

Introduction

In May 2013 a young man called Michael Adebolajo, London-born and of Christian Yoruba background, hacked a soldier to death with a cleaver, in broad daylight, outside the military barracks in Woolwich, southeast London. He did this in the name of Islam, to which religion he had converted some years before. When he was charged in court a week later, he brandished a Koran and shouted *Allahu akbar!* to underscore the point, and likewise his accomplice, another young man of similar background. The incident was shocking enough in itself, to people of all religions and ethnicities, though it was not unthinkable, as it would have been a few years earlier. It led to a range of what are, by now, fairly predictable public responses, ranging from the criminal and disgraceful, such as retaliatory attacks on mosques, to the evasive and implausible, such as the insistence of Muslim leaders and some others that the attack “had nothing to do with Islam.”

No doubt the backstories to this incident—the preconditions that we need to know to make it rightly intelligible in all its detail—ramify so widely in time and space as to pass beyond the bounds of any final understanding of what happened. In the main, they are stories of movement and change, and stories that serve to connect people and religion. If we start from the Yoruba background of the perpetrator, there has been for decades a large-scale migration of Yoruba to London. It goes back to the 1950s—a time bright with the prospect of Nigerian independence—when the migrants’ main motive was to gain qualifications to enhance their life chances when they returned home. A good majority of them were already Christians when they came, and their migration was grounded in a process of social transformation that already went back for more than a century. A key element in this was the conversion of roughly half the Yoruba to Christianity,

the other half becoming Muslim. “Conversion” was never a narrowly religious process, for it went with the adoption of a whole complex of values: education as a key to personal and communal advancement, progress and prosperity, modernity.

Over the years the Yoruba have grown to become the largest single African-heritage group in London. They have brought with them the whole spectrum of their rich associational life, including a great variety of churches, among which Pentecostalism now bulks large. At the same time, they have become socially differentiated in British terms, ranging from a substantial professional stratum to a mass of middle- and lower-income folk, mostly concentrated in a broad swath of south London stretching from Brixton to Thamesmead. Some of their children (to the anxiety of their parents) were drawn into the multicultural lifeworld of inner-city youth, with its linkages to delinquency, drugs, and gang violence. A measure of disaffection from mainstream society and its institutions was fueled by the experience of racism, especially at the hands of the police.

Among the various forms that disaffection may take, radical Islam has emerged as an option attracting young men from diverse cultural origins. Though Adebolajo came from a solid family background and was popular at school, he went through a period of teenage alienation in which he was involved in petty crime (dealing in marijuana, stealing mobile phones, etc.) before becoming a Muslim at the age of sixteen, to the dismay of his Christian family. The bitter irony of his having adopted a violently jihadist form of Islam is that Yoruba Islam is not at all like this. In Yorubaland, Islam and Christianity, although rivals, coexist peaceably within a framework of shared community values, in marked contrast to the situation in Northern Nigeria, where a jihadist tradition has contributed to a pattern of endemic religious violence whose most recent manifestation is the militant Islamist organization known as Boko Haram. Paradoxically, if Adebolajo’s own background had been Muslim rather than Christian, he would probably have been *less* susceptible to jihadism, since he would have lacked the incentive to that self-proving extremism that is so commonly a mark of the convert. Yet in the end, his Yoruba or Nigerian background is less relevant to what he became—he might as easily have been Jamaican or Ghanaian—than certain conditions provided by the worlds of multicultural London and of global Islam.

The Islamist group that played the prime role in radicalizing Adebolajo was a later-banned organization called Al-Muhajiroun. Its name (The Emigrants) alludes to an epochal event in early Islamic history, the Prophet’s withdrawal (*hijra*) with a group of companions from Mecca to Medina in 622. The contemporary sources of Muslim anger (colonialism, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, the invasion of Afghanistan, etc.) were thus configured in terms of a long-span vision of Islam’s history that also yields precedents for action. The most consequential *hijra* in West African history was surely that of Shaykh Usman dan Fodio in 1804, which led to the launching of the jihad that established the Sokoto Caliphate and that has deeply

shaped the politicoreligious order of Northern Nigeria ever since. Though religious traditions (which include much more than what is in their scriptures) are capacious and multivocal, they still give a strong cultural steer to the actions and aspirations of their adherents. This occurs not automatically but through a complex, two-way exchange between the messages of the tradition and the pressures of the contexts in which believers turn to it for guidance. So debates among Muslims about the import of their faith are, from an anthropological perspective, directly constitutive of it. At the same time, where grievances arising in a specific context are articulated through the lens of a world religion, connections are necessarily made across large gulfs of time and space. The full explication of what happened on 22 May 2013 thus points toward an analysis that is both comparative and historical.

