The Rabbi's Well: A Case Study in the Micropolitics of Foreign Aid in Muslim West Africa

William F. S. Miles

Abstract: A conventional distinction in the foreign aid literature contrasts relief aid (qua emergency help and charitable giving) with developmental assistance (for sustainable economic growth, capacity building, and equitable distribution). In practice, however, the distinction blurs, and in the field it can lead to micropolitical conflict. This point is illustrated by the ecumenical efforts on the part of a U.S. rabbi to assist a school in southcentral Niger. As illustrated by the history of this project, complexities of local administration, and tensions between the staff and principal of one school, crystallized and demonstrated conflicts between traditional authorities and those of the modern state.

> There are no totally generous acts. All "acts" have an element of calculation. One black ox slaughtered at Christmas does not wipe out a year of careful manipulation of gifts given to serve your own ends.
>
> Richard Lee, "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari"

The Ethics of Non-intervention versus the Problematics of Intervention

Richard Lee's cautionary tale (1969) of blending ethnography and generosity among the !Kung raises fundamental questions about the role of

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the Africanist in promoting change. Whether the goal is raising living standards throughout an entire society or feeding a Kalahari clan at Christmastime—or just increasing knowledge about any one aspect of the African past or present—the academic's interaction with Africa inevitably changes something about the continent. The problem is: what is the nature of this change; how much of it is desired; and can we control it?

A cornerstone principle of conventional social science is that the researcher should minimize his or her impact on the population under study. Few fundaments of positivism have retained as much consensus among social scientists. Yet for social scientists conducting fieldwork in rural communities of Africa, this principle represents a major challenge. By virtue of the enormous economic disparity between scholar and subject, the goal of apprehending a community without changing it is as difficult as it is problematic.

A related and relevant distinction that permeates both the scholarly literature and the foreign aid community is that between relief aid and developmental assistance. The former encompasses monies allocated for emergency help in circumstances of natural or human-induced disaster. Relief aid can be also thought of as a kind of charitable giving. Developmental assistance, by contrast, is supposed to lead to change. Whereas denying relief aid in the name of academic nonintervention would be callous, if not unethical, the decision to facilitate developmental aid for a community under study is much more discretionary, as is the decision *not* to facilitate developmental aid.

At the grassroots level, the line between relief aid and developmental assistance blurs easily. There is not only a question of recipients' inability to distinguish, in circumstances of acute resource scarcity, between short-term assistance and long-term aid; the motivations of actual donors may not be all that clear, either. As the current case illustrates, within poor communities the extension of even modest amounts of foreign aid can exacerbate, if not trigger, micropolitical conflict. Heightened knowledge of, and sensitivity to, the local dynamics of foreign aid absorption is critical to successful implementation of development activities. This thesis is illustrated in the case of an artesian well constructed on the grounds of a middle school in a West African Muslim community and financed by a theo-politically progressive pulpit rabbi in New England.

Snapshot of a (Relatively) Impoverished Community

Yekuwa (Yékoua) is an agglomeration of two Hausa villages in the Magaria district of southcentral Niger, approximately seven miles from the boundary with Nigeria (Katsina State).[1] Now exceeding eight thousand in population (double its size from 1986), Yekuwa, over the last two decades, has experienced progressive development in both the traditional and secular realms of administration. In terms of traditional chieftaincy, in addition to the two village chiefs, a resident district chief (*hakimi*), son of the Chief

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of Magaria, has been enthroned. In 2004, as one byproduct of a national policy of decentralization, the government headquartered in Niamey designated Yekuwa a rural commune; as a result, Yekuwa now has an elected municipal council headed by a mayor chosen from among the municipal councilors.[2]

Under the aegis of the municipality are three development associations: for farmers, for youth, and for women. There is a kindergarten and there are three primary schools, two of them government established and therefore secular (*école de quartier; école mixte*) and one Islamic madrasa. A major indication of the community's importance for the district is its being the site of a middle school (Collège d'Enseignement Sécondaire, or CEG). There is also a dispensary that dispenses rudimentary medical treatment.

For a rural community in the Republic of Niger, Yekuwa is in a relatively favorable location. By virtue of its proximity to the country's southern border, it benefits from the relatively robust economy of neighboring Nigeria. (Monetary transactions are conducted exclusively in naira, the currency of Nigeria, not the CFA that Niger as a whole uses.) The settlement is far from the Sahara which occupies most of Niger and sits on the lower edge of the Sahel: during the national famine of 2004–5, people suffered from high food and related costs but no starvation.

