City of gods and goods
Exploring religious pluralism in the neoliberal city

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Introduction
Religions are booming in the fast-growing megacity of Lagos. This dynamism has a multitude of sources and must be understood within the religious, political, socio-economic interactions, and developments in Nigeria, in Africa more widely, and globally. In a religiously pluralistic country such as Nigeria, religions are shaped and transformed by each other by borrowing, adapting, and rejecting practices and ideas. Given increased religious hostility in Nigeria, and intense political crisis, religious pluralism is often studied in relation to politics, within the frames of ‘conflict’ or ‘tolerance.’ Yet, while religious tension is an important and escalating aspect of the Nigerian reality, this limited view obscures the multiple ways of engagement. The study of effective religious pluralism needs alternative analytical frames (Nolte and Ogen 2017; Soares 2016), and this chapter is a contribution in this respect.

The patterns of borrowing, adapting, and influencing between the three major religions are strong and complex in Nigeria. Not coincidentally, the new reform movements that have been at work within Islam and Christianity—Pentecostalism and Salafi-inspired movements—since the late 1980s share many important characteristics. These movements are critical of local adaptations of their own religion, and both are transnational in orientation and institution (Larkin and Meyer 2006). Meanwhile, the stunning growth of Pentecostalism is often attributed to its close resemblance to the spiritual worldview and practice found in indigenous religion. As for traditional religions, Olupuna’s remarks about the Yoruba örìsà tradition are indicative:

Although indigenous örìsà traditions have vigorously infiltrated Islam and Christianity, the örìsà traditions have co-opted Islamic and Christian frameworks and interpretive models to make sense of their own plausible structures. Although unacknowledged, these religious worldviews and belief systems have benefited from each other.

(Olupuna 2011, p. 12)

Among the new emergences in the twenty-first century, new Muslim prayer groups such as NASFAT have been labeled ‘Pentecostal Islam’ due to the many similarities between both
religious movements, although observers have also located NASFAT within broader currents shaping global Islam (Obadare 2016). In sum, influences go in many directions.

While Islam and Christianity in Nigeria have been transnational since their beginning in Nigeria, there is currently a revival of a traditional religious process underway, most prominent abroad, and in the Americas particularly (Adogame 2010; Olupuna and Rey 2008; Peel 2016). Paradoxically, while the Yoruba indigenous religion is known for its openness to other religious and cultural traditions, its dissemination and growth outside of Nigeria has intensified a search for authenticity and pure forms of indigenous devotion (Peel 2016, p. 227). The transatlantic slave trade first brought Yoruba religious cultures to countries such as Haiti, Brazil, Cuba, and the United States. However, the current revival and search for authenticity, as described by Peel, has led devotees traveling from the ‘New World’ to Nigeria to learn from Nigerian religious authorities, while Nigerian Yoruba specialists have traveled to offer their services and knowledge to revitalized communities abroad. This renewed interest abroad also influences the quest for religious knowledge in Nigeria.

As for the new reform movements within Islam and Christianity, they have been particularly vocal in their fear of ‘pollution’ or ‘corruption’ of the ‘pure faith,’ but given this new search for authenticity within the Yoruba religion, Peel argues that ‘a war against syncretism appears to be the ordre du jour across the religious field’ (Peel 2016, p. 227), in spite of the transactions that are effectively occurring. Paradoxically, perhaps, while claims to exclusive worldviews and universalism might be thriving, in practice, in Lagos today, there are multiple convergences and compromises between the different traditions.

This chapter draws attention to one often overlooked factor in the study of religions in Nigeria. We focus on the economic, neoliberal character of the cities, characterized by minimal government regulation, widespread privatization, and mismanagement. It argues that this context is important in shaping religious transformation today and proves a stimulating frame for the analysis of religious pluralism.

The Lagosian government is largely distant from most people’s daily life. For many, basic welfare such as water sanitation or electricity must be purchased on the private market (Oyegoke, Adeyemi and Sojobi 2012). Despite advances in areas such as waste collection and personal income taxation, the large-scale urbanization rate coupled with the welfare program tear down typical neoliberal policies mismanagement, and corruption has left the government crippled. In Lagos, the state’s capacity to provide jobs or maintain social services remains low in a city beset with extreme income inequality and poverty (Onuoha 2013). Due to insufficient tax administration, and a large informal work force, many Lagosians are more likely to pay religious tithes, zakat—religious offerings—than personal income tax. The role of alternative networks becomes particularly salient in a megacity where many have left old kinships and families for possible better opportunities in a cosmopolitan urban setting.

