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African Muslims and the Secular State

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The postcolonial African state is a weak institutional structure, deficient in many respects—in structural capacity, in the legitimacy of authority, (and of course, in economic performance). There is a wide margin of difference between states, from the relatively successful Ghana or Uganda to disaster cases such as Sierra Leone, but there is also a point in common. The African state has not inspired an intense loyalty; it has not been loved by its citizens. It was in origin an alien imposition, the creation of European colonial rule at the end of the nineteenth century, and a conquest state. That state is still there now, the same territorial frontiers, the same capital cities, even if the performance of state institutions has been weakened by corruption and predation, as some see it by patron-client politics. And the idea of a secular state, standing aside from religious identification, is itself a colonial legacy, again a legacy that is still there. The state may for the most part not be loved, there is no intense national commitment, but there is also more of emotional involvement in the African state than at first appears.

State and religion: symbiotic relations

How do the citizens imagine the state? How do the people imagine power? The state has no surer foundations than are to be found in the people's imagination of authority, the symbolic language of power. The colonial governments of Africa indirectly recognised as much when they chose to rule through chiefly intermediaries, through chiefs who had their own symbolic capital. Thus the European rulers could have legitimacy at second hand. Postcolonial African rulers can do some of the same with the chiefs, but in looking for a symbolic language for state authority they have turned to the markers of religious devotion. The holy symbols are the respected symbols, indices of devotion, of love. Thus the postcolonial state can hope to borrow a little of its own second-hand legitimacy, pilfered from the pious. Power in Africa is often imagined to be of other-worldly origin, rulers can usefully suggest a religious mystique to themselves; they know where to look for the symbols. Given the religious diversity of Africa, between Islam, Christianity,

Postcolonial Africa has witnessed problematic processes of nation and state building, but in general the state structures as designed in late-colonial and early independence endure, including their secular orientation.

A major challenge for the state in Africa is to advance its respect for devotional diversity, because the secular state has an interest in religious diversity.

and religions of African origin, they have plenty of symbols from which to choose. Islam and Christianity each have their hierarchical structures of devotional authority, their shrines to give a geographical focus to devotion; West African voodoo too has its shrines, and each of the three religious forms has its powerfully loaded symbolic language, a language loaded with the symbols of power. So the state has every interest in doing political business with the religious, however secular it may proclaim itself to be. The religious return that interest, the state remaining the fount of resources of many kinds, including those of symbolic endorsement.

The secular self-identification of the state in Africa is however no mere convenient fiction. The state may borrow or pilfer from the religious in its search for symbolic authority, but it also really does have a fundamental interest in staying secular, and in being perceived so to do. The diversity of African religiosity means that the state stands aside from religion in the interest of its own unity. And this basic logic still applies where the majority of the population is Muslim, as in Senegal where 90% of the population is Muslim but the Muslims are divided into a number of rival Sufi orders. Sufis cherish their differences, their devotional particularities, and in a secular state they find an authority which respects those particularities. An "Islamic state," the project of an activist minority, is likely to be a great deal less tolerant of devotional particularity and much more intrusive in spelling out the detail of correct Islamic practice. And who is to be in charge of an Islamic state? Muslims are divided in many ways: in Sufi orders, in sects, in rival ethnicities or racial categories, and in rival schools of thought. Only a charismatic leadership could hold such diversity together, an Islamic Leninism, and charisma as we know does not last.

Love transactions

So back to the secular state, a state that knows how to mind its own business, to respect devotional diversity. In giving that respect, in its symbolic recognition of the differently devout, the state may begin in return to win that warmth of popular respect which it so badly needs.

The state has an interest in the differences, the interest of its own indispensability; and the differences have an interest in the state, the interest of their own preservation. But more than interest may be involved here; as the state does its pilgrimages to the different holy places, be present for the holy occasions, it begins to be recognised not only as a valuable witness but as "our" state, a possible object of love. Love too is a transaction, and the African state need not be so wholly bereft.

The State as Devil, painting by Alexis Ngom, Dakar, 1970



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