

UNITY THROUGH DIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY OF CHRISLAM IN LAGOS

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The world has *no* significant binary features ... it is, on the contrary, divided into overlapping, fragmented cultures, hybrid selves, continuously dissolving and emerging social states (Asad 2003: 15).

During a sermon, Tela Tella – the founder of Nigeria’s Chrislam movement *Ifeoluwa* – proclaimed: ‘Moses is Jesus and Jesus is Muhammad; peace be upon all of them – we love them all.’ One of his followers, who called himself a ‘Chrislamist’, told me after the sermon: ‘You can’t be a Christian without being a Muslim, and you can’t be a Muslim without being a Christian.’ These powerful statements reflect well what Chrislam, a series of religious movements that emerged in Nigeria’s former capital Lagos in the 1970s,¹ is about: the mixing of Christian and Muslim beliefs and practices. In this article I focus on the two most prominent Chrislam movements in Lagos: *Ifeoluwa* was the first Chrislam movement, and *Oke Tude* is the most popular one. In addition to their Yoruba names, the founders and their followers use ‘Chrislam’ as a concept for self-designation. Despite their inclusive conception of religion, there is surprisingly little interaction between the Chrislam movements. Although Tella accepts both Christianity and Islam and preaches ‘unity’, he rejects other forms of Chrislam, such as *Oke Tude*, as ‘inauthentic’. *Oke Tude*’s founder, Saka, claims not to know Tella. Somewhat paradoxically, inclusion and exclusion thus work side by side.

Contrary to conventional understandings of Christianity and Islam as mutually exclusive entities, Chrislam considers them to be inclusive. That these movements originated in Nigeria is of course revealing because its inhabitants are strictly divided between Muslims and Christians along a predominantly north-south axis. Although southern Nigeria is mostly Christian, the Yoruba ethnic group – the protagonists in this article – in the southwest is almost evenly divided between Christians and Muslims (Peel 2000). Christian-Muslim conflict has played a role in Nigerian politics since the centralization of the political system in the 1970s (Falola 1998), and it has become increasingly important since the political liberalization associated with the return to civilian rule in 1999, when Christians and Muslims competed for access to the state and its

resources (Nolte 2013: 456). The typical image of Nigeria promulgated in the Western media is that of a country being torn by religious violence. Religious violence is, however, just one aspect of Christian-Muslim manifold relations in Nigeria. The case of Chrislam demonstrates that Christianity and Islam are broached readily in the religiously plural setting of Lagos.

The typical response of mainstream Christians and Muslims when they heard that I was conducting research on Chrislam was ‘Welcome to Lagos, here everything is possible’. This response needs to be understood within Hackett’s (1989: 280-2) characterization of Nigeria in terms of a ‘kaleidoscopic array of religious phenomena’. Remarkably, although many mainstream believers did not take much offence at Chrislam,² my academic audience seemed to have more problems with a phenomenon like Chrislam. Every time I presented my research data at seminars and conferences, my listeners’ primary reaction was laughter. They seemed to feel unsettled, not knowing how to make sense of Chrislam, thereby reducing it to something trivial against the backdrop of the ‘world’ religions: Christianity and Islam. Being raised in a tradition that perceives religions as mutually exclusive, I must admit that initially I also found myself somewhat uneasy with Chrislam’s religious pluralism.³ My colleagues’ and my own uneasiness with a movement like Chrislam could be explained by the conventional Abrahamic understanding of religion as an integrated, internally consistent belief system. Although the scholarly emphasis on religion as a bounded system has long been criticized (e.g. Gellner 1974; Barber 1981; MacGaffey 1983; Ottenberg 1984; Hackett 1989; Kirsch 2004; Lambek 2008; McIntosh 2009), there is still a tendency to study Christianity and Islam as distinct traditions. According to Fabian, this persistent tendency is highly problematic because ‘expectations regarding the logical consistency and coherence of belief systems often lead to elegant but potentially misleading descriptions’ (1985: 139). My argument in this article is that Chrislam proposes a model to escape mono-religious approaches, and an emic perspective on religious mixture beyond the downtrodden paths that take ‘syncretism’ as a conceptual frame.

Religious movements like Chrislam are not a new phenomenon in Africa.⁴ Indeed, Turner (1979) considers the situation of encounter or interaction of two different types of religion a necessary cause for the emergence of all religious movements in sub-Saharan Africa. Succeeding generations of Africanists had more problems with this interaction model, describing what in Turner’s terms are new religious movements as syncretic forms of ‘African Christianity’ or ‘African Islam’. Although due to its fusion of Christian and Muslim elements it might seem obvious to study Chrislam in terms of syncretism – defined by Stewart (1999: 58) as ‘the

combination of elements from two or more different religious traditions’ – here I argue that this is a misleading appellation. In fact, Chrislam provides a rationale for scrutinizing the very concept of syncretism and offers an alternative analytical case for understanding its mode of religious pluralism. Instead, I propose ‘assemblage’ as a heuristic device for understanding the religious mixing within Chrislam. Collier and Ong define an assemblage as ‘the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic. ... It does not always involve new forms, but forms that are shifting, in formation, or at stake ... [It is] heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial, and situated’ (2005:12). Inspired by Collier and Ong, I will show that assemblage theory may help us to understand the emergent, fluid, and rhizomatic nature of Chrislam.

Compared to the Nigerian Pentecostal mega-churches like the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and Muslim mass organizations like *Nasr Allah al-Fatih Society of Nigeria* – which translates as ‘There is no help except from Allah’ and is abbreviated to NASFAT⁵ – Chrislam is somewhat marginal. Despite its marginality, I study the movement as a symptom of wider religious shifts and transformations that are difficult to map because of the ingrained conception of religion as an internally consistent belief system preoccupied with universal truth. Drawing on Larkin and Meyer (2006), I argue that rather than taking for granted the oppositions between Christianity and Islam we must explore the convergence between the two religious traditions, thereby crossing boundaries and blurring sharp distinctions.⁶ According to Larkin and Meyer, new reformist trends in Christianity and Islam in West Africa should be studied as doppelgangers – ‘enemies whose actions mirror each other and whose fates are largely intertwined’ (2006: 287).⁷ Indeed, despite the conflict of opinions between Christians and Muslims that has all too often degenerated into violent conflict in Nigeria, they actually share a great deal of common ground and, while disagreeing on doctrine, overlap in several of the religious practices on which they depend and the social processes they set in motion. Chrislam provides more insight into the complex process of copying and the dynamism of the entanglements between Christianity and Islam that Larkin and Meyer touch on in their seminal article.

Although I do not deny that Christianity and Islam have their own distinctive traditions in Nigeria, my point here is that we should focus more on how people actually ‘live’ religion and how their ways of ‘living’ religion relate to each other. By focusing on lived religion, it will appear that the idiosyncratic ways in which religion is performed are often marked by contradiction, ambivalence, and double standards rather than by neat divisions along religious boundaries (see also Marsden 2005; Schielke and Debevec 2012; Janson 2014, 2016). The

challenge is thus to develop a new conceptual framework to explore mutual influences and interactions between Christians and Muslims, and Chrislam may help us in this undertaking.

CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM ENCOUNTERS IN NIGERIA

Nigeria has a long history of conflict and religious violence (Falola 1998). The country, known as the ‘giant of Africa’ because with its approximately 170 million inhabitants it is Africa’s most populous country, is therefore an interesting setting to study Chrislam. As Smith (2007: xii) points out, conflict and violence are so closely associated with the image that people (not only outsiders but also Nigerians themselves) have of the country that a common phrase in Pidgin English to typify the country is ‘Nigeria is a war’. However, Christian-Muslim relations are not just marked by conflict. Christians and Muslims have long lived side by side in Nigeria, often in harmony with ‘traditional’ practitioners – the boundaries between the three not always sharply demarcated (Peel 2000, 2016). For centuries, there were high levels of social interaction between Christians, Muslims, and traditionalists, and interfaith marriages were not uncommon (Soares 2006: 2-3).