Much of the scholarly gaze on religion continues to have the nation-state as its frame, while, as argued for by the editors of this volume, the market is becoming more and more important for how we structure our lives (Gauthier 2020; Martikainen and Gauthier 2013). The process of marketization, as they phrase it, is a two-way process involving consumerism as the dominant social and cultural ethos of today on the one side, and the effects of neoliberalism and its loose set of free-market ideologies and policies on the other (Gauthier 2018, p. 389). Following these authors, this chapter considers that understanding this new political and economic reality is key to grasping the religious transformations of today. Gauthier sums up these transformations with the image of religion moving out of the former ‘churched-religion’ model, of religion ‘moving out of its box,’ as expressive,
experience-based, charismatic, personalized, and identity-oriented brands of religion seek to cater for the need for self-realization, identity, status, community, socialization, health, and wealth (Gauthier 2018, p. 403).

Contextualizing Lagos, religion, and the economy

Nigeria, including the megacity of Lagos, has undergone dramatic political, economic, demographic, and religious changes in the last decades. Democracy was reinstalled in 1999 after a long period of at times very brutal military regimes. In the new democratic Nigeria, already fragile state institutions were further eroded. Neoliberal policies opened up the media and the economy to new actors and closed opportunities for others. The withdrawal of the state has been accompanied by a proliferation of religious movements (Meagher 2009; Onuoha 2013). This added to a religious landscape modeled by the 1970s and 1980s reform movements within Islam and Christianity. Both of these trends have coalesced to challenge established (Muslim and mainline Christian) religious authorities and have carved a space largely outside, or alongside, the state.

According to the Nigerian constitution, the state shall not adopt any religion. Yet in practice, the state, the law, the government, and its policies are filled with religion, particularly Islam and Christianity (Laguda 2013). The last decades have seen an increased politicization of religion, as well as a ‘religionization of politics’ (Adogame 2010). Religious rhetoric, institutions, and leaders are often part of national politics. Increased insecurity, including religious conflict, verbal and physical, has accentuated the role of religion in the public sphere.

In Lagos, it feels like religion is everywhere. It is the Pentecostals that dominate the public sphere, as their flyers, posters, music, and churches are omnipresent. Non-Pentecostals must, as aptly put by Obadare, ‘act within a culture whose soundtrack is increasingly Christian Charismatic’ (Obadare 2016, p. 77). While Pentecostals might be the loudest and most visible religious movement, they are far from alone. Myriad Christian dominations, from independent African churches to Jehovah’s Witnesses, as well as Muslim movements and African traditional religions, co-exist visibly in the city. Lagosians are known for their entrepreneurial spirit, not just in business and culture but also in the religious domain. It is probably no coincidence that this is the city were ‘Chrislam’ has emerged, an as yet small new religious movement that sees Christianity and Islam as inclusive rather than exclusive religions (Janson 2016).

Studying religious pluralism in the city

Urban centres around the globe can be identified as places of religious innovation and growth (Becci, Burchardt and Casanova 2013). Religion is not something distinct from the city and the context; it evolves as part of the urban social and political economy. The multiple links between neoliberal capitalism, governance, and Pentecostalism have been frequently discussed in the literature (Freeman 2012; Meyer 2007, 2010), yet similar trends can be identified in other religious traditions. Rather than diminishing the role of religion, the effects of economic and cultural globalization, combined with the political effects of neoliberal policies, have coincided with a renewed religious visibility and new relations between religion, the state, and society (Gauthier 2018, p. 390). Similarly, ‘religion’ itself has seen profound transformations within this new social environment. While it is fruitful to cast these transformations against this backdrop, it is misleading to cast religion in market terms

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and talk for example of a free religious market (Gauthier 2020; Gauthier and Martikainen 2013). The religious landscape is by no means ‘free’ of regulation in this sense, but rather shaped by not only state-originated regulations but also the normativities inherent in the neoliberal megacity and the specifics of the Lagosian and Nigerian cultures.

