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RADICAL OTHERS AND ETHICAL SELVES

Religion in African journalism

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Introduction

Although virtually ignored by the general scholarship on African news media, religion is a pervasive influence on African journalism. Religion is both subject and object of news stories, that is, religious activities and authorities are frequent topics of news stories while religious identities frame the very perspectives of journalists as they write on any and all topics. In this chapter, I give an overview of African journalism, highlighting religious aspects, then pursue two case studies on the intersections of religion and journalism in Africa: one case study on the representation of Boko Haram in Nigeria and the other on the representation of Islamic communities in Ghana.

African journalism: political renaissance and religious fervor

Since the democratic renaissance of the 1990s, the journalism scene in most African countries has burgeoned into lively and contentious public spheres of news, critical commentary and debate (Hasty 2005, Nyamnjoh 2005). Walking down the main streets of African capitals, you will inevitably encounter the little wooden kiosks where newspapers are sold, the papers hung in a colorful spectrum of bright mastheads, sensational headlines and provocative photos. On weekday mornings at busy intersections, you will often see small crowds gathered in front of these kiosks, scanning the headlines and commenting on the breaking news of the day. Though print circulation tends to be fairly low, print journalism still drives the news circuit, breaking the stories that are later picked up by radio and Internet news organizations. In Ghana, where I have worked as a journalist, newspaper headlines are read out on many morning radio shows and discussed on radio and television talk shows, including the very popular call-in programs.

In most African contexts, news media is divided between a state media apparatus (inherited from colonial rule) and private media organizations, often owned by economic or political elites. State media, including newspapers, radio, television and sometimes even film studios, tends to emphasize themes of development, citizenship, unity and peace; while private media focus more on corruption, scandals, conflicts and political critique. The public interest orientation of African development journalism practiced in the state media provides
African governments with a means of communicating their agendas and accomplishments, often resulting in blatant propaganda. Development journalism can function to promote peace and public safety in times of crisis, however, particularly during and after contentious elections. The oppositional journalism practiced by many private newspapers has worked as a tool of democracy and accountability, broadening the field of political representation and exposing the misdeeds of public officials. Private media in many African countries have been responsible for publishing sensational allegations based on anonymous sources and rumor, resulting in a constant stream of libel suits against them. Some worry, too, that the divisive and polarizing rhetoric of many private newspapers undermines national cohesion and stability.

The general literature on African journalism has had very little to say about the representation or influence of religion on African news production, texts or audiences. Instead, this literature is preoccupied with the twin political themes of democracy and development (Fair 1989, Ibelema 2008). Most books in this field trace the history of the press in Africa, journalism ethics in African contexts (Kasoma 1994), press-government relations (Asante 1996, Jeyifo 2016) and cultural practices of production (Bourgault 1995, Ansu-Kyeremeh 2005). Since the 1970s, many works traced the anti-colonial activism of the private press into struggles against authoritarian rule (Hachten 1971, Ziegler and Asante 1992, Monga 1996). Historical works sometimes do note the Christian identities of many early journalists and newspaper owners but have not pursued the ramifications of that identity to the production of news in Africa.

While the book-length scholarship on African journalism overlooks religion, African journalism scholars who specialize in specific conflicts have devoted substantial attention to religious representation and conflict, particularly involving Islam. Nigerian scholars have been particularly active in this field. Akinro and Zeng, for instance, show how national newspapers framed and reframed the outbreak of Christian-Muslim violence in the Nigerian city of Jos in the early 2000s, a conflict that resulted in over 4,000 deaths (Akinro and Zeng 2017). A large number of studies of Boko Haram examine media representations and appropriations of this militarized conflict (Asogwa, Iyere and Attah 2012, Ekwueme and Obayi 2012, Popoola 2012, Okoro and Odoemalam 2013, Ayoola and Olaosun 2014). Examining text and photographic coverage of Boko Haram in Nigeria, for example, Ojebuyi and Salawu (2018) conclude that Nigerian editors tend to show ethical restraint in their selection of photos to depict the crisis, in an effort to avoid moral panic.

However, religion is not just relevant to journalism in situations of conflict. Even in times of tranquility among religious groups, African journalism is profoundly shaped by religious themes, motivations, ethics, and affiliations. In Southern Ghana, where I worked in the 1990s and early 2000s, the majority of journalists ardently professed their commitment to Christian values, frequently tying their religious ethics to their professional obligation to fairness and truth by reciting Bible chapters and recalling the sermons of their favorite popular pastors. Many newspapers ran motivational Christian columns such as the Salt and Light by former Minister of Information Joyce Aryee. Many of my Ghanaian colleagues at oppositional newspapers were born-again evangelicals, they embrace a more activist form of Christianity infusing their investigative pursuits of social justice. Some journalists have suggested to me that Ghana’s reputation for peace and stability is largely due to the religiosity of most Ghanaians.

