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Crossing borders: the case of NASFAT or ‘Pentecostal Islam’ in Southwest Nigeria

Abstract

The Pentecostal movement in Nigeria, with its emphasis on this-worldly blessings and healing, has become so vibrant that today even Muslim organisations appear to be increasingly ‘Pentecostalised’. Nasrul-Lahi-il Fathi Society of Nigeria or NASFAT is a case in point. In an effort to compete with Pentecostalism on Yorubaland’s religious marketplace, NASFAT has copied Pentecostal prayer forms, such as the crusade and night vigil, while emphasising Muslim doctrine. As such, the case of NASFAT illustrates that religious borrowing does not imply that religious boundaries do not matter: indeed, NASFAT is a powerful example of the preservation of religious differences through the appropriation of Pentecostal styles and strategies. In this spirit, religiously plural movements such as NASFAT prompt us to unlock analytical space in the nearly hermetically sealed anthropologies of Islam and Christianity and to develop a comparative framework that overcomes essentialist notions of religious diversity.

Key words comparative religion, religious pluralism, Muslim-Christian relations, Islamic reform, Nigeria

Introduction

‘Welcome to Lagos; here everything is possible’ were the words with which my research collaborator, Mustapha Bello, greeted me when I first arrived in Nigeria’s economic epicentre. That everything is possible in Lagos I soon discovered when we drove by a three-storey building that hosted a mainstream church, a Pentecostal church and a mosque. Although he described himself as a ‘die-hard Muslim’, Mustapha did not seem to have any problem with a mosque sharing the same space as a church. Underlining the pragmatism that characterises Lagosians, he argued that this was an ‘economic use of space’. While in this particular building different religious institutions occupied different floors, I also came across movements mixing Islam and Christianity. Nasrul-Lahi-il Fathi Society of Nigeria or NASFAT – one of Nigeria’s largest contemporary Muslim organisations – is a case in point. Complementing the typical image of Nigeria as being torn by religious violence, this article illustrates that rivalry is just one aspect of Muslim–Christian manifold relations. I argue that if we want to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of religiously pluriform settings such as Yorubaland in southwestern

Nigeria,¹ where Muslims and Christians interact, align with and copy from another (Peel 2016a), we must bridge the common divide in the study of religion along theological boundaries and overcome essentialist notions of religious difference.

The call to devise better ways of understanding religious encounters in Africa (and beyond; see this special issue) is not new. Sanneh's prediction that interreligious encounter, which he illustrated with a vignette of a Christian man reciting a Muslim prayer, heralded 'the arrival of an age of religious convergence' (1975: 108) has not come true. Three decades later, Soares wrote in his edited volume on Muslim–Christian encounters that the dynamics of 'their interactions in Africa are still not properly understood' (2006: 1).² Around the same time, Larkin and Meyer proposed to look at reformist Islam and evangelical Pentecostalism in West Africa as *doppelgangers*: 'enemies whose actions mirror each other and whose fates are largely intertwined' (2006: 287). Nevertheless, more than a decade later, Muslim–Christian relations in Africa are still largely approached in terms of either religious conflict (a tendency that has gained more currency since the upsurge of Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria) or what scholars attempting to advance ecumenical ideas have called 'interfaith dialogue'. Although these two approaches represent opposites, they suffer from the same limitation: they take religious boundaries for granted. By means of an ethnographic case study of NASFAT,³ this article attempts to open up the binary logic of an exclusive 'either/or' that permeates the anthropological study of religion and replace it by an inclusive 'both/and' paradigm (Lambek 2008).

Nigerian Muslims fear that Pentecostalism, with its lively worship, flashy health and wealth gospel, extensive use of modern media and opening up of leadership positions to young people, will lure their children away from Islam (Soares 2009). In an attempt to curb anxiety about the exodus of youth, a group of Western-educated young Yoruba professionals founded NASFAT in Lagos in 1995. Targeting Muslim youth, they fashioned NASFAT as a 'pacesetting Islamic organisation' aspiring to achieve 'conformity to modernity'. In consonance with neoliberal consumer capitalism and a lifestyle associated with modernity, NASFAT offers management courses taking the Prophet Muhammad as exemplar businessman, professional network meetings and a dating service called 'Dating the *Halal* Way' (Janson 2018). These are also the kinds of services that Pentecostal churches offer, which explain their appeal to a youthful, upwardly mobile middle class. NASFAT may thus be interpreted as a direct response to Pentecostalism, adopting strategies and practices from it, thereby affirming Obadare's argument that 'Christian resurgence, epitomized by Pentecostalism, has provided an impetus for Muslim revivalism and charismatisation' (2018: 26). Consequently, many Nigerians (Christians and Muslims alike) refer to NASFAT in terms of 'Islamic Pentecostalism' (Sanni 2004; Soares 2009: 183–4; 2016) or 'Muslim born-again' (Peel 2016a: 187).

¹ Although Yorubaland is certainly not an exceptional setting in Africa, its religious constellation is unique for several reasons. Whereas elsewhere in Nigeria and beyond, multi-religious communities are small-scale and geographically demarcated, in Yorubaland – a vast region of approximately 50,000 square miles with a population of about 40 million people – religious pluralism is practised on a large scale (Peel 2000).

