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Africans, Religion, and African Religion through the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

This essay explores the intersections of colonialism, enslavement, freedom struggles, and religion in the African global experience, focusing on the critical navigational properties of leadership.

Religion has been central to the African experience, an observation more than supported by historical inquiry. Within the African space, and before the onslaught of external interventions, there is every indication that indigenously conceived religion, or what could be called organized spirituality, functioned just fine. The mysteries of life, especially those surrounding birth and the seeming finality of death, were all negotiated through a view that formed coherencies between apparently irreconcilable opposites. Death was but an extension of life, life was a condition on multiple planes, and the demise of the body no more than an opportunity to reform the village, renew familial ties, in another, often parallel world; while physical death was simply an interregnum, within which the departed awaited opportunity to inhabit the corporeal once again. Reincarnation linked the deceased with the newborn in endless cycles, with death as the requisite and ultimate *rite de passage*, mitigating its dread among those bearing witness to such transitions. Not all were believed to return to the time-space world but instead joined that regaled community of the ancestors, with whom the living maintained vital bonds through veneration. Whether returning as newborns or remaining in the ancestral realm, the divide between the living and the dead was continually forded via innumerable bridges.

While the foregoing approach is vulnerable to a kind of dismissive reductionism by which it is deemed as merely a coping mechanism confronting the

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vicissitudes of life, such an explanation privileges a certain Enlightenment rationality that discounts the foremost claim of the experiential, that spirituality is not an attempt to explain the material in terms of the noumenal but is rather a positing of the spiritual as lived reality inviting participation and appreciation. The intimacy between the living and the dead, in turn, transpires within a larger context in which there are other beings, creative and generative forces, that continue to sustain that creation. High gods and ultimate deities, often acknowledged, are just as often far removed and quite distant from the affairs of human beings. Instead, appeals are made to deities of lesser rank and power, overseers of particular phenomena (rain, bodies of water, unusual land formations, disease, fertility, and so on). The sacrifice is central to such appeals, undertaken for purposes of intervening into matters of the quotidian, the expert handling of which is confined to specialists. Such arrangements were more or less ubiquitous throughout the African continent, dating as far back as pharaonic Egypt.

Just as ubiquitous was the concept of religion as specific to particular communities, or stated inversely, that religious universality was foreign, even antithetical to religion as conceived throughout much of Africa. The gods of those who would come to be known as the Igbo were not the deities of ethnolinguistic groupings who would be considered Yoruba, nor would there be any attempt to make it so. Bordering communities would often borrow from each other, and symmetries between religious approaches allowed for mutual intelligibility as well as for subsequent scholarly generalization, but it would have been odd indeed for the Shona to worship the deities of the Ndebele, or vice versa. The imperial dimension was largely absent from African religions, which evinces both an expectation and acceptance of difference, as communities occupied not only different regions but different types of topographies and soils, to which they necessarily developed varying regimes of agricultural endeavor, fishing, transhumance, and specialized areas of transformative productivity (for example, metallurgy). Groups adapted according to their variable collective genius and were respected for such, all of which was reflected in religious expression, the pursuit of which was anticipated to be differential.

Such an approach to the divine, together with an abundance of land and relatively low population densities in the ancient-through-precolonial historical periods, tended to minimize group hostilities and maximize complementarities. It can be assumed that large-scale migratory activity, such as the movement of Bantu-speaking populations from what is now Nigeria-Cameroon from the

third part of the second millennium BCE to the fourth century CE to the beginning of the sixth century CE, was accompanied by some level of violence, and there is no reason to doubt that tensions did flare up from time to time over access to land and resources; but outside of North and Northeast Africa, from ancient Egypt through medieval Ethiopia in the latter region, there is neither record nor evidence of large-scale warfare prior to the eleventh century. Of course, pharaonic Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia were imperial formations, in contact for millennia with Near East civilizations as well as those elsewhere in the Mediterranean, as was true of North Africa. In such regions, the scale of conflict over control of resources escalated exponentially, with the result that varying cultural concepts were also placed into mutual conversation. Influences spread far and wide, especially from Egypt and facilitated by commercial activity, but within the context of military conflict, such influences were imposed in order to facilitate an ensuing peace. In this way, at least, religion in Africa developed an imperial component political in origin.

