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Religion and Politics in Africa

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Like elsewhere in the world, religion has long played a critical role in African societies. Islam's historical connections with Africa extend beyond its northern boundaries, reaching deep into the continent. By the eighth century, Islam had already been introduced in parts of the Sahel and West Africa. Its trajectory and the path of its influence are as varied as the cultural communities that have embraced it, either wholly or in part. Since the eighteenth century, Africa's encounter with colonialism—and the process of state formation it redefined—dramatically reshaped the political dimensions of religion: European powers imposed their visions of Christian faiths while Islam often emerged as a language of anti-colonial resistance. This Christianity-Islam binary does not obscure the resistance and omnipresence of African traditional belief systems, often intertwined with Abrahamic religions.

The legacies of colonialism both enabled and constrained religious actors and practices in the post-colonial period, as states and civil societies alike sought to appropriate religion for their own purposes. But religious institutions, practices, and movements have continued to evolve in response to local factors and global trends. Over the last several decades, those institutional arrangements and social practices have been profoundly affected by transnational flows of ideas and practices such as Pentecostal revivalism within African Christianity; the introduction of Salafist and Islamist ideas through Gulf-centered Islamic networks, along with the emergence of a range of jihadist and Islamist revivalist movements within Muslim communities; and continent-wide calls to return to or maintain traditional African religions. The flow has not been unidirectional. Even as African societies have been shaped by global trends, they have also pioneered transformations in Christianity and Islam, driving changes in religious practice with global repercussions while advancing novel and incisive moves to revitalize and reconceive traditional beliefs and practices.

These important and fascinating developments have attracted a considerable amount of new scholarly activity in religion and politics in Africa. A wide range of scholarly organizations, including the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR), The Timbuktu Institute, the Islam in Africa Studies Group, and the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA), continue to engage in a systematic examination of religious dynamics on the continent.

In June 2023, the Program on African Social Research and Abdourahmane Seck and the Group for Action and Critical Study (GAEC-Africa) convened a junior scholar workshop at the West African Research Center in Dakar, Senegal, to explore the many historical and contemporary dimensions of religion and politics. The workshop brought together an interdisciplinary group of scholars from across the African continent, along with more senior scholars experienced in the intellectual and empirical issues in play. This collection includes many of the papers from that workshop and offers a tapestry of the innovative and groundbreaking research being done by young African scholars on a topic of global interest.

The workshop's discussion, and the papers featured in this collection, offer only one small snapshot of the intellectual engagement on the continent around these issues. Several key themes emerged from the workshop discussions and these papers. First, the religious landscape of Africa is characterized by an incredible diversity of religious traditions. Consequently, the associated debate often centers on how various religious groups coexist, interact, and influence one another. While some countries have witnessed polarization and conflict along religious lines that have hardened boundaries, in many other countries the lines between religious communities and practices blur on the ground in dynamic ways. The issue of religious pluralism and its implications takes precedence in analyses of the place and role of

religion in society. Simultaneously, discussions on interfaith dialogue pay attention to initiatives that seek understanding and collaboration among people of different religious traditions to address shared challenges.

Second, and relatedly, these trends bring forth the essential discourse on syncretism. It is often said that Africans are neither exclusively Muslim nor Christian but frequently engage in syncretic practices, even when identifying with a single religious group. Early scholarship explored how Christianity, Islam, and African religions merged or influenced each other. In more recent years, scholarship has focused on the emergence of sub-cultures spurred by intra-religious innovations and contestations across the continent. These contestations often redefine religious dynamics by addressing gender roles, incorporating popular culture into religious discourse, and challenging established theological conventions. These innovations at the local and national level, in turn, inform religious change globally in ways that decenter narratives of global religion from Western and Middle Eastern institutions and movements.

A third major strand of research presented in this collection focuses on the historical encounter with colonialism and the difficult politics of religion in post-colonial societies. David Maina Muthegethi, in his essay, demonstrates how Islamic businessmen and communities in the Swahili coast adapted to the political changes in post-independence Kenya. Nyasha Samuel Chikowero demonstrates the complex intersections of colonial rule and indigenous practice through an examination of accusations of "witchcraft" in colonial and contemporary Zimbabwe. Yusra Abdullahi explores the role of religious leaders and networks in Somali-Ugandans' long struggle for belonging in Uganda. Several of the papers focus on the particularly fraught questions of gender: Namugenyi Lilian Caroline examines the agency of women and understandings of gender from the time before colonialism through the encounter with European colonial discourses and especially in present day African Pentecostalism. Palesa Nqambaza delves deeply into the complexities of gender and sexuality within indigenous spiritual practices.

Fourth, another complex and dynamic area of debate revolves around the relationship between religion and formal politics, whether at the level of elections, civil society, or state institutions. This encompasses discussions on the role of religious institutions in governance, political activism based on religious beliefs, and the impact of religious identities on political processes. For instance, the prominence of Pentecostalism and charismatic movements in Africa has been a subject of debate, with discussions focusing on their social, economic, and political implications, as well as their influence on traditional beliefs. Adedeji Aina Ademola shows how religious organizations have played a critical role in pushing for electoral integrity in Nigeria, while Dina Osama Lofty draws cross-national connections between religious institutions and support for autocracy across the continent.

Fifth, and relatedly, in Islam specifically there are strong mutual interactions between religion and politics, for these are not seen as distinct realms of social practice. Africa hosts an eclectic range of Islamic movements whose experience can challenge and reshape mainstream academic debates about Islam and politics in productive ways. Islamism in Africa has followed different paths and has mostly evolved in engagement with local societies and competing religious traditions. The relatively recent emphasis on political Islam relies significantly on a comparative perspective grounded in historical dynamics in the Middle East. This approach often presents a monolithic narrative centered on the roles of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the legacies of the late Ottoman Empire. It is a narrative, however, that detracts from an understanding of the dynamics of intellectual, philological, and cultural resources that underpin governance practice within Muslim societies. For instance, Mouhamadou Mansour Ndong's essay profiles a distinctively Senegalese Islamic proselytizing movement that employs terminological and sartorial techniques and ritual resources to communicate within a specific Islamic orthodoxy. Shia movements and figures also play a quite different role in Africa than in many Middle Eastern arenas, as Danladi Abah demonstrates in his essay on Nigeria's Ibraheem Yaqoub El-Zakzaky. Anthony Gunde focuses on the role of social media and religion in reinforcing

patriarchal beliefs by analyzing a political campaign in Malawi directed at defeating a female candidate.

Sixth, and critically, the essays in this collection engage the larger trend towards examining the role of indigenous knowledge systems across multiple domains of life. Mugove Ishmael Chikowero argues that such indigenous knowledge systems offer a path towards breaking the long history of failed economic development in post-colonial Zimbabwe. The workshop discussions and papers on indigenous knowledge systems, religion, and the environment were particularly compelling. They examine how traditional African religions and belief systems contribute to environmental ethics and sustainability. They resonate powerfully with the contributions to the African Social Research 3 (Summer 2023) by scholars such as Amal Bourhrous, Jackson Tamunosaki Jack, and Stanley Ebitare Boroh that connected indigenous practices with adaptation to climate change.

The study of religion in politics in Africa has evolved in response to the intricate dynamics of diverse societies and their historical contexts. The essays in this collection articulate the productive tension between the study of globally occurring processes and trends and the specificities of religion in African societies. The papers presented in this collection are merely a snapshot of the kind of concerns and questions that animate African scholars interested in religion and politics in Africa. The study of religion in African politics, economy, and cultures has evolved as organizations, institutes, and research endeavors grapple with historic and contemporary religious challenges.

Looking ahead, cutting-edge scholarship might explore the interplay between the development of new technology and emerging existential concerns around the climate catastrophe. Investigations into the nuanced interactions between indigenous belief systems and socio-political structures could shed light on the resilience and adaptation of "traditional" practices. Another compelling research area is the exploration of the impact of globalization and transnational phenomena on religious identity and its influence on political landscapes. Additionally, a comparative analysis of the roles played by different religious groups in shaping political discourse and policies across various African regions could offer valuable insights. Lastly, an examination of the evolving role of religious institutions, religious thought, and folk religion in confronting contemporary socio-political challenges and existential crisis may prove fruitful for understanding the ongoing transformations within African societies.

Ibraheem Yaqoub El-Zakzaky: Shia Islam, Politics, and the Rise of an Iconic Figure in Contemporary Northern Nigeria

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Ibraheem El-Zakzaky leads the largest Shia movement in Africa, claiming to guide over 10 million Shiites in Nigeria. His positionality, temporality, and materiality in contesting and appropriating space in Nigeria has generated both violent and subtle contestations with the Nigerian state and with its Sunni citizens. This paper investigates when and how El-Zakzaky, an iconic Islamic figure in West Africa, transformed Shia politics in Nigeria, and how the crises associated with its metamorphosis have been instrumentalized by political and religious groups. Using primary and secondary sources of data, this paper argues that El-Zakzaky's foreign support, use of media technology, and pro-poor, anti-government messaging allowed him to build a cult-like following that has monopolized the promotion of Shi'ism. This study traces the sanctification of El-Zakzaky within the political ecology of religious entrepreneurship over three decades, placing his rise within the period of Sunni Muslim led military rule that oversaw the introduction of the neo-liberal structural adjustment programs (SAP) and sparked Shia religious mobilization and commercialization. I demonstrate how his iconicity, suffused with the dramaturgy of martyrdom, is shaping Islamic space and intra-religious interactions, practices, and values including those related to women and governmentality. El-Zakzaky has become an enigma in Nigeria's religious space, with his Shiite revivalism having a significant impact on Islam and Muslim life in Nigeria and West Africa. I argue that politics, governance failure, social media, and Iranian influence are responsible for the transmission and recreation of his teachings and Islamic ideologies to contemporary generations of Muslims in Nigeria.

Islam in Nigeria

As Onapajoh (2017) and Sounaye (2020) observed, Arab merchants who crossed the desert from North Africa to the Western Sudan first introduced Islam to Nigeria. Islam entered Northern Nigeria through the Borno Empire around the eleventh century through the activities of Wangara traders (Balogun 1980; Lavers 1980; Falola 1998; Umar 2006; Sounaye 2020). Islam was made the official religion in the Kanem-Borno Empire at that time when Mai Umme Jilmi was converted. It later spread to Hausaland in the fourteenth century during the reign of Sarki Ali Yaji (1349–1385) of Kano. Before the introduction of Islam, the people practiced African traditional religion, which involves the worship of ancestral spirits, stones, rivers, waters, forests, and others. The early Northern Nigeria Muslims mixed Islam with paganism (Paden 2005; Isa 2018). But by the early nineteenth century, Uthman Danfodio, a radical revivalist and revolutionary preacher, staged a holy war or jihad that dramatically changed the trajectory of Islam and the religious landscape of Northern Nigeria (Simon and Adeakin 2019). In 1804, Uthman Danfodio led a jihad to cleanse Islam of its adulteration with traditionalism and promote its spread across the length and breadth of Nigeria. The jihad led to the massive spread of Islam across Northern Nigeria as well as to non-Islamic communities in central Nigeria (Onapajoh 2017).

The number of Muslims grew in leaps and bounds, with the majority practicing Sunni Islam (Isa 2018; Jasper 2020). Sufism, an Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God, was the dominant strand of Sunni Islam in Nigeria at this time (Thurston 2016). Two strands of Sufi order shaped Islamic orientations and practice in Northern Nigeria. The first was the Qadiriyya brotherhood inspired by the teachings of Adulkadir Al-Maghili, a reputed North African cleric. Uthman Danfodio, his brother, and son were members of the Qadiriyya Sufi order and as a result

it became the most popular in Northern Nigeria. The second was the Tijaniyya brotherhood led by the nineteenth century Alhaji Umar Tal (Thurston 2016; Isa 2018; Sounaye 2020). The Quairiyya order in Nigeria was challenged with the emergence of the Tijaniyya Sufi order in the nineteenth century. In the populous Northern Nigeria cities of Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, and others, members of the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya Sufi orders were violently divided. They established different mosques and schools and often engaged in open debates.

Another force that challenged the Islamic ecology of early Northern Nigeria Sufi orders was the emergence of the Salafist order through the formation of Jama'at Izalatul Bid'awa Iqamatus Sunna (Izala) in 1978 in Jos by Shaykh Ismaila Idris (Isa 2018,115). Salafism is a movement within Sunni Islam that seeks to achieve the revival and renewal of Muslim life through imitation of the Holy Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Salafist Muslims reject religious innovation and support the implementation of Sharia (Thurston 2016). However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the dominance of Sunni Islam was challenged through the emergence of Shia Islam with Ibraheem Yaquoob El-Zakzaky as its major iconic leader and promoter (Isa 2018). The history of Shia Islam in Northern Nigeria began during the late nineteenth century with the migration of Lebanese traders, who served as imperial agents for colonial firms (Isa 2013). The Lebanese and Iranian governments and foundations sponsored Nigerian students to go to Iran for studies (Ibrahim 2022). Recent decades have witnessed conflict and the repression of Shiite communities, with violent confrontations especially rife during the administrations of former presidents Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari (2011–2023).

Of Agency, Ideology, and Power: El-Zakzaky and Shiism in Nigeria

Ibraheem Yaqoub El Zakzaky was born in 1953 in Zaria, in present day Kaduna State of Northern Nigeria. He enrolled at the School of Quranic and Islamic Studies in Zaria and thereafter proceeded to the Fada Provincial Zaria Native Authority School of Arabic from 1969 to 1970, a school that trained Islamic clerics for Zaria and the entire Northern Nigeria (Isa and Adam 2013; Isa 2018)**.** Between 1971–1975, he was a student at School of Arabic Studies (SAS), Kano, Nigeria, a school famous in Islamic Jurisprudence and Islamic political thought and philosophy. In 1975, he gained admission into the Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, to study economics. At ABU El Zakzaky first became involved in Islamic activism through the Muslim Student Society (MSS), an association of Muslim students in various Nigerian tertiary institutions that organizes public lectures and annual Islamic vacation courses on Islam (Bunza 2004, IHRC 2019). He was involved in Islamic teachings and preaching among students within and outside the university campus. He charged Muslim students to seek Allah's ways first, ahead of other things in life. He admonished his members to reject anything that is not in tandem with the Prophet's teachings including subjecting themselves to non-Islamic authority.

El Zakzaky held several prominent leadership positions within the MSS. First, in 1978, he was appointed the secretary general of the MSS, ABU chapter. His role here was to help coordinate and direct the association and the members, represent the ABU branch at national and international meetings and conferences, fundraising, and welfare of Muslim students in the university (Uche 2020). As MSS leader, he organized a popular revolt against the sale of alcohol within the ABU campus (Isa and Adam 2013, Bunza 2004; Isa 2018). He vehemently challenged the university authority's use of fees paid by Muslim students in the promotion of this kind of illicit, haram business and mobilized his followers to destroy alcohol shops on campus. This particularly audacious act led to his arrest by security agents and the summary detention and expulsion of some of his members (Key Informants 2022).

In 1979, El Zakzaky was elected the vice president, international affairs, of the national body, Muslim Student Society of Nigeria, MSSN. He leveraged his position as the vice president to build and consolidate his international links with Shia leaders in Iran. Shortly after the Iranian revolution of 1979, El Zakzaky and other national executives

of MSSN travelled to Iran where they met with the supreme leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini (Zeen 2013; Suleiman 1997; Bunza 2004). El Zakzaky returned to Nigeria from Iran with photographs and messages of Khomeini and made frantic efforts to disseminate them across Nigeria. Shortly after this, he travelled around Northern Nigerian campuses, preaching and giving talks about what had happened in Iran and his understanding of the issues and why Nigerian Muslims should adopt the Iranian approach. It was at this point that he was intensely radicalized and rejected the authority of the Nigerian state and its corrupt institutions (Onapajo 2017; Jasper 2020; Ojorako 2022). During his sermons, he enjoined the Muslim faithful to reject the constitution and disregard the security agencies, especially the police and their corrupt leaders. He denounced the Nigerian political elites as agents of Western imperialism responsible for the high rate of poverty and suffering among Nigerians.

He then became the leader of the largest Shia organization in Africa, the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) with over 10 million members. El Zakzaky advocates for the establishment of an Islamic theocratic state in Nigeria. He calls for the unity of the Islamic nation and the overthrow of corrupt, un-Islamic, democratic leaders in Nigeria who he views as responsible for the pauperization of the masses. El-Zakzaky and IMN's main struggle is against the state and the oppressive ruling class. In contemporary Nigeria, the IMN "operates like a state, within a state." The movement has its own quasi police force, musical band, newspaper, schools, hospitals, and radio stations (Uche 2019).

Shia Islam, Conflict, and Society in Northern Nigeria

El-Zakzaky has become a deified saint and iconic figure among Shiites in contemporary Northern Nigeria. Oral accounts prove that he is seen by millions of Shiites as a messiah, sent by God to liberate his people and believers from government-induced injustice, oppression, ignorance, and poverty. El-Zakzaky's long persecution at the hands of the Nigerian state, and its mostly Sunni leaders, has emboldened both El-Zakzaky and his followers. Apart from the incessant attacks on IMN members, three of El-Zakzaky adult children were murdered in cold blood by state agents (Tangaza 2019; Key Informant 2022). He has, cumulatively, spent over ten years in different Nigerian prisons for trivial charges (Key Informant 2022). His trials, tribulations, and travails at the hands of state agents have hardened his belief in and pursuit of Shia Islam in Nigeria. His case is a perfect dramaturgy of martyrdom, long suffering, and unending persecution.

Shi'ism prioritizes the supremacy of martyrdom as the ultimate responsibility of every true Muslim. Martyrdom is conceived here to mean great, often horrendous, suffering sometimes leading to death on account of obedience or adherence to Shia Islamic causes and the profession of Islamic faith and beliefs. A martyr in this context is a person who sacrifices his or her life for the sake of Allah, his Holy Prophet, and for Islamic causes in general (Bunza 2004; Jasper 2020). IMN pursues extreme martyrdom. Through daily teachings and admonitions, members are charged to die for the sake of their faith. This could be through jihad. For instance, the type that Uthman Danfodio led in 1804 in Nigeria that culminated in the establishment of a caliphate in Sokoto. The idea of martyrdom can be found in the following verses of the Holy Quran 2:1, "Do not say regarding those who are slain in the path of God that they are dead; rather they are alive, but you are not aware." Quran 3:169 states, "Do not consider as dead those who are slain in the path of God; rather they are alive and well-provided for in the presence of their Lord." Another verse states, "And if you are killed in the cause of Allah or you die, the forgiveness and mercy of Allah are better than all that you amass" (Holy Quran; Key Informants 2022).

In IMN and Shia Islam martyrdom is a call to pay the supreme sacrifice in the promotion of Islamic beliefs. It means being prepared to die in the course of submission (Key Informants 2022). At the battle of Karbala, Hussein Ibn Ali, grandson of the Holy Prophet Muhammad and son of Ali, was killed along with his family members. In Shiism this is celebrated as martyrdom during Muharran, the first month in the Islamic calendar. In Nigeria,

Ibraheem El-Zakzaky is known for consistently encouraging his members and all Muslims to live a life of martyrdom. During Muharran, IMN offers massive prayers in remembrance of all martyrs. Special gifts and scholarships are given to the families and children left behind (Simon and Adeakin 2019; Jasper 2020). From the Hussainiyya Baqiyyatullah (Shia Mosque) in Zaria, he narrated his trials and tribulations. He led daily, weekly, and monthly sermons that were highly disseminated through online media platforms and through cassette tapes. At the mosque, which has over 13,000 online followers, pilgrims (worshippers) have access to holy sand that the Sheikh brought from Iran. The mosque is manned by white dressed, Shia police.

The Iranian government has also contributed to the deification of El-Zakzaky. The Iranian government directly provides moral and financial support to El-Zakzaky and the IMN to fund crusades, outreach, and processions. They also fund IMN schools and hospitals across Northern Nigeria (Zeen 2013; Isa 2018; Bunza 2004). Since the 1980s, the Iranian government has continued to offer free scholarships to members of IMN to study in different universities and Islamic vocational centers in Iran. They also always publicly condemn government attacks and arrests of his followers.

The rise of the IMN has been met with violence. Over the last decade, Shiites have been at war with the state and Sunnis. There has been violent intra-religious conflict and war with the Sunni population and the members of the Nigerian security agencies, especially the police and the army. (Ibrahim 2022, 211; Luke Binniyat 2016). For example, on July 25, 2014, a violent clash ensued between Shiites and the Nigerian Army over the alleged closure of the road by the IMN members who had gathered at PZ roundabout in Zaria to observe the annual Quds day, which marks global Shiites' opposition to the formation of the state of Israel and Zionism. The army used live bullets to clear the road. Over 16 people were reported killed, including three of El- Zakzaky's children.

Similarly, a violent conflict occurred from December 12 to 15, 2015, in Zaria when the Chief of Army Staff, Major General Tukur Yusuf Buratai led a bloody clamp down and massacre of Shiites. According to IMN, over 1,000 Shiites were killed, and property worth millions of Naira destroyed. The government of Kaduna state refuted the figure and claimed that only 347 deaths were recorded while the Army claimed that only one soldier was killed (Luka Binniyat 2016). Citing infringement of Kaduna State building regulations, El-Rufai ordered the demolition of Hussainiyya, the administrative headquarters of IMN and the burnt home of El-Zakzaky. This was intended to eliminate the existence of Shia Islam in Nigeria (Key Informant 2022).

On Friday, April 29, 2022, during the annual Quds day procession in Kaduna, the IMN claimed that members of the Nigerian police, acting on the order of Sunni political leaders, killed one of its members and arrested 78 others in Zaria, Kaduna State. Quds day is celebrated worldwide on the last Friday of the Holy Month of Ramadan as a sign of solidarity with the Palestinians. Ibrahim Hassan-Wuyo (2022, 2) reported that:
…the procession in Kaduna was brutally attacked with live ammunition, gunshots and massive teargas, resulting in the cold-blood murder of one Mustapha Abubakar Wagini (28 years old) and seriously injuring 9 others. Eight people were arrested on their way back home and are now in detention with the police...70 of their members were also arrested in Zaria during the peaceful procession.

Even though IMN does not recognize the legitimacy and authority of the Nigerian state, they often make references to the Nigerian constitution in defense of their maltreatment and abuse by the state. Ibrahim Hassan-Wuyo (2022) for example, quoted the spokesperson for the IMN while condemning the 2022 attack on Shiites in Kaduna. He stated that:

> We view the police action in only Kaduna State as barbaric and uncivilized at this critical moment of insecurity and dissentions. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (As Amended) guarantees freedom of religion as enshrined under Section

> 38(1) and section 40 …. Army and police brutality/attack under Buhari Regime have been going on during our religious activities; why all these indiscriminate attacks?!

On June 21, 2018, a police inspector was killed in Kaduna when Shiites and IMN members clashed with law enforcement agents. The IMN members were protesting the arraignment of their leader, Ibraheem El-Zakzaky who was taken to court after many years in detention without trial (*Premium Times Newspaper*). In four years, specifically between 2014 and 2018, it was reported that 492 Shiites were killed by the Nigerian government (Kunle Sanni 2018). Other IMN members have been arrested and kept in detention without trial on the pretense of disturbing public peace, culpable homicide, manslaughter, and other trumped up, laughable charges. For instance, Femi Falana, as quoted by Kunle Sanni (2022, 3), said that as of July 2018:

> over 500 IMN members were dragged to various criminal courts and charged with unlawful assembly and conduct likely to cause a breach of the peace by the Police in Abuja, Sokoto and Kano States…in addition to 100 Shiites who were charged with offence of culpable homicide arising from the alleged killing of a soldier in Zaria on December 12, 2015.

The reckless massacres happened at different times and places within the Northern Nigerian states of Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, and others. Kunle Sanni tracked the killings to include:

- 49 Shiites killed in Abuja in October 2018 by the Army and Police
- 20 Shiites killed in Abuja on July 26, 2019
- 12 Shia Ashura mourners killed across Kaduna, Bauchi, Sokoto and Katsina States
- 1 Shiite killed and 49 arrested in Abuja, May 7, 2021
- 8 Shiites killed and 57 others arrested in Abuja September 28, 2021
- 1 Shiite killed in Kaduna, April 29, 2022
- 8 Shiites killed in Kaduna, August 2022

(Source: Compiled by the author from different Nigerian newspapers, 2022)

At the center of most of the killings and clashes between the Nigerian government, in the form of the police, and the Shiites have been the issues of demonstrations against the unlawful detention of El-Zakzaky, his wife Zeenatudeen, and other top leaders of the IMN. Other issues range from illegal blockage of highways by Shiites during Quds and Ashura processions, which usually undermine human and vehicular movement within major cities in Northern Nigeria including Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria. Generally, different social groups, especially the majority Sunni Muslims and Christians, have been contesting the space with Shia ideology. The failure of the Nigerian state to adhere to the tenets of secularism has heightened the intensity of conflict. Poems and songs have been composed by Sunni apologists to ridicule and discredit El-Zakzaky and his followers in different parts of Nigeria. More importantly, unlike in the 1970s and 1980s when Shiites were less violence-prone, contemporary Shiism in Nigeria has culminated in violent conflict. The reasons for these differences can be linked to the impact of social media and weak institutions of governance in democratic Nigeria.

Conclusion

Nigeria's Shia icon, Ibraheem El-Zakzaky, is unarguably an indispensable actor violently responsible for the dramatic changes in contemporary Northern Nigeria's Islamic landscape. With support from the Iranian government, El-Zakzaky has transformed from an ordinary student leader to a martyr reordering the patterns and dynamics of modern Muslim life in Nigeria. But this has brought him and IMN into violent confrontation with the Sunni majority led government. The attacks on IMN and El-Zakzaky were rife during the former administration led by Sunni president Muhammadu Buhari. Under his regime, there were massive repressive clampdowns on Shiites in Zaria and other parts of Northern

Nigeria. While El-Zakzaky has become the new face of Shiism, his trials, tribulations, and triumphs at the hands of the state and its officials continue to reify and endear him to many. His travails in the hands of the state have largely been politically motivated and supervised by Sunni government officials. This situation is unhealthy for Nigeria's national security and religious harmony.

The Nigerian state must ensure that it adheres strictly to the basic tenets and practices of secularism by remaining aloof from the religious lives of citizens. The excessive influence and involvement of the state in religious affairs, especially in Northern Nigeria, creates a problem for the state. The state must allow citizens to practice whatever religion they deem fit in as much as such religious practices do not harm national security. El-Zakzaky and his Islamic Movement in Nigeria should be allowed to carry out their activities without threats from Sunni politicians and government officials. The Nigerian state should not allow Nigeria to become the site of another proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia as such a development will undermine Nigeria's national security.

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Tawheed Mosque and the Battle for Citizenship for Somali-Ugandans in Uganda

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Religious leaders and religious networks have played a crucial role in the efforts by the Somali-Ugandan community to resist othering in public life in Uganda. Tawheed Mosque in the Kisenyi neighbourhood of Kampala has been a particularly important centre for integration, belonging, and pan-African activities. It serves as a setting where religious figures mediate the division between Ugandans and Somali-Ugandans while strictly upholding equality and harmony as guiding principles. In 2010, after an Al-Shabaab terrorist attack provoked hostile attention towards the Somali-Ugandan community, Sheikh Abduweli of the Tawheed Mosque worked with business and religious leaders to file a lawsuit against the Ugandan government to block an effort to deny citizenship to Somalis born to Ugandan-born parents.[1] This initiative demanded the same social and political rights for Somali-Ugandans as for all other Ugandan citizens. Religious leaders spurred community members to defy discriminatory practices by the immigration office as they urged to be recognised as fully-fledged Ugandan citizens entitled to all rights outlined in the Ugandan constitution.

This essay draws on empirical data gathered in Kampala and Jinja between March and April 2023 and focuses on the myriad ways Somali-Ugandans are part and parcel of Uganda's political fabric. This focus aligns with the recently growing scholarship on Somalis on the African continent, in addition to the already established scholarship on Somalis in both Kenya and South Africa where their trajectories are well documented. An example of Somalia's impact on the African continent can be found in Sahra Koshin's work on the migration patterns, humanitarian efforts, and diasporic activities of Somali migrant entrepreneurs in Zambia.[2] This essay will also contribute to our understanding of the Somali presence in African countries traditionally not considered theirs, while delving into their engagement with politics via the instrumentalisation of religious networks.