² In his follow-up article, Soares concludes that even if it is now acknowledged by some scholars that it is no longer sufficient to study different religions as separate units, the study of Muslim–Christian encounters is 'only beginning to receive the empirical and analytical attention that it merits' (2016: 691).

³ This case study is based on approximately nine months of ethnographic field research in Lagos, between 2010 and 2017.

Although I do not deny that Islam and Christianity have their own distinctive historical traditions in Nigeria and propagate different doctrines, my point here is that we should focus more on the ways in which religious practitioners actually 'live' religion and how their ways of 'living' religion relate to each other. A focus on lived religiosity may eventually shift the attention from a narrow analysis of religious traditions as mutually exclusive to the complex dynamics of actual entanglements. Although under the influence of the 'fundamentalisation' of religion in Nigeria (Peel 2016b) there has been an increasing tendency to underscore religious boundaries,⁴ the case of NASFAT illustrates that while it urges Nigerian youths to become 'good Muslims', and thus emphasises religious divisions, it simultaneously borrows from Pentecostalism. Our challenge is therefore to develop a new comparative framework that sheds a fresh perspective on practices of religious pluralism.

Muslim–Christian encounters in Yorubaland

A factor explaining NASFAT's success in southwest Nigeria is its targeting of Yoruba Muslims, and youth in particular. In the few studies that exist on NASFAT, the organisation is described in terms of ethnicity. For instance, Soares claims that 'although NASFAT has spread rapidly and widely since it was founded in the mid-1990s, it remains very much a Yoruba Muslim organization, arguable even a form of Yoruba Muslim cultural nationalism' (2009: 190). This may explain why NASFAT's spread to northern Nigeria was originally resisted: northerners read an ethnic motive by Yoruba Muslims into the movement's growth (Adeniyi 2013). Given its particular religious constellation, it is not surprising that NASFAT originated and expanded in Yorubaland. In what follows, I map NASFAT as part of Yorubaland's pluriform religious constellation.

Nigeria has a long history of conflict and religious violence, which makes it an interesting setting in which to study NASFAT's entanglement of Muslim and Christian beliefs and practices. 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 characterise the nation is 'Nigeria is a war'. And yet, Muslim–Christian relations in Nigeria are not just marked by conflict: Muslims and Christians have long lived side by side, often in harmony with practitioners of Yoruba religion (Peel 2000, 2016a). For centuries, there were high levels of social interaction between Muslims, Christians and 'traditionalists', and interfaith marriages and reverted conversions were common (Soares 2006: 2–3; Nolte and Ogen 2017a, 2017b).

⁴ Two prominent examples of this tendency are the militant Islamist group Boko Haram and the Pentecostal mega-churches that aim to reform the way religion has long been practised locally. However, even those movements that emphasise neat religious divisions are themselves often the product of engagement with religious others. For example, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) – one of the fastest growing Pentecostal churches in Nigeria – calls adherents to break with their 'sinful past' of 'idol worshipping', but in doing so it constantly revokes 'traditional' Yoruba religion (see also Meyer 1998).

Most analysts date the beginning of Muslim–Christian confrontations in Nigeria to the late 1970s,⁵ when a new constitution had to be adopted after power temporarily shifted from the military regime to civil politicians. Conflict arose over the question of whether Nigeria should become a secular state or subscribe to the *shari'a* legal system (Falola 1998). Moreover, the rapid rise and spread of Pentecostalism and its increased presence in the public sphere fundamentally altered Nigeria's religious landscape (Obadare 2018). As Ojo (1988: 179–84) points out, the Pentecostal movement took off 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 collapsing oil prices in the 1980s, Pentecostalism expanded even faster. Over the past three decades, Pentecostalism has drawn many Nigerian Christians from the mainline churches, promising them spiritual rebirth. The Pentecostal upsurge has thus played a central role in the increasing political cleavage along religious lines. That religion has become 'weaponised' (Obadare 2018: 126) is apparent in Pentecostals fighting what they see as 'a life and death battle with the enemy', i.e. Muslims (Marshall-Fratani 1998: 308). Muslims reacted with equally aggressive proselytisation campaigns.

In this current of conflict, Yorubaland is something of an exception. Muslims, Christians and practitioners of Yoruba religion have lived together relatively harmoniously here since the 19th century, making the region an icon of ecumenism (Peel 2000). Indeed, many extended Yoruba families are composed of Muslims, Christians 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* way, so that his Muslim relatives and neighbours can also partake of the meal. Similarly, Christians participate in the festivities at the end of Ramadan. This asserts Laitin's argument that in Yorubaland 'cross-cutting cleavages have made the politicization of religion difficult' (1986: 141).