It is therefore no surprise that it was precisely in these interconnecting regions of the world that universalist claims began to emerge, religions insisting on singular and inerrant truths that assaulted and scaled heretofore-inviolable walls of ethnically determined verity. Ironically, however, forms of universality with staying power were not engineered in the interest of empire but rather against those interests. Thus, Judaism, its relationship to the monotheism of Akhenaton an unresolved matter of conjecture, developed as a mechanism against empire; indeed, even the monotheism of Akhenaton was subversive in relation to established religion in Egypt. Christianity, in turn, evolved from a branch of Judaism at a time of Roman imperial occupation, while Islam emerged out of a decentralized and fractured Arab community largely at the mercy of foreign powers (the Byzantines, Sassanids, and Ethiopians) vying for control of trade routes connecting the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf via the Hijaz. In this way, the Ibrahimic traditions can be seen as essentially anti-imperial discourses.

Problems emerge with the grafting of Semitic monotheism onto imperial designs external to the core teachings of these religions. Judaism may have been invoked to wrest control of ancient Palestine, but there is no imperative to vigorously promote the religion beyond those born into the religion. In contrast, Christianity certainly enjoins its followers to spread the Gospel as a fundamental tenet, but there is no scriptural basis for doing so at the point of a gun. Similarly, and as a corrective to both Judaism and Christianity, Islam

is viewed by its adherents as the ultimate expression of submission to God and therefore should be globally embraced. This notion is in tension, however, with the injunction that religion is no matter of compulsion, to be embraced as a function of individual volition. All of this is fine within the realm of the ideational, but it did not actually play out that way in Africa, and this is where the story gets particularly interesting.

In Northeast Africa, monotheism as royal cult became the linchpin to imperial designs. This was nowhere more true than in Ethiopia, where ruling dynasties claiming descent from Solomon embraced a Christianity that was at times under the supervision of the Coptic Church in Egypt and at other times independent. Forever enshrined in the *Kebra Negast*, an account finally redacted in the early fourteenth century that melded concepts from the Hebrew Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Qur'an, the spiritual and emotional center of these claims is the insistence on the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant from Israel to Ethiopia, where it allegedly remains. The effect of *Kebra Negast* was to legitimize both ruling elites and their territorial expansion beyond the Amhara-Tigrean core. But there were limits to Ethiopian ambition, and following a highly destructive conflict with Muslim forces under Ahmad Gran in the sixteenth century, the spatial definition of Ethiopia more or less stabilized. Throughout the centuries-long process of Ethiopian expansion, a number of groups were defeated or otherwise subsumed within the parameters of the state, many converting to Christianity for reasons having little to do with the appeal of the religion itself.

The history of Ethiopia and religion is a narrative of a sort of internal or domestic imperialism, and though Ethiopia is a vast territory, events were more or less confined to that territory. In contrast, the arrival of Islam in North, West, and East Africa is a much more complex set of stories, covering vast amounts of land and affecting myriad groups and cultures. Beginning in the seventh century, Muslim armies spread from the Arabian peninsula in multiple directions, including Egypt and North Africa. Convinced that Muslim political authority should be established far and wide, conquering Arabs were initially less certain that Islam was meant for Egyptians and Berbers, and in any event the conversion of subject Christian and Jewish populations tended to lag behind their subjugation; in Egypt, for example, the majority of the population did not become Muslim until the eleventh century, some four hundred years after the initial Muslim conquest. It is therefore accurate to conclude that, with some exceptions, the native populations of North Africa and Egypt

were not forced to convert to Islam but did so over a period of time (with North Africans converting more rapidly than their Coptic counterparts) and for varying reasons.