The Trajectory of Somalis in Uganda

Since the eruption of the civil war in Somalia in 1991, people have been crossing Somalia's borders and entering neighbouring nations in East Africa, including Uganda. The resettling of Somalis in Uganda, however, predates the 1990s and can be traced to the colonial era (1894–1962). Men from northern Somalia were stationed by the Imperial British East Africa Company to serve as *askaris* in Uganda, and many of them made the decision to stay there after completing their military service by relocating their families and starting new lives in the landlocked country known as the Pearl of Africa. Concurrently, Somali pastoralists had started venturing into new territory, and in their quest to find greener pastures some ended up in Uganda, where they mostly engaged in the cattle trade. These historical trends slowly but surely led to the formation of a bona fide Somali community in Uganda, where they resided in locations like Jinja, Soroti, and Kumi.[3] The majority of families initially lived in Karamoja during the colonial period, and a large number relocated to Kampala in the post-independence period.

People of Somali origin in present-day Uganda come from different camps, which Iazzolino and Hersi demarcated as "*askaris*, pioneers, and refugees."[4] Somali-Ugandan communities who are pioneers and have lived in Uganda for three generations are the subject of this essay. More specifically, the focus is on a sliver of these communities that encompasses a group of religious leaders and businesspeople who are intertwined through kinship ties and who will be referred to as a singular Somali-Ugandan community for the purpose of this essay. The other two groups of Somalis are Somali refugees and Somalis whose

migration to Uganda in recent decades has been motivated by economic and social opportunities. In addition, the essay deliberately sidesteps the majority of scholarship on Somalis that is conducted through the prism of refugeehood and instead foregrounds the movement of Somalis that can be traced to pre-colonial times within and between African borders.

Somali communities in Uganda swiftly established a name for themselves as people with sophisticated business acumen while maintaining both their commercial and cultural ties to Somalia. As they assimilated into Ugandan society through time and with each succeeding generation, Somali migrants began to see themselves as more than just Somalis but also as Somali-Ugandans, as they were fully embedded in Ugandan society. These Somali-Ugandans immersed themselves firmly in economic life as they engaged in petty trade by setting up small shops and eventually going into the bus and trucking business as they carried goods across the Kenyan, Sudanese, and Congolese borders.[5] The socioeconomic success of Somalis in Uganda is greatly aided by their relationship with the state, as each sitting president, from Milton Obote to Idi Amin and currently Yoweri Museveni, has viewed Somalis in a favourable light and considered them an asset to the Ugandan economy.

This positive perception was shattered in July 2010, however, when twin blasts carried out by the Somali terrorist organisation Al-Shabaab hit Kampala in the wake of the World Cup final. Seventy-four Ugandans who had gathered to watch the match died, with many more left injured.[6] As a result, Somalis in Uganda, who had previously experienced a degree of anonymity, suddenly received considerable negative media attention. Kisenyi, dubbed Little Mogadishu due to its large Somali business enclave, received the attention of national and international media outlets alike as its residents articulated fears of reprisal attacks.[7] President Museveni reiterated his commitment to continuing an open-door policy for Somali refugees while also contributing to the fight against Al-Shabaab in Somalia itself. Public discourse, however, diverged from the government's stance (albeit moderately), and the Somali community was seen as detached from Ugandan culture. In addition, tainted imagery proliferated through Ugandan media outlets that reproduced ethnic stereotypes and falsehoods, which were harmful to Somalis living across Uganda.[8]

In response, Somali-Ugandan community leaders deliberated how to counter negative perceptions of Somali people. In fact, the community's religious leaders played an authoritative role in mediating the peripheral standing of Somalis in Ugandan society. After the Al-Shabaab attack, Somali-Ugandans had faced retaliatory xenophobia through the exclusion of citizenship status as migration officials dismissed pre-existing policies that were in place to grant these groups citizenship. Somalis who were born in Uganda to Ugandan-born parents were denied citizenship as immigration officials grouped them together with recently arrived Somali refugees. In response, third-generation Somali-Ugandan religious leader Sheikh Muhammad Abduweli suggested petitioning the Civil Division of the High Court based in Kampala to grant Ugandans of Somali descent citizenship, with the goal of inserting them further in state structures to both increase political leverage and alter public perceptions of Somalis. Sheikh Abduweli, along with six other members of the community, namely Hirsi Mohamed, Yahaya Yusuf, Ahmed Noor Osman, Abdullah Ahmed Sheikh, Abdu Abucar Hussein, and Abdinasir Hussein Shire, sued the government in 2019 to reverse the discriminatory migration decree.[9] As the Sheikh aptly stated, "Our rights should not be infringed upon by outside parties who are unwilling to recognise our rights. It is important that we are recognised as Ugandans first. I was born here, as were my father and his father before him. So, we decided to fight for our rights to be recognised as one of Uganda's tribes. This will greatly help the community's standing and influence."[10] The lawsuit yielded positive results for the plaintiffs as the court ruled that the Ugandan Constitution's Article 10 and Section 12 of the Citizenship and Immigration Control Act's qualifications were met by them, making them citizens by birth.[11] Moreover, the lawsuit whipped up considerable public controversy as it raised questions of who and what constitutes a Ugandan, and it simultaneously opened the possibility

for other minority communities to pursue Ugandanness through the legal route.

Tawheed Mosque—A Pan-African Site of Possibilities, Integration, and Togetherness

In Uganda, relations between Muslim and Christian communities have historically been characterised more by mistrust than by cooperation, but this phenomenon has slightly improved in recent decades. Initiatives aimed at fostering solidarity and collaborative gestures have worked to alleviate tensions in Uganda's multireligious society. Religious actors from wide-ranging backgrounds have played an indispensable role in these efforts.[12] Islam is a major world religion, yet it is a numerically marginal religion in Uganda, which has caused Muslim communities, such as the Nubians as well as Somali-Ugandans, to face exclusion in socio-political realms. Somali-Ugandan imams have sought recourse against ostracising elements, and in particular, Tawheed Mosque has proven itself a central site for resolving barriers.

The mosque was founded in the 1980s, when Somali-Ugandan elders pooled resources to build a communal mosque and was expanded in 1994 when a *madrassa* was added.[13] Tawheed Mosque is thus a Somali-Ugandan-run mosque based in the heart of Somali life in Kisenyi, with its minaret functioning as a compass for Somali(-Ugandan) groups who frequent the mosque. It is a space of religious and political significance, and it is the site where Sheikh Abduweli disseminates his pan-African notions in his preaching and teaching. Though most worshippers are of Somali descent, fellow Africans are welcomed by the Sheikh as he forges deep religious connections that translate into cultural and political understandings.[14] Tawheed is a transnational space that has provided social services and cultural exchanges alongside educational activities since its inception, though the offering of social services to Ugandans of all walks of life has increased since the 2010 twin bombings in Kampala.

Overall, Tawheed Mosque was strategically positioned as a site for intercultural convergence that yielded the potential to move beyond binary imaginaries that include or exclude Uganda's Somalis. For example, religious leaders established programmes that facilitated relations between the Somali community and other communities. In one such instance, community members were encouraged to attend a yearly Blood Donor Day initiative aimed at meeting the needs of various people while positioning Somali citizens as integrated people who actively contribute to Ugandan society.[15] In addition, while in the past *Jummah* prayers would routinely be held in the Somali language, Luganda and Swahili were increasingly used to draw other Muslims, with English becoming the official lingua franca. In addition, during the holy month of Ramadan, Ugandans from different religions were welcomed to join for a meal and a prayer, further reframing Somali-Ugandans as neighbours not to be feared but with whom to feel solidarity.

Familiarity and reciprocity were centred on erasing the negative tinge ingrained in the community's societal standing by terrorist activities that had nothing to do with Somali-Ugandans. The initiatives therefore fostered social cohesiveness as they made Somali-Ugandans visible as an integrated collective that was fully a part of Ugandan life. Moreover, Sheikh Abduweli, a staunch pan-Africanist, espoused unified visions of Islam and pan-Africanism as belief systems that not only existed in harmony on paper but also in practice. Proposals intended to foster togetherness were, unsurprisingly, arranged around a unified *ummah* woven together through the principles of equality, brotherhood, and sisterhood. This meant foregoing social practices that were exclusionary to non-Somalis and instead embracing a reinterpretation of communal standards that had long been in place to avoid the intermingling of Ugandans and Somali-Ugandans. Abduweli fervently preached a critical Islamic tenet, namely that Islamic thought is driven by the significance of social inclusivity—piety and prophecy cannot exist alongside marginalising exchanges. Consequently, the issues faced by Somali-Ugandans were not only their burden to carry, but it was also the *ummah*'s task to ensure the fair and just treatment of shunned groups of fellow Muslims, despite socio-political differences.

Religious spaces in Uganda also function as political sites, especially as members of the clergy are more revered than politicians.[16] When prominent community members, businesspeople as well as religious leaders, deemed it necessary to sue the government for not protecting ethnically Somali Ugandans from xenophobic treatment by immigration officials in their denial of the Ugandan passport, Sheikh Abduweli opened the mosque to representatives of the community as a base for their political lobbying. Petitioners congregated in the offices of Tawheed's densely visited confines to debate matters of national belonging and its associated rights, all the while coming to the mutual stance that the proposed naturalisation process by immigration was wholly unmerited as Somali-Ugandans were legally citizens by birth. In the words of Abduweli, ''when you have been living in Uganda for several generations, you have the right to citizenship, and we should not be treated as if all Somalis are refugees. We took this complaint to the government because that is our right as Ugandans. We are an indigenous community, and the businessmen know this, which is why they were supportive of turning this into a legal issue."[17] Thus, in response to looming restrictive conditions imposed upon the community's rights, Somali-Ugandans' foremost religious leader advanced the claim by exerting the Ugandanness of his community. By defying the delineation of the community and exercising agency in pursuing a right available to all citizens, Somali-Ugandans surpassed subjugation and instead embraced empowering communal practices that serve as learning tools for other post-migrant communities in Uganda.

Jummah prayer at Tawheed Mosque, Kampala, April 2023. Photo taken by Yusra Abdullahi.

The Somali-Ugandan Community versus the Republic of Uganda

In the 2019 lawsuit against the Ugandan government, the Somali-Ugandan plaintiffs had numerous demands that they wished the court to uphold. These demands included a declaration that eligible members from the Somali-Ugandan communities are automatically citizens by birth entitled to both the issuance and renewal of all available Ugandan citizenship documents and that the Directorate of Citizenship and Immigration Control issue these identity-related documents to those eligible without creating more discriminatory hurdles.[18] This was in direct response to Immigration's requirement that, in order to be granted a Ugandan passport or identity card, all Somalis must either first be naturalised or provide evidence that marriage to a "true" indigenous Ugandan is in their lineage. The petitioners, however, provided evidence of the illegal nature of these requirements and employed Articles 9 and 10(b) of the Constitution of Uganda to demonstrate how one is by default eligible for citizenship by birth.[19] The attorney general countered by claiming that the plaintiffs were not entitled to automatic citizenship simply for being born in Uganda and that, in fact, they could not even provide evidence of being denied certain rights and services for being of Somali origin. While this further attested to the intensification of the marginalisation of Somali-Ugandans post-2010, Sheikh Abduweli's reconstruction of a collective identity rooted in a firm belief in Ugandanness in conjunction with the Islamic practice of justice allowed for the continuance of court proceedings in an agreeable manner.

Sheikh Abduweli and the Tawheed Mosque play a critical role within the influential business community. Some businessmen provided legal fees and assisted behind the scenes during the lawsuit, while others were at the forefront in their dealings with the state and acted as intermediaries between the Somali-Ugandan populace and political circles.[20] Somali-Ugandans are the second largest group of taxpayers in Uganda due to their many successful businesses in various domains, including the fuel sector, foreign exchange and money transfer services, and the hospitality industry.[21]

The Somali-Ugandan businesspeople are closely tethered to Somali communities across the country, and they play a crucial role in creating job and schooling opportunities for Somali youth. These entrepreneurs also frequent Tawheed Mosque, where they call upon the Sheikh for spiritual counsel, engage in almsgiving, conceive of ways to improve the overall wellbeing of the communities, and discuss political matters.

In these ways, Tawheed connects community members who consider the mosque a critical information hub where political, economic, social, and judicial matters intersect and where important community issues are discussed and resolved. The Somali-Ugandan community's modus operandi is to exert influence without making their way onto news headlines since, as one businesswoman put it, '"politics is a dangerous game for Somalis."[22] Businesspeople often prefer not to have their dealings with political figures publicised. To illustrate, the Mandela family—famed for their Café Javas franchise as well as their City Oil fuel company branches—represented the wider community in political fora, and they also facilitated relations between the state and their own Somali-Ugandan community. However, the Mandelas are careful not to be seen as crafty negotiators. Mosque-led initiatives thus allowed businessmen to navigate the precarious nature of the state in which they conduct business and live their everyday lives. Nevertheless, political clout was openly sought after through the matter of citizenship. In 2020, Justice Ssekaana ruled in the case filed in 2019 and declared that the Somali-Ugandan plaintiffs were, indeed, entitled to Ugandan citizenship. According to the judge, Somali-Ugandans born in Uganda and whose parents or grandparents were also born within Ugandan borders from February 1, 1926, onwards should automatically be granted citizenship.[23] In addition, Justice Ssekaana determined that the plaintiffs must be provided with the documentation they require and stated that the continued exclusion of Somali-Ugandans by skin colour (in their case used to determine indigeneity) is "extremely dangerous, derogatory, and discriminatory."[24] Lastly, he determined that petitioners who were eligible for citizenship renewal had to be given the appropriate documents.

Conclusion

The example of Tawheed Mosque and Sheikh Muhammad Abduweli demonstrates the unique role of religious institutions in the interactions between Somali-Ugandans, the Ugandan state, and the broader Ugandan public. Their response to the move to deny citizenship to long-time resident Somali-Ugandans became part of a larger campaign to resist othering and officially demand to be recognised as Ugandan. The mosque served as a site of community building, integrational activities, and a forum for deliberating socio-political strategies aimed at improving the standing of Somali-Ugandan communities, in the process displaying Tawheed's potential for accommodating these convergences. Despite the complex and varying relationships between the mosque and political integration, Muslim leaders in this Somali-Ugandan community worked to produce collective identity practices that were aligned with the goal of wider cohesive integration in the Ugandan context.

Further, prominent Somali-Ugandan businesspeople assumed a critical role in linking the community to broader political institutions that were uniquely placed to advance their rights claims. Here, the Sheikh was influential in developing congregational dynamics that encouraged Somali-Ugandans with relevant networks to advocate for fellow congregants and sponsor integrational endeavours. Before politicising the contours of the Somali-Ugandan community, however, the Sheikh had to first engage with the civic lives of his congregants to maximise his impact on political matters. This exercise led to the lawsuit against the Ugandan government, which yielded a win against the discriminatory practices of the immigration office and set the precedent for other Ugandan communities of non-Ugandan origin to pursue similar pathways to achieve citizenship. Ultimately, the civic and political engagement of the Somali-Ugandan community was informed by proceedings at Tawheed Mosque, where religious leadership concurrently became a mechanism to mobilise Somali-Ugandans who wished to exercise agency over their own affairs. ■

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Faith and Power: Exploring the Impact of Religious Organizations on Governance and Electoral Processes in Nigeria Since 1999

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This paper explores the pivotal role that religious organizations have played in Nigeria's governance and electoral processes, particularly since democracy was restored in 1999. It also investigates the effects of religious organizations' political participation on Nigeria's democracy and the potential challenges it poses. The research highlights the impact that religious organizations have on shaping the political landscape in Nigeria. It acknowledges their role in influencing election procedures and presents a perspective on the positive contributions made by these organizations to political and governmental systems. It also takes into account concerns about the misuse of pulpit power and the possibility of divisive and provocative discourse, as well as the blurred boundaries between religious and political domains. The paper aims to shed light on the critical nexus between religious organizations, electoral processes, and good governance in Nigeria in order to inform actionable measures that can be taken towards a more prosperous and peaceful electoral process in Nigeria.

Nigeria is a multi-religious society. Mackinnon (2021) states that the two largest religious identities in Nigeria are Christian and Muslim, despite the contentious statistics on religious identification. Stonawski et al. (2016) found that in Nigeria, Christians and Muslims had an equal proportional number, with Christians at 49.3 percent and Muslims at 48.8 percent in 2010. The Harvard Divinity School (2023) reports that Muslims constitute half of the population, 40–45 percent are Christians and 5–10 percent practice indigenous religious traditions. For effective coordination, Christians and Muslims are organized under different umbrellas, and their activities are monitored by religious organizations. These organizations, such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), ensure that the activities of the plethora of religious denominations in Nigeria are regulated. While their potentially destructive role has received the most scholarly attention, in fact these organizations have had a significant impact on the country's electoral process. They have played a significant role in the promotion of good governance and electoral integrity since the transition to democratic governance, particularly in the areas of election monitoring, voter mobilization, voter education, and reporting electoral malpractices.

The study emphasizes how religious organizations can play a role in reducing electoral violence, fostering interfaith harmony, and promoting peaceful electioneering. Religious organizations face major difficulties in promoting electoral integrity, such as lack of funding, partisanship, and political interference. While the role of religious organizations in governance and electoral processes have been significant, it is also worrying that they have used their pulpit power to influence their members and have extended their pastoral work by involving themselves in political engagement mostly in the interest of their followers rather than the greater national good.

Using a review of existing literature and a qualitative research methodology and thematic analysis of reports, studies, and data obtained from these religious organizations' portals, this study assesses the effectiveness of religious organizations in promoting governance, transparency, and fairness in the Nigerian electoral process through various strategies, such as voter education, civic engagement, and election observation missions. It focuses on the activities of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in the 2019 general elections, the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) in the 2015 presidential elections, the Catholic Caritas Foundation of Nigeria (CCFN),

and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) in election monitoring since 2003.

Religion and Religious Organizations in Nigeria

Pew Global Religious Futures reckoned that Nigeria has one of the highest levels of religious diversity in the world (International Religious Freedom Report, 2021). Although mainly portrayed as populated by Muslims and Christians, there are also significant numbers of African traditional religionists and atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, and many others that are not practicing any religion. This multi-religious society poses unique challenges to Nigeria's democratic process, particularly regarding the role of religion in politics.

Nigeria is divided into six geo-political zones. The northwest and northeast regions are predominantly Muslim while in the north central, Islam and Christianity are dominant. Christians predominate in southeast and south Nigeria. In the southwest, Christianity is the dominant religion, but there are substantial numbers of Muslims in the region as well. It is important to note that there is no zone that is 100 percent dominated by any religion. Taking this diversity into consideration, Nigeria was declared a secular state, where no religion is dominant but where anyone can practice his or her religion without fear. However, this has not been the case as the society's religious architecture is structured in a way that benefits whichever religion is dominant in a particular area. For instance, it is not expected in Zamfara or Borno State, where Islam is dominant, to see Christians in key government positions. Likewise in Enugu State or Imo State, where Christians hold sway, Muslims rarely hold office.

Religion and religious organizations have historically had a substantial influence in Nigeria's political sphere (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015; Onapajo, 2012; Nolte, Danjibo and Oladeji, 2009; Familusi, 2012). In the past 24 years since the return of democracy, there has been a noticeable shift in how these religious organizations engage with the political sphere. Instead of primarily conferring blessings upon political candidates and providing prophetic guidance, they have increasingly engaged in governance and especially in the electoral process.

Religion, according to Uche Eze (2020:3), is a "spectrum of beliefs and principles that guide the relations between a people and a supreme being (divine) they perceive to be their maker." Eze (2020:3) also notes that such beliefs often "elicit a set of dogmas, rites, and worship." Religious organizations were created to support and represent certain faiths, communities, or denominations, unite communities, and promote religious teachings and spiritual guidance. In Nigeria, over time, they have been used by national, regional, and state actors to drive their political ambitions (Eze, 2020).

Nigeria is undoubtedly a religious country, and away from the highways it is not difficult to find a church or mosque every kilometer. From the author's personal observations, in the southwestern part of the country, for instance, particularly in Lagos and Ogun States, the number of churches or mosques in towns and cities competes with the number of educational institutions. It is not surprising, therefore, that Nigerians are rated ninth among the most religious people in the world (Onapajo, cited in Adamo, 2018).

People attend churches, mosques, and other places of worship primarily to connect to God, who they see as supernatural and the creator of heaven and earth, but also to become better and more responsible citizens. The level of poverty, illiteracy, and the general feeling that some miracle will happen to pull people out of their challenges draw more and more people to places of worship. Thus, Karl Marx, cited in Tarela Ike (2022:3), argues that "religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering." Weber (1905), also cited in Tarela Ike (2022), stated that "religion is a precipitator of social change." Religion has grown in appeal as Nigeria is regressing in many facets, including in governance and the electoral process. This shows the decay not only in the democratic and political space but also in the religious system.

In the words of Afolabi (2015:42), "religion has been used negatively in Nigerian politics since independence." Even in the recent elections of

2023, religious issues featured prominently. The main challengers, Bola Tinubu, a southerner and a Muslim, who ran on the platform of the All Progressives Congress (APC), chose a Muslim from Borno State, Kashim Shettima, in order to get votes from the northern part of the country. In response, many Christian denominations encouraged their members to vote for another political party, the Labour Party, whose candidate is a Christian, Peter Obi. Tensions were high before the elections, and the result of the elections clearly shows that votes were cast based not only on ethnicity or region but also along religious lines. Even after Tinubu won the elections, there was a debate on who should be the president of the Senate and Speaker of the House of Representatives, which also followed religious lines. Political parties are being cajoled to elect only Christians to the positions because not having Christians as the number three or four in the country would mean "injustice" for the Christians.

This religious involvement in the political space of Nigeria's young democracy is a big distraction. People are selected or appointed based on what religious faith they belong to instead of competency and merit. This is why, over time, scholars have come to believe that religion has been negatively used in Nigerian politics. But religious organizations have also been involved in several initiatives to help their members, like offering them vocational skills and training, setting up free clinics, and providing humanitarian services. They have also contributed in one way or another to improving the conduct of elections.

Religion, Politics, and Democracy in Nigeria since 1999

Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999 after an election conducted by the then-military head of state, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, ended 29 years of military rule in Nigeria since independence. From 1999 to 2023, Nigeria successfully conducted six general elections for federal and state government positions. President Olusegun Obasanjo, a Christian southerner, ruled for eight years. His successor, Umar Musa Yaradua, a Muslim northerner, died during his first tenure, and the baton was passed to Vice President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian southerner, who completed Yaradua's term. Jonathan ran in 2011 and held office for another four years. He failed to return to the state house when Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim northerner, defeated him in the 2015 elections. Buhari also won the 2019 elections and spent a total of eight years in office. Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a Muslim southerner, won the 2023 elections, albeit controversially. This was the first time a southern Muslim ran for the highest office (apart from the aborted June 12, 1993 presidential elections which Moshood Abiola won), which forced him to break tradition and chose a northerner as vice presidential candidate, because the north will only vote en masse for a Muslim.

Every election from 1999 to date has been marred by inconsistent monitoring by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and crimes such as vote buying, ballot snatching, thuggery, arson, and killing. Except for the 2015 election, where President Goodluck Jonathan conceded defeat even before the announcement of the winner, perhaps to prevent bloodshed, there has been no single election in Nigeria that has not led to litigation and crisis after the conduct of the elections.

Abiodun (2018), noted that these trends of irregularities and lack of proper planning and integrity were the hallmarks of the electoral process in Nigeria. The 2023 elections were not so different from the past, even with the introduction of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS). ECOWAS Observers (Africa News, 2023) claimed that "the voting process was marred by irregularities, including the late start of voting beyond 8:30 a.m. due to the late arrival of polling officials and voting materials, and in some cases, the delivery of wrong materials at polling stations across the country."

The Role of Religious Organizations in Promoting Governance and Electoral Processes

These problems with the electoral process have created an opportunity for religious organizations

to play a significant role in promoting governance. These groups have taken an active part in many initiatives designed to strengthen democratic and electoral integrity such as voter education, overseeing elections, interfaith dialogue, advocacy, lobbying, and civic engagement.

They have focused on educating citizens about their rights and responsibilities by organizing workshops, seminars, and public awareness campaigns, equipping Nigerians with the necessary knowledge to make informed choices during elections in the process. This work has helped to foster a more politically conscious and engaged citizenry, thereby strengthening the foundations of democratic governance. Additionally, religious organizations have participated in overseeing elections to ensure transparency and fairness. They have deployed election observers to monitor polling stations, assess the conduct of electoral officials, and report any irregularities or malpractices. Through these efforts, religious groups have contributed to building public trust in the electoral process and holding accountable those responsible for any electoral misconduct.

Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in the 2019 Election

CAN is an umbrella association that represents various Christian groups and denominations in Nigeria. The goal of CAN is to "be the watchman of the welfare of society" (canng.org, 2023). CAN participated extensively in politics during the 2019 elections, like other religious and sociopolitical organizations. The association voiced its worries regarding the state of the country and the requirement for trustworthy, free, and fair elections. CAN urged its members to exercise their right to vote responsibly and actively participate in the electoral process. It declared November 18–20, 2018 as days of non-stop praise for God for the much-awaited divine intervention over the general election and other problems facing the country (Premium Times, 2018). Also, ahead of the 2019 elections, CAN met behind closed doors with the two leading presidential candidates, Muhammadu Buhari of the APC and Atiku Abubakar of the PDP, as well as other presidential candidates (Nigerian Tribune, 2018). All these efforts were geared towards ensuring that the nation was peaceful during and after the elections. To further ensure this, CAN signed an agreement with the Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) to ensure the peaceful conduct of the 2019 elections under the auspices of the Nigerian Interfaith Action Association (NIFAA) (This Day, 2018).

Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and Electoral Integrity

The Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) is "the apex Islamic authority in Nigeria. It was established in 1973 to cater for, preserve, protect, promote, and advance the interests of Islam and Muslims throughout the country" (nscia.com.ng). Over the years, the NSCIA, while not directly involved in elections, has encouraged civic engagement and advised the government from time to time on how best to conduct elections as well as promote development. Before the recent general elections, the NSCIA drew the attention of the government to important problems like inadequate service delivery, instability, poverty, and deteriorating infrastructure. The NSCIA emphasizes the importance of the incoming president giving these issues top priority: putting an end to instability, tackling poverty and injustices, recovering the economy, upgrading infrastructure, putting money into human capital, and battling corruption—none of which are specifically religious demands. They also stress the significance of inclusivity and creating a framework that fosters confidence, national cohesion, and rational and transparent governance. NSCIA and other Muslim bodies have facilitated debates for electoral candidates, engaged in conflict resolution, and promoted interreligious councils.

Catholic Caritas Foundation of Nigeria (CCFN) and Election Monitoring

The Catholic Church has always been a leader in advancing responsible and accountable leadership. The Catholic Caritas Foundation of Nigeria (CCFN) is the official relief and development arm of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (caritas.org), while the Justice Development and

Peace Committee (JDPC) at the national level is the advocacy organ of the conference (Premium Times, 2015). The CCFN stationed 4,889 observers in 23 states around the nation during the 2015 elections. Furthermore, Caritas sent 6,000 election observers to monitor voting in 36 states during the recently concluded elections, the most of any observer mission in Nigeria's February 25, 2023, general elections (CISA, 2023). This was done to guarantee impartial, trustworthy, and free elections. To strengthen the election process, encourage civic engagement, and let citizens take control of the political process, Caritas also developed a situation room to allow observers to interface directly with members of the situation room for quick information dissemination and analysis of election matters. Over the years, the JDPC in Nigeria has overseen electoral initiatives, including multi-stakeholder engagement, voter and civic education, capacity building, security awareness (particularly in troubled areas of the nation), observer training and deployment, and others.