Because the Yoruba seem to attach more value to common culture and ethnicity than to religious affiliation, NASFAT can be considered a typical Yoruba phenomenon: it is the shared culture and ethnicity that makes the appropriation of Christian elements by Yoruba Muslims possible and acceptable. Gani Adams, the leader of the Yoruba nationalist organisation Oodua People's Progress (OPC), emphasised the complex way in which religion plays into present-day Yoruba identity politics as follows:

Yoruba religion, Islam and Christianity do not exclude each other; in fact, they go together. The reason why I was late for this interview was that I had been performing Muslim supplications all morning. On Sunday I go to the church, and I practise Yoruba religion as well. Being a Yoruba means that you don't see a contradiction between the three religions.

Although the Yoruba remain a beacon of religious amity, also in Yorubaland religious relations grew tenser in the 1980s. For instance, the history of Yoruba popular theatre recounted by Barber demonstrates that whereas the early history of the theatre was

⁵ This is not to say that Nigeria was free from religious tension before the 1970s. For example, in the early 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. However, since the late 1970s incidents of religious violence have increased in number, spread geographically and affected larger portions of the population (Falola 1998: 5).

marked by 'ecumenical inclusivity' (2000: 424), towards the late 1980s there was an increasing trend of religious polarisation and 'fundamentalist exclusions and oppositions carved up the theater's audience into smaller and smaller fragments' (2000: 340). While the focus in Yorubaland shifted again to religious symbiosis in the 1990s, it is well possible that the competition between Muslims and Christians will contribute to the hardening of religious boundaries in the future (Nolte and Ogen 2017b: 264).

NASFAT demonstrates not only the porosity and fluidity of religious boundaries in Yorubaland, it can also be interpreted as an emancipation attempt by Yoruba Muslims. Islam in the southwest is often described by northerners as having been subject to a process of 'domestication' or 'Yorubacisation' (Danmole 2008: 205–6). This appellation is, as Nolte and Ogen (2017a: 14–15) note, problematic because it suggests that there exists a 'pure Islam' from which Yoruba Islam, which is considered less 'orthodox' and more prone to syncretic 'mixing' with traditional elements than Islam in the north, is derived. To counter this image, NASFAT provides Yoruba Muslims with an organisational framework for a reformed religious community, thereby underlining that Yoruba Islamic practice is 'modern' and 'enlightened'.⁶

NASFAT originated in Yorubaland's cosmopolitan centre Lagos, whose estimated population of 20 million represents a crossroads of people 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'.⁷ The immorality that is associated with life in the 'Sin City' is compensated by a saturation of both the public sphere and people's private lives with religion, converting the 'Sin City' into a 'Prayer City' (Ukah 2013). Larkin and Meyer explain the dynamism of reformist Muslim and Pentecostal Christian movements in urban 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). In a similar vein, NASFAT's appeal can be explained by its ability to negotiate the culture of insecurity that marks daily life in the 'apocalyptic megacity' that is Lagos (Koolhaas 2001). This context of uncertainty necessitates the skills of inventiveness and entrepreneurship that resonate with the novel ways of being Muslim as propagated by NASFAT. By participating in NASFAT's professionalisation activities, Lagosian youths have converted themselves from passive victims of an eroding state and a failing urban infrastructure into enlightened Muslims who actively engage the religious world they help to create.

NASFAT's mission and vision

Concerned about the lack of religious awareness among Muslim youngsters, a group of seven young professional Yoruba men – university graduates who were working in banking and other modern sectors of the Nigerian economy – assembled in Lagos in 1995 to establish a prayer group. The driving force behind the group was Alhaji Abdul-Lateef

⁶ Both terms are widely used in NASFAT's Mission Statement. All citations in this article are from NASFAT's Constitution (<http://nasfat.org/images/stories/NASFAT%20CONSTITUTION.pdf> Accessed 16 October 2018), Prayer Book (NASFAT Society 2006), Code of Conduct (NASFAT Society 2005) and website (<http://www.nasfat.org/> Accessed 16 October 2018).

⁷ '419' is what Nigerians call fraud – apparently after a section in the Nigerian criminal code that describes these crimes (Smith 2007).

Olasupo, now retired as a senior manager with one of Nigeria's largest banks and chairman of NASFAT's Board of Trustees. He and his fellows named the prayer group NASFAT, an acronym of Nasrul-Lahi-il Fathi Society of Nigeria, which translates as 'There is no help except from Allah' (Soares 2009; Peel 2016a: 186–91). In less than two decades, NASFAT has become hugely successful: it claims to have over 300 branches in Nigeria and other African countries, Europe and the USA, and a membership exceeding 1.2 million.

NASFAT's expansion is to be explained by the appeal of its spectacular prayer gatherings or *asalatu*, which take place on Sunday mornings from 8.30am to 12.30pm and attract a larger audience than the Friday congregational prayer. Explaining the choice for Sunday, the most important day in the Christian calendar, one of NASFAT's founding fathers told me:

We noticed that Muslim youths were useless on Sundays, sleeping late, watching television, doing nothing, while Christians went to church. Friday is the most blessed day for Muslims, but we don't have the same kind of privileges on Fridays as the Christians have on Sundays. That's how the idea of Sunday *asalatu* came up.