Beginning in the 1820s, protestant missionaries flooded the area that become the Gold Coast, a British colony (Meyer 1999, Miller 2003). Methodist and Presbyterian missions were extraordinarily successful in building large congregations in the South of Ghana. More recently, Pentecostal and evangelical forms of Christianity have become wildly popular, often
focusing on the prosperity gospel, a belief that Jesus will reward his faithful servants with health, wealth, fertility and social success (Guazon 2015). Hundreds of these new churches have emerged, centered around the teachings, prophecies and healing powers of charismatic pastors. In the context of economic liberalization, many Ghanaians have been attracted to the promises of these churches to provide the economic opportunities and business success associated with Ghana’s growing economy.

The texts of Ghanaian newspapers bear out this evangelical fervor. Stories on the provocative exhortations of popular pastors frequently adorn the front pages of the private press as well as stories of sexual predation and financial mismanagement among the evangelical clergy. While providing the publicity essential to building the popularity of many celebrity pastors, the Ghanaian news media has recently become much more critical of the newer churches. Over the past year, newspapers have given prominent coverage to court cases involving Christian ministers accused of molesting children or fondling their female parishioners, sometimes in the context of prayer or healing rituals (Razak 2018, Ghana News Agency 2018b, Ghana News Agency 2018c). In a spectacular case emerging last November, the famous Daniel Obinim was charged with assault for publicly whipping two teenagers accused of extramarital sex (Daily Guide 2016). Other cases given attention in the press include cases of fraud, such as Pastor Joel Amenu, founder of Faith Embassy Ministry, accused of duping traders, artisans, hotel operators, schools and even other churches in schemes to provide soft loans, vehicle leases, and scholarships (Opoku 2017). While much of this critical coverage is aimed at corrupt pastors, some journalists argue that prosperity-hungry parishioners are also to blame for the widespread problem of religious fraud:

…they can’t be bothered if the pastor is proven to be a Satanist. God does not matter. They are in church for a miracle, a prophecy, for visa or for a child.

(Ashon 2018)

As if to balance this critique, another genre of religious representation, common to both state and private news media, comprises reports on the magnanimous donations of churches to schools, orphanages, women’s groups and other civil society groups. For instance, “Divine Intervention Prayer Centre Donates to Orphanage” (Ghana News Agency 2018a) describes how the center gave the orphans “biscuits, mini-bags of rice, edible oil, bathing and washing soap, assorted drinks, and an undisclosed amount of money” in order to “put smiles on their faces during the festive season” (Ghana News Agency 2018a, 1). While here a prayer center is the generous benefactor, in most donation stories it’s either state institutions or prominent businesses who are portrayed as gift-givers, thus such stories of church donation position religious organizations as sources of material patronage alongside the state and business elites. Indeed, a more recent story reports how a Pentecostal church donated assorted items including furniture and a photocopier to a local police station in order “to help position them properly in their resolve to deal with crime and ensure law and order” (Awuah 2018). In this case, the church has become patron to the state.

Thus, Christian institutions, beliefs, and practices are considered central to social life in southern Ghana, reflected in the form and substance of Ghanaian journalism. Therefore, it is curious indeed that mainstream scholarship on African news media pays so little attention to religion. Possibly African journalism scholars have been influenced by Western models that position news media in the secular realm of economics and politics, compartmentalized from the realm of religion. Habermas argues, for instance, that news media were originally developed by a rising capitalist class to construct a rational sphere of public debate in opposition

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to religious authority and feudal elites, forms of power associated with devotion and fealty (Habermas 1991). However, news media in many African contexts, including Ghana, were originally developed in the same time period many Africans were undergoing conversion to Christianity, in the missionizing period of the 19th century. Developing in tandem as powerful social forces, religion and journalism have always been deeply intertwined in many African societies.

