


Forms of Interreligious Encounter in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction

Nathan Suhr-Sytsma 

Abstract: Africanist scholars continue to debate how best to frame Christian-Muslim encounters. Examining literary fiction that portrays interreligious conflict and dialogue in northern Nigeria, Suhr-Sytsma opens up an exchange between social scientists and Nigerian writers including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Uwem Akpan, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, and E. E. Sule. Suhr-Sytsma argues that, as social thinkers, Nigerian writers explore interreligious solidarity through forms of doubling and critique forms of sacrifice that authorize scapegoating. Consequently, contemporary Nigerian fiction raises fundamental questions not only about the relation of text to reality but also about the making and crossing of boundaries identified as religious.

Résumé: Les chercheurs africanistes continuent de débattre la meilleure façon de cadrer les rencontres entre chrétiens et musulmans. En examinant la fiction littéraire qui dépeint les conflits et les dialogues interreligieux dans le nord du Nigeria, Suhr-Sytsma ouvre un échange entre les sociologues et les écrivains nigériens, y compris Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Uwem Akpan, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim et E. E. Sule. Suhr-Sytsma soutient que, en tant que penseurs sociaux, ces écrivains nigériens explorent la solidarité interreligieuse à travers des dédoublement et formes critiques

African Studies Review, Volume 65, Number 3 (September 2022), pp. 669–691

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doi:10.1017/asr.2022.78

de sacrifices qui permettent la stigmatisation. Par conséquent, la fiction nigériane contemporaine soulève des questions fondamentales sur la relation entre le texte, la réalité et le franchissement des frontières identifiées comme religieuses.

Resumo: Os académicos africanistas continuam a debater sobre a melhor maneira de enquadrar os encontros entre cristãos e muçulmanos. Suhr-Sytsma analisa a ficção literária que retrata os conflitos e o diálogo inter-religiosos, para assim encetar um intercâmbio entre cientistas sociais e vários escritores nigerianos, nomeadamente Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Uwem Akpan, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim e E. E. Sule. Segundo Suhr-Sytsma, os escritores nigerianos, enquanto pensadores sociais, exploram a solidariedade inter-religiosa através de diferentes formas de projeção no outro e criticam o tipo de sacrifícios que fomentam o recurso a bodes expiatórios. Consequentemente, a ficção nigeriana contemporânea levanta questões fundamentais não só quanto à relação entre texto e realidade, como também acerca da construção e da interpenetrabilidade das fronteiras identificadas como sendo religiosas.

Keywords: African literature; Nigeria; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; Uwem Akpan; Abubakar Adam Ibrahim; E. E. Sule; religion

(Received 19 March 2021 – Revised 27 April 2022 – Accepted 06 May 2022)

Introduction

Addressing how African literature is related to the social sciences, anthropologist and political scientist Wale Adebaniwi argues that “scholarship in and about Africa has yet to pay sufficient attention to the fundamental connections between both, and the centrality of imaginative literature in the articulation of, and as vehicle for, social thought in Africa.” Adebaniwi emphasizes “the role of African creative writers, not merely as intellectuals whose works mirror or can be used to mirror social thought, but as social thinkers themselves who engage with the nature of existence and questions of knowledge in the continent—and beyond” (2014:406). In their role as social thinkers, “African writers offer [...] abstractions, comparisons, frameworks and critical reflections on the African lifeworld” akin to those developed by political philosophers (2014:409). Adebaniwi’s examples of African writers as social thinkers are drawn primarily from the twentieth century. Turning to the twenty-first-century, this article examines the “abstractions, comparisons, frameworks and critical reflections” that Nigerian writers, in particular, offer for thinking through interreligious encounters.¹

A literary powerhouse, Nigeria can also be considered “one of the world’s major laboratories for the study of religious-based conflict and reconciliation” (Vaughan 2016:1). This article focuses on literary fiction that portrays northern Nigeria as a site of Christian-Muslim encounters. Africanist scholars continue to debate how best to frame such encounters. A November 2016 special issue of the journal *Africa*, titled *Studying Islam and Christianity in*

Africa: Moving Beyond a Bifurcated Field, features the work of anthropologists and sociologists with expertise in Ghana, Mali, and Nigeria. According to the editors, Marloes Janson and Birgit Meyer, the contributors “move away from the conventional understanding of Christian-Muslim relations in terms of either religious conflict [...] or what scholars attempting to advance ecumenical ideas have called ‘interfaith dialogue,’” approaches which, the editors contend, “take religious boundaries for granted” (Janson & Meyer 2016:618). Literary writers from the region certainly question religious boundaries. Both conflict and dialogue remain central, however, to the literary imagination. On one level, fiction can hardly dispense with the narrative elements of conflict and dialogue between characters. On another level, writers address issues of public concern as social thinkers whose critical reflections may diverge from the emphases of ethnographic researchers.

Indeed, “anthropological” has become a pejorative term among scholars of African literature. Amatoritsero Ede, for instance, detects what he terms “self-anthropologizing discourse” in contemporary African writing “that bears traces of the traditional Western anthropological Othering of Africa as uncanny” (2015:114). African literary scholarship remains rightly wary of colonial anthropology’s long shadow and the potentially “extroverted” orientation of African literary fiction (Julien 2006) toward readers situated outside the contexts depicted by that fiction.² Still, it is possible to see current anthropology and literary studies as mutual correctives. Trained in both disciplines, Aamir R. Mufti appreciates both anthropology’s “insistence on an experiential encounter with the social life-world that is the object of research” and literary studies’ “emphasis on textuality, that is, the insistence on the codified and mediated nature of all social and cultural experience, and therefore the insistence on the necessity of *reading* and interpretation” (2016:54). Multiple senses of interpretation are relevant here; creative writers invariably interpret “social and cultural experience,” including religious experience, and readers of literary texts in turn interpret their meanings. Even as literature can illuminate the realities of a society, “the real” itself is always a matter of interpretation. In Ato Quayson’s elaboration of how “to read *for* the social,” aesthetic representation generates “reality-effects,” and at the same time, “reality itself acquires its texture” through the ways it is represented (2003:xv, xxii).