When the number of NASFAT members increased, *asalatu* was decentralised. Nowadays prayer gatherings take place in NASFAT's headquarters in Lagos and local branches spread all over Yorubaland. The first Sunday of the month the members based in Lagos assemble at NASFAT's prayer camp, stretching to 100 acres of land along the busy Lagos–Ibadan Expressway. Drawing on the examples of the Redeemed Christian Church of God's Redemption City and Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries' Prayer City – massive prayer camps where hundreds of thousands of worshippers flock to attend prayer services – NASFAT's prayer camp, called NASFAT Islamic Centre, is being projected as a model city for Muslims. That NASFAT competes with the Pentecostal prayer camps became apparent in 2001, when its celebration of *Laylatul Qadr* (the night during Ramadan when the first verses of the Qur'an were allegedly revealed to Muhammad) attracted tens of thousands of worshippers, as a result of which the traffic along the Lagos–Ibadan Expressway was blocked for two days. Because in the southwest the blocking of streets for prayer is usually associated with Pentecostal churches, NASFAT's flooding of the Expressway can be interpreted as an attempt to assert Muslim presence in what is marked a 'Christian space' (Obadare 2016: 75–6).

A missionary⁸ explained NASFAT's success as follows:

NASFAT has a strong mission and vision, which speaks to the Muslim elite. The majority of our members are bankers, business executives, accountants, lawyers, engineers, doctors, university lecturers and government officials. Besides elites, we are progressive Muslims who practise Islam in a way that fits today's world. Our social profile distinguishes us from other prayer groups.

The Western suits and ties that are worn during NASFAT's executive meetings are a symbol of the elite status to which NASFAT aspires. The targeting of Muslim professionals

⁸ Perhaps in an effort to distinguish themselves from Christian missionaries, many NASFAT officials self-identified as 'missioners'. They are distinguished by their knowledge of Islam and their commitment to its principles. Their main responsibility is to spread NASFAT's message through *da'wa* (the 'call to Islam'). While all Muslim organisations engage in *da'wa*, within NASFAT this activity encompasses economic empowerment in the form of business ventures (see below).

needs to be studied in relation to Pentecostalism's theology of the Prosperity Gospel that preaches that God bestows spiritual and material blessings on those He loves, which explains Pentecostalism's popularity among a young, upwardly mobile middle-class (Marshall 2009). In an attempt to reconcile Islam with the modern society in which urban youth live, NASFAT overtly copies from Pentecostalism (Soares 2009: 186–7; Peel 2016a; Ibrahim 2017). In line with its self-presentation as a modernist movement for the Western educated elite, NASFAT preaches and publishes mainly in English.

In addition to its appeal among Muslim professionals, another factor behind NASFAT's phenomenal growth is, according to a NASFAT missionary, its 'inclusive nature':

Any Muslim can thrive in NASFAT; we are a liberal movement. Sufis and Salafis assemble on Sundays to pray together. You find here men with beards, clean-shaved men, ... women with fashionable *bijabs*, and women with body-covering gowns. When you are a Muslim who accepts other Muslims, you are welcome.

Indeed, NASFAT's non-sectarian character explains why the younger generation feels attracted to it. A university student said:

Other Muslim movements are strict on their members; they don't want women to wear fashionable clothes. But when I attend NASFAT's *asalatu* in jeans with a small shawl to cover my hair, nobody will complain. That's why I feel at home in NASFAT.

Here it should be noted that, despite its open character, NASFAT is preoccupied with the development of a reformed Muslim society that condemns the way Islam has long been practised locally.

To draw in more youth, NASFAT has set up a Youth Wing that is actively involved in organising activities for youngsters, such as vocational and employability training, a platform for professional networking, a dating service and an annual Youth Conference. NASFAT targets not only youth but also women as the instruments of Islamic reform. NASFAT's Women's Wing has been successful in raising the religious status of Muslim women and in bringing them together for educational purposes, such as vocational training, Arabic lessons⁹ and *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis) classes. Following the example of the Pentecostal churches, NASFAT has opened up leadership positions to women. NASFAT's female representatives are members of the National Executive Council and operate at the senior-most level of NASFAT, taking decisions on strategy, planning, policy and investment. A female representative explained women's leadership roles in NASFAT as follows:

Women are the main pillar of support for NASFAT. They are more effective in raising funds and they are more committed to their faith than their male counterparts. Men are a bit funny you know. If you want to draw them in, you need to pamper them like babies. Women are not like that.

Because NASFAT is negotiating new roles for women, some established Muslim scholars accused its leadership of implementing *bid'a* or un-Islamic innovations (Adeniyi 2013: 332). NASFAT leaders defended themselves against these accusations by arguing

⁹ These lessons take place on Sundays, as part of what NASFAT calls its 'Sunday School'.

that NASFAT strictly obeys the Islamic principle of gender segregation. Women and men sit separately during *asalat*, and security patrols to make sure that this rule is observed.

Criticism is coming not only from outside of NASFAT but also from within. Although, as we will see below, the copying of Pentecostal organisational structures explains NASFAT's enormous success, its spiritual leader, Chief Missioner Akinbode, criticised the way NASFAT is run as a 'business' and demanded the merging of its spiritual and administrative leadership. When Akinbode's call for more spirituality fell on deaf ears, he resigned in April 2017, taking many NASFAT members with him. Somewhat ironically, the solution to NASFAT's current leadership crisis lies, according to a NASFAT official, in its willingness to learn from Pentecostal leadership styles:

If we do not want to lose our grip on the Society [NASFAT], we must copy Christian management structures. Only then can we deliver on our mandate of providing strong leadership to the Muslim *umma* in combating the onslaught of Pentecostalism.

