi were invited because “we are visible and responsible Yoruba leaders who also servants of the Lord.” At the meeting the two clerics called for caution. In the end, President Obasanjo gave assurances that everyone would act within the law, adding that he would not renege on his promise, since “politics is not a do-or-die thing; winning or losing, we are all still citizens of Nigeria” (interview with Ladigbolu, Oyo, Jan. 8, 2007). As it turned out, the leaders and most members of the group believed that the president “tricked them” into the pact and never respected his end of the deal. There were accusations of massive rigging of the elections in Yorubaland by the president’s People’s Democratic Party (PDP), and all but one of the governors of the Afenifere/AD were defeated—“rigged out,” they say—at the polls by the PDP candidates. Afenifere/AD also lost its majority in all but one of the State Houses (Lagos), while only a few of its candidates for the federal parliament won elections against the PDP candidates. This defeat later caused an implosion in Afenifere/AD, and the resulting rancor among leading members of the group eventually necessitated the intervention of Ladigbolu and Gbonigi once more.

Why were clergymen, who were neither members of Afenifere/AD nor part of the pact, considered crucial to securing an assurance from the president? How can we understand the role of clerics in the resolution and/or amplification of (potential and real) cultural-political conflicts in Yorubaland? My focus in this article is on contemporary manifestations of the politicization of culture in political conflicts in Nigeria, specifically the activities of Yoruba Christian clergy and political leaders who are followers of Chief Obafemi Awolowo. The subject is particularly interesting given that some Muslims in Nigeria, particularly Hausa-Fulani (northern) Muslims, have come to reject what William Connolly (1999:24) describes as “the civilizational hegemony of Christianity,” first in Yorubaland, and ultimately in Nigeria.² For example, one of the most zealous critics of Christianity and the Yoruba in Nigeria, Ibrahim Ado-Kurawa, conflates the West, the Yoruba, and Christianity and dismisses the liberal public sphere “imposed” on Nigeria by this “trinity” as constituting “essentially the propagation of Western Christian values and the promotion of Yoruba Christian interests” (Ado-Kurawa 2001:343).³

Locating Yoruba Christianity

Given the historical trajectory of Christianity in Yorubaland, the Christian clergy has always been an important component of the super-elite (see Peel 2000). And given this fact and the dynamics that it has created, the Christian clerics and leading members of the social, economic, and political elite in Yorubaland in particular and Nigeria in general are related and interact through various networks, including those of friendship, kinship, marriage, and church membership. The so-called structural homology produced by these interlocking relationships—a type that Pierre Bourdieu (1984) describes in the case of France—functions in “reproducing social class relations by legitimating the unequal distribution of cultural capital” (Swartz 1997:130). In this section, I examine the theme of religion and power in the context of the cultural capital that the clerics possess.

The role of religion in shaping social and political life around the world, including its capacity to organize “people into cohesive social groups” and maintain “the order necessary to preserve societal functioning” (Mattis 2001:263; see also Mitchell & Morrison 1970; Durkheim 1915; Geertz 1989) has become part of the conventional wisdom in both lay and academic discourses. Following Geertz (1973), Mattis (2001:263) claims that religion “lends coherence to social life by providing people with common symbols, a shared collective identity, and systems of meaning and morality that manifest as a shared world view.” Geertz’s (1989) influential work is also taken as the departure point in Talal Asad’s (1983) important review of the anthropological conceptions of religion as a “cultural system.” I join all of these scholars in approaching religion and the practices it enables as part of a cultural system. Broadly speaking, I seek to capture the specific ways in

which religion and the pronouncements of its leading adherents are used to pursue political and ethnocultural interests and to rationalize a particular social order. Such an examination also leads to a study of the ways in which “power constructs religious ideology, establishes the conditions for distinctive kinds of religious personality, authorizes specifiable religious practices and utterances[, and] produces religiously defined knowledge” (Asad 1983:237).

In sub-Saharan Africa, even under colonialism (particularly in the late colonial era), Christianity contributed to social change and the rise of nationalism, and the roles of Christianity and other religions in the nationalist struggles in modern Africa have been noted and examined by many scholars.⁴ Christian ideas and institutions have always figured prominently in the political history of South Africa, for example, and they are interwoven with the social and cultural history of the country. Christian doctrines were central to the principle and practices of apartheid—whether for justification or for opposition—and the Christian leadership in South Africa was instrumental in the founding of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1912. As the struggle to end white minority rule deepened and expanded, both the antagonists and the protagonists tapped into “Christian affirmations, symbols, and rituals” (Elphick 1998:1).

In postcolonial Africa, especially from the 1980s on, various forms of indigenous Christian practices emphasizing the public role of religion have become common. Indeed, the politicization of religion has become part of the received wisdom in the literature on the developing world (see Adebaniwi 2005a). Daniel Levine (1986:97) argues that such politicization is conditioned by the socially pervasive character of religion, which makes it “a perennial source of political action and meaning” based on the “ability of religious metaphors, places and rituals to sum up and intensify popular experience.”

In Nigeria, religion “has become . . . deeply entwined with the tissue of everyday life” (Obadare 2004:177), and its central and critical role in public life has been emphasized, explored, deplored, and/or celebrated, both in academic and lay literature.⁵ Falola (2000:15) argues that “the politicization of Christianity in Nigeria is in large part a response to the challenge posed by Islam,” and recent literature on religion and politics in Africa generally tends to concentrate on the divisive (and even violent) role of religion. Scholars have also acknowledged that “religious forces can play constructive roles in conflict resolution” (Haynes 2009:53), although the role played by religion in the attenuation and resolution of conflict and in the building of intraethnic, panethnic, or cross-ethnic alliances—which is the topic of this article—has been studied less extensively.