Challenges Faced by Religious Organizations in Promoting Electoral Processes

While religious organizations have made tremendous inroads in improving electoral integrity, there are bottlenecks preventing them from fully implementing their lofty ideals in Nigerian society. First is interference from state and government officials. Nolte, Danjibo, and Oladeji (2009:4) put this succinctly: "The government primarily views religious organizations as political mobilizing agents; thus, state institutions often attempt to co-opt specific religious groups and faith-based organizations (FBO) for political purposes rather than providing systematic support for the development activities."

Despite these important initiatives, religious organizations in Nigeria lack the funding necessary to conduct the level of voter education campaigns or provide election monitoring and observation necessary at the national scale. Most of the funds in the church were donated by members, most of whom are poor. Furthermore, there is still a lack of channels for promoting harmony among followers and resolving conflicts that may develop along religious lines. The capacity of religious organizations to successfully support electoral integrity may be hampered by this. In the same vein, religious organizations, despite their moral standing, may find it difficult to have a substantial impact on how elections are run or how political actors behave.

Conclusion

While many observers argue that religion should not mix with politics, Balogun (theconversation.com: 2023) noted that,

> the relationship between religion and politics isn't always productive. Religion embeds some doctrines, such as love and obedience to political authority, that support secular authorities and the development process. Unfortunately, religious organizations have not adopted measures to curb members from using religion to dominate or oppress the people… religious bodies' interest in who wields the power of the state is not out of place. But the extent of their intervention can portend serious dangers for the state.

There are cases where individuals have used religion to achieve their personal agendas. Ahmed Yerima, for instance, promised the people of Zamfara that he would adopt Sharia Law if supported to become the governor of Zamfara State. Chants of Allahu Akbar (God is Great) were used variously at campaign grounds in the state (Onapajo, 2012). In the 2011 elections, a popular Lagos-based pastor impressed upon his followers that they should go all out to vote for Christians in the elections because Muslims have dominated for too long (Onapajo, 2012). In the 2023 general elections, Christians and Muslims largely supported candidates from their religion, and religious and hate speeches were freely used by even supposed "men of God" to support their candidates in the elections. This trend, if sustained, would not augur well for the nation.

But, as this essay has argued, there is more to religious organizations than such destructive trends.

Without a doubt, religious organizations have been crucial in aiding the nation's population, particularly in the fields of education, humanitarian relief, primary healthcare, and infrastructure support for local communities. As I argue here, they have also entered the murky world of politics by holding seminars and workshops, educating voters, and mobilizing their members in order to uphold integrity and make politicians and the electorate aware of the rules of the game. Specifically, they are dispatching observers to make sure that the regulations are followed during elections. These efforts have significantly improved Nigeria's voting procedures and political involvement.

Meanwhile, to be even more beneficial, religious organizations should focus on developing harmony between themselves and contributing more to electioneering through the selfless work they are doing to enhance free and fair elections. They should focus more on the six functions itemized by Mala and Aiyegboyin, cited in Oshelowo and Maren (2015:4): "restraining or criticising the conduct of government, encouraging political participation, promoting democratic values and norms, articulating and aggregating distinctive societal interests, generating cross-cutting identities, and providing avenues for the development of leadership skills." Religious leaders and organizations also need to shun patronage politics. It is not the business of religious faithful to conduct morning devotion in public offices or even private institutions, or to allow the public to worship in mosques located inside defense institutions. The Nigerian government must implement for the latter the provisions of the electoral act, Section 97, which prohibits candidates, individuals, and associations from running campaigns based on religion, ethnicity, or sectional interests. If this is done, religious organizations' influence in politics will become more impactful for the betterment of the country.

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African Women and the Paradoxical Agency of Religion

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Introduction

Women in Africa have engaged in spiritual practices and beliefs since time immemorial. Their participation during the precolonial period made them legitimate authorities in different African societies since spiritualities had a power dimension. During the colonial era, spiritualities were banished and replaced with patriarchal Christianity. This Christianity was pushed out of public space and relegated to the private domain of society under the logic of secularism. Despite its patriarchal nature, religion (Christianity) in the colonial and postcolonial states has attracted more women than men.

This essay argues that the colonial privatization of religion coincided with the colonial domestication of women, hence presenting Christianity in its various forms as the avenue through which women could seek agency and other consolations against the dominant patriarchal structure. Their agency, however, is shaped by religious structures and therefore has limitations—Saba Mahmood terms it "docile agency."[1] Only religion that propagates ideologies that challenge the modern state's logic of patriarchy and capitalism are prone to being banished from the state. This is because the modern state, as described by Foucault, creates its subjects and further still creates the means of resistance that its subjects are supposed to take. The paper argues that the docile agency offered by African Pentecostalism is meant to uphold the dominant structures of patriarchy and capitalism within the modern state.

Theoretical Framework

For Karl Marx, labor is one of the most important elements for the flourishing of capitalism. Under colonialism, labor is usually free or extremely exploitative in nature, allowing it to generate massive profits for employers. The colonialists ventured into colonies for cheap labor and raw materials for their goods. In order to best exploit this cheap labor, the colonial system needed to domesticate women, whose role was to support the men as they labored towards capital's demands. Colonialism hence directly exploited men and indirectly exploited women under the logic of capitalism. As women grew exhausted with the unpaid routine work in homes, many resorted to religious practices that bolstered their resilience but only offered a docile form of agency. Saba Mahmood has defined agency as not simply a "synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable."[2] This implies that capitalism exploited women while depending on religion to further make women more submissive to its dominant structures of patriarchy and exploitation. This paper shows that women use their agency to negotiate within structures of power instead of overhauling them because such structures have organized how women ought to respond in particular contexts. One example is drawn from the interview I had with a female Pentecostal pastor who claims that in her marriage she prays for her husband to change his unsupportive ways, she started up a savings cooperative to assist fellow women, and she offers counselling and guidance to women from abusive homes.[3] This is an example of how women are addressing their concerns and challenges but in ways that do not necessarily change oppressive structures but instead offers women resilience. Women's choices are constrained because a failed Christian marriage can be a source of public shame with the woman at the center of ridicule.

From the twelfth to seventeenth centuries, African women participated in spiritualities and rituals that

were also a source of power within self-regulating societies.[4] In most cases women headed spiritual rituals as seen in the Cwezi-Kubandwa debate.[5] This debate questions whether women's participation in spiritualities gave them authority and power over important societal realms like agriculture, reproduction, kingship, and others. It can be argued that their participation in such spiritualities gave them relative freedom from predominantly patriarchal societies and complete freedom within matriarchal societies. As stated by Fredrich Engels, once a woman evokes divine authority, she is respected by society.[6] Precolonial Uganda is not any different. The shrines and spirit mediums were sources of power.[7] In precolonial Ugandan states, religion was one of the avenues through which women gained dignity. This dignity took the form of representation, access to resources and respect in society. Power was fluid in precolonial African societies and was present in different elements of society ranging from spiritualities, women, the elderly, the clans and much more.[8] Women's engagement in religion gave them a particular satisfaction that transcended the purely spiritual benefits. As Donna Pankhurst argues, "It is now common for historians in Africa to claim that the relationship between women and men in precolonial times were more evenly balanced than during colonialism, as well as those of today, even when they were clearly patriarchal societies."[9]

Women across the Bantu ethnic group were relatively empowered in social, political, and economic practices when they used religion as their medium of effect. The coming of colonialism demonized all African spiritualities as it brought in a Christianity that is patriarchal at its core. Christianity under colonialism was a critical nexus for the privatization of women (in the economy) and the privatization of religion (secularism). In Uganda, colonialism took an ad-hoc approach towards the religious question. First, colonial states banned all indigenous religions and only left Christianity as the normative religion for the civilized, while exerting control over religion for their own purposes. The church mission was deliberately excluded from all colonial mission projects—which included land, education, and health—and was left to only manage the marriage and family. The church oversaw marriage to ensure that it was an exclusively heterosexual relationship with the man as the head of the family. The domestication of women came through a gradual process that involved the exclusion of women from religious spaces, which had once been a source of their social power. Colonial Christianity did not have any space for women except to subjugate them through its doctrine, prevent the evolution of diverse practices of marriage, and confine their labor to the domestic realm. The debates about the emancipatory nature of religion globally fail to interrogate the powers that shape women's participation in religious practice. This essay argues that both women and religion in colonies were domesticated to uphold structures of patriarchy and capitalism, and that workers turned to spiritual practices in the face of exploitation.

Understanding Pentecostalism

Talal Asad argues that "religion is both the expression of suffering and a protest against it."[10] This implies that the different religious transitions are well-crafted ideologies aspiring for change or power. The "status of belief and blasphemy alter in relation to the powers of the modern state and are, among other things, effects of expansion and changes in these powers."[11] Asad captures well how the born-again revival starting from the United States signaled a change in power as well as in consciousness from mainstream gendered, racialized, and class-stratified societies. The born-again Pentecostalist faith seems to protest the failures of the state in securing women's livelihoods, health, identity, and other needs. This section reads the born-again faith as a protest against patriarchy that draws on its doctrines of appointment by the holy spirit and divine commission by God to call for an ungendered society spreading the gospel.

Women's agency here can be understood as both docile and overt. The latter enables women to act within specific relations of subordination while the former enables women to act "against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles whether individual or collective."[12] I argue that when women act within the framework of religion—when all their actions remain within the

belief sphere—that is docile agency. Such actions include the formation of groups for social support. For example, among the Anglicans in Uganda there is the Mother's Union. This group is for all legally wedded women. The core message in the Mother's Union has been the upholding of the family structure and the empowering of women economically so that they can be of help in the family. This later helps women gain some platform for decision making since they too add to the family's income. A second example is the Christian Women. This group includes all women from the age of 18 and above who are not married, mothers and those who are not yet mothers. This group encourages women to live a pure life emulating Mary Magdalene. Most importantly, it encourages women to continue to work hard and alleviate their domestic burden.

Among the Pentecostals, churches may have different terms for the different associations that connect women, but the message of resilience in marriages and living within such structures is shared. For that reason, Pentecostals usually have many family and marriage conferences where there are attempts to address the issues that could lead to the dissolution of the family. In other cases, women form groups where they offer each other emotional support and technical skills. The idea is that Pentecostal women appreciate that the structures of the family may not necessarily be broken but they can act within those structures and negotiate for better treatment in specific cases. For example, domestic violence in homes is usually initiated by drunkard husbands, therefore a drunkard husband may be advised to stop drinking and if they are tempted to drink, they are advised not to abuse their wives through any form of violence. The actions that women take look subtle but are necessary for their survival in circumstances where society may not approve the drastic measure of divorce or where divorce would open them up to ridicule. Women hence act but within the structures of oppression to negotiate for certain treatment. This partly explains why many women convert to Pentecostalism in Uganda or why the church has more women than men.[13]

Conversion (becoming born again) is a key moment in this exercise of women's agency. According to Sarbeswar Sahoo who writes about conversion to Pentecostalism in India, "conversion is a complex process" that cannot be fully explained by what he refers to as "the material incentive discourse."[14] Therefore, "material incentives, though important, are short-term and temporary and may not strongly influence one's decision to convert given that there are strong stigmas and sanctions against conversion in the tribal community."[15] It is therefore not enough to claim that women convert because the church can offer them material incentives. Instead, Sahoo argues that, faith and spiritual transformation, caused largely by miracle/faith healings, have played an important role in influencing tribal women's decision to convert. Additionally, "hope" for improved socio-economic well-being in the post-conversion period has supported their decision. In this case, it is not the immediate and temporary material incentives given by the missionaries and the church but tribal women's desire for long-lasting change caused by the Lord's "blessings" that becomes important in explaining their conversion.[16]

Therefore, tribal women's conversion to Pentecostalism in Rajasthan could be seen more "as a personal strategy in response to a specific social situation rather than caused by material incentives alone."[17] The case for Ugandan women's conversion is similar. As much as the church can offer material incentives, women in Uganda convert for the indirect benefits such as belonging to a social group that can offer counseling and moral support when they experience challenges.[18]

On the other hand, the social effects of Pentecostalism have also been overt. I argue that Pentecostalism has enabled some women to completely overhaul structures of oppression and patriarchy. Sahoo quotes Rabelo, Mota, and Almeida who say that "Pentecostalism has not only opened up new avenues for the expression of women's agency but has also contributed to alter the balance of power between spouses."[19] This then implies that a Pentecostal woman who learns to fend for herself without staying only in the private

sphere is an emancipated woman capable of also making decisions in a home. Sahoo further quotes Brusco who argues that "evangelical Protestantism has radically transformed gender relations in favor of women and could be considered as a 'strategic' women's movement."[20] In Uganda, a famous female pastor called Irene Manjeri was able to divorce her husband because of infidelity while another famous pastor called Imelda Namutebi domesticated her late husband and positioned herself as the bread winner of the household. The late Alice Lakwena, founder of the Lord's Resistance Army rebel group, formulated her ideologies in line with her beliefs in the holy spirit and commanded a whole army that terrorized the state until 2016. There are many other examples of women who have used beliefs about the holy spirit to challenge many social aspects in Uganda, including marriage. According to Sahoo, unlike the Western feminist movement that promotes women's participation in the traditional male sphere of paid work, Colombian evangelical Protestantism has "domesticated" men and promoted their participation in the female sphere of family and household, which has benefited women both materially and socially.[21] By engaging men in domestic work, women then take up work in the nation's economy, which benefits their status. In Uganda the spirit-led movement has empowered several women in the Pentecostal church to take up leadership positions that include owning and running the church. This promises gender equality for Pentecostal women. The presence of such leaders is inspirational to many other women and, consequently, the Pentecostal church in Uganda has the largest number of female pastors as compared to the Anglicans, Catholics, Adventists, and orthodox.

Post-Colonial Uganda

According to Mbaalu Christopher, a senior evangelist in Kawempe division Kampala—who I interviewed while trying to understand the wide spread of Pentecostals—"most of the evangelical mission teams when sent out meet only women in homes during the door to door evangelical outreach."[22] Another interviewee on the question of Pentecostalism in Uganda, Pastor Samuel Wamala, says that "most men do not attend his church because the church does not offer material incentives such as money or preach the gospel for material incentives."[23] These gender divides reflect the fact that men historically enter the paid labor space while women enter the unpaid labor space. Pastor Wamala says that "the church has been pivotal in helping single women as well as oppressed women in different families."[24] Due to their exclusion from paid labor, women become dependent on men and are vulnerable to patriarchy. This explains their turn towards born-again conversion, a form of subtle resistance where they address their concerns as social groups that do not overhaul but negotiate with structures. For example, one of Uganda's most popular churches, the Miracle Centre Cathedral, features the "girl power project," which encourages women to pray for their husbands and become more useful within the domestic spheres. The mainstream and institutional Protestant and Catholic churches offer organizations such as the Mother's Union and Christian Women Fellowship for Protestants and Caritas Women for Catholics. The role of the Mother's Union is to join all mothers and consolidate their faith in patriarchal marriages even if they are failing. In such organizations, the role of Christian women is to ensure that all women are raised and receive mentorship to grow into culturally accepted Christian women. The Caritas group for the Catholics performs a similar role. All these are meant to teach and enforce particular doctrines that promote docile agency.

Women's participation in mainstream religion is shaped by colonial modernity and designed to uphold the logic of capital and patriarchy. Pentecostalism offers a paradoxical alternative to the dominant patriarchal systems, which explains why it has attracted so many women, children, and youth in post-colonial Uganda. According to the 2019 religious demographic report, Pentecostalism, which revived in the 1980s, has a growth of 10 percent while the Anglicans and Catholics have a decline of 13 percent and 17 percent respectively.[25]

Reading Pentecostalism's Agency as Docile

The modern state—as the only legitimate violence-wielding body—wields its violence on all aspects of

society that do not promote its logic of capitalism and patriarchy. The existence of Pentecostalism as blasphemy to the Anglican faith makes one wonder why it has not faced any challenges from the modern state in Uganda. According to Fanon, the modern state is capable of creating modes of resistance that are usually derivative in nature and do not challenge the whole logic of the modern state. This paper argues that the creation of women's groups that practice docile agency within the dominant structures of patriarchy is meant to uphold and enable the survival of both capitalism and patriarchy. This implies that as long as religious movements do not challenge the modern state, such as in the case of German witches, the movements can survive because they uphold the structures of power.[26] While Pentecostalism tends to enable overt responses to patriarchy and capitalism, the cases where it has overhauled structures and enabled women to take bold actions are minimal, even given the number of successful women who have taken such measures.

On the other hand, most women in Pentecostalism can only act within the framework of capitalism and patriarchy through the formation of social groups and women's associations. These enable them to negotiate with patriarchy. This is seen when women draw on their teachings to question abusive forms of behavior. Second, these groups enable women to stay resilient in the face of capitalism. This is seen when women start small-scale enterprises while at the same time provide domestic unpaid labor at home. The ability to survive and fend for themselves without letting go of their unpaid, domestic labor is learned from such social groups formed at church. I argue that the capacity for women to act within such structures of oppression without necessarily changing the structures is docile agency—an agency that enables people to act within the structures of oppression without necessarily overhauling them.

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Rethinking the Predicament of Colonization: African Indigenous Knowledge Systems as the Hub for Development in Zimbabwe

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Introduction

> "When two societies of different sorts come into prolonged and effective contact, the rate and character of change taking place in both is seriously affected to the extent that entirely new patterns are created."
> -Walter Rodney, 1973

This paper examines the development of African Indigenous knowledge systems, embodied in African traditional/Indigenous religion and Zimbabwean cultures from the precolonial period to the present. I maintain that African religion and the culture of the Zimbabwean people, particularly the Shona, are intertwined. Thus, I use the phrase "African cultures" and "African religion" interchangeably. I argue that African religious and cultural spaces shaped human development before the emergence of colonization. These spaces include dare (traditional homestead or community court), mushandirapamwe (communitarianism), and spiritual ecological practices like mukwerera (rain-inducing ceremony) that was traditionally practiced at such places as Mabweadziva in western Zimbabwe.

The country's name Zimbabwe is derived from the language of the Shona-speaking people, who occupy the largest part of the nation. (The Ndebele people make up the next largest population and reside on the country's western side among other groups of people.) The term means dzimba dzemabwe (houses made of stone). Such unique architecture is symbolized today at cultural centers like the Great Zimbabwe monuments in the southern part of the country. The practice of mukwerera famously drew practitioners from around Zimbabwe, from other regional countries like Botswana, Zambia, Mozambique, and South Africa, and even from beyond southern Africa. Such ceremonies were held not only to alleviate droughts and other ecological disasters, but mukwerera practice also served as an important space to impart to community members essential spiritual wisdom about security in its many forms, including food security and state making. It is at such places as Mabweadziva during mukwerera practice proceedings that the voice of Musikavanhu, the creator, spoke to humanity and governed life. Masvikiro (spirit mediums) played an intermediary role to communicate important messages from Musikavanhu and the ancestors concerning the community inhabitants' welfare.

I further contend that the developmental and statecraft crisis in Zimbabwe today makes it time to interrogate and decenter the adopted heritage of colonialism in favor of taking traditional African religions seriously. The paper adopts a materially focused approach to the study of traditional Zimbabwean religio-cultural phenomena such as ritual practices, paraphernalia or artifacts used during ceremonies like mukwerera (for example, the musical instruments hosho, mbira, and ngoma), and other tangible and intangible mushandirapamwe activities and dare sessions. It asks how these traditional practices could be harnessed at the material and moral levels of human development. Within such systems lies the knowledge that gave rise to the technological wonders of Zimbabwe's traditional societies, including architecture and metallurgy common in the early civilizations of Khami, Mapungubwe, Great Zimbabwe, and the Njanja ironworking guilds.

Grounded Afrocentric scholarship maintains that prior to colonization, African Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), or African ways of knowing, as Tensen Muyambo (2017: 172) prefers to identify these sources of knowledge production, were intact (Chinake 1997: 43, Nzenza 2014). In

this context, the term "intact" implies that African ways of knowing were not yet distorted by the effects of colonization. I agree with Muyambo's (2017) choice to identify Indigenous knowledge systems in an African setting as African ways of knowing, as they provided the Indigenous people with basic sacred principles and key knowledge about their own culture. Defining Indigenous knowledge systems, Jacob Mapara (2009:140) asserts that they "are a body of knowledge of the Indigenous people of particular geographical areas that have survived" over a long time. Further to this definition, I argue they are a body of knowledge developed by the local people to inform the community's social, economic, political, and cultural development. African Indigenous religions have various politically led institutions. Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, such institutions include dare, mushandirapamwe, and mukwerera, which served as the hub to disseminate wisdom to the local communities. This was common, especially during the precolonial period. Not only were these institutions central to informing political matters and decisions, but they also influenced economic, social, and cultural development.

Colonization disrupted these Indigenous people's traditions. Walter Rodney's assertion cited above explains the effects of such attitudes by the West against Indigenous knowledge systems as the essential institutions that produce knowledge in Africa. In Zimbabwe, as elsewhere in Africa, the arrival of colonialism in 1890 distorted and destroyed the core meanings of such important spaces and changed the meaning of development as it is understood in an African setting. Development in Africa is not only defined in terms of economics, but also culturally, socially, and politically. Today, as Rodney (1973) rightly observed, the European capitalist approach and extractive logic has distorted, destroyed, and as a result, underdeveloped Africa. The manifestations of such colonial projects deliberately designed to kill African Indigenous cultures still dominate in postcolonial Zimbabwe 43 years after the attainment of political independence. Little has changed since Kwame Nkrumah (1965) rightly argued almost 60 years ago that most African countries' economies remain neo-colonial.

The religious and the economic dimensions of underdevelopment cannot be separated easily. Fundamental sectors such as agriculture that are central to determining people's livelihood relied in the past on the wisdom acquired at such cultural events as mukwerera ceremonies, dare sessions, and mushandirapamwe activities. Colonial attitudes against Zimbabwean cultural institutions demonized not only ideas, but also the key material artifacts used during particular practices. For example, the chirongo (clay pot) and mukombe (calabash), important beer-brewing and drinking objects used during the rain-inducing ceremony, were associated by colonial settlers with evilness. The same applies to paraphernalia like the ngoma (drum) and hosho (rattle) as musical instruments played during different African ceremonies to enhance effective spiritual communication with the ancestors. From this background, I provide a comprehensive reflection on how the African people's traditional institutions impacted societal life skills to augment any form of development during precolonial Zimbabwe. I maintain that various cultural institutions can equally serve the same purpose today, like in the past, regardless of the existing distortions made upon African cultures during the colonial period. For instance, African ways of knowing can inform the production of food for both subsistence and commercial purposes. Hence, I call to rethink the "buried" but not-so-forgotten heritage in Zimbabwe.

Beer brewing and drinking objects: clay pot and calabash. Picture by the author.

Religion and the Politics of Belonging in Colonial Zimbabwe

Religion plays a central political role in responding to community challenges. In the case of Zimbabwe, colonial occupation triggered the First Chimurenga (1896–1897), or first wave of resistance, as the Indigenous people fought to safeguard both their cultural and material possessions. During this confrontation with the invading European settlers, Africans were optimistic in the leadership of their great traditional chiefs (madzishe). The British beheaded most of the key cultural and political leaders, including chiefs and spirit mediums, in an attempt to destroy the cultural heritage that they protected. In 2016, the local Zimbabwean newspaper The Patriot identified my own grand ancestor, Muchecheterwa Chiwashira and many other chiefs including Chinengundu Mashayamombe and Chingaira Chirimaunga Makoni, together with national masvikiro Nehanda Nyakasikana Charwe and Kaguvi Kaodza Gwanzura Gumboreshumba as some of the many religious and political leaders who encountered this fate. Compounding the atrocities, the practitioners' heads were exported to England where they were deposited and displayed in the London Natural History Museum as trophies to symbolize victory over Zimbabwe. To this day, the British government has not demonstrated any interest in repatriating these heads, despite repeated petitions from the government of Zimbabwe requesting their release. Given this history, I maintain that part of the colonial program was intended to dehumanize Africans and replace every spiritual and cultural practice with a foreign religion.

After quickly realizing the colonists' disastrous intentions in Zimbabwe, it became part of the chiefs' obligation, as sacred practitioners and guardians of the fundamental values of life, to call for resistance against foreign intrusion. As political leaders, the chiefs understood colonial intentions that aimed at the destruction and distortion of Indigenous cultures. Esther Lezra (2014) rightly describes such attitudes as the colonial art of demonizing others. Such politics of belonging in Zimbabwe, as part of colonization, were meant to alienate fundamental cultural institutions such as dare, mukwerera, and mushandirapamwe. Concurrently, the Europeans subverted crucial figures who upheld the African religious values mentioned above.

The conversion of traditional leaders to the Christian religion became one of the strategies employed against Indigenous societies (Mhoze Chikowero 2015). Many devices were employed to ensure the success of this colonial art of alienating Africans as people of no religion. In the bid to replace African cultures with a foreign religion, Christian churches were built on sacred places such as mountains, which the local people used as important spaces to communicate with the Supreme Being through their ancestors. The performance of Christian rituals and tampering with African spiritual shrines—like Manhize Chikapakapa in Mhondoro Ngezi, central Zimbabwe, and Mabweadziva shrines in western Zimbabwe, where sacred practices like mukwerera ceremonies were conducted—weakened the relevance of such places as an Indigenous people's hub against socio-political and related challenges.[1] This was done in the name of the so-called "Western civilizing mission," a strategy that sought to suppress the cultures of Indigenous people. Thus, it was this attempt for spiritual displacement of the Indigenous communities in Zimbabwe that contributed to the current challenges of underdevelopment such as mass poverty, epidemics, unemployment, and homelessness, among other ills.

In light of the above, I concur with Arowolo (2010: 2) that colonialism distorted and retarded the tempo of cultural growth in Africa. Forty-three years after independence, not every Zimbabwean has achieved or benefitted from the progressive human development that was anticipated with independence. The country still suffers challenges of cultural erosion and underdevelopment in all its forms. This essentially means that political independence, and even such radical economic programs like Zimbabwe's land reclamation of the year 2000 that Mahmood Mamdani (2009) celebrated as Zimbabwe's real independence, did not resolve the rewiring of the country's development to European logics that had occurred during colonialism. Medicine Musiiwa (2004: 11) notes that the Fast Track Land Reform in

Zimbabwe became more pronounced in June 2000. At this stage the term jambanja, which in this context meant the uncompromising repossession of land from the white community by the Indigenous people, became common to describe the strategy employed by Zimbabweans to take back their land. To describe this strategy and how the dissatisfied citizens of Zimbabwe invaded the land, Musiiwa (2004) frequently uses the term "violent." In my view, these reactions by the people indicate the close relationship between man and his environment. I do not dismiss the usage of the term "violent," but provide a further explanation for it—that the repossession of land in Zimbabwe was associated with some violence, and that violence was informed by religion and the local people's sacred connection to their own land. African people everywhere in the continent have found it difficult to accept physical and spiritual displacement by any foreign forces because of their ties with the ancestors who reside in that same space. Since the precolonial period, the people of Zimbabwe have always been both physically and spiritually attached to their land because it is a legacy and heritage from their ancestors (Bakare 1993).

Part of what makes land more sacred is the existence of cultural institutions established on it. African traditional homestead and community courts led by religious specialists and rain-inducing shrines, among other sacred spaces, are places where the active participation by different practitioners of the Indigenous religion is significant. People in African Indigenous religion believe that ancestors reside in the land's big trees, water bodies, mountains, groves, and other places of the natural environment (Michael Gelfand 1969; Nisbert Taringa 2015). According to Magobe B. Ramose (1999) and Taringa (2015), African culture considers everything that belongs to the ecosystem as sacred. This implies that ancestors can be found anywhere on the land, and they possess the powers to determine the pace of a people's development. In this same understanding, Munamato Chemhuru and Denis Masaka (2010: 123) assert that the act of violating the moral codes in African religion is an action that invites catastrophes such as diseases, drought, and even death. In this regard, misfortunes mentioned here are inseparable from underdevelopment.