Still, Yekuwa is incontrovertibly ensconced within the nation that the United Nations consistently ranks as dead last in terms of human development (UNDP).[3] The local economy is based on rain-fed dependent cereal production (millet, sorghum, maize) and livestock production. Outside of the few government-employed functionaries (teachers, medical personnel), there are no salaried workers. There is no electricity or running water: hand-drawn and manual foot-pump wells are the only source of water. The gamut of local commerce justifies only a weekly market. Proximity to Nigeria is a double-edged sword: in 2006 avian flu spilled over rapidly from Nigerian poultry farms into southern Niger. There are no welfare provisions for the numerous widows, blind, and destitute: begging for charity (*sadaka*) is a common practice. In short, conditions in Yekuwa may be marginally better than the average for Niger as a whole, where life expectancy is 44 years, adult literacy barely tops 14 percent, and 85 percent of the population survives on two dollars a day or less (61% survive on US$1.00). Hardship defines life in Yekuwa as it does throughout rural Niger: development is a slow and imperceptible process, a theoretical concept barely grasped by the population at large. There is nevertheless one sustaining force that does impart hope and meaningful existence within grinding conditions otherwise determined by material privation: Islam.

Preliminiary (T)sadaka

Upon the birth of my first-born (a daughter) in 1987, I sent word with a request that the town crier of Yekuwa spread the news. As is customary, I arranged to

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give a small sum of cash to "thank" the town crier for his efforts. The same procedure was followed two years later following the birth of my son.

During intervening visits, ad hoc, I extended modest amounts of sadaka to individuals, as culturally appropriate: to widows of recently deceased friends; to the blind and otherwise disabled; to *almajirai* (young Koranic disciples). It was with the impending bat mitzva (the coming-of-age ceremony for Jewish females) for my daughter that the first attempt at wider scale sadaka distribution was instituted, thirteen years after her birth.

Distribution of sadaka is an integral part of life-cycle rituals within Nigérien Hausa society (Nicolas 1975). At naming ceremonies for newborns, at public wedding rites between betrothed families, at mourning sessions following funerals, it is customary for sponsors and attendees to make donations that are in turn recycled to other attendees in the form of kola nuts and to the presiding mallams (Koranic masters) as honoraria. *Not* to contribute even a token amount of sadaka in such contexts is culturally uncouth.

Similarly, giving *tsadaka* (Hebrew: charity) has become an integral part of the coming-of-age ritual for Jewish adolescents in North America. Neighborhood soup kitchens, shelters for the homeless, abandoned animal clinics—such are typical recipients of bar/bat mitzva tsadaka projects. Given my longstanding relationship with Yekuwa, and the villagers' oft expressed interest in the growth of my family, we conducted a traditional Hausa distribution of *(t)sadaka* in each of the villages in honor of Arielle's coming of age.[4] Instructions went out that the (t)sadaka should go to the needy, as defined by categories utilized in the carrying out of village censuses conducted in the course of research.

In each of the villages an interlocutor-correspondent prepared a list with the names of the (t)sadaka recipients. In Yekuwa, one hundred and four people each received fifty naira; in the neighboring village over the border in Nigeria, one hundred and nineteen individuals received the same: based on updated censuses that I conducted in 2000, this represented approximately 1 percent of the population of each community. One of the lists detailed the following categories of recipients: blind (or partially sighted); mentally disturbed; extremely poor; crippled (polio, crawling); deaf; widowed; leprous; other.

No doubt encouraged by this expression of religiously inspired beneficence, the Sarkin Makaho (King of the Blind) of Yekuwa's sister village in Nigeria approached me during a subsequent visit. "Should you be able and Allah so move you," he suggested, "please think about building a village Guest House for the Blind."

Thus germinated the idea for the (t)sadaka project tied to my son's bar mitzva in 2002—thirteen years after Samuel was born and two years after he had accompanied me on a visit to the village.[5] A subsequent visit to the villages generated (1) a realization that the Guest House for the Blind was restricted to blind *men*; and (2) a request from the principal of the middle

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school of Yekuwa to finance construction of latrines for both male and female pupils. Gender bias with respect to the shelter for the blind was addressed subsequently by construction of a separate Guest House for Blind Women, financed by my mother, aunt, and daughter. Provision of sanitary facilities in Yekuwa became the entry point for rabbinic involvement in this Nigérien community.