How, specifically, do interreligious encounters in Nigeria acquire their “texture” in literary texts? First, literary fiction deals distinctively in embodiment. Using statistical modeling, Ted Underwood has found that as the novel developed from 1750 to 1950, it “steadily specialized in something that biography (and other forms of nonfiction) could rarely provide: descriptions of bodies, physical actions, and immediate sensory perceptions in a precisely specified place and time” (2019:26). Nigerian writers have adopted and adapted the novel’s specialism in embodied actions and perceptions, including the gendering of embodiment. Literary fiction deals, too, in the imaginative. Mike McGovern refers to Guinea’s “imaginative ethnopolitical geography” (2017:43). Its much larger West African counterpart, Nigeria,

also has an imaginative ethnopolitical geography, commonly conceived of as divided between North and South, Islam and Christianity, although officially demarcated into six “geopolitical zones” (Thurston 2016:24): south-west, south-south, south-east, north-west, north-central (or Middle Belt), and north-east. Works of fiction participate in constructing—and potentially deconstructing—these imaginative, which is not to say unreal, conceptions of intra-national divisions. Representing bodies and imagining geographies, literary fiction reflects, moreover, on its own audience or readership. Even as they depict conflict, literary texts pose the question, for whom and to what purpose is this conflict being depicted?

This article examines fiction by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Uwem Akpan, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, and E. E. Sule (the pen name of Sule Emmanuel Egya) focused on so-called religious crises during the 1990s and early 2000s in the north-west and north-central zones of Nigeria. Born after 1970, these writers hail from disparate ethnic communities, Adichie and Akpan in southern Nigeria and Ibrahim and Sule in northern Nigeria. All of them write in English and published their first works of fiction after 2000. Other compelling examples of contemporary northern Nigerian literature in English dealing with religion include novels by Helon Habila (2007) and by Elnathan John (2015).³ The selected texts by Adichie, Akpan, Ibrahim, and Sule remain unique, however, both in their reliance on ostensibly religious conflict to produce narrative conflict and in their use of dialogue between characters who hold alternate religious commitments.

Conflict and dialogue, opposition and exchange, are forms—arrangements or patterns present in both social life and literary texts (Levine 2015). The social thought of these texts works through two even more specific forms: that of the double, which models social imaginaries of difference and belonging, and that of sacrifice, which literary theorist Rey Chow reads as the “conceptual double or conjoined twin” of representation itself (2006:132). Employing forms of doubling that emphasize the suffering of women and youth, Adichie’s and Akpan’s stories revolve around embodied encounters between supposed religious Others, challenge the ascription of their protagonists to fixed religious positions, and hint at the politics of representation through references to broadcast media. Ibrahim’s novel describes violence against religious Others without identifying northern Nigeria exclusively with violence. The burden of Sule’s novel, meanwhile, is to deconstruct perceived oppositions amid a sustained meditation on the politics of representation. If forms of doubling can signify possibilities for human solidarity across religious boundaries in these texts, forms of sacrifice too often signify the collapse of solidarity into scapegoating. Akpan and Sule, in particular, dramatize and discuss sacrifice in order to critique violence committed in God’s name. Taken together, these fictional texts unsettle perceptions of northern Nigeria as a cultural or religious monolith. Before further analyzing them, appraising a debate among scholars of religion about late twentieth-century developments in West Africa will help to open up an exchange between the insights of social scientists, which have

been historically privileged in African studies, and of African writers as social thinkers.

Beyond the Doppelgänger Thesis

In 2006, a book chapter by anthropologists Brian Larkin and Birgit Meyer proposed that “evangelical Pentecostalism” and “reformist Islam” in West Africa could be understood as “doppelgängers, enemies whose actions mirror those of the other, and whose fates are intertwined” (2006:286–87). Ruth Marshall makes a similar observation in her 2009 book *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria*, a revolution to which she also refers as the Born-Again movement: “In many respects, the Born-Again and reformist projects are doppelgängers [...]. At the same time, these projects are clearly mutually exclusive” (2009:222–23). Such interpretive claims are often accompanied by a more empirical claim, that the rise of both Born-Again or Pentecostal forms of Christianity and reformist or Salafi forms of Islam in the 1980s contributed to the outbreak of religiously charged violence in Nigeria. Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, recently the Emir of Kano (2014–2020), has traced “religious crises in the form of violent conflicts between Christians and Muslims” to “the failure of the Nigerian state and the emergence of Pentecostal Christian and extreme Islamist groups” (Sanusi 2007:182). Sanusi’s formulation markedly pairs Pentecostals with “extreme” Islamists rather than reformist or Salafi movements.⁴ Each version of this emerging doppelgänger thesis frames Christian-Muslim conflict, including the conflict in northern Nigeria, as a result of polarization between movements which share broadly comparable stances to modernity and the state yet remain opposed to each other.

More skeptical of the doppelgänger thesis was the late J.D.Y. Peel, whose final book includes a chapter titled “Pentecostalism and Salafism in Nigeria: Mirror Images?” (note the final question mark). Although Peel grants that Pentecostals and Salafis are both subject to “the paradox that their modernizing critiques of the immediate past are grounded in the invocation of an older normative past” (2016:194), he finds the differences between these movements more significant. He claims that the form of Pentecostal political engagement is diffuse, ranging from critiques of corruption to a desire for development, as opposed to what he understands to be a focused Salafi program for justice through *shari‘a* law. Yet Peel’s interpretation is complicated by scholars both of Pentecostalism and of Salafism. In *Pentecostal Republic*, a title that refers to Nigeria’s Fourth Republic, which was inaugurated in May 1999 with the presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo, Ebenezer Obadare observes that “state power is perennially used to advance the competing interests of Christians and Muslims,” not just of sharia proponents (2018:60). At the same time, the Salafi pursuit of sharia law may be less programmatic than Peel believed. “Nigerian Salafis, like their Sudanese counterparts, expressed concern about the doctrinal and methodological character of northern states’ efforts to implement *shari‘a* after 1999,” points

out Alexander Thurston (2016:171). Consequently, “The implementation of *shari‘a* generated new debates and tensions between Muslims and Christians but also among Muslims themselves” (Thurston 2016:178). Likewise, the Fourth Republic has been riven by “tensions” and “disagreement” between the Christian Association of Nigeria, representing mainline denominations, and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (Obadare 2018:4).

Given such debates, tensions, and disagreements, the terms “Christian” or “Muslim” imply a questionable degree of unity. Critiquing the term “Abrahamic religions” as ahistorical, Aaron W. Hughes advocates “developing a new conceptual language that avoids positing discrete religious traditions interacting with and borrowing from one another, and that instead envisages complexity and porosity between manifold and overlapping subgroups within and among ‘religions’” (2012:3). Efforts to attend to the porosity of supposedly discrete Christian and Muslim traditions in West Africa include Marloes Janson’s work on Chrislam movements in Lagos. Janson concludes that “lived religion” is “often marked by contradiction, ambivalence and double standards rather than by neat divisions along religious boundaries” (2016:649). Similarly, Marleen de Witte cautions scholars to “be wary not to uncritically reproduce religious self-categorizations and boundary setting” (2020:186). Nigerian writers would not be surprised by these conclusions. While their fiction lends imaginative depth to their characters’ penchants for both boundary-making and boundary-crossing, it tends to identify with the latter.