Many analysts date the beginning of Christian-Muslim confrontations to 1978,⁸ when a new constitution had to be adopted after power temporarily shifted from the military regime to civil politicians. Conflicts arose over the question as to whether Nigeria would become a secular state or subscribe to the *Shari‘a* law (Falola 1998: 3). The battle over the *Shari‘a* law laid the way for the violence of the 1980s. The most notable crisis occurred in 1987 in the College of Education in Kafanchan, Kaduna State, when Christians belonging to the Federation of Christian Students organized what they called ‘Mission ’87 in Jesus Campus’, a title they proclaimed with a banner at the entrance to the college. The college’s Muslim students removed the banner and protested against the talk given by a Muslim convert to Christianity, who allegedly misinterpreted Qur’anic verses and falsified the prophecy of Muhammad. The struggle between Christian and Muslim students ensued violence in other urban centres in northern and central Nigeria, leaving many dead and churches and mosques being destroyed. There have been several other such incidents of Christian-Muslim tension at college campuses over the years (Falola 1998: 179-87).

The economic decline and neo-liberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s made it easier for religious leaders to mobilize followers, thereby contributing to religious polarization. Since 2000, a new field of conflict has been added to the long list of Christian-Muslim clashes: the introduction of the *Shari‘a* law to twelve of the northern states, which instigated Christian

anxieties of Nigeria becoming an Islamic state (Loimeier 2007: 65-9).⁹ Christian-Muslim relations have deteriorated further because of the violent attacks against Christians in which Boko Haram is involved.¹⁰ Initially, the militant Islamist group based in the northeast of Nigeria attacked particularly security forces, which symbolized the immorality and corruptness of the secular Nigerian state. Boko Haram changed its policy after the killing of its leader Muhammad Yusuf in 2009. The target then shifted from government representatives and institutions to Christians. The international world was shocked when at Christmas Eve 2010 Boko Haram insurgents bombed a church in Jos – the ethnic and religious fault-line which divides the mainly Muslim north from the largely Christian south. In January 2012 Boko Haram gave a three-day ultimatum to all Christians to leave northern Nigeria and summoned all Muslims to leave southern Nigeria. In this way the militant group aimed to bring about a sharper division of Nigeria into a northern, Muslim bloc and a southern, Christian enclave (Higazi 2013).

Starting in the late 1970s, a time of great political and economic turmoil, there have been competition and higher levels of radicalization not only between, but also within the different religious traditions. In 1978 the Islamic reformist movement *Jama'at Izalat al-Bid'a wa-Iqamat as-Sunna*, that is, the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reinstatement of the Sunna or Izala for short, rose to prominence with a series of attacks against Sufism – the mystic orders that up to that point had effectively dominated Islam in Nigeria (Loimeier 1997; Kane 2003). In its efforts to reform Nigerian society, Izala fought against a broad range of Sufi practices labelled un-Islamic, such as amulets, saint veneration, supererogatory prayers, and conspicuous life-cycle rituals. However, with the growing 'Pentecostalization' of Nigerian society (Marshall 2009) in the 1980s, reformist and Sufi Muslims drew closer to each other. According to Loimeier (1997: 308), the leaders of Izala and the Sufi orders shelved their disputes and formed a 'coalition of convenience' in order to better resist the Christian 'crusade'. While these alliances of convenience have led to a considerable pacification of intra-Muslim disputes, they facilitated increasing religious polarization between Muslims and Christians (Loimeier 2007: 60-2).

The rapid rise and spread of Pentecostalism and its increased presence in the public sphere have fundamentally altered Nigeria's religious landscape. As Ojo (1988: 179-84) and Peel (2000: 314) point out, the Pentecostal movement did not take off in Nigeria until the 1970s, when vastly increased public revenues from oil permitted a great expansion of higher education and fuelled urban growth. Pentecostalism had its roots among university staff and students. It later moved with them off campus and continued to grow in the urban centres. Due to worsening economic

and political conditions as a result of collapsed oil prices in the 1980s, Pentecostalism expanded even faster. By the mid-1990s, the Redeemed Christian Church of God's monthly 'Holy Ghost Nights' had become the largest gathering of any kind – attracting tens of thousands of worshippers – ever held in Nigeria.

Over the past decades, Pentecostalism has drawn many Nigerian Christians from the mainline Protestant Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, and the African Independent or *Aladura* Churches,¹¹ promising them spiritual rebirth. The Pentecostal upsurge has thus played a central role in the increasing political cleavage and violence along religious lines. Pentecostals are fighting what they see as 'a life and death battle with the enemy', that is, Muslims (Marshall-Fratani 1998: 308). Muslims reacted by equally aggressive proselytization campaigns. Given the mutual demonizing rhetoric of Christian and Muslim preachers in Nigeria in recent years, their proselytizing contributed to what Last (2007) has called an 'economy of political panic'.

Here it should be noted that where Christian-Muslim conflicts prevail, it would be better to describe the causes of these conflicts as a mixture of different factors, with religion being only one of them and many of them rooted in colonial and postcolonial development (Falola 1998: 12-4; Loimeier 2007: 60). The striking gap between the Christian south and the Muslim north in educational standards and wealth has its roots in British colonial policies. The colonial rulers privileged Christianity and produced a new elite, which controlled the postcolonial economy and bureaucracy (Falola 1998: 38; Nolte 2013: 462). In addition to the uneven access to state facilities and distribution of resources, other factors contributing to inter-religious conflict included the effects of the Civil War (1967-70), the foreclosure of all democratic debate by the military regimes that succeeded one another until 1998, the manipulation of religion to accentuate ethnic differences as a tool to retain political power, and the difficulties of managing plural identities in a federal state system (Falola 1998; Danfulani 2005; Last 2007; Loimeier 2007).

In this current of conflict, the religiously plural south-western part of Nigeria, called 'Yorubaland', is somewhat of an exception. Christians, Muslims, and practitioners of 'traditional' or Yoruba religion have lived together relatively harmoniously here since the nineteenth century, making the region an icon of ecumenism (Peel 2000, 2016). Indeed, many extended families in Yorubaland are composed of Christians, Muslims, and practitioners of Yoruba religion; and mutual participation in each other's ritual festivities is a standard feature of Yoruba social life. For instance, an elderly Christian told me that during Christmas he asks a Muslim butcher to slaughter a ram for him in the *halal* (lawful in Islam) way, so that his Muslim relatives and

neighbours can also partake in the meal. Similarly, Christians take part in the festivities at the end of Ramadan. The family situation of my research assistant Tobi is another example of Yorubaland's multiform religious landscape. Tobi's Muslim father married two wives: the first (Tobi's late mother) was a Muslim while the second is a Christian. Tobi's elder brother is a Muslim scholar who spends his leisure time listening to tape-recorded sermons, while his younger half-brothers, who are DJs and live in the same family house in Lagos, play popular music and his half-sister, who is a member of a Pentecostal choir, practices her Christian hymns. Tobi married a woman from an *Aladura* church who upon their marriage converted to Islam. To avoid offending either his family or his in-laws, the wedding took place in a wedding hall instead of a mosque or church. It took Tobi's wife some years to replace the cross around her neck by a veil. Tobi and his wife raise their two daughters as Muslims. To make things more complicated, Tobi goes by his Yoruba instead of his Muslim name so that even those who are close to him cannot immediately tell his religion.

Given its particular religious constellation, it is not surprising that Chrislam originated in Yorubaland. Nor is it surprising that this is the only place it thrives. According to Laitin, 'Muslim and Christian Yorubas see themselves culturally as Yorubas rather than as Muslims or Christians' (1986: 97). Because Yoruba attach more value to common ethnicity than to religious affiliation, Chrislam can be considered a Yoruba phenomenon: it is the shared ethnicity that makes the mixing between Christianity and Islam possible. Several interlocutors argued that if Chrislam would have emerged in Hausaland in northern Nigeria 'the founders and their followers would have been dead by now, because unlike the Yoruba, northerners are not tolerant'. An exception to the image of northerners as 'fundamentalists' is the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) that was founded by Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa Nuruddin in the religious hotbed of Kaduna in 1995.¹² The centre's mission is to mediate between Christians and Muslims in order to 'create a peaceful society' (<http://www.imcnigeria.org>). Unlike the IMC's pioneers, the Chrislam founders do not so much situate their movements against the backdrop of religious violence plaguing Nigeria but rather against the unstable flux of life in Lagos (see below). Although they see it as their task to 'bring unity between Christians and Muslims', their movements are not examples of what scholars attempting to advance ecumenical ideas have called 'interfaith dialogue' (e.g. Hock 2004). Rather than interfaith dialogue, the Chrislam founders see it as their mission to mix Christian and Muslim rituals in an effort to bring about 'deliverance' in their followers' lives, as expressed in success, wealth, and good health.¹³ Here it

should be noted that Chrislam is not represented by the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), which was established with the aim of promoting greater understanding among Nigerian Christians and Muslims in 2000. In an interview, the co-chairman of NIREC depicted Chrislam to me as a ‘heretic sect’ that was unrelated to NIREC’s higher aim of ‘laying the foundations for religious harmony’.