NASFAT's modernist message of Islamic reform is disseminated during the Sunday *asalat* which, copying Pentecostal discourse, is referred to as 'prayer crusades' and whose timing coincides with that of Pentecostal services. Below I describe the course of events during *asalat*.

NASFAT's prayer crusade

After another sleepless night, caused by the loud night vigil in the Pentecostal church next to the compound where I was staying, my alarm clock rang at some ungodly hour. Dressed in a body-covering dress and a *hijab*, I rushed to the gate, where the taxi driver – whose car window sported a NASFAT sticker – was waiting. Along the way, we picked up Mustapha Bello, who at that time was NASFAT's Assistant General Secretary. Although it was still early, we got stuck in a 'go-slow' – Nigerian slang for traffic congestion. From the stationary taxi, I observed Lagosians heading to their various Sunday programmes. In the cars next to us, I spotted men wearing smart suits accompanied by dressed-up women wearing hats or towering headdresses, with a Bible on the back shelf. In other cars, with prayer beads attached to the rear-view mirror, men dressed in caftans with matching caps were accompanied by women wearing colourful headscarves or more distinguished black *hijabs*. Bumper stickers propagated a variety of religious messages, ranging from 'I've found a friend in Jesus' to 'Proud to be Muslim'. A group of young evangelists ran along the motorway, accompanied by a brass band, while shouting 'Hallelujah' in an attempt to combine their early morning workout with proselytisation. Hoping for alms from drivers stuck in the traffic, beggars reciting Qur'anic verses knocked on car windows. Young men manoeuvred between the cars recommending religious paraphernalia. Loudspeakers set up in the recording studios along the highway sounded Christian hymns and Muslim sermons. Mustapha did not seem to be disturbed by this cacophony of religious sounds and symbols: 'This is Lagos for you', was his dry remark.

We finally reached NASFAT's headquarters. At the gate – with separate entrances for women and men – a young woman and man, wearing vests with the caption

'usher', distributed envelopes for members' 'prayer requests' – a practice that is common in Pentecostal churches but that I had never observed among Muslim groups. In the stall next to the gate, I bought a CD with Akinbode's 'Islamic gospel music'. I knew Akinbode as NASFAT's resigned Chief Missioner, but it turned out that in a previous career he had been a renowned lead vocalist. To my surprise, the CD did not contain the solemn Qur'anic recitation that I was used to but upbeat songs – resembling Christian gospel music – praising God and the Prophet. In another stall I bought NASFAT literature, including a booklet subtitled *Believers' Sword* – a collection of Muslim prayers for 'protection and for shielding against evil' (Shekoni 2012), which resembled the booklets with special prayer formulas or 'prayer points' that are sold in Pentecostal bookstores.

After shopping, I entered the 'extension ground', where several tents had been put up promoting NASFAT's 'strategic objectives'. According to its Mission Statement, which addresses NASFAT members as 'stakeholders', it is NASFAT's mission to 'empower Muslims spiritually as well as economically'.¹⁰ With this aim, it has invested heavily in business ventures, of which TAFSAN (NASFAT spelled backwards) Beverages is the oldest. TAFSAN produces and markets the non-alcoholic malt beverage Nasmalt,¹¹ which is sold during *asalatu*. Ten per cent of TAFSAN's profits go to NASFAT's university, Fountain University, which was founded in 2007. Explaining the university's foundation, a NASFAT missioner told me: 'Because of the Pentecostal syndrome that keeps Nigeria firmly in its grasp, we decided to establish our own university. All big Pentecostal churches have a university, so we thought we also needed one.'

Also TAFSAN Tours and Travels and TAFSAN Investment were represented at the extension ground. To facilitate the increasing number of Nigerian pilgrims to Mecca, NASFAT launched its own travel agency in 2006, which arranges travel to and accommodation in Mecca. TAFSAN Investment is the name of NASFAT's community bank, which operates in accordance with the ban in Islamic jurisprudence on charging interest on loans. It offers microcredit for small businesses and vocational training for women and youth. These business ventures are meant to fill the vacuum left by the Nigerian state – which has cut back or stopped providing social services – and to generate income and publicity for NASFAT. They put the movement on a par with Pentecostal churches which, as Ukah (2013: 189) points out, run elaborate marketing plans that have turned them into known 'brands' on the heavily contested religious marketplace that is Lagos. Unlike many other Muslim organisations, NASFAT is not patronised by Islamic scholars but is organised as a corporate business composed of an Executive Council, Management Council, Board of Trustees, Business Secretary, Treasurer and a Strategic Committee that is responsible for 'developing the corporate strategy of the Society [NASFAT]'. Over the past two decades, NASFAT has turned into a known brand that is recognisable by its stylised logo composed of the Islamic star and crescent, which has gained both national and international recognition. Cars with a bumper sticker with the NASFAT logo have become a common sight in the Nigerian traffic. NASFAT's vice-president told me laughingly that even his Christian friends drive cars with a NASFAT bumper sticker:

¹⁰ NASFAT's use of managerial language resembles Pentecostal discourse, which from its American sources is well saturated with the idioms of corporate business (Peel 2016a: 188).