The observance of a moral code of conduct is emphasized at such places as the community's *dare* institution, during social interaction at *mushandirapamwe* activities as well as at places like *mukwerera* shrines where *masvikiro* communicate directly to the ancestors on behalf of the community inhabitants. This ensures the community remains politically, socially, and culturally guided. For instance, from precolonial times, the institution of *dare* has always been identified as the key space meant to equip life skills to young people by their elders (Ramose 1999; Chikowero 2015). Similarly, *mukwerera* served as one of the fundamental cultural practices during the same epoch (Nzenza *et al* 2014) to ensure food security (Tabona Shoko 2007) and effect certain African behavioral patterns emphasized throughout the ceremony's proceedings guided by the ancestral wisdom. Missionaries and colonial administrators were aware of the cultural meanings of land, the impact of cultural institutions, and the different roles played by sacred practitioners as important platforms to promote cultural, political, social, and economic development. They therefore targeted and attempted to destroy and replace these structures with those of a foreign religion.

African Ways of Knowing and Development in Contemporary Zimbabwe

Most African countries share the understanding that the concept of development involves the people's desire to achieve a lasting satisfaction of human needs and an improvement in lifestyle that is beyond the levels of subsistence. This contradicts the Western narrative of development that emphasizes the growth of economies more than any other facet of life. Such a contradiction reaffirms an observation by Chitando and Kamaara (2022: 71) that there is no particular yardstick to measure development. From this insight, I concur with Walter Rodney who observes that the concept of development itself is colonial and that the idea of development according to a Western lens has to be decolonized.

Despite the Christian missionaries' deliberate scorning of African cultures embedded in Indigenous religion, the communities of Zimbabwe have managed, to some extent, to maintain their

ways of knowing, which have defined and informed development in their own setting. This can be evidenced by the impact of remnant cultural traits that continue to survive, such as the Shona people's *dare* institution, even several decades after violent colonial encounters with Europeans. If carefully considered by the Indigenous community, the cultural beliefs and practices seen as barbaric and devoid of any development remain as intact as before. The precolonial socio-political spaces like *dare*, *mukwerera,* and *mushandirapamwe* have contributed much to knowledge about human development. These institutions, among others, informed civilization in Zimbabwe, as evidenced by the establishment of early communities like Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe; the latter remains Zimbabwe's key cultural tourism center up to the present day.

In the context of Ghana, Kwame Gyekye (2004: 16) observes the power in sharing cultural values when he asserts that the fundamental meaning of community is the "sharing of an overall way of life, inspired by the notion of the common good." The Shona people's traditional homestead or community court is the typical example of an institution that emphasizes living in a way that is informed by a common cultural belief or practice. It is at such institutions that the sharing of a particular societal code of conduct is encouraged. Understanding this from the setting of Hunhu-Ubuntu philosophy among the Africans, Mangena (2016: 66) refers to this situation as the Common Moral Position, which is that notion of understanding *hunhu* (humanness) as based on sharing a common societal code of conduct from one generation to the next.

Conclusion

For quite a long time, Zimbabwe has remained underdeveloped because of the continuous application of inappropriate and out of context mechanisms deliberately introduced by the West. Contrary to this, I conclude that Africa has its own ways of knowing relevant to African society that can resolve particular challenges that are impeding development. The alien tools introduced and employed by colonization have remained irrelevant devices of development in Africa. In response, Africans have called for a complete revival of African Indigenous knowledge systems as the factual hub to ensure human development in Zimbabwe.

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Endnotes

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"Witchcraft," Religion, and the Struggle for Power in Zimbabwe

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The interaction between politicians and religious actors has grown increasingly visible in Zimbabwe as elsewhere across Africa. Prophets, spirit mediums, and healers have always been involved in politics, but their participation has become more pronounced in the last decade due to modern-day technologies. In this new reality shaped by social media, politicians are seen making appeals to the followers of chivanhu (African Traditional Religion), Pentecostal churches, mapositori (Apostolic Faith Ministries), and other indigenous churches, whose sizable followings offer an ideal chance for them to build popularity and garner votes. Religious actors, on the other hand, are interested in politics for economic gains and to exercise their democratic and political rights as citizens.

The mainstream media and political analysts overemphasize politicians' interference with religion while overlooking religious actors' agency in national politics. I argue that this perspective regards adherents of various religious faiths as incapable of making rational and autonomous political decisions. Traditional healers, spirit mediums, and members of diverse religious organizations should also be seen as equal and legitimate players, capable of directly or indirectly influencing Zimbabwe's political processes. Using qualitative source materials such as interviews, newspapers, and X posts (formerly Twitter), this study argues that politics and religion have long been intertwined and continue to shape each other in many ways. Although religious leaders have long played an active role in politics dating back several centuries prior to colonial rule, this has happened behind the public eye. This paper, therefore, elucidates these developments in an era of wide media coverage.

The paper further examines changing perceptions about the role of spirit mediums, traditional healers, and prophets in politics and how these have been entangled in accusations of "witchcraft" in the struggle to control state resources. (In my work, I use the term "witchcraft" in quotes to show that it is problematic. The term was imposed on African societies by nineteenth-century Christian missionaries and colonial administrators to refer to an array of African cultural practices and religious ways of life and does not necessarily refer to the malevolent use of supernatural powers). Rumors and video evidence have been circulating on social media about politicians' involvement in what many people believe is the use of supernatural powers for political gains. The political figures' involvement in these activities is a manifestation of Zimbabwe's complex political landscape. This turbulent environment provides a hotbed for such developments as many political players vie for strategic government positions that give them the leverage to control state resources. This leaves us with one key question: what function does this serve for both religious and political actors involved, and how do they justify their interaction in the face of popular criticism?

Religion and Politics in the Post-Mugabe Era

Former president Robert Gabriel Mugabe was deposed in a military coup in November 2017, with Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa formally ascending to the presidency following disputed elections in August 2018.[1] Since then, episodes of politically motivated violence and power struggles have been reported, especially by officials such as Jonathan Moyo, Walter Mzembi, and Saviour Kasukuwere, who (among others) had been kicked out of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union—Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) party in 2017. These conflicts have coincided with accusations of politicians' involvement in "witchcraft". It is, therefore, imperative to examine how religion has

intersected with the strains of an unstable political environment and a low-performing economy.

There are notable figures who have openly resorted to the use of religion in politics. In October 2022, Andby Makururu, a leader of the vapositori religious sect (Johanne the Fifth of Africa International church), which boasts of having more than 700,000 followers, said, "Registering to vote is a right, and I have been encouraging my church members to register to vote for ZANU PF."[2] He further stated, "I use spiritual vetting to see if people in my church have registered to vote."[3] These remarks can be interpreted as threats to those who may decide to vote for an alternative political party. Such a political strategy based on coercion and intimidation is endemic in Zimbabwe, and many religious groupings across the country do not seem to be exempt. Viewed from this perspective, religion is re-entering the political scene to perpetuate oppression rather than to defend the exercise of citizens' constitutional rights or to provide for their spiritual needs.

Despite this clear-cut connection between religion and politics, it would be interesting to understand why President Mnangagwa's decision to uphold chivanhu after taking office was met with the greatest skepticism within ZANU PF and from the opposition parties. As soon as Mnangagwa assumed power, he declared himself anointed, claiming he was chosen and appointed by spirit mediums.[4] This implied that no one was supposed to question his legitimacy because the ancestors and spirit mediums endorsed him. As one ZANU PF government critic, Kerina Mujati, stated in a tweet, Mnangagwa's apologists have been feverishly trying in vain "to chlorinate the coup" for years.[5] These allegations have been ongoing for almost six years, with many citizens and opposition political parties refusing to acknowledge his right to power. This lack of acknowledgment has culminated in an unhealthy political landscape marked by anti-government protests frequently met with heavy police crackdowns, alleged state abductions, and the incarceration of political opponents. The detention, conviction, and sentencing of Job Sikhala—a member of Zimbabwe's largest opposition party, the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC)—for inciting violence and obstructing justice is a classic example of the ZANU PF government's use of lawfare to crack down on political opponents.

Fig. 1. President Emmerson Mnangagwa (center) and the "Vapositori for ED" members at the State House, Zimbabwe. Photo made available by Presidential Communications (The Standard, May 18, 2023).

Like many other African societies, Zimbabwe is a religiously diverse country comprised of adherents of African Traditional Religions (ATR), Christianity, and Islam. Because of this diversity, many were perplexed by the members of the Apostolic sects and traditional healers' regular visits to the State House and public appearances during government-run activities, a spectacle not seen since the country's independence in 1980 (Fig. 1). Some applauded these visits as a step in the right direction towards religious tolerance, while the opposition parties criticized it as an attempt to return the nation to its "traditional" past, which offers no solutions to Zimbabwe's socio-economic and political woes. Notwithstanding the state's motivations in religious and cultural revivalism, adherents of chivanhu perceive good, even if unintended, effects of the politicians' efforts, considering that their religious way of life faced the harshest colonial censure throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[6] The engagement of indigenous religious practitioners in current Zimbabwean politics thus validates Gordon Chavunduka's assertion that, before the colonial criminalization of their office, traditional healers played a significant political role as advisors to African leaders.[7] Chiefs also frequently sought their counsel because of their breadth of knowledge in many facets of African daily life, especially during political crises.[8]

Although "witchcraft" is not recognized as a religion in Zimbabwe, it is part and parcel of African spiritualities, beliefs, and socially constructed knowledge system. Muslims, Christians, ATR adherents, and people of many other indigenous faiths recognize the realities of the "witchcraft" phenomenon in their everyday lives. Most Zimbabweans, regardless of religious beliefs, level of education, social standing, or political allegiance, fear "witchcraft."[9] There is a common belief among Christians and those who embrace chivanhu that the practice has the power to disrupt the normal course of nature. Speculations abound that those of high social status seek "witchcraft" powers to sway any issue, whether justice, politics, or otherwise, to their advantage. When government officials are seen in the company of traditional healers and prophets, it sparks political concern emanating from the assumption that there is a thin line between "witchcraft" and African traditional medicine. I interrogate this confusion, created by nineteenth-century Christian missionaries and colonial administrators.[10] It is noteworthy that the fear and accusations of "witchcraft" transcend geographical, social, and political boundaries.

Mnangagwa's administration continues to take bold steps to embrace indigenous culture and religion, defying all these criticisms. In this regard, the opposition parties raise questions about ZANU PF leadership's appeal to various religious groups. They argue that many religious leaders, such as Andby Makururu, are stooges for ZANU PF party members. On the same note, chivanhu continues to be negatively portrayed, with many people, particularly Christians, equating it with ancestor worship and the practice of "witchcraft".[11] The government's efforts to publicly embrace chivanhu have provoked mixed responses among politicians and the media due to its long history of colonial and Christian missionary demonization as backward and evil. Scholars such as Federick Kakwata and Edward Miguel argue that poverty and low levels of Western education are the primary drivers of the high prevalence of "witchcraft" beliefs, a surge in accusations, and anti-witchcraft campaigns across Africa.[12] This hypothesis, however, does not adequately capture the Zimbabwean situation, where a substantial spike in "witchcraft" accusations has been documented at the state level, where the parties involved have acquired some degree of Western education and wealth. Evidence from Zimbabwe also suggests that "witchcraft" accusations often emerge when politicians vie for crucial government positions. The struggle for political control of resources is a major contributing factor in the rise of "witchcraft" beliefs and accusations. Accusations are common in situations where the individual making "witchcraft" claims aims to obtain political legitimacy by discrediting their opponents.

The Politics of "Witchcraft" Regulation

Although Zimbabwe is predominantly Christian, some sections of the society practice chivanhu. The 2015 Demographic and Health Survey carried

out by the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZimStat) estimated that "86 percent of the total population is Christian, 11 percent reports no religious affiliation, less than 2 percent adheres uniquely to traditional beliefs, and less than 1 percent is Muslim."[13] Contrary to what the report claims, these distinctions are not always clearly defined since some adherents of these dominant religions practice some aspects of traditional religion in secret. Because of this schizophrenic attitude, it is very hard to quantify the number of people who adhere to chivanhu. As a secular state, the constitution of Zimbabwe guarantees religious and philosophical freedom.[14] By extension, everyone can exercise their freedom of thought, speech, conscience, and religion in public and private spheres. The terms of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) Article 18 of 1948 also protect people's rights to identify with any religion, creed, or cultural practice they choose if it does not cause harm to others. However, most of these provisions, along with those of the Witchcraft Suppression Act imposed by the British in 1899 on Zimbabwean societies, are fundamentally incompatible with many aspects of African cultures and religions. Colonialists demonized and deemed ungodly the African Traditional Religions. For this reason, chivanhu enthusiasts rarely disclose their religious affiliation. This negative portrayal stems from nineteenth-century Christian missionaries and the colonial government's condemnation of African culture and tradition as uncivilized and as ancestor worship. Since the African belief in "witchcraft" presented an obstacle to colonial expansion, the British South Africa Company (BSAC) government conspired with Jesuit and Protestant groups to condemn these beliefs and practices as evil and to destroy them. Due of this pressure, Zimbabwean society is one of many on the continent where ATR is widely practiced but privately.

The Witchcraft Suppression Act (WSA) exacerbated Zimbabwe's confusion about what constitutes "witchcraft" and how best to regulate the practice. To this day, contradiction still exists in the law that seeks to regulate "witchcraft" in the country. The reality of "witchcraft" is acknowledged in the statute books, and it is now possible to openly accuse someone and prosecute them for practicing "witchcraft." This is possible only if there is tangible evidence to prove beyond a reasonable doubt in the courts of law that the accused is, in fact, a "witch."[15] However, dealing with a spiritual problem and socially constructed knowledge such as "witchcraft" and expecting the complainant to present concrete evidence in court is unrealistic. In this way, the regulation of "witchcraft" in postcolonial Zimbabwe remains political, as it was during the colonial period. The law is selectively applied as a tool to counter political competition. For instance, during the colonial era, the Rhodesian settler government enforced the 1899 Witchcraft Suppression Act as a tool for cultural domination and exploitation of Africans. The legislation made it illegal to name a "witch," consult a traditional healer, or resolve any conflicts involving witchcraft accusations under African courts.[16] The British colonial officials and Christian missionaries launched an assault on African chiefs, spirit mediums, and traditional healers in a desperate effort to stamp out "witchcraft" beliefs among Africans.[17] These three kinds of African cultural and religious leaders were assaulted, imprisoned, or even publicly executed for contravening the provisions of the WSA.[18] Following the formal lowering of the British colonial flag in April 1980, the Black majority government inherited the WSA. In 2006 there were only cosmetic revisions that lifted the ban on naming someone as a "witch." The current provisions remain contrary to popular opinion and African cultural foundations even with such amendments.

"Witchcraft" as Power or Power as "Witchcraft?"

Accusations of "witchcraft" among elites in Africa are well-documented, dating back to the eighteenth century. Kings accused their contenders of conspiring against their authority by means of "witchcraft." For instance, towards the end of the nineteenth century, rival claimants to the throne in the Ndebele Kingdom, such as Mtikana Mafu and Thuni Ndiweni, were executed by King Lobengula on allegations of "witchcraft" and plotting against him.[19] In 1906, Revd. D. Carnegie also noted, "Witchcraft was mixed and intermingled in every

part of Lobengula's policy…if there was one thing that led to such crimes, it was the influence of the witchcraft."[20] He also stated, "The people were led by the nose, deceived, robbed, burned to death, disinherited, driven out the land, thrown to the crocodiles, and murdered and treated in all shameful ways by witchdoctors."[21] Throughout history, this has been the rule.

Traditional healers are extensively featured in these tales, providing evidence to support the claim that chivanhu, both as a culture and religion, has been vital in Zimbabwean politics. The current president periodically invites spiritual healers to serve as consultants on state matters. As the custodians of African traditional religion and culture, the traditional leaders around the country also enlist the help of spirit mediums and traditional healers. It is worthwhile to note that before the British colonial invasion, these spiritual healers played an important part in conflict resolution, decision-making, and warcraft.[22]

Such events from the late nineteenth century are manifesting in contemporary times. July Moyo, a top ZANU PF member, cabinet minister, and presidential aspirant, was publicly humiliated and accused of "witchcraft" in a plot to oust the current president, Mnangagwa. The incident is said to have occurred during Mnangagwa's birthday celebrations.[23] The decision to publicly decline a birthday gift of a pair of shoes from July Moyo demonstrated that the First Family understands the realities of "witchcraft" and embraces chivanhu. Former cabinet minister Jonathan Moyo corroborated this in a tweet, claiming that "Moyo's succession plot was leaked to Mnangagwa's traditional healer who acted swiftly to intercept the gift before it reaches the president."[24]

Under the Witchcraft Suppression Act (as revised in 2006), this charge should have resulted in a lawsuit against the president, but no action was taken. This demonstrates the selective and unbalanced character of the Roman-Dutch legal system inherited from the British former colonizers. The charges were made because July Moyo has always been viewed as a contender to the current president and thus as a potential threat.

On June 6, 2023, the current president of the Pan-African Parliament and Zimbabwe's Chiefs Council, Fortune Charumbira, acknowledged that some politicians use herbs and other powers sourced from traditional healers for luck to win elections and parliamentary seats. However, due to the negative portrayal of African knowledge systems over the last two centuries by the colonialists and Christian missionaries, this is now being wrongly equated with the practice of "witchcraft." For example, several top government officials have been accused of employing "witchcraft" to influence the outcome of court verdicts. In 2016, a woman named Alice Nalule was alleged to have sought a traditional healer to conduct a ritual on the seat of Uganda's Chief Magistrate to sway justice in favor of her husband, who was facing numerous fraud charges at the time.[25] However, their scheme failed to yield the expected results. Like many others across Africa, this incident demonstrates that belief in and allegations of "witchcraft" are prevalent in poorer regions and can also be found among wealthy, educated, and powerful groups. The motivations behind politicians' involvement in "witchcraft" practice and accusations are, therefore, closely linked to the need to eliminate their opponents.

Heading Back to the Stone Age? The Public Perception of Traditional Healers and Spirit Mediums

Many have characterized the postcolonial government's decision to officially recognize the significance of embracing *chivanhu* and the role of spirit mediums in state operations as anti-progress and an intrinsically retrograde step.[26] Others remain optimistic, asserting that it is part of Zimbabwean culture and history and should be embraced without reservations.[27] Photos of a traditional healer welcomed to the State House by Mnangagwa were circulating on social media in June 2022, generating a heated debate about the role of indigenous religion in national politics. What role do these spiritual leaders play in national politics? What value do they add to the state, given that some have a history of misleading government officials and ordinary Zimbabweans in full sight of the public? Most pundits accused him of

attempting to consolidate power through spiritual means. Others warned him not to fall into the same trap as Mugabe, who in 2007 was led by a spiritual healer, Rotina Mavhunga, to believe that there was a strange diesel-oozing rock in Chinhoyi, a small city about 116 kilometers northwest of the capital city Harare. The traditional healer claimed that "the diesel was a gift from ancestral spirits who saw that their children [Zimbabweans] were suffering because of the fuel shortage."[28] This occurred when the country was experiencing one of the worst economic crises since independence and most citizens desperately needed aid.

The fact that most individuals publicly denounce *chivanhu* while practicing it behind closed doors indicates that Zimbabwe is now a traumatized society dealing with acculturation. The nineteenth-century missionary assault on African belief systems, cosmologies, and religions left clear traces. Most people do not declare their practice of *chivanhu*, as the Zimstats report shows. Such negative portrayals of *chivanhu* and traditional healers have been central to the criticism leveled against the current government by the opposition political parties and the general public.

Fig. 2. The statue of Nyakasikana Charwe, the medium of Mbuya Nehanda. Photo: Author (June 6, 2022).

The politics of naming streets, administrative structures, and schools after the heroes and heroines of the liberation movements in Africa, and more recently erecting statues of them, has drawn scholarly attention.[29] The current government of Zimbabwe resumed a project from the Mugabe era on renaming buildings and roads, among other things, replacing the old colonial names with those of the war veterans, both the departed and the living. However, incorporating statues of spirit mediums into African culture and religion has drawn criticism from the general populace. On May 25, 2021, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Zimbabwean government unveiled the statue of Nyakasikana Charwe, the medium of Mbuya Nehanda, a notable spirit medium who served as an inspiration for Zimbabwe's fight for liberation from the shackles of British colonizers. The statue was erected atop a massive footbridge at the intersection of Samora Machel and Julius Nyerere Streets in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital city (Fig. 2). Unveiling the statue, Mnangagwa declared, "This statue is a bold and unapologetic statement that we are a people who know who we are and where we came from."[30] Despite these declarations, the CCC party accuses Mnangagwa of patronage politics, vote buying, and election rigging, strategies they claim were also common during Mugabe's 37-year authoritarian rule. In his election campaign speeches, Nelson Chamisa, a pastor and CCC political party leader, maintained that Zimbabwe is a Christian nation. He also mocked traditional healers and spirit mediums, further disputing Mnangagwa's claims that the country should embrace African traditional culture. Since its establishment in January 2022, his party has been mobilizing Christian communities and using demeaning language to delegitimize their rivals. The Mnangagwa government also employs the same strategy, labeling the main opposition party a "terrorist organization."[31]

Just like the state's recognition of spiritual healers and their involvement in politics, Nehanda's statue continues to be a subject of debate from sociocultural, economic, and political standpoints. Even since the early 1980s, members of the media fraternity have mocked this move as a step back to the Stone Age era. It can be argued that such conclusions are drawn from an unfair assessment of Zimbabwe's recourse to its African

cultural foundations in practically every facet of daily life. Nonetheless, the popular belief is that Zimbabwe's political warfare is spiritual, hence the need for political actors such as Mnangagwa, his government, and the leader of the main opposition party, CCC, to seek spiritual legitimacy.

This study has shown that religion and politics are inextricably linked in the Zimbabwean context. Politicians believe that not all political battles are waged in the physical domain. Thus, they seek supernatural intervention to alter any political situation to their advantage. Besides, accusations of "witchcraft" and malice in the political arena have also been a major weapon against political opponents. The study concludes that the interplay between politics and religion should be examined beyond the notion of winning elections and the religious actors' political agency. The ZANU-PF party's move towards embracing indigenous faiths has deeper motives beyond the need for votes in the struggle for state power. Their involvement is also about the desire to strengthen their hold on power in cases where their legitimacy is questioned.

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Religiosity, Emotional Rhetoric, and the Legitimization of Gendered Political Power Relations in Malawi

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While democracy has allowed more opportunities for women's participation in the political arena of Sub-Saharan Africa, internet media platforms have offered increased opportunities to promote patriarchal religious and cultural beliefs that assert male dominance in political leadership positions. This paper examines the ways in which religiosity can be used to reinforce gender stereotypes by promoting patriarchal religious rhetoric and considers the implications of this for women's empowerment in political leadership roles in developing democracies. The paper analyzes a YouTube campaign slogan "Sesa Joyce Sesa" using Aristotle's explanation of the rhetorical strategy of pathos. The slogan, meaning "Sweep Joyce Away" in Malawi's dominant language of Chichewa, was created by the then-opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), and promoted by online news media platforms, to attack then-President Joyce Banda of Malawi during the country's 2014 elections. The paper argues that in deeply entrenched religious societies, such as Malawi, male politicians may use emotional rhetoric and manipulate religious texts as symbols of violence to promote gender disparities while still embracing the principles of democracy, good governance, and human rights.[1]

On May 20, 2014, Malawians went to the polls to elect the country's fifth president after 20 years of democracy. For the first time, one of the major contestants was a woman, President Joyce Banda. By virtue of being Malawi's vice president at the time of President Bingu wa Mutharika's sudden death, Joyce Banda had assumed power in April 2012 in accordance with the Malawian Constitution. The development made her Southern Africa's first female president, and the continent's second after Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf who was elected to office in 2005. The May 2014 elections provided an opportunity for Banda to seek her own presidential mandate through the ballot box. The principal candidates in the elections were President Banda representing the People's Party (PP), Lazarus Chakwera of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), Peter Mutharika of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), and Atupele Muluzi of the United Democratic Front (UDF). The election was won by Mutharika of the DPP with 36 percent of the votes; Chakwera of the MCP amassed 27 percent of the votes while President Banda of the PP came a distant third with 20 percent of the votes; the remaining votes were split between the UDF and other smaller parties (National Democratic Institute, 2014).

Prior to these elections, the organized, sexist, and religious political campaign slogan "*Sesa Joyce Sesa"* dominated the Malawian public domain and underscored the principle that women are expected to be subservient to men. The DPP utilized social media by transmitting a two-minute YouTube video (*Sesa Joyce Sesa*), which went viral by resonating with the cultural identity of many Malawians. Religion contributed to the defeat of Joyce Banda and the PP. This paper employs Aristotle's theory of rhetoric, specifically his understanding of pathos, to illustrate how the patriarchal beliefs embedded in Christianity and Islam were used by the DPP to consolidate male-dominated power relations in the political arena.

The paper has five sections. The first section provides the contextual background for the anti-Joyce Banda political campaign slogan on YouTube, *Sesa Joyce Sesa,* and considers how it was articulated to audiences at political gatherings organized by the DPP and its presidential candidate, Mutharika, preceding the May 2014 elections. In the second section, the paper provides a historical overview of the crucial links between religion and politics in the Malawian context. Third, the paper develops the

Aristotelian concept of pathos to contextualize the issue of gender and power relations. The paper then analyzes the YouTube video clip before concluding the discussion.

Contextual Background of Malawi's DPP Campaign Slogan: *Sesa Joyce Sesa*

Sesa Joyce Sesa, or "Sweep Joyce Away," first appeared in November 2013 when the DPP presidential aspirant (and now president) Peter Mutharika addressed a political gathering in his home district of Thyolo, southern Malawi. In a prelude to Mutharika's speech, George Saonda, a key member of the DPP, delivered a speech containing rhetorical questions that were peppered with misogynistic religious and cultural images about then-President Banda's credibility to lead the country because she is a woman. In response to these questions, the audience, which included hundreds of women, joined Saonda in mocking Banda's name.

Following the political rally, the opposition DPP uploaded a video recording of the gathering onto YouTube, with a background of jazz-rhythmic sounds. The video was soon circulated via WhatsApp, YouTube, and other social media, and it was popularized as a campaign tool against President Joyce Banda and her PP (Lora-Kayambazinthu and Shame, 2016). The thematic slogan instantly went viral on social media, generating over 3,781 views (Saonda, 2013), and reverberated in many households across Malawi. The following dialogue is an excerpt from the *Sesa Joyce Sesa* YouTube video clip:

> **DPP's Saonda**: "*Kodi kumpingo wa a katolika, wansembe akachoka, munaona asisteri akudyetsa mgonero?"* (In the Roman Catholic Church, in the absence of a priest, does the nun bless the Holy Communion for the congregants?)
>
> **Audience**: "*Ayiii!"* (No!)
>
> **Saonda**: "*Sesa Joyce Sesa"* (Sweep Joyce away!)
>
> **Audience**: "*Sesaaaah*!" (Sweep her away!)
>
> **Saonda**: "*Nanga ku Chisilamu, ku mzikiti Shehe akachoka, munaona mzimayi akupita kutsogolo?* (For Muslims, when the Sheikh/ Imam is away from the Mosque, do you ever see women lead prayers?)
>
> **Audience:** "*Ayii!"* (No!)
>
> **Saonda:** "*Sesa Joyce Sesa!"* (Sweep Joyce away!)
>
> **Audience:** "*Sesaaah*!" (Sweep her away!)

Saonda then capped the religious rhetoric with a traditional proverb: "*Fisi akalowa mnyumba, mwini ake akamwalira, sindiye kuti mkaziyo ndi wache."* (A man hired to sleep with a widow to cleanse off evil spirits following the death of her husband is not necessarily expected to take over the household.)

As noted, the *Sesa Joyce Sesa* slogan contained rhetorical jibes drawn from Christianity, specifically the Catholic Church, and Islam, which suggested that women should not be expected to lead but should be subservient to men. The religious campaign motto was also fused with a proverb, based on an old tradition within some cultures of Malawi, where a man would be hired by the village elders to "sleep" with a widow a few months after the death of her husband to ward off evil spirits from the village. As pre-arranged with the widow, the man would arrive in disguise in the middle of the night and depart at dawn. For this reason, the hired man was metaphorically called *fisi* (hyena) due to the similarities with the animal's nocturnal hunting behavior.