Yorubaland’s cosmopolitan centre is Lagos. This estimated twenty-million megacity represents a crossroads of people and commodities from around the continent and the world. It is a node not only for migrants seeking jobs and education, but also for drug-traffickers, smugglers, and fraudsters or ‘419’.¹⁴ The amorality that is associated with life in the ‘Sin City’ (Ukah 2013: 182) is compensated by a saturation of both the public sphere and peoples’ private lives with religion. Because religion to a large extent delimits the micro-processes of everyday living in Lagos, Ukah (2013: 179) predicts that it will increasingly influence the future and the trajectory of its transformation into – according to a United Nations’ projection – the third largest city in the world in the twenty-first century.

It is not easy to describe life in Lagos to those who have never been there. I think Smith’s (2007: xii) description that in Lagos ‘the volume is turned up – sometimes too high’ is striking. Despite several attempts by Lagos Governor Fashola to implement a law that prohibits religious organizations from using loudspeakers at night, Lagos’ soundscape is marked by what Larkin (2008) calls ‘religious noise’. Lagos’ huge population and process of rapid urbanization contribute to a sense of life that is not only loud but also turbulent and hectic where survival depends on improvisation, risk-taking, and ingenuity (see also De Boeck and Plissart 2014). In this environment religious ‘entrepreneurs’ consider Chrislam not a *contradictio in terminis*, but an example of the resourcefulness of Lagosians who – as will become clear below – by partaking in both Christian and Muslim practices, increase their chances of having a better life if not in the hereafter than at least in this world.

IFEOLUWA: THE WILL OF GOD MISSION

The oldest Chrislam movement was founded in Lagos in 1976 by a Yoruba man named Tella Tella. In addition to ‘Chrislam’, he refers to his mission as *Ifeoluwa*, Yoruba for ‘The Love of God Mission’. Similar to Islam, *Ifeoluwa* is based on five pillars, with ‘love’ being the first one. The others are ‘mercy’, ‘joy’, ‘good deeds’, and ‘truth’. Tella sees himself as God’s love incarnated in a human being, who has been ordained to ‘enlighten the world’: ‘I’m the will of

God personified. The word of God is Jesus. The motor of my mission is love, peace, and abide. My followers abide by the laws, rules, and regulations of *Ifeoluwa*. I'm an instrument in the hands of God.' According to Tella, God communicates with him via divine revelations, which he conveys through glossolalia. Until the world is ready to receive these revelations, Tella lives a secluded life with his two wives – the Lady Apostles – and their children – the Prayer Warriors – on the 'Mountain of Power',¹⁵ that is, a whitewashed compound in a densely populated slum area in Lagos. On the compound's fenced wall *Ifeoluwa*'s symbols are portrayed: a wooden slate on which students learn to write Arabic in traditional Qur'anic schools with a Christian cross in the middle, and a heart signifying love.

Tella has a small congregation, composed of about fifty lower-middle-class followers, who meet every Saturday. Similar to many other religious organizations in Lagos, youth outnumber elders and women outnumber men in the congregation. A young *Ifeoluwa* member whose husband is a Muslim who does not attend *Ifeoluwa* services explained: 'Men don't care. We women are more concerned about our children, families, and businesses. That's why you find more women in Chrislam – but not only there: in all religious organizations in this country women are over-represented.' Both men and women hold leading positions in *Ifeoluwa*, but since women are believed to be 'impure', they are – like Muslim women – not allowed to attend services when they are menstruating. During an interview Tella explained why his congregation meets on Saturday, and not in a mosque or church but in a temple:

I don't want to lean on Friday since Friday is for the Muslims, and I don't want to lean on Sunday since Sunday is for the Christians. Therefore we congregate on Saturday, which is the Sabbath.¹⁶ In previous years, services took place on both Fridays and Sundays but because people accused me of practising my faith half-way, I decided to switch to Saturdays. (...) *Ifeoluwa* is unique. I don't love Jesus more than the Prophet. I love them all and they love me.

To prevent accusations of favouring Christians above Muslims or vice versa, Tella refused talking about his religious background. Nevertheless, it is generally known that he was a Muslim before founding Chrislam.

The Saturday service in Tella's temple – composed of a garage-like white building with in the middle a colourful altar that is separated by a curtain from the prayer ground where, like in a mosque, the congregation sits on the floor – starts with singing Christian and Muslim songs from the *Ifeoluwa* 'hymn book' and the *Ifeoluwa* 'creed':

The God of Jesus is One
The God of Muhammad is One
Humanity is one
Chrislam, Chrislam, Chrislam

The singing is accompanied by African instruments as well as a Western drum set.

While the singing is going on, Tella enters the temple accompanied by his disciples holding burning candles and ringing bells with which ‘to summon the angels’. Resembling the Muslim practice of *tawaf*, Tella circumambulates the Holy Spirit Square – an open space decorated with a cross – seven times while holding both a Bible and Qur’an.¹⁷ According to Tella, the holy scriptures are incomplete and contain some inaccuracies. For this reason he is working on his own Holy Book, the *Ifeoluwa* Book, which will be the last book. Since he does not consider himself a religious scholar, the book contains none of his own theologies but only divine revelations. After circumambulating the Holy Spirit Square, Tella delivers a sermon in Yoruba and English recounting passages from the Bible, Qur’an, and *Ifeoluwa* Book. Elucidating his message of love in a way that reminds of the Pentecostal theology of the Prosperity Gospel,¹⁸ I heard Tella preaching:

God doesn’t love one religion more than another. Among all religions, Christianity and Islam are closest to each other. Christians and Muslims should love each other, but instead they hate each other. Because they don’t open their hearts for love, they have problems. God means love. The way to reach God is through love. Once you receive my message of love and disseminate it to others, you will prosper in life. If you want prosperity in your business, radiate love. If you want success in your life, you must spread the gospel of love.

The service ends with a joint prayer mixing Christian and Muslim elements. Unlike Muslims, who pray five times a day, *Ifeoluwa*’s congregation prays only twice a day. Tella explained: ‘Life in Lagos is hectic. We don’t have time to pray more than twice a day, but we love God constantly in our hearts.’ This pragmatic approach to religion is, as we will see later, characteristic of Chrislam. The closing prayer, during which *Ifeoluwa* members gesticulate wildly with their arms to ‘open the way for deliverance in their lives’, is followed by testimonies and thanksgiving. Similar to Pentecostal services, the testimonies recount the ‘miracles’ encountered by Tella’s followers when they accepted God’s love in their lives, including healing, the birth of a baby, finding employment, and a windfall.

In addition to the weekly service, which lasts for about three hours, the congregation assembles every Friday to attend the Holy Ghost service, that is, an all-night prayer meeting. Once a year they set out on a pilgrimage to the ‘Mount of Authority’ in Tella’s hometown, where they pray and fast uninterruptedly for three days. Tella’s daughter explained: ‘Like the Muslims have their pilgrimage centre in Mecca and the Christians in Jerusalem, we have our pilgrimage centre on the Mount of Authority. We are proud that God has chosen Nigeria as Chrislam’s pilgrimage centre.’ Another annual event is the Dancing Anniversary when Tella – who is ‘like King David commanded by God to dance for Him’ – dances and brings out the religious paraphernalia that are normally kept inside the temple. This is an important event for the congregation, which receives special blessings on that day.

Somewhat paradoxically, despite its inclusive conception of religion Tella seems to draw upon the idiom of the secret society – a socio-religious institution in Nigerian society that provides collective solidarity and security for its members – as the basis for his mission.¹⁹ Membership is modelled on an initiation rite and requires years of spiritual training. Initiation is expected to elicit a higher spirituality and new moral lifestyle that will promote social harmony in society. Just as membership in a secret society is constrained by restricted knowledge, membership of *Ifeoluwa* is restricted by the observance of eighty rules and regulations concerning codes of moral behaviour, dress codes (like Muslim women, Tella’s female followers are obliged to cover their heads and to dress modestly), and food taboos derived from the Old Testament. During their spiritual training, the initiates earn different spiritual ranks, symbolized by coloured belts worn on their white gowns,²⁰ and religious paraphernalia such as prayer sticks and swords. These religious paraphernalia are believed to protect them against spiritual attacks by evil forces, and enable them to heal fellow worshippers. In order to reach a higher spiritual level that brings them closer to God, initiates fast on Fridays – the most holy day in the Muslim calendar.