The Charity–Development Nexus

Temple Emanu-El was founded in 1924 to serve that portion of the Jewish community of Providence, Rhode Island, adhering to the Conservative movement of Judaism. While "conservative" may have been an accurate characterization of the denomination vis-à-vis the less ritualistic and *halachic* (Talmud-adhering) Reform movement, it is a misnomer with respect to contemporary notions of politics and social justice. Although Conservative congregations differ considerably (based on membership and the rabbi's theo-politics) in their attitudes toward and involvement in policy issues that transcend the Jewish community, by and large they have come to embrace an expansive application of the principle *tikkun olam* ("repairing" or "mending the world"; the Hausa equivalent is *gyaran duniya*).

It was in this spirit of tikkun olam, undergirded by tsadaka, that I persuaded the rabbi of Temple Emanu-El, in the course of an informal and informational discussion, to finance the construction of latrines in Yekuwa. Given the potential for political mischief or suspicion that could arise at higher levels of Nigérien officialdom from formal Jewish charitable intervention in this Muslim society—and with such activity occurring at the height of the second Intifadah in Israel/Palestine—I asked that the rabbi's identity not be divulged in official correspondence. Invoking the Talmudic maxim that anonymous charity is higher than attributed tsadaka, the rabbi readily agreed.

Conceptually, it is unclear whether rabbinic sponsoring of latrines for Muslim children in a West African school should be characterized in terms of "development" (a secular notion) or "charity" (a notion with religious inspiration). Secular developmentalists could easily justify school latrines in terms of general hygiene and especially female empowerment (see LaFraniere 2005). The rabbi himself employed more Buberian language to describe his motives: human dignity, respect, privacy. In the context of Muslim–Jewish tensions revolving around the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, some might see the gesture through the lens of instrumental theo-politics (see Miles 1996). Social scientists, of course, could easily take issue with the hermeneutic, methodological, and indeed ethical propriety of integrating my religious background into the fieldwork locale. That line had already been crossed a year before, however, with the original distribution of (t)sadaka funds to mark the bat mitzva.

A letter dated March 26, 2003, from the principal reaffirmed the need for latrines for the middle school pupils and requested "expedited send-

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ing of the promised sum so that the work be entirely completed before the rainy season." A subsequent letter confirmed the receipt on May 15, 2003, of the money transferred via Western Union and collected at the BIA Bank in Zinder. That same letter went on to explain a change in program plans: "At the meeting of the School Board, the governing body of secondary schools in Niger, it was affirmed that priority here still goes to drinking water. The decision was therefore taken to dig a well...." Permitting community-defined needs to determine the actual use of externally funded developmental assistance is a time-honored proposition. However, the implications of this unilateral change in project goal were more problematic: "The decision was therefore taken to dig a well, even though the amount of money available will not be sufficient. In order to do so, it is necessary to launch another financial offensive to complete the project." Dated November 7, 2003, the letter went on to confirm that construction of a "traditional well in place of a pupil-latrine" was proceeding.

Despite the fait accompli, the rabbi not only agreed to the modification of the original project goal, but also decided to underwrite the additional funds necessary to complete the well. When I returned to Yekuwa in December 2003, work on the well had been held up on account of traditional wrestling and boxing matches that had drawn away most of the able-bodied well-workers. With a few apprentices the master well-digger had proceeded on his own, but water had not yet been reached by the time I departed the village. There was also now a planned second phrase of the well project. With the redoubled rabbinic contribution, the principal now envisioned improvements beyond the well project and the provision of regular drinking water for the students. These included a range of school gardening activities and a protective wall around the well to prevent contamination from animals attracted to the water source.

In face-to-face conversations with the principal and other village school administrators, I revealed the identity of the hitherto anonymous donor. Pictures of the rabbi, in liturgical dress and taken in the synagogue, were widely shown and left as mementos. Subsequent correspondence referred to the "salvific actions" of my "spiritual leader, the honorable Rabbi." To all who saw the photos, great interest was taken in the displayed Torah scrolls, skullcaps, and prayer shawls.

Emphasizing the role of the rabbi in the well project had strategic value: I retained my role as scholar-friend of the community, and at best intermediary of (t)sadaka development, but deliberately eschewed adopting the persona of donor per se. Maintaining the long-term scholarly relationship without "giving back" to the community had become, over time, ethically problematic; but it also would have been problematic for me to assume the image or title (as a Nigerian immigration agent would later put it) of "philanthropist."[6] It had taken many years, and some strategic personal investments, to earn the status of "son of Yekuwa"; becoming "benefactor of Yekuwa" would ineluctably distort and problematize this position.