Peel (2000) has provided convincing evidence that Christianity, and the associated discourses of enlightenment, development, and civilization (*olaju*), was critical to the making of Yoruba identity in the twentieth century and to overcoming the nineteenth-century legacy of disruption and violence (see Adebaniwi 2005b). He argues that the adoption of Christianity was the key fac-

tor in “transforming Yoruba identity in a single seamless process,” such that the “invention” or “imagining” of a unified Yoruba people and the “notion of a shared Yoruba identity” was a “direct corollary of the project of Christian evangelism” (2000:8,26). At the same time, he points out that Yoruba indigenous religious culture is unusually vital, adaptive, and tenacious, and that the Yoruba missionary clergy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries aimed to “maximiz[e] the area of possible agreement between Christianity and Yoruba culture” (2000:116). E. A. Ayandele (1966) points out that the Yoruba, while eager to appropriate the project, values, and benefits of *olaju*, still insisted on and promoted the validity and vitality of their indigenous culture. This “contradictory impulse” led Yoruba Christians to separate out what they saw as *pure* Yoruba culture (which excluded the pagan practices of traditional religion) and then to marry this sanitized culture with the “liberating theology” of Christianity.⁶ While in the past such an approach was a strategic response to European domination, in contemporary times it has been useful in the lived (social, political, and economic) experiences of the Yoruba and in their encounters with other ethnic groups (see Adebaniwi 2005b). Christian clerics are involved in reviving Yoruba language and culture with the goal of championing Yoruba ideals in the struggle for power among the major ethnic groups in Nigeria, and they also intervene regularly in the political conflicts in Yorubaland between and among the core political elite in Afenifere and the rival Yoruba Council of Elders (YCE).

Apart from spending two years in Nigeria during fieldwork between 2005 and 2007—during which I gathered the data for this article—I have interacted closely with key members of the Yoruba elite and have studied them closely for many years. I attended a number of meetings and peace-making gatherings, although I was sometimes excused or not even admitted into the inner room of discussions, and I also conducted formal and informal interviews with clerics, politicians, opinion leaders, and other relevant social actors. Since clergymen and other members of the elite are regularly in the news, I supplemented such participant observation with library and archival research, particularly in newspapers and newsmagazines.

I will argue in this article that Christian clerics directly engage political power and Yoruba culture as legitimators in the context of the crises of the postcolonial state. I attempt to uncover why and how they play this role, against the backdrop of the fact that Christianity has had a distinctive preoccupation with power (Asad 1983:238) from its early beginnings. This is particularly interesting given the fact that the discourses of agency or actorhood are central to the Yoruba cultural grammar.

Religion, Agency, and Cultural “Intervention”

In the study of culture and politics, Gramsci (1971) has alerted us to the importance of focusing not on “stable, bounded cultural wholes, but [on] relationships and how these create fluid and shifting social entities” Specifi-

cally, Gramsci conceives of societies not as “mosaics of different cultures, hybrid or otherwise,” but rather as “constellations of different power groups” (Crehan 2002:66). Other scholars have examined the role of human agency in larger social contexts, and various viewpoints have emerged regarding the interplay of individuals, power groups, and culture.⁷ In general, a consensus has emerged about the “active, reflexive character of human conduct” (Giddens 1984:xvi) and about the role of individual agency in the elaboration of structural and cultural arrangements (Archer 2000). This consensus transcends the structural-functionalist traditions, in which structure trumps agency and where actors are conceived of as either “cultural dopes” (as in the Parsonian tradition) or “structural dopes” (as in Althusserian tradition).

Nevertheless, Bourdieu (1977:233), echoing Gramsci and his emphasis on power relations as the key to understanding sociopolitical reality, claims that actors by and large “misrecognize” how cultural resources, processes, and institutions lock individuals and groups into reproducing patterns of domination. By implication, he argues for an activist theory of culture in which the “usurpation” of actors by culture in the context of specific power relations is recognized and unveiled. Key to this intellectual project is “the question of how stratified social systems of hierarchy and domination persist and reproduce themselves intergenerationally without powerful resistance and without conscious recognition of their members.” The answer to this question, Bourdieu argues, “can be found by exploring how cultural resources, processes, and institutions hold individuals and groups in competitive and self-perpetuating hierarchies of domination” (Swartz 1997:6–7).

While Bourdieu does argue persuasively about the power of culture to enfold actors within its hegemonic discourses, he does not, I believe, account adequately for the consciousness of the actors themselves. In pointing to what he describes as the “unacknowledged interests that actors follow when they participate in the social order,” he overlooks the fact that such participation does not necessarily mean lack of awareness. His argument also ignores the fact that what is called “culture” in any particular context exists in a dynamic relationship with the actions of the definers and defenders of that culture. Actors, in other words, are themselves implicated in the construction of social and cultural discourses, and their actions reinforce the structures and practices of such hegemonies in specific contexts and in particular ways. It is a two-way street.

Nevertheless, Bourdieu’s ideas on how groups pursue strategies to produce and reproduce the conditions of their collective existence, and how culture is constitutive of this reproductive process, is very useful for my understanding of the Yoruba case that I examine in this article. In proposing a structural theory of practice, Bourdieu connects action to culture, structure, and power within structured arenas of conflict he calls “fields.” He draws on Weber’s sociology of religion to posit that all action, including symbolic pursuits, is carried out to advance the interests of the parties in-

volved. In this sense he extends the Marxist notion of capital to all forms of power, whether they are material, cultural, social, or symbolic. Arguing that individuals and groups have the capacity to draw upon a variety of cultural, social, and symbolic resources in order to maintain and enhance their positions in the social order, he conceptualizes such resources as capital when they function as a “social relation of *power*, that is, when they become objects of struggle as valued resources” (Swartz 1997:74; emphasis added).