A decade after initially advancing the doppelgänger thesis, Meyer “concede[s] that our suggestions to view these movements as ‘mirror images’ or ‘doppelgängers’ of each other overstates the case” (2016:629). She remains, however, invested in comparison. Larkin, meanwhile, seeks to go beyond the common “set of binary distinctions” in Africanist scholarship on religion in Africa to consider “entanglements,” including “the entanglement that happens through opposition” (Larkin 2016:633, 634). Based on fieldwork in Ghana, de Witte adapts the doppelgänger thesis to “the inextricable intertwinement of charismatic Pentecostalism and (neo-) traditional African religion as part of one religious field” (2020:190). Fiction that takes up the notion of the doppelgänger stretches it even further to portray the “intertwinement” of non-Pentecostal Christian and Muslim characters, as well as to triangulate Christians and Muslims with devotees of indigenous religion.

To notice that these debates among Africanist scholars hinge on (literary) figures—the doppelgänger, the mirror—is not to advocate for the doppelgänger thesis as an analytic frame but rather to recognize an opportunity for comparison with creative writers’ social thought. The existing debates pinpoint two key intellectual problems for studying interreligious encounters that resonate strongly with the concerns of imaginative writers: first, “the politics of representation of such encounters and religious pluralism more generally, which often sit uncomfortably with certain official narratives,” and second, “readings and misreadings of the religious ‘Other’”

(Soares 2016:678). Literary fiction departs from the initial formulations of the *doppelgänger* thesis by shifting attention from the official narratives produced by political and religious leaders to the imagined lives of ordinary citizens who must navigate political and religious polarization. Consequently, contemporary Nigerian fiction raises fundamental questions not only about how text relates to reality but also about why people both make and cross boundaries that they identify as religious.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Uwem Akpan: Embodied Encounters

One of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's first published stories is premised on violence in Kano. Titled "The Scarf" when it appeared in the UK-based journal *Wasafiri* in 2002, it was later re-titled "A Private Experience" and included in her 2009 short story collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck*. The story is focalized through Chika, who is visiting the city when riots break out. Chika, a medical student who identifies as "Igbo and Christian," spends most of the story sheltering in an abandoned store with an unnamed woman, whom she identifies as a Muslim, Hausa-speaking Northerner (Adichie 2009:44). Even as the story highlights the distance between the women in terms not only of ethnicity and religion but also of education and social class, it attempts to develop a fragile solidarity between them. Eventually the unnamed woman prays while Chika looks away and reflects on her own Catholic faith—the "private experience" of the revised title—and at the end, the woman gives up her headscarf as a bandage for Chika's leg. "The story lends itself to an unobtrusive, but clearly discernible, symbolic reading, as the Hausa woman who initially brings Chika into safety invites the latter to sit on her wrapper," observes Daria Tunca, noting that through Adichie's revisions, the wrapper "significantly becomes 'green'—that is, the national color of Nigeria" (2013:54, 68). Yet the story also suggests the fictional grounds of national unity-in-diversity: giving medical advice to her companion, Chika lies by claiming that her mother has had six children, rather than two, in order to lessen the apparent class difference between the two women (Adichie 2009:50).

Furthermore, Adichie's revisions to the dialogue trouble the story's representation of solidarity between women of different faiths. In "The Scarf," Adichie describes the Hausa woman as speaking "in Pidgin English" but renders her dialogue in Standard English (Adichie 2002:26). Presumably so as to make the dialogue more realistic, Adichie renders the Hausa woman's English as much less fluent in the final version. "While Adichie was obviously attempting to explore the way that an encounter with an 'Other' complicates Chika's assumptions," argues Carmen McCain, "her portrayal of the nameless Hausa woman, in fact, reinforces the stereotype of the northern woman as seen in public discourse in Nigeria—the ultimate subaltern, married young, uneducated, unable to speak" (2014:109). The story's effort to imagine the possibility of embodied contact between Christian and Muslim women does not entirely succeed.

“The Scarf” was likely written in the aftermath of the October 2001 violence in Kano, but “A Private Experience” is set during the regime of General Sani Abacha (1993–98). Here the riots are attributed to the accidental desecration of a copy of the Qur’an by “a man who happened to be Igbo and Christian” and his subsequent beheading (Adichie 2009:47). In this respect, the story echoes the lynching of an actual Igbo trader, Gideon Akaluka, in December 1994 (Maier 1995). In the story, Chika thinks of her sister, a political science student involved in the pro-democracy movement. “She imagines the cocoa brown of Nnedi’s eyes lighting up, her lips moving quickly, explaining that riots do not happen in a vacuum, that religion and ethnicity are often politicized because the ruler is safe if the hungry ruled are killing one another” (Adichie 2009:48). Later, the narrator says of Chika, “She will listen to BBC radio and hear the accounts of the deaths and the riots —‘religious with undertones of ethnic tension’ the voice will say. And she will fling the radio to the wall and a fierce red rage will run through her at how it has all been packaged and sanitized and made to fit into so few words, all those bodies” (Adichie 2009:53–54). Here, the source of her rage may be partly that the BBC’s explanation makes no room for politics, but what’s more important is that any such explanation cannot account for the permanent disappearance of Chika’s sister. Unpacking such narrative movements into the future, or prolepsis, Susan VanZanten comments, “The early closure of the central conflict created through the text’s focalization in Chika—where is Nnedi?—transfers the narrative focus to the events taking place in the store” (2016:13). The unnamed woman with whom Chika shelters is also missing a child, we are made to understand, so that the two women both experience loss.

There is a kind of doubling or mirroring in Adichie’s story, then, but it is a mirroring of personal trauma rather than mutual intolerance. Adichie strives to distinguish violence, associated with men in public space, from religious rituals, associated with women’s “private experience.” While the other woman prays, Chika “wishes that she could leave the store. Or that she, too, could pray, could believe in a god, see an omniscient presence in the stale air of the store” (Adichie 2009:52). Insofar as Chika doubts her faith, belief matters less than parallels between embodied religious practices; the rosary that Chika wears in order to keep her mother happy resembles the Hausa woman’s scarf, while the woman’s act of prayer inspires Chika to find some comfort, later, in the Masses the family will offer up for her missing sister. Reading the story alongside other fictional representations of Islam in Africa, Shirin Edwin concludes that Adichie does not reduce “the women’s interactions” to either “conflict or understanding” (2019:271–72). Even so, some readers may wonder whether this story, with its neat parallels, exemplifies the very “packag[ing] and sanitiz[ing]” of conflict for international consumption that it aims to critique by reference to the BBC (Adichie 2009:54).