Religion, Gender, and Politics in Malawi: Historical Overview

Malawi has a population of about 19 million people in which 76 percent are Christians, 11 percent are Muslims and the rest belong to other indigenous faiths. Of all the religions practiced in the country, Christianity has had the most enduring impact on people's socio-religious life (Matemba, 2011).

The intertwining of religion and politics in Malawi came to the fore in 1992, when the Roman

Catholic Church played a crucial role in galvanizing the masses against the dictatorship of President Kamuzu Banda and the MCP (Ross, 2004: 91). This turbulent year was characterized by industrial action, serious urban riots, student demonstrations, the emergence of new domestic political groupings, and the MCP government's agreement to hold a national referendum on the future of the one-party system in the country. In retrospect, perhaps what was most remarkable about these developments was that they were initially caused by the actions of the Roman Catholic Church and that their momentum was sustained at crucial stages by other Christian denominations in Malawi (Newell, 1995: 243).

As Dulani (2009) states, religion was one of the few platforms from which criticism of the one-party regime could be made without being silenced, as evidenced by the events of 1992. Newell (1995) argues that with the pastoral letter, the bishops "struck a chord in the nation's psyche," which was evidenced by the clapping of hands and ululation when it was read out to the Catholic faithful across the country (251). The letter was so significant that, after its release, there were protests for political change from University of Malawi students and leading Protestant churches such as the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) who supported the Catholic clergy (Dulani, 2009: 145).[2]

The reverence given to religion and religious leaders continues to be evident among Malawian politicians 21 years into democracy. For example, a month ahead of the May 2014 elections, both the then-President Joyce Banda and the leader of one of the major contesting political parties, Lazarus Chakwera of the MCP, participated in a long Good Friday walk called "the Way of the Cross." This walk occurs through the streets of the capital city, Lilongwe, and is organized by the Roman Catholic Church, representing the path taken by Jesus Christ on his way to Calvary, as described in the Bible. Neither Banda nor Chakwera is Catholic, but they are members of the Protestant Presbyterian and Assemblies of God churches, respectively.

The preceding discussion illustrates that historically, religion—particularly Christianity—has played an important role in the socio-political arena of Malawi. As Matemba (2011: 331) argues, religion is the crux of Malawi's national identity. The impact of religion on Malawi's cultural identity is of profound importance with respect to issues of gender.

Aristotelian Rhetorical Theory

According to Hartelius and Browning(2008), "rhetoric is profoundly influenced by its roots in classical antiquity." The field of study was originally based on the thinking of the philosopher Aristotle (McCormack, 2014). In his text, *Rhetoric*, Aristotle focused on what he called the proofs or appeals that the speaker could create or manipulate (Larson, 2010: 71). Aristotle identified three major types of proof—ethos (credibility), pathos (emotions), and logos (reason). Put another way, ethos are ethical proofs derived from the moral character of the speaker; pathos appeal to the emotions, and logos are about the appeal to reason or logic. For McCormack (2014), *Rhetoric* is considered the "earliest authoritative analysis of persuasive discourse and argumentation techniques" (131). Andrus (2012) explains that "discourse analysis and rhetoric come together around the common view that language, whether spoken or written, does something in addition to or beyond merely reflecting the world as it is" (1). Aristotle defines the emotions (pathë) as "those things which, by undergoing change, people come to differ in their judgments and which are accompanied by pain and pleasure, for example, anger, pity, fear, and other such things and their opposites" (Remer, 2013: 408). Turnbull and Broad (2022) maintain that while language can be analyzed "at the macro level to understand its main patterns," this should not be detached "from its immediate context—to persuade an audience about the importance and scale of the problem, and to move them to act" (208). Rhetoric analysis through the Aristotelian approach is a useful method as it situates discourse in context and illuminates how orators stimulate the audience.

The argument herein aims to reveal evidence of Aristotle's rhetorical appeal of pathos from the DPP campaign discourse to legitimize patriarchal, symbolic violence against women vying for political office.

Sesa Joyce Sesa: Rhetorical Analysis

According to Setzler and Yanus (2015), "research shows that areas with high levels of aggregate religiosity are less likely to elect female candidates to national offices" (679). By the same token, they also note, "many religious leaders and church teachings intentionally inculcate and reinforce stereotypes that undermine gender equality" (Whitehead, 2012 in Setzler and Yanus, 2015: 681). This is no different in Malawi. Given the role played by religion in shaping Malawi's cultural identity, it comes as little surprise that religious and gender factors impacted the 2014 elections. Malawi, as noted earlier, is a patriarchal society, which is reinforced from an early age. The *Sesa Joyce Sesa* campaign, created by the DPP, resonated with this historical background of Malawi's religious identity, particularly amongst rural dwellers.

Close to 85 percent of Malawi's population is based in rural areas, where most young women drop out of school and marry early (Government of Malawi, 2012), resulting in a culture that is heavily dependent on men (especially husbands). Against this backdrop, Malawian society was vulnerable to manipulation by the DPP's religious, sexist slogan: *Sesa Joyce Sesa*. This aligns well with Aristotelian theory of persuasion with respect to pathos—emotional appeal (McCormack, 2014)—in which the orator uses language that evokes the messages of the viewers, thereby polarizing the Joyce Banda regime as "the Other." Language and images are used in this case as symbolic means of inducing persuasion among the audience. In the case of Malawi and the political campaign slogan, the sexist nature of the motto was intentionally relayed to audiences who, in turn, subconsciously approved of it because patriarchy had already been inculcated from childhood through multiple socio-cultural structures and, specifically, religion.

The title of the campaign, *Sesa Joyce Sesa,* is demeaning as it compares Joyce Banda to "garbage" or "trash" that has to be "swept away." This analogy has both cultural and religious connotations. In a cultural context, it is common for rural societies to exclude women who are deemed to have engaged in immoral practices or practices not in tandem with traditional beliefs. For example, a woman refusing to cook for her husband, even when pregnant, is taboo. Such women are taken to traditional courts and may be excluded from society; in other words, they are fit to be "swept away." For the DPP, President Joyce Banda deserved such treatment. This was a clear illustration of covert violence.

The *Sesa Joyce Sesa* slogan also contains a religious connotation with a Biblical heritage. In Jewish law, which is noted in the Bible in Deuteronomy 22:18–21, virginity is of profound importance for women to be seen as "clean" and eligible for marriage, and "those persons considered clean, were granted the right to participate in religious ceremonies." In the context of *Sesa Joyce Sesa*, the DPP's campaign slogan refers to President Banda as "unclean" or "filthy," much like the women described in Job 14:4 where Job asks: "Who can bring what is pure from the unpure?" (Job 14:4). As Clifford (2019) explains, "a wide variety of emotions can be triggered by political arguments, but two emotions stand out as likely facilitators of moralization and polarization: anger and disgust." He continues, "feelings of disgust motivate an aversive response to food, people, animals, or other objects that represent potential sources of contamination" and the response is avoidance (3). This is what the DPP orator's emotional strategy, pathos, intended: to evoke disgust against Joyce Banda.

The *Sesa Joyce Sesa* campaign slogan was well constructed to resonate with the religious identity of Malawians and belittle Banda's capability to continue governing the country. This view is informed by Castells (1997) who maintains that cultures embedded with deep religious heritage encourage the oppression of women because submission to men guarantees salvation (23). Remer (2013) points out that "Aristotle assumes that the lexis (style) the speaker adopts can directly influence the hearer's emotions, if the style is coordinated with the desired emotion."

The DPP campaign aimed to manipulate the electorate, particularly religious rural communities, asking them to reflect on the traditional organizational structures within their religious sense

of identity. First, Saonda, who delivered keynote speeches during the campaign rallies organized by Peter Mutharika, engaged audiences with language exemplifying the hierarchical structures within the Catholic Church, the most dominant Christian denomination in Malawi. He then used similar analogies in Islam before concluding by referring to the traditional cultural belief called *fisi* (hyena).

As Lora-Kayambazinthu and Kalilombe Shame (2016) argue, "although the campaigns against Banda focused on ridicule, corruption, and fraud, Joyce Banda and her Peoples Party did not counter-attack" (70). However, they engaged a defensive rhetorical strategy arguing that the time had come for a woman to be accorded a political leadership opportunity. In this regard, electioneering was centered on gender lines and, for Lora-Kayambazinthu and Kalilombe-Shame (2016), "this demonstrates how strong the gender aspect became in the election campaigns" (70).

Saonda would tell audiences: "*ngakhale fisi akalowa mnyumba sindiye kuti mkaziyo ndi wache"* (A man hired to sleep with a widow is not expected to be the next head of the family). This is striking because, like the Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church who blended traditional proverbs and Biblical texts in their 1992 Pastoral letter to criticize the one-party regime, the DPP fused a traditional patriarchal proverb with religious beliefs that underline the role of women in society as being subservient to men. The *fisi* (hyena) proverb symbolized that President Banda was a caretaker president, following the death of Bingu wa Mutharika in 2012, and that she had not been given a full mandate to govern. This supports Clifford's (2019) argument that "emotion plays a critical role in political communication." During electioneering, politicians "frequently appeal to emotions and strategically target different emotions," and this is clearly observed in the Malawian case (2).

However, while the argument in this paper is based on the rhetoric of emotion (pathos), there were other factors that contributed to Joyce Banda's loss in the 2014 elections which still relate to gender. The elections were contested in the shadow of a major corruption scandal, dubbed locally as "Cashgate." The magnitude of Cashgate had never been experienced in Malawi's history and, as Dulani et al. (2021) explains,

> it involved the looting of public resources through the exploitation of weaknesses in the government's Integrated Financial Management Information System (IFMIS). Cashgate perpetrators transferred funds from government bank accounts to vendor accounts for goods and services that were never supplied; the transactions were then deleted from the IFMIS system. (2)

Joyce Banda's eventual election defeat was attributed to her government's inability to fight corruption. Dulani et al. (2021) also point out that Joyce Banda's "electoral fate is consistent with studies demonstrating that women holding political offices are scrutinized more heavily than men, and when they transgress female gender stereotypes of incorruptibility, they are judged using a higher standard" (3). This is clearly evident because there were multiple cases related to corruption in previous regimes, but Joyce Banda's case received more criticism that the others prior to her tenure.

Prior to the 2019 elections, the Institute of Public Opinion and Research (IPOR) conducted a survey which established that women candidates face a different standard than men during elections (Dulani et al., 2021). The study not only found that a majority of Malawian voters prefer male over female candidates, but it also revealed that female political aspirants have more challenges than men during the electioneering period (Institute of Public Opinion and Research, 2020).

Conclusion

Religious texts and traditional proverbs rooted in culture "form an important category of discourse, can influence our day-to-day activities since they reflect sociocultural beliefs and values which are recycled and reinforced through language usage" (Lomotey, 2019: 326). In a desire to remove political power from caretaker President Joyce Banda, the DPP created a campaign slogan that

manipulated the religious beliefs that are deeply woven in Malawi's cultural identity. Religiosity was thus used as a "holy instrument" of legitimizing gendered political power relations in Malawi. Because the Malawian culture is deeply entrenched with patriarchal religious beliefs from history, the prejudicial emotional rhetoric against women as potential political leaders diffused rapidly among the electorate. This was due to the fact that religion, particularly Christianity and Islam, is highly regarded as a legitimate source of authority in everyday life, including politics.

As it has further been noted, populism has much value during electioneering in African societies; more in particular when there are critical factors such as corruption plaguing the country. Peter Mutharika and the DPP rode on the populist platform of an anti-corruption drive, the fragile economy, and patriarchal discourse to legitimize wresting political power from a female incumbent, Joyce Banda.

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Endnotes

1 Portions of this paper were previously published in Gunde, A.M. (2015) "Online News Media, Religious Identity and their Influence on Gendered Politics: Observations from Malawi 2014 Elections." *Journal of Religion, Media, and Digital Culture* 4 (1): 39–67. doi.org/10.1163/2165921490000100_And in Gunde, A.M. (2018) "Holy Symbols of Violence: New Media, Religious Rhetoric and Gendered Power Relations in Malawi's 2014 Elections." In *New Media and the Mediatisation of Religion: An African Perspective,* edited by G. Faimau and W. Lesitaokana, 140–156. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

2 The CCAP church is the second largest Christian denomination after the Catholics in Malawi (Newell, 1995).

Religious Markets and Autocratization in Africa

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Introduction

Scholars who follow a religious economy approach assume that religious markets operate similarly to those of commercial ones, benefiting from competition while being negatively affected by government intervention (Finke and Stark 1988; Iannaccone 1991; Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Witham 2010). The degree of religious competition was found to have its own effect on religious groups' political positions during what Samuel Huntington termed the third wave of democratization (1970s–1990s). Scholars found that when dominant religious groups faced high competition from other religious groups, they were more likely to oppose authoritarian regimes (Gill 1994) and to support the long-term process of democratic deepening (Froehle 1994). Even though there are many different religious denominations in the African continent (Abbink 2014, 87), the religious economy approach has not yet been adopted by African studies. This essay uses this analytical approach to examine the dynamics of religious markets on the African continent in the post-third wave period and the markets' effect on the stances of religious institutions towards more recent democratic setbacks.[1]

Most countries in Africa, since decolonization until the third wave, had been subject to big-man or military rule (Carbone and Pellegata 2020). When the third wave of democratization hit the region in the late 1980s, transitions to democracy (not necessarily full democracy) began in dozens of countries across the continent (Ihonvbere 1997). Meanwhile, more recently, autocracy has been reintroduced in many African countries. The African region, as well as many other regions, is now facing democratic backsliding, the so-called "Third Wave of Autocratization" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). [2] Although there are some scholars who argue that the region is not facing democratic backsliding but rather "democratic stagnation" (Arriola, Rakner and Walle 2023), there is a broad consensus that the African region is not only facing a democratic decline (African Social Research 2022; Dresden and Howard 2016; Obiagu 2021) but also has the lion's share of the post-Cold War full autocratization (Cassani and Tomini 2019a, 138).

There are different contemporary methods used by leaders and governments to autocratize. Amendments to executive term limits that permit elected presidents to remain in power despite constitutional prohibitions are considered one of the main methods for would-be autocrats in Africa (Cassani 2020; Reyntjens 2020). Military coups are still a common event in Africa and have become even more frequent across the Sahel and West Africa in recent years (Clark 2007; Harkness 2016; Ibrahim 2022; Lindberg and Clark 2008; Tangara and Diallo 2022). Exploiting democratic election mechanisms, such as gerrymandering and vote buying, to achieve political objectives is also a common autocratizing method (Obiagu 2021).

These autocratizing moves challenge international, regional, and domestic actors, with some choosing to resist these anti-democratic acts while others support them. In this essay, I focus on the stances of religious institutions. Religious institutions here means institutions that were not originally created to organize political activity but are primarily religious in their mission, meant to defend religion and protect its followers (Fox 2018, 74): for example, the Episcopal Conference of Bishops, Catholic and Protestant Churches, Islamic Councils, and Grand Mosques. Such religious institutions played an important role in the region during the third wave of democratization (Huntington 1991; Toft, Philpott and Shah 2011). How have they responded to subsequent democratic setbacks?

I study this question through the concept of religious markets for two primary reasons. First,

the liberalization of the public realm that the third wave of democratization brought about increased the importance of religion in Africans' lives. In 2020, Afrobarometer reported that Africans are more inclined to contact religious leaders as they are perceived as being less corrupt than other public figures (Howard 2020, 2). Second, this liberalization led to the formation or emergence of a large number of new religious movements with a diverse variety of ideologies and theologies (Villalón 2010, 379), which increased competition in the African religious market—new groups offered alternative religious and social products that competed with those of established religions. Therefore, this essay asks the question: How has the African religious market shaped religious institutions' stances towards the current democratic setbacks?

I focus on religious institutions' positions on term limit amendments and military coups in the post-third wave period. There were around 40 attempts to contravene term limits in the studied period (Lotfy 2022). I managed to gather credible information about religious institutions' stances on 22 of those attempts.[3] Additionally, according to the Coups d'Etat dataset compiled by the Center for Systemic Peace (Marshall and Marshall 2022), there were around 20 successful coups in the studied period. I managed to gather credible information about religious institutions' stances towards ten successful and short-lived coups.[4] I collected the data about their positions from international and local news and religious websites. All in all, this essay maps the stances of 60 religious institutions. Half (30) of the studied religious institutions are from the plurality/majority religions, while the other half (30) are considered to be second majority religions or minorities.[5] The time period for data collection is from the early 1990s, when the third democratic regression started (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), until 2021.[6] The data is analyzed using descriptive statistics.

African Religious Markets in the Post-Third Wave Period

Religious markets are made up of present and prospective members, current and prospective religious producers, and religious products offered by a single, a small number, or a variety of religious producers (Stark and Iannaccone 1994, 232).[7] The degree of religious competition, whether it is low in monopolistic situations or high in pluralistic ones, is based on religious group size and government regulation, whether supportive or restrictive (Finke 1997, 50).

The democratization wave and economic liberalization that crossed the African continent in the late 1980s and 1990s increased the presence of religion in the African public sphere (Abbink 2014, 84) and opened up divides within and among religious groups. This led to a proliferation of less institutionalized religious actors, often charismatic or reformist, who were seen as challengers to those established religions (Cooke and Downie 2015, 5-6; Umar 2015, 66). Therefore, the religious market in Africa has become more competitive as Figure 1 shows. The data is based on the average of freedom of religion indicator, from Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) across the years since the beginning of the twentieth century (Coppedge, et al. 2022; Pemstein, et al. 2022).[8] Religious freedom increased from being somewhat respected in 1900 to being mostly respected by the public authorities in Africa by 2022.

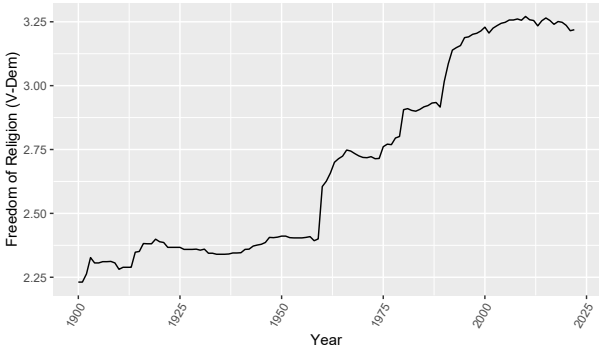

Figure 1: Freedom of Religion in Africa (1900–2022)

Figure 2 shows that most of the studied cases experienced a low degree of religious regulation by public authorities prior to the autocratic attempt (lagged one year), which means that the religious market in these countries is *competitive* in terms of switching from one religion to another and practicing that religion in private or in public. Meanwhile, some cases enjoy moderate religious regulation, while only a few have higher religious regulation by the government.[9]

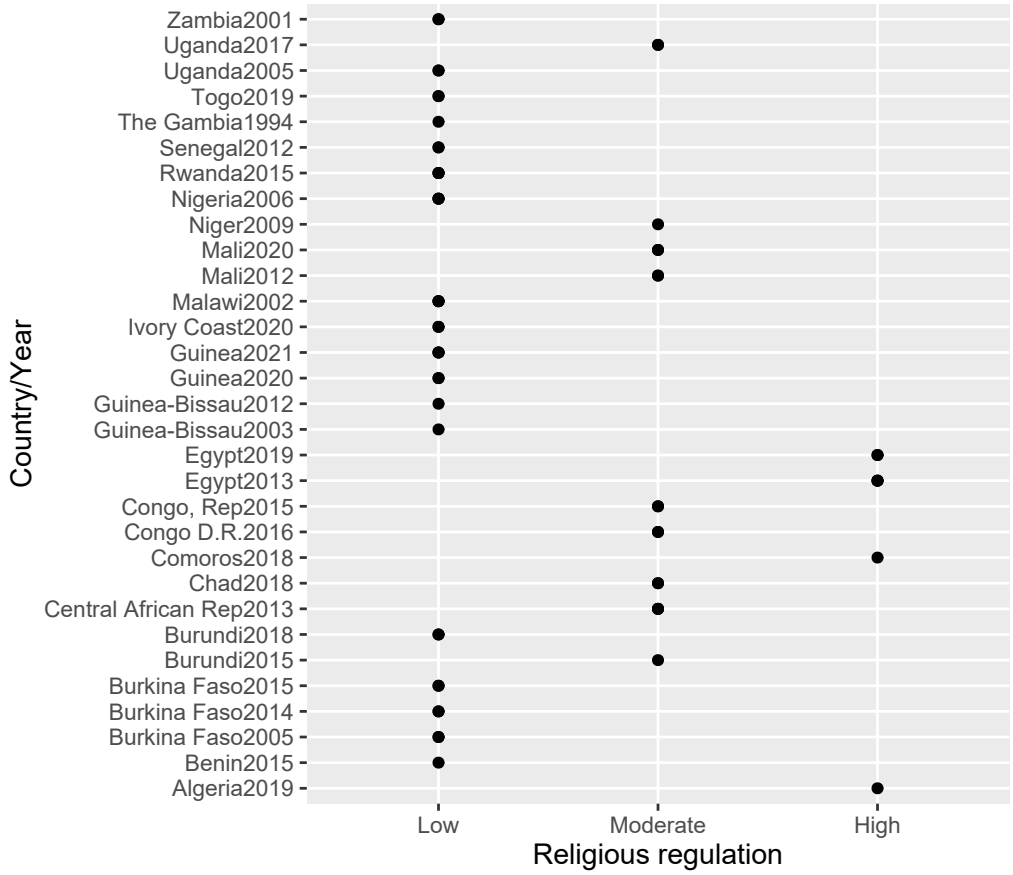

Figure 2: The Degree of Religious Regulation in Africa

Changes in the African religious market can also be detected by studying the difference between the denomination sizes of the religions today and in the last century. Drawing upon the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) national profiles data (Johnson and Grim 2022), Figure 3 shows the difference between the denomination size of each studied religion in each studied country in 1970 and the year of the backsliding act. It is revealed that some of the majority religions are facing high competition from minority religions, despite the fact that the majority religion retains its majority. For example, Protestants[10] in Rwanda increased by 20 percent; the Catholics decreased by 3 percent but remained the majority denomination. Catholicism in Uganda also faces clear competition from the Protestants, as both now have almost the same size. The Catholics only increased by 6 percent, while the Protestants increased by almost 30 percent. The same goes with Burundi. On the other hand, there are some countries where the majority's size increased much more than the minority religions. For example, the Catholic majority increased in the Republic of Congo by more than 30 percent, while the Protestant minority decreased by 2 percent. In Nigeria, Protestants have become the dominant type of Christianity, increasing 17 percent compared to Catholics, who only increased 5 percent.[11]

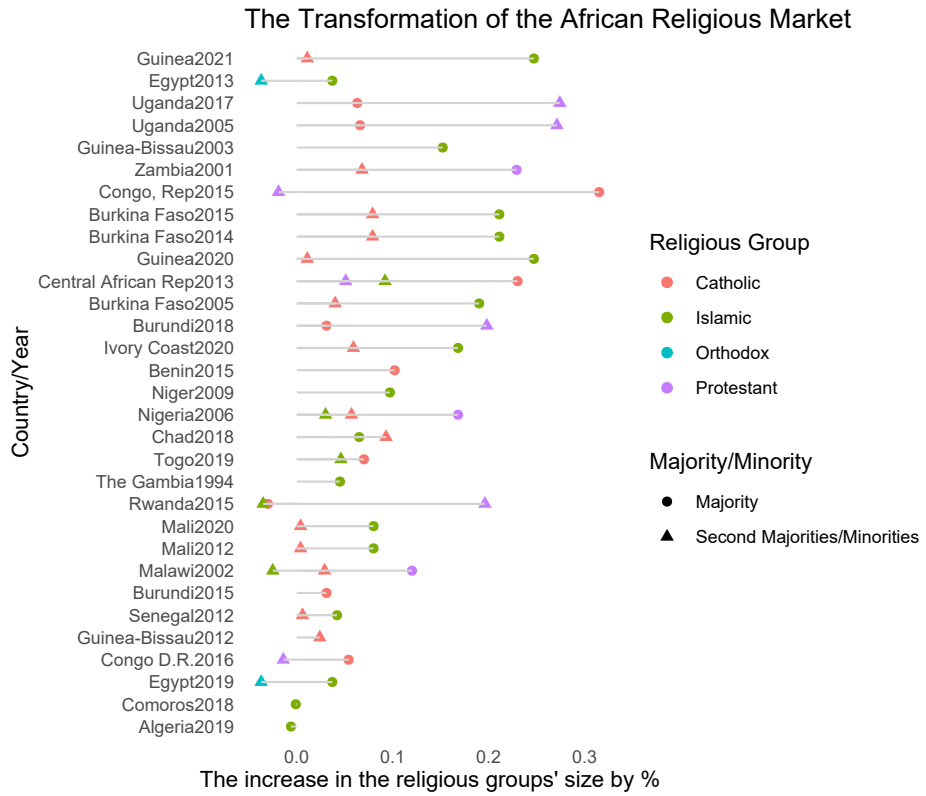

Figure 3: The Difference Between the Denomination Size in the Year of the Backsliding Act and in 1970

This data shows that some minority religions have reaped the benefits of the freedom of religion that most African countries adopted, by increasing their denomination size and producing an alternate religious product that competes with the majority religion in the religious market. However, there are some countries where plurality/majority religions still retain their own segment in the market, while increasing it in others.

Mapping the Stances of the African Religious Institutions Towards Autocratization

Drawing upon 60 religious institutions active during the studied period, I compare the stances of the plurality/majority and minority religions. Table 1 shows that most of the plurality/majority religious institutions did not oppose military coups that happened in their countries. The only two plurality/majority religious institutions in the data that opposed a military coup were Burkina Faso in 2015 and the Central African Republic in 2013.

For Burkina Faso, Cercle d'étude, de recherche et de formation islamique (CERFI) showed support to the young people who resisted the military coup in 2015 by choosing Tiéfo Amoro, a place where demonstrators gathered against the coup, for Tabaski prayer after one week of the coup (Burkina24 2015). In the Central African Republic, the Catholic institutions opposed a coup carried out by a coalition of rebel groups called Séléka whose leader reportedly sought to turn the country into an Islamic state (Baptist Press 2013). Unlike the majority religious institutions, there is more variance in the stances of minority ones towards military coups. Figure 4 also shows that most of the minority religious institutions match the stances of the majority religious institutions towards military coups (whether supporting or opposing them).[12] For example, the Catholic bishops' conference in Burkina Faso denounced the military coup in 2015 and demanded that democratic elections proceed (Catholic News Service 2015), as did their Muslim majority counterparts.

Table 1: Majority and Minority Stances Towards Autocratic Attempts [1990s–2021]

	Majority		**Minority**		**Total**	
	Term limit Amendment (N=22)	*Military coup (N=8)*	*Term limit Amendment (N=20)*	*Military coup (N=10)*	*Term limit Amendment (N=42)*	*Military coup (N=18)*
Did not Oppose	10 (45.5%)	6 (75.0%)	10 (50.0%)	4 (40.0%)	20 (47.6%)	10 (55.6%)
Opposed	12 (54.5%)	2 (25.0%)	10 (50.0%)	6 (60.0%)	22 (52.4%)	8 (44.4%)

Meanwhile, both majority and minority religious institutions are almost split in half in their stances towards term limit amendments, as shown in Table 1. Figure 4 shows that there is no clear pattern for the minority religions, as half of them resemble the majority stances while the other half of the cases contrast them. For example, the Malawian Catholic Church and the Muslim Association of Malawi, through the Public Affairs Committee, agreed with the Malawi Council of Churches, an assembly of the Protestant majority, in opposing the attempts to allow President Bakili Muluzi to stand for a third term of office (afrol News 2002). On the contrary, the president of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, said that the third term in office is not a crime, while Jama'tu Nasril Islam (JNI), an assembly of Muslims in Nigeria, and the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, along with the Christian Association of Nigeria (*The Washington Post*, 2006; Babadoko and Sanusi, 2006), opposed allowing a third term for President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2006.