In Bourdieu’s reading there are four generic types of capital that are produced and appropriated and that circulate within fields. Three of these are relevant to my understanding of the Yoruba case: cultural capital (cultural goods and services, including educational credentials); social capital (acquaintances and networks); and symbolic capital (legitimation). This concept of capital invites us to pay attention to the latent patterns of interests and struggles that shape the behavior of groups and institutions. What I propose to show is that an account of the instrumental uses of religion and culture in contemporary Yoruba society can illuminate the nature of power relations, along with the attendant contestations and inequalities that such relations imply.

The Apostles of Peace: The Clergy and Cultural Agency

Fratricidal conflicts and crises are not unusual among the Yoruba elite.⁸ Despite their grand narrative of immemorial unity and solidarity, the making of the Yoruba as a common ethnicity involved fratricidal conflict among the various subethnic groups (Johnson 1926; Peel 2000), which degenerated into long years of civil war in Yorubaland after the collapse of the Oyo Empire in the nineteenth century. During the First Republic (1960–66), when a crisis broke out in the Yoruba-dominated political party Action Group (AG), three clerics, Bishops Seth I. Kale, S. O. Odutola, and I. O. Jaiyesimi, were the leading peacemakers between Chief Obafemi Awolowo and his estranged deputy, the then Premier of the Western Region, Chief S. L. A. Akintola. Peel (2000:8) characterized the work of these clerics as “Acts of the Apostles.” Following Awolowo’s death, a struggle ensued within the mainstream power elite in Yorubaland over the matter of succession, and particularly over who embodied the essential qualities of Awolowo’s leadership. It is this story of conflict and conflict resolution that I highlight here, especially the role of the Venerable Emmanuel Alayande (who died in October 2006), Bishop Emmanuel Gbonigi, and Bishop Ayo Ladigbolu.

The late Archdeacon Emmanuel Oladipupo Alayande (1910–2006) was born into a Muslim family in Ibadan. He converted to Christianity in 1917 at the St. Peter’s Church, Aremo, Ibadan, which later became the home church of most of the Ibadan Christian elite. Following his education at St. Andrew’s College in Oyo, he served in several towns in Yorubaland and later became the principal of Ibadan Grammar School (1948–68), where many members of the emerging late colonial elite were trained. Alayande met Awolowo in

London, where the latter had formed the Egbe Omo Oduduwa (Society for Oduduwa Descendants). He later joined the Egbe in Nigeria and the Awolowo-led Action Group (AG), serving first as the AG financial secretary and later as chaplain. "I doubt if Awo trusted anyone like he trusted me," Alayande boasted to me.

Bishop Emmanuel Bolanle Gbonigi has served as Bishop of various dioceses in Yorubaland and recently retired as Bishop of Akure Diocese of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion). He too has had long-standing personal and religious relationships with key members of the Awolowo political movement. Gbonigi first met Awolowo in Ikenne, Awo's home-stead, in 1978. During Nigeria's struggle against military fascism in the 1990s, Gbonigi achieved fame for his courageous attacks on the regime's human rights violations and subversion of democracy; he was dubbed the "NADECO Bishop" in reference to his association with the umbrella pro-democracy National Democratic Coalition. After the collapse of the Abacha regime he was elected president of Yoruba Parapo (the Yoruba Solidarity Council), a group of eminent Yoruba citizens organized to promote Yoruba culture and interests, retiring in 2001 after forty-seven years of service. He has since become one of the leading voices for Yoruba ethnonationalism. Recently, on the subject of perceived Hausa-Fulani domination in Nigeria, he stated, "We are not fools. This country belongs to all of us. . . . The Fulani are saying that they were born to rule, but over who? . . . We Yoruba are ready to tell them that we are born equal" (*Nigerian Tribune*, Feb. 25, 2010).

Bishop Lawrence Sanda Ayo Ladigbolu was born into the influential royal (Muslim) family of Oyo. His father was an Alaafin (king) of Oyo, and as a prince of the ancient Alafinate he is well-versed in Yoruba culture. His sermons are always interspersed with Yoruba proverbs and Ifa (oracle) chants and wisdom. Indeed, Chief Bola Ige has described him as the best preacher in the mother tongue (interview with Ladigbolu, Oyo, Feb. 10, 2006). The Ladigbolu family has supported the Awolowo political movement starting from the time of the Action Group. Ladigbolu said that his family "looked up to Awolowo as a leader," and when he became a Methodist minister he became closer to Awolowo, who, he said, "took a special interest in me." He has preached at two of the remembrance services held annually for Awolowo. Bishop Ladigbolu retired in December 2005 but is still the favorite preacher of many of the key members of the Yorubaland elite. Upon his retirement he told the press that "I will be involved in the [affairs of] the Yoruba nation and creating greater unity among the Yoruba leaders as well as fostering the unity and prosperity of the Yoruba nation and of course of Nigeria, in totality" (*Daily Independent*, Dec. 28, 2005).