In some accounts, the return to democracy at the end of the 1990s has further “fueled the friction between Nigeria’s Muslims and Christians”

(Griswold 2010:45). According to these commentators, Nigerians have come to identify their political interests with being represented by members of their own religious communities. As Obadare sees it, “the success of Pentecostalism, as symbolised by the Obasanjo presidency, was a probable factor in triggering the sharia project,” that is, the introduction of sharia law in a dozen predominantly Muslim states across northern Nigeria (2018:70). In the “Sharia crisis” of February 2000 (Angerbrandt 2011), riots in Kaduna that began during an anti-sharia demonstration led to hundreds or even thousands of deaths, the displacement of tens of thousands of people, and “riots in Aba, Abia State, which were portrayed in the media as reprisals for the Kaduna riots” (Obadare 2018:68).⁵ Set during this crisis, Uwem Akpan’s harrowing novella “Luxurious Hearses” was first published in the US in 2008 as part of *Say You’re One of Them*, a collection of novellas and short stories about African children that became a *New York Times* bestseller after Oprah Winfrey selected it for her book club. *Say You’re One of Them* was also published by Bookcraft in Nigeria in 2010. The very name of Akpan’s sixteen-year-old focal character implies that he is his own doppelgänger; baptized as Gabriel in the Niger Delta, he is known as Jubril in the northern city where he has spent most of his life.

“Luxurious Hearses” is set almost entirely on a coach or “Luxurious Bus” waiting for a driver and fuel, a bus that at once realistically portrays the turn-of-millennium economy and symbolizes the limits of democracy (Akpan 2009:190). Early on, the narrator refers to Jubril as a “Muslim, [who] ha[s] done a good job disguising himself as a Christian fleeing south” in order to escape “religious conflict” (2009:190). Jubril begins to associate the coach bus with “the myth of the south. In his imagination, he saw the south as more developed than the north, even if it was inhabited by infidels” (2009:209). In this way, Akpan’s novella interrogates Nigeria’s “imaginative ethnopolitical geography” (McGovern 2017:43). The geography is imaginative, too, in the sense that Akpan attributes “the Sharia crisis” to the fictional cities of Khamfi and Onyera rather than Kaduna and Aba (Akpan 2009:193). As Murray Last notes, northern Nigerian cities now “notorious for their communal violence,” including Kaduna and Jos, were formed as colonial-era towns populated largely by immigrant workers, absent the traditional authority of an emir, and have since become “centres of new religious groupings committed to forms of evangelization” (2007:612). Although Akpan’s Khamfi is portrayed as having an emir, it otherwise resembles Kaduna. By placing his invented city at the end of a list of “big, multiethnic cities like Lagos, Kaduna, Jos, and Khamfi,” Akpan at once invokes real sites of crisis and distinguishes his fiction from ethnography (2009:241).

The novella’s narrative point of view oscillates between close third-person and omniscient, even as its depiction of Jubril “oscillates between the deeply sympathetic and the lightly satirical” (Ndlovu 2014:84). As flashbacks reveal, Jubril is the product of a mixed marriage between a Catholic man from the Niger Delta and a woman from a Muslim family that had migrated southward. When Jubril was only two, however, his mother left her

husband to live with relatives in Khamfi, taking her sons with her. Subject to one of the most controversial provisions of sharia law, Jubril has had his right hand cut off for stealing a goat (Sanusi 2007:177). In order not to give himself away as a Muslim on a bus full of non-Muslims, he must keep his right arm hidden in his pocket. Much of the novella's suspense stems, then, from the question of whether he can successfully perform a Catholic identity as Gabriel, under the sign of the "worn Marian medal dangl[ing] from his neck" (Akpan 2009:189), or whether his body—his northern accent and amputated hand—will betray him as a Muslim. "Luxurious Hearses" manifests what Quayson (2007) terms "aesthetic nervousness" insofar as Jubril's hidden impairment becomes the locus of anxieties over differences coded as ethnic, political, and religious.

As the novella moves forward, it suggests that even Jubril's Muslim identity is in question. Many years after their move northward, his older brother Yusuf ran away back to the Delta to find his father and returned as Joseph, a born-again Christian. Joseph, readers learn, was stoned to death by his relatives and neighbors for apostasy. Having stood by as Joseph was killed, Jubril was nonetheless tainted by his brother's so-called apostasy. When a mob of young Muslims started looking for targets, two supposed friends who owed Jubril money accused him of being a Christian like his brother; he has only escaped to the Luxurious Bus thanks to help from a Muslim teacher.

Jubril's memories of his escape are intercut in the novella with the present time of the bus, in which the passengers watch television coverage of the ongoing violence in their city. This device both enables the novella to reflect on the mediation of images of Africa and introduces a kind of generic instability. As Isaac Ndlovu observes, "when scenes of violence become images on television screens or are translated into fiction, something unreal and almost playful attaches itself to them" (2014:91). Akpan's text becomes at once realism and satire, mimetic representation and critique.

What the news media in the novella call "Religious Riots" (Akpan 2009:234) have an economic subtext: the increasing number of *almajirai* or Qur'anic-school pupils, sent to the city by poor rural families, who subsist by begging. Like Nnedi in Adichie's "A Private Experience," Akpan implies that the political rhetoric around sharia and the politicization of ethnic difference channel these boys' frustration into violence against those marked as religious Others. Lest readers be tempted to treat religion as merely an ideological cover for political economy, however, Akpan attributes the selfless actions of Mallam Abdullahi, who hid Jubril alongside Christians under his family's prayer mats, to his Muslim faith. "Repeatedly," writes Akpan, "he told Jubril that Islam was a religion of peace" (2009:276).

