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Milligan, M.

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# Nigerian Echoes of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

MAREN MILLIGAN

I never thought I would travel to Tel Aviv by motorcycle, but somehow I found myself on the back of a bike on my way to an interview there—not in Israel, but in Nigeria. I was in Kaduna, once the capital of the Northern region. Famously known as the “liberal city” and one of the few cities in the North where Muslims and Christians could live side by side, after the 2000 and 2002 riots Kaduna became increasingly ethnically and religiously segregated. More surprising than the spatial expression of these tensions are the imported terms, maps, and metaphors deployed to articulate them.<sup>1</sup>

One mostly Christian neighbourhood, previously called “Television” now sometimes bears the nickname “Tel Aviv,” and Kaduna South, (also mostly Christian) “New Jerusalem.” Correspondingly, the Muslim neighbourhood of Rigasa is now sometimes called “Palestine.” But these parallel terms for neighbourhoods do not just represent the well-known Nigerian flair for humorous renaming. While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a significant factor in internal Nigerian politics, Christian and Muslim activists do sometimes articulate local politics in the borrowed lexicon of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## Regional foreign orientations

Yet, religious divisions in Nigeria—and their linkages to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—have a long history dating to the early days of independence in the 1960s when the country was divided into three autonomous regions: North, East, and West. These regions roughly corresponded to the three main ethnic groups of the country: the largely Muslim Hausa/Fulani in the North, the mostly Catholic Ibo in the East, and mixed Muslim and Christian Yoruba in the West. From independence in 1960 until the creation of states in 1967, each region had a large degree of autonomy including international affairs.

A particular bone of contention was Nigeria's relationship with the Muslim World and Israel. During the First Republic, Ahmadu Bello, Premier of the Northern Region had a close personal friendship with King Faisal, and became the Vice President of the World Muslim League in 1963. As an outgrowth of this role, Premier Bello also opposed economic agreements between Nigeria and Israel in 1961-1962. Yet, by 1964, this stance

softened, with the Premier meeting the Israeli Ambassador. In contrast, the predominately Ibo region of the East had consistently extremely strong economic ties with Israel, with many companies operating in both manufacturing and agriculture.

The strong Ibo-Israeli ties have also been explained by referring to the locally popular idea that the Ibo are descended from the Israelites.<sup>2</sup> Given Israeli investment in the East and theories of the Judean origin of the Ibos, there have long been rumours of official Israeli support to the secessionist movement of Biafra, particularly during the civil war (1967-1970). Although General Ojukwu, Biafra's leader, flatly dismissed reports of Israeli governmental support, he explained that a small number of Israeli individuals with business interests in the Eastern region acted as intermediaries for arms acquisition and humanitarian aid.<sup>3</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Ojukwu placed this in a context of a “natural affinity.” Ojukwu also maintained that the Ibo were likewise an “oppressed people that suffered genocide.” Many of the tropes deployed in the Biafran

**Although resonances of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are unexpected in Nigeria, in various ways political actors in Nigeria borrow tropes from the remote conflict to articulate local politics. Relatively autonomous foreign policies of the regions in the early independence period set the stage for contending orientations toward the Middle East, but imported concepts have more recently been deployed in Muslim and Christian politics.**

propaganda war echoed those deployed by Israel's international campaign during the 1967 war, including the David and Goliath metaphor coupled with heavy use of references to “jihad.” Ojukwu explained his deliberate and repeated use of the term “pogrom” in Biafran propaganda stating “one thing that will wake up Europeans is to see the type of massacre that happened to the Jews.”

This balancing act between contending foreign policy orientations remained even after the regions were abolished. In October 1973, Nigeria cut diplomatic relations with Israel in response to OAU (Organization of African Unity) positions on the issue and the October 1973 war. A decade later, Gen. Babangida made Nigeria a member in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1985. This surprise move caused tremendous controversy and is often cited as a cause of a rise in Muslim-Christian tensions in the late 1980s. In what is commonly portrayed as a compromise between the two communities in advance of the 1993 elections, Babangida reinitiated diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992. Although the actual motives behind these decisions taken under military rule may never be clear, what is well-understood is that both communities view recognition of Israel as a Christian counterpoint to OIC membership. But why would Israel be seen as a Christian country? When I asked this question to Christians, I was told repeatedly that Israel is a Christian country. Samuel Salifu, Secretary General of the Christian Association of Nigeria, explained it this way, “The average Christian does not understand the details. Israel is the country from which Christ sprang...The way Christians feel about Israel is the way Muslims feel about Mecca.”