Religious institutions, old and new, are important economic actors in Lagos. They are employers, land and property owners, they own businesses and are major actors in the private welfare sector, education in particular. In this domain, the Muslim and Christian traditions far dominate indigenous religions. Indigenous religions, however, are emerging as important economic actors which, as in the Eyo Festival studies in this chapter, generate revenues—financial and cultural—and act as a much needed cultural symbol for the city all year round (Adogame 2010). In Lagos, religion as a whole is a fundamental resource and an important social, economic, and political actor.

The aim of this chapter is to address a lacuna within research on religious pluralism in Nigeria by examining three major different religious traditions within the same analytical frame. Compared to research on Pentecostalism, that on other religious traditions and mainline Christian denominations is lagging behind (Soares 2016). The research on religion in Lagos and neighboring Yorubaland is dominated by research on Christianity, and in more recent years on Pentecostalism. There has been important work on the Yoruba religion (Olupuna and Rey 2008) and on the compatibility between mainline Christianity and indigenous religions, but less on Islam in the southern regions of Nigeria. Few studies explore cases of all three major religions, notwithstanding some important exceptions (Adogame 2010; Peel 2016).

The present study is less concerned with differences and similarities between religions as it is with connections and resemblances. It connects emerging religious trends to the wider political, economic, and social context of contemporary Lagos understood as a neoliberal city, characterized by a weak state and feeble state regulation in religious affairs. The chapter examines three sites of religious revival in Lagos: 1) the Pentecostal Redemption Camp; 2) the Muslim NASFAT prayer camp; and 3) the indigenous Eyo Festival. The three sites are important in their own right, but they represent larger trends within Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religions in Nigeria that this chapter wishes to bring to the fore and inform the wider objectives of this volume as concerns religion in global society.

Religious revival and remaking in Lagos

Urbanization is happening on a large scale in many African countries, but no other city has attracted as many people as Lagos. Numbers are notoriously difficult to assess, but the megacity probably hosts 20 million inhabitants, and it is growing every day. It is the country’s economic hub, as well as a multi-cultural and multi-religious melting pot. While situated in the predominantly Yoruba southwest geographical region, Lagos attracts people from all over Nigeria, as well as from abroad.

When the British annexed Lagos in 1861, the city (and the larger Yoruba region) already had a multi-religious environment dominated by traditional religions as well as Islam (Peel 2016, pp. 219–220, 130). With the colonizers came the missionaries, and with them a Christian infrastructure of education, churches, and welfare institutions. Just as with Islam, it took time before Lagosians converted, and it was not until the 1920s or 1930s that large segments of the population converted to Christianity. By 1950, the two world religions combined claimed about 90% of the Yoruba region in Nigeria, almost equally divided among them.

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Yet, despite the hostility and pressure coming from Islam and Christianity, traditional Yoruba religions continued to be practiced and celebrated. For long, traditional religions had a prominent position, often regarded as a broker between the main religions due to their ethos of religious tolerance. This position was challenged in the late 1970s, partly because of the rise of Pentecostalism and different variations of Salafi Islam that actively and aggressively attacked indigenous religious symbols and practices (Peel 2016, pp. 220–222). For them, there could be no compromise with traditional religions, and to be a good Christian or a good Muslim meant rejecting traditional practices and beliefs.

There are occurrences of religious hostility in Lagos, such as the contestation for public space between Muslim and Christians in the university arenas, or quarrels over ‘noise pollution’ during religious celebrations (Lende 2015, pp. 133–135). However, compared to other areas of Nigeria, particularly the Middle Belt and the North, there is limited religious tension in the city. As such, Lagos is more similar to the Yoruba town Ede, southwest of Lagos, where religious difference is appreciated as a value in itself by its inhabitants confirming ‘the town’s cosmopolitanism, attractiveness and complexity, conferring status both on the community in itself as a whole and on its individual members’ (Nolte and Ogen 2017, p. 6). Diversity in Lagos can be said to be a source of pride. People from different religions visit each other on public holidays and may socialize peacefully within families, among friends, in the neighborhoods, in the workplace, and through intermarriages. It is noteworthy that two of the most prominent political actors in Lagos since the installment of democracy, the two former governors of Lagos State, Bola Ahmed Tinubu (1999–2007) and Babatunde Raji Fashola (2007–2015), were both Muslim men married to Christian women, Oluremi Tinubu and Abimbola Fashola. While the heads of the dominant Muslim and Christian movements are antagonistic towards traditional religions, it is not uncommon for Lagosians to have multiple identities and make use of resources from different religions.