One of the similarities among the three clerics is that they all were posted around Yorubaland during the course of their careers and therefore met and mixed with different sectors of the elite in their home areas. Most of the key members of the Yoruba political elite who organized around

Awolowo were Protestant (“mainline”) Christians, particularly Anglicans and Methodists. Given the importance of one’s hometown (*ilu*) in Yorubaland (see Trager 2001), even for people who no longer live there, the bishops of the home areas are held in high esteem, and their clerical office gives them great leverage in Yoruba society. Another factor adding to the prominence of these clergymen is that unlike their Islamic counterparts, they received a Western education and could interact with the elite as social equals. “I think educational background is responsible,” said Bishop Gbonigi (interview, Ibadan, Jan. 18, 2007).

At the same time, even Yoruba Muslims and traditional religionists respect the Christian clerics.⁹ All Yoruba tend to see themselves primarily as Yoruba before they are Muslims or worshippers of local gods, and while some non-Christians may be uncomfortable with the dominance of Christians in the larger Yoruba national project, they accept and embrace the project itself. Bishop Ladigbolu argues that the clerics are trusted because they in fact show greater concern for overall Yoruba political and cultural welfare than their Muslim and even Pentecostal counterparts. Both he and Bishop Gbonigi contend that their cultural legitimacy stems partly from the tendency of the Nigerian people to “look for somebody who will be the voice of the voiceless, . . . who will let those in power know the feelings of the people and where they hurt” (interview with Gbonigi, Ibadan, Jan. 18, 2007). Ladigbolu also thinks that Christian clerics are prominent in political conflict resolution because “there is something that is radiated to the people, maybe about the Christian faith, maybe about our own ways of living the Christian life. Like the shadows of [Saint] Peter fell on people and they got well” (interview, Oyo, Jan. 8, 2007).

Bisi Alamun, one of the two young politicians who contacted the priests to intervene in the Afenifere/AD crisis, points out that the original invitations to witness the agreement with President Obasanjo suggested that the Afenifere leaders themselves must have expected the clerics to exert a special influence over the Yoruba leaders (interview, Ibadan, Jan. 20, 2007). Indeed, the record of success in conflict resolution that the clergymen have achieved over the years has itself increased their symbolic capital and specifically their reputation as mediators (interview with Ladigbolu, Oyo, Jan. 10, 2006). Despite the greater visibility of Pentecostal (“born again”) leaders—such as the Reverend Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Church, Bishop David Oyedepo of Living Faith Church (otherwise known as Winner’s Chapel), and the Reverend William F. Kumuyi of the Deeper Life Bible Church—as well as their massive congregations and substantial influence with political officeholders, they are hardly ever invited to intervene in politicocultural crises. One major explanation that could be offered, following Ruth Marshall-Fratani (1998) and Van Dijk (1997), is that these charismatic leaders “create a moral and physical geography whose domain is one of transnational cultural interpenetration and flow” (Van Dijk 1997:142); their ethos and teachings, by design, erode identification with and allegiance to the

nation-state or other “moral communities” such as the ethnic group (Marshall-Fratani 1998:281). Such “flow” not only downplays the dynamics of the specific cultural context, but it in fact treats “culture”—or “tradition”—as one of the great impediments to the victory of the transcendental essence of Christianity. It is probably relevant as well that the Pentecostal churches in Yorubaland—whether in response to this message or vice versa—tend to be much more multiethnic than their Protestant counterparts, and for the clerics the diverse needs of their congregations may stand in the way of direct political advocacy. Still, Marshall-Fratani argues that Pentecostal conversion, while not implying the rejection of other identities, does involve assimilation within a complex of global discourses and practices that deflects attention from the local arena (see also Gilford 1995).

In the specific cases that I discuss below, I suggest that the clerics, in important ways, are continuing the nineteenth-century project of the early Christian evangelists to write “Christianity into Yoruba culture and history” (see Adebani 2005b:342). Samuel Johnson’s influential *History of the Yoruba*, written in the late nineteenth century but published in 1927, ends with a vision of a new Yoruba society emerging from the ruins of war, as well as the injunction that “the wish and prayer of every true son of Yoruba” should be

that peace should reign universally, with prosperity and advancement, and that the disjointed units [of the Yoruba nation] should be once more welded into one under one head from Niger to the coast . . . , that clannish spirit disappear, and above all that Christianity should be the principal religion in the land—paganism and Mohammedanism having had their full trial. . . . (1921:642)

In this spirit, I now turn to an examination of some of the critical conflicts in which the three clerics attempted to ensure such a reign of peace, prosperity, and advancement in Yorubaland.

Turmoil in Yorubaland: Conflicts and the Clerics

Potentially destabilizing conflicts among the dominant Yoruba political elite first broke out in 1962 when the Awolowo-led Action Group was factionalized. However, the crises that engulfed the group in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were different in that the central signifier of modern Yorubanness, Awolowo, was no longer alive. Thus it became difficult to arrange the rivals according to a simple axis of right/good versus wrong/evil. In the resulting scenario, every side and every individual claimed to represent Awolowo’s heritage and to be the most qualified to carry Awo’s mantle in Yoruba and national politics.

It is therefore interesting that the three clerics who were historically very close to Awolowo, and whose deep understanding of that heritage

could not be challenged, were the people who were invited to intervene in the crises. Also, it must be noted that in the particular case of the crisis that engulfed the AD in the post-Bola Ige era (the third case examined below), it had been impossible before the clerics' intervention to find anyone with the status and respect that could bring the warring parties to the table.