**Christianity and Islam in African public spheres**

Oddly enough, it is the Habermasian notion of the public sphere that has inspired recognition of the importance of religion in African public life, that is, the very same concept that originally separated the two realms of religion and political economy is now deployed to undermine the distinction between the two (Meyer and Moors 2006). Societies do not produce singular realms of rational discourse, but rather multiple public spheres animated as much by belief, devotion and desire as by rationality. In the early 2000s, a field of enquiry began to develop exploring the role of religion in the constitution of public spheres, particularly via media forms, both old and new. Many scholars of African religion have contributed to this scholarly boom, with studies on the role of media in religious identity-formation and community in such contexts as Mali, South Africa, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Nigeria.

For instance, in her ethnographic work on Islamic religiosity in Mali, Schulz has shown how media forms can become “pathways” of spiritual renewal, providing a means of articulating and sharing religious experience. As radio discussions and video cassettes come to play a more central role in public religious debates, women are coming to assume more prominent roles in definitions of Muslim piety (Schulz 2012).

The broader community of scholarship on religion and media is well represented in Hackett and Soares’ recent edited volume, *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa* (Hackett and Soares 2015). Contributors to this volume illustrate the diversity of ways that religious leaders and activists appropriate new media technologies to revitalize and expand their communities while advertising their agendas and accomplishments. Such media engagement often works to transform religious movements from within, changing the very nature of religious experience through processes of mass mediation.

For instance, Zappa’s examination of Islamic bookshops in Mali (2015) illustrates how print media works to both standardize Muslim religiosity while pluralizing religious language and doctrinal interpretations. Zappa shows how a genre of catechism-like Muslim pamphlets spread a kind of generic Islam, promoting a simple set of uncontroversial beliefs and practices. On the other hand, publications in French and Bambara challenge the linguistic dominance of Arabic, opening up spheres of religious discourse to a wider range of writers and readers. Likewise, Larkin’s study of Muslim reformist cleric Sheikh Abubakar Gumi (2015) argues that Gumi’s reformist message of egalitarianism and rational argumentation was actualized in his own strategic use of media technologies such as print, radio and videocassette recording. Using radio to amplify his reformist messages, Gumi relied on the reasoned listening of radio audiences, the historical association of radio with rationality and pluralism in Northern Nigeria.

This process of transformation works both ways as religious themes can change the nature of media engagement. Pype (2015) explores how Pentecostal Christianity shapes fictional melodrama in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In one such television program, *The Heart of Man*, two sophisticated, urban women are motivated by jealousy to use secret occult rituals to inflict harm on their romantic rival. When one of these witches becomes blind, she
is forced to confess her sins to an evangelical pastor who grants her forgiveness and chases the demons from her body. Pyper describes a kind of haptic visuality whereby viewers can become bewitched or healed by engagement with media forms infused with such religious content.

Studies in this field have foregrounded the importance of new media forms such as satellite television, the Internet and social media (although the not-so-new genre of film receives plenty of attention). African journalism tends to be overlooked in this discourse. Despite an entire section devoted to older media forms (print and radio) in Hackett and Soares (2015) volume, none of the articles explored the role of journalism and newspapers in African religious communities. The one article on print media is Zappa’s study of religious pamphlets in Mali, discussed above. While mentioned in passing in several chapters, print journalism remains unexamined.

**Media and religious pluralism**

At the level of the individual situated in a religious community, people generally practice either Christianity or Islam, not both. Likewise, people who study religious communities in Africa tend to focus either on Christianity or on Islam. When studying how religious communities make use of media, then, studies tend to take a separatist approach, examining media forms designed for and consumed by a particular Christian or Islamic community. Less attention is paid to the role of religious beliefs and practices in larger national public spheres. So, for instance, scholars of African Christianity have recently explored the development of Christian radio stations (Gratz 2011, Damome 2012), the constitution of religious communities on Facebook (Gachau 2016) and the role of various churches in press-mediated controversies such as homosexuality in Uganda (Ward 2015). Focusing on Islam, scholars have been interested in orientalist representation of Muslims (Baderoon 1999, 2009, 2010), the construction of charismatic authority (Schulz 2015) and the communication of radical ideologies via social media (Chiluwa and Adegoke 2013, Chiluwa and Ajiboye 2014).

Nevertheless, in many, if not most, parts of Africa, Christians and Muslims live alongside one another, interacting in everyday activities such as business, civil society, and politics. How do different religious communities understand one another? How do they distinguish themselves and characterize others? What might seemingly diametrical religious forms have in common?