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The story just told has touched on many of the general themes of this book: religious conversion, new movements in Islam and Christianity, relations between world religions, the conditions of religious violence or amity, the transnational flows of contemporary religion, the interplay between tradition and the demands of an ever-changing present. The people at the center of the story are the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, who are also the starting point for the various comparative forays, both internal and external, that are undertaken in the course of it. They are the second largest language group (over 35 million) in Nigeria and are concentrated in its most developed region, Lagos and its hinterland, reaching some two hundred miles into the interior. Before their incorporation into the colonial state, they formed a cluster of a few dozens of mostly small kingdoms or city-states, among which a few larger ones achieved periods of wider regional domination, notably Oyo (up to ca. 1830) and its principal successor state, Ibadan. The name Yoruba came into currency as a self-designation only in the late nineteenth century, but there is no reason to doubt a good measure of cultural continuity between today's Yoruba and the culture of classical Ife (fl. 11th–16th centuries), known for its magnificent bronzes. Ife (which Yoruba have also seen as the site of their cosmogony) is powerfully evoked in the myths of the *oriṣa* (deities), who are the centerpiece of their traditional religion.

For over four hundred years the Yoruba have straddled two geocultural spheres, one reaching north over the Sahara to the world of Islam, the other linking them via the Atlantic to the Euro-American world. Besides their trade networks, these two external spheres were the source of contrasting cultural influences, notably those emanating from the world religions (Islam probably going back at least to the seventeenth century, Christianity to the mid-nineteenth). Since it was only in the late 1930s that these religions, taken together, came to command the allegiance of a majority of Yoruba, there is the unusual theoretical bonus that we can compare *three* religions in one society. Moreover, the Yoruba have not only imported

Islam and Christianity but have also exported their own *oriṣa* religion to the New World. Besides the voluntary modern diaspora that has created Yoruba communities in London and elsewhere in Euro-America, there was an earlier involuntary diaspora, reaching its peak in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, which took tens of thousands of them as slaves to the New World, and with them *oriṣa* religion. Ironically, the internal disruption that fueled those wars of enslavement also contributed to the spread of Islam and Christianity among the Yoruba at home. The intertwined character of the three religions in Yorubaland and the dense imbrication of religion in all other aspects of its history are what this book sets out to explore.

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The research on which this book is based goes back now over half a century, to when I first went to Nigeria, in 1964. The five chapters of Part I are revised versions of papers published between 1987 and 2009, while those of Part II all largely depend on research done since 2008, were written as a set, and appear here for the first time. Part II deals largely with Islam and the contemporary situation, but so much of the ground for it was laid in the earlier papers that it made for greater completeness and coherence in the collection as a whole for them to be included. All the chapters are strongly comparative in their approach. Their thematic sequence bears the traces of an interlinked double history, between how the religious scene in Yorubaland and Nigeria at large has evolved since the 1960s, and how its study has developed. Of course these two strands do not move in lockstep: apart from the inevitable time lag between social reality and its representation, or between history as lived and history as written, the study of Nigerian religion has been shaped by currents in African studies at large, as well as by intellectual trends grounded outside Africa altogether. It is almost normal that a research project of any duration—from its conception through research and writing to final publication—will be framed in one social and intellectual context and find itself concluded in another; and will so bear the traces of its own history.

Fifty years ago Nigeria was coming to the end of the first flush of its postcolonial existence, and my first book, *Aladura* (1968), being a study of independent churches that emerged in the midcolonial period, fitted in with the nationalist zeitgeist. Such churches were often placed within a larger literature on supposedly similar movements in other colonial settings—cargo cults, millennial and “revitalization” movements, and so forth—that saw them as “religions of the oppressed” or applied a Marxist schema that viewed them as the immature precursors of a political nationalism that would supersede them.¹ Closer analysis, however, led me to see the *Aladura* rather differently: “nationalist” in being a self-directed African initiative, but one addressed to practical and existential problems that arose from the encounter between two religions and cultures under specific colonial conditions.