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Micropolitics and External Aid

Half a year later, not yet having received confirmation that water had been struck (much less news of the second phase of the project), I wrote to the principal. The response, dated August 1, 2004, carried a single word in the subject line: "Regrets." Although the letter confirmed that water had been struck, and indeed that there had been a ceremonial inauguration, the letter continued:

> I have the profound consternation to inform you that I was transferred right in the middle of the school year. It is [M.M.G.], the *surveillant* (assistant principal; school disciplinarian), who is at the bottom of this transfer. He is, in effect, someone who never accepts obeying his hierarchical superiors. He was very jealous to see me coordinate the activities of our project because for him, I am a stranger to Yekuwa. His philosophy has always been than every non-native civil servant serving in Yekuwa is called *étranger* [stranger/foreigner] and should be his valet.

The principal's status as local "étranger" to Yekuwa is notable, especially in light of the work by Shack and Skinner (1979) on this subject. The "stranger" in West African parlance has generally been someone from another colony, another country, or another region. But this principal hails from fewer than fifteen miles from Yekuwa. Unlike the archetypical Yekuwa villager (Hausa), he is an ethnic Fulani; but this is not typically a source of ethnic rivalry. Tension between Hausa and Zarma has been noted more commonly for Niger, but even this is not as great as the tension "between the sedentary negroid peoples (principally the Zarma) and the lighter-skinned nomads (the Tuareg and Tubu)" (Charlick 1991:9). In the case of Yekuwa, we were witnessing what I would characterize as "localistically based indigenism." A January 2004 letter addressed to the prefect of Zinder (the region in which Yekuwa is located), signed by nineteen "non-native civil servants of Yekuwa," made the case most directly: "We civil servants serving in Yekuwa—so-called Strangers/Foreigners—notwithstanding our being Nigérien and parents of Nigériens—regret to inform you of the existence in this locality of a pocket of xenophobia [that makes] working conditions insufferable." The letter went on to state that over a four-year period of time, these "non-native civil servants" had been "victim" of concocted written denunciations as well as calumny circulated at such communal fora as public meetings, weddings, and naming ceremonies. Their tormenters' strategy was expressed with an analogy: "When one wants to kill a dog, it is... accused of carrying rabies." The letter concluded with an appeal to the prefect in the name of all those "solicitous of the socioeconomic development of the country."

Three months later, the former principal followed up with a request that the rabbi send 170,000 CFA right away to finance the construction

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of boy and girl latrines at the middle school to which he had been transferred.

Undergraduate Development Enthusiasm—and Reality Check

Undeterred by the unhappy political turn of events, the rabbi remained willing to aid in (t)sadaka in Muslim West Africa. At this juncture, however, I decided to bring the request from the principal to the attention of the undergraduates in a course I was teaching for the first time entitled "Politics of Developing Nations" (PDN). Appalled to learn that schoolchildren in rural Africa had no toilets, they readily collected several hundred dollars from among themselves for building the latrines. First, however, I initiated a full-blown and open discussion about the propriety of integrating such a financial component into the academic enterprise of an undergraduate course. With but one or two dissenters, the class enthusiastically endorsed taking on the latrine project. So as to keep it within the parameters of a structured class learning experience, I discouraged proposals for undertaking fundraising within the wider student community. And so as to preserve my status as intermediary rather than outright donor, I delegated to a student the task of corresponding with the principal. It was the student, then, who first received the news that the principal had again been transferred (this time to a desk job in district headquarters) because "in Niger, when you are suspected of belonging to a political party that is not in power, you are removed from your position of responsibility because you are considered an opponent (detractor of government policy)." It was the same student who also processed the news that his class's money had not, after all, been used to pay for latrines at a middle school but rather for bench-tables for the newly created primary school in the ex-principal's home village.

For some students, the unilateral transfer of their aid from latrines to furniture was a betrayal of sorts; others argued persuasively that the new cause was equally valid, and that as sympathetic donors they should not be so controlling. The former principal's added request for a partnership—or twinning—between the undergraduates' university and the primary school (to provide furnishings for three classrooms, notebooks, teaching aids and, once again, latrines) might therefore have had a positive resonance. However, the letter also begged the undergraduates to provide him with a cell phone. He was about to retire, he wrote the class correspondent, and had few resources on account of delays in government salary payments. Moreover, personal cell phones were de rigueur in his new milieu, and the controlling company was on the verge of raising user fees. "I thank you in advance," he wrote, "my dear sons who will not hesitate to come to the rescue of their poor father. I count on your promptness and speedy reply."

This latest twist did generate some classroom discussion regarding the developmental utility of cell phones in rural locales where land lines are nonexistent. In the end, however, enthusiasm for continuing to rely on the

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former principal as a conduit of development aid evaporated for all parties concerned—including the rabbi. Despite the culminating disappointment—or perhaps on account of it—the exchange with the ex-principal of a middle school from the least developed country on earth was a profound learning experience for undergraduates from the most powerful nation in the world. It concretized the study of development as well as the difficulty of achieving it. More than any lecture could, it instilled the reality of North–South dependency.