The novella also has characters who critique the bus's largely Christian ridership—and perhaps Christians among its readership, as well. The arrival on the bus of Colonel Silas Usenetok acts as a catalyst. On the one hand, Colonel Usenetok is a figure of Nigerian national pride, a former member of the ECOMOG forces deployed throughout the 1990s to intervene in civil wars in other parts of West Africa. On the other hand, he is neither Christian nor

Muslim, but an adherent of an indigenous African religion who sets up “a temporary altar” and prays “to Mami Wata, the goddess of the sea” (Akpan 2009:299). When the other passengers start trying to evict the colonel from the bus, he declares, in his Delta accent, “Let me tell all of you in this bus, none of these white countries, which brought us Christianity and democracy, came to die for Liberians. Did any of these Arab countries peddling militant Islam in Africa send troops to Sierra Leone? I say you all are mad, to kill each other for two foreign religions” (Akpan 2009:288). The soldier’s comment echoes an earlier one by another devotee of an indigenous African religion, a chief who points out how little peace the “imported religions” have given Nigeria and taunts the Christians around him, “Is the blood of goat and sheep that we use for our sacrifice to be compared to the human blood you are spilling in Khamfi?” (Akpan 2009:253).

This language of sacrifice lays bare an underlying dynamic in “Luxurious Hearses,” a dynamic that French theorist René Girard identified as “the scapegoat mechanism” (1996:viii). According to Girard, social conflict arises out of “mimetic rivalry” (1996:12). People learn to desire by observing what others desire, yet by seeking the same objects, they thwart others’ desires to possess those objects. When social conflict threatens to break out into violence, the scapegoat mechanism diverts that violence onto a victim who temporarily reconciles members of a society as together they participate in the victim’s destruction. For Girard, the ancient idea that the gods require sacrifice obscures the fact that it is actually the community that requires a victim (1996:76–77). Akpan presents the terrible irony that the Christians and Muslims who claim to worship a God who no longer requires sacrifices continue to practice a form of human sacrifice by scapegoating religious Others.

Is Girard’s theory adequate to twenty-first-century Nigeria? Girard’s transhistorical claims sit uneasily with current emphases on historical contingency and political economy. Yet even without Girard, a political scientist working in contemporary Kaduna worries about the “scapegoating” of non-normative gender performance by both state and federal governments, on the one hand, and reformist Muslims and Pentecostal Christians, on the other hand (Harris 2012:19). Within Akpan’s novella, the scapegoat mechanism Girard identifies—the tendency to restore social unity through violently converging on a victim—becomes so central as to be impossible to ignore. With the televisions turned on again for the journey, the passengers see that southerners have reacted to the arrival of the first “luxurious hearses,” full of bodies, by exacting revenge on northerners living among them.

The novella cautions against simplifying the conflict to northern Muslim versus southern Christian. Interviewed by a television reporter, a leader of the Hausa-Fulani people in the southern city says, “I’ve never lived in the north.... My great-grandfather settled here a hundred years ago, like some of your people” (Akpan 2009:312). He goes on to thank Christian viewers: “If not for some of you who died hiding us and many who are here with us in the

barracks, it would've been worse.... I want to say a special thanks to that family that hid me under their Sacred Heart altar and prayed their rosaries while Bakassi Boys—a vigilante group formed in Aba in 1998—“stormed the house....” (Akpan 2009:314; Smith 2007:169). But those on the bus, who have yet to find a scapegoat, do not seem to hear this message. While anthropologist Francis Nyamnjoh sees public transportation as a place of “conviviality” that is “likely to welcome and accommodate ethnic and national ‘strangers’ beyond mere tolerance” (2017:265), Akpan portrays a failure of conviviality.

As the southern riots continue to be broadcast on the television, the passengers' rage against northern Muslims flares. In the uproar, Jubril forgets himself and takes his right wrist out of his pocket. Edgar Nabutanyi astutely reads Jubril's amputation not as a sign of his essential Muslim difference but as “evidence of his victimization” within northern Nigeria and as “a more encompassing symbol of inscribed violence and pain” (2014:113). Nevertheless, his fellow passengers converge against him: “These were not the stares of Catholics or born-again or ancestral worshippers” (Akpan 2009:320). Although Jubril protests that he is a Catholic by virtue of his child baptism, the passengers make fun of Jubril's “supposed Christo-Muslim identity” (Akpan 2009:321). There is no room here for the “contradiction, ambivalence and double standards” that Janson (2016:649) finds in her ethnographic study of Chrislam. Jubril and Colonel Usenetok, viewed as outsiders, are “dragged [...] out” and killed (Akpan 2009:322). In a momentary solution to the southerners' divisions along ethnic, class, and denominational lines, Jubril and Usenetok become scapegoats.

The novella is structured by a pattern of doublings. In his last moments, Jubril thinks of his brother Yusuf, “who refused, when the crucial moment came, to abandon his faith; he felt one with him, though they belonged to different faiths and worlds now” (Akpan 2009:321). Both brothers have dual religious backgrounds reflected by their dual names—Joseph/Yusuf, Gabriel/Jubril—and both are killed by crowds that fix them with a single identity—Yusuf by Muslims for being a Christian, Jubril by Christians for being a Muslim. These two killings are counterpoised with two instances of religiously-motivated altruism. Mallam Abdullahi, who shelters Christians under his prayer mats, is mirrored by the Catholic family who shelter the Hausa-Fulani man under their Sacred Heart altar. A reference to “all [the Abdullahi family] had sacrificed” to protect “infidels” even suggests an alternative non-violent form of self-sacrifice (Akpan 2009:261). In this respect, Akpan's novella lines up with Girard's critique of sacrificial logic. But whereas Girard still speaks as though societies were self-contained units, each with its own distinctive religious system, Akpan shows how sacrificial logic continues to play out in the twenty-first century. In societies connected by media and migration, implies Akpan, the scapegoat mechanism is less likely to end conflict, even temporarily, than to fuel further violence against those (mis)read as Other.

A Jesuit priest at the time he wrote “Luxurious Hearses,” Akpan grounds his portrayal of Nigerian Muslims in Catholic social teaching following the Second Vatican Council, including “the solidarity of the different” articulated by the theologian Anselm Min (Szolosi 2012:446). “[I]t is in relation to this potential solidarity,” suggests Stephen M. Szolosi (2012:457), “that Akpan invites readers to judge the events of the story and what constitutes fidelity to one’s religious tradition.” Akpan associates Catholicism primarily with a sympathetic female character, Madam Aniema; in the tense world of the novella, Catholic faith figures as a moderating force but ultimately fails to avert the deaths of Jubril and Colonel Usenetok. Such violence, implies the novella, is fidelity to Christianity in name but not in substance. Relying on forms of doubling and of sacrifice, the fictional narrative poses a normative critique, from within a Catholic theological tradition, of the move to identify as Christian but accept the necessity of others’ suffering rather than allying oneself with those who suffer.