A more recent strand of the scholarship on media and religion in Africa has taken a comparative approach among religious communities. Noting similarities in emergent forms of evangelical Christianity and fundamentalist Islam, these scholars press for the examination of the role of media in Muslim-Christian relations and the dynamics of religious pluralism in African societies (Larkin and Meyer 2006). As Soares remarks,

> Among historians, social scientists, and scholars of religion, there has been increased recognition of the importance of studying Islam and Christianity in Africa not separately but together, as lived religions in dynamic interaction over time.
>(Soares 2016, 673)

Meyer argues, “the point is to identify mediating categories...in which Muslims and Christians coexist” (Meyer 2016, 630). What African Islam and African Christianity have in common, among other things, is strategic and competitive use of media forms to galvanize
community and gain new converts. Print media, radio, television drama and film are key tools used by religious communities to represent (and misrepresent) self and other. The following two case studies illustrate particular forms of religious coexistence in the way Islam is portrayed in the Christian dominated mediascapes of Nigeria and Ghana.

African news media and Islam – two case studies

Christians and Muslims are entwined in historically complex, power-laden relations in national contexts the world over. In two case studies, I explore two ways how Islam is represented in West African public spheres dominated by Christianity. First, I examine the frame of militarized conflict emerging in Nigerian coverage of the religious radicalism of violent dissident groups such as Boko Haram. Then, I look at the more routine, everyday coverage of Muslim communities in the national press in Ghana, tracing the ways that Muslims are positioned as subjects in (harmonious but subordinate) relation to the state.

Boko Haram and the frame of terror

Since 2009, the militant Islamic group known as Boko Haram has waged a campaign of terror across northeastern Nigeria, attacking Nigerian villages, churches, mosques, markets, schools and security forces. Boko Haram opposes Western education and the modern nation-state, seeking to establish an Islamic caliphate instead. In this sense, Boko Haram may seem to resemble other global forms of militant Islam such as Al Qaeda and ISIS (or Islamic State). However, Boko Haram is not some kind of Al Qaeda outpost, rather the local product of historical patterns of dissent and endemic factionalism within northern Nigerian Islam, processes with deep historical roots (Azumah 2014). Separatist strains of Islamic practice were popularized by reformers such as Uthman dan Fodio in the early 19th century and have played a prominent role in Northern Nigerian public life ever since.

Although Boko Haram is a complex movement with historical and political roots, media coverage tends to brand it as a terrorist form of religious fundamentalism, emphasizing its militant, insurgent and violent elements. Osisanwo (2016) is a very good example of this approach. In his content analysis of news stories in four Nigerian newspapers, Osisanwo identifies 13 representational strategies used in the representation of Boko Haram. Those strategies include the depiction of Boko Haram as insurgents, militants, attackers, religious fundamentalists, killers, gunmen, criminals, abductors, political gangsters, miscreants, bombers, affiliates of Al-qaeda and wasters/damagers. Osisanwo identifies 20 discourse strategies, including labelling, condemning and controlling audience knowledge, used by journalists to convey these representational strategies.

Osisanwo’s analysis is one of many studies using content analysis to document the frames and styles of Boko Haram coverage in the Nigerian news media (Okoro and Odoemalam 2013, Nwabueze and Ekwughe 2014, Akinro 2016). Meticulously executed, these studies form a foundation upon which we might further explore the reasons and consequences of this kind of coverage. As Boko Haram is positioned as a violent and irrational Other, reduced to a global (foreign) form of religious fanaticism, local historical causes and political claims are largely ignored. Why do Nigerian journalists overlook the local social and historical tensions that gave rise to Boko Haram? Why are the substantial ideological perspectives and political demands of this complex movement almost totally eclipsed by frames of radicalism and terror? These questions suggest a pressing array of topics for future research by scholars of African news media. Beyond content analysis, scholars might analyze ideologies.
and practices of newsmaking as well as newsroom dynamics that might contribute to the stereotypical and ahistorical depictions of Boko Haram.

Indeed, coverage of sectarian conflict may generate multiple, contradictory frames. Baderoon examined coverage of a 1998 mass murder in South Africa by local and foreign news media (Baderoon 2002). While CNN coverage referred to the label militant Islam to frame the murders, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) framed the incident as a gang-related killing. Baderoon points out that the image of the killer as a masked man, his face wrapped in a scarf, drew from popular representations of Muslims as inscrutable and unknowable. She argues that masked and veiled images of Muslims contribute to stereotypical representations of Muslims as violent, threatening, and exotic Others in global and national media. News media thus cover Islam rather than explaining and elucidating the complexity of news events involving Muslims. She argues for a more complex and varied portrayal of diverse Islamic communities, rather than the constant reproduction of this stereotype.