What followed on from *Aladura* was strongly shaped by the review essay of it written by Robin Horton, which branched out from appreciation through critique to develop a general and influential theory of African conversion.² Horton's theory treated both colonialism and the world religions as merely catalysts of a process of cognitive adjustment grounded in indigenous terms. Its clarity and generalizability allowed the theory to be greatly taken up, applied, confirmed, rebutted, or qualified over the next twenty years. But religious change tends to be a very multi-dimensional process, and there were important aspects that his theory neglected or underplayed. To draw these out, comparison was an essential instrument. I had previously made use of internal Yoruba comparison to throw light on the spatial patterns of conversion within Yorubaland, and now I used an external comparison to test his theory.³ This took two polities, the Ijebu-Yoruba and the better-known case of Buganda in East Africa, which both experienced mass conversion movements in the 1890s. What that comparison showed was that beneath considerable surface differences were linkages of conditions and outcomes similar to those that Horton had proposed. But a more searching comparison, one that would not just confirm the theory as far as it went but drive the analysis of religious change forward on a broader front, would need to be one where the conditions specified by the theory went with divergent outcomes. Such appeared to be the case when the Yoruba were compared with the Akan of southern Ghana.

That paper appears below as chapter 1: "History, Culture and the Comparative Method: A West African Puzzle." The puzzle was defined as such within the terms of Horton's theory. Since the relevant conditions, of increase in social scale, were equally present in both societies, why was the patterning of conversion over time so different, with the Yoruba being precocious and the Akan tardy? My answer was that this needed to be explained by a factor that lies quite outside the terms of the theory, namely the role of religion in a society's political integration. Now, there was produced in the 1960s and 1970s a substantial literature on the conditions of political centralization in precolonial West African kingdoms. This had its theoretical roots in a genre of regional comparative studies that had grown up in British social anthropology since the 1940s and had led to a revival of interest in the "comparative method" as a distinctive feature of anthropology. But there was inadequate recognition that comparison had been practiced in a number of very different modes and that hardly anyone (except Radcliffe-Brown) was still attached to the classic comparative method that nineteenth-century social theorists had advocated. The ahistorical character of most anthropological comparison became a problem when the work on West African kingdoms required a measure of convergence between anthropology and history. For there was still a strong penchant to discount cultural factors (including religion) and to look for social-structural or technoecological factors to explain variations between kingdoms. Since the former were seen as essentially a reflection of social structure, they could produce

only circular explanations. But culture is the way that the past of a society reaches into its present, to continuously inform the choices and actions through which social forms are realized. Akan/Asante and Yoruba each derived from their pasts a view of what mattered to them, to which what we may call “religion” was integral; and this underlay their differential responses to the challenge presented by the world religions. What this perspective allows us to address is something neglected in Horton’s very “cool” view of religious change—as a process of cognitive adjustment to change in the conditions of social life—namely as a “hot” process often attended by passion, conflict, and violence.

This argument, without doubt, was speculative, because our factual knowledge of West African religions as historical entities is so patchy and limited. So with the aim of developing it through a substantial comparative study of religion in the forest kingdoms of precolonial West Africa (Oyo, Asante, Dahomey, and Benin), I thought I had better begin by getting a better picture of Yoruba religion itself. So I embarked on an exhaustive reading of what is by far the richest documentary source, the archive of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), an evangelical Anglican body that started its Yoruba operations in the 1840s. Over several years this led to a displacement of my original objective, as I came to write a detailed account of the encounter between evangelical Christianity and the Yoruba when their indigenous *oriṣa* religion was still absolutely predominant.⁴

As historians tend to appreciate better than anthropologists, theoretical objectives have to be adjusted to what the source material makes possible. Yet a theoretical thrust can still make itself felt, even though it may entail brushing against the grain of the evidence. I wanted to tell as much as possible a Yoruba story, a story with a Yoruba starting point and the story of an African initiative in religion (as *Aladura* had been), even though the evidence was almost entirely derived from missionary reports. So it was a great help that so much of this material—as well as the greatest literary achievement of the mission, Samuel Johnson’s *History of the Yorubas*—had been written by the African agents of the CMS. Even so, in the writing of *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* the greatest challenge was not to give an adequate account of the encounter itself but to avoid anachronism in reconstructing what *oriṣa* religion had been at the first point of encounter and to be especially careful in doing what is very hard to avoid, namely filling the gaps in the evidence from what “traditional” religion had *subsequently* come to be. What we too readily forget is that “tradition” itself is subject to change. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the two sides of the encounter.