Tella is aware of the fact that *Ifeoluwa*’s strict rules and regulations prevent adherents from committing themselves wholeheartedly. Adherents often attend weekly services and special programmes for some time and when the problem that brought them to *Ifeoluwa* has been solved, they return to their original church, mosque, or shrine. As such, there is a high level of fluctuation among the congregation. To break open the cloud of secrecy surrounding himself and his mission and to attract more adherents, Tella has recently joined Facebook. Although this has led into a small increase in worshippers attending *Ifeoluwa*’s services, and an modest international

following intrigued by the idea that Chrislam might be the solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, Tella wants to keep his congregation ‘manageable’ so that he can rule it as a ‘spiritual family’: ‘The more people, the more *wahala* (Pidgin English for “trouble”).’ Just as his mother was pregnant with him for allegedly thirteen months, he thinks that his mission – that aims at bringing ‘a new world order beyond the imagination of homo sapiens’ – also needs time to flourish.

OKE TUDE: MOUNTAIN OF LOSING BONDAGE

Tella complained that a man calling himself Prophet Dr Samsindeen Saka²¹ stole his idea and founded his own Chrislam movement in 1989. Though several of his followers advised him to take Saka to court, Tella refused saying ‘I don’t like *wahala*. God knows the truth.’ In addition to Chrislam, Saka’s movement is also known by its Yoruba name *Oke Tude*: ‘Mountain of Losing Bondage’, a name that is redolent of Pentecostal discourse. Similar to Pentecostal Churches, the basic idea behind *Oke Tude* is that worshippers’ progress in life is blocked by evil powers that hold them trapped in bondage with Satan. These powers are personified as ‘witches and wizards’.²² By fasting and participating in a ritual called *Tude* or ‘running deliverance’, during which worshippers run seven times around the replica of the Ka’aba (the most sacred site in Islam) containing a well with ‘holy water’ while shouting ‘Hallelujah’ and ‘*Allah Akbar*’ (God is Great),²³ it is believed that they can be ‘delivered’ from these demonic forces. Deliverance, which is accompanied by possession by the Holy Spirit, is expressed in good health. The crutches hanging on the wall next to the well serve as proof of the healing powers of Saka, who even claims to be able to cure AIDS.²⁴ Physical healing is but one aspect of deliverance: there are also promises of affluence, fertility, virility, finding a partner, freedom from family problems, passing exams, and getting jobs when partaking in *Tude*. This deliverance ideology explains *Oke Tude*’s popularity in Lagos, especially among socially marginalized groups like barren women and unemployed youth.

In Nigerian society bearing children is a prerequisite for attaining complete social and moral womanhood, and childless women are often abandoned by their husbands. Women’s concern to bear and successfully rear children may lead them to *Oke Tude*’s weekly Women Affairs Programme and Healing School, which offer them the means to ‘destroy the yoke of barrenness’. During the Women Affairs Programme I heard dozens of women, and a few husbands, praying aloud to God to ‘open their wombs and let their fibroids melt down in Jesus’ name’. Besides

barren women, quite a number of unemployed youth attend *Oke Tude*'s services.²⁵ At a time when a school diploma is no longer considered sufficient to secure upward social and economic movement with the promise of a more successful life, religious movements like *Oke Tude* offer disenfranchised urban youth the spiritual means, and sometimes also material ones in the form of business opportunities and small loans, to bridge the gap between their aspirations and actual possibilities. For instance, a man in his early thirties told me that 'Daddy G.O.' (General Overseer, i.e. Saka – a title that is also used in Pentecostal churches) helped him finding a job and obtaining a plot of land to build a house for his family. Although *Oke Tude* is not an exception in that Pentecostal Churches and Muslim organizations like NASFAT offer similar opportunities, what makes Chrislam exceptional is that by mixing elements from both Christianity and Islam members believe that it is more likely that they will be 'delivered'. Several interlocutors explained to me that Chrislam allowed them to hedge their bets by 'combining the powers in Christianity and Islam' – thereby redoubling their chances of achieving a 'good life', that is a life in health and wealth. For instance, the *Oke Tude* imam told me that he prayed eight times a day: five times in the Muslim way and three times in the *Tude* way in order to benefit from the cumulative power of prayers.

Besides the benefits, members also mentioned the 'costs' of joining *Oke Tude*. A young veiled woman reacted very hesitantly when I asked whether I could interview her. After many phone calls, she finally allowed me to visit her at her sister's place. She did not want me to visit her at home since her husband – a pious Muslim – does not know she is going to *Oke Tude*. She attends services on Sunday morning when her husband attends NASFAT's prayer meetings. She feared that her husband and in-laws would consider her an 'unbeliever' when they know she is attending services at *Oke Tude*. Because in Islam apostasy is considered a sin, several interlocutors from a Muslim background did not openly present themselves as Chrislamists. But because by running *Tude* this young woman's headache reduced, she took the risk of being considered an 'unbeliever'.

Even Saka – who like Tella was born into a Muslim family, but whose father was a famous herbalist – initially found it difficult to give up his booming business as an herbalist for a life as a Chrislamist. However, he felt he had no other choice since he received a 'divine call' to establish his mission: 'When I was on pilgrimage to Mecca and rested near the Ka'aba, God showed me in a dream photographs of religious intolerance in Nigeria.²⁶ He assigned me to bridge the misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims. ... This is how it started.' Although Saka

made the pilgrimage to Mecca four times, for a long time he followed the example of his father – to the regret of his mother, who introduced herself to me as a dedicated NASFAT member – and worked as an herbalist. His vision encouraged him to stop his business in herbs, to divorce his five wives, and establish a worship centre in a lower-middle-class neighbourhood on the outskirts of Lagos. On *Oke Tude*'s flyers the location of the worship centre is indicated by means of the name of the closest bus stop. While one often sees double-parked cars standing in front of Pentecostal Churches on Sundays, most members travel by bus to *Oke Tude*. In a country where cars are seen as a status symbol, the fact that most *Oke Tude* members do not have a car suggests that they are from a poor background. From the outside *Oke Tude*'s worship centre looks like a church, but with its pillars the inside resembles a mosque. As in a mosque, *Oke Tude* members perform ablution and remove their shoes before entering the worship centre and there are different seating areas for women and men.

Initially, Saka had wanted to register his worship centre under the name of 'Chrislamherb', an acronym expressing a mixture of Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion that believes in the power of herbs for healing purposes. However, the Federal Government did not approve of this 'heretic' name, which Saka then changed into *Oke Tude*.²⁷ Because many people knew him as a successful herbalist, Saka soon attracted a congregation of thousand-or-so followers who started worshipping in his centre in the hope of being delivered. In addition to his worship centre, Saka runs three smaller *Oke Tude* branches in Lagos, three in Abuja, one in Ibadan, and a house fellowship in London, but due to its particular religious constellation the movement flourishes only in Lagos.

In addition to *Tude*, which takes place on an individual basis, Saka's followers engage in congregational worship. Every Sunday they assemble at 8am to participate in a Muslim prayer session (*wuridi*) led by an imam, followed by a Christian prayer session led by a rotating group of gifted prayer leaders, and closed with a joint service led by Saka himself.²⁸ Before the joint service starts, the choir sings Christian and Muslim songs, as well as the *Oke Tude* 'anthem':

Our God, the Creator, hear us
Oh God, bless the Prophet Isa (Jesus)
And the noble Prophet (Muhammad)
Oh God, bless Samsindeen (Saka)
And the noble Prophet

Oke Tude, deliver us

Deliver us from illness
Oke Tude, deliver us

While the singing is going on, Saka enters the stage dancing. He then opens his sermon – called ‘lecture’ in *Oke Tude* discourse in line with the growing trend toward intellectualization in Pentecostal Churches – by quoting in both English and Yoruba verses from the Bible and Qur’an that stress the similarities between Christianity and Islam. During a service that I attended, Saka assured his followers that irrespective of being a Christian or Muslim ‘God would answer our prayers because we’re all children of Abraham’²⁹:

Who is a child of Abraham? A Muslim is a child of Abraham. ‘Muslim’ is an Arabic word that stands for ‘believer’ in general. As such, a Christian can be a Muslim too, because they are both believers. What Christians believe, Muslims believe and what Muslims believe, Christians believe. Do we have two different suns for Christians and Muslims? ... I have never visited a restaurant where only Muslims eat, nor have I ever shopped in a supermarket where only Christians shop. Because we are children of Abraham, Christians and Muslims should not fight over God; God is able to fight for Himself.