Afenifere Leaders' Crisis (Ige versus "Ijebu Four")

The first major crisis that threatened the group solidarity in Afenifere resulted, ironically, from the group's victory over martial fascism, which led to a return to democratic rule in Nigeria on May 29, 1999. When the military regime led by General A. Abubakar announced a credible plan for a return to democracy, two key Afenifere members expressed interest in the presidency: Chief Bola Ige, the deputy leader of Afenifere and former governor of Oyo State, and Chief Olu Falae, the former secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF) and former finance minister. Since the rest of the country had more or less conceded the presidency to the Yoruba, the Alliance for Democracy asked Afenifere to produce the presidential flag-bearer.

Bola Ige, acclaimed by his supporters as the "Arole Awolowo" (pillar of Awolowo's lineage, or heir to Awolowo) and the most popular and respected Yoruba politician of his generation, brought impressive credentials to the race. Olu Falae was a credible opponent, however; he had won votes across the geopolitical zones in Nigeria and built an impressive network of supporters during the Babangida transition program when, at the behest of the Awolowo camp, he ran for the presidency on the platform of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). But Ige and his supporters considered Falae's candidacy within the Afenifere as an affront, since he was not an original member of the Action Group and had never been, like Ige, Awo's lieutenant. The Afenifere caucus eventually decided that an electoral college, or "screening committee," of twenty-three people would be constituted to select the candidate of Afenifere/AD. The primary was held at the D'Rovans hotel in Ibadan, and despite Ige's confidence he was defeated.

All hell seemed to break loose following this event, which came to be described as the "D'Rovans Affair." Even though Ige publicly claimed to accept the results, he and his supporters regarded the decision of the group as an "apostasy" and "the beginning of the end of the AD."¹⁰ The group became so factionalized that a crisis similar to the one experienced in the First Republic became an alarming possibility. Some of the younger Afenifere sympathizers came together under the auspices of Alajobi (meaning, consanguinity or common progeny) and decided to invite Archdeacon Alayande to chair a reconciliation meeting. The meeting was held on March 26, 2000, at the home of Chief Adesanya in Ijebu-Igbo.¹¹ In attendance were the warring Yoruba elders; the Alajobi chairman, Dare Babarinsa, a journalist and activist; and the Alajobi secretary, Akinyemi Onigbinde, a philosophy teacher at Ogun State University.

At the opening of the meeting Babarinsa praised the elders for their sacrifice and commitment over the years and Alayande, recalling two earlier attempts to settle the conflict, insisted that at this meeting the whole truth would emerge. Alayande proceeded with the story of Egbe Omo Oduduwa's founding, his introduction to Awolowo in 1944, and their enduring friendship. He traced the disunity in Yorubaland to the time of S. L. A. Akintola (who succeeded Awolowo as premier but later formed Egbe Omo Olofin) and implicitly deplored the disagreement between Adesanya and Ige as a recapitulation of that earlier conflict. He concluded by invoking the spirits of the Yoruba ancestors and calling for God's guidance in settling the dispute (see Oshun 2005).¹²

All the feuding rivals then spoke up to express their grievances, some of which dated back to the 1980s. But they all resolved to bury the hatchet and work together for the interest of the Yoruba nation. The meeting ended with a number of resolutions, including the introduction of a system of crisis resolution that would ensure that "outsiders" and the non-Yoruba would not be involved in Yoruba national matters and the recognition by all the leaders that "there is only one Yoruba nation, it has a common interest and one inescapable destiny" (minutes of the meeting, March 26, 2000).

At the end of the meeting Alayande said that the resolution of the crisis was the best thing to have happened to him, adding that he could now die in peace and be able to tell Awolowo when they met in heaven that things were well in Yorubaland. He thanked all for the honor they had conferred on him in inviting him to preside over the reconciliation.

Afenifere–YCE Conflict

As it turned out, another crisis intervened before Alayande could hold his anticipated postmortem meeting with Awolowo.

Justice Adewale Thompson, who had administered the oath of secrecy during the D'Rovans primaries, did not attend the meeting at Ijebu-Igbo. But both before and after the meeting he issued press statements about the D'Rovans Affair and also wrote about it in his column for the *Nigerian Tribune*—in express violation of the oath that he himself had administered—in order to attack the Afenifere leaders of the Ijebu subethnic group whom he saw as Ige's enemies. According to Thompson, the selection of an electoral college—in which he had participated—"was a violation of that traditional transparency of the Awo club" through which Ige was "cheated" (*Nigerian Tribune*, March 17, 1999). Thompson also told Bishop Gbonigi that Ige had been "cheated" (interview with Gbonigi, Akure, Dec. 16, 2005).

Thompson, who like Ige was from the Ijesa subethnic group, later became the impetus behind the formation in 2000 of a rival group called the Yoruba Council of Elders (YCE) (Igbimo Egbe Agba). Although described as a nonpartisan pan-Yoruba group to which the Afenifere leaders could also belong (membership was open to all Yuroba over the age of 60), the

YCE clearly was formed in response to Ige's defeat at D'Rovans and as a means of contesting the leaders' legitimacy (see Johnson 2000). According to the conveners of the YCE, the council would be "the supreme authority of the Yoruba nation in all matters of public interest which have degenerated into disputes or communal strife or political controversy" (Oshun 2005:76). Despite such conciliatory language, however, a spokesperson for Afenifere described the formation of the YCE as an attempt to sow seeds of discord in the ranks of Yoruba leaders: "It is not an attempt to bring us together. We suspect very strongly that they are being influenced by external forces to bring disunity and problem to Yorubaland" (Johnson 2000).