Whereas Islam gained political ascendancy in North Africa and Egypt via military prowess, extending all the way to Iberia, Islam's movement into West and East Africa was much more pacific. Arriving by way of merchants, Islam was established in both regions as the religion of commerce very early in the eighth century. It would slowly develop as the practice of traders and ruling elites over several centuries, but nowhere was it imposed upon the peasantry, who remained practitioners of their own, ethnically based religions well into the eighteenth century in many parts of the West African Sahel. A major exception to this were groups of Mande speakers, a characterization representing populations stretching from the Sahel through the Savannah that includes the Soninke, Bambara (or Bamana), Susu, Jallonke, Juula, and others; there is a strong correlation between Islam and the Mandinka, the core constituency of old Mali, that antedates the thirteenth century, but even here there remained significant vestiges of non-Islamic practice and belief among the Muslim Mandinka. Otherwise, even under reformist governments such as those of *Askia al-hājj* Muhammad of Songhay (ruled 1492 to 1529), the masses were largely left to construct their lives as they wished, so long as they respected the authority of the central government. And though there were wars of expansion, they were not conducted for the purpose of making converts. It can therefore be surmised that relations between Muslim and non-Muslim under the same Muslim government through the sixteenth century in West Africa were largely peaceful and cooperative, with the majority non-Muslim agricultural sector supplying the necessary sustenance undergirding the entire enterprise.

The foregoing is significant in light of what followed, as it was a period in which individual and communities were free to make choices and form their own affiliations, and they did so. Into the seventeenth century, Muslims tended to be congregated among elite formations in West Africa and formed a (growing) minority, but this would change in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the outbreak of jihad, stretching from the Atlantic through the Lake Chad area and beyond. There were major movements, such as those led by Usman dan Fodio in Hausaland and *al-hājj* 'Umar in what is now Senegal and Mali, both of which were nineteenth century endeavors, and there were any number of smaller ventures, but in most cases the consequence was

the conversion en masse of peasant communities under constraint. In the aftermath, it is usually very difficult to reconstruct pre-Islamic beliefs, as they have been nearly obliterated under Islam.

There is also a direct connection between the rise of so-called militant Islam in eighteenth and nineteenth-century West Africa and slaving activities. Trans-Saharan, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean trafficking in human beings had been under way long before the rise of Islam, but with that rise (and the introduction of the camel into North Africa between 110 BCE and 100 CE) came an intensification of slaving, as captives were used in a variety of capacities, including military and domestic roles. With the advent of the Portuguese in both the Indian Ocean and off the Atlantic coast, slaving went into overdrive, initially to meet the demands for servile labor in the Mediterranean and islands off the West African coast and subsequently in the Americas after the latter's "discovery." Muslim communities in West Africa first organized to protect themselves against slaving but in the process of protection necessarily produced captives, whom they sold. Muslim polities began to envision a much larger role for themselves across West Africa, endeavoring in some instances to create far-flung empires, in response to not only slaving but also to European incursion and ideas circulating within the larger Muslim world.

European incursion brought with it notions of Christianity, which had a major impact on West Central Africa and the kingdom of Kongo. Christianity there had formed a royal cult since the fifteenth century, with adherents throughout the realm, though the extent and quality of their adherence remains a matter of debate, as they clearly continued practices antedating Christianity's arrival. In West Africa, on the other hand, Christianity was for a long time largely confined to coastal communities, where Europeans needed intermediaries, or where they sometimes settled and "went native," producing interracial, intercultural families. Attempts to convert the indigenous tended to be limited to non-Muslim populations, with very little effort devoted to converting Muslims, seen as a waste of time.

Campaigns to convert large numbers of Africans became much more organized with the official onset of colonialism late in the nineteenth century, though the Dutch, Germans, and English had been steadily encroaching upon African lands in southern Africa since the late sixteenth century, while the French had been operating in Senegal since the nineteenth. Colonialism was to a minor degree a response to missionaries' lobbying for the imposition of European political authority in order to overcome resistance on the part

of indigenous rulers, but with the establishment of colonialism, catechizing Africans was also seen as a means of facilitating political control, which in the end was all about promoting European economic interests. The French were less zealous about promoting Catholicism, while British missionaries were far more active, establishing schools and churches through which many African elites were subsequently produced. African elites socialized through missionary schools, in turn, constituted a generation built upon earlier efforts in places like Freetown, in Sierra Leone, where Africans liberated from slavers, interdicted by British naval vessels following the outlawing of transatlantic slave trade in 1807, were exposed to Christian tenets and formed the basis of indigenous religious leadership. These were men like Samuel Ajayi Crowther (d. 1891).