¹¹ Nasmalt tastes like Maltina, a non-alcoholic drink popular at Pentecostal social events (Peel 2016a: 277 n.53).

'NASFAT has become a household name in Nigeria. Because NASFAT members are known to be trustworthy, my friends believe the police will not stop them at road-blocks when they see the sticker with the NASFAT logo.'

In addition to bumper stickers, the NASFAT logo is printed on promotional materials merchandised on NASFAT's website and sold at *asalat*, such as prayer mats, wall hangings, t-shirts with the text 'Islam – my brand', key rings, and the like. Another way in which NASFAT has turned into a known brand is through its media campaigns (Ibrahim 2017). It runs a public relations office that negotiates airtime for NASFAT missionaries on radio and television, sends out press releases, and posts on Facebook and Twitter. Because of its active involvement in marketing and media – domains that have long been dominated by Christians – some mainstream Muslim organisations categorised NASFAT as not 'truly Muslim'. NASFAT's leadership responded to this criticism by arguing that their involvement in business-related activities is the only effective way in which Islam can survive the onslaught of 'rival faiths' on the competitive religious marketplace (Adeniyi 2013: 336).

When the sound of thousands of voices reciting Qur'anic verses was elevated to ear-splitting volume, I hurried to the prayer ground, where I seated myself with a group of young women on a prayer mat. As with Pentecostal services, the *asalat* began with 'praise worship', that is, praise of God and the invocation of blessings on the Prophet. Similar to the hymn book in Pentecostal churches, NASFAT uses a prayer book for its praise worship, containing selected Qur'anic verses, supererogatory prayers (*du'a*) and prayers for Muhammad. The praise worship was followed by Qur'anic recitation or *tankara*.¹² Afterwards, the congregation was encouraged to donate money for sponsoring Fountain University. A missionary explained the collection of donations in a way similar to how Pentecostal pastors legitimise donations in their churches: 'By giving money during *tankara*, Allah will reward us and make us prosperous.'

After *tankara* an Islamic scholar delivered a 'lecture'. Parallel to the trend in Pentecostalism towards a higher level of intellectualisation (Marshall 2009: 179–81), the sermons delivered at *asalat* are referred to as lectures, during which the congregation takes notes. During the lecture that I attended, the scholar preached in English about prayer as the key to success: 'Pray ceaselessly and your problems will be solved. If you want to be successful in life, then raise your hands.' After being responded to by a mass of outstretched arms, he concluded his lecture by preaching 'May we all *insha'Allah* ('God willing') reap the full benefits of our prayers.'

As with Pentecostal services, the *asalat* concluded with prayer requests. Several members gave 'testimonies'. Like in Pentecostal churches, members testified that they were healed, had found employment or had had a baby on praying during *asalat*. A young man testified that he survived a car accident because he carried the Qur'an and NASFAT's prayer book with him, to which the audience responded with *Allah Akbar* ('God is great'). Members like him who encounter 'miracles' in their lives often make generous donations to NASFAT. After the concluding prayer, 'thanksgiving' was collected with the aim of being 'spiritually and economically uplifted'. NASFAT holds out the promise to its members that individual ethical reform and economic empowerment go hand in hand (Soares 2009: 192). Again, this is in line with Pentecostalism's Prosperity Gospel that emphasises the achievement of success and

¹² *Tankara* is derived from the Arabic *iqra*, meaning 'read' or 'recite'.

wealth by worshippers as the mark of salvation. Indeed, according to NASFAT's leadership, the essence of *asalatu* is 'to be determined to please Allah in order to be granted prosperity and salvation by Him' (Adetona 2012: 103).

Following a calendar similar to that of Pentecostal churches, NASFAT organises not only weekly prayer crusades but also bi-monthly night vigils or *tabajjud*, that is, all-night prayer meetings. When I asked a NASFAT missionary about the origins of *tabajjud*, he responded: 'We might say that Pentecostalism encouraged the congregational *tabajjud* as we do it in NASFAT every first and third Friday of the month.'¹³ *Tabajjud* is an intense spiritual experience, in the course of which NASFAT members pray collectively. The proceedings of *tabajjud* resemble that of *asalatu* with the main difference that there is more room for prayer that is ascribed an 'ecstatic quality' (Peel 2016a: 187). Enhancing the ecstatic quality of communal prayers, the congregation chants during *tabajjud*:

He has solved it for me (2×)

Allah

All the problems that I face

In my family

All the problems that I'm afraid of

Don't let me encounter them

Ameen

The resemblance with Pentecostal songs, which assign primacy to preventing misfortune and maximising good fortune, is striking. Highlighting the similarities, Mustapha Bello referred to NASFAT's chants as 'hymns': 'The hymns spice up the *tabajjud* and give instant relief from tiredness.'