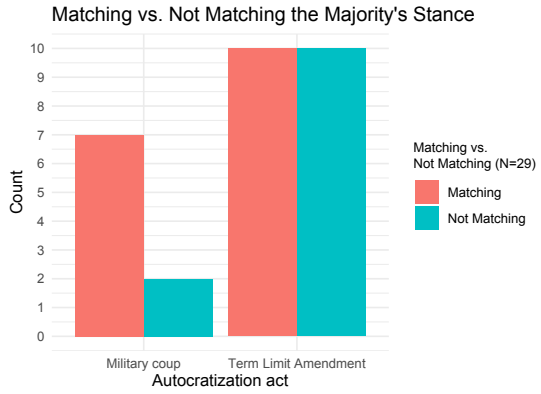

Figure 4: Minority's Matching vs. Not Matching the Majority's Stance

African Religious Markets and the Stances Towards Autocratic Acts

Studying the impact of the degree of competition in the religious market provides a possible understanding of the motives behind the different stances of religious institutions towards autocratic acts. Since most of the studied cases enjoy low religious regulation, this section focuses more on the demand side of the religious market, i.e., religious group size. Figure 5 shows that most of the plurality/majority religious institutions that were facing high competition in the religious market (specifically dominating less than 70 percent of the population) opposed term limit amendments and military coups. A large number of the plurality/majority religious institutions that highly monopolize the market, in contrast, took non-opposing stances. This suggests that high competition forces plurality/majority religious groups to adopt retention policies to maintain their positions in the religious market as dominant religions. These policies are mostly adhering to popular demands in terms of siding with the poor, defending the constitution, and preserving peace and democracy.

For example, the Catholic majority in Burundi is facing clear competition from the Protestants in the religious market, where the Protestants are now dominating more than 25 percent of the population, an increase of 20 percent since 1970 (see Figure 3). The country also enjoyed moderate and low religious regulations prior to the 2015 and 2018 autocratic attempts, respectively (see Figure 2). This competition between the Catholics and Protestants is not only felt in the religious

Figure 5: Comparing Majority and Minority Stances by Population Size

market but also in the political arena, where the ex-Burundi president Pierre Nkurunziza was himself evangelical and claimed to be chosen by God to rule Burundi (Mulindwa 2019). The Catholic Church took an opposing stance towards his attempt to stand for a third term in 2015 (Nduwimana 2015) and towards the referendum to extend his rule in 2018 (Chimtom 2018), arguing that these amendments destabilize national unity and the cohesion of the Burundian people.

Another example is the Ugandan case where the Catholic Church is facing high competition from the Protestant (Anglican) Church which constitutes around 40 percent of the population. The growth of the Protestantism by 27 percent in the country has occurred under the rule of President Yoweri Museveni, who has been in power for more than 35 years. The Catholic Church and its leaders took a strong opposing stance against lifting presidential term limits in 2005 (Ahimbisibwe 2005) and the extension of the presidential age limits in 2017 (KFM 2017).

Figure 5 also shows that minority religious institutions that constitute more than 10 percent of the religious market, competing with the existent majority religions, generally took opposing stances towards term limit amendments and military coups, while a large number of them did not oppose these autocratic acts when they have a very low segment of the religious market (10 percent or less). Thus, minority religious institutions that are weak and threatened in the religious market are not in a powerful position against the autocratizers, unlike those that constitute a considerable percentage of the population and can threaten the autocratizers and take popular stances.

A clear example of this is the case of the Catholics in Burkina Faso in 2014, who constitute more than 15 percent of the population and consider themselves the dominant religious minority since they hold prestigious education and state apparatus positions (Madore 2020, 626). Broad popular protests and opposition from civil society organizations challenged Blaise Compaoré's attempt to establish a senate that was intended to amend the constitution to prolong his tenure (Eizenga and Villalón 2020, 156). The Catholic Bishops Conference of Burkina Faso was one of those actors that took a strong opposing stance towards term limit reforms and served an important role in the failure to establish the senate (Eizenga and Villalón

2020, 164), which caused the Catholic president to lose the support of the dominant religious minority (his minority). Also, the Catholic Church took a strong and popular opposing stance against the short-lived military coup in 2015 (Catholic News Service 2015).

Unlike the Catholics in Burkina Faso, the Catholic Church in Egypt, which constitutes 0.27 percent of the population (Johnson and Grim 2022), took supportive stances towards the military overthrow of the Islamist president Mohamed Morsi as this military push responded to the desire of the Egyptian people and was intended to restore democracy (Luxmoore 2013). Their stance was similar to that of the Coptic Orthodox Church and Al-Azhar. This suggests that minority institutions that constitute small segments of the population size are more likely to match their stances with the plurality/majority institutions. Figure 6 confirms this finding and shows that when minority institutions have a considerable percentage of the population (specifically more than 10 percent), they are more likely to take opposite stances from the majority.

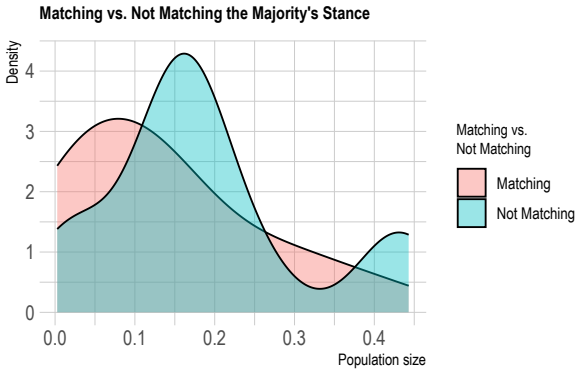

Figure 6: Minorities' Size and Matching Stances with the Majority

Conclusion

This essay set out to examine the impact of the African religious market on the stances of religious institutions towards the current autocratic attempts by political forces to ensure regime survival. The findings show that religious competition urges plurality/majority religious institutions to take opposing stances towards autocratic acts to retain their dominant position in the religious market and not lose followers. Minorities with a threatened position in the market are more likely to acquiesce to autocratic acts or at least take similar positions to those of the majority religions. It is also shown that there is more compatibility among majority and minority institutions in their stances towards military coups than term limit amendments. The religious economy approach is one part of the explanation of the motives behind the political positions of African religious institutions. Future research can examine the impact of other factors like ethnic and regional dimensions, the historical pro-democratic role, and the historical reputation of the involvement of these religious institutions in times of civil war or genocide. Future studies can also tackle the division among religious leaders from the same religious groups towards these autocratic acts.

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Endnotes

1 I focus here on the inter-religious competition, not on the competition between secular and religious actors.
2 Autocratization is the process of regime change towards autocracy. It takes many forms of autocratic transitions: from liberal democracy to defective, electoral, or closed autocracies; from defective democracy to electoral, or closed autocracies; from electoral autocracy to closed autocracy (Cassani and Tomini 2019b).
3 Algeria 2019, Egypt 2019, Chad 2018, Congo D.R. 2016, Congo Rep 2015, Burundi 2015/2018, Comoros2 018, Malawi 2002, Rwanda 2015, Uganda 2005/2017, Zambia 2001, Benin 2015, Burkina Faso 2005/2014, Guinea 2020, Ivory Coast 2020, Niger 2009, Nigeria 2006, Senegal 2012, Togo 2019.
4 Egypt 2013, Central African Rep 2013, Burkina Faso 2015, Guinea 2021, Guinea-Bissau 2003/2012, Mali 2012/2020, The Gambia 1994.
5 I managed to gather information on the stances of religious institutions that have the largest population in each of these cases except Guinea-Bissau 2012, while I managed to gather information on the stances of religious institutions that represent the minority or second majority in each of these cases except Burundi 2015; Niger 2009; Benin 2015; Algeria 2019; Comoros 2018; Guinea-Bissau 2003; and the Gambia 1994.
6 If Christianity is the majority, I select the denomination (e.g. Protestant or Catholic) with the highest percentage of identifiers as the majority religion.
7 Religious products take the form of expressions of faith, promises of otherworldly rewards, moral guidance, and answers to the questions of life and death (Gill 1994, 405).
8 This indicator outlines the scope of people's and groups' freedom to choose a religion, change their religion, practice that religion in private or in public, as well as peacefully spread that religion. It also entails a dimension of discrimination against minorities. This indicator ranges from zero (not respected by public authorities) to four (fully respected).
9 Religious regulation is measured by the freedom of religion variable from the V-Dem data set. I recoded it from 0 (low religious regulation) to 1 (high religious regulation).
10 Protestants here include the Anglicans, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Baptists, and Methodists. Due to the limited number of cases for each, I had to group them under the Protestant type.
11 According to the ARDA data set, the percentage of Christians by 2000 was 46.2 percent in Nigeria, while the percentage of Muslims was 45.2 percent. Therefore, in this essay, I coded the Christians as the majority and Islam as the second majority. As previously mentioned, if Christianity is the majority, I take the largest denomination as the plurality or majority religion. According to the ARDA data set, Protestants in Nigeria were the largest Christian denomination at 29.1 percent of the population by 2000. Therefore, Protestantism was coded as the majority religion.
12 The total number of cases is 29, not 30, because the data on whether the minority is matching the stance of the majority or not towards the 2012 military coup in Guinea-Bissau is missing.

Sacralizing the Modern State: The Violent Ways of Ethiopian Secularism

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Ethiopian secularization has resulted in decades long hostility against religious reason and authority with the goal of banishing its influence from political affairs and public education. The Marxist-Leninist Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM), whose activities culminated in the 1974 military revolution, entrenched the perspective that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its traditions are causes of stagnation in the country. The socialist utopia could only be achieved through progressive "revolutionary atheism."[1] The critique of religion was equated with critique of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), its traditions, and institutions. In addition to Marxist-Leninist ideology, ESM's secular discourses of power were borrowed from Italian civilizational discourses articulated during the Italian colonial occupation of Ethiopia that lasted from 1935/36 to 1941.[2] The anthropological colonial library on Ethiopia also influenced how identity, religion, and history were articulated among the ethnonationalist elite of ESM. It can be argued that the epistemic violence that made the secular possible unleashed a "crisis of knowledge,"[3] identity, and history in Ethiopia. Colonial and Marxist injunctions to restrict religion and banish the EOTC were zealously followed under the Tigrayan People Liberation Front's (TPLF) regime and culminated in its open violence against the church during its rule from 1991–2018.

The violence that accompanied secularization in Ethiopia unmasks secularism's self-narrative and defeats its promise of tolerance, equality, neutrality, and strict separation of religion and politics. Contemporary political conflicts, the shift from anti-religious to devotional secularism, and the conspicuous state hostility against EOTC confirms this claim further. As one commentator rightfully noted, "political secularism in Ethiopia has clearly failed."[4] Fundamentally, this secular state cannot live up to its laws because its principles have been proven untenable; especially its claim of a strict separation of religion and politics.

The relationship between faith and reason and the location of religion in modern society were broadly discussed among social contract and Enlightenment thinkers. They argued that the triumph of scientific reason relegated faith to the private sphere. The traditional secularization thesis as discussed by Max Weber (1904) in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism conjectures that the rise of scientific rationalism has compromised religious faith. Weber believed that the mystical concept of religion should be subjugated to logical explanations found in the natural sciences. He argued that human control over nature, facilitated by technological advancements, reduces the reliance on divine providence and that religious authorities are undermined by the separation of church and state following the emergence of secular, rational-legal bureaucratic regimes.

The claims of the traditional secularization thesis were progressively challenged from within and outside of Western epistemology. Carl Schmitt (1922) in Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty argued that all central concepts of modern states and politics are secularized theological concepts. For him, the belief in human cooperation and human perfectibility under democracy is theological; religious in a way. Schmitt proposes unity ought to be achieved through religion and the state must enforce religion to this end.[5] If this is true, it can be argued that by naturalizing its theological epistemic roots, modern secular social and political thought became heretical and anti-theological.[6]

On the other hand, Leo Strauss (1997) argued that philosophy's commitment to rationality and its neglect of biblical revelation failed to disprove revelation. By displacing the classical and medieval

philosophy that dealt with metaphysics, scientific individualism and philosophical rationality failed to address the "theological-political predicament."[7] Strauss suggested, rather than a permanent resolution for the tension between philosophy and religion, there should be a recognition that tension between "Jerusalem and Athens" is irresolvable and proposed pragmatic ways of living with these problems.

Tallal Assad (2003) in The Formations of the Secular adopted a genealogical study of the secular. He argued that such an approach reveals what was possible and what was excluded by dint of violence and colonialism. European modernity imposed a specific type of imaginary of society and a universal understanding of religion. The secular is a way of thinking of the human internal to the West and secularism is a conception of the world used to establish new forms of power and authority. While political theology remains rooted in Western epistemic tradition, the genealogy of the secular makes the violent foundations and functioning of secularism intelligible.

This paper aims to contribute to this broader academic debate on secularism. It explores the structures of power that made political secularism possible in Ethiopia through an examination of the problematics of epistemological violence. It looks into the processes and content of Ethiopian secularism within the period of "passive-modernization" and comments on the vicissitudes of collective consciousness and political identity under the secular-modern state.

The essay uses historical and ethnographic sources with an analytical tool of discourse analysis to attend to the questions it raises. The essay argues that similar to developments elsewhere in the continent, Ethiopia has been interpellated into a hegemonic, secular-modern existence through epistemic violence. Colonial knowledge production constituted new ethno-religious subjectivities at the expense of alternative local imaginations. The interpolation of a modern autonomous subject that required the production of emancipatory knowledge from the grip of tradition (religious and cultural) was articulated in atheistic, secular, Marxian terms. This sponsored cultural alienation, uprooted the protagonists of ESM, and created a crisis of knowledge and identity.

The Theists of State and Marxian Dystopia

The dyad concepts of the Foucauldian approach to knowledge production—episteme and discourse—provides a crucial insight into the polemics concerning the relationship between secular and religious authorities in Ethiopia. Foucault understood episteme as an "unconscious" structure that constitutes the condition of possibility for knowledge production and discourses as "'enouncements" on social formations within a specific culture.[8] Building on these concepts, scholars in subaltern studies and the postcolonial school argued that global power relations under modernity are enforced by "epistemic violence"[9] as a discursive extension of neo-colonial economic and political domination of the Global South. They argue that through naturalized ideological and scientific conceptual categories, Eurocentric knowledge production perpetuates the (re)production of the other of Europe; thereby organizing realities of the opressed societies.[10] In line with these arguments, this section discusses secularization and secularism in Ethiopia by exploring the implications of the crisis of knowledge effected by epistemic/discursive violence and the subjectivities it informs.

The process of modern Ethiopian state formation and consolidation should be approached within regional power dynamics and from the hierarchical global order at different historical pivots. Historically, the imperial and ecclesiastical authorities in Ethiopia began to consolidate and expand their power into the adjacent territories that had been occupied by Islamic sultanates since early medieval times. In this expansion period—from the thirteenth century to its twilight in the sixteenth century—most of the existing features and characteristics of the Ethiopian church took shape. Following several decades of civil war among regional lords with no central authority, known as Zemana Masafinit (the Era of the Princes), state power was centralized under visionary leader Emperor Tewodros.[11] Aware of the dangers of

European imperial expansion, Tewodros tried to modernize Ethiopia through the centralization of political authority and unification of the EOTC.

Unlike Europe, the emergence of the modern state in Ethiopia was envisioned not only to resolve internal problems but to curb external ones. As a result, modernization has different features. If Tewodros took measures against the church through reformation of land policy, introduction of a feeble form of toleration towards missionaries, and attempts to delimit the church's jurisdiction, he was also committed to protecting the beliefs of the fathers.[12] The presence of Protestant and Catholic missionaries, who long aspired to "civilize Abyssinia" and its church, further complicated the process. Both the emperor and missionaries aimed to redefine religion by promoting vernacular scriptures and inward religious experience as opposed to rituals. It can be argued that modernization and secularization were put in motion following Tewodros's rule with the rising consciousness of asymmetrical power relations with Europe.

A strict separation of state and church authorities was not sought before it was zealously pursued in post-revolution Ethiopia. Prior to 1974, political Christianization and baptism along with other cultural elements played profound roles in defining national identity and framing political subjectivity.[13] Religion shaped and shared the public space until EOTC and its traditions were identified by colonial forces and ESM radicals as the archenemy of progress. The first modern constitution of 1931 under Emperor Haile Selassie maintained the divine right of law of the emperor and the revised 1955 constitution recognized the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as the state religion. The Church continued to exercise authority even after religious freedom was declared by the Imperial Constitution (Art. 40). Orthodox Christianity remained a state religion by constitutional legislation (Art. 126) until the military regime, the Dreg, took power in 1974.

Haile Selassie's efforts to restrict religious influence in politics remained performative and was precipitated by the pressure the empire was facing from the internal student Marxist movement (asking for equality and freedom of nations and religions) and the international challenges of colonial expansion. Following a period of occupation by Italy, an afterlife of colonial encounter marked the necessity of modernizing to face economic and political challenges.[14] Secular-modern education was deemed to alleviate these challenges and the first university was inaugurated under the auspices of the emperor. If the Empire nominally appropriated the Western secular discourses of power while remaining religious in practice,[15] the leeway it provided for secular-modern education to displace "traditional" schools facilitated its demise.

However, secular values were not being solely articulated in the university. Intellectuals from previous generations were also contemplating the boundaries of church-state relations. A call for limitations on religious authority, for example, was echoed by authors such as Afework Ghebreyesus, who wrote a "fictionalized" Ethiopian history that prescribed an "end for role of religion as state ideology" with the new substitution of an "ethos of civilization."[16] Hiruy Woldessilassie also advocated in favor of separation of religious and state authority; he identified that "the earthly king" draws its authority from the consent of its people while the "heavenly king" does not.[17] The approach of an older generation of intellectuals was theological and culturally rooted. However, their vision of modernity had no place in the face of growing atheistic Marxist sentiments. It was the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) that framed the radical changes under the first republic following the demise of imperial Ethiopia.

The Marxist-Leninist dialectical notion of human history and their conceptual categories of the oppressed and oppressor, progressive and conservative transposed the binaries of Western Europe. Concomitant with this development, the colonial narrative of ethnic and religious oppression that targeted EOTC under the period of Italian occupation, also lingered and found habitus in the Ethiopian Student Movement and in the radical Marxist ideology that defined it.[18] The quest for social justice and equality, articulated as anti-

Amhara and EOTC domination, led to a revision of Ethiopian history through a pastiche of colonial, Marxist-Leninist discourses. No less influential were the anthropological works that demarcated ethnic lands and ossified their cultural-religious institutions, similar to the needs of indirect rule in Africa.[19] ESM accommodated all sorts of epistemic violence against Ethiopian civilization and self-understanding.

The military regime of the Dreg that ousted the emperor in 1974, proclaimed the formal separation of state and religion. It did so without defining religion and putting it under state jurisdiction, marking an epistemic defeat of religion by modern state power. The Dreg intervened in religious affairs, persecuted religious leaders, and executed a patriarch of the Orthodox church in an electric chair.[20] The Marxian ideology endorsed by the regime coincided with continental post-colonial military regimes. Socialist practice rejected religious practices as backward and stagnant and tried to replace them with modern, rational Marxian values.[21] Despite the suppression of the church and its teachings and the constitutional atheistic secularization of the state, its religious national symbols persisted and its schools remained a reservoir of civilizational wisdom.[22] Its religious values "feriha egziabher," (reverence of God) continue to inform public morality and ethics.[23]

"Desacralization" narratives of national origin, discourses of power, and understandings of history continued after the 1991 political change that swept away the Dreg and established ethnic federalism.[24] The second republic recognized the further separation of state and religion. The 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia guaranteed the freedom of public expression of faith and made the principle of mutual exclusion of state and religion its cornerstone. The law designates the jurisdiction of law to protect citizens when there is a conflict that interferes with public safety, peace, health, education, and public morality. In doing so, it reduced religion to faith, and demarcated a territory for the public sphere. The constitution allows the maintenance of customary and religious courts under the jurisdiction of the law.

In this period, the interference of the government in religious affairs resulted in the split of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church into two and replaced the patriarch, forcing him into exile in the United States. The authoritarian rule of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) resulted in conflicts such as a social media-led protest called Dimtsachin Yisema (Let Our Voices be Heard) between 2011 and 2015 by Ethiopian Muslims who were discontented with the regime's policy that intervened in religious institutions' internal organization and operations.[25] Incendiary, anti-religious secularization, which follows the Russian model of atheistic secularism, changed course following 2018 after dominating political rhetoric and practice for almost half a century.

Secularization and secularism in Ethiopia is open to different interpretations regarding the definition of a secular space.[26] Minority religious groups who were disadvantaged by previous power alighnments between state and church might especially view the process of secularization positively. However, it is important to note, secularization through epistemic violence with a blanket adoption of Western binaries of secular-sacred informs the criteria for determining what counts as knowledge and non-knowledge. In doing so, the local episteme is rejected as non-knowledge. The storming of Meqdalla and the defeat of King Tewodros by British imperial forces in 1868 effected the development of "consciousness of power" towards Europe. The West increasingly came to be considered as an epitome of progress, modernization, and knowledge. This consciousness of power "legitimized the imitation of Western systems and institutions that produced epistemic violence."[27] It culminated in the reign of scientific rationality and Western education at the expense of culturally-rooted knowledge systems and intellectuals. When the church schools (abnat timihrt betoch) and mosque's madrassas were completely replaced with secular education, the Ethiopian self-consciousness receded, making way for coloniality. If secularization in the West transposed god and theological concepts to the political, Ethiopian secularism haphazardly transplanted European theological self-consciousness as its own.[28] This has had fatal

ramifications for contemporary events animated by identity politics and religious conflicts.

Devotional Secularism: Religious Dissent and Political Quandary

The assumption of the premiership in 2018 by Abiy Ahmed, a devout Pentecostal, marks both a shift and continuity of state ideology concerning state-religion relations. In the early period of reform, public speeches of the prime minister created an ambiance of hostility towards secularism and the Marxist ideological edifice. Discourses of religiosity permeated his public speeches. At the official launching of his first book, Medemer, the prime minister stated,

> For all that happened today, for medemer to take place, for prosperity to unfold, it is because Ethiopia's God will not forsake Ethiopia. We must be thankful to Him for all that He has done. People get astonished by our everyday discourse of God, but we are not brainwashed with Marx and Lenin [neither are we blinded by] ideology, we believe in God's superiority, and we are not abashed by our beliefs. Scorning religion [or belief] while leading a nation with 99% believers is unknowing the masses. So may God bless Ethiopia and her people![29]

This is just one example where he strongly appealed to the religiosity of the nation as a countervailing force against previous political ideologies and secularization.[30] Abiy's political vocabulary appeals to popular religious sentiments, as he was initially seen as a Moses who would lead his people to freedom.

The twin concepts of *medemer* (synergy) and *bilitsgna* (prosperity), that define the new state ideology, are rooted in religious discourses and international movements. The political concept of *medemer* is rooted in the liturgical concept of unity regarding the godhead within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.[31] While *biltsigna* is a concept that was also mobilized by previous regimes, it was now deployed in new ways as a concept associated with the global hegemonic spread of the American gospel of prosperity. The re-emergence of prosperity as a post-revolutionary discourse that mobilizes methodological individualism as an amalgamation of Evangelicalism and neoliberalism is conceived as a manifestation of political theology that functions to depoliticize the political.[32]

In his book *Yemedemer Menged,* Abiy stressed that order, solidarity, kindness, and benignancy would lead to prosperity.[33] He underscores that "the sole thing that can heal our wound is forgiveness" and added that the goodness in us would manifest only when we heal through forgiveness, come closer with reconciliation and become one with love."[34] He further explained that giving and receiving are not only rules but also a deep secret of life. He critiqued the prevalent political culture from a religious perspective and argued that the religious and moral grounds on which Ethiopia stands had gravely weakened.[35] Thus, he pointed out that our "culture of living in synergy with love through comprehension that one is the beauty and source of existence for the other has been weak" and lamented that "for centuries there is discord in the country based on ethnicity, locality, religion, and ideological differences, which still is prevalent." He exclaimed that the only solution is love.[36]

Practically, Abiy facilitated the reunification ceremony of the split synods of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and brought back the synod with a televised grand ceremony of repatriation. The two synods reunited with one Holy Synod after 27 years. At the early period of reform, national television broadcast religious prayers, religious leaders blessed "secular" governmental sessions, and the prime minister and his cliques attended religious ceremonies. One can also observe the proliferation of religious movements—one of the most striking being Pentecostal, which has been at loggerheads with EOTC for several decades.[37] Political parties forming informal affiliations with religious movements and institutions has also surged with wider public support, all signifying the growing "derivatization of religion."

Among the political parties with a religious affiliation, the Enat Party has a particularly large number of constituencies in the country. It was

established in November 2019, obtained its initial permit in 2020, and received a legal license and acknowledgment in January 2021 from the Ethiopian Election Board. In an interview, the deputy president of Enat stated,

> We aim to bring the country to the level it deserved. What is reflected in today's Ethiopia does not represent its image. Ethiopia is a model country for the rest of African countries to ensure their freedom. Though it has a history of more than 3,000 years, the world knew Ethiopia through conflict, human trafficking, drought, famine, and poverty. The party's idea is adored and accepted by all citizens and this is the reason why the party could gain several candidates within a short period.[38]

The discourse of national pride and rich history shows the party's affiliation to the group of political adherents informally called "unity forces/*yeandnet hayloch*" in the political order. Furthermore, the preface of the party's bylaw resembles a prophetic discourse of a sacrosanct land with notes such as "the yellow color on the party logo indicates the radiant hope and coming growth of Ethiopia that will benefit the rest of the world" [39]

The party manifesto places *feriha fetary* (reverence towards God) as the base of ethical and moral virtues. The manifesto further notes that "the party considers there is a growing feeling that is not based on Ethiopian values" to which there is a pressing need to respond. The leadership and membership of Enat party is predominantly Orthodox Christian. When asked about the religious agenda of the party, one of the leaders admitted that they are indeed Christian believers. Regardless, he argues they take a secular position on the political ideology of the party claiming "politics and religion are different things."

Another religious movement called Yemankiya Dewel *(*The Bell of Awakening) also reflects the overlap between religious and political spheres. Followers occupy public spaces to organize religious events and use loud traditional trumpets to mark their presence. The banality of "sound wars" in a "secular" space, often on mundane days (no special public religious celebration) manifests the need to assert political existence or a disregard of the other. The movement is primarily led by a man called Mihreteab who serves under the Orthodox Christian Church as a preacher and member of clergy. Yemankiya Dewel is seen as his initiative. It is registered as a privately held non-profit organization established in 2017 in Addis Ababa.

On the movement's YouTube channel, discussants participate in religious and political arguments that focus on political developments that appear to be a threat to their existence. The title of the movement itself indicates the concern of the leaders to intervene in the political-cum-religious developments by "awakening" the masses. In many of its YouTube videos, Mihreteab condemns the reviving Protestant movement and speculates about the government conspiring against the church and his movement. Under this hostile milieu of the confrontation between government and EOTC order, the Central Bank tried to freeze the bank accounts of the leaders, tried to block funds to the movement, and arrested some members. The movement embodies the feeling of marginalization of Orthodox Christians by the ruling elite that they believe acts in favor of Pentecostal religious groups.

At another event, a renowned religious scholar, public intellectual, and advisor of Prime Minister Abiy, Daniel Kibret, questioned the receding role of religion in public life during the inauguration of a church in 2020. Through the metaphor of a soccer field, he invited the congregation to rethink "Why we are being defeated? If we play in our fileld, the possibility of incurring a defeat is less. We are being defeated because we retreated from the field."[40] The metaphorical field, he explains, symbolizes "politics, civil society, economy, and so on." He asks, "Where is our place now?" and laments that parliament used to open with the prayer of holy fathers and Bishops of the Orthodox Christian Church. He further advised, "We need to sit down and contemplate what we have done wrong. What we have not done too." Daniel's speech alludes to the fundamental problem of secularisms and their demand of a split personality—the dilemma on how to simultaneously adhere to secular and

religious reasons when they are at odds. The increasingly violent conflicts between religious and secular authority, along with psudo state neutrality further demonstrate secularism's impossible promise of a stable boundary of the public (secular reason) and private (religious reason) realms.