It would appear, then, that at least in the case of West Africa and arguably West Central Africa, the introduction of both Islam and Christianity was neither planned nor coordinated by external powers and followed the logics of commercial enterprise. A sizeable number of Africans embraced these religions, joining elite formations here and there, but the majority of Africans were slow to respond to either religion and did so only when faced with the exigencies of war, conquest, and subsequent rule. As such, the movement of monotheism throughout much of Africa cannot be easily separated from the objectives of imperialism; the extent to which Africans were really free to choose, and what they would have chosen, remains an open question.

European colonial imposition did not simply happen magically. Conquering armies did not materialize out of thin air and swoop down from the skies. European imperialism, motivated by economic imperative and increasingly informed by racist ideology, was made possible through technological innovation and the accumulation of long-distance seafaring knowledge, some of which was borrowed from Indian Ocean practices (the lateen sail and the strategy of tacking against the wind, to give a few examples). Africans were hampered by strong contrary currents along the Atlantic that essentially prevented seafaring in directions north and west, but this does not fully account for why Africans did not take part in any number of technological advances registering in other parts of the world, from China through the Middle East to Europe, such that they were at a decided disadvantage in the confrontation with Europe. One can account for the technology gap by trafficking in racist premises concerning differential innate ability, or take refuge in “négritudinal” notions of affinities with nature (Africans) as opposed to the

exploitation of that nature (Europeans); or one can take the more laborious route in examining, epoch by epoch, the ways in which certain technologies were either invented or adopted by Africans (such as metallurgy) while others were eschewed (such as firearms when first introduced in South Africa, as they were seen as inferior to the accuracy and rapidity of spears and arrows). But as our concern here is religion, it is appropriate to consider the ways in which viewing phenomena, and the control over interpretations of phenomena, also contributed to the technological lag. For if one posits that causality always and ultimately rests in an unseen realm, the manipulation of which can only be effected through ritual and paraphernalia created expressly for that purpose, then it stands to reason that technological innovation will not necessarily be greatly encouraged, especially by experts and priestly classes who have a vested interest in maintaining intact the belief system (the standoff between religion and science a well-worn theme in European history). It is the rare and courageous individual who, under circumstance dominated by an entrenched cultural elite, breaks through consensus and “tradition” and calls for a reassessment of things. That is arguably what the European medieval period was all about, which is not to say that the period was at all stagnant, but that it was a time of testing of alternative explanations and wills, ultimately resulting in the understanding that principles undergirding the universe are not always or necessarily to be found in spirituality. In the African space, the weight of culture was such that individuality and iconoclastic initiative were hardly celebrated. It is simply not possible that in the passing of thousands of years, there were no Africans who did not question conventional explanations, who did not seek to explore alternatives, who were not born with innate ability to observe natural phenomena and search for causality in the physical realm, who did not have original ideas about improving agricultural productivity, transporting goods and people, and so on. But against such innovation, the power of cultural convention and that of those entrusted to preserve it would have assumed tyrannical proportions. This is a delicate matter, but in the effort to defend and explain African culture and lifestyles against a tendentious and hypercritical foreign gaze, one must also be careful to maintain some level of criticality. Just because a convention or belief is African does not render it unassailable or immune from scrutiny.

Of course, for many Africans their initial exposure to Christianity took place within the context of captivity in the New World, preceding the colonial event in Africa itself. Here, a number of dynamics come into play, some

similar to those at work in the continent, with others at variance. Throughout the four-hundred-year history of the transatlantic slave trade, there is very little evidence that enslavers were very preoccupied with converting Africans. Though the Portuguese often baptized captives prior to leaving West Central African ports, often branding them a cross to boot, there was very little in the way of formal catechism on either side of the Atlantic. With the progression of time, into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there may have been a more concerted effort to catechize the American-born progeny of Africans, but even these efforts were uneven and differentiated according to the type of colonial regime and cultural conventions at work. In what became the United States, for example, nineteenth-century slaveholders were torn over whether Christian conversion among the enslaved was desirable, as it encouraged manumission efforts. The point of these generalizations, therefore, is that Africans trafficked into the New World brought with them their own beliefs, beliefs rarely frontally challenged by an insistence upon conversion.

