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PROJECT

Muslim Men, Christian Women: An African History of Gender and Religious Coexistence

Why study Muslim-Christian relations in Africa? Over the past two decades, social historians, anthropologists, and scholars of religion have highlighted that histories of Muslim-Christian relations in Africa and Asia often differ significantly from those in Central and Western Europe and North America. My research focuses on the Yoruba of south-west Nigeria, where Muslims and Christians have coexisted largely peacefully for more than a century. It addresses the conceptual gap between the study of Muslim-Christian relations (usually explored through the lens of politics or communal history) and the study of everyday and gendered religious practice (typically explored within a single religious tradition) by focusing on the everyday relationships between Yoruba Muslims and Christians.

The key argument of my book is that gender is an anchor of Muslim-Christian relations among the Yoruba. Based on long-term collaborative and interdisciplinary research in Nigeria and previously neglected oral and Islamic sources, I highlight that nineteenth-century Yoruba men and women often followed diverse traditional religious practices. While men and women embraced Islam and Christianity differently, their roles were also transformed by the gendered conceptions that were part of Muslim and Christian practices. By the mid-twentieth century, men were more likely to be Muslims, and women more likely to embrace Christianity. As interfaith marriages became frequent, gender, marriage, and kinship shaped the mutual engagement of both religions.

While the Yoruba constitute an important case study of positive Muslim-Christian relations, twentieth-century Yoruba gender preferences for Islam and Christianity also reflect global patterns of religious engagement. I will therefore sharpen and expand my analysis through comparison with other African and Asian societies to refine the understanding of gender as a fulcrum of Muslim-Christian relations beyond south-west Nigeria. Insofar as such insights highlight the limits of European-centred approaches to religious difference, they also contribute to the emergence of a more global understanding of Muslim-Christian relations.

Recommended Reading

Nolte, Insa, Olukoya Ogen, and Rebecca Jones, eds. (2017). *Beyond Religious Tolerance: Muslim, Christian and Traditionalist Encounters in an African Town*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer / James Currey.

Nolte, Insa (2019). "The Future of African Studies: What We Can Do to Keep Africa at the Heart of Our Research." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 31, no. 3: 296–313.

– (2020). "'At Least I Am Married': Muslim-Christian Marriage and Gender in Southwest Nigeria." In *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 28, no. 2: 434–450.

The Politics of Religious Difference: Gender Relations, Òrìsà Religion, and Conversion to Islam in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland

Yoruba Muslims and Christians in present-day southwest Nigeria have lived in close interaction with each other since the early twentieth century, and frequently intermarry. The foundations for this coexistence were laid in the nineteenth century, when Yoruba speakers began to convert from the worship of “traditional” òrìsà deities to Islam. In the Oyo empire, the largest Yoruba-speaking polity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, marriage was central to social and political reproduction. Unlike in Europe, it was not primarily conceived as a union of men and women from the same or similar backgrounds, but as an institution that linked individuals and their extended families across social and religious boundaries. In everyday life, wives joined their husbands’ communities and actively contributed to them by bringing new trade links, artisan skills, or forms of worship with them. For this reason, wives were not expected to follow the same religion as their husbands.

By the early nineteenth century, the success of Islamic revolutions in the north and west of the Yoruba region contributed to the rise of conflict, which continued after the 1835/6 destruction of the Oyo empire. In the context of warfare and enslavement, a growing number of male Yoruba speakers adopted Islam, and many converts relied on shared religion to found communities that resembled and transformed kinship-based forms of community. Many Muslim men married women from non-Muslim families, who either did not convert or had very little Islamic education. Such traditions were legitimized by Islamic traditions privileging wifely support and motherhood over education. While this limited women’s access to Islamic education, it also allowed women to pursue social and political roles that mediated between social and religious boundaries. More broadly, the gendered differences in religious practice allowed Muslims and non-Muslims to coexist in new, cosmopolitan form of urbanity, which also prepared the ground for the Christian mission.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Nolte, Insa (New York, NY, Oxford, 2020)

'At least I am married' : Muslim–Christian marriage and gender in southwest Nigeria

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1811015417>

Nolte, Insa (Leiden, 2019)

Introduction to learning to be Muslim in West Africa ; Islamic engagements with diversity and difference

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1811148506>

Nolte, Insa (London, 2019)

The future of African Studies : what we can do to keep Africa at the heart of our research

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Nolte, Insa (Edinburgh, 2018)

Inter-religious relations in Yorubaland, Nigeria : corpus methods and anthropological survey data

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Nolte, Insa (Leiden, Boston, 2018)

Imitation and creativity in the establishment of Islam in Oyo

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1811138268>

Nolte, Insa (2017)

Introduction

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1817220659>

Nolte, Insa (Austin, TX, 2017)

Views from the shoreline : community, trade and religion in coastal Yorubaland and the western Niger delta

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1817220411>

Yoruba Studies Review ; 2017

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1817220411>

Nolte, Insa (Oxford [u.a.] Wiley-Blackwell, 2017)

New histories of marriage and politics in Africa

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Nolte, Insa (London [u.a.], 2017)

From ethnographic knowledge to anthropological intelligence : an anthropologist in the office of strategic services in Second World War Africa

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Nolte, Insa (Woodbridge, 2017)

Beyond religious tolerance : Muslim, Christian and traditionalist encounters in an African town

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Religion in Transforming Africa

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