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim and E. E. Sule: Humanism and Critique

Unlike Adichie and Akpan, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim and E. E. Sule grew up in northern Nigeria. Ibrahim’s *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, first published in Nigeria in 2015 by Parrésia and subsequently by Cassava Republic Press, was awarded the Nigeria Prize for Literature in 2016. Sule’s *Sterile Sky*, published in 2012 as part of the African Writers Series relaunched by Pearson Education the previous year, received the Commonwealth Book Prize for the Africa region in 2013. Despite these accolades and lively conversations about their work within Nigeria, neither novel has received the international critical attention afforded to Adichie’s and Akpan’s story collections. In a brief reading of *Season* and more detailed reading of *Sterile Sky*, this section explores how northern Nigerian writers shape the novel for social thought.

Rather than doubling characters to question religious boundaries, Ibrahim and Sule present singular young people who survive the unspooling of sacrificial logic into violent scapegoating. Still, their texts activate a fundamental form of doubling. “Reading also is an experience of doubling,” writes Paul B. Armstrong (2013:135) in the context of neuroscientific theories that rely on doubling, such as by positing the existence of mirror neurons, to explain how the brain interacts with others. “The doubling of me and not-me in reading,” asserts Armstrong, is “an instance of the general, everyday experience of connection with and difference from others that the mirroring and inhibitory mechanisms of the brain enact” (2013:158). *Season* and *Sterile Sky* imagine the potentially life-or-death consequences of “connection with and difference from others” in both theme and structure, content and form.

A much-discussed review of Zimbabwean writer NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* for the *Guardian* (UK) by Helon Habila queried whether the London-based Caine Prize—and by extension, the Global North publishing industry—had “created an African aesthetic of suffering” (Habila 2013).

Both Adichie and Akpan have had success publishing in the Global North; both present fictional tableaux of spectacular violence and compassion. Neither statement necessarily follows from the other. Nevertheless, Ibrahim and Sule seem more wary of an “aesthetic of suffering” hardening stereotypes not only of Africa but also of northern Nigeria. Making full use of the extended duration that a novel affords, Ibrahim sets intercommunal violence in the narrative background rather than primary plot, while Sule historicizes spectacular violence within quotidian existence, setting the time of crisis amid the timeline of personal development and perceived national decline.

Ibrahim’s *Season* is dedicated “For Beloved Jos,” his city of birth and a periodic epicenter of violence between ethnically and religiously identified communities. In an article about the conflict there, political scientist Kingsley Madueke relays the story of a Jos resident who witnessed the killing of three of his siblings by neighbors in September 2001. “Overnight, it seemed, neighborhoods that were once scenes of convivial coexistence became fierce battlegrounds of ethnic cleansing between Christians and Muslims” (Madueke 2018:87). Like Akpan’s novella and Madueke’s article, Ibrahim’s novel probes when and why conviviality breaks down. Although the narrative is set in a suburb of Abuja circa 2011, the main character, Hajiya Binta Zubairu, has moved there from Jos after her husband died during the September 2001 outbreak of violence. Her niece Fa’iza comes to live with Binta after Fa’iza’s family is killed in the November 2008 riots that followed a local election. While the primary plot is about the scandalous relationship between the widow, Binta, and a much younger ne’er-do-well, Reza, the novel also tracks Fa’iza’s efforts to come to terms with her family’s violent death.⁶ What Binta thinks of as “the conflagrations of faith and ethnicity” (Ibrahim 2016:78) in Jos predate and counterpoint the primary narrative.

During a tryst with Reza, Binta recalls her husband’s death a decade earlier. Her account underscores both the unexpectedness of conflict between neighbors—“Such a thing had never happened in Jos, how can people start fighting like that?”—and the intimacy of perpetrators and victims: her husband’s killers “‘knew him. [...] [T]hey called him by his name, as he called them by theirs” (Ibrahim 2016:172). In the one encounter between Christians and Muslims that the novel narrates directly, through a flashback, Fa’iza witnesses a mob killing her father in their home. Here, as in “Luxurious Hearses,” the writer suggests how twenty-first-century scapegoating involves the Othering of both strangers and neighbors. Hearing an unknown woman urge the mob to kill her father, Fa’iza “perceived the contagious nature of hate that makes one want to murder people they have never interacted with. Or people with whom they have eaten from the same bowl, mourned alongside and shared laughter, people with whom they have nurtured the verdant canopy of friendship that was on occasions closer to kinship” (Ibrahim 2016:76). Here Ibrahim identifies contagion not with religious Others but with hatred of them.

Later Binta tells Reza that her husband “‘was killed by some Christian boys he employed” and that Fa’iza’s father and brother were killed “‘by

their Christian neighbors because a woman urged them to. But my sister and her daughters were saved from being raped and murdered by a Christian woman whose husband had been killed by some Muslim youths” (Ibrahim 2016:246). This altruistic or self-sacrificial neighbor should be recognizable, by now, as a trope of Nigerian literary fiction that portrays conflict. In *Season*, this figure permits Binta to blame neither religion in general nor Christians in particular for her and her family’s suffering. As she goes on to tell Reza, linking this backstory to the plot of their relationship, “I want you to understand why I have not given up on humanity, and why I won’t give up on you” (Ibrahim 2016:246). In Ibrahim’s affirmative vision, human altruism might allow even people who have suffered harm to come to peace with themselves rather than continuing the cycle of scapegoating and violence.

While the humanism of Ibrahim’s *Season* works with the social categories of Christian and Muslim, Sule’s *Sterile Sky* subjects the categories themselves to critique. The author has described his “somewhat autobiographical” novel, set in Kano during the 1990s, as “a story of a destitute family in a time of ethno-religious crisis” (Egya 2019; Osofisan 2013). The novel’s narrator-protagonist, Murtala, is the son of a low-ranking policeman and a market trader, nominally Christian Eloyi speakers from Nigeria’s Middle Belt or north-central zone, and the eldest of eight children.