Living in a multi-religious setting like Lagos, the lived experience of religious pluralism affects how religion is practiced. Importantly, these religions thrive in the same physical location, yet with different privileges and restrictions. What follows sketches some of the characteristics of the current religious remaking and revival as experienced in Lagos today.

Christianity: The Redemption Camp

The Pentecostal appropriation of the city involves both the public space and the public conversation, i.e., the broader public sphere (Adeboye 2006). Olufunke Adeboye has explored how Lagosian Pentecostals in the 1990s turned formerly secular spaces such as cinemas and shopping malls into religious spaces. This form of public appropriation on the part of Pentecostals has since reached a new level with the establishment of prayer camps and religious cities on the outskirts of Lagos (Ukah 2014).

Prayer camps have been built along the busy Lagos-Ibadan highway for the last thirty years. The pioneer and the largest of them is the Redemption Camp, which hosts the headquarters of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), one of the major Pentecostal churches in Nigeria and the world. The Redemption Camp boasts to host half a million people during their monthly Friday Holy Ghost meetings, attracting large crowds of people, cars, motorbikes, and buses for long evenings and nights of prayers, miracles, preaching, and singing. The camp is the largest privately owned property in Nigeria and is much more than a site of religious ritual and preaching (Ukah 2016). It has emerged as somewhat of an alternative to the city itself; surrounded by walls, it has houses and apartments for sale, schools and universities. It has established cooperation with several
commercial companies who are allowed to sell their goods at the camp, be it for daily use or special occasions. Redemption Camp is therefore a church, a city, a market, a franchise as well as a political body. It commonly acts as a VIP stage for politicians (Obadare 2006; Onuoha 2013, p. 212). RCCG and the wider Pentecostal movement are known for their spiritual and material focus, as exemplified by its ‘health and wealth’ prosperity gospel. While it started as a pious revival movement with anti-materialist and apolitical orientations, the Pentecostal movement has evolved into an ultra-successful promoter of entrepreneurship in economic and spiritual matters, and its reach today extends well beyond the walls of the ‘church’ per se.

The commercial dimensions of Pentecostalism have been widely accounted for in the literature, as has been its quest for public dominance (Adeboye 2012; Ukah 2008). With increasing participants (more than adherents, as belonging is increasingly elective rather than exclusive and explicit), growing institutions, and heightened presence in the public sphere, the RCCG, like other Pentecostal churches, has sought political influence (Marshall 2009). Given the nationwide growth of Pentecostalism and RCCG’s central position within this movement, no aspiring politician can do without a visit to Redemption Camp (Obadare 2006). It is politicians that need the support of the Pentecostal churches rather than the other way around, and namely their financial support, their networks as well as the moral legitimacy that they provide. As newcomers to the religious scene, Pentecostals take the context of dwindling state power seriously. They therefore locate power in and focus their attention on the economic, educational, and media spheres particularly, as a way to gather political influence and rival the state (Lende 2015). The close alliance between the Churches and the state is beneficial for the Pentecostals, as it can lead to political and economic privileges such as representation, tax exemptions, and building permits.

Islam: NASFAT Prayer camps

Not far from Redemption Camp, along the busy Lagos-Ibadan Expressway where several of the major Pentecostal Churches have built large arena-style buildings, a Muslim movement, the Nasrul-Lahi-L-Fatih society of Nigeria (NASFAT) has purchased a major plot with ambitions to build an Islamic version of Redemption Camp. NASFAT was first established in Lagos among the Yoruba ethnic group in 1995 before it spread to the rest of Nigeria, and boasts a growing international appeal (Adetona 2012). Since the start of the twenty-first century, NASFAT has become a popular movement among urban Nigerians, known for its focus on social, economic, and spiritual development (Adeniyi 2013; Adetona 2012; Obadare 2016; Ogunbile 2012; Peel 2016; Soares 2009). NASFAT became well known to Lagosians in 2001, when thousands of its members took to the highway following its weekly Asalatu prayers, creating huge traffic problems and amid extensive media coverage. Lagosians are used to traffic congestion due to religious services, but this was the first time a non-Pentecostal group created chaos on the Lagos-Ibadan highway. According to NASFAT sources, it was a planned performance which aimed at increasing the public visibility of Islam in an urban context where many Muslims feel the public sphere has become too ‘Christianized’ (Obadare 2016).

