
Since the 1970s, religion has been a source of intense conflict in Northern Nigeria. As a result, its religious history has been, and remains, fraught terrain—too often rewritten and reimagined to support various political agendas, most recently by Boko Haram. In her new book, Shobana Shankar, assistant professor of history at Stony Brook University, complicates these politically motivated historical narratives of Christian-Muslim interactions by investigating the relationships between Hausa-speaking Christians and their Muslim neighbors. Shankar contends that colonial Northern Nigeria was “a place of religious collaboration, experimentation, puzzlement, and sympathy” (p. 144). Her conclusions are based on archival research in Nigeria, the United Kingdom and the United States, and on new evidence, including handwritten diaries from the 1930s, around one hundred interviews with Christians and Muslims, and the unpublished memoir of Ethel Miller, the first white woman to work for the Church Missionary Society in Northern Nigeria.

Her monograph is divided into two parts and six chronological chapters. Part One, “The Word Travels,” shows how the spread of Christianity was unequivocally linked to literacy in boko, which Shankar defines as Roman script and sometimes Western academic subjects more generally, and the attempts both to gain and to control access to it (pp. xiv-xv). Marginalized peoples who were disconnected from their pasts, such as slaves, refugees, and migrant families, created opportunities for social, economic, and political mobility by casting off their previous identities, and crafting new religious identities for themselves as “stranger-migrants” (p. xxvii). The socially estranged, however, were not the only ones who were drawn to the missions. In Kano City, for instance, Muslims, along with the displaced, also frequented the missions and their bookshops to acquire reading materials, literacy, technical skills, and the prestige that accompanied these things—a process Shankar calls “the commercialization of Christian identity” (p. 46). These “crypto-Christians” would then use their new skills and fluid religious identities to find advancement in their professional life, straddling the line between the colonial and native governments (p. xxvii).

Part Two, “Followers of the Word,” inquires into the development of medical work among lepers and an associated informal education in Northern Nigeria after 1930, showing how Muslim authorities collaborated with missions to keep an eye on them and to control their activities, and also how these plans sometimes went awry. Although sequestering lepers was meant to contain and control Christian missions and to consolidate religious power, an unintended consequence ensued. Because leprosariums provided access to informal education and job opportunities on top of medical work, they instead promoted grassroots evangelism. This produced a large group of “Muslim Christians,” Muslims who participated in mission culture without any loss of social status, capable of exercising religious authority (p. 92). At the end of her book, Shankar demonstrates how Christians in Northern Nigeria effectively became invisible outsiders in political debates in the late colonial period and the era of independence, because they lacked a cohesive political identity. Northern Nigerian Christians were, in essence, culturally northern but religiously southern.

Shankar’s monograph reads more like a series of essays about differing episodes in the formation of Christianity in Northern Nigeria, linked only by chronology, rather than a
http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/pdfs/v15i3a6.pdf


Cuba and Angola: Fighting for Africa’s Freedom and Our Own is an excellent read for both the academic and layperson. Mary-Alice Waters’ socialist passion is truly felt in these accounts of Cuba’s campaign to defend the country of Angola against Zaire (now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo), South Africa, and their benefactors circa 1975 until 1991. The multiple sections of this book contain excerpts from key decision makers such as Fidel Castro, Raul Castro, and Nelson Mandela; as well as accounts from generals of the Cuba’s Revolutionary Armed Forces, the Cuban Five, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It details how former President Fidel Castro used centralized command and decentralized execution to devastate some of the best militaries on the African continent during the struggle known as “Operation Carlota.” “The mission was named Operation Carlota, after a slave woman from the Triunvirato sugar mill near Matanzas, Cuba, known as ‘Black Carlota’. Armed with a machete, she led a slave rebellion in 1843 that extended to a number of plantations in the province. She was captured and drawn and quartered by the Spanish colonial troops” (p. 17). The name of this operation captured the spirit that the Cuban people wished to exhibit in every aspect of this conflict. It also revealed how Castro used motivated Cuban nationalists known as Internationalists to build relationships with the African people creating a movement utilizing the basic principles of the Sun Tzu’s Art of War to defeat their adversaries on the African continent from November 1975 until May 1991.

This book seems to suggest that the Internationalist cadre helped the Cuban people gain a better understanding of the pulse of the Angolan people. Waters states that, “[a]n additional 50,000 internationalist volunteers carried out various civilian responsibilities” (p. 15). The dynamic group of volunteers integrated into the various aspect of Angola life to understand