Initially, Archdeacon Alayande disassociated himself publicly from the group.¹³ However, at its first meeting, on October 21, 2000, he directed the proceedings and was formally elected president. Some believed that he must have caved in to pressures from Ige. He later told the press that "I have agreed to be part of it after much persuasion. It is a venture that is so important; so nerve-racking" (Oshun 2005:78).

Meanwhile, members of Bishop Gbonigi's Yoruba Parapo had decided to try to prevent the factionalization of Afenifere. According to Gbonigi,

[At a] point . . . some people came to me and said, God has given you a name; you are a credible Yoruba man. It doesn't matter what you are to the whole country, you are a Yoruba man. *Ile la ti i k'eso r'ode* [Charity begins at home]. You should not watch and see . . . the way the Yoruba are going . . . [without trying to help]. (Interview, Akure, Dec. 16, 2005)

Gbonigi met with Alayande and Adesanya and asked each leader to send twelve members from the group with which each was associated (YCE and Afenifere, respectively), to a meeting. He also asked them to suggest some "credible Yoruba people" who were uninvolved in partisan politics who would join him in adjudicating and reconciling the warring men. Those who agreed to participate were Justice Kayode Esho, retired justice of the Supreme Court; Justice Akinola Aguda (now late), retired judge of the Federal Appeal Court; Chief F. R. A. Williams (now late), perhaps Nigeria's most prominent lawyer, who ended up sending his eldest son in his place; and Fola Ighodalo, the retired permanent secretary in the Ministry of Trade and Industry of the defunct Western Region. The meeting took place early in 2001 in Ibadan, although Ige did not attend or send his apologies. After the two sides stated their cases, the bishop concluded that the controversy hinged on the D'Rovans Affair and everyone agreed that Ige's presence was crucial to the resolution of the crisis. Adesanya then asked Bishop Gbonigi to call a meeting of a few influential people to appeal to Ige (interview, Akure, Dec. 16, 2005).

This meeting, which included the original group of "credible Yoruba" along with the former military governor of Old Western Region, General Adeyinka Adebayo, and the former head of Government Service in the old

Western Region, C. S. O. Akande, took place in Williams's chambers in Lagos about two months after the first meeting in Ibadan. Ige promised to join them, again failed to turn up, and then repeated this behavior on three subsequent occasions, all the while avoiding Gbonigi and neglecting to return his telephone calls. "I don't blame him," said Gbonigi, "because . . . as his bishop it would have been very difficult for . . . Bola Ige to say 'no' to me" (interview, Akure, Dec. 16, 2005).

Solanke Onasanya died in November 2001. The following month, Bola Ige was assassinated; Thompson's death followed in 2004. With the key members of the warring groups no longer alive, Bishop Gbonigi assumed the role of peacemaker once more, leading in the formation of Igbimo Omo Oduduwa (the Council of Oduduwa Descendants), an umbrella organization for all Yoruba groups, both in Nigeria and in the diaspora, and dedicated to the goal of ending discord and conflict in Yorubaland.

Fresh Afenifere/AD Crises

By 2003, the crisis within Afenifere-AD and between the group and the YCE had taken a different turn. YCE had enjoyed a deep romance with President Obasanjo, although it eventually led to disillusionment on the part of Adewale Thompson, particularly after the assassination of Bola Ige. But while Thompson was denouncing Obasanjo in the newspapers, the president was making friends with other members of the Council. He also was able, as we saw above, to convince the leaders of Afenifere to support him for the 2003 presidential election. The defeat of AD in Yoruba states by Obasanjo's PDP led to accusations and counteraccusations between the leaders and the governors over who had "sold out" to Obasanjo. The situation degenerated to the point that only the governor of Ondo State continued to attend Afenifere meetings.

Eventually, Governor Bola Tinubu of Lagos, who was in alliance with the PDP's Vice President Atiku Abubakar—in the hope of forming a common front in 2007—convinced the other former governors and others to form a faction in the AD and Afenifere. Most of the older men supported Senator Mojisoluwa Akinfenwa for the national chairmanship of the AD, while Tinubu and others supported Chief Bisi Akande, the former governor of Osun State, for the same position. Two parallel conventions of the party were held with the two men emerging as factional leaders. The trend was repeated in Afenifere, with Tinubu-Akande and others declaring Senator Ayo Fasanmi, who became deputy leader of Afenifere after Ige's death, as the acting leader of the Afenifere in the absence of the ailing Adesanya. Earlier, Afenifere had appointed Chief Reuben Fasoranti as the acting leader when Adesanya became totally incapacitated. The Fasoranti faction subsequently announced the suspension of Fasanmi and others, while the Fasanmi faction also announced the suspension of Fasoranti and others. Therefore, Afenifere, like AD, also split into two factions. Bishop Gbonigi at

this point said he personally visited Fasoranti to tell him that “we Yoruba are ashamed because of the way things are going among you” (interview with Gbonigi, Akure, Dec. 16, 2005), but nothing came of that intervention.

In 2005, two politicians in Osun State and members of the AD, Bisi Alamun and Olapade Fakunle, contacted Bishop Ladigbolu and asked him to intervene in the crisis. Bishop Ladigbolu made some limited attempts at that point but was hampered by the need to arrange for his impending retirement. Then, in 2006, in a sermon that was part of the birthday celebration for the former governor of Ondo State, Adebayo Adefarati, the preacher launched into a discussion of the AD crisis and beseeched members of the AD to bury the hatchet. Moved by the preacher’s advice, Gbonigi asked AD members to meet after the service (interview with Bisi Alamun, Ibadan, Jan. 20, 2007). When Alamun and Fakunle heard about this initiative, they decided to appeal to both Bishop Gbonigi and Bishop Ladigbolu for help in resolving the crisis. Both clerics promised to pray over the request and to seek God’s guidance (interview with Bisi Alamun, Ibadan, Jan. 20, 2007).

