EDUCATION AND THE GROWTH OF RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS AMONG YORUBA MUSLIMS—THE ANSAR-UD-DEEN SOCIETY OF NIGERIA

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1. Introduction: Religion and elite formation in Yoruba society

Yoruba society with its remarkable communal diversity and its religious pluralism still continues to serve as an important focus of research into the internal and external factors of social and cultural change in Africa. Apart from the rich complex of Yoruba traditional religious institutions, Christianity and Islam, both present with large and dynamic communities all over Yorubaland, have found particular interest. The widespread religious ‘tolerance’ and the apparent non-politicization of religious differences among the Yoruba has led D. Laitin (1986) to his model of a hegemonial state influencing the cultural development within society. According to him it was the colonial state which, through coercion and elite cooptation, established the ‘ancestral city’ as the dominant symbolic framework which continues to dominate even present-day political activities in Yorubaland. Without denying the major importance of the framework of the city states, Peel (1988) in his analysis of early Yoruba nationalism draws attention to the Christian background of the very concept of the Yoruba as a unified cultural and political entity. He brings out the thoroughly Christian (sometimes even anti-Islamic) reading of the Yoruba past which was created by nationalists like Samuel Johnson and which came to have decisive influence on the educational and political ideals of later political movements. He also argues that the religious division between Muslims and Christians which corresponded to other cultural and geographical differences did find expression on several levels in Yoruba politics. Two related problems of Yoruba historiography, the transformation (but also persistence) of the precolonial political communities and the emergence of a new ‘educated elite,’ seem to be reflected in these diverging views on the role
of religion among the Yoruba. From Peel's own monograph on the eastern Yoruba town Ilesa (1983) educational change comes out as a major link between communal and elite development in 20th century Yorubaland.

It is indeed the field of education where the different religious affiliations have had their most obvious impact. From a small group of educated Christians in the colonial service, in commerce and in the professions emerged the administrative and political leadership in Lagos and Yorubaland before and after independence. As the Christian missions for a long time controlled most of the educational institutions, the Christian moulding of this elite remained strong, even among those of its members who later came to identify themselves with indigenous religious traditions or with secularism. The common moral notion of ilajú/əlajú 'enlightenment, civilization' which has been described by Peel as a key term for social development was strongly linked to this educational background.²

Although Islam, too, was frequently seen in Yoruba communities as an element of plajú,³ the prestige of the Muslims was of a different kind as they represented a way of life which promised both personal dignity and economic welfare and which at the same time remained closer to communal life than missionary Christianity. Yoruba Muslims for a long time did not share the educational and professional interests of the Christians, given the continuous growth of Islam in Yorubaland and the important role played by Muslim traders and titled chiefs in many Yoruba towns. The large Muslim community of Lagos, however, was gradually drawn into the struggles and tensions between the Government, the educated Christian elite, and the local Chiefs. Earlier than other Muslim groups the Muslims in Lagos started to take part in the competition for commercial and public employment. The new situation made them aware of their disadvantaged educational position vis-à-vis the Christians who controlled most of the schools. This awareness, combined with a growing reformist tendency among younger educated Muslims, finally led to the establishment of associations which were to provide Western education for Muslim children. From the twenties and thirties they spread among Yoruba Muslim communities in many parts of the country, giving them a quite distinct character even among other Muslim groups in Nigeria.

Several models can be traced for these educational associations of the Yoruba Muslims which gradually developed into fully-fledged religious communities. A basic element was the Yoruba tradition of age-grade and professional associations (ggbe),⁴ which had been present also