Saka concluded that ‘we’re all the same’, which – similar to a Pentecostal service – was answered by the congregation with clapping and shouting ‘Hallelujah’, with the only difference that also ‘*Allah Akbar*’ and ‘*Amin*’ (Ar. ‘so be it’) were shouted. Other services that take place on a weekly basis are the Women Affairs Programme and Healing School mentioned above. Night vigils take place twice a month and attract a large following. Once a year *Oke Tude* celebrates its anniversary, which is accompanied by festivities and the distribution of gifts among the poor. In addition, Saka holds daily counselling sessions for those seeking health and wealth.

In order to become a member of *Oke Tude*, one does not have to convert. A member is only expected to buy a copy of both the Bible and Qur’an, and to run *Tude* for seven consecutive days. To this end, new members sometimes temporarily stay in the *Oke Tude* guest house. Running this guest house is an additional source of income for Saka, who is also involved in selling second-hand cars and in the real estate market. He has invested the money he earned as an herbalist in property, which he now sells to his adherents to whom he preaches that ‘to become successful in life you must change your status from tenants into landlords’. Another of Saka’s enterprises is his bookshop, where his religious pamphlets, audio- and visual recordings of his Sunday lectures, and bottles with anointing oil and ‘Blood of Jesus’ that are ascribed healing powers are sold.

Saka's wish for the future is to have, similar to Pentecostal and Muslim religious entrepreneurs, his own television channel: 'The whole world should know of Chrislam'.

RELIGIOUS ASSEMBLAGE

Although Tella keeps a low profile while Saka seeks publicity, there are many similarities between the two Chrislam leaders and their movements. Most importantly, they both use the term Chrislam as a concept for self-designation. Through their mixing of Christian and Muslim rituals, their aim is to deliver their followers from the evil powers that hold them trapped in bondage with Satan so that they will succeed in life. As noted above, this religious mixing has to be understood not so much in a context of religious violence – after all, Yorubaland in general and Lagos in particular are figureheads of what Laitin (1986) calls the 'nonpoliticization of religion' – but rather in what Gore and Pratten (2003) call a 'culture of violence', characterized by chaos, corruption, high rates of un- and underemployment, unprecedented levels of inequality, and staggering levels of criminality. This 'culture of violence' that pervades everyday living in Lagos explains why an increasing number of the urban lower-middle-class, who feel frustrated by the failure of the Nigerian state to deliver welfare to its citizens, have turned to new religious movements such as Chrislam, which provide them with the spiritual as well as pragmatic means to overcome social anxiety and economic hardship.

In a similar vein as Larkin and Meyer who explain the dynamism of reformist Christian and Muslim movements in West Africa by their ability to provide 'the networks and infrastructures that allow individuals to negotiate the material anxieties of living in uncertain economic times' (2006: 307), Chrislam's popularity can be explained by its ability to negotiate the culture of insecurity that marks life in the 'apocalyptic megacity' (Koolhaas 2001). Chrislam is not alone in providing its membership with a discourse of material and spiritual security in that also other religious movements promise eternal rewards for those whose lives are marked by poverty and inequality. The difference is, as we have seen above, that Chrislam is believed to offer a more powerful discourse of hope than Christianity or Islam alone. One of Saka's religious pamphlets is entitled 'My Hope is Not Lost', encouraging readers not to lose hope in challenging times. Similarly, Tella's sermons contain moral lessons that are interpreted by his followers as 'religious pep talk' instructing them in how to combat their feelings of despair and how to become successful in life.

In this spirit of hope, most of my interlocutors rationalized their joining Chrislam in pragmatic terms, arguing that physical, spiritual, and/or financial problems led them to *Ifeoluwa* or *Oke Tude*. Many of them had been what they called ‘religious shoppers’ since they attended several churches, mosques, and/or shrines before turning to Chrislam. A prominent example of a ‘religious shopper’ is Patrick, whose search for a job and a happy life had led him to numerous *Aladura*, Baptist, and Pentecostal Churches, as well as to *babalawos* (traditional priest-diviners). After a failed suicide attempt, he finally ended up in *Ifeoluwa*. The religious ‘shopping’ of people like Patrick, induced by concerns about their material success and well-being in this life, challenges the conventional equation of religion with ‘belief’ – an equation that has been criticized by Asad (1993) as part of a post-Enlightenment Protestant legacy that needs to be located historically, but should not be taken as universally valid. In line with the conventional conception of religion as an internally consistent belief system, anthropologists have long couched ‘belief’ in terms of a wholehearted personal dedication and absolute, universal truth (Ruel 1982). But rather than belief as an interior state, Chrislamists tend to privilege the performative power of religious practice that helps them negotiate their way through the insecurities and uncertainties of their situation (see also Kirsch 2004; Larkin and Meyer 2006: 287).³⁰

Highlighting the performative power of Chrislam’s rituals, a Yoruba man in his thirties explained to me that *Oke Tude* helped him in overcoming his past ‘sinful’ life by giving him a new direction in life:

I used to be an Area Boy,³¹ always engaged in street fights. My mother, a Muslim, knew someone who attended Chrislam services. Hearing about Chrislam made me curious. Upon attending *Oke Tude*’s programmes, my life changed completely and I stopped fighting. In Nigeria Christians and Muslims are fighting. Why are we fighting when we all descend from Abraham? In Chrislam, Christians and Muslims pray together; we love each other and we find comfort in religion.

In line with Chrislam’s pragmatic ethos, Tella’s followers gain religious paraphernalia to defend themselves against the attacks by evil forces blocking their progress in life. In a similar spirit, Saka’s Healing School teaches its participants special prayers and other techniques to heal themselves. For example, during one of the sessions several participants complained about ‘itching hands’, a condition that was explained by the minister leading the Healing School as metaphoric for the situation they found themselves in: being poor, unemployed, and not being

able to spend money. He guaranteed that as soon as they would adhere to *Oke Tude* wholeheartedly – expressed in praying vehemently, running *Tude*, drinking *Tude* water and bathing with it, and fasting – they would ‘see changes in their lives’ and their hands would stop itching; a prediction that was responded with eager shouts of ‘Hallelujah’ and ‘*Allah Akbar*’. This example illustrates that similar to Pentecostal discourse, ‘healing’ – a gift of the Holy Spirit – is not only significant in its literal sense, but also as a potent metaphor for renewal and deliverance.

Chrislam’s emphasis on orthopraxy (correct religious practice) rather than orthodoxy (correct belief and doctrinal conformity) prompts us to search for an approach to religion that moves beyond abstract theological paradigms and is more perceptive of everyday religious practice. Because of its emphasis on orthopraxy, Chrislam offers more room for religious mixing than the orthodoxies of Christianity and Islam allow for. Opposing the conventional understanding of religion as normative doctrine, Tella noted: ‘I don’t like dogmatic teachings’. Saka went as far as defining Chrislam in terms of a ‘practical religion’, offering practitioners ‘tools to instant deliverance’: ‘People come here to fight their enemy. Their enemy is illness, bareness, death, poverty, disillusion, frustration, failure, sorrow. We teach them how to pray to God, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad to conquer their enemy. Prayer is the key to success.’ But, as Saka stressed, success does not come automatically: ‘Belief in God alone is not enough; one has to work hard for God. Faith without hard work for God is dead [worthless].’ To underline that pragmatism outweighs doctrine in Chrislam, one of Saka’s ministers – who introduced himself to me as an *alfa*-pastor (*alfa* is the Yoruba term for a Muslim cleric) – said: ‘God is not interested in our faith; to Him it doesn’t matter whether we are Christians or Muslims. All He is interested in is what we do with our faith.’ Indeed, as Bayat (2007: 588) points out, marginalized urban residents cannot afford to be ideological; instead, they are more likely to side with religious movements because they effectively support them in their everyday needs.

What these narratives illustrate is that Chrislam does not just promise peace and fortune in heaven; it wants to ensure its membership that peace and fortune can be had on earth too. Remarkably, whereas Christian and Muslim theological doctrines focus on salvation and the afterlife, Chrislam promises a better life on earth. The general conviction among Chrislamists is that God – referred to as ‘the living God’ in Chrislam discourse – is immanent and active in their lives, and concerned to solve their problems (see also Hackett 1987: 237-8). Because God is believed not to be a remote entity but someone – a ‘lover’ in Tella’s terms – with whom one can communicate through prayer, Chrislamists may influence Him through their ritual actions. This

urges us to shift attention from religion as a coherent belief system to the practicalities, with their incoherence and all, of the ‘lived religion’.

