

Review

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Book Review

Ousmane Kane, *Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria: A Study of the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reinstatement of Tradition*, Brill: Leiden, 2003. ISBN 90 04 12588 4 Hardback (xxii, 284 pp., 3 illus.). List price: EUR 95.- / US\$ 129.

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Kane's seminal work, *Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria: A Study of the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reinstatement of Tradition*, is a study of the Yan Izala or the Society for the Removal of Innovation and the Reinstatement of Tradition, which is the single largest Islamic reform movement in West Africa. Kane treats Izala as a vehicle for modernity and aims at providing an analytical account of the restructuring of the religious field in Northern Nigeria with Kano as a focus. The Islamic field in Nigeria, like that of West Africa, is uniquely expressive of Sufism- a mode of Islamic devotion. In order to situate the reader into the debate, it is imperative to present an overview of Sufism.

The Sufi mystical tradition is characterized by its reverence of spiritual beings (alive or dead) that are believed to embody extraordinary amounts of *baraka*, or divine grace. Islamic practice takes the form of membership of religious brotherhoods, *tariqa*, that are dedicated to marabouts (the founders or current spiritual leaders) of these brotherhoods. Muslims in Nigeria are almost always members of the Qadriyya brotherhood, which is the smallest and oldest, or the Tijani (Tijaniyya) brotherhood which has the largest following and is spread all over West Africa (Kaba 1974; Miran 1998; Brenner 1988). Sufi Islam is essentially conservative and supportive of the African traditional socio-political order and hierarchical system of class and gender differentiation. Until the 1950s, Sufi orders largely dominated the Northern Nigerian religious sphere and were accepted as the highest form of Islamic orthodoxy and purity (p.150). Kane's thoroughly researched work is an interesting account of how the traditional Sufi *tariqa* came under attack from Islamic reformers, particularly the Yan Izala that claim Wahabiyya

persuasion. The work has the outstanding merit of addressing a largely neglected field of Islamism in sub-Saharan Africa, and provides a useful background to an understanding of the Shari'atisation of the Northern Nigerian states since the advent of Obasanjo to power in 1999.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first two introductory chapters, (the introduction and chapter 1) provide a broad overview of twentieth century Nigeria. Chapter 2 discusses the postcolonial growth of a succession of reformist Islamic religious movements including Izala, which had transnational connections. The postcolonial era witnessed Saudi Arabia, and to a certain extent Egypt, launching a Pan-Islamic policy aimed at the promotion of ties between different Muslims countries. For that purpose the World Muslim League was created which included prominent Nigerian Muslims as its founding members. The Iranian revolution and its Shi'ite brand of Islam, however, posed a serious threat to the Gulf states. Saudi Arabia had to counter it by propagating its own brand of Islam through generous donations to Nigerian Muslims in the form of sponsorships, and the distribution of copies of the Koran and Wahhabi Islamic literature. The context was therefore ripe for the rise of reformers with an alternative orientation to that of the Sufi *tariqa*.

Chapter three deals with the fragmentation of sacred authority in the form of new challenges. In the wake of social changes and new influences, a generation of young religious entrepreneurs started to interpret Islam in a way that was not always different from, "but on some occasions, challenged or rejected the existing mainstream Sufi Islamic discourse" (p. 69). These groups included the Muslim Students Society, the Da'wa Group of Shaykh Aminudeen Abubakar, Shaykh Abubakar Gumi's Society for the Removal of Innovation, the moderate and radical advocates of an Islamic state in Nigeria and the millenarian movement led by Maitatsine. Aminudeen Abubaka started his activism with the radical Muslim Student's association before forming the Da'wa group which campaigned strenuously against the secular state. He later shun the Iranian revolution but was careful in his relations with the Sufi *tariqa* (pp. 75-84).