## Politics of pilgrimage

And this statement is not surprising. The Nigerian government provides a degree of public support for individual pilgrimages—not only to Mecca, but also to Jerusalem. Even though there is no Christian religious duty of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, it has become an established state-sponsored Christian activity in Nigeria as a response to state support for the Hajj. The practice has become so institutionalized that Christians who have gone on pilgrimage are given actual “JP certificates” which gives them the ability to claim the honorific title “Jerusalem Pilgrim” as do Muslims “Hajji.”

Christian Pilgrims' Welfare Boards in all states administer governmental sponsorship of pilgrims to Christian Holy Lands. In doing so, they coordinate their activities with the Israeli government and hire Israeli tour companies, who then map the ideological and physical boundaries of the “Holy Land” for Nigerian pilgrims. The packages include overnight stays on kibbutzes and “Bible quizzes” in which Israeli-Nigerian flagpins are the prize. While pilgrims visit the Western Wall in order to write their prayers and insert them so that they will be answered, al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock are not included.

Not only do these itineraries draw lines inclusively with Israeli culture and exclusively of Muslim heritage, but the Green Line itself is often distorted on pilgrimages as well. One itinerary boasts of boat trips from the Sea of Galilee to Kibbutzes in the Golan Heights, portrayed as if located in Israel. The next day, from the Golan the group “drive(s) southwards through the Jordan Valley to Jericho, the most ancient city in the world” after which pilgrims also take in some shopping at the AHAVA plant on the shores of the Dead Sea on their way back to Eilat.<sup>4</sup> Mention of border crossings comes only during the Mt. Sinai portion of the excursion, when pilgrims “commit ourselves into the hands of our Lord before setting out for the Egyptian border at Taba.” After this overnight

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day ...

sojourn in Arab lands, "we set off again and drive back to the 'Promised Land'"

One critic of Christian support for Israel, Joseph Hayap, Secretary of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Kaduna State, challenges this perspective and attributes his alternative view to increased exposure to areas outside of Israeli control. Of Palestinians, he states: "They have even more Christians in Bethlehem than Muslims. A good number of churches are there and they actually worship. I have been there many times, five or six times." And this has shaped his view: "We have lost so many churches...so many pastors have been killed just because Israel starts bombing...I say no. The problem with Israel is not a religious problem... The issue between Israel and Palestine is purely a political issue." When asked why Christians from various communities in Nigeria view it as a religious issue, he replied: "They think that way because they know that Muslims think that way too. Any day Israel strikes Palestine, assume it's a Christian war against Islam."<sup>5</sup>



PHOTO BY MUSA AL-SHAER / © AFP, 2004

## Al-Quds in Kano

As for the Christians, Jerusalem is also a focal point for Muslim mobilization on the conflict. Christian Nigerians go to Jerusalem, but Jerusalem comes to Muslims in Nigeria through the form of al-Quds day (the Arabic name for Jerusalem). Although Muslim (and non-Muslim)<sup>6</sup> solidarity with the plight of the Palestinian people is neither uncommon nor particularly noteworthy in and of itself, the observance of al-Quds day is a unique practice, most prevalent in Shia areas such as Iran and Lebanon. Because Nigeria's Muslim population is largely Sunni, the observance of al-Quds day in Kano and other cities of the north is quite unexpected. One of the Nigerian Muslim activists most popularly associated with this phenomenon is Ibraheem Zakzaky.

Then a student at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria and Vice President (International) of the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (MSSN), Zakzaky travelled to Iran on the one-year anniversary celebration of the Iranian Revolution. Like the rest of the Muslim population of Nigeria, Zakzaky was Sunni but deeply impressed with the political and social transformation in Shia Iran. Upon his return he delivered a series of lectures. During one key lecture Zakzaky spoke about the revolution, recounting his meeting with Imam Khomeini. Students poured into the streets and demonstrated in Zaria painting graffiti saying "Islam only." As Zakzaky's support grew, he left the MSSN and began a movement, called the Ikhwan, inspired by the success of Iranian students.