While its ‘this-worldly pragmatism’ (Hackett 1987: 237) explains Chrislam’s popularity among its members, it also makes it vulnerable to criticism from outside. Several mainstream believers considered Chrislam a ‘cult’ composed of ‘unbelievers’. According to them, Chrislamists are neither ‘sincere’ Christians nor Muslims – ‘they are nothing’. Labelling a religious movement that is not aligned to mainstream Christianity or Islam a ‘cult’ is a popular way of abusing rival congregations in Nigeria (cf. Hackett 1989). Similar to cultists who are believed to be involved in all kinds of malevolent practices, including ritual killing and money scams, in an effort to attain ‘fast wealth’ (i.e. a form of wealth that is no longer rooted in traditional systems of kinship and patronage; Smith 2001), many mainstream Christians and Muslims believed that Chrislamists used religion to seek after their own selfish interest to become rich. Joining Chrislam may thus have severe social consequences for the members in that it evokes images of deviance and opportunism.

In addition to their use of Chrislam as a concept for self-designation and the performative power they ascribe to religious practice, another similarity between Tella and Saka is that they mix Christian and Muslim elements in their use of religious space, mode of worship, performance of the life-cycle rituals, proselytization, organization, and style. Although they are both from a Muslim background,³² their style of preaching resembles that of Pentecostal pastors as is apparent in their focus on prayer healing and prophecy, their engagement in lively worship, and their belief in the power of the Holy Spirit. Also in their public self-presentation they resemble Pentecostal styles. Drawing upon the example of Pentecostal pastors, Tella presents himself as a ‘Man of God’, and copying the leaders of the Pentecostal mega-churches’ flamboyancy (cf. Meyer 2004: 448), Saka drives a Hummer. Furthermore, both Tella and Saka make use of the media in propagating their message – a message that, as in Pentecostalism, stimulates their followers’ aspirations for prosperity.

The blending of elements from different religious traditions has been captured under the banner of ‘syncretism’ in the literature on religion in Africa. However, social scientists have increasingly doubted the usefulness of this framework to theorize religious mixture: “Syncretism” is a contentious term, often taken to imply “inauthenticity” or “contamination”, the infiltration of a supposedly “pure” tradition by symbols and meanings seen as belonging to other, incompatible traditions’ (Shaw and Stewart 1994: 1). At stake here is the power to identify

‘true’ religion and to authorize some practices as ‘truthful’ and others as ‘false’ or ‘syncretic’. Particularly the underlying political agenda that motivates claims to syncretism makes it a problematic concept (MacGaffey 1983: 244-5; see also Stewart 1999). Historically, syncretism has had pejorative connotations to missiologists and theologians who used it to designate supposedly unacceptable forms of religious mixture that comprised the nominal purity of Christianity (Droogers 1989; Leopold and Jensen 2004). Remarkably, this pejorative connotation has undergone little alteration, even among anthropologists whose mission it is to chart cultural mixture and who implicitly seem to accept that syncretism is a theological concern (Stewart 1999: 46).

Another reason why syncretism is controversial is that it is an etic rather than an emic term (Stewart 1999: 56-8). As McIntosh (2009: 185) points out, even when syncretism appears to be quite evident to the outsider, it may not be so to the insiders who insist upon the ‘authenticity’ of their religious practice. Indeed, syncretism may appear as anti-syncretism – defined by Shaw and Stewart as ‘the antagonism to religious synthesis shown by agents concerned with the defence of religious boundaries’ (1994: 7) – in the eyes of the religious practitioners themselves.³³ In this spirit, what to the anthropologist may look like the combination of incommensurable religious elements into a syncretic configuration is for Chrislamists not conflicting at all. For example, during my field research I met with a university student, Sefiyat, who told me that her father is a Muslim who prays in the mosque, while her mother is a Christian who worships in *Oke Tude*. She herself attends the *Oke Tude* services during the holidays that she spends with her family in Lagos. At university she attends the Redeemed Christian Church of God. Nevertheless, she considers *Oke Tude* more ‘effective’ because by running *Tude* she recovered from tuberculosis. Yet, when I asked her which religious affiliation she fills in on a university form, she responded ‘Muslim of course, since my father is a Muslim’. Sefiyat’s narrative challenges essentialist notions of religion that the framework of syncretism reinforces. Moreover, the relativism implied in her comments (Sefiyat remains Muslim while attending Chrislam or Redeemed Christian Church of God services) stands in marked contrast to the categorical absolutism of the anthropological conception of religion as an internally consistent belief system.

Underlining that Chrislam worshippers do not intend to harmonize Christian and Muslim beliefs and practices in a syncretic synthesis, simply because they do not necessarily recognize contradictions between these beliefs and practices, an *Ifeoluwa* member of long standing responded to my question as to whether he worshipped Jesus as the son of God (as in

Christianity) or as a prophet (as in Islam) that ‘he is both’. Highlighting their similarity, Tella said: ‘Jesus Christ is on my right hand side, the Prophet Muhammad is on my left hand side; they are two of my best friends.’ Although my interlocutors put Christianity and Islam on the same footing as prophetic traditions, the most fundamental doctrine in Islam is *tawhid*, which holds that God is One. The Islamic principle that God is Unitarian differs from the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. However, Tella’s first wife did not consider these doctrines conflicting: ‘God is not three but just one. Both Christians and Muslims believe in the same God and they believe that He is one. We aren’t idol worshippers.’ I had expected that Chrislamists would have problems with the notion of the Holy Spirit, because unlike the figure of Jesus this is a notion predominant in Christianity while absent in Islam, but I proved to be wrong. When expressing my confusion about how the notion of the Holy Spirit had become firmly integrated within Chrislam, a female *Ifeoluwa* member lectured me: ‘The Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit, whether it touches a Christian or a Muslim.’ Tella added: ‘The Holy Spirit is not reserved to Christians – God doesn’t discriminate. He revealed himself to humanity through the Holy Spirit. Muslims call him Jibril; Christians Gabriel – it’s all the same.’ These narratives suggest that for Chrislamists, religion is not centrally about the truth of one religious tradition and the falsehood of others. Instead of competing sets of truth claims, both Christianity and Islam are believed to represent distinct loci for achieving a state of deliverance and may therefore well be combined (see also Kirsch 2004: 707; McIntosh 2009: 183-4).³⁴ An *Oke Tude* member put it strongly: ‘Unlike what most people think, Chrislam is not about mixing Christianity and Islam in a new religion. We gain the good things from both.’

Because Christianity and Islam are not considered to be contradictory but rather seen as complementary and mutually reinforcing each other, Chrislamists retain rather than reconcile the distinctions between the two religious traditions. For instance, female worshippers from a Muslim background often continued wearing the headscarf upon joining Chrislam. In addition to praying the Chrislam style, several Chrislamists continued praying either the Christian or Muslim way at home in the hope of receiving dual blessings. In addition to fasting on Friday or when running *Tude*, *Ifeoluwa* and *Oke Tude* members from a Muslim background often fast during Ramadan as well. Furthermore, instead of running around the replica of the Ka‘aba during *Tude*, several *Oke Tude* members told me that they were ‘dreaming of going on *hajj* and circumambulating the Ka‘aba in Mecca’. Thus Chrislamists remain, to some extent, loyal to the religious tradition in which they were born (mostly Islam),³⁵ while making use of and interacting

with another religious tradition (in most cases Christianity). This openness to religious pluralism is not only a factor in drawing people to Chrislam; it also explains why membership of Chrislam – as we have seen in the *Oke Tude* case – is not accompanied by any formal conversion ritual like a baptism or sacramental communion. Rather than rejecting previous identities as in the conversion from one religious tradition to another, Chrislamists' religious behaviour resembles what Travisano calls 'alterations', that is, 'transitions to identities which are ... permitted within the person's established universes of discourse' (1981: 244, in Kirsch 2004: 707).