Politics of the Rabbi's Well

In anticipation of my return to West Africa in March 2006, I took an empty bottle of drinking water from the repast following sabbath services in Providence. I vowed that I would fill it in Yekuwa so that the rabbi could drink from "his" well in Niger.

Shortly after arriving, I searched with difficulty for the rabbi's well: village housing had expanded almost to the perimeter of the middle school, and spatial perspective was very different from what I had been familiar with just two years before. The well, when I finally discovred it, was a profound disappointment; in local parlance, it had "died." No longer giving any water, it had been stuffed with bramble to prevent the unwary from accidentally falling into the abandoned pit. I thereupon requested an audience with the hakimi, to be attended by the two village chiefs and the principal of the CEG. Two sets of reasons were proffered at that meeting (and at a subsequent one, with the mayor) for the well's dilapidation: one indigenous and one technical.

The indigenous explanation was that "the eyes of the well" had become "blind" for lack of care. A well must be constantly primed; otherwise it will dry up. Students at the school where the well had been dug were not drinking from it enough—they were studying instead. And the master well-digger—the person who had been paid to dig it in the first place—considered his job over once water had been reached. No one was in charge of maintenance. The technical explanation was that from the outset the well was not geologically, topographically, or hydrologically sound. It had been constructed in artisinal fashion, not scientifically: neither the location chosen nor the technology employed was suitable. Modern wells are made differently, with much more sophisticated equipment. That is why it stopped giving water after only a little time.

As I dug deeper, however, I sensed that the overarching reasons for the well's abandonment were political. According to the new principal, the well was a private, "person-to-person" enterprise between his predecessor and me. The former principal had not informed the staff, he claimed, which included himself. Without saying so explicitly, the new principal made it clear that when he took over the CEG he had no sense of ownership of, or responsibility for, the well.

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Based on the correspondence that I had received from the former principal (the *étranger*), this was patently false: it had been at an official parent–teacher meeting that committee members had decided to use the rabbi's money to dig a well rather than latrines. This correspondence also identified the ringleader who supposedly had plotted, be it out of ethnic rivalry or partisan politics, to have the former principal ousted from his position. It was only after I returned to the U.S. that, rereading the correspondence and focussing on the names, I realized who this "plotter" was: the mayor!

Nevertheless, as yet oblivious to these machinations, I leveraged the rabbi's well in separate discussions with the current principal and the mayor. To the principal, with the hakimi and two chiefs witnessing, I asked rhetorically, "What am I going to tell my imam?" I then handed over the empty water bottle "from the rabbi's mosque," expressing the wish that, with the principal's leadership, one day it would be filled with water from the well and the rabbi would drink from it. I followed up this symbolism of the water bottle with a letter to the principal documenting the chronology of the rabbi's donations and official school meetings about the uses to which they were supposed to be put. The letter (in French) concluded: "I cannot adequately convey, Monsieur, the importance that this first effort of direct and decentralized aid to the students of the Middle School of Yekuwa entails. The future of all future assistance from the donor, students, and other nonprofit organizations depends on it. Indeed, it is question not only of the development of the Middle School, but of all Yekuwa."

I similarly leveraged the well in my communications with the mayor, both in person (when the question of international assistance for Yekuwa's development plan was first raised), and on paper (by sending him copies of the above referenced correspondence). Future aid, I made clear, would be jeopardized by poor performance outcomes. I also communicated the date of my next visit.

Goats, Bulls, and a Wedding

Despite this ultimatum of conditionality, as part of my coursework on development I acted as the mediator for a student-run effort to pool personal contributions and a departmental grant for two new projects in Niger. Undergraduates pitched in to purchase a cart-and-bull; graduate students designed a goats-for-widows project, modeled after Heifer International.[7] Thanks to a well-organized women's group in Yekuwa, the selection of recipients and the distribution of goats went relatively smoothly. Politics among the menfolk, however, complicated the bull-and-cart project in ways reminiscent of the well.

As mentioned above, since 2004 the local system of governance through traditional chiefs had been complemented by that of an indirectly elected mayor chosen by the new municipal council. The mayor, informed of my impending visit and propelled by the national policy of development

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through decentralization, had prepared several documents.[8] One was an elaborate four-year development plan for the entire commune of Yekuwa. The plan recognized the fragility of the commune due to "a limited financial resources base, insufficient surface water and therefore lack of potable water, depleted soil, few natural resources, little socioeconomic infrastructure, constrained access by the population to basic social services, etc." It was the mayor's fervent hope that I would post the plan on the Internet and thereby generate funding from generous donors in the U.S. and the world over. He specifically mentioned Bill Gates in this context.