Because of its association with Iran, the movement has been called "Shia" a designation to be understood in the context of tensions between sects in Northern Nigeria. Zakzaky himself offers the name "Ikhwan" and hesitates to use the term Shia at all despite observing Ashura and other Shia rituals, saying "Here people give Shia different meanings, so we try to avoid it...since we all understand that we are Muslims." Although this statement is clearly tied to Nigerian politics which have seen extensive intra-Muslim divisions, it can also be read as a caution against growing Sunni-Shia sectarian strife in the Muslim World, about which Zakzaky has written and spoken extensively.

Although small in number and based primarily in Zaria with a scattered presence elsewhere in the North, the observances of the Ikhwan are a good example of transplanted practices. Since the early 1980's, Zakzaky as well as many of his followers have studied in Qom and he himself has travelled several times to Lebanon for conferences. Through Zakzaky, the route from al-Quds to Kano thus goes through Qom. The mission statement of al-Quds day on the Ikhwan website states: "Today being 25<sup>th</sup> of Ramadan is the last Friday of the holy month, and as designated by Imam Khomeini of blessed [sic] memory, is the International Quds Day in which we come out en masse commemorating the flight of Muslims in Palestine and the oppressed globally...It is a day set aside

for reminding the world the significance of the holy Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and its desecration perpetrated by the Zionists usurpers for decades, by staging peaceful marches, making speeches and distributing releases."

Keenly aware of the sometimes less than benign interest in global activist networks, Zakzaky is quick to place the role of travel and education in perspective. In doing so, he quotes the Hausa expression "tafiyya mabudin ilimi" or "travel is the key to knowledge." And it is clear that while exposure to the perspectives of Shia Muslims shaped the expression and particular practice of solidarity, solidarity itself does not emerge from it. Zakzaky states: "Times without number, our ideas did not change because of travels...We thought these things in the late 1970's...we are just as you knew us in the late 1970's, even before the Iranian Revolution."

In Nigeria, the metaphors have been transported and transformed from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ibo activists who believe they are a lost tribe of Israel invoked the language of "pogrom" to garner international support. Aspiring "Jerusalem Pilgrims" travel to the "Holy Land" whose physical and ideational boundaries are carefully mapped by Israeli travel agents. Likewise, while solidarity with the Palestinian cause is not uncommon among movements around the world, the Shia inspired Ikhwan movement has introduced a unique form of practice in pro-Palestinian solidarity. Yet, these transnational transactions are neither provisions of material support nor tentacles through which Israel and Iran influence Nigerian politics through Christian-Muslim competition. However, these metaphorical borrowings by Nigerian Christian and Muslim actors have shaped some of the discursive terrain of intra-group relations and group identity in Nigeria.

**Nigerian Christians engage in government funded pilgrimage to Israel.**

## Notes

1. The author would like to thank Dr John Paden and Dr Brian Larkin for their comments on previous drafts.
2. N. T. Ogbukagu, *The Ibo and the Riddles of their Jewish Origin* (Enugu: Okike Printing, 2001); Chief Eric C. N. Okam, *The Ibo as Descendants of Jacob* (Enugu: Snaap, 2004); and Uchechukwu Ikanyibe, *Biblical Evidences: Confirming the Hebrew Origin of the Igbo People* (Benin: Peculiar Heritage, 1999).
3. Interview, General C. Odemgwo Ojukwu, 29 September 2006, Enugu.
4. "Day-by-day itinerary" 05-15 March 2006, obtained from the office of one of the Christian Pilgrim's Welfare Board in a state in northern Nigeria.
5. Interview, Joseph Hayap, 17 July 2006, Kaduna.
6. During a trip to Belfast during Summer 2002, it was difficult not to notice that Catholic-Protestant competition had taken on a new dimension: Republican areas were plastered with Palestinian flags; likewise, Unionist neighbourhoods were sporting Israeli flags.

Maren Milligan is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Government and Politics, University of Maryland. Her dissertation is on power-sharing regimes, group identity, and democratic transitions in Nigeria and Lebanon.  
Email: mmilligan@gvpt.umd.edu