Chapter 2 follows on directly from chapter 1 in that it involves a comparison between the pioneer local historians of the same two societies: Samuel Johnson of the Yoruba and C. C. Reindorf of Akan/Asante. As a comparison it is uneven, since it is much more a study of the making of Johnson as a historian, beside whom Reindorf stands mainly as a foil. So the play of resemblance and contrast, which is

the essence of comparison, is used more for expository than explanatory purposes. Its aim is to bring out the singularity of Johnson's achievement, in transmuting his social experience so as to produce the extraordinary work that came to play such a large role in forming modern Yoruba identity.

Chapter 3 is complementary to chapter 2, since it is a sample analysis of the other side of the equation, namely what Johnson, as a Christian missionary, pitched himself *against*. Yet it would have been impossible to write without the evidence about nineteenth-century life, especially the worship of the deities (*oriṣa*), that Johnson and his colleagues provided in their journals. Its subject, Ogun, the god of iron, was arguably the most extensively worshipped of the quite small number of truly pan-Yoruban deities. The argument is built around two axes of comparison. The first contrasts different regions of Yorubaland, showing that the worship of particular *oriṣa* varied from one region to another; and the second compares Ogun and other *oriṣa*, showing that many of their functions and attributes were not stable but variable between one *oriṣa* and another. The paradox here is that, though Johnson and his fellow Yoruba clergy subscribed strongly to the idea of an essential Yoruba unity—evident in the standard form of the language that they actively promoted and the legend of common descent from Ife as “the cradle of the race,” which they accepted as historical truth—their concrete observations, taken in the aggregate, tend to undermine it. We are left with a picture of “Yoruba traditional religion” as a dynamic entity, with fluid and malleable deities, less a single religion than a spectrum of local cult complexes.

With chapters 4 and 5 we come forward in time, both in the real time of the events and in the time of writing. They stand loosely together, for they both focus on Pentecostalism, but their approaches differ according to the logic of the comparison that they employ. Both were commissioned for conferences dealing with wider-than-African themes, so the consideration of Yoruba matters is subsumed within a wider theoretical or thematic framework. As in chapter 1, the argument of chapter 4 is driven by a theory-led contrast, this time Harvey Whitehouse's distinction between two modes of religiosity, which he terms “imagistic” and “doctrinal.”⁵ These depend on two contrasting forms of memory by which religions may perpetuate themselves but that are variably present in particular cases. Since this model is abstracted from the contrast between the indigenous religions of Papua New Guinea and mission Christianity, its relevance to the situation of West Africa is obvious. And since as a model it is abstract, it allows us in principle to make comparisons between religions in many other situations, such as between different indigenous cults or religions, or different forms of world religion. Chapter 4 applies it across the long span of Yoruba religious forms, from those of the *oriṣa* to Aladura and contemporary Pentecostalism, finding that the success of the latter can be seen in terms of how Pentecostalists are able to combine elements of both the imagistic and doctrinal modes.

Chapter 5, by contrast, takes off from an empirical comparison—between the post-Soviet and the postcolonial African worlds—and so follows a more open and exploratory path.⁶ It opens with the unlikely story of an Ijebu-Yoruba founding the largest Pentecostal church in the Ukraine—which prompts us to ask: What it is about Pentecostalism and the present global conjuncture that makes such an outcome possible? The argument proceeds by a series of ad hoc but strategic comparisons: between the articulations of religion and polity in the two regions; between different former colonial regimes in Africa in terms of their propensity to adopt socialist solutions to their problems after independence; and among the three African regimes (Benin, Mozambique, and Ethiopia) that claimed to be Marxist-Leninist. It culminates in an analysis of how Pentecostalism gained massively after the fall of these regimes at the end of the 1980s and why it has such appeal in the neoliberal world order.