In March 2006 Bishop Gbonigi requested separate meetings at his country home in Akure with the leaders of the AD factions, Chief Akande and Senator Akinfenwa. He reminded both men of the essential unity of the Yoruba race and the legacy of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, adding that reconciliation was still possible. These meetings were followed by a letter from Gbonigi (and delivered by Alamun and Fakunle) to all the former and current AD governors inviting them to attend a reconciliatory meeting. The meeting was hosted by the former governor of Ogun State, Segun Osoba, in his house in Lagos on April 30, 2006.

Bishop Gbonigi opened the meeting with a “powerful sermon” that he delivered to the warring politicians (interview with Alamun, Ibadan, Jan. 20, 2007). By the end of the meeting, the bishop and the two facilitators felt that at the level of the governors, at least, the crisis had been resolved. The governors asked Gbonigi to meet with the Afenifere leaders on both sides and then convene a larger reconciliation meeting for the Afenifere and the AD.

Gbonigi subsequently invited the Afenifere leaders, including Reuben Fasoranti, Sir Olaniwun Ajayi, Chief Ayo Adebajo, Alhaji Ganiyu Dawodu, Chief Olu Falae, Chief Wunmi Adegbonmire, and Femi Okunrounmun. One of the elders had told me that he was not planning to attend the reconciliation meeting and that he planned to tell Gbonigi, “My Lord Bishop, . . . there is no need for the meeting. There is no need for the meeting of light and darkness” (anonymous key member of the Afenifere, telephone conversation, May 27, 2006). Eventually, however, Gbonigi persuaded all the invited leaders to meet with him, although most of the elders at that gathering (which took place on May 22, 2006) told the bishop that reconciliation was not possible. Some of the leaders accused the governors of “treachery, betrayal and abandonment of the ideals of the Awolowo group.” Eventually, however, Gbonigi was asked to speak to Senator Fasanmi and then meet with both factions of Afenifere at the same time.

Gbonigi met Fasanmi and a few of his associates, although unknown to Gbonigi, the Fasoranti faction was already planning to create a new party and the Fasanmi faction was planning to join an emerging alliance with the former governor of Osun State, Bisi Akande. Still, the AD and Afenifere reconciliation meeting was scheduled for later that summer, eventually taking place on August 2, 2006, at the Institute of Church and Society, Samonda, Ibadan. In the meantime, Bishop Gbonigi wrote to Bishop Ladigbolu to update him on what had been accomplished and invited him to join the meeting as one of the three who were “to listen [and] arbitrate” (Ladigbolu, interview, Oyo, Jan. 8, 2007).

The August 2 meeting did take place, although while the Akinfenwa faction of AD was fully represented, the Bisi Akande faction of AD “had no quality representation” (Gbonigi, interview, Akure, Dec. 16, 2005). All the subsequent efforts to get Akande to attend proved abortive, and the clerics had to abandon the peace efforts. Ladigbolu, however, still nurses hope for a united Yoruba nation in the future:

We knew they were going to go their different ways and we just prayed that someday, sometimes, maybe in another generation, something better than this will happen to the Yoruba race when people will be better organized and their leadership will be focused enough not to be selfish. . . . In the political leadership in Yorubaland there can never be real consensus, because the binding factors are gone, the Awolowos. . . . [What we have is] this new generation of self-seeking, position-grabbing leaders. And what do you do? You just have to wait. And like Ogunde said in “*Yoruba Ro’nu!*” [Yoruba, Ponder!], after this era of thick darkness, we can still hope for a glorious dawn. (Interview, Oyo, Jan. 8, 2007)

The Westerner (Sept. 24–30, 2006), described the turn of events in a cover story as “Danger: Yoruba in Disarray. . . as Unity Talks Flop.” About one year later, in late 2007, the elders of Afenifere asked Justice Kayode Eso and Bishops Ladigbolu and Gbonigi to make another attempt to reconcile the warring Awolowo followers. Nothing came out of this, too.

Conclusion

While contemporary Yoruba Christians and their clergymen are no longer as concerned as their nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century predecessors with “maximizing the area of possible agreement between Christianity and Yoruba culture,” to quote John Peel, the cases examined here may indicate that these clergymen have taken much of this “agreement” for granted and internalized the mission that they assume the agreement authorizes—which predisposes them to constant intervention in political and cultural disputes.

The three clerics are focused on the Yoruba nation as the prism through which they approach the Nigerian state. In many ways, they operate from the same politico-cultural register as the feuding politicians. In this sense, loyalty to the ethnic group and its assumed interests undergirds the peace process. Therefore, Yoruba cultural narratives of loyalty and betrayal are central elements of the peacemaking process. The clerics aimed to ensure loyalty to a “common cause,” erase fears of the betrayal of the cause, and restore the real or imagined betrayers of the cause to the dominant strand in Yoruba cultural politics. Also, because the specific politics of the group whose crises they were trying to resolve reflects the ideological outlook of the clerics on the Nigerian state, the clerics also saw their commitment to the peace process as a way of facilitating the important work of a political elite that they believe is best placed to lead Nigeria.