Likewise, Adebayo (2017) identifies the tendency of the Nigerian press to report on sectarian issues in a warlike, and divisive style. He describes how the press developed its vociferous attitude in the anticolonial struggles of the early 20th century. In the postcolonial period, Nigerian news media have channeled their political enthusiasms into their coverage of sectarian and regional conflicts, becoming a tool for ethnicity and bigotry and fueling intranational conflicts. In an effort to address the problems of this divisive reporting style, Adebayo advocates for a form of conflict-sensitive journalism education emphasizing the responsibility of the journalist to promote peaceful and inclusive social messages (Adebayo 2016a, Adebayo 2016b). In his repeated calls for peace journalism, he frames Islamic communities among the several ethnic and geopolitical factions in Nigerian society, arguing that journalists should strive to unite rather than divide rivaling groups of the nation-state.

**Ghanaian Muslims and the frame of national piety**

Adeboyo’s recommendations are reminiscent of the style of journalism practiced in state media organizations in Ghana. As I learned on the job, journalists for *Daily Graphic* and *Ghana News Agency* are charged with framing everyday news events in peaceful and inclusive social messages as an element of the distinctive house style of *Daily Graphic* and *Ghana News Agency*. Foregrounding the public pronouncements of government officials and the accomplishments of the government, state media journalists see it as their vocation to promote the unity and prosperity of the nation-state, avoiding irresponsible coverage that might foment dissent or violence. Critics point out, however, that this form of public interest media or development journalism amounts to state propaganda, providing a platform for the state to establish and maintain its political hegemony while marginalizing alternative and oppositional voices. The state press tends to gloss over real social divisions, obscuring the complaints and demands of minority groups.

How do Muslim communities figure into this style of journalism? Rather than focusing on a particular conflict or event, I attempt to discover how Muslim groups are represented and narratively positioned in everyday coverage in the state press, including the full diversity of cultural and political stories involving Muslim communities. To that end, I conducted a content analysis of news articles involving Muslim actors and communities in the pages of the most widely circulated newspaper in Ghana, the state newspaper *Daily Graphic*.

*Daily Graphic* is Ghana’s most widely read newspaper. Originally, a state-owned tool of propaganda, the paper is now only partially owned by the state and formally insulated from state control. A much thicker paper with stories on a diversity of topics and communities,
*Daily Graphic* maintains its place in the Ghanaian mediascape is the most professional and well respected among the daily newspapers. For my sample, I conducted a series of searches of *Graphic Online* (Graphic.com.gh), aiming at retrieving as many stories involving Islam and Muslims as possible. Using the search terms *Islam*, *Muslim*, *Muslims*, *Imam* and *Zongo*, I collected 274 articles, ranging in dates from October 2012 to May 2018 (roughly a 5½ period).

As my interest was to discover the predominant themes in the coverage of Muslim communities in Ghana, I grouped the stories into categories according to the main event depicted in the story, often foregrounded in the lead. I created categories to separate the stories involving Muslims in other African countries and other world contexts from those involving Muslim communities in Ghana. Thus, my analysis focused on the coverage of Ghanaian Muslims. The initial results were revealing, as the diagram below demonstrates (Table 17.1).

The vast majority of stories involve the depiction of Muslim holy days and events, benevolent acts such as donation or development, and uplifting messages to and from Muslims. News stories on Christian-Muslim relations and feature stories on Muslim culture and lifestyle are also predominantly positive in tone. Summed up, this sort of coverage comprises 213 of the 274 stories (77.7%). In contrast, only 16 stories (5.8%) portray acts of conflict, crime or danger to society.

Based on this strong result, we might be tempted to argue that Muslim communities are quite well represented in *Daily Graphic*. Aziz conducted a similar content analysis of the representation of Islam in *Daily Graphic* and *Daily Guide*. Likewise, Aziz finds the theme of violence to be marginal, with only 4.1% of stories referring to Muslims engaged in acts of violence. Out of 172 stories in *Daily Graphic* and *Daily Guide* (a private newspaper), the majority of stories (64.5%) were categorized as neutral in tone. “All news items that were written by Ghanaians were mostly positive issues like charity/donations and religious issues like celebration of religious festivals” (Aziz 2015, ix).