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Part II, like Part I, opens with a chapter of much wider scope, which sets out the theoretical basis for the empirical studies that follow. Whereas the chapters of Part I mostly compare contexts (societies, regions, states, etc.) to clarify the conditions under which religions—chiefly forms of Christianity—gain support or take on a particular character, in Part II the main logic of comparison is reversed: Christianity and Islam are compared within a single setting, first Yorubaland and then Nigeria as a whole. And while in the papers of Part I comparison is mainly an analytical instrument of the observer, in Part II it also comes into the picture as part of what is observed, namely as a key aspect of the interaction between the two religions.

Islam got all too short shrift in the earlier papers. While this might be considered venial in an author whose main interest has been on Yoruba Christianity, it also reflects a serious weakness in the literature on modern Yoruba religion as a whole. There has never been a serious in-depth anthropological study of Yoruba Islam and virtually the only historical study appeared over thirty years ago.⁷ References to Yoruba Muslims in writing on modern politics are quite frequent but brief, and the specific character of Yoruba Islam gets little detailed attention. For that, one has to turn to scholars grounded in religious or Islamic studies. As academic disciplines these tend to be very distinct, with the former mainly the province of non-Muslims, the latter of Muslims—a division unfortunately now solidified in the organization of Nigerian universities.⁸ Much of the research produced in the latter has a strong literary or philological bent, though it also contains very useful material on Islamic movements, aspects of Muslim religious life, and the intellectual concerns of the *ulama*. There is much of value in Ph.D. theses, particularly from the Arabic and Islamic Studies Department at Ibadan, but these nearly all remain unpublished. In 2008 and 2009, I undertook six months' fieldwork, mainly collecting local documentary materials and conducting interviews

with Yoruba Muslims. I found myself on a steep learning curve. In the comparative chapters that follow, I have tried to give particular attention to Islam in order to do something to even up the coverage that the two religions have received in the past.

Chapter 6 picks up from where the argument of chapter 1 ended, with its plea, against the dominant tendency in social anthropology, for a mode of comparison that takes seriously the fact that societies have histories, meaning that they are shaped by the reach of the past into the present that we call culture. Now, the world religions may be seen as an ideal terrain for exploring this, with their richly documented histories and their realization in so many culturally diverse settings. Yet anthropology was slow to study them and slower to attempt any theorization of them as objects of study. Eventually this got under way not at a generic level but rather as a series of religion-specific initiatives, hardly connected with one another: an anthropology of Islam started to emerge in the 1970s,⁹ then Buddhism and Hinduism,¹⁰ and last of all Christianity. Chapter 6 argues that these need to be brought together in a common comparative framework, not just because of their close coexistence in today's world but because they present common analytical problems. The main one is how to treat the characteristic features of religion *X* without defining it in terms of a single set of enduring attributes (an "essence") that is held to underlie all its manifestations. I argue that we can avoid this through a notion of tradition, which reciprocally interacts with the contexts through which it passes over time and by which it is simultaneously reproduced and transformed.

The extended comparison of Christianity and Islam as they have developed in the one Yoruba context, which follows in chapters 7–9, shows this in operation. These three chapters, all covering roughly the same time span, explore from different angles the complex patterns of convergence and divergence that have played out between Muslims and Christians over the long twentieth century. The Yoruba context was not, of course, historically static, but a large component of it, a nexus of values built round the notion of community, did serve to connect the Yoruba to a sense of their own past—and not least to certain aspects of their "traditional" *oriṣa* religion, which overall they were in the process of abandoning.

Chapter 7 thus begins by analyzing the process of conversion to the world religions. It goes on to examine how the new potential for religious conflict that they brought was checked by strongly held community values, and how each community of faith still drew on its inherited cultural template to realize itself institutionally in the Yoruba setting. Yet Yoruba religious amity is to be seen not as a timeless cultural absolute but as always needing to be worked at; and at times it has come under strain. This showed above all in the sphere of modern politics, which initially was dominated by Christians, because of their higher level of education. The significant measure of Muslim disaffection that had emerged by the 1980s has since receded, as the Yoruba default system was restored, and the Muslim/Christian divide was neutralized as a source of political cleavage.

