An Islamic social movement in contemporary West Africa: NASFAT of Nigeria

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Much recent scholarship about Islam among youth has tended to privilege so-called political Islam or Islamism and the radicalization of Muslim youth. In this chapter, I shift the focus away from such objects of study to consider a new Islamic organization in Nigeria called NASFAT (Nasr Allah al-Fatih Society of Nigeria) that exhibits some features of a social movement. NASFAT also clearly illustrates the influence of Pentecostalism on Muslim religious practice with some even referring to the organization as ‘Islamic Pentecostalism’. NASFAT’s founders intended the organization to be both non-sectarian and non-political. Like some other modern Islamic movements, NASFAT has focused on questions of piety and ethics and has been very active in social and economic activities. However, NASFAT’s development of business activities, which it has sought to explicitly link with Islam, has been rather distinctive, helping to define it as an Islamic social movement. Given the limited attention to such contemporary Islamic organizations and social movements, which challenge some conventional terms and categories of analysis of Islam, Muslim youth and social movements, the chapter is a preliminary attempt to trace

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the history of NASFAT and set it within the larger social and historical context.

Young people – whether considered as a demographic group, a generation or a segment of consumer society – have captured the imagination and, not infrequently, the opprobrium of social and political commentators for several decades now. At least since the Iranian Revolution, there has also been considerable interest in Muslim youth in the world. From the time of the Palestinian intifada when young people were key actors to the events of September 11, 2001 when young Arab hijackers engaged in spectacular acts of terrorism, Islam and especially young Muslims have been key objects of attention and have faced heightened levels of scrutiny. This degree of interest in young Muslims and their activities is unlikely to abate any time soon.

Given this excessive interest in young Muslims, it is not surprising that much recent scholarship about Islam among youth has tended to privilege so-called political Islam or Islamism and various trajectories of the radicalization of Muslim youth in volatile and unstable settings in the world. This is not least the case for Nigeria, especially in the predominantly Muslim north of the country where, for several decades, Muslim youth have been prominent religious and political activists. Since the 1980s, there have been waves of Muslim radicalism in Nigeria from the millenarian Maitatsine movement to the more recent self-styled Nigerian Taliban. Following the extension of sharia to cover criminal law in twelve northern states beginning in 1999, scholars and other commentators have focused with great intensity on Islam and Muslims in northern Nigeria.

In this chapter, I shift the focus away from such objects of study, which are, of course, not without interest or importance, to consider a new Islamic orga-

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3 See, for example, Olivier Roy, Globalised Islam: The search for a new ummah (Hurst, London, 2004); cf. Linda Herrera & Asef Bayat (eds), Being Young and Muslim (Oxford University Press, Oxford, forthcoming in 2010).
5 See Jon Abbink’s contribution in this volume.