Building on Aziz’s path breaking analysis, my own study takes a more critical look at stories categorized as positive or neutral. Delving into the categories, the seemingly positive coverage of Islam in Ghanaian newspapers is complicated by the problematic positioning of Muslims as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category: predominant theme of story</th>
<th>Number of stories</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslim holy days and events</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benevolent acts for Muslim communities</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Donations to Muslim communities)</td>
<td>(25)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Development for Muslim communities)</td>
<td>(32)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Messages</td>
<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>(From Muslims)</td>
<td>(34)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(From Non-Muslims)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>World news</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim culture and lifestyle</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict, crime, and danger</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian-Muslim relations</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa news</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership issues</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zongo stories (misc.)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>274</strong></td>
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</tbody>
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targets of state tutelage and aid in so many of the stories in almost every category. Space here will only allow for brief discussion of four of these categories: Muslim holy days and events, benevolent acts, messages, and the catch-all negative category of conflict, crime and danger.

**Muslim holy days and events**

Like other state media, *Daily Graphic* routinely announces annual Muslim holy days such as Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha as well as the beginning of Ramadan and other religious and cultural events. Often, stories describe the significance of the day and the forms of observance associated with it. These stories seem intended to de-exoticize Islamic beliefs and practices by explaining them in the context of Islamic doctrine. Stories on Ramadan, for instance, describe how and why Muslims fast and what meanings they impute to Ramadan, highlighting the moral and ethical aspects of Islamic piety. A 2013 story, “Muslims Begin Ramadan,” observes that Ramadan “teaches Muslims how to better practise self-discipline and self-control and sacrifice and show empathy for those who are less fortunate, thereby encouraging generosity and compulsion” (Obour 2013, 1). Likewise, a 2014 editorial on the end of Ramadan remarks: “It is our hope that they will bring the renewal they have gained during the Ramadan fast to bear on nationbuilding during these trying times in Ghana” (*Daily Graphic* 2014, 1).

Evident in the above editorial, stories on holy days are often framed in a message to the Muslim community by representatives of the state. On 27 June 2017, President Akufo-Addo spoke to an audience of Muslims at the Eid-ul-Fitr celebration at Independence Square in the capital city Accra. A quote from the president formed the basis of the headline: “Don’t Allow Ideologues to Pervert Islam – President tells Muslims” (Syme 2017). In his speech, the president further elaborated on what Adebayo might call his peaceful and inclusive social message: “Describing Ghana as a nation where people of different faiths lived together in peace and harmony, the President urged Ghanaians to cherish that long-standing bond existing among them and use it as a basis for advancing the cause of the country” (2017, 1).

*Daily Graphic* thereby takes the opportunity of holy days to remind Muslims of their ethical commitments to national unity and development, subordinating Muslim identity to national citizenship. The tone is indeed positive; but such stories position Muslims as a potentially divisive group subject to the strong and patient tutelage of the state.

**Benevolent acts for Muslim communities**

After holy days, the next most common subject is benevolence to Muslim communities in the form of donations or development projects. Political figures, business elites and civil society groups are portrayed in acts of prestation (the anthropological term for gift giving) to Muslims in various neighborhoods and districts throughout the country. A smaller number of donations are presented to Islamic leaders such as the National Chief Imam, presumably for distribution to the less fortunate. Though only one story (of 25) refers to needy Muslims, the routine positioning of Muslim communities as recipients of donation (never as donors) would seem to suggest that Muslims as a whole are poor and in need of material support. Typical gifts include bags of rice, cooking oil, sugar and soap – all everyday necessities, indicating that these donations are intended to relieve extreme poverty. Frequently, a color photograph depicts donor and recipient, both smiling in a posed handshake, surrounded by the plenty of donated goods. Many of these donations are timed to mark Muslim holy days and most of them incorporate public messages exhorting Muslims to be peaceful and
hardworking. In one story, the benefactor urged Muslims to pray for peace in the country and maintain their holiness.

Stories on development typically portray a government official or donor representative launching a project for a Muslim community, such as a new school building, a water borehole or a community center. Stories in this period also include pronouncements and discussion of Akufo-Addo’s Zongo Development Fund, a special government fund aimed at enhancing infrastructural development and tackling the deprived nature of the predominantly Muslim zongo communities in many cities and towns in central and southern Ghana. As with donation stories, development stories position Muslims as passive targets of support from state and civic authorities.