The second document declared me a "citizen of the Rural Commune of Yekuwa." As he handed me the document, the mayor emphasized that such citizenship conferred "obligations" as well as "privileges."

I did not know at the time that there had been a serious rift between my main Yekuwa host and close friend, Alhaji M. H., and the mayor. Part of the tension may have stemmed from the implicit transfer of power from the Yekuwa village chief—a close relative of Alhaji M. H.—to a mayor who expressed the inveterate disdain of Francophone *évolués* in regard to supposedly old-fashioned and uneducated traditional authorities. ("We must make concessions," the mayor told me. "At least at the beginning.") Another informant revealed that the mayor and the alhaji had clashed in recent local elections, backing rival parties.[9] Alhaji M. H., moreover, had accused the mayor of corruption: the diversion to his personal use of thirty bags of cement earmarked for communal purposes. I knew none of this when I was seeking a reliable group to take possession of my student-financed bull-and-cart, and the mayor steered me to the Groupement de Jeunesse, or Youth Group.

Alhaji M. H. was adamant: under no circumstances should the cart-and-bull go to what he characterized as "the government group." Rather, it had to be offered to the Samariyya, the youth group of the *talakawa* (commoners). Otherwise, he said, I would be siding with the elites against the people; this he could not abide.

Associated with the ancien régime, the Samariyya hearkened back to the Development Society of President Kountché (Robinson 1991). Despite its longevity and local legitimacy, it was no longer a recognized group, at least not by the new municipal authorities. Were I to follow my old friend's advice and grant Samariyya the cart-and-bull, I would not only be alienating the mayor, that newly critical lynchpin in the village polity, but also jeopardizing the decades-long friendship that existed between me and the village chief. For the chief understood well the necessity of working with the new authority, and he could not risk compromising his position by sanctioning the project with an unofficial, unrecognized group. He, too, was caught in the middle, squeezed between the passion of his younger relative for "the people" and his need to tow the line with the new government executive. But he did not have to feed an undelivered bull. Nor did he refrain from expressing a somewhat patronizing view of the bull donors: "Those

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students of yours don't have much money to give. If they had more—and especially if they were more knowledgeable—they would not have tried to help out by buying and offering a bull in such a way. If it's *your* baggage," he commented proverbially, "it won't go neglected" (i..e, property that has no identifiable owner is likely not to be taken care of).

A way out of this dilemma was offered through the wisdom of another old friend, Souleymane, a mallam (Islamic teacher/priest) who had traveled from Magaria to visit me. It is not a big problem, Mallam Souleymane affirmed; I did not really have to choose between the two sides: "There is democracy everywhere in the world now, is there not? In America, too, there is democracy. Let the students themselves decide." Mallam Souleymane further suggested that until a final decision was made we could leave the bull-and-cart in the hands of my former horse handler, Gito. There was no urgency to my undergraduates' decision. Indeed, it was not even pertinent to point out that, since the semester had ended, the class had disbanded and these students would never actually reassemble as a whole. Mallam Souleymane's "temporary" solution was expediently, if not ingeniously, indefinite. Both the mayor and alhaji agreed, independently, that it was indeed proper to leave the choice of bull recipient to the students.

In the meantime, we designed a more informal system of communal bull-and-cart access. Since transport was a major constraint on individual farmers and householders, the bull-and-cart would be used, for example, to lug fertilizer to the fields, to bring home crops after harvest, and to haul bricks for home construction. The town crier was commissioned to circulate through the village announcing that, thanks to the researcher's students, a bull-and-cart was now available for anyone's use. Whether a villager could pay the costs of the day's hire (evaluated at between 40 and 50 cents, depending on distance) was irrelevant: even those without money could borrow the bull-and-cart. The village chief asserted that it was publicly known who would be able to pay and who could not. Monies collected would be used for the feeding of the bull, and the village secretary (Ma'aji) would keep records. To provide an initial cushion, I opened a community chest for bull feed of approximately twenty-five dollars.