The post-2018 reform period witnessed a thriving of Oromo ethnic nationalism, designated as "Oromummaa project" by its progenitor, which deplores EOTC as a Neftegna/Amhara colonizer's institution and has called to replace it.[41] Similar accusations against the EOTC reverberate in movements that aim to establish ethnicity-based breakaway synods in the Oromia and Tigray regions. In 2019, a movement that aimed to establish an independent Oromia Orthodox Church entered into a controversy with the EOTC. The synod denounced the movement and its leader Kesis Belay.[42] Hailemichael Tadesse articulated the fundamental claim, stating, "We are asking the question in the name of the people for whom we have given service in its language. We are speaking on behalf of the people whose culture and tradition were categorically denied as Aramaic and infidel (*ahzab*) even in sacred texts of the church; a politically charged act."[43] The controversy was declared to be resolved by internal deliberations, until a larger movement surged, this time including higher order clerics in the church.

In February 2023, three Oromo archbishops accused the church's leadership of discrimination and a lack of diversity. They contend that Amhara and Tigray ethnic groups have dominated Ethiopian Orthodox Church culture and values for far too long, regardless of the quest for reform. They mentioned, for example, the patriarch speaks Tigrayan and Amharic only. The issue of the language of church service was at the center of the conflict. The clerics argued services must be given in Oromiffa and other ethnic languages that are understood by followers. They claimed there was discontent regarding the imposition of Amhara-Tigray culture and the discrimination of ethnic groups in the ranks of church administration. Consequently, they were excommunicated for organizing a breakaway synod. Even though the Federal High Court gave a favorable verdict to the church, by a temporary freezing order on the breakaway synod, the government was slow to prevent the bloody conflict that followed.[44] By December, the controversy escalated when Archbishop Abuna Lukas called for the military to intervene and assassinate the prime minister.[45] In February 2024, the government deported the General Secretary of the EOTC Holy Synod Archbishop Abune Petros.[46]

Abiy Ahmed tried to resolve the controversy just a day ahead of a nationwide demonstration declared by the synod in an attempt to save the authority of the church. The public viewed this effort as an outcome of political strategy instead of goodwill. The conflict exacerbated the conspiracy theory that the ruling elite is affiliated with the Pentecostal Church that has inimical relations with the Orthodox Church. Pentecostalism in Africa has an antithetical relationship with "traditional religions" and spiritual life, which it regards as satanic. The Protestants found in Ethiopia an autochthonous model of Christianity. They criticize the Judeo-Christian elements of the Orthodox Church, the belief in saints and Mary as mediators between man and the divine, its texts, the belief in holy water (*tsebel*), and church education that incorporates indigenous knowledge systems.[47] Orthodox Christians in turn view Protestants as *mete* (foreign), *menafiq* (heretic), and Western (*mirabawi*). There is a strong adversarial relationship between the two religions.

Several incidents of religious conflict that resulted in civilian causalities and destruction demand a re-consideration of secularism at the ideological-discursive and structural level. The local and global entanglements that bring shifts in state ideology impact the nature of secularism in Ethiopia and the subjectivity it informs. Abiy's promises of *lewt* (change) and optimism quickly failed as the country soon descended into a protracted civil war. The shift in state ideology, political contestations to define state ideology, and radical ethnonational politics informed by the insolvable nationality question creates a political environment of animosity. The armchair Ethiopian secularism and the uncritical transplantation of hegemonic ideologies from the West, resulted in mimicry of

unproductive concepts and binaries such as the dyad realms of public and private, faith and reason. This in turn occludes the political imagination and an open political order that can address historical and contemporary challenges.

Conclusion

In a post-reform Ethiopia, while the theological discourse of *biltsigna* (prosperity) and *medeme*r (synergy) operate as a tool of de-politicization, there is an increasing suspicion towards the ruling elite that results in a plethora of conspiracy theories and prophetic claims. This paper tried to make contemporary political developments intelligible, from their constitutive and expressive elements, and it reveals that religious discourses have been mobilized both to shape a specific political subjectivity and a resistance to the new political discourse. In the current period of civil war and mutual suspicion, religion has been instrumental in political contestations by affording adherents a horizon of hope, building social bonds, and uniting them under a common agenda. The political inclusion and exclusion of subjects based on language, religion, ethnic affiliation, and class, operating as first-order violence by naming and blaming, seem to continually facilitate the construction of an epistemic "abyss" and translate it into second-order violence by organizing, naturalizing, and legitimizing power relations, social inequality, and exploitation.[48]

While the EOTC's primacy in the political realm created a quest for equality from other religious believers in the modern Ethiopian state, the quest for social justice under "passive modernization" was articulated through colonial discursive constructs. Currently, the political order mobilizes religious discourse either to reassert national identity or to challenge it while simultaneously informing political subjectivity. The quest for equality and freedom has galvanized communities of faith to reproduce the violent way of doing politics to redress past injustices. This mimicry of political discourse and action continues to have negative implications for secularism's promise of tolerance, equality, state neutrality, and peaceful coexistence. Considering the crisis of knowledge that resulted from the advent of the secular and violent secularization—with the implications for the deteriorating relationship among ethnic nationalists, religious groups, and communities of faith—this study argues that it is urgent to reimagine a non-secular order that redefines religion and sets in motion a compromise of religious freedom with mutual coexistence and respect among multiple religions in decision making. This requires a rereading of local intellectual works and alternative imaginaries. Social science needs to rethink the binaries of Western epistemic constructs and recognize the possibility for the coexistence of faith along with politics, public with private, This would make possible the critique of Western modernity that has colonized our episteme.

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Re-Imagining Islamic Political Power in the Swahili Coast of Post-Independence Kenya

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This paper interrogates how Muslim elites have renegotiated their political power in post-colonial Kenya's Swahili coast region. The paper traces their history of domination over the coastal region's political and commercial spaces for over a thousand years. It explores how these elites re-invented their power after they lost it by using religion and marginalization as rallying points in post-independence Kenya. I argue that Muslims were able to re-imagine their political power through the incorporation of other groups while remaining at the helm despite their minority status. This result was achieved through repackaging themselves as fighters against the oppression of coastal people by "up-country" communities from the highland interior. This transformation entailed reconfiguration of their identity from "foreigners" and oppressors of coastal people to liberators and legitimate leaders. The re-imagination was fueled in part by the expansion of their economic muscle through Middle East commercial networks, which were in turn strengthened by the rise of the Middle East as a global commercial hub in the last three decades.

Islam as a religion informed the political choices of the Swahili people until the arrival of British colonialism in the early twentieth century. In Kenya's Swahili coast, for over a millennium, Islam defined the political, social, and economic landscape and attracted prestige and power as the official religion for Swahili city states (Rothman, 2002; Ichumbaki and Pollard, 2021). This can be attributed to networks that existed between East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula from the eighth century onwards (Pouwels, 2002). These cultural and commercial linkages were anchored on Islamic values. Omani Muslims dominated Kenya's coastal region along the Swahili coast (Nesbitt, 2018), especially economically, due to the maritime trade between East Africa and the rest of the world. The spread of Islam decisively changed East Africa's social landscape. Islam spread to become the dominant religion in new city states such as Mombasa, Mogadishu, Kilwa, Zanzibar, Malindi, and Lamu, among others (Wynne-Jones, 2016).

This study concentrates on Mombasa County in the Swahili region due to demographic and historical considerations. The county has been dominated by Muslim elites continuously, unlike other counties such as Kwale and Kilifi that have large numbers of other coastal communities (Al Bulushi, 2021). I use the term Muslim elites to describe those people who identify themselves as from a "foreign origin," especially from Oman (Ogechi, 2019). Many Muslims from Oman maintained their family ties with their homeland and culture (Marshall, 2021). When Sultan Qaboos took power in Oman in 1970, he pleaded with Omanis in East Africa to return to their homeland hence showing a distinction with other East Africa Indigenous communities (Verne and Müller-Mahn, 2013). These differences were at the root of their ability to access certain spaces and gain political and commercial privileges (Bone et al., 2021). Indigenous communities who converted to Islam were not necessary entitled to the prestige accorded to their "foreign ancestry" counterparts.

This article is divided into five parts. The first section introduces the study and traces the history of the Muslim elite's political domination over the Swahili Coast for a millennium, especially the period of Omani rule. The second section interrogates how Muslim elites re-invented themselves during the colonial period. The third section discusses how Muslim elites asserted their power in post-independence Kenya without occupying positions of power. The fourth section explores how they reconfigured their political power to dominate political positions in the present. The fifth section concludes the study by highlighting how political elites in the Swahili Coast have used religion to consolidate their power.

Muslim Elites' Re-Invention in Colonial Kenya

The domination of Islam along the Swahili coast can be attributed to commerce with the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian subcontinent and beyond. Political leaders and merchants in the area have mainly been Muslims since the beginning of the second millennium (Wynne-Jones, 2016). Since these Swahili city states relied heavily on a mercantile economy, conversion to Islam attracted prestige and offered commercial and political opportunities as well as access to certain spaces on the basis of religion. Ibn Battuta wrote concerning his visit to Mogadishu in 1331 CE how the foreign merchants were hosted in private homes (Gibb and Beckingham, 2017). Muslims were more likely to provide conducive hospitality for other Muslims.

In the fifteenth century, there was some decline in Muslim dominance due to Portugal's conquering and controlling of Indian Ocean trade. However, the decline of Portuguese influence after its defeat by Omani Arabs led to a re-invention of Islamic elites in coastal politics (Fay 2022). Over the next two centuries, the Omanis were tremendously influential along the Swahili coast (Askwe,1999). During the period of Omani rule, Muslims of Omani ancestry dominated the political landscape of Swahili urban areas. This trajectory continued in the early colonial period, as the British made treaties with Omani ruler Seyyid Said rather than directly colonizing the area (Pawelczak, 2020). On the eve of colonization in Kenya, the ten-mile coastal strip, including present day Mombasa County, was still controlled by Omanis in Zanzibar. However, the British took control of coastal Kenya through several treaties, including the 1895 treaty "renting" the region to the British East Africa Company to prevent the region being annexed by the Germans who had taken Tanganyika. In 1920, when Kenya officially became a British protectorate, the coastal strip continued to be administered through the treaties between the British and the Sultan of the Zanzibar (Willis and Gona, 2013).

This led to Muslim elites losing some political power to the British (Mathews, 2013). Nonetheless, they retained more prestige than their Indigenous African counterparts. The Muslim elite's prestige emanated from the fact that there was a racial hierarchy based on skin tone, with those of lighter tone with Middle Eastern ancestry having higher status than the darker skinned Indigenous communities, although the colonial government did not implicitly promote racial classes. These Muslim elites with foreign ancestry owned land and controlled urban commerce during the colonial period at the expense of Indigenous non-Muslim communities.

In 1960, with Kenyan independence imminent, coastal Muslim elites feared being subjugated by dominant groups from inland Kenya, which led to increased agitation for regionalism and debates over secession (Yousaf and Wakhu, 2020). The debate soon broadened to include a larger coastal region than the "ten-mile" strip (Willis and Gona, 2019). At independence, Muslim elites campaigned for independence from the rest of the country. This created tension with non-Muslim elites from the coastal communities, who had been dominated for centuries despite being the majority (Kassim, 1995). British officials realized popular opinion favored a federal government with Africans as the leaders of the coast for the first time in over a millennium. Muslim elites, realizing their minority status, demanded autonomy and possible secession from Kenya, with extreme demands including "repatriation" of civil servants who were not from the coastal region back to their "home" region (Willis and Gona, 2013). This perspective enabled Muslim elites to acquire more support at the coast, hence maintaining their political power in the new demographic dynamics and modern state realities.

Muslim Elites' New Political Power in the Postcolonial Period

Christian Africans took power in post-independence Kenya under a strong federal system. Ronald Ngala, a Black Christian, became the de facto leader of the coastal region. Regionalism was initially backed by Muslim elites who perceived this model as the only solution for negotiating political power. However, by 1964 the government had succeeded in dismantling regionalism leading to

disgruntlement from Muslim elites and Indigenous African communities who felt centralization of the government by the communities from the interior was a form of oppression of the coastal people. The Muslim elites continued to dominate the commerce of the region using guarantees they negotiated through the Sultan of Zanzibar, the British government, and post-colonial Kenya (Willis and Gona, 2013). But the influx of an up-country population had adverse effects on Muslim elites. The elites from the hinterland challenged the Muslim elite's monopoly on commerce as well as land ownership, leading to conflict between those described as "Africans" and "Arabs." In subsequent years, there was a transfer of land from Arabs to Africans from up-country as well as a shift in the distribution of government jobs. Muslim elites sought to re-imagine their power by creating a coalition with Indigenous African communities against the people of the hinterland who dominated Kenyan government at the time. However, their political activities and agitation never gained much of a foothold due to government control of political activities from the 1960s to 1990s.

In subsequent years, the Muslim elites came to believe that their political space could only be realized in an autonomous coastal region. The notion of secession emerged as the political reality dawned on Muslim elites that their chances of dominating the political landscape in the region were dwindling. This realization led to new voices who advocated for seceding from Kenya, an idea that they linked to their "historical roots" and that cultivated nostalgia for the past. Some of these elites and even Muslim commoners began to reframe their identity as "foreign," tracing their origin from Persia and the Arab world (Saalfeld, 2020). This claim of foreign origin, which had been in existence and captured in some of the early Arabic writings such as Kilwa Chronicles, was used by Muslim rulers to re-legitimize their political power (Spear, 1984). The Kilwa Chronicles, which were written in the middle of the second Millenium CE, attributed the origin of Swahili communities to Persia and elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula. The Muslim elites, therefore, sought to anchor their political grievances in the memory of an historical prestige that predated British colonialism in Mombasa (Willis and Gona, 2013).

Also, after 1990, the politics of marginalization dominated the political landscape in Kenya at large. The Muslim elites identified this reality of marginalization as an opportunity to galvanize Muslims against the dominant communities from the inland. Notable changes happened in 1992 with the general elections where Muslim elites—through the Islamic Party of Kenya—campaigned against the domination of up-country communities with the blessing of the ruling party, Kenya African National Union (KANU). The ruling party had incorporated this strategy to divide the opposition to win the election by pitting the coastal Muslim community against the Luo and Kikuyu populations who mainly voted for the opposition. This strategy of divide and rule by the ruling party shaped Muslim elites' politics in the next decade in the region.

Hybridization of Political Power Between Muslim Elites and the Christian Majority

In the 2002 general election, the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) won on a platform of reforms anchored on justice and reconciliation (Veney and Zeleza, 2013). Although Muslim elites did not belong to a specific party, they perceived the new ruling party's desire to deal with "historical injustices" as important to their cause of dealing with decades of marginalization. The Muslim elites aligned themselves with the new regime and reconfigured themselves as major players in the drafting of a new constitution. With their input, the constitutional draft of 2004 aimed to address some of their grievances. However, the failure to implement the proposed constitution led to the creation of the Mombasa Republic Council (MRC) by disgruntled Muslims (Willis and Gona, 2013; Papale, 2022). The MRC called for independence of the coastal region with an appeal anchored in economic grievances and discrimination against the Muslim population in the "war against terror" (Aroussi, et al., 2022). The crackdown on Muslims by the state intensified further with the Kenyan incursion into Somalia in 2011. The MRC even

wrote a letter to the Queen of England challenging the legitimacy of Kenya in maintaining control over the coastal region. In the letter, which was circulated to the general public, the MRC evoked their historical legitimacy and their Islamic and Arab identity by stating:

> The Coastal Strip initially had been a colony of the Ammu Zaid Arabs who made Benadir Coast their capital in 740 AD and ruled important towns of the East Coast of Africa for two hundred years (200 years), then a colony of the Arab Zenj Empire from Persia under Hassan Bin Ali in 975 AD and ruled the whole of the East Coast of Africa for five hundred years (500 years) then a colony of the Portuguese who came in the early fifteenth century and ruled the East Coast of Africa for nearly four hundred years. (Willis and Gona, 2013, 63)

The uniqueness of this letter lay in its racial inclusivity between Arab, Asian, and Mijikenda communities (the group of tribes of African descent who traditionally lived in the coastal region for centuries and are perceived to be Indigenous to the area) (Meinema, 2021). I argue that this was the re-imagined Muslim political power that aimed to incorporate Mijikenda with the sizable Muslim population, hence using religion as a basis for consolidating power. That is, the Muslim elites embarked on galvanizing coastal societies and forming a political alliance that aimed to portray communities from the interior of Kenya as colonizers of the coastal region. This re-organization led to the support by Christian churches of Indigenous coastal peoples, hence giving the MRC party a broader acceptance at the coast. The party rallied against historical injustices suffered by up-country communities and thus bridged the religious gap that existed in the past. With the new constitution in 2013 and formation of a regional government, the Muslim elites were able to return to the helm of political leadership at the coast with the support of other groups. Furthermore, with some of the up-country communities joining the opposition, the Muslim elites were able to tap these constituents to consolidate power over the last three general elections. The new alliance has been achieved by sharing power with their Christian counterparts and supporting up-country communities who feel left out by the central government of Kenya.

Conclusion

For over a millennium, Muslim elites dominated the Swahili Coast's political and economic spheres. British colonialism in the end of the twentieth century brought the first challenge to their domination. Nonetheless, they were able to establish a niche that allowed them to thrive in colonial Kenya. In post-independence Kenya, their power declined due to conflicts with coastal Africans as they lost land and economic power to up-country communities. This led to a reconfiguration of the political identity of Muslim elites as they started associating themselves initially with coastal Africans, Muslims, and later people of other religions as they challenged the "domination" of the coastal region by some communities especially the Kikuyu who were in power. Therefore, their re-imagined political power is anchored on inclusivity of the coastal people where they remain as de facto leaders. Muslims re-inventing themselves from colonizers and oppressors of the coastal African population to liberators in the last few decades is a major transformation. The aim was to maintain political power despite their minority status, to use religion to consolidate power by identifying with the Muslim population of Indigenous African people especially Mijikenda communities, and to create alliances with other communities who feel marginalized by the central government of Kenya.

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Walking with the Dahiratoul Moustarchidine Wal Moustarchidate Movement of Senegal

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Dahiratoul Moustarchidine Wal Moustarchidate (DMWM) is a religious movement that emerged from the Sy Tijaniyya brotherhood in Senegal in the 1970s. Originally, the movement was organized into dahiras, which were meeting places for granddaughters (moustarchidates) of the Sy family. The name Dahiratoul Moustarchidine Wal Moustarchidate means movement of men and women in search of righteousness. Fabienne Samson provides information on the internal, family-oriented nature of the movement, which was a forum for meeting and discussing issues related to Islamic religious teachings.[1] During the 1970s and 1980s, in a global context characterized by an Islamic revival boosted by the Iranian revolution of 1979, Senegal faced an economic crisis characterized by the multiplication of structural adjustment policies. Young people, who were the first victims of the crisis, became the driving force behind social protest in Senegal. This part of the population, in search of a politico-religious renewal, became the perfect targets for brotherhood movements, which became their place of refuge. It is at this level that the dahira emancipates itself from the family circle to open up to youth and more specifically to those who have pledged allegiance to the Sy family.[2] From then on, the Dahiratoul Moustarchidine Wal Moustarchidate took its place in the public arena offering a politico-religious renewal and new ways of practicing Islam in Senegal.

The Moustarchidine movement offers an excellent focal point for addressing the issue of religious politics in Africa given the context in which it emerged and the nature of its political-religious offerings. The link between the Moustarchidine movement and politics materializes on two levels: the religious movement's involvement in political affairs, and the movement's establishment of a policy for managing the brotherhood's internal affairs. The latter point, which is the focus of this article, is explored through an ethnographic description of a day's walk organized by the Moustarchidine students at Gaston Berger University (GBU) in Saint-Louis, Senegal. Through a phenomenological description of this event, I analyze how the movement mobilizes a set of political tools in public space. In what way is this neo-confrerric movement different from classic brotherhood organizations? [3] What is the place of followers in the reconfiguration of religious politics within this movement?

This article is informed by two research methods. The first is devoted to observing, listening, and then describing this moment of public presence. Secondly, I have opted for participatory immersion, punctuated by interactions and summary interviews, to establish a dialogue with the movement's actors.[4]

The Walk: The Moustarchidine in Public

On May 7, 2023 (a Sunday), students from the GBU's Moustarchidine *dahira* are out for a walk. As agreed with my interlocutor, we meet in room 4 of the university canteen number 1 at around 7am. In the cool of the morning, we find ourselves in the queue leading to the room, equipped with a red ticket and our university cards. Some of the students, like us, are dressed in sportswear. Most wear MJ caps, while others wear polo shirts with different designs like the insignia of their movement symbolized by a photo of Serigne Moustapha Sy.[5] Some of the men and women carry backpacks, while others (a group of six men) stand out with their orange vests. On this Sunday, far from the usual rush, the canteen opens at 8. After an hour of waiting, the group of walkers gradually gathers around.

To gain access to the canteen, we follow the slow-moving queue until we reach the door, where we show the inspector our identification and access ticket. In a relatively noisy atmosphere, the sound of metal utensils imposes itself in the ambiance. After picking up a plate on our right, we take sugar, milk, and butter, in front of waitresses with closed faces. Further on, we pick up a slice of bread and if we wish, chocolate. After this step, we turn to large coffee pots, filled with hot water, arranged in a parallel position on two tables. Once the small glass bowl has been filled, everyone heads for the empty tables at the back, where some of the group sit while the rest are spread around the room. In this general chaos where it is hard to hear each other, everyone focuses on his breakfast, which takes around 30 minutes. The first to finish deposit their plates in a recovery area just to the right of the exit.

The group then gradually moves on to the second meeting point, the soccer pitch known as Valentin II, near the canteen, for a warm-up session. The exercise takes place in an unfocused atmosphere, with a mix of men and women. Women's complaints and groans about the physical activity can be heard: "uy, ay." Men, for their part, play with rough voices: "aï ca, aï ca," "allez, allez" ("come on, come on") to motivate each other. At the same time, others laugh at the way their friends perform certain movements. From there, the group takes a road that crosses the campus and leads to the national road number 2, which connects Saint-Louis to Dakar. This road also leads to the urban center of Saint-Louis, Ngallèle, less than 7 km from the university.

At around 9am, the group of men dressed in orange vests begin the march. After checking traffic, one of them gives the signal to go ahead. The walk around the campus is set as usual: walking, chatting, taking photos, joking, some affirming their affinities with each other while others seem timid.[6] Among the topics of discussion are not only introductions and making contacts but also the trial of a member of the Senegalese opposition, Ousmane Sonko, which was to take place the following day.[7] After a few kilometers of walking, the group begins to swelter in the 32 degree Celsius heat. Along most of the route, the group does not meet many people, except security guards posted at the campus exit. Upon leaving campus, still under the guidance of the men in vests, the group of walkers takes the national road linking Senegal to Mauritania. The walk is now organized in lines along the road, one that does not offer enough space for pedestrians. The walk is now constantly punctuated by stops. The frequent passage of heavy vehicles prompts the men in vests to take the lead: advising people to "walk away from the road," stopping to wait for those who are behind the main group. We walk along, avoiding the tree branches and debris on the roadside, already quite busy with public works.

Following these moments of organization, a male voice suddenly rises, harmoniously intoning a poem named "xilass."[8] This poem is taken up by the whole group, who suddenly seem galvanized and invigorated. It is around these melodies, which follow one after the other, that the general atmosphere of the walk is defined. Along the walk to Ngallèle, the group does not go unnoticed. Here local residents pay attention to the walkers as they take possession of the public space. In most of the areas we pass through, the group immediately catches people's eyes, with a certain surprise at their attitude.

As the group progresses towards Ngallèle, the demand for water increases. The supply missions are carried out by men with backpacks that serve as storage space. They are members of the movement's social action committee, says my contact. The group's motivation to keep smiling and singing the praises of their marabout, Serigne Moustapha Sy, remains undiminished in this seemingly tired moment. One of the songs dedicated to him repeats the phrase "Jaarama jaarama jaarama seriñ Mustafa, Ku soxorul nila jaarama" ("Thank you, thank you, thank you Serigne Moustapha, those who aren't envious will say thank you"). As the song progresses, a succession of different tones are played, not exclusively dedicated to the guide "Serigne" but also in honor of his father Serigne Cheikh Tijaan Sy[9] and his grandfather Babacar Sy.[10] In this atmosphere, the arrival at Ngallèle seemed to surprise many. The vest-clad scouts search for a spot to take a break before setting off on their return journey. It takes a few minutes before the group

finally takes refuge under the shadow of the trees in front of the Ngallèle socio-educational center at around 11am for a moment of recuperation, breathing under divine melodies. In this musical ensemble, women's voices stood out along the route. Often adding to the enthusiasm, they set the mood by clapping their hands according to the rhythm of melodies in a very relaxed atmosphere.

After 10–15 minutes of rest, the men in vests announce that it is time to return. The walkers have all taken care to pick up any garbage on the spot, which the men in rucksacks collected before setting off. The return journey is almost identical. The only change in the itinerary is a stop at the soccer pitch in Sanar Wolof district, next to the campus. This stop, at around 1pm, marks the end of the physical side of this walk. Time to take a breath and release the pressure, followed by a session of stretching muscles and joking under the guidance of two men, one of them a member of the *dahira*'s health commission. He is accompanied by another who introduces himself as a student from the UFR SEFS (faculty of science of education, formation, and sports). He gives us a lecture on the benefits of sport for human well-being. The other followed in his footsteps to talk to us about the relationship between health and sport. He shares his concerns about the prevalence of diabetes and cardiovascular disease in the Saint-Louis region. He also takes the opportunity to raise awareness of our sugar and rice consumption habits, which, he says, puts us at enormous risk in view of our almost sedentary lifestyle. For him, a sedentary person is "anyone who doesn't exercise for more than an hour and a half per week." From there, he shares advice on how to better maintain our bodies through simple, practical activities such as walking, fitness, and so on. As he concludes, "it's these activities that allow us to eliminate harmful elements from the body." He is followed by another speaker who shares information such as the programming of a soccer tournament for men and handball for women, and preparations for the upcoming *Guddi Aljumua.*[11]

The event ends with a prayer session before a joyful, good-humored return to the social campus, where a collective lunch is scheduled. In a much more relaxed atmosphere, the walkers meet again at Village I.[12] During these moments of relaxation, Tijan songs give way to games of Ludo (a popular board game), photo sessions (Snapchat for the girls), musical entertainment, and above all, commentary on current political events. A meal of *mbaxalu saalum* reveals the exhaustion of some. Then, suddenly, in a group movement, several people rush towards a man chanting "happy birthday, happy birthday" over and over again. We understand from our interlocutor's explanations that he is the coordinator of the student movement.[13] During this moment of emotion, testimonials are made about him, especially his commitment to the cause of the *dahira* and the service that he is rendering.[14] He in turn gives thanks to his comrades, who were keen to share this moment of joy with him, before the group gradually dispersed, agreeing to meet again the following day for a training session, which takes place every Monday and Wednesday at 9pm and every Saturday at 5:30pm.

Around 3pm, my day of observing the students of GBU came to an end.

Analysis

This movement, in the way it displays itself in public, mobilizes its religious identity in an activity that enables it to put its community management policy into practice. Moreover, the latter is essential to the organization's image and reputation.

Showing Off with Style

We could immediately turn our attention to the choice of walking as an activity. In the daily life of brotherhoods, their different manifestations or religious activities are generally organized around conferences, *dahiras* (the structure around which brotherhood followers form a local community), *thiantes* (one of the forms of manifestation among Mourids), and the best-known such as the *Gamou* or the *Magal*, as the main channels of communication and public display. These two events are world-famous annual celebrations among Mouride and Tijjan of Senegal. However, if we look at the history of the Moustarchidine movement, we can see that this way of proceeding (walking

as a religious and sportive activity) is a form of its modernization process. This modernity is reflected in the dress code adopted by walkers. Even if the activity itself was a social gathering, it was also a moment of communion and symbiosis around religion. Sportswear, yes, but there were many references to the movement's identity structured around charismatic figures. Polos and T-shirts displayed the images of Moustapha, Serigne Cheikh Tijan, or Babacar Sy, but songs were also sung in their honor. These moments are lived in communion by the whole group, including the distinguished female voices and their traditional handclapping that adds a folkloric touch to the rhythm of the sounds performed.