Chapter 8 turns to a countertendency that arises from the cultural trajectories inherent in each religion's history. Staring from a baseline around 1870, when Islam was widely seen as much better adapted to Yoruba culture than Christianity was, I draw a systematic contrast between the Christian project of inculturation or Africanization, and the Muslim "Reformist" project, which tended toward the adoption of a more universalizing form of Islam. The outcome has been that Muslims are now more likely than Christians to set themselves off from previously shared Yoruba attributes by adopting marks of religious distinctiveness. The acme of this, Sharia law, adumbrates the possibility of further cultural divergence, but it remains unappealing to the great mass of Yoruba Muslims and an unrealizable objective in the foreseeable future.

At the same time, this divergent tendency is checked by a counterforce that fosters convergence, which paradoxically has its roots in the very fact of the competition between the two religions. Since the Yoruba religious field is like a marketplace with potential converts as consumers, local criteria of religious value will tend to prevail, giving the rival faiths a strong incentive to borrow effective elements from each other. Chapter 9 traces this process over time, noting shifts in the direction and content of the borrowing that has taken place. Since the rise of neo-Pentecostalism since the 1980s, influence has flowed mainly from Christianity to Islam, evoking a range of Muslim responses, of which the most notable has been NASFAT, the largest new movement in Yoruba Islam. Yet again there is a check: the market model, while illuminating, is itself limited by constraints arising from within the distinctive traditions of each faith.

In chapters 10 and 11, the geographical focus is expanded, first to Nigeria at large and then beyond Africa. Chapter 10 examines critically the claim that Pentecostalism has its mirror image in "fundamentalist" Islam, or Salafism. For comparative purposes the argument moves from Yorubaland, where Pentecostalism is strong, Salafism weak, and interfaith relations peaceable, to Northern Nigeria, where Salafism is strong and interfaith conflict has been acute and often violent. I argue that, despite some formal resemblances, their ethos and historical trajectories have little in common and have very different implications for the Nigerian public sphere. The argument is clinched by a comparative reading of two recent histories by Yoruba authors—a Pentecostal view of Nigerian Christianity and a Salafist one of Nigerian Islam—which brings out how radically divergent are the conceptions of state, nation, and culture promoted by the two traditions.

An irony of Yoruba religion today is that whereas the *oriṣa* cults in Nigeria itself (Circle 1, the historical baseline) are deep in decline, eclipsed by the two Abrahamic faiths that demonize them (Circle 2), *oriṣa* religion in the New World (Circle 3) is flourishing and spreading. Yet the two sets of phenomena, of interest to different bodies of scholars (and believers), have been studied largely in isolation from each other—which chapter 11, in a very preliminary way, attempts to

rectify. I conclude with reflections on the cross-pressures of re-Africanization and universalization evident in Circle 3, as phenomena of religious globalization.

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The essays are linked not just by their Yoruba point of reference but by their commitment to comparison as a tool of analysis. It is odd that comparativism has had such a faltering, on-and-off presence in the history of anthropology, granted that the “comparative method” was virtually its founding charter.¹¹ But it came to be widely seen as an embarrassment, whether because of its link with a discredited unilinear evolutionism, or because its generalizations failed the test of evidence, or because it seemed wedded to a scientific program too exclusively positivist. The well-worn antinomies of nomothetic (generalizing) vs. idiographic (particularizing) or of causalistic vs. hermeneutic analysis have given rise too readily to an overlimited view of the possibilities of comparison. If the blind trial of a newly developed drug in medical research may be taken as a kind of gold standard in the use of comparison to test causal relations, the social sciences can still go some way to emulate this within the limits of what is practicable for their subject matter, as with the statistical analysis of large data sets used in the study of social mobility. These are theory-led inquiries, which are made easier if the data can be “constructed” in a controlled way, as when informants are questioned. But even when these strict conditions cannot be met, the same logic underlies more informal and open-ended comparisons. Historians (and to a large extent anthropologists) have to work with the evidence as they find it, and their comparisons mostly arise from given circumstances, such as a historic path not taken, the contrast with a neighbor, the divergent actions of two groups within a nation or region, and so forth. Such comparisons are often *ad hoc*, made within the flow of a narrative and various in their aims: to bring to light new factors, to clarify or rule out causal hunches, to give a sharper definition to probable connections. And moving right away from positivistic or cause-seeking conceptions of the comparative method, what could be more essentially comparative than translation between languages, the very germ of hermeneutics?¹²