From the abovementioned it may be concluded that Chrislam's religious pluralism is not just about reconciling Christianity and Islam in a syncretic synthesis, but about drawing on both religious traditions simultaneously while marking them as distinct (see also McIntosh 2009: 188). Because of the preservation of religious differences through religious fusion, 'assemblage' – which, according to McFarlane and Anderson (2011: 162), functions as 'a name for unity across difference' – seems a more fine-grained analytical tool for analysing Chrislam than syncretism, which is premised on the assimilation of religious differences. Assemblage theory is derived from mechanics and has become adopted in social-science scholarship under the influence of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). In their work assemblage is the causally productive result of the intersection of two open systems. It has been Deleuze and Guattari's (1987: 503, 509, 530-1n.39) understanding of states of temporal instability, combined with the heterogeneous as a productive property of the interaction of open systems, which has influenced its use by social scientists as an anti-structural concept that connotes emergence, heterogeneity, the decentred, the evanescent, and the ephemeral (Marcus and Saka 2006: 104-5). Collier and Ong (2005) were the first anthropologists to employ assemblage theory as a lens through which to explore new socio-cultural formations emerging from globalization processes. Building on Collier and Ong, I use assemblage theory to explore new religious formations like Chrislam (see also Peletz 2013).

Although assemblage as a conceptual frame does not entirely fit the ethnographic case described here in that it – as pointed out by Ong and Collier (2005), Bennett (2010) and others – describes an *ad hoc* congregation that is not governed by a central force, head, or office, whereas in the case of Chrislam there is a charismatic leader who is very much in control, still assemblage seems more in line with how Chrislamists experience their religiosity than syncretism. The notion of syncretism presupposes the distinctness of religious traditions as default and takes mixing as a deviation. By contrast, the concept of assemblage challenges the tendency to study religious traditions uniformly and does not take religious boundaries for granted. Whereas syncretism

designates an absolute category that refers to the outcome of religious blending, assemblage is emerging and rhizomatic. And whereas syncretism focuses on the mixture of religious elements into a new organic whole that assimilates its component parts (Baird 1991), assemblage leaves room for the juxtaposition of divergent religious elements and allows for the amalgamation to be more than simply an aggregate of its component parts. Or, in terms of Bennett, ‘an assemblage is never a stolid block but an open-ended collective, a “non-totalizable” sum’ (2010: 24).

To sum up, the merit of studying Chrislam as an assemblage is that the contradictions between Christianity and Islam are not reasoned away because members are not expected to be consistent in their beliefs or committed to a single tradition of practice (see also McIntosh 2009: 189). Far from being reasoned away as in syncretism, contradictions and inconsistencies between Christianity and Islam are embraced, even celebrated as part of the multitude of spiritual gifts bestowed by God upon humanity – gifts that deliver Chrislamists from any hardship in their lives. The underlying idea in Chrislam’s assemblage of Christianity and Islam is that to be a Christian or Muslim alone is not enough to guarantee success in this world and the hereafter and therefore Chrislam worshippers partake in Christian as well as Muslim practices, appropriating the perceived powers of both.

CONCLUSION

By means of an ethnographic case study of Chrislam, I have made a plea for a conceptual reconfiguration of the Christian-Muslim encounters in Nigeria. Rather than tearing the country apart in a Christian south and a Muslim north, Chrislam provides its members with a powerful tool to deliberately manoeuvre between Christianity and Islam. Beginning with the religious revival in the 1970s, Lagos has produced new constellations of religion in the form of Chrislam among other things. A focus on these novel religious assemblages challenges conventional assumptions of Christianity and Islam as bounded and distinct traditions, and forces us to rethink our analytical tools for understanding religious pluralism, leaving more room for ambivalence and incoherence.

In their conceptualization of distinct religions as bounded entities constituted by the belief in God, anthropologists and other scholars of religion have long hold on to contentious appellations like syncretism, in the sense of the mingling of religious traditions that might once have been incompatible but are now rendered compatible (McIntosh 2009: 186). However, Chrislamists do not strive to harmonize Christianity and Islam, and they are not bothered by ontological

contradictions between the two traditions. Since religion is for *Ifeoluwa* and *Oke Tude* members not primarily about belief but about practical concerns, the pragmatic assemblage of diverse – and often contradictory – religious elements is permitted as long as it helps them confront the contingencies of daily life in Lagos.

Studying Chrislam in terms of an assemblage fits in with Larkin's and Meyer's (2006) plea to go beyond the ready-made binary opposition between Christianity and Islam and to concentrate instead on their convergence. This also ties in with Lambek's (2008) call for replacing the exclusive 'either/or' binary logic that characterizes Western scholarship on religion by the pluralist logic of 'both/and' marking local religious practice. For the Malagasy in Mayotte and northwest Madagascar studied by Lambek, religion has long been inclusive. They regularly observed that God was the same everywhere and hence it mattered little which avenue one used to approach Him. For example, a devout Malagasy Muslim told Lambek (2008: 125) that when he served as a rural policeman in a region without mosques, he simply took part in Christian observances. This resembles Chrislam's inclusive religious practice in which instead of making absolute choices between bounded alternatives one can be a Christian and Muslim simultaneously.

The study of Chrislam as a religious assemblage helps us to move away from the conventional understanding of Christian-Muslim relations in terms of either religious conflict (a tendency that has gained more currency in the media since the upsurge of Boko Haram) or what scholars attempting to advance ecumenical ideas have called 'interfaith dialogue'. Although these two approaches represent opposites – the former stressing 'war' and the latter 'peace' – they suffer from the same limitation: they take religious boundaries for granted. Challenging the tendency to study Christian-Muslim interactions in terms of either conflict or cooperation, assemblage as a conceptual model helps us to understand Chrislam as a heterogeneous and unstable arrangement of practices that are not reducible to a single logic. Taking such a course may eventually shift the attention from a narrow analysis of 'world' religion as a coherent belief system towards a perspective that focuses on how religious practitioners actually live religion in their daily lives, and the ambiguities, inconsistencies, aspirations, and double standards as the constitutive moments in their lived religiosity.

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an ethnographic case study of Chrislam, a series of religious movements that fuse Christian and Muslim beliefs and practices, in its socio-cultural and political-economic setting in Nigeria's former capital Lagos. Against conventional approaches to study religious movements in Africa as syncretic forms of 'African Christianity' or 'African Islam', I suggest that 'syncretism' is a misleading appellation for Chrislam. In fact, Chrislam provides a rationale for scrutinizing the very concept of syncretism and offers an alternative analytical case for understanding its mode of religious pluralism. To account for the religious plurality in Chrislam, I employ assemblage theory as it proposes novel ways for looking at Chrislam's religious mixing that are in line with how its worshippers perceive their religiosity. The underlying idea in Chrislam's assemblage of Christianity and Islam is that to be a Christian or Muslim alone is not enough to guarantee success in this world and the hereafter and therefore Chrislam worshippers partake in Christian as well as Muslim practices, appropriating the perceived powers of both.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Marloes Janson is Reader in West African Anthropology at SOAS, University of London, and was previously a researcher at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin. Her ethnographic work focuses on religious reform (both Muslim and Christian) in the Gambia and Nigeria. Janson is the books reviews editor of the *Journal of Religion in Africa*. Her publications include *Islam, Youth, and Modernity in the Gambia: The Tablighi Jama'at* (Cambridge University Press/International African Institute, 2014). She received a PhD in cultural anthropology from Leiden University, the Netherlands.

NOTES

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¹ The 1970s – the years just after the Nigerian Civil War when a dramatic growth in oil revenues raised hope for Nigeria's national development – were a time of religious revival, when Pentecostal groups and Islamic reformist groups came into being (Peel 2016: 220-1). A further indication of religious revival was the emergence of Chrislam in Lagos. Despite the relocation of many government institutions to the federal capital of Abuja in 1991, Lagos remains Nigeria's economic and cultural hub.

² Most 'mainstream' believers, however, distanced themselves from Chrislam by saying that as self-respecting Christians or pious Muslims they would not partake in Chrislam rituals.

³ Drawing on MacGaffey (1983: 16), I define religious pluralism as the phenomenon whereby 'two or more collectivities, each characterized by its own set of basic institutions, are differentially incorporated within the same ... framework'. Rather than a 'problem' opposing the neo-Platonic tradition of 'monism', I consider religious pluralism an opportunity to reconsider essentialist notions of 'world' religion and to rethink the coexistence of religious traditions in West Africa today.

⁴ Most of the cases described in the literature concern the mixing of African Traditional Religion with Christianity, and less often Islam – which are artificially distanced as 'traditional' and 'modern' (MacGaffey 1983: 18) – and not so much the fusion of two monotheistic religions. What is distinctly new about the movements described here is their deliberate appropriation of Christian and Muslim elements as reflected in the name they usurped for self-designation: Chrislam.