While NASFAT has its origins in Lagos, the group has spread to other urban centers across Nigeria. NASFAT represents a new direction in Nigerian Islam, and its emergence is often understood in response to the Pentecostal surge (Obadare 2016). However, one could also understand the movement as a Muslim response to the social, economic, and political realities of neoliberal urban life. NASFAT similarly target the urban middle and upper
classes, aiming to inspire its followers to live a successful life, both materially as well as spiritually. NASFAT has established primary schools as well as a university and is engaged in a score of economic enterprises, such as halal business companies, Tafsan (i.e., sharia-friendly) Tours and Travels, and Tafsan (non-alcoholic) beverages (Adetona 2012; Obadare 2016). Tafsan Tours and Travels is a growing business in an expanding pilgrimage sector. According to their publicity, their objective is to ‘arrange Haji and Umrah travels and rites in such manners as to confer comfort and spiritual fulfilment on our pilgrims, devoid of the stress and hindrances usually associated with such operations’ (www.tafsantoursandtravels.com/). While Islamic finance and the halal market in Nigeria are not as developed as in other Muslim regions (Abdullahi 2017), NASFAT has emerged as one of the protagonists in this growing economic market. NASFAT may therefore be a vivid example of the African acculturation of what scholars have called the new ‘Market Islam’ (Gauthier 2018).

NASFAT places a strong focus on prayer and on the individual’s capacity to change his or her life for the better, spiritually as well as materially, as does Pentecostalism. NASFAT also represents a democratization—or pluralization—of religious authority, as services and functions are not necessarily led by theologically trained religious virtuosi. Rather, there is a corps of ‘Missionaries,’ young and educated individuals, who, while not being necessary well versed in Arabic and the Quran, are present to guide individuals. As Adetona argues, NASFAT aims to empower the individuals to take charge: ‘once a devotee can recite or perform the prescribed recipes and litanies, he becomes his own therapist’ (Adetona 2012, p. 105). The ceremonies are eventful, emotional, participatory, and experiential. A strong emphasis is put on prayer, which forms the core of popular all-night events. Prayers tend to be longer and more fervent than in the usual Muslim ceremony. There is an emphasis on a cosmic battle against the forces of ‘evil’ and the occult. NASFAT ceremonies also integrate personal testimonies and prayer requests from individuals, again on the Pentecostal mode (Obadare 2016, pp. 85–86). Attendees at NASFAT events can also be members of other Muslim religious societies, as belonging is elective and inclusive. It defines itself as a prayer movement, not as a distinct movement requiring exclusive membership (Ogungbile 2012).

NASFAT has had a proactive attitude with respect to the political sphere. Several of its members are prominent politicians and business leaders, and members work actively to influence politics (Obadare 2016, p. 84). NASFAT encourages its attendees to participate in politics, which also includes a call for women to get involved (The Guardian 2018). NASFAT has over the years engaged in communal projects together with non-Muslim partners, such as an initiative together with UNICEF from 2019 to eradicate child abuse in Nigeria, and worked on women’s rights with a North American NGO (Cartercenter.org. 2018). In the Nigerian Muslim setting, NASFAT has a Yoruba, reformist, modern, charismatic, yet pious outlook with a strong focus on individual morality and ethics.

**African traditional religions: the Eyo Festival**

As with Islam and Christianity, African traditional religions in Nigeria have undergone changes in face of the new political, economic, and religious context of globalization (Adogame 2010; Hackett 1998; Olupunla and Rey 2008). African traditional or indigenous religions are a category encompassing a wide variety of local ethnic-based religion. In spite of these differences, there is as Adogame argues, common ideas, rituals, and world views in the various local religions that constitutes a ‘distinctively indigenous pattern of religious thought and action’ (Adogame 2010, p. 480). Despite a decline in central practices and belief systems, the last decades have also witnessed signs of increased visibility and a new
appreciation of certain traditional symbols and practices. One example is the many festivals held throughout the country, often as commemoration of local deities. The festivals are supported financially by private businesses and local communities, as well as by the municipality. They have also become internationalized, namely through the globalization of indigenous religion, migration, and tourism (Adogame 2010, p. 496).