But this was not the case with Shaykh Abubakar Mahmud Gumi who emerged on the Islamic scene as "one of the most charismatic anti-Sufi reformist figures in the twentieth century West Africa" (p.82). This Islamic scholar developed solid contacts with the political and religious leaders of Saudi Arabia and became an "indefatigable advocate of social and religious reforms along Wahhabi lines" (p. 82). He commenced his reformist activities by criticizing different aspects of the Sufi orders during Koranic exegesis in the mosques, in newspapers and over the radio and television. In

1972, he published an extremely anti-Sufi book in which he zealously set out to demonstrate the totally heterodox nature of Sufism. The publication triggered an unprecedented polemic between him and the Sufi *tariqa* and caused a factional split within the Nigerian Islamic field. An attempt was made on his life and that of his close collaborators by inflamed Sufi radicals. Against these developments, the reformers formally created the *Jama'at Izalat al-bid'a wa iqamat al-sunna* (Society for the Removal of Innovation and the Reinstatement of Tradition) in 1978 as a movement committed to pursue their work should they be murdered. The Society, in essence, advocated the "abandonment of local Islamic practices and the return the pristine Islam" which the Saudis claimed to be practicing. Venerated Sufi saints such as Ahmad al-Tijani and Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani were labeled infidels.

Chapter four examines the social base of the Yan Izala movement. The Yan Izala were like other members of contemporary Islamic movements of the modern world-urban-based, with modern education and were composed of different socio-economic categories. Its leadership was made up of two segments: the religious entrepreneurs and the political/economic entrepreneurs, each engaged in advocating the reform of Sufi Islam. A select biography of each of these categories is highlighted by Kane. The biographies compiled by the author make a useful revelation, namely, that despite the claim of the Society, *inqamut al-sunna* (the reinstatement of tradition), its agenda was by no means to "re-traditionalise society". Yan Izala's set goals was to modernise, "to make sense of, to mediate social change" (p.122). They were therefore selective in the appropriation and specific interpretation of Islamic heritage. It would therefore be an overstatement to perceive Yan Izala as full-fledge Wahhabiyyas. Although chapter 1 to 4 make interesting reading of the emergence and position of the reformers, no detailed doctrinal differences between the Sufi *tariqa* and the Yan Izala are exposed beyond a critique of Sufism as a deviation from pristine Islam.

Although chapter five is titled: Worldview and recruitment patterns of the Yan Izala, what actually follows is more of an analysis of the discriminatory selection of those materials from Islamic tradition that best suited their agenda to use as references for writing treaties and pamphlets that could support their preaching. The sources of the material used for preaching, the recurrent concepts and ideas in their proselytisation, their mode of recruitment and maintenance of allegiance are discussed. Although the major theological text used by Izala is the *Kitab al-tawhid* by Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab, the Yan Izala also depended on a second one, the *Jama'at al-Tabligh* of Indo-Pakistani origin. It is pointed out here that Islamic movements of Wahhabi persuasion have the tendency of labeling Sufis "unbelievers" and that this

practice is more prevalent in Northern Nigeria than elsewhere in West Africa. But no explanation is given for this Nigerian peculiarity. Perhaps this chapter could have been introduced earlier to enable the reader understand the doctrinal impurities the Yan Izala were accusing the Sufi orders of.

Chapter Six is a riposte of the Sufi *tariqa* which Kane titles the counter reform movements. The Sufi *tariqa* had to unite in order to protect their common heritage and identity. Shaykh Mudi Salga created the Fityan al-Islam with the aim of fighting the Wahhabis and another Islamic sect, the Ahmadiyyas. In the 1980s, Shaykh Sharif Ibrahim of the Tijaniyya persuasion struggled to reinterpret a version of Sufi Islam that was free from excessive veneration of saints and guarantees of salvation. The spread of the Izala movement thus led to the redefinition of religious identities and the bipolarization of the Islamic field with the Sufis being referred to as Yan Tariqa and the reformers as Yan Izala.

Chapter Seven examines Muslim-Christian confrontations but it is a departure from the scope of the book and would not necessarily devalue its wealth of information and analysis if it is left out. Chapter 8 deals with the domestication of the Izala that led to its disintegration.

Kane has definitely succeeded in demonstrating the polarization that occurred in the Islamic religious field following the appearance of the reformers on the scene. One might want to wonder whether it was necessary for him to attempt to restrict his study to Kano and to the Yan Izala when the Sufi *tariqa* and Yan Izala were so pervasive in Northern Nigeria. The author has presented more of the view points of the attackers than that of the attacked; he also needs to explain further the resilience of the Sufi orders despite the scathing denunciation they were subjected to by the reformers as being heterodox. The Sufi *tariqa* actually flowered under colonial rule, incorporated several aspects of African traditional belief systems and ensured the survival of Islam. Is this not sufficient reason for a more profound and sympathetic analysis of the nature of Sufism to enable one judge the extent to which the attacks of the Yan Izala was in order?