According to Adetona (2012: 105–6), *tabajjud*'s aim is to provide NASFAT members with problem-solving or healing means: an aim that is close to Pentecostals' motivations to attend night vigils. Because of the prospect of encountering health and wealth, NASFAT's *tabajjud* often attracts thousands of worshippers, including Christians, waiting for 'miracles' to happen in their lives. The resemblance with Pentecostal programmes and practices has invoked descriptions of NASFAT in terms of 'Pentecostal Islam' (Sanni 2004; Soares 2009), 'Born-Again Islam' (Peel 2016a) and

¹³ The question whether night vigils originated in either Christianity or Islam is hotly debated among religious scholars in Nigeria. According to Peel (2016a: 176–7), night vigils were not part of the evangelical missionary tradition, but originated with the African Initiated Church Cherubim and Seraphim. Realising the benefits of communal prayer, the first modernist Muslim group, Ahmadiyya (which was brought to Lagos by missionaries from the Punjab in 1916), borrowed from Cherubim and Seraphim. Ahmadi missionaries went round in a group to members' houses to wake them up to pray, thus giving *tabajjud* – which of old has been an individual form of prayer in Islam – a communal dimension. Nowadays, most religious denominations hold night vigils. Most of my interlocutors (Muslims and Christians) agreed that in present-day discourse 'night vigil' has a strong Pentecostal connotation.

'Charismatic Islam' (Obadare 2016, 2018: 167). Although catchy, the next section analyses the shortcomings of these portmanteau terms in shedding light on NASFAT's mode of religious pluralism.

Studying religious pluralism

Established at a time when the Pentecostal presence in the public sphere was increasingly pronounced, NASFAT is probably the most effective response to Pentecostalism (Soares 2009; Peel 2016a: 186–91; Ibrahim 2017). Somewhat paradoxically, while Islam and Christianity compete to win souls and public space in Nigeria, the very act of competition has led NASFAT to borrow from Pentecostalism to a significant extent.

The case study suggests that this borrowing occurs especially in formal aspects, including prayer styles. In addition to prayer as the battleground of NASFAT's competition with Pentecostalism (Obadare 2016), NASFAT has copied proselytisation strategies from Pentecostalism. It is actively involved in evangelism through the guided leadership of a body of missionaries, who, as part of social service provision, pay regular visits to hospitals, prisons and orphanages. These extra-ritual activities underline NASFAT's self-conscious 'modernity'. In building up a portfolio of welfare and development activities, NASFAT follows a trail that Pentecostal churches have blazed in Nigeria in the past three decades (Peel 2016a: 188–9). Besides missionaries, NASFAT uses marketing strategies to recruit new members and proselytises via (social) media. Like Pentecostal pastors, NASFAT's missionaries appear in religious talk shows on radio and television. Another overlap concerns NASFAT's use of space and institutional framework: in an effort to inscribe itself in the Pentecostal-dominated public space, NASFAT has opened a prayer camp along the Lagos–Ibadan Expressway (Janson and Akinleye 2015). Finally, NASFAT's organisational structure resembles that of Pentecostal churches that operate as corporate businesses, whose primary goals are to produce and market religion and to generate profit (Ukah 2006: 89).

Irrespective of these formal similarities, NASFAT preaches a Muslim message that aims, according to NASFAT's Mission Statement, 'to develop an enlightened Muslim society nurtured by a true understanding of Islam for the spiritual upliftment and welfare of mankind'. While NASFAT's leadership openly acknowledged its borrowing of Pentecostal prayer styles and techniques – which it believed necessary 'to compete with Pentecostalism' – it dissociated itself from Pentecostal worship, which it considered a form of 'hero-worship'. Over the past two decades, the founders of the Pentecostal mega-churches have become celebrities, dressing conspicuously, driving posh cars and travelling in private jets. NASFAT, on the other hand, has a strong aversion to this kind of personality cult that envelops prominent Pentecostal pastors and to the flashy and noisy quality of Pentecostal worship. In interviews, NASFAT's leaders described their movement as a 'pious movement that preaches humbleness rather than clapping and dancing'. They underlined that their appropriation of Pentecostal prayer modalities does not in any way affect the fundamentals of Islam; in fact, it only strengthens them. In their opinion, Pentecostal devotional practices help NASFAT to preach a theology that strictly adheres to the Qur'an and *Sunna* (the Prophetic traditions), whose over-riding ethos is to develop a Muslim society nurtured by 'a true understanding of Islam'.