Isale-Eko, or Lagos Island, is part of the main commercial area of the city. This is where the biggest banks and financial institutions are situated, and it has major markets and residential areas. It hosts the palace of the traditional ruler, the king, known as the Oba of Lagos State. The best known festival in Isale-Eko is the Adamu-Orisa play, popularly known as the Eyo Festival. It is the Oba of Lagos that announces the festival. It is called for on special occasions, such as if a new king is to be coronated or the ‘Lagos @ 50’ celebrations which took place in 2017. During the Eyo Festival, Isale-Eko is closed to traffic to allow for the white-clad masquerades to fill the streets.

The festival can be understood as both a festival and a ritual. The many rituals—sacrifices, propitiations, and consultations—form part of the more explicit religious elements, and are performed by a small group. The public masquerade, meanwhile, which is largely believed to more cultural then religious, attracts big crowds (Fosudo and Babatode 2017). By attracting local and national tourists, the Eyo Festival becomes important not just as a celebration of the history of Lagos but also as a notable source of income for the local business community (Emmanuel 2014). Political elites participate in the festival and the municipality itself takes part in the festivities. The Eyo Festival, particularly images of the white-clad masquerades, are prominently used in various advertisements for Lagos. Throughout Nigeria, politicians are keen to boost festivals, which are understood as being both effective resources for nation-building and purveyors of income through tourism (Chidozie and Ayibainewoufini 2014; Emmanuel 2014). It is significant that the ‘religious’ component of the festival is downplayed in favor of a cultural connotation. In this sense, indigenous religions function as an overarching civil religion which facilitates the cohabitation between Islam and Christianity (Olupuna 2011).

In Nigeria, as in most African countries, traditional religions are not officially recognized as a religion and thus lack the rights and privileges that come with recognition (Hackett 2011). Focusing on the cultural and historical dimensions rather than on the explicit religious dimensions is an effective way to gain legitimacy and visibility within the public sphere and the culture at large. The Eyo Festival in Lagos may therefore be seen as a cultural festival that honors the city, its inhabitants, and its history rather than a religious event. The process to delegitimize and de-sacralize African traditional religions has long historical roots. By rebranding the Eyo Festival as cultural and downplaying the religious dimensions of the ancestor worship that is at the heart of the festival’s traditional make-up, traditional Yoruba religion becomes safe and compatible with Islam and Christianity in the opinions of the vast majority (Peel 2016, p. 222). Thus when Lagosian Christians and Muslim visit and participate in the Eyo Festival they can claim to do it as part of their culture rather than seeing it as participating in a religious gathering. As Peel writes: ‘In recent years a highly reified concept of culture has been used to present the annual festivals of major patronal deities as cultural festivals, celebrations for the community and its history rather than as religion’ (Peel 2016, p. 222). Similarly, writing about the Yakurr festivals in the south-eastern Cross River State, Williams argues that the festivals have been transformed since many of the participants ‘no longer hold sacred the meanings, nor the socio-religious values, attached to them’ (Williams 2012, p. 149). Yet, its symbols and practices will always be potentially religious, available for those who use them.
Characteristics of revival in the neoliberal city

All three sites explored here are vibrant examples of public religion in Lagos today. While the convergences between Islam and Christianity, exemplified with Redemption Camp and NASFAT, are easier to detect, there are certain tendencies across all three that are worth noting.

Engagement with economics and the market

All three sites have a close connection to local businesses. Redemption Camp and the Eyo Festival are also commercial sites in their own right, and NASFAT is certainly attempting to follow this model. All are enmeshed in the local business milieu. NASFAT and RCCG similarly aim to develop their adherents spiritually as well as materially. They target the business community and organize courses in economic entrepreneurship. Both have established several private businesses as part of their activities as religious movements, such as bookshops, universities, and halal trade. While NASFAT criticizes excessive personal wealth (Obadare 2016), at least for the time being, the fact that all three have an explicit financial component in their activities might indicate that engagement with consumerism and the market is necessary to strive as a religion today.