It is well documented that Africans continued to practice their own religions in the New World, with varying success relative to place and time. Given the assault upon the dignity of the African everywhere, the daily affront to her self-worth, the merciless denigration of his culture, the resolve of Africans to pursue their own religions constitutes an attitude of defiance. In this way, the embrace of religious ritual constitutes resistance even more so than sumptuary patterns and culinary preferences, as the latter were arguably much more inertial in nature—people, even in captivity, still had to eat and dress, using whatever materials were at hand. But ritual and worship requires thought and evinces a perspective regarding one's relationship to both the unseen and the enveloping world. As such, religion is an act of self-determination, especially in a context of political constraint, and there is no greater political constraint than that of slavery.

So in continuing to adhere to their own beliefs, Africans were performing defiance. They continued to do so as ethnicities, not as "Africans," but in the American circumstance they necessarily began to interact with those from other places in the continent, resulting in the blending of cultural expressions in a number of instances, with Vodun representing a preeminent example, itself a *mélange* of West and West Central African influences. In some instances, the structure of European religion allowed for African beliefs to be practiced in tandem yet at a level of protective remove, as was true of Yoruba-infused Candomblé in Brazil or Santería in Cuba in relation to the Catholic Church.

Or Africans may have expressed their faith openly, as did many (but not all) Muslims throughout the Western Hemisphere.

It is therefore not surprising that African religions provided a basis for armed revolt among the enslaved, as it did for Akan speakers in eighteenth-century Antigua and Jamaica, for the mostly West-Central Africans during the Haitian Revolution, for the Hausa-Yoruba Muslims of Bahia in the nineteenth century, culminating in the 1835 *malé* revolt. But religion need not be African, in the sense that it emanates from that place, for it to serve as the organizing principle for insurrection, nor need the insurrectionists be African-born. Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner appropriated Christianity as the source of illumination for their revolts in the United States, as did Paul Bogle in the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica. There is arguably no more radical, unflinching, cogent articulation of freedom and the right to fight for it than David Walker's 1829 *Appeal*, a document thoroughly infused with Christian sentiment and teaching. It is therefore not surprising that the late nineteenth-century architects of pan-Africanism were either ministers or powerfully motivated by Christian tenets—Martin Delany (d. 1885), Edward Blyden (d. 1912), Henry Highland Garnet (d. 1882), Henry McNeal Turner (d. 1915), and so on. These were individuals who read the same Bible as those who published it and yet interpreted its meaning very differently.

But not all Africans, and certainly not all of African descent, took up arms against the slaveocracy, nor against ensuing regimes of predatory racism and discrimination that stretched from slavery's abolition well into the twentieth century. Millions of African-descendants, from sharecroppers in North America through the peasantries of the Caribbean and South America, lived in unending penury long after the end of legal slavery. The struggle for human dignity took many forms during that period, but the objectives had essentially crystallized into two distinct distillates. One option was to fight for inclusion into the mainstream, a struggle for full citizenship, whereas the other called for the abandonment of all such efforts in order to begin again, someplace else, under conditions of autonomy at the very least. Individuals like Blyden and Delany had concluded, at least for significant stretches of time in their lives, that there was no real hope for the African descended in the Americas, especially North America, and that the only alternative was to start anew elsewhere.

Of course, not all felt this way. And just as there were ministers who were pan-Africanists, there were ministers who were committed to achieving

citizenship in the lands of their birth. By the second half of the nineteenth century, many African descendants were voluntarily participating in churches throughout the hemisphere, such that even debates over emigration to Africa, for example, were framed in a Christian discourse that could be followed by many. Indeed, thousands left North America for Liberia driven as much by missionary impulse as by American racism.

The examples of ministers employing the teachings of Christ to achieve radical ends raises questions regarding the criteria by which a religion may be considered African and suggests that interpretation and implementation of a religion that addresses the sensibilities and cultural values of African people may qualify, an argument buttressed by the manner in which Christianity was reinterpreted by the Kongolesse mystic Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita (d. 1706) in her effort to unify Kongo, effectively Africanizing the religion (Jesus, the saints, all became Kongolesse); by the example of Simon Kimbangu (d. 1951), who refashioned the Christian message into anticolonial resistance to the Belgians; and by many others.