It may thus be concluded that, contrary to what popular labels of NASFAT in terms of 'Islamic Pentecostalism' suggest, NASFAT's mission is not so much to

Pentecostalise Islam but rather to emphasise its Muslim distinctiveness. What we have here is an intriguing example of the preservation of religious difference through the appropriation of Pentecostal prayer modes. This affirms Nolte and Ogen's argument that religious borrowing is premised on religious boundaries:

The drawing of clear religious boundaries is not a denial but a recognition of the religious agency of others, and transgression or transcendence do not imply that religious boundaries do not matter: in fact, the agency that derives from such practices is only meaningful as long as religious differences exist. (2017a: 13–14)

In this spirit, my call to devise new ways to study Christian–Muslim entanglements does not entail that we overlook religious difference (see also Peel 2016b). To account for religious multiplicity in Yorubaland, we must not reduce diversity to unity. Hence, Spies proposes to take 'incommensurability' as starting point in the study of religious pluralism, because it enables us 'to come to terms with situations in which people ... do not feel the need for one practice or view to include or exclude another. Sometimes different ways of doing and seeing things do not stand with or against each other – they simply stand side by side' (2013: 123). By acknowledging incommensurability, we can come to grips with situations that at first sight seem contradictory or confusing, where, as in the case of NASFAT, Muslim and Christian beliefs and practices do not exclude but mutually influence each other.¹⁴ Taking this course, NASFAT offers an analytical case for conducting religious comparison across and through difference. Rather than trying to reconcile differences between Islam and Christianity, as is the case in much earlier work within comparative religion, NASFAT prompts us to reflect on the complex ways in which religious traditions relate to each other in plural settings (see also Spies 2013).

Conclusion

Although theological differences between Islam and Christianity remain salient in present-day Nigeria, including Yorubaland, in its attempt to expand itself into a modernist Muslim movement that can compete with the Pentecostal mega-churches, NASFAT overtly crosses religious boundaries and deliberately appropriates Pentecostal prayer styles, missionary techniques, media practices and organisational strategies. In this article I have argued that this is not so much an attempt to 'mirror' – to use Larkin's and Meyer's (2006) term – Pentecostalism, but is intended to strengthen NASFAT's Muslim credentials for the sake of developing an 'enlightened Muslim society'. Whereas Larkin and Meyer compare reformist Islam and evangelical Christianity in West Africa

¹⁴ Although here the focus is on Pentecostalism's influence on NASFAT, that the influence goes in two directions was highlighted during an interview with a Pentecostal Yoruba woman married to a Muslim. She said that although Christian funerals normally last several days, many Nigerian Christians nowadays bury the dead the same day, which she explained as a Muslim influence: 'It's cheaper to bury one's beloved ones immediately like the Muslims do: you don't need to pay the bill of the mortuary and you don't need to entertain your guests with food and drinks. Moreover, it's safer: if you keep the body in the mortuary, strangers could enter and do all kinds of evil things [i.e. witchcraft] to the body.' Moreover, copying from NASFAT, which offers travel packages to Mecca, several Pentecostal churches organise pilgrimages to Jerusalem.

by focusing on similarities, or ‘ideological kinship’ in Obadare’s terms (2018: 60), the case of NASFAT illustrates that differences should not be overlooked in a comparative study of religion (see also Spies 2013; Peel 2016b).

NASFAT’s conjoining of Muslim beliefs and Pentecostal practices calls for a more inclusive anthropology of religious pluralism (Lambertz 2018: 33 n.17), that is, an anthropology that shifts the attention from a narrow analysis of Islam and Christianity as bounded entities structured around distinctive theologies towards a perspective that focuses on the ways in which religious practitioners live religion and the ambiguities, contradictions and aspirations as the constitutive moments in their lived religion (cf. Schielke and Debevec 2012). Pluralism is a condition for the ecumenism that characterises lived religiosity in Yorubaland but, as the case of NASFAT illustrates, this does not imply that religious differences do not matter. Indeed, to cite Nolte and Ogen, ‘In the context of religious plurality, [...] religious difference is valued in itself, as difference’ (2017a: 6). In this sense, religious ‘otherness’ is no longer understood as a threat but as a potential resource to gain from. What we then see is that religious pluralism may become a political tool: the Yoruba can teach us an important lesson about how different religious traditions coexist in peace.

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Traverser les frontières : le cas de la NASFAT ou de « l'Islam pentecôtiste » dans le sud-ouest du Nigéria

Le mouvement pentecôtiste au Nigéria, qui met l'accent sur les bénédictions et la guérison en notre monde, est devenu si dynamique qu'aujourd'hui les organisations musulmanes elles-mêmes apparaissent de plus en plus « pentecôtistes ». La Société Nasrul-Lahi-il Fathi du Nigéria (NASFAT) en est un parfait exemple. Dans le but de concurrencer le Pentecôtisme sur le marché du religieux en pays Yoruba, la NASFAT s'est inspirée des modèles de prière pentecôtistes, comme la croisade et la veillée nocturne, tout en insistant sur la doctrine musulmane. Le cas de la NASFAT montre que l'emprunt ne nie pas l'importance des frontières entre les religions : en effet, la NASFAT illustre de manière efficace la protection des différences religieuses à travers l'appropriation des styles et des stratégies pentecôtistes. Dans cet esprit, les mouvements religieux pluriels tels que la NASFAT nous encouragent à ouvrir une espace analytique dans le champ presque hermétique des anthropologies de l'Islam et du Christianisme, et à développer un cadre comparatif qui dépasse les concepts essentialistes de diversité religieuse.

Mots clés religion comparée, pluralisme religieux, rencontres entre chrétiens et musulmans, réforme islamique, Nigéria, la NASFAT