Bourdieu, in his concept of field, alerts us to the inclinations and dispositions toward power within cultures by agents who are thus bound to enter into conflicts. Indeed, these inclinations and dispositions made the resolution of the crises within Afenifere/AD difficult to resolve despite the best efforts of the clerics. Yet in spite of the collapse of the initiatives, it cannot be said that the clerics failed, because to some extent they helped attenuate the conflicts. However, the efforts of the clerics were a demonstration of their view on the primacy of the collective cultural interest of the Yoruba nation over personal ambitions and calculations. In this sense, contrary to Bourdieu’s arguments, the clerics, as cultural actors, reproduced culture by their actions and practices in the name of Yoruba culture. The interests that they pursued in the context of the social order were not unacknowledged. Consequently, where Yoruba culture provides the context for the practices and actions of the clerics and the warring politicians, through their commonsense assumptions about the culture and Yoruba interests, the actors also reinforce and transform the structures and practices of Yoruba political culture in specific contexts and in particular ways. However, the cultural authority on which the efforts of the clerics was based would appear to be insufficient in goading the politicians toward reconciliatory, collective cultural aspirations—even though such a push toward collective vision was what the factions claimed as their mantra. Each of the sides to the dispute accused the other of “betrayal,” given that the narratives of loyalty and betrayal are very strong in Yoruba politics and cultural life. Such narratives constitute very important cultural scripts and schema that people use in negotiating power and interests. Understandably, therefore, the crises, in Sablins’s (1985:xiii) words, “bear distinctive cultural signatures.” As Bolaji Akinyemi, formerly a ranking member of Afenifere and former federal external affairs minister, told me during fieldwork, in the “Awolowo political family mentality . . . political difference is always turned into mortal enmity: you are disloyal, you are an enemy. No middle-ground” (interview, Lagos, July 27, 2006). As evident in Awolowo’s reaction to the clerics who met

him in the early 1960s—while he was in jail—to make proposals on how to end the political crisis (see Awolowo 1985), when political differences are cast in the mode of the struggle between light and darkness, with religious rhetoric of good and evil, righteousness and unrighteousness, true or full reconciliation is almost always impossible. Therefore, even the intervention of the men of God could not help in resolving the crises because the factions had already constructed each other as fighting for or against politico-cultural and religious righteousness.

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Notes

1. I was given a copy of this MOU by one of the ranking members of the group.
2. Connolly (1999:5,8) deconstructs what he describes as "secular conceit [which] provide[s] a single, authoritative basis of public reason and/or public ethics that govern all responsible citizens regardless of 'personal' or 'private' faith," while being bound up with "generic characteristics of Christian culture."

3. There is a measure of contradiction in the twin issue of the “civilizational hegemony of Christianity” and the “political dominance of (northern) Muslims”—and therefore Islam—in Nigeria. For instance, Barnes (2004:63) discusses how, in spite of the fact that British colonial officials were Christians, they practiced “a covert policy of favoring the expansion of Islam at the expense of Christianity in the north of Nigeria.”
4. See Furlong (1992); Hastings (1979); Ayandele (1966); Ajayi (1965); Webster (1964); Parrinder (1953); Hopkins (1966); Goedhals (2003),
5. On indigenous expressions of Christianity, see Goedhals (2003). Paul Gilford (1995:1) catalogs the involvement of clergymen in the public sphere in Africa in Benin, Gabon, Congo, Kenya, Malawi, and Zaire, where leading clerics in “mainline churches” either presided over the national conferences or led the criticisms of dictators and tyrants. However, some clerics have also played “the contrary role of supporting oppressive regimes and opposing reforms” (Gilroy 1995:3). See also Kamrava (1993); Levine (1986); Ekeh (1996); Marshall (1991, 1993); Ibrahim (1991, 1998, 2001); Akinrinade and Ojo (1992); Kukah (1993, 1996); Haynes (1994, 2009); Suberu (1996); Udoidem (1997); Ilesanmi (1997, 2001); Ado-Kurawa (2001); Gaiya (2002); Kalu (2003); Obadare (2004, 2005, 2006, 2007).
6. For a related attempt—with different specificities—by Zionist Christians in South Africa to merge Christian ideals with the old Zulu religion, see Sundkler (2004:238–59).
7. On the interplay among structure, culture, and individual agency, see Giddens (1979, 1984); Archer (1988, 1995, 2000, 2003); Ritzer (1996); Emirbayer and Mische (1998).
8. See Sklar (1963); Coleman (1958); Dudley (1982); Awolowo (1985).
9. There have been attempts since the 1950s to challenge the dominance of Christians among leading politicians in Yorubaland, leading, for instance, to the creation of a Muslim party in Yorubaland. See *West African Pilot* (1953), p. 1. But this party did not survive. For recent changes in Muslim attitudes see, Agbaje, Okunola, and Adebani (2002).
10. Itse Sagay, an Ige admirer, published a piece in *The Guardian* (Feb. 18, 1999) in which he so described the action as “AD’s Apostasy.” It turned out to be a correct prediction.
11. Details of the reconciliation meeting, as captured here, were gathered from several interviews with informants—most of whom would not like to be identified—as well as from one informant’s handwritten records of the meeting. I have also referred to Olawale Oshun’s (2005) account as a backdrop.
12. As I have argued earlier, for Alayande there was nothing contradictory in a Christian cleric’s invoking ancestors. This would have been unthinkable for the new Pentecostal clerics.
13. Bishop Gbonigi stated in a newspaper interview that when he and others wanted to create a nonpartisan Yoruba umbrella group, Egbe Apapo Omo Yoruba, Alayande “emphatically told us he was angry with us. . . . He [Alayande] said, ‘Why do you have to start another Yoruba cultural organisation?’ And that, we should all join Afenifere.” See Oshun (2005:75).