Just as Christianity was reformulated for radical purposes, so was Islam employed against colonial rule in West Africa. *Al-hājj* 'Umar and his sons fought the French in West Africa until the end of the nineteenth century, as did Samori, as did the Sokoto Caliphate (against the British in this instance). These and other movements led by Muslim clerics should not be understood as anticolonial movements only, or even primarily, but they certainly included that dimension.

But everyone did not resist, at least in the conventional sense of resistance. Many Africans collaborated with colonial forces, often led by Muslim clerics who reached various accommodations with the French or the British. Likewise, not everyone of African descent in the Americas took up armed revolt; in fact, the vast majority did not. The question of resistance on either side of the Atlantic is a complicated one, with armed resistance only one facet. But the point is that the response to repression and exploitation was myriad, and not all of it can be considered "resistance." Such responses were often conditioned by religion and sociopolitical contingency, with the latter often determining the expression of the former.

And sociopolitical contingency, in turn, was a function of successive developments. In general, the trend throughout the Americas has been the gradual inclusion of African descendants into the mainstream of societies in which they are not numerical majorities, whereas in precolonial black-majority states

like those in the Caribbean it was more difficult to break through barriers of class. In any event, religion played a major role throughout, with the upwardly mobile tending to adopt church affiliations that conformed best to aspirations of inclusion and amelioration. This is intriguing, because on the one hand it could be argued that such churches guided and promoted the conservative comportment of its parishioners. On the other hand, it could be said that it was the *a priori* social positioning and aspirational drive of the individual that was actually determinative and dispositional, and that church affiliation was simply a means that, when conjoined with class affectation, demonstrated that the progeny of the formerly enslaved were well able to take on the accoutrements of European culture, making their inclusion all the more palatable. As such, the approach was *quid pro quo*, whereby a small percentage of the oppressed would become the beneficiaries of a modicum of largesse, in exchange for their cooperation. As a process, it was understood that social change would unfold gradually and in a manner that did not threaten the fundamental interests of those truly in power.

Individuals can make up their own minds about what they believe and choose to follow but often fall in line with the prevailing culture. They are rarely in position to select their religious leaders, who are invariably in positions of enormous influence. This was true of the priestly class in early, middle, and precolonial African societies; it was true during the apocalypse of slavery and colonialism, the quintessential experiences of the art of imposition; and it remains true at the time of this writing. Missionary efforts to successfully Christianize large numbers of “natives” largely awaited the conversion of talented sons of the soil, which at times required years of training via missionary schools, who were then able to more effectively communicate the message. In fact, throughout the diaspora, the leadership of African-descended communities often came from men and women of religion. The quality of that leadership was therefore critical. As intermediaries between the realms of oppression and oppressors, these individuals were uniquely positioned to lead their communities into acquiescence or opposition, and if the latter, into the precise form of that opposition. The direction they took could be influenced by many factors, and as intermediaries, they could expect to be rewarded for advocating accommodation, a path unfailingly taken by those ruled by fear. Religion, in this case, is a mechanism of self-perpetuation.

The problem of leadership remains the principal obstacle to the realization of the corporate interests of Africa and its diaspora. There has never

been uniformity of belief in either, and there is no reason to expect such will ever take place. Africans, broadly conceived, are practitioners of any number of faiths, even though the approach to those faiths (movement, possession, trance, etc.) may be more or less the same. But religion has the capacity to be a means to multiple and conflicting social and political ends. What therefore awaits more definitive resolution to the challenges facing Africans is not a better religion, or the embrace of a single faith, but a reformed leadership in the sphere of religion as well as every other area of human endeavor. One that does not reflexively fear alternative ways of seeing things, nor engages in efforts to stifle and suppress innovation and creativity. One that is not consumed by its own insecurities or obsession with self-preservation. One that is prepared to make room and even step aside for new leaders with new ideas. One that is unafraid.