Messages from Muslim and non-Muslim authorities

Stories in this category highlight the public pronouncements of politicians and Muslim leaders. By the standards of Western journalism, such pronouncements would not always seem newsworthy. In Ghana, however, the public comments of authority figures are taken very seriously, comprising an entire genre of news coverage in the state press. Privileging the perspectives and agendas of elites, this speech act journalism reinforces elite authority and supports the status quo ordering of social groups. Politicians and Muslim leaders continually advise Muslim communities to avoid sectarian conflict and be loyal to the nation-state. In one example from January 2016, the Chief of Ejura warned Zongo youth in his area “to be wary of politicians who will use them for their selfish interests,” advising Muslim leaders to “ensure peace and stability in the country” (Barimah 2016, 1). Muslim leaders are also depicted addressing their own communities, exhorting Muslims to respect the lives and properties of non-Muslims by maintaining their pious commitments to “obedience, submission, and peaceful co-existence” (Jasmine 2013, 1). Thus, represented as naive and vulnerable to political or radical exploitation, Muslims appear in need of the ethical tutelage of elites, whether Muslim leaders or state officials.

As mentioned in discussion of previous categories, messages encouraging Muslims to be peaceful and diligent citizens often adorn stories of holy days and benevolent acts as well as constituting this category of stand-alone stories. Thus, the vast majority of stories about Muslims contain these subordinating messages of national piety.

Conflict, crime and danger

Perhaps most surprising in this content analysis is the paucity of stories on conflict, crime and danger. Moreover, the negative tone of such stories is often attenuated by the peaceful efforts of Muslim authorities or the seemingly frivolous nature of the conflict. In several stories, the National Chief Imam is shown as mediator of the conflict and advocate of peaceful solutions. In the town of Tafo, for instance, a group of Muslim youth attacked local traditional authorities who tore down a wall the youth were building around the Muslim section of the cemetery. Graphic reports how the National Chief Imam met with both parties to settle the dispute. In another story, the Imam urged dialogue in a clash between two sects, both wanting to worship at the same mosque in Tema.

The seriousness of these crimes and conflicts varies considerably. One story reports on an elderly Muslim cleric accused of sexually molesting two boys, quite a serious allegation, while another story describes how a local Imam was accused of drinking an extraordinary amount of Coco-cola on his visit to the Minister of Parliament. Another story describes a dispute between Muslims and the West African Examinations Council over the wearing of
veils by students sitting for national exams. While a serious consideration for pious Muslims, this conflict has not resulted in violence in Ghana.

Two factors might condition the small number of negative stories involving Muslims. First, the content analysis here excludes stories about Muslims in other African countries or in world contexts in order to focus on the representation of Ghanaian Muslims in Ghanaian news media. The vast majority of stories involving Muslims in world contexts and other African countries are negative stories involving war and terror attacks and attempts by various countries to deal with these forms of violence. Factoring those stories into the category of Conflict, Crime, and Danger, the number rises from 16 (5.8%) to 40 stories (14.6%) of the 274 total stories in the sample. This is a significant increase and lends some support to the notion that Muslims are stereotypically associated with violence in the media.

Second, while national news stories about Muslims rarely involve violence, many stories in Daily Graphic document various political and ethnic conflicts in primarily Muslim communities in the Northern part of Ghana. These stories do not identify the conflicts in terms of religious difference but as the conflicts occur in the northern, Muslim-dominated part of the country, they do tend to support the stereotypical association of Muslims with violent sectarian conflict. As stories of northern conflicts do not usually incorporate specific references to Islam or Muslims, they are not included in my sample; though such stories most certainly color the representation of Muslims in national news media.

Preliminary conclusions

A brief comment on historical context is necessary to interpret these results. Islam originally spread into what is now northern Ghana by Sahelian traders and scholars in the 15th century (Bari 2009). Annexed into the British colony of the Gold Coast in 1902, the Northern Territories were by then a predominantly Muslim area. While the British encouraged Christian missionaries to establish schools and hospitals throughout southern Ghana, colonial authorities disallowed the spread of mission institutions into the North, fearing Christian-Muslim conflict. Rather, the North was cultivated a labor reserve, deprived of colonial investment so as to force Northerners to migrate south to work in the gold mines and cocoa plantations so vital to the extractive colonial economy. Settling in Southern towns and cities, Muslim migrants formed zongos, predominantly Muslim communities of workers and traders. In the postcolonial period, Northerners have been continually marginalized by national politics and development initiatives. Through these historical processes, Southerners came to view Northerners through a frame of poverty and religious difference, Muslim exotics in distinctive regions and communities not quite integrated into the nation-state.