One morning, members of a wedding party from both the bride's and groom's side of the family appeared unannounced at my lodgings in Yekuwa. The main purpose was to officialize the marriage of the two families. After Mallam Souleymane, the visiting friend, asked that the parents counsel their children to be patient with their spouse (to the husband: "Be kind"; to the bride, "Do not run away"), Alhaji M. H. seamlessly integrated into the wedding formalities the problems of the rabbi's well and the promise of the students' livestock gifts: "Similarly, may the assistance wrought by the students—the goats, the bull, and the cart—proceed properly, without any problem that might bring us shame or embarrassment. Unlike the well at the middle school. The foreign 'imam' wanted to help, and built the well. Already, after less than a year, she is ruined. The foreign imam was sup-

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posed to drink from the well; [our friend] brought a bottle so that his imam could do so. But it could not be. So he put the bottle in the hands of the principal, as a sign of what he needs to do. May nothing like that come of the assistance from [our friend's] disciples."

Lessons Learned

The long-term impact of the rabbi's well and related goats-for-widow and bull-and-cart projects are unknown. Still, they have already clarified certain lessons that other Africanists contemplating direct grassroots aid might contemplate. These lessons are not proffered to discourage engagement, but rather to render any such engagement all the more realistic.

Importance of Local Responsibility

If the intention is to benefit a resource-deprived community, the experiment demonstrated that it is easier to buy a bull, or a herd of goats, than to give it away. Similarly, it is easier to get a well dug than to have it maintained. A close friend of the fieldworker in Yekuwa put it this way: *Ka bada a jama'a, babu mai-kula*: "If you hand it over to 'the people,' then there is no *one* to care for it."

It is in this context that the rabbi's well is so important, at least as much for the water it may provide thirsty pupils as for its testing of local responsibility. Requests/expectations/ demands for assistance can be limitless. As symbol of the external help that has been provided, but one requiring local maintenance, the well takes on great import in the larger scheme of direct people-to-people aid. A well is not just a well; the benefit of having it accrues only by virtue of the local participation in maintaining it.

Politics, Butchery, and "Doing Good"

Electoral democracy has often been likened to meat processing: one may relish the outcome, but the details may repel. The same may be said of "doing good," especially for well-intentioned Westerners vis-à-vis impoverished Third World communities. Giving money to worthy causes is incontestably laudable; actually spending the money, and dispensing the goods so acquired, can be difficult and uncomfortable in its implementation. It may also be fraught with unpleasant side effects and consequences. Creation or reinforcement of a dependency complex is one such danger. Inevitable dashing of raised expectations may be another. There are intercultural ambiguities to "giving" that are learned with difficulty.

Job descriptions for "doing good" in impoverished Third World settings ought to bear the requirement "thick skin." One must not be unduly upset by painful human reality, by the misery of the destitute blind, by the indigence of the deaf-mute. One must be steeled against difficulties attend-

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ing the transition from helping needy individuals to helping a needy community.

Indignenous Triage and Cultural Biases Regarding "The Needy"

Caring for the lowest of the low, defined as the most physically needy, is a Western cultural trait that often goes by the name "humanitarianism." While the principle of charity is firmly engrained in the Islamic world, "putting the last first" makes little sense in an economic environment in which a majority of individuals and households struggle for survival. Helping the blind, the crippled, and the infirm through charitable donations is religiously laudable: but investing significant resources in them can simultaneously be seen as holding back the more dynamic elements of the community. This lesson emerged most clearly in the goats-for-widows project, elaboration on which space does not allow. Examined from within and close up, communities subsisting at the lowest levels of material development practice an indigenous form of triage for survival's sake.

In the local context, altruism from abroad is not easily comprehended. Viewed from inside, the visitor's efforts to help the neediest makes little sense. Only a semblance of self-interest, in fact, can save the altruist from being overwhelmed by demands for help.

Too often, host country nationals who have "made it," either through schooling or inherited nobility, are downright disdainful of those whom Westerners feel most compelled to help. *Les misérables* are embarrassing to the local elite, for they are reminders of the impoverished state of their own society. Members of the elite do not identify with the poorest of the poor; their aspirational identification is with Westerners. When the latter identify instead with *les misérables*, an inter-elite disconnect results.

Conclusion

The biblical "Song of the Well" (Numbers 21:17–18) lyrically expresses the joy, accompanied by song, that the digging of new wells occasioned within the water-scarce environment of ancient Canaan: "Spring up, O well, sing-in-chorus to it; the well that was dug out by princes! that was excavated by people's nobles! with scepter! with their rods!" Yet wells have also been "causes of strife" (Miller & Miller 1952:814). Today, both the joyous and conflictual properties surrounding wells are evident more commonly in the Sahel than in Israel.

