


BOOK REVIEW

***Entangled Domains: Empire, Law and Religion in Northern Nigeria.* By Rabiāt Akande. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Hardback, ISBN 9781316511558**

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When people debate secularism, what exactly are they debating? Are they evaluating the pure theory of the thing – the abstract principle that religion and the state ought to live in separate rooms? Are they pitting different religions against one another while pretending to have an argument about principle? Does it all boil down to self-interest – choosing the religious way when it benefits you, and the state way when it doesn't? Rabiāt Akande's *Entangled Domains* shows that, in one important front in the larger war about religion and the state, what's going on is really a fight about *history*.

In this meticulously researched book, Akande reconstructs the fine points of British colonial policy about law, Islam, and public administration in Nigeria and then shows how those policies were litigated – literally and figuratively – in the decades after Nigeria's independence in 1960. Secularism, Akande writes, is like all “legal ideas” in that it has internal contradictions and “competing external deployments” (25). Throughout, Akande brings a legal historian's appreciation of ambivalence, complexity and *whataboutism* to the study of secularism. This makes her argument both harder to pin down and truer than those – for or against secularism – who have preceded her. Both sides got it wrong, she shows; debates about Islamic law were not a civilizational fight to the death between Muslims and the west, and secularism's defenders did themselves a disservice by framing it that way. But secularism's critics *also* warped the debate by making it seem as if secularism was always a fig leaf for power and never a device that might be turned back against it (268).

In the kind of move that legal historians often make, Akande shows that secularism could be simultaneously a tool of domination and a tool of dissent. Moreover, secularism's meaning changed over time. What it did depended on who was using it and why. “Contestants switch their allegiance to ideas of religious liberty and secularist separation and deploy those ideas in shifting ways,” she writes. “This lays bare the instability of those ideas and the elusiveness of a conceptual resolution of the struggles.” Secularism, in its colonial guise and otherwise, “is not an unchanging mode of domination. It is a domain of contestation” (266). This may sound like a lukewarm

point, but in a literature that mostly consists of hot takes, Akande's nuance is essential. This is emblematic of her style; she consistently brings the temperature down, allowing us to see what's going on underneath the roiling surface of politics.

Northern Nigeria is a good place for Akande to bring this perspective. The Muslim-majority region of Africa's most populous, arguably most religiously divided country has been wracked by several decades of fighting about Islamic law, and in the process the subtleties of what exactly is being fought over has been lost. Akande restores it. Both those who argue *for* the use of sharia in northern Nigeria and those *against* it are not actually making arguments about the merits or shortcomings of the law itself (at least not always). Nor are they arguing about the temporal roots or authenticity of Islamic law in this part of the world, even though they often say they are. Sharia's proponents may invoke its deep roots in Nigeria to justify it, and its opponents might cite its antiquity to argue that it isn't suitable for use in the modern world – but both sides are being ahistorical. The sharia debates *are* about the past, Akande argues, but the past in question isn't "time immemorial," as the juridical boilerplate goes. Rather, the dispute about Islamic law and secularism in northern Nigeria is fundamentally a quarrel about *colonial* history, masquerading as something else. With great conceptual deftness, Akande pulls off the mask.

The colonial debates she finds underneath will not immediately be legible to outsiders. It isn't something so simple as whether colonial religious policy was good or bad, or an attempt to tot up who lost and gained what. Rather, what Akande finds at the heart of the fiery debate about sharia today is an old administrative question: is it better to leave existing structures in place and govern through them or to replace them with something designed along European lines? Administrators tacked back and forth about this throughout colonial rule, and in Nigeria the main players are two colonial ideologues who still haunt debates about religion and the state. The first is Lord Frederick Lugard, a swashbuckling early governor whose "Orientalist fascination" with the caliphates of Africa's past led him to a philosophy of native administration "premised on noninterference with Islam," which came to be known as "indirect rule." The Lugard paradigm survives as one side of the contemporary debate about Islamic law. The other is represented by Donald Cameron, a secular-minded administrator who "did not adulate precolonial Islamic traditions," and argued that "'neutrality' ought to be the highest principle" of British rule (17). Akande's focus is on the minutiae of colonial policymaking, but the conclusions she draws from them will appeal to readers beyond African history. *Entangled Domains* is an excellent book. It offers a fundamental challenge to Nigerian historiography and an important lesson for the study of law and religion everywhere.