Daily Graphic is a national newspaper with historical ties to the state, published and largely circulated in the south of the country. For its Christian-dominated audience, the newspaper seems to be fashioning a narrative of Muslim national inclusion while still reproducing stereotypes of poverty and difference. As a mode of national incorporation, Muslims are mainly represented as objects of tutelage and aid, needy recipients of state, donor, and corporate patronage. With Christian audiences as witnesses, the paper exhorts Ghanaian Muslims to overcome their difference and poverty to join in the national struggle for unity and development. Stories in every category address Muslims as ethical citizens, with messages urging peace and loyalty to the nation-state as an aspect of Muslim piety.

In sum, this distinctive portrayal of Muslim communities is rooted in the historical (colonial and postcolonial) underdevelopment and political marginalization of the North, home of Ghana’s Muslim-majority communities. While certainly an improvement on
themes of violence and national threat, this recurring frame represents Muslims as passive subjects interpolated into the patronage of the state, rather than active, political subjects actively engaged in contest over their political and economic subordination.

Contribution

The two case studies above demonstrate how Muslims are viewed alternatively through the lens of conflict (in Nigerian coverage of Boko Haram) and the lens of national development (in Ghanian state press). Comparison of these two modes of representation disrupts the monolithic critique of orientalism in the African press, suggesting instead that the portrayal of Islam in national spheres is profoundly conditioned by specific socio-historically positioning of Muslim groups in African contexts. The comparison cannot be reduced to an opposition between negative and positive portrayals, however. Even when emphasizing themes of harmony and national unity, Muslims are stigmatized as needy and potentially disruptive, positioned in news stories as targets of national aid and tutelage. Ghanian media scholars such as Aziz and Musah (both 2018, personal communications) are critical of the stereotypes that govern the portrayal of Muslims in Ghanian media. As Aziz notes, Ghanian journalists are quick to include the modifier Muslim to violent acts even when the religious affiliation of the perpetrators is unclear or irrelevant. Musah points out that the relentless coverage of the public pronouncements of the Chief Imam do little to educate the public about the practice of Islam in Ghana and the social complexities facing Muslim communities.

Taken together, the above case studies of Islam in Nigerian and Ghanian new media illustrate the implicit bias of Christian hegemony in West African journalism as messages of conflict and peace both represent Muslim groups as subordinated Others. Such tropes of Othering serve to objectify and marginalize Muslims rather than representing the diverse identities, histories, and agendas of Muslim communities in West African national contexts. Orientalism is not a singular lens for framing Muslim communities, but multiple techniques of representation implicitly shaping the stories of non-Muslim journalists.

Conclusion and future of the field

As discussed earlier, the trend of current scholarship on religion and media in general emphasizes a comparative approach to contemporary forms of Christianity and Islam. More and more scholars are interested in the common uses of media among those two groups as well as ways that Christians and Muslims interact in mass mediated encounters, how those interactions reinforce and/or undermine stereotypes. I would predict that journalism scholars would take a similar turn away from a focus on singular communities and focus more broadly on the depiction and enactment of relations among Christian, Muslim and indigenous African religious communities. I would also argue for the importance of qualitative methods such as interviewing and participant-observation in order to answer questions about the dynamics of the various strategies of news production as well as patterns of reception among audiences.

Further readings


In this edited volume, contributors blur the boundary distinguishing the secular and the sacred by demonstrating how mass mediated public spheres in Africa are suffused with religious beliefs
Radical others and ethical selves in African journalism

and practices. Geographically and conceptually wide-ranging, this collection of essays shows how media forms serve to constitute and energize religious communities while also fomenting religious contention and conflict. In three sections, the book covers older media forms such as print and radio, newer media such as web, text, and film, and, finally, contexts of religious pluralism played out in documentaries, music, and television.

Meyer, B. and Moors, A., 2006. Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Emerging from a conference in Amsterdam in 2001, this collection of essays explores the contemporary proliferation of mass-mediated forms of religion in contexts the world over. Contributors demonstrate how changes wrought by globalization and the weakening of the state have shaped the way religion is expressed and realized in various media forms. Section one shows how media serve to construct new religious publics, while the second section further illustrates how those publics become entangled in politicized competition and conflict with other groups. The third and last section of the book identifies media contexts in which religion is consumed as a form of entertainment, blurring the boundaries of devotion and leisure.

Schulz, D., 2012. Muslims and New Media in West Africa. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. This book is an ethnography of Islam and media in Mali. Schulz shows how movements of Islamic moral renewal in the southern part of the country use media forms to construct new forms of religious authority and subjectivity while allowing for the development of innovative forms of public engagement. Looking at the liberalization of radio and the proliferation of cassette sermons, Schulz explores how Muslim women experience religion through various media forms, challenging religious authority by placing media texts in the contexts of their own lives.

References

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