The novel is framed, on one level, by public crisis; it opens with Murtala, on his way home from school, catching sight of a “chanting mob” and “thick smoke surging upwards behind” it (Sule 2012:1). “A kiosk with Reinhard Bonnke’s posters pasted on it caught aflame,” adds Murtala (2012:1). This detail identifies the mob violence with a specific historical incident: a “crusade” headlined by Pentecostal evangelist Reinhard Bonnke (1940–2019) and planned for October 1991. Bonnke was granted permission to hold a massive event at Kano’s Race Course, a venue that had been denied to Muslims only weeks beforehand (Gifford 1992:170), with the crusade theme “tearing down the strongholds of Islam” (Marshall 2009:228). The image of the kiosk concretizes the combustibility of the city, even as it suggests that the German Pentecostal’s image is the primary catalyst for the conflagration. Although the crusade was cancelled, riots “left several hundred (some said 2000) dead” (Gifford 1992:170).⁷ In the novel, Murtala’s family flees their home for the temporary protection of the police barracks after overhearing the deaths of their neighbors, including Murtala’s friend Helen; while fleeing the violence, his brother Ukpo is hit by a car and dies. Late in the novel, crisis recurs: a woman is beheaded after being accused of desecrating a Qur’an. The rumor that sparks this violence—according to one of Murtala’s neighbors, “Dem say she tear paper from Koran clean im pikin nyash” (Sule 2012:250)—resembles one that reportedly led to the death of Gideon Akaluka in December 1994 (Maier 1995), also fictionalized by Adichie in “A Private Experience.” Underlining the recurrence, Murtala observes, “At the police station, we spread our mat and blanket on the very spot we had occupied during the previous crisis” (Sule 2012:253).

If *Sterile Sky* is thus a historical novel on one level, it also a novel of education framed, on another level, by Murtala's educational trajectory through Tony Cheta College. The first crisis coincides with his first day of junior secondary school; by the end, presumably three years later, he is preparing to take his JSSCE exams. Narrated by Murtala in the past tense and in standard English, implicit proof of his educational attainment, the novel also features dialogue in Nigerian Pidgin and points to Kano's multilingualism by tagging some conversations as "in Hausa" or "in our language" (Sule 2012:114, 144).

Even as a violent opposition between Christian and Muslim inhabitants of Kano weighs on the characters, the novel works to deconstruct this opposition, to present Christians and Muslims not as doubles of each other but as diverse members of a shared community. During the first crisis, a Muslim neighbor lies to his co-religionists to save Murtala's family. When they thank him, this barber replies, "The breath of life is the same for every person" (Sule 2012:13). Some time later, in an instance of literal religious dialogue, the same neighbor offers Murtala an explicitly Islamic rationale for his action: "Prophet Muhammadu *sallallahu alaihum wasallam* enjoins us to welcome strangers and live with them" (Sule 2012:71). Furthermore, the portrayal of a different neighbor known as Baba Fatima, who had converted to Islam during a previous crisis (Sule 2012:86), suggests the potential mutability of religious identity.

The most sustained deconstruction of religious difference, however, comes from vernacular intellectuals who, like Colonel Usenetok in Akpan's novella, identify as neither Christian nor Muslim. Listening to prayers at a school assembly after the first crisis, Murtala recalls his Uncle Tony, a university student, referring to Christianity and Islam as "foreign religions." When Murtala's mother implied that he had become an over-educated atheist, Tony responded, "The ancestral way our fathers worshipped God is the best way for me." As Murtala decides not to "say amen," he clearly identifies with his uncle's position, relating, "I did not wish to pray anymore within the religions that had triggered the violence in which Ukpo and Helen perished" (Sule 2012:40).

Omodiale, Murtala's university-educated but unemployed neighbor, depicts intercommunal violence as on a continuum with the violence of colonialism. Holding court in their compound, he tells the neighbor men, "What do your religions tell you? A simple act of offering to God brought violence between brothers: Cain and Abel. Look at it this way: Christianity and Islam are rooted in violence" (Sule 2012:88). In Omodiale's reading of the ancient story, reminiscent of Girard's, violence stems from rivalry, which is itself incited by a (mistaken) belief in a divine requirement for sacrifice. Whereas a number of ancient Jewish, medieval European, and Mormon sources associated "the mark of Cain" with blackness (Mellinkoff 1981:76–79), Omodiale turns this racist myth on its head by referring to European and American weapons manufacturers, including the developers of the atomic bomb, as "children of Cain" (Sule 2012:89): "And the children

of Cain, in order to keep the trend of violence, killed all our *Jesuses* so that they could use their Jesus to rob us. They slew our black saviours: Patrice Lumumba, Amílcar Cabral, Martin Luther King Junior, Walter Rodney and Steve Biko. Look brothers, the violence you see today has a history” (Sule 2012:90). Rather than entirely blaming colonial and white supremacist forces for intra-Nigerian conflict, however, Omodiale’s analysis takes an anthropological, even Girardian turn: “The foundation of the world and its religions is laid on violence. Even our primitive societies were founded on violence” (Sule 2012:91; cf. Girard 1987). What requires explanation, in this view, is not so much the fact of violence as Nigerians’ continued adherence to “foreign” rather than ancestral religions.

Sterile Sky reflects, too, on how violence in Africa is presented to—and exacerbated by—the Global North. Reading a newspaper early in the novel, Murtala encounters a picture captioned “*Child victim of war in Liberia,*” which he cuts out and pastes near his bed (Sule 2012:35). The relative specificity of this caption in a local newspaper contrasts with the headline of an issue of *The Economist* that his well-off schoolfriend Ola brings to school one day: “*Africa: The Hopeless Continent,*” inside of which is a picture of a child soldier (Sule 2012:188). Here Sule has transposed an infamous *Economist* headline from May 13, 2000, “The hopeless continent,” into the early 1990s, during the First Liberian Civil War, which Ola describes to Murtala (Sule 2012:189). Inspired by older authority figures, neither Murtala nor Ola accepts the hypocrisy of the *Economist* title. Murtala says, “my uncle told me that the use of violence to seize power in Africa was copied from the West.” Ola responds, “Imagine the white people calling Africa a hopeless continent. Dad says they send arms and ammunition, instead of technology, to Africa” (Sule 2012:189–90). Murtala’s own father, or Baba, frequently lays the blame for their destitution at the feet of the Structural Adjustment Program instituted in 1986 at the behest of the International Monetary Fund. In this he echoes the political economy analysis of Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, who has observed that the “increased impoverishment of the population” after 1986 became “a major factor contributing to religious crisis” (2007:183).

Murtala’s family crisis comes to a climax when Baba disappears. As Murtala learns from an account that Baba wrote in his exercise book, he has been fired from his job as a policeman. A new District Police Officer, SP Ibekwe, who had lost his parents and siblings to “religious killers” in Kano, mistakenly takes out “his cold war” against northerners on Baba (Sule 2012:219), whose identity as a minority-language Christian from Plateau State does not fit easily into Ibekwe’s binary imagination of a Christian South and Muslim North.