⁵ NASFAT was founded by a group of young Yoruba professionals, who were concerned about the lack of religious awareness among higher-class youth, in Lagos in 1995. Targeting Muslim youth, its leadership fashioned NASFAT as a revivalist Muslim movement aspiring to achieve 'conformity with modernity'. Established at a time when the Pentecostal presence in the public sphere was increasingly pronounced, NASFAT is probably the most effective response to Pentecostalism, adopting many practices and strategies from it (Soares 2009; Peel 2016: 186-91; Janson f.c.).

⁶ Larkin and Meyer (2006: 287-8) identify three basic commonalities between Pentecostal Christianity and reformist Islam in West Africa: both religious traditions distance themselves from local religious and cultural traditions; both offer their adherents new ways of becoming 'modern'; and both see themselves as part of global movements.

⁷ For the study of Christianity and Islam as mirror images, see also Loimeier (2005); Cooper (2006); Marshall (2009); Janson (2016). However, as Peel points out in his response paper in this issue, there are also irreconcilable differences between Christianity and Islam in West Africa, notably in the call for *Shari'a* and an Islamic state. Yet, although not taking *jihad* as its model to bring about religious reform, many current Pentecostal Churches dream, more or less openly, about a Christian nation (Marshall 2009; see also Obadare's response paper).

⁸ Though this is not to say that Nigeria was free from religious tension before the 1970s. For instance, in the 19th century Usman dan Fodio led a *jihad* that resulted in the creation of the Sokoto Caliphate, the largest state in West Africa until it was conquered by the British. But since the late 1970s incidents of religious violence have increased in number, spread geographically, and affected larger portions of the population (Falola 1998: 5).

⁹ Although the issue of the Shari'a law added to the existing anxieties among Christians to be dominated by Muslims, Loimeier (2007: 59) warns not to consider the Shari'a as the sole instigator of Christian-Muslim clashes. For example, a considerable number of Christian-Muslim tensions have occurred in Plateau state, where the Shari'a has not been implemented. The conflicts in Plateau state are mostly linked to disputes over land and access to resources between settlers and immigrant groups. This demonstrates that conflict in Nigeria is instrumentalized for a variety of reasons.

¹⁰ The Boko Haram uprising was not the first forceful attempt to impose a religious ideology on a secular Nigerian society. Boko Haram compares to Maitatsine in terms of philosophy, objectives, and organizational planning (Adesoji 2010: 96-8). The Cameroonian Mohammed Marwa, alias Maitatsine ('the Master of Condemnation'), founded the radical Maitatsine movement in Kano in the 1970s. Marwa's movement was highly controversial: he refused to believe that Muhammad was the Prophet and he claimed to be a Prophet himself. Maitatsine was responsible for many riots (envisioned as *jihad*), during which Christians and churches were attacked, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of people. Like Boko Haram, Maitatsine propagated a stricter form of Islamic practice through condemning Western culture.

¹¹ *Aladura* Churches were founded in the early 1930s with the aim of Africanizing the Protestant Mission Churches (Peel 1968).

¹² IMC's story is featured in the documentary entitled *The Imam and the Pastor*, produced by FLT Films. A 2010 follow-up documentary, *An African Answer*, chronicles their journey since, and the reconciliation process approaches in Kenya (<http://www.fltfilms.org.uk/>).

¹³ Deliverance may be understood broadly as what the Yoruba call *alafia*, a condition of well-being with health and prosperity as its main components, which sums up what individuals pray for and wish for one another (see also Peel's response paper).

¹⁴ '419' is what Nigerians call fraud; apparently after a section in the Nigerian criminal code that describes these crimes (Smith 2001: 804).

¹⁵ 'Mountain' has a strong reference to Mount Sinai in Egypt where, according to Christian and Jewish traditions, Moses received the Ten Commandments.

¹⁶ Besides the Sabbath, I did not come across other references to Judaism in *Ifeoluwa*.

¹⁷ *Tawaf* is one of the Muslim rituals of pilgrimage. During the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), Muslims circumambulate the Ka'aba (the most sacred site in Islam) seven times. This circling is believed to demonstrate the unity of the believers in the worship of God, as they move in harmony together around the Ka'aba, while supplicating to Allah.

¹⁸ According to the Prosperity Gospel, God bestows spiritual and material blessings on those He loves, whereas the devil is responsible for the Spirit of Poverty, which has so many Africans in its grip (Larkin and Meyer 2006: 290-1n.6).

¹⁹ As Gore and Pratten (2003) point out, during the economic crisis in the mid-1980s, and especially during the coercive and repressive military regimes of the 1990s, secret forms of organization like the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity have re-emerged in Nigeria.

²⁰ The wearing of white gowns by *Ifeoluwa* worshippers reminds of the dress code in the so-called 'White Garment Churches' (*alaso funfun*), that is, *Aladura* Churches, as well as in certain Muslim prayer groups (Peel 1968; 2016: 190).

²¹ Based on his power to 'see' ('seeing' is the term used in Pentecostal Churches for prophecy), Saka regards himself as a prophet intermediating between God and his followers. Besides prophesying, another feature of Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria is the growing trend toward intellectualization (Marshall 2009: 179-81). In line with this trend, Nigerian Pentecostal pastors often adopt the title of 'doctor', deliver lectures, publish books, and open universities. As reflected in his name and activities, Saka – who never finished secondary school – has been influenced by this trend.

²² Similar to the strong connection between witchcraft and the Christian imagery of the Devil (Meyer 1999), *Oke Tude* members believe that witches and wizards conspire with *jinn*s or Muslim spirits to block their progress in life.

²³ *Tude* resembles the *sa'i* ritual during the *hajj*, when pilgrims run or rapidly walk seven times back and forth between the hills of Safa and Marwah. This is a re-enactment of Hagar's search for water before Allah revealed the water of the Zamzam well to her.

²⁴ The practice of exhibiting healed members' crutches comes from the Catholic tradition of *ex votos*. One sees a similar practice in T. B. Joshua's *The Synagogue, Church of All Nations* (SCOAN) in Lagos. Joshua's alleged healing powers have brought him international fame.

²⁵ Also Pentecostal Churches have appeal particularly for African women and youth, who seek to eschew patriarchal and gerontocratical hierarchies (e.g. Van Dijk 1999; Mate 2002; Maxwell 2002).

²⁶ That Saka received photographs by divine revelation is interesting in relation to the heavy mediatization of religion in Nigeria (Larkin and Meyer 2006).

²⁷ Ironically, whereas state representatives took offence at Saka's attempt to mix Christianity, Islam, and Yoruba religion, they did not see a contradiction in his bringing together Christianity and Islam.

²⁸ Whereas the imam and prayer leaders were previously ordinary believers, they have been promoted to leading positions by Saka who employs them fulltime.

²⁹ Saka's conception of the Abrahamic religions seems to exclude Judaism. There are not many Jews in Nigeria, except for some Igbo communities with Judaic practices (Bruder 2008).

³⁰ By privileging the performative aspects of religious practice over religious belief, the Chrislam leaders reassert traditional religious patterns. The predominant feature of African Traditional Religion is that it assigns primacy to preventing misfortune and maximizing good fortune. In this context, De Craemer et al. (1976) speak of the 'fortune-misfortune complex' in traditional religious practice. The influence of the local historical religious heritage on Chrislam deserves further study.

³¹ 'Area Boys', or urban youth gangs, are associated with crime, '419', and violence (Momoh 2000).

³² During my field research in Lagos, I came across only one Chrislam leader from a non-Muslim background: Malaika, the founder of the Saint Peter's Church (New Jerusalem), has an *Aladura* background. During her Sunday services Malaika, who is a Lilliputian, sits on a throne and does *dhikr* (remembrance of God by recalling His names), while sipping from a bottle of beer. The main part of the Sunday service is composed of singing Christian and Muslim songs, dancing, eating and drinking.

³³ An example of anti-syncretism is found in the *Aladura* Churches. Peel (1968: 129, 133-4) criticizes studies that analyze them as syncretic churches. According to the church members, their forms of prayer-healing and possession are not syncretic since they have Western Christian rather than Yoruba origins.

³⁴ Although I am referring to a different ethnographic setting than McIntosh (2009), who explores the intersection of class and ethnicity among the Kenyan Giriama whereas my article pays attention to the intersection between religion and ethnicity among the Nigerian Yoruba, the Chrislamists' religious practice resembles that of the Giriama. McIntosh's ethnographic analysis has helped me to develop a model that advances the study of religious plurality.

³⁵ Saka estimated that around 80 per cent of his congregation is of Muslim origin. This seems to assert the common belief that Islam is more accommodative, more 'African' so to say, than Christianity (cf. Laitin 1986: 189).