Kane's description of some Middle Belt peoples as "pagans" (p.30) is surprising because he is probably referring to African traditional religionists. He states that Yorubaland is roughly 40% Muslim, 40% Christian and 20% traditional religions. Going by his previous logic, where does he classify pagans?

Kane notes that the advocates of an Islamic state were a serious challenge to many and the grand *qadis* played a predominant role in domesticating them. He states that the Islamist agenda can be best understood within the context of the evolution of Islamic law in Northern Nigeria. He opines that

“before British conquest, the Sokoto Caliphate and Borno were governed by Islamic law. After the establishment of colonial rule, the colonial administration strove to replace Islamic law with positive law....” The author needs to be more prudent in making such a sweeping statement about the prevalence of Islamic law in Northern Nigeria before British rule. The statement needs to be revisited because “among Northern Nigerian Muslims the notion is widespread that the introduction of Shari’a in 1999 is a restitution of their rights which they lost during the colonial period” (Ludwig 2002:2). The adoption of Shari’a under Obasanjo’s presidency was seen as the reassertion of the Islamic heritage, which had been chequered by the British colonial administration. According to Dr Ibrahim Datti Ahmed, the National President of the National Council for Shari’a implementation in Nigeria, the “reintroduction” of the Shari’a was a tremendous achievement after being “absent almost totally from this country for nearly 100 years, since the coming of the British to Kano in 1903” (Suleiman 2003). Islamic law in pre-colonial Nigeria could not have been applied in its entirety owing to patchy knowledge of it, the absence of sufficient knowledgeable Shari’a judges and the specificity of the African social context..

As I noted elsewhere (*cf* Awasom forthcoming 2005), the judges in the traditional caliphate courts in Northern Nigeria combined elements of the Shari’a and African customary practices implying that a syncretised form of justice prevailed. According to Christelow (2002:189):

tradition and Islam in the pre-colonial era came to co-exist, even in some respects reinforce one another. For instance, one can argue that the emir’s traditional authority helped to enforce and win acceptance for Islamic law in many domains, perhaps especially in homicide law. In others, such as property law, one might use the term co-existence.

If there was anything close to the Shari’a, it was a tropicalised version of it. Nonetheless, the British rationalised the Shari’a court system particularly from 1933 onwards to fit with the reality of the colonial state (Laitin 1982: 411-450). What gave Northern Nigeria a semblance of religious homogeneity was more of Islam as a package than the practice of the Shari’a.

There are some isolated incomplete sentences (p. 190), unnecessary repetitions (pp. 190-191), and inadvertent articles that creep into a sentence. For instance, on page 198 the author writes: “in disagreement with the above description, the weekly magazine...ascribes the ...cause of the riot to the attempt ...to slaughter a pig in the Muslim section of the abattoir”. On page 198, there is a slight error in dating. The third Arab-Israeli War took place in 1967. Nigeria could not have broken diplomatic relations with Israel in solidarity with the Arabs after the setback of the Arab armies in 1966 (p.216). At

the end of the study, it is still not clear what the estimated percentage the Sufi *tariqa*, Yan Izala and other Islamic movements could be.

The title of Kane's seminal work: *Muslim modernity in postcolonial Nigeria: A Study of the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reinstatement of Tradition*, is quite intriguing and confusing at first sight. The author himself notes in the introduction of the book that when he was invited to comment on contemporary West African Islamic movements at the Africa Studies Association meeting in 1995 in Orlando, Florida, he shocked his audience with the argument that contemporary West African Islamic movements attempted to promote modernity. How *An Islamic Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reinstatement of Tradition* could promote modernity confuses the reader. If the Society is out combat innovation and reinstate tradition, it is definitely a conservative one and cannot be associated with modernity.