Comparison is in fact so basic to human beings’ engagement with the world in which they live that it is as integral to mundane, practical reasoning as in its more formalized and systematic applications. It is at least implicitly present whenever there are choices to be faced. It belongs as much to *pensée sauvage* as to scientific inquiry, as much to the moral as to the cognitive options that human beings face. For wherever it is applied, comparison implies difference, and so opens up a range of possibilities for seeing the world and for living life differently. Few subjects take us more directly to comparison in social practice than those treated in this book, such as conversion from one faith to another and the interaction between religions. What the anthropologist or historian attempts, therefore, is both a meta-activity

and a deeper and more systematic pursuit of the same activity, albeit from a more detached subject position, than those engaged in the practical comparison of religions can usually manage. It thus has the potential to flow across from the study of the social processes of religion in history to a real-life engagement with them.

In the five or so years that this book has been in the writing, violent Islamism has shot up the register of public attention, in Nigeria as in the rest of the world, and this is reflected in the content of its later chapters. It seems fair to say that much more discussion, at least in the West, has been given to how to control it than to understand what gives rise to it. As to the latter, there are diametrically opposed opinions, with *It's nothing to do with Islam* and *That's the way that Islam is* at the extremes. Comparison can release us from these hopeless polarities, because it opens up a wider range of possibilities and enables us to choose between them. And here there is a way for Nigeria not just to address its own agony over Boko Haram but to serve a wider purpose, since it furnishes two sharply contrasting cases—Yorubaland and the North—that suggest two broad conditions for the absence or presence of religious violence, which have their analogues in many other situations. The first is sociological: the crosscutting of communal and religious ties (universal in Yorubaland, much rarer in the North), which greatly raises the cost of religious violence and so reduces its incidence. The second is cultural: the virtual absence from Yorubaland of a jihadist tradition, such as had such a strong presence within Northern Islam.¹³

In general, we are much more inhibited about probing the cultural than the social conditions of Islamist violence, whether because we feel it is politically inexpedient,¹⁴ or because we wish to avoid essentializing Islam, or because we don't want to be accused of Islamophobia. That perhaps explains the very circumspect tone in which Michael Cook argues that the exceptional degree of Islam's engagement in modern politics, compared with other religions, has clear roots in its heritage, going right back to the teaching and example of its Prophet.¹⁵ Violence as such, except implicitly under the headings of jihad and warfare, does not figure saliently in his analysis, though it is the inescapable concomitant of any attempt to turn a confessional community into a state, as the Prophet and his successors set out to do; and the Prophet was not squeamish in endorsing violence when he thought it justified.¹⁶ Cook's compelling case for the capacity of Islam for political mobilization rests primarily on his mastery of the foundational texts of Islam and of works by later Muslim scholars, in relation to the course of Islamic history as informed by them; but it is strengthened by a systematic comparison with Hinduism in India and Catholicism in Latin America, where he finds this capacity lacking. His conclusion is carefully balanced: "no [religion's] heritage is a reliable predictor of the behaviour of those who inherit it, but just as surely heritages are not interchangeable."¹⁷ The implication is that while a religion's tradition can be powerfully constrained by any fresh context in which it is realized, it still makes

some responses to fresh contexts more or less likely than others; and that produces what we regard as the typical features of that religion in practice. But here a limitation arising from the broad scope of Cook's book shows itself. Because he has to compare the religions in the different regions of the world where they have been dominant, there can be little contextual overlap (except to a degree in South Asia) between the three cases. This means that the power of comparison cannot be fully brought to bear on the crucible where religions are at their most concrete, the social contexts where traditions prove themselves. The sparrow hawk coursing the hedgerows is closer to its quarry than the eagle scanning the ideological terrain from on high. So I offer a historical anthropology of a context where Islam and Christianity both coexist and interact with each other: the exemplary Yoruba, who have so much to tell us about how different religions can live together in peace.