We can also pay attention to the way the tour was organized. One might think that this movement would be tempted by separatist visions of men and women whose contact should only be sealed by the sacred links of marriage. The Moustarchidine movement has instead greatly contributed to deconstructing gender theories. The patriarchal organization of religious brotherhoods in Senegal automatically conditions them to restrict women's freedoms for religious reasons.[15] The DMWM, in its desire to rethink the traditional organization of brotherhoods, has shown considerable interest in the status of women in Islam. This interest has resulted in the production of a series of discourses revisiting Quranic texts to challenge the widespread idea that women were created from men. For many Muslims, this thesis justifies the idea that women are subject to male subordination. During one of his conferences in 2001, Serigne Moustapaha Sy explained that "the question of equality between men and women has already been settled by God, and it's the way in which it's translated that suggests this supposed male domination."[16] Women are highly regarded in the movement, and this is why International Women's Day is celebrated every year. It is important to remember that at the beginning this movement was essentially made up of granddaughters of the Sy family. They were the first to take up the cause and have held a privileged position ever since.

There is another point worth considering: the choice to make this walk from and outside the social campus is significant. The public space in its modern and urban structure is a place of social interaction. The passing group was the object of particular attention in the eyes of those who seemed impressed and intrigued to see a group of young people, with a certain fervor, singing the praises of their marabout under an intense sun. This strategic choice to legitimately occupy public space has been and continues to be the basis of many decisions by religious figures in their quest for social legitimacy. This first challenge of achieving existence and affirmation depends on the community of disciples that marabouts are able to form.

The Community Space of the Moustarchidines

If it is strategic to use sport as a channel of communication, we should also focus on the importance of this activity in federating a group. Indeed, I was surprised by the climate that prevailed at the meeting point where some members were not sufficiently integrated into the group spirit. Our contact pointed out that he did not know everyone in the group. We could see smaller groups forming on all sides. However, this dynamic was broken as soon as the walkers interpreted religious poems. In harmony, the group suddenly rediscovered a team spirit.

Between the trip to Ngallèle and the return, affinities were formed. We saw that this activity greatly facilitated the consolidation of links between students in the space of a morning. My interlocutor told me about a meeting he had with a young girl from the south who belongs to the Ballantes ethnic group. He magnified this setting that allowed them to constitute as a family in the strange space of university. The importance of showing off as a community is a certain demonstration of strength mixed with a form of family solidarity.

The surprise given to the coordinator of the movement on his birthday is a proof of the esteem in which this community holds itself. The approach adopted is in line with the movement's drive to modernize the confraternities, with the aim of turning the *dahira* into a second family space where disciples can easily discover

themselves. This is illustrated by the moments of sharing and conviviality at the end of the activity around a collective lunch. A number of ethnographic elements allow us to return to this moment, where the disciples reveal themselves in a relaxed atmosphere, each one focusing on his favorite activity such as the game of Ludo, photo sessions, and musical entertainment. However, beyond showing off as a group through a moment of consolidation, ensuring the group's longevity becomes a major issue. In this sense, they attach a great importance to raising awareness of social well-being.

Health and Well-Being at the Heart of Concerns

This sporting activity reflects an awareness of well-being, materialized by a health commission. Beyond inviting its members on an exclusive spiritual quest, taking care of followers' health is prioritized. The holding of a communication session on the benefits of sport in relation to eating habits is proof of a set of concerns cultivated among young people. Understanding health issues linked to diet (sugar, rice) is an act of raising awareness in the face of a danger the public faces every day.[17] To build on this set of priorities, the *dahira's* sports committee has drawn up a program of training sessions that take place several times a week.

As part of their dedication to well-being, the group of young Moustarchidines also showed respect for the environment. Given that the walk took place on a day when the temperature rose above 30 degrees Celsius, the demand for water was constant. But this water supply is also a source of waste production. This is where the movement's sense of organization comes into play once again. Before setting off for the return journey, a few men with plastic bags took charge of cleaning, recovering, and collecting the garbage, with the support of their partners. I took advantage of this moment to say to a member: "I didn't know you had any environmental concerns." He is visibly surprised by my level of ignorance of his movement. My interlocutor replies: "Life at the *dahira* is not strictly limited to religious affairs. Far from it, we are trained to embody lot of values, including respect for the environment and civic values." According to my interlocutor, "being a Moustarchid is to be both a disciple and a model citizen." He goes on to say: "For us, life within the *dahira* is designed to inculcate a set of values that enable us to embody a certain way of being a *talibé sheikh*." *Dahira's* space acts as a relay between the main structure and *talibés*, or students. At a time when global issues such as global warming, pollution, and waste management are the subject of debate, this movement aims to set an example in terms of environmental protection, a value they seem to incorporate into their actions during this moment of observation.

The Dahiratoul Moustarchidine Wal Moustarchidate as a Political Movement?

While this paper did not focus on the movement's involvement in politics, the context in which this work took place leaves us more sensitive to it. While observing and listening during this walk it was clear that the walkers were very preoccupied by the political situation, which is above all linked to the fate of the political opponent Ousmane Sonko. After the walk I talked to some members of the movement to get their take on the circumstances. One might ask, why are members of a religious organization so interested in politics? The simple answer is that they are ordinary citizens discussing the situation in their country. However, if we push our thinking a little further, we can say that following his election in 2012, the current president was fiercely opposed by Moustapha Sy, the guide of the Moustarchidines. This public stance by the religious leader seems to be proof of the crumbling barriers between religion and politics among the Moustarchidines. During these interviews, it became clear that religion is essentially linked to politics.

This connection between the temporal and the spiritual is, in fact, the principle on which the Moustarchidine movement is founded. According to this widely shared opinion among my interlocutors, politics is in principle concerned with a project for society, while religion is concerned with the perfection of man. If the man who is to establish this plan for society is not so virtuous as to

be just, then his plan can only be in his own image. This means that society cannot be built without honest men who fear God's punishment. In this light, the political commitment of religious figures becomes understandable.

Serigne Cheikh Tidiane Sy has distinguished himself in this respect since 1950, when he set up a political party called the Senegalese Solidarity Party (PSS). In 1998, the *dahira*'s political commitment materialized around the Party of Unity and Rally (PUR) founded in Dakar by Serigne Moustapha Sy. Although Moustapha Sy was not the candidate of the party at the last presidential elections, he remains its central figure.

By proposing an alternative socio-political project, the Moustarchidines differ from other religious organizations traditionally known in Senegal. This social project is a recurrent topic in the language of the Moustarchidines, in that it brings an innovative perspective to the religious sphere in Senegal. As one of the people I interviewed put it: "I think the Moustarchides' vision will bring to Senegalese politik bi gën bifi nekk; religion bi gën bifi nekk; benen Senegal bu bokkul ak biñou xam." ("I think the Moustarchides' vision will bring to Senegalese a better politics than the one we've always known, a better religion than the one we have, another Senegal different from the one we know.") These weighty declarations are proof of the desire for renewal embodied by this religious organization for the benefit of society, which they consider to be in perdition. Regarding the different points of view expressed by our interlocutors, religious leaders have a real interest in taking part in political activities. As far as the Dahiratoul Moustarchidine Wal Moustarchidate is concerned, with the political speeches held there, it is difficult to separate politics from the *dahira*, even if the PUR party is the vehicle.

At the end of these moments of presence, we see there are different ways religious brotherhoods can articulate a moment of occupying public place, such as in the example of the Moustarchidines's communal walk. This ethnographic descriptive study presents us with elements of analysis concerning models of presentation to the public, an approach that is not detached from existence and appearance. However, we should also note the central position of the disciple at the heart of the modernity of the brotherhood, encouraged by marabouts such as Serigne Moustapha Sy. As we have seen, this involves a diversification of styles of public display, for example, a sport activity with religious elements. The illustrative elements of this political vision of the movement begins with the choice of walking as a channel of exhibition. At the same time, the brotherhood is developing a policy to ensure community sustainability through health and well-being. This preoccupation is closely linked to the teaching of civic and ecological values to disciples, which they translate into their daily lives. The elaboration of a social project by the Moustarchidine movement reveals the political ambition of this religious organization, even when there are attempts to separate the *dahira* from the PUR party in order to separate political practices from religious ones.

Endnotes

1 Fabienne Samson, *Les marabouts de l'islam politique. Le Dahiratoul Moustarchidina Wal Moustarchidaty un mouvement néo-confrérique sénégalais (Paris: Karthala, 2005).*

2 The *dahira* were exclusively for members of the Sy family originally but responding to the context they later opened up to youth from outside the family. Léonardo A. Villalon, "The Moustarchidine of Senegal: The Family Politics of a Contemporary Tijan Movement," in *La Tijâniyya: Une confrérie musulmane à la conquête de l'Afrique* (Paris, Karthala, 2000). 476–496.

3 According to Olivier Roy and Christian Coulon, the term neo-conferric refers to "religious groups that claim to be Sufi organizations but 'recruit according to modern forms of religiosity (individualization, globalization), without always going through an initiatory process, as is the case within classical brotherhoods' (Roy 2002: 126–131; Coulon 2002: 23)." Reported by Fabienne Samson, "Les classifications en islam," *Cahier d'étude africaine, 2012.* 4.

4 The initial idea for this work was to make an observational survey of how the Dahiratoul Moustarchidne Wal Moustarchidate (DMWM), with their new approach to Sufi brotherhoods, established their occupation of space during one of their religious events such as the *dahira*. Considering that the *dahira*, a regular religious gathering of followers, was the most widespread channel of expression and the angle from which these movements were most studied, the approach would be a little less original for our purposes. In fact, this is what justifies the choice of walking as a time for research. With the DMWM, the activity was conducted according to the codes that frame the vision of Moustarchidines to promote their identity on the occasion of a public presence. In this case, we can enjoy a moment of observation and interaction with the group. In any objective research activity, the choice of methodology is a crucial step. In situ observation makes it easier to appreciate all the elements navigating around the movement. However, it is not enough to appreciate the elements of an observation and be satisfied with them, but we must go further in understanding certain behaviors, words, and facts with a view to better analyze them. To achieve this goal, interactions with the members who are active in the group is crucial.

5 MJ (Moustarchidine junior) refers to the Moustarchidine youth section. Serigne Moustapha Sy is the moral leader of the Moustarchidines Wal Moustarchidates movement. Like his father, he is involved in a system of social legitimization.

6 Affinities enable people who have already met to find their place in a group (they feel at ease). This is not the case for a person who has just joined a group into which he or she is being asked to integrate. This is why this person shows his or her timidity.

7 This field work is being carried out in a relatively turbulent political context, with the various court cases involving one of Senegal's opposition members, Ousmane Sonko, who enjoys a good reputation among many young people.

8 Poem written by Mame El Hadji Malick Sy about the life of the Prophet Mohammed "from the cradle to the grave." They say it is a poem that enhances spirituality, confided one member.

9 Cheikh Tijaan Sy is the spiritual leader of Dahiratoul Moustarchidines Wal Moustarchidate.

10 Serigne Babacar Sy is Cheikh Tijaan Sy's father and therefore Moustapha's grandfather. He was the first Khalif of El Hajj Malick Sy, founder of the Sy Tijaniyya.

11 Weekly meeting every Thursday evening.

12 "Village" is the name given to the housing blocks at GBU. The alphabet letter helps to distinguish them from one another, from village A to village Q.

13 In recent years, because of the influence of social media, birthday celebrations have become a trend among young people and, at some point, became a norm.

14 The local section of the student *dahira* is headed by a coordinator. He works in collaboration with committee chairmen, such as social, sports, scientific, women, and educational.

15 Penda Mbow, "The Context of the Reform of the Family Code of Senegal," *Revue internationale-interdisciplinaire Droit et Cultures* 59 (2010).

16 Conference by Serigne Moustapha Sy organized by "Synergie femme's association," Dakar, October 6, 2001. Available in two parts on YouTube: Part 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B75xUcwjEDg&t=90s
Part 2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8N8l5KXC9c

17 Gaec-Africa, "Journeys into our Love of Rice. Everyday Scenarios from Senegal," documentary film, 2021.

Gender in Sacred Places

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Lesbians in South Africa have been subjected to sexual, physical, and emotional violence. However, female sangomas (traditional healers) in same-sex relationships have been largely exempt from this treatment (Morgan and Reid 2003).[1] Because of widespread knowledge of the hostile environment that lesbian womxn live in, some scholars have begun to hypothesize that "the institution of the sangoma might have developed as a way for woman-identified women to find space for themselves outside of the patriarchy; at the very least, it presents to Africans a model of a respected community member who defines herself independently of men" (Morgan and Reid 2003: 381).[2] For Gort (1997), the institution of ubungoma (the practice of being a sangoma) is a site where disempowered womxn living in a patriarchal society exercise power and dominance, and thus a reason why women would tend to favor it. This view is supported by the fact that typically there are more female sangomas than there are male.

However, I maintain that these accounts overlook the fact that discussions of sangomas in same-sex relationships often do not use the logic and language of the sex/gender anatomical schema.[3] The language that is often employed to make sense of them is heteronormative and their relationships are not necessarily understood as homosexual. Therefore, I argue that as far as the sacred institution of ubungoma is concerned, a different register should be employed to account for the unique position that sangomas in same-sex couplings occupy. To make this argument, I look at the case of Nkunzi Nkabinde, born Zandile Nkabinde, to demonstrate the complexity that characterizes the institution of ubungoma in relation to same-sex relations among sangomas.

Abantu and Ubungoma[4]

The institution of ubungoma/ubugqirha has been extensively explored in anthropological work on African indigenous systems, but few scholars have explored the institution's potential for indigenous sex/gender theorization. However, using the biography of Nkabinde (2008), scholars such as Mkasi (2013), Nkabinde and Morgan (2005), Stobie (2011) and Van Klinken and Otu (2017) have begun to explore what insights lie dormant in this underexplored site. I focus on the institution of ubungoma as a site where we see the anatomical and the sacred interact in ways that Western dominant sex/gender frameworks and discourse have been unable to articulate and capture fully.

A sangoma is someone who has gone through the process of ukuthwasa, which is a form of spiritual training and initiation. Initiates must be "called" into the institution through their spirit guides (ancestors); they cannot join of their own accord (Magadla et al. 2021; Nkabinde and Morgan 2005). Sangomas are primarily concerned with diagnosing sickness and unwellness (spiritual as well as physical) and prescribing treatment. Tisani maintains that "[a]maXhosa have always distinguished between two forms of disease (or sickness) as encountered in the community. 'Ukugula' (illness) […] The second category of disease has been referred to as 'Ingulo' or 'Inkathazo' […] reference here was to the relationship the individual had with izinyanya (ancestors)" (1987: 65). For the latter condition, the likelihood that the said individual must go through a sangoma initiation ritual increases because their condition could be signaling a "calling."

The power and wisdom that sangomas possess that enables them to perform acts of divination is drawn from ancestors who are a powerful force in the cosmology of Abantu (Magadla et al. 2021). As Tisani indicates, "access into the presence of izinyanya [ancestors] is not available to all, but only to a few chosen and

anointed ones. The iinyanga [diviners] are such chosen and anointed people" (1987: 71)"author":[{"family":"Tisani","given":"Ezra V."}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["1987",6]]}}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} .

Transcending Gender and Sexuality

The institution of ubungoma is a productive site to witness the ways in which the logics of the sex/gender anatomical schema can be disrupted. The case of Nkabinde (2008), who is well known for being a lesbian sangoma, is a useful contemporary case study to consider.[5] Nkabinde was born in Soweto during the apartheid era. Born Zandile Nkabinde, he was assigned female at birth. Zandile was later named "Nkunzi" (black bull) after becoming a sangoma, adopting the name of his dominant ancestor, who is male. Every sangoma is possessed by multiple spirits or ancestors. However, among those ancestors, there will be a dominant one, and often some behavioral traits of the dominant ancestor will manifest in the subject whom they have possessed. At times this includes their sexual desires. For instance, studying sangomas in Swaziland, Gort was told by one of the respondents that "long ago there were many more female tangoma. The male tangoma were like females because female spirits possessed them. If you have a masculine spirit, you can behave like a man; if you have a feminine spirit, you behave like a woman" (1997: 299).

Zandile Nkabinde's dominant ancestor was Nkunzi, after whom he was named. In fact, saying Zandile was named "after" Nkunzi is misleading. When Nkunzi possesses Zandile, it is almost as if Zandile becomes Nkunzi. His power and dominance take over, and so do his sexual desires (Nkabinde 2008; Nkabinde and Morgan 2006; Van Klinken and Otu 2017). Nkabinde shares an experience that occurred during a ceremony that heralded the beginning of his training as a sangoma:

> I heard the sound of the drums beating and felt the rhythm in my body. Suddenly the snake that I saw at my aunt's house appeared between my legs and wrapped itself around me. They say that a powerful man's voice exploded out of my mouth. It was the voice of my ancestor Nkunzi saying that he had come to claim his bag of bones. From this moment, I took my ancestor's name as my own. (Nkabinde 2008: 51)

The passage above illustrates that upon possessing Nkabinde, Nkunzi claims him and his corporeal body as his own, hence the statement "he had come to claim his bag of bones." Nkabinde now becomes Nkunzi's vessel in the land of the living.

Nkabinde acknowledges that he was a tomboy in his youth and that he became even more masculine-presenting after answering the call to become a sangoma. He attributes this to the spirit of Nkunzi living within him (Nkabinde 2008). According to Van Klinken and Otu (2017), the spirit possession of Nkabinde by a male ancestor has had implications for his gender expression and spills over to the biological workings of his body. For instance, Nkabinde shares that "[s]ince I started to have the spirit of Nkunzi in me I hardly menstruate […] With Nkunzi I can stay up to a year without menstruating" (2008: 19). Thus, we see an instance where the sacred alters that which exists in the material world. Even though Zandile was born anatomically female with a womb, his possession by a male ancestor overrides his menstrual cycle. Zabus and Das articulate this phenomenon as "the female sangoma's body act[ing] as the conduit for the male dominant ancestor, who renders it passive through possession, thereby locating agency outside of the subject" (2021: 815). This places Nkabinde beyond sexual dimorphism (Zabus and Das 2021).

Van Klinken and Otu, drawing from Stobie's (2011) analysis of Nkabinde's biography, share their suspicion that Nkabinde could be using the site of the sacred to garner legitimacy for his lesbian sexuality in a society that perceives it as "a socially deviant sexual identity" (2017: 77). They make this claim based on how Nkabinde narrates his sexual encounters with womxn as being in service of Nkunzi's desires:

> Nkunzi loves women, especially young women. If I am with a woman of 21 or

> 22, normally Nkunzi will want to have sex with her. I feel his presence as if someone is touching my shoulders, and sometimes I see the legs and genitals of a man. This is one way he shows himself to me. (Nkabinde 2008: 68)

In the above quote, we witness an oscillation between Nkabinde attributing his sexual desires for womxn to Nkunzi, "Nkunzi loves women, especially young women." At times he claims his sexual desire for womxn as his own, "I have more power when Nkunzi is in me, especially when we desire the same woman" (Nkabinde 2008: 68). Here we see him acknowledging that while Nkunzi might be sexually attracted to womxn, he too might have independent desires.

It is striking that although the institution of ubungoma presents a complex arena that complicates Western cis-gendered heterosexual ways of thinking about subject formation, it is still predominantly made sense of using the grammar of heteronormativity. This is to say, we see instances where females that are possessed by male spirits sexually desire females, and males possessed by female spirits desire males. Spirits appear to mainly attract individuals of the opposite sex to themselves, thus making the coupling between the spirit and the desired individual heterosexual, notwithstanding the body that the spirit uses as its vessel.

Similarly, society makes sense of such couplings using the framework and language of heteronormativity. For instance, Morgan and Reid (2003) refer to female sangomas possessed by male spirits as social males. Zabus and Das, on the other hand, refer to them as "male women" (2021: 815). While they might be biologically female, they recognize themselves as male, and so does the broader society. They also quote Carlson, who studied sangomas among the Shona and maintains that "[t]he only way in traditional Shona culture to accept a woman wanting to be with another woman is if that woman is a traditional healer who has a male spirit medium. The female healer with a masculine ancestral spirit can properly argue that she shouldn't marry a man because she is now, in the most important sense, a man herself. The gender of her ancestral spirit outweighs her biological gender" (quoted in Morgan and Reid 2003: 378).

Riley (2021), on the other hand, shares an excerpt from an interview conducted by Makhosazana Xaba with a lesbian pastor, Zenzeni Zungu, that demonstrates the complex ways in which sangoma subjectivities are constructed. According to Zungu, "[t]here was only one man, a lesbian who was a sangoma, and everyone in society feared her, she had a family, and she would carry a walking stick and smoke, she would be accompanied by her child and her wife" (quoted in Riley 2021: 59). Riley acknowledges that the gender pronouns in the quote would have been absent in the original non-translated quote since Nguni languages do not have gender pronouns. Still, that the said individual is referred to as simultaneously a man, female, and lesbian speaks of a complexity that opens opportunities for theorizing (non)gender and sexuality in alternative ways (Riley 2021). Hammond-Tooke also writes about womxn diviners who are "permitted to carry a spear, a symbol of maleness," and that, "the few male diviners wear skirts" (Hammond-Tooke 1975: 32). Thus, if one were to read the diviners as a text, it would be a highly complex and ambiguous one that amalgamates both male and female symbols in a single subjectivity. Borrowing from Olaoluwa, ubungoma can be said to be

> a cultural category in which linguistic and spiritual interaction between humans, deities, and other non-human categories facilitates an order of symbolic [and material/physical] transgression of sexuality [and subject formation]. (2018: 26)

Sangomas occupy spaces and subjectivities that transgress and complicate normative ways of being and occupying the world, in part because the figure of the sangoma itself speaks to a nexus between the spiritual and physical world. Therefore, I maintain that if it is to be theorized and made sense of (in English), the figure of the sangoma demands a different English grammar.

On Heteronormalizing the Non-Heteronormative

The works of Matebeni (2022) and Emezi (2018) introduce and invoke categories that are beyond gender and are productive for thinking through the workings of how sangoma subjectivities are understood. Matebeni argues that gender ambivalence among the indigenous peoples of South Africa is captured in the concept of unongayindoda. Unongayindoda is a Nguni term which has been "popular among Nguni speaking people referring to masculine women or men-like women" (2022: 569). However, Nicholas Hlobo translates the term as "one who almost looks like a woman" (Matebeni 2022: 572). Unongayindoda is an ambivalent subjectivity that cannot be fixed or captured, it "is limitless and its shape malleable. The notion is both man and woman, male and female, subversive and normative, communal and individual" (Matebeni 2022: 574). Unongayindoda offers a productive conceptual category to grapple with the gender ambivalent spaces in which sangoma subjectivities are forged.

There is something to be said about human subjects who exist in a world of taxonomies and gender categorizations and share a vessel with spirits that complicate those very taxonomies. Emezi's work on the ogbanje, which is a spirit embodied in human flesh in the Igbo cosmology, is productive in helping us think through what it means for a spirit to be embodied. Emezi, who is an ogbanje, has undergone what is typically understood as gender affirming surgery to remove their breasts and womb to adjust their (fleshly) vessel to better accommodate the spirit. Grappling with questions of what it means to be an embodied spirit, Emezi asks,

> If *ogbanje* represent an overlapping of realities—a spirit who looks incredibly convincing as a human, then what does it look like for one to experience gender dysphoria and take surgical steps to resolve that? Our language around gender identity is often so Western, how can we intersect with non-Western realities? For example, is there a term for the dysphoria experienced by spirits who find themselves embodied in human form? It was inevitable that I'd be drawn to the overlaps, since I live there, inhabiting simultaneous realities that are usually considered mutually exclusive. (2018: n.p.)

In the above quote, Emezi speaks of a gender dysphoria that they experienced with the vessel they are embodied in, but simultaneously hints at a dysphoria with gender categorization itself because it is limited and thus cannot account for realities that stem from the spiritual realm. Emezi now identifies as "they"—neither man nor woman—and the surgical procedures performed on them attest to this ambivalence. This gender ambivalence echoes similarities to the case of the *hijras,* who are a spiritual community of individuals in India. Many were assigned male at birth and go on to transition to become neither male nor female, sometimes referred to as the "third gender." Zabus and Das (2021) share that the *hijra* of are often thought of as asexual. This is because the spiritual world and the sexual world of the carnal have historically been thought to be separate, with the *hijras* symbolizing the embodiment of the former. In contrast, (sexual) desire is one of the (multiple) ways that dominant spirits manifest their presence within a sangoma vessel as demonstrated in the case of Nkabinde.

Writing on the transgression of gender and sexuality that occurs in Ogu (an ethnic group in southwestern Nigeria) spirituality, Olaoluwa (2018) speaks of the linguistic shifts that occur when human subjects encounter non-human objects or spiritual objects. For instance, he speaks of the disruption of fixed gender barriers when humans interact with the supernatural; they are then referred to as wives (both male and female) to the dieties. This shift of referring to all humans as wives to the diety, who is a husband, linguistically heteronormalizes this spiritual encounter. Similarly, in the case of gender ambivalent sangomas (as a result of spirit possession), their subjectivities as spirit possessed beings render their bodies ambivalent to the sex/gender anatomical schema. To borrow Matabeni's language, they become ononganyindoda in that they are no longer womxn but not really men either.[6] Consequently, this neutrality heteronormatizes their non-heteronormative encounters both linguistically and socially.

Sangoma subjectivities that result from spirit possession are highly complex and cannot be fully captured through language because in many ways, they are otherworldly. However, the relative insulation that sangomas in same-sex relationships enjoy from homophobic violence and discrimination suggests that their subjectivities and relationships do not share the same space as homosexual subjectivities and encounters in society's discursive imaginary. Therefore, the theoretical and linguistic tools offered by Matabeni with unongayindoda and Emezi on the ogbanje offer us a productive site to begin to hypothesize on how these complex relationships of spirit embodiment ought to be made sense of and the language that ought to be used to articulate them.

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Endnotes

1 I will not be italicizing indigenous words from the languages of Abantu (of Southern Africa) because I want to emphasize that they are as central to my thinking and theorizing as English.

2 According to Black feminist scholar Kunz (2019: 2), womxn "is an intersectional concept that seeks to include transgender womxn, womxn of colour, and womxn of Third World countries."

3 Sylvia Wynter references two schemas of Western origin that have been historically used to categorize and order human beings. The first is the anatomical model of sexual differentiation, and the second is the physiognomic schema of race. Before the European expansion into the "New World," Wynter maintains that Europeans were primarily organized following the anatomical model of sexual differentiation (what I refer to as the sex/gender anatomical schema). Males were differentiated from females purely based on their reproductive organs. This ordering was perceived as divinely ordained by the Christian God, who put man above woman (Wynter 1990). Wynter also highlights how the physiognomic schema of race and the sex/gender anatomical schema have historically been mutually reinforcing in keeping Indigenous and Black people outside of the category of "human."

4 By "Abantu" I am referring to the Indigenous peoples of Southern Africa who during the Apartheid regime were classified as the "Bantu." These groups of people include amaMpondo, amaXhosa, amaZulu, amaSwati, Batswana, Basotho, BaPedi, VhaVenda, VaTsonga and many other Indigenous groups.

5 At the time of the publication of his biography in 2008, Nkabinde identified as lesbian. However, later Nkabinde transitioned and began to identify as a man. Therefore, although I demonstrate the complexity of Nkabinde's subjectivity throughout the article, I will refer to him using the gender pronoun "he," following his decision to transition and identify as a man.

6 This could also go the other way with a sangoma that, because of spirit possession, they are no longer a man but cannot be said to be a woman either.

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