Remaking religious practice

NASFAT and RCCG are both examples of how charismatic religion is thriving today. As observed in Latin America (Chesnut 2003), and on a more general level (Gauthier 2018, p. 403) the charismatic forms of religion enjoy phenomenal success globally. All three sites use large-scale ‘spectacles’—holy night’s revivals; all night prayers and festivals—as core to their practice. At the same time they, in particular NASFAT and RCCG, encourage small, tighter communities. Religions that emphasize individual practice, healing, and a focus on spiritual and material growth are gaining ground in the face of dwindling mainline denominations. While not so present at the Eyo Festival, there are other practices within traditional religions that are experiencing renewal as they cater to similar needs for success and health. Traditional healing techniques and modes of connection with the world of spirits in order to infer on worldly matters are as prevalent in traditional religions as they are in Pentecostalism. NASFAT similarly encourages its adherents to engage in prayer and to seek modern health facilities through the NASFAT services (Soares 2009, p. 193).

Cooperation with the state

The crisis of political legitimacy in the neoliberal and corrupt Nigerian state has led to more religion in the public sphere, not less. Taking a global view, authors have argued that the processes of democratization and globalization, as well as the dissemination of modern communication technologies, have increased the role of public religion (Toft, Philpott and Shah 2011). Adding to this perspective, one can also mention the legitimacy crisis which has affected political institutions, parties, and politicians alike. These entities seek moral legitimacy outside the political domain. For Nigerian politicians, aligning themselves with religious leaders may add to their public image and enlarge their network. Most prominent among these constellations are the connections between Pentecostal leaders and politicians, which some have called the ‘Lagos-Ibadan theocratic class’ (Obadare 2006). NASFAT’s
political connections are not as elaborate, but they have a proactive stance towards politics and politicians that mirrors their Pentecostal counterparts. The Eyo Festival, for its part, also attracts politicians as well as public funding in a bid to boost the economy in the area as well as to strive for cultural pride and a shared identity in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious setting like Lagos.

Building alternatives to the state

RCCG and NASFAT both expand religious practice by moving well beyond the mosque and the church. They do this by establishing universities, providing a host of welfare and other services, creating businesses and giving their adherents the ‘full package’: a focus on spiritual, social, and material means, buttressed by personalized attention, heightened experiences, and a feeling of belonging. While both movements nurture close relationships with political elites, neither of them is particularly critical of the state. This also feeds earlier discussions on the weakened state: when power no longer sits dominantly within the state and the political realm, there are fewer reasons to express criticism in that direction. By building institutions that stand at the crossroads of many different social spheres and fostering mass movements, these religious groups are successful in infusing the public sphere with their values and changing society from below, rather than from above, through state means.

Conclusion

The religious landscape in Lagos operates with restrictions, influences, and privileges in the context of a loosely regulated and globally enmeshed megacity. If one considers the salient novelties acting to reshape the religious landscape, it becomes obvious that there are other dynamics at work than the level of state policies which have been at the centre of much social scientific work on religion. To understand religion in a global city like Lagos, it is fundamental to put it back in a wider context that pays attention to a series of factors, whether economic, cultural, social, or political. This chapter has attempted to capture some of the dominant trends which partake in the profound religious transformations of the last decades and which attest to the unexpected revival and penetration of religion in the public sphere.

Comparing the three major religious traditions has been the focus of this chapter through the examples of the RCCG, NASFAT, and the Eyo Festival, and insisting on what they have in common should not be understood as passing over their particularities and idiosyncrasies. Given the dominant position of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, the space and opportunities for indigenous religions are limited. The Pentecostal movement already has big economic muscles and is not likely to diminish its influence in the short run. As for NASFAT, it exemplifies a more mainstream tendency that aligns with Pentecostalism at the same that it has to fight for its legitimacy in the face of more fundamentalist and even violent Islamic movements which increasingly make the headlines. Given the revival of legitimacy and interest for traditional African religion internationally, in diasporas but also in transnational New Age and neo-pagan networks, there might be a potential for further resurgence of traditional religions domestically. As we have seen, traditional Yoruba rituals and symbols act as powerful and much needed markers and vectors of national and regional identities. Here also, the reshaping of the world through economic globalization and the massification of digital means of communication can provide a fertile ground for unexpected revivals and new syncretisms. Many factors will shape the future of religion (and religions) in...
Nigeria, yet how the Nigerian state navigates in a world set to dance in step with market forces and the lures of consumerism will be one crucial factor to keep in mind.

References


