

Review: Insa Nolte, Olukoya Ogen and Rebecca Jones (eds.), Beyond Religious Tolerance: Muslim, Christian and Traditionalist Encounters in an African Town

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Book Reviews

Insa Nolte, Olukoya Ogen, and Rebecca Jones (eds) (2017), *Beyond Religious Tolerance: Muslim, Christian and Traditionalist Encounters in an African Town*, Woodbridge: James Currey, ISBN 978 1847011534, 318 pp.

Both Christianity and Islam have been in the focus of academic attention and research on Africa for quite some time. This observation applies not only to studies that focus on continental, or at least regional, expressions of Islam and Christianity but also to studies of those religions in individual countries, such as Senegal, Ghana, or Tanzania. When looking at Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria, it is interesting to note, however, that studies of religions have been marked by a distinct bias: whereas most studies of Islam in Nigeria focus on Northern Nigeria, most studies of Christianity focus on both South West and South East Nigeria. While the predominance of research on Christianity in South East Nigeria may be explained by the simple fact that most Nigerians living in this part of the country are members of one or the other Christian domination and that Muslims form only a small minority, the bias in research on Christianity and Christian churches in the South West is rather curious: South West Nigeria – more specifically, Yorubaland – is not dominated by either Christianity or Islam, but rather characterised by the historically unique coexistence of Christianity, Islam, and Yoruba religion.

Yorubaland, in fact, has often been described as an African (or even global) “exception” to the rule that Islam and Christianity cannot coexist peacefully. Numerous studies on Yorubaland thus start out by stressing the multireligious character of Yoruba society and the deeply engrained practice of religious tolerance in Yorubaland. Despite paying that kind of lip service to the obvious, most studies of religion in Yorubaland then focus on Christianity and Christian churches (history, dynamics of development, the rise of Pentecostal churches, etc.) and Yoruba religion, one of the few vibrant African religions that is presently even expanding into both European and North American constituencies. Names that have to be mentioned here are, of course, J. D. Y. Peel (1941–2015) and many others (for Christianity in Yorubaland) and Jacob Olúpòṇà and many others (for Yoruba religion).

So where is Islam in Yorubaland? A superficial bibliographical search usually leads to two publications in this respect – namely, G. O. Gbadamosi's *The Growth of Islam among the Yoruba, 1841–1908* (1978) and Stefan

Reichmuth's *Islamische Bildung und soziale Integration in Ilorin (Nigeria) seit ca. 1800* (1998). In addition, there are numerous unpublished studies on Islam in Yorubaland (usually studies of local communities) by Nigerian scholars in the form of bachelor's and master's theses as well as doctoral dissertations, yet these texts are usually stacked away in the research sections of Nigeria's university libraries and difficult to access from outside. Finally, there is a small number of research-based articles by Western scholars on certain curious and rather specific religious developments such as Marloes Janson's excellent study of the different (Lagos-based) "Chrislam" groups.

This volume's extensive introduction has a clear message – namely, that it represents a truly pioneering study of Islam, Christianity, and Yoruba religion in Yorubaland, or, more specifically, in Ede, a middle-sized (but predominantly Muslim) town of about 75,000 (according to the 2012 census) approximately 80 kilometres northeast of Ibadan. As such, this text is not only overdue, but also highly welcome for its thoroughness. The contributions made the religious dynamics come alive in a way that I have seldom experienced reading academic texts. This impression is most probably due to the fact that all twelve contributors (ten Nigerians and two Europeans) are speakers of Yoruba and, thus, able to present us with a remarkably dense account of religious dynamics in Ede.

In addition, the ten thematic contributions in the volume in addition to an excellent introductory chapter and an equally excellent "outlook" chapter provide a truly comprehensive and well-balanced overview of religious life in Ede from many different angles, such as the history of Ede (contributions by Insa Nolte, Olukoya Ogen, and Siyan Oyeweso), the dynamics of interaction between Muslims and followers of Yoruba religion (contributions by Aderimi Sulaiman Ajala, Insa Nolte, and George Olusola Ajibade), communal practices of religions (contributions by Amusa Saheed Balogun, Ibikunle H. Tijani, Insa Nolte, and Tosin Akinjobi), the emergence of new religious forces in Ede (contributions by Adeyimi Balogun, Olukoya Ogen, and Amusa Saheed Balogun), places of religious encounter (contribution by Akin Iwilade and Oladipo Fadayomi), and the dynamics of interreligious marriage (contribution by Insa Nolte and Tosin Akinjobi).

Research for this volume was based not only on participant observation and interviews with numerous local interlocutors, but also on an impressive survey of nearly 3,000 residents of Ede. It is consequently rather difficult to give a general summary of the volume. I would instead like to focus on a key idea of the text that may explain the peaceful co-existence of Islam, Christianity, and Yoruba religion in Ede and that runs

through many chapters: “Of course, the widespread preparedness to accept religious difference may also reflect the historical religious landscape. In most pre-colonial Yoruba towns there were various religious cults which coexisted. Significant open confrontation or opposition was very rarely linked to debates about the right (or wrong) of beliefs or practices. If people wanted to follow a practice that seemed strange to others, this was considered their business as long as it contributed to the overall good” (82). I wonder why such quotidian religious tolerance should remain confined to Yorubaland. Ede could well serve as a model for the practice of religious coexistence on a global scale, and the volume edited by Insa Nolte, Olukoya Ogen, and Rebecca Jones shows how this quotidian religious tolerance is produced and reproduced every day. As such, this book is a must not only for scholars interested in Islam, Christianity, and African religion in Yorubaland, but for anybody interested in the governance of religious diversity.

■ Roman Loimeier