Yet, Kane claims that his book "aims to contribute to the debate on the formation of modernity in Muslim societies...." (p.8). In the introductory chapter, the author brilliantly argues that colonialism set in motion various types of modernity viz: economic modernity, social modernity, political modernity and cultural modernity. If this categorizations are frames for the conceptualization of modernity, it would be quite difficult to package Muslim modernity properly within them. Is it the discourse of Izala that gave it the pretence of modernity? In chapter 5, the author examines the discourse of Izala as a "group of statements aimed at emancipating Yan Izala from traditional institutions and beliefs which curtailed their perceived autonomy". Is this what the author has in mind as modernity? In the next chapter, the author notes that religious beliefs and practices in Muslim Nigeria changed as a result of the Yan Izala's advocacy for reform. Sufi leaders tried to rearticulate their creed and reform some of their religious practices in order to retain their members from falling prey to Izala propaganda. The emphasis on chapter 5 and 6 is on reform and change, and not modernity. Reform is a matter of degree and may not actually amount to modernity. Kane himself states that reformism is not equal to modernity because it sometimes results in "reactions against established dogma and practices which are seen as having departed from orthodoxy. He agrees with Lansine Kaba that reformism "implies a firm belief in both the validity of orthodox doctrine as a model for the current situation and in the assumption that the problems facing Muslim communities at present are due either to a misunderstanding of the Islamic doctrine or to the true Koranic principles" (p.8). Thus, conformism to orthodoxy cannot be taken to mean modernity. Perhaps a title, like Miran's "Le wahhabisme à Abidjan: dynamisme urbaine d'un islam réformiste en Côte

d'Ivoire contemporaine" (1998), which reflects reform might be more appropriate and suggestive of the content of the book.

When one reads the interview conducted by the author (pp. 67-68), one can have an idea of Kane's problematic of modernity. According to his interviewee the unsettling effects of modernity could be blamed on the advent of the radio and television among other things and most importantly on activities of the Izala in causing the collapse of the traditional system of justice and promoting the new ideology of defiance etc. To the author, these developments revealed in the interview illustrated his perception of cultural change or the new emerging society. The Izala were presented as the mediators of social change although they were not alone in creating this situation.

The real agenda of the Izala as revealed by Kane in chapter 3,4, and 5 was not the promotion of modernity but the introduction of an alternative Islam of the Wahabiyya creed at the expense of the Sufi Orders. Izala was simply a manifestation of transnational Islam on the pay roll of the Saudi authorities whose policy was to counteract the Iranian brand of Islam. In a bid to contain Iranian shi'ism that was threatening the Gulf states, Saudi Arabian religious bodies, particularly the Dar al-Ifra provided funds to local religious entrepreneurs in Nigeria, particularly Shaykh Amiudeen Abubakar and Shayk Abubakar Gumi. This quest for Saudi Islamic hegemony can be likened to the ideological struggle of the cold war époque on another scale. Shaykh Amiudeen Abubakar, a local client of the Saudis, openly criticized Ayatollah Khomeiny in 1982 during Friday sermons. He went as far as openly admitting his allegiance to the Saudis:

Those who call me a Wahhabi are right, those who say I am a supporter of Izala are right. I have come to understand that Iran is not a Muslim country and that Ayatollah Khomeiny is a demagogue (p. 78).

Shayk Abubakar Gumi who was the chief anti- Sufi reformists in Nigeria West was heavily funded by Saudi Arabia (p.78). Saudi Arabia, as we know, is the bastion of conservatism where women's rights are largely curtailed. It is really hard to attribute modernity to the Saudi brand of Islam and its propagators. Shaykh Gumi, as the chief proponent of Izala, refused the prospects of Nigerian women holding executive positions in the country and prayed never to see such a thing happen in his life time. What we should note is that Izala appeared determined to impose a poorly digested alien culture on Nigeria and unsettle the Sufi orders that had developed in Nigeria over the years because they judged Sufism as a brand of Islam that had departed from orthodox Islam. The egalitarian doctrine of the Izala which preached equality before God and the disrespect of traditional Nigerian culture that revered parents, elders, and duly constituted authority, and at the same time opposed

the positioning of women in the public arena was clearly double standards. According to Professor Ottite,

Nigerian cultures enforce, or at least promote the virtue of respect for parents, elites, rulers and constituted authority. This trait is cultivated while growing up in the family and community under various forms of political organizations, and through various forms of media and exhortations and proverbs (Ottite 1995: 4).

When Izala opted to go against traditional Nigerian virtues which in no way constituted an immoral agenda, one can only wonder whether that is modernity. Really modernity as a concept has been approached in a way that is difficult to capture.

Nonetheless, Kane's book is an indispensable companion for scholars, statesmen and diplomats who want to understand the dynamics and specificities of contemporary Nigerian Islam. It is a book to be read by all.

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