As outlined, an unusual rabbinic intervention in a Muslim community came to highlight both the positive and negative potentialities of well-digging. On one level, the religious profile of the donor was incidental: the micropolitical machinations surrounding the well's maintenance (or lack thereof) had little to do with its original financing. Yet the religious imperative "to do good abroad" did become enmeshed with local politics in

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unforeseeable ways. It also set into motion a series of other interventions, involving goats and bulls and carts, with delicate and still unfolding outcomes.

Local politics render much more complex the goal of accomplishing grassroots, international development than some academics (see, e.g., Sachs 2005) and Western donors imagine: Thomas Dichter (2003) and William Easterly (2006) provide comprehensive explanations for why this is so. In addition to the contrast between relief and development, the story of the rabbi's well also illuminates the messy contours between morally driven giving and locally directed projects. Faced with the inevitable frustrations and disappointments that such well-intentioned initiatives occasion, what course should one take? One possibility is to follow Rondinelli's (1983) and Korten's (1980) prescriptions to view development projects as "experiments" and a "learning process," accepting that experimentation carries with it the risk of failure. Another is to embrace the Hausa proverb, "Better the smallest present than the most magnificent meanness," and joint to it the Talmudic maxim: "It is not for you to complete the work. Neither are you free to desist from it" (*Pirkei Avoth* 2:21).[10]

Afterword: Fifteen American university students in tow, I returned to Yekuwa in December 2006. Leverage seemed to be working: the mayor claimed to have paid for repairs out of his own pocket, and water was again being drawn from the rabbi's well.

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Three anonymous readers for this journal made critical comments that undoubtedly enhanced the quality of this article, even if my revisions did not entirely address their concerns. I also thank colleagues who presented feedback to my presentation at the African Studies Association annual meeting in 2006 in San Francisco. Various members of Temple Emanu-El in Providence, Rhode Island, and the Northeastern University community have, benownst to them and not, challenged me to assume greater humanitarian responsibility for my research in Africa. So have my aunt, Hannah Bryman, and my mother, Helen Miles-Rayner. As should be apparent from the text, without the ecumenical benevolence of Rabbi Wayne Franklin, there would have been no well, and no article

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Notes

1. Yekuwa's borderline location was a major factor in choosing it as Nigérien foil in my comparative study of the long-term legacies of the colonial boundary that separated the Hausa people into Nigeria and Niger (Miles 1994). Related research on Yekuwa and its counterpart in Nigeria has focused on dreams (1993b), shari'a (2003), and identity (Miles & Rochefort 1991/1997). I have also approached issues of local development there from the perspectives of Islam (1986) and boundary infrastructure (2005). My concerns with the racial, colonial, and neocolonial contexts to fieldwork in Hausaland and elsewhere are explored in Miles (1993a) and, with respect to Peace Corps service, Miles (1999).

   Contested ownership over my horse in Yekuwa stimulated further reflections on the problematics of researcher involvement in fieldwork sites (2003; forthcoming). As relates to the interreligious dimension embedded in this case study, my profile as a Jew conducting fieldwork in Muslim communities in the sub-Sahara has given rise to previous African Studies Association publications: Miles (1987) and Miles (1997).
2. As a national policy, decentralization began a decade before, concurrent with structural adjustment imposed from international lenders. See Kalala, Danda, and Schwarz (1993). Since its heyday as a "neo-traditional corporatist state" (Robinson 1991), Niger has experienced fitful periods of democratization.
3. As a result of economically devastating effects of civil war, in some years Sierra Leone has "overtaken" Niger in the dubious distinction of lowest-placed rank on the UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI). That is an acute placement; Niger's is chronic.
4. I have coined the term *(t)sadaka* as an amalgam of the Hebrew and Hausa words for charitable giving.
5. A visit that was partly connected to his status as future heir to a disputed horse (see Miles 2003; forthcoming).
6. That said, being labeled a "philanthropist" at the border control station did have strategic value: it was on that basis that extraordinary arrangements were made to allow me to exit and reenter Nigeria, even though I was not in possession of a multiple entry visa.
7. I acknowledge the suggestions of Momodou N. Darboe for the cart-and-bull component of the project.
8. Both the mayor and the high school principal identified themselves as my students, in that they had attended the middle school where I was teaching as a Peace Corps volunteer in the late 1970s.
9. The mayor stood with the Convention Démocratique et Sociale (CDS), headed by Mahamane Ousmane, the second largest party in the national governing coalition. The alhaji backed the Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme (more commonly known as Tarayya), the major opposition party headed by Mahamadou Issoufou.
10. "Da babbar rowa gara karamar kyauta" and "Lo alecha hamlacha leegmor v'lo ata ven-horeen l'heebatel meemena."

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