No longer a Christian believer and not yet an intellectual in his own right, Murtala is granted insight in his dreams. Through the character of his paternal grandmother, who visits his dead brother Ukpo’s grave, the novel explores what Harry Garuba (2003:266) called the “animist unconscious.” A devotee of “the Wind,” Grandmama addresses Ukpo in an extended poetic utterance, imploring him to be reborn in “the choice wombs / Of our

daughters” and promising him “a pure white he-goat” as sacrifice. Grand-mama also reassures Murtala, disturbed by his own dreams of Ukpo and of an “angry masquerade,” that “Among our people, dreamers are great people” (Sule 2012:50, 121–23). A later dream sequence establishes the prescience of these dreams, as Murtala foresees the events of 9/11 and the US War on Terror. In the novel’s final chapter, Murtala even compares himself to the biblical dreamer Joseph, as Ukpo appears in a dream to lead Murtala to his father (Sule 2012:199, 279).

Baba, having undergone a conversion of his consciousness, tells Murtala that most Nigerians “are enslaved to Islam and Christianity, two foreign religions tied together by violence” (Sule 2012:283). He names a pantheon of male African revolutionaries similar to Omodiale’s list of “black saviours” (Sule 2012:90) and is reading postcolonial African political analysis and fiction. The books that Murtala notices in his father’s room, all written by men, emphasize cultural, economic, and political struggle against (neo) colonialism: “*The West and the Rest of Us, The Wretched of the Earth, Petals of Blood, God’s Bits of Wood, Violence, The House of Hunger, The Poor Christ of Bomba and Two Thousand Seasons*” (Sule 2012:285). That the last novel is by Ayi Kwei Armah, whom Sule credits as his “favourite novelist” and under whose supervision he drafted *Sterile Sky* while in a writing residency in Senegal, suggests that the author endorses Baba’s reading list (Sule 2012:v). At the same time, *Sterile Sky* allows readers to question Baba’s decision to abandon his family.⁸ Remarkably, the novel layers together a realist portrayal of Murtala’s family’s struggle with an analysis of Nigeria’s political economy that nonetheless holds space for animism as both a spiritual force and a symbolic narrative resource.

Written from the perspective of an ethnic minority within the north, contributing to a body of Anglophone northern Nigerian literature that its author understands to be minoritized within Nigeria (Egya 2020:343), and criticizing the violence committed by adherents of Nigeria’s majority religions, *Sterile Sky* issues a minority report. In a discussion of Ibrahim’s equally iconoclastic *Season*, the novelist has claimed that “unless northern Nigerian writers, males and females, begin to deconstruct anti-human religious and cultural conventions [...], northern Nigerian literature will continue to suffer self-limitation” (Egya 2020:349–50). Some may be tempted to write off such humanism as merely a privileged minority opinion. Yet critique is a primary literary function. As Adriaan van Klinken (2020:7) finds in a wide-ranging survey of religion in African literature, including Adichie’s first novel and Ibrahim’s *Season*, “writers serve as social, cultural and political critics, implicitly or explicitly interrogating the workings of religious norms and power in communities and society.”⁹ Arguing for an anthropology based on political equality rather than cultural difference, Marshall (2014) observes that disciplinary respect for alterity poses difficulties for anthropologists studying religious movements they find politically objectionable. Less constrained than Africanist social scientists, African writers can not only represent and interpret but

also memorably critique oppression and suffering within their own societies.

Conclusion

The works by Adichie, Akpan, Ibrahim, and Sule discussed here do not, of course, represent the entirety of literary fiction concerned with religion in Nigeria. Other works depict struggles within religious communities, portray conviviality amid religious diversity, and satirize duplicitous religious leaders. Even as scholars of politics and religion continue to debate the extent to which contests over resources, the politicization of difference, or theological imperatives contribute to so-called religious crises, writers of fiction immerse readers in their characters' embodied perceptions and imagined geographies and challenge readers to reflect on their own complicity in consuming violence. As social thinkers, African writers insist on the ubiquity of forms, the inevitability that both social life and literary material will be arranged in some fashion, and thus the need to hold up these arrangements for critique. Contemporary Nigerian writers, in particular, explore possibilities for interreligious solidarity through forms of doubling and interrogate forms of sacrifice that authorize scapegoating. Whether critiquing violence from within a monotheistic religious tradition or from a stance that is at once humanist and animist, fiction shows how forms of interreligious encounter are both produced in local contexts and mediated to the wider world.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported in part by the University Research Committee of Emory University. I gratefully acknowledge Adesola Thomas for crucial research assistance; Adeshina Afolayan, Chris Dunton, and Devaka Premawardhana for helpful comments on an earlier draft; interlocutors at the University of Ibadan for productively challenging conversation; and the anonymous reviewers for pressing me to clarify the analysis.

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Notes

1. While focusing on sexuality rather than religion, Edgar Nabutanyi (2019) extends Adebani's work to contemporary Ugandan writer Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi.
2. On the market for African literary fiction and Julien's concept of "the extroverted African novel," see Akin Adesokan (2012), Nathan Suhr-Sytsma (2018), and Madhu Krishnan (2019).
3. In a monograph on earlier northern Nigerian fiction in English, Shirin Edwin (2016) spotlights novels by Zaynab Alkali, Hauwa Ali, and Abubakar Gimba as instances of what she terms African-Islamic feminism. For critical overviews of contemporary Hausa-language prose fiction, which this study does not consider, see Abdalla Uba Adamu (2006) and Carmen McCain (2014).
4. Examining the movement known in Hausa as Yan Izala, Ousmane Kane (2003:7) distinguishes "reform movements [...] that attempt to reform social and religious practices" from Islamist movements "that attempt to capture political power and establish the rule of God." Thurston (2016:21) further distinguishes the reformism represented by Yan Izala from Salafism, which he identifies with graduates of

- the Islamic University of Medina and the particular canon that they advance. Salafism should not be conflated, though, with Islamism on the order of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (Thurston 2016:170–74).
5. For a critical account of how the Nigerian press covered the 2000 sharia crisis, see Adebani (2016:205–10, 223–24).
 6. For a reading of Fa'iza in terms of trauma, see Elizabeth Olaoye and Amanda Zink (2020:47–49).
 7. Having reviewed newspaper and magazine reports on the Kano riots, which emphasized economic and political over religious causes for the violence, Gifford (1992:178–79) calls the government's claim that only eight people died "transparently false." Reflecting on the ensuing 1993 "Bonnke Affair" in Mali, Soares (2016:685) asserts that "the media and mass-mediated religious content in particular have been especially important in raising tensions" between African Muslims and Christian.
 8. Sule's subsequent novel, *Makwala* (2018), further explores the character of Odula in the years following his role in *Sterile Sky* as Murtala's father.
 9. On the relevance of debates about critique and secularity to African writing, see Jeanne-Marie Jackson and Nathan Suhr-Sytsma (2017).