

## 'At least I am married'

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# 'At least I am married': Muslim-Christian marriage and gender in southwest Nigeria

Insa Nolte

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## **Abstract**

This article explores religious coexistence among the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria. It focuses on interfaith marriages, frequent especially between Muslim men and Christian women, as a practice that brings Islam and Christianity into a mutually productive relationship. The article explores the tension between the general understanding that interfaith marriage is a positive anchor of Muslim-Christian relations and the widespread individual scepticism towards such marriages. Rooted in distinct discourses, Muslim and Christian attitudes to interfaith marriage have undergone changes along different trajectories since the 1980s. At the same time, they share a 'family resemblance' because members of both religions emphasise the importance of marriage and its unequally gendered nature. The unequal and asymmetric relationships between the two religions constitute part of a wider religious field, where the shared belief in the importance of conjugality is central to the gendered social order. Thus, even though Muslim-Christian marriages are often understood as problematic, they are still seen as less problematic than the failure to marry.

## **Article text**

When I first spoke to Bola Adesanya about my research on Muslim-Christian relations in 2012, she was excited. As a Christian woman 'ready for marriage', as she put it, she was in a relationship with a Muslim man. She emphasised that a marriage between them was compatible with the teachings of both religions because Muslim men could marry Christian women. Equally, her church allowed marriage to non-Christians if they respected the religion of the Christian partner. Moreover, she explained, interfaith marriages brought family members of both religions closer together and thus contributed to the positive Muslim-Christian relations that distinguish the Yoruba-speaking part of Nigeria from other parts of the country. In May 2013, Bola invited me to her wedding in Ibadan. Unlike most Nigerian marriage ceremonies, hers was a rather small and subdued affair that ended in the afternoon rather than continuing into the night. After most of the guests had left, Bola explained that several members of both families had either not responded to the invitation or offered last minute excuses, which she took to imply that they disapproved of the interfaith marriage. But when I expressed sympathy for her and her husband, she shrugged it off: 'At least', she said, 'I am married!'

This vignette illustrates the mixed appeal of interfaith marriages in Yoruba society, where marriages between Muslim men and Christian women are frequent. Located in present-day southwest Nigeria, Yorubaland is home to significant numbers of both Muslims and Christians. Islam was an important cultural influence from the sixteenth century and began to attract significant numbers of Yoruba-speaking converts by the nineteenth century (Sanni 1995). Christian missions, established in the nineteenth century, became highly successful during the twentieth century (Peel 2000). Islam is particularly embedded in the northwest and Christianity predominates in the south and east of the Yoruba-speaking region, but most towns and villages include sizeable groups of both

religions. Unlike many other religiously mixed parts of Nigeria, Yorubaland has experienced very little religious conflict during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Social boundaries between Muslims and Christians are fluid, and many Yoruba speakers have friends and relatives of the other religion. But although interfaith marriages are relatively frequent, both Muslims and Christians also view them with reservations.

This article examines interfaith marriage as central to ongoing contestations about Islam and Christianity as well as gender and marriage in Yoruba society. Drawing on a wide range of encounters, conversations, and in-depth interviews, this article explores the contradictory expectations that surround interfaith marriage by engaging with Yoruba-speakers as everyday philosophers and social commentators on religious coexistence (cf. Kresse 2007, Das 2010). This approach highlights the gendered social logic of interreligious marriage rather than the processual nature of Muslim-Christian conjugality (Nolte and Akinjobi 2017). A focus on reasoning also reflects the fact that abstract debate constitutes an important form of social reflection on marriage as a locus of Muslim-Christian conviviality (cf. Kringelbach 2016). When interfaith marriages are first suggested and negotiated, people often discuss them hypothetically – i.e. in relation to religious values, the gendered order, or the importance of marriage – in order to avoid giving offence. In everyday life, hierarchies of accommodation and respect usually reflect seniority rather than religion (cf. Nolte, Ancarno and Jones 2018), and an exploration of the rhetorical and hypothetical can illuminate different dispositions in the abstract without the need to consider particular interpersonal relationships. Instead of exploring the typical processes of accommodation associated with interfaith marriage in everyday life, the article therefore foregrounds the debates and concerns surrounding it.

Conceptually, the article is informed by two strands of anthropological scholarship. Studies of marriage across ethnic and religious boundaries illustrate that the rise of interfaith marriages often reflects global patterns of migration and the growing importance of love or companionate marriage (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006). But at the same time, marriage continues to be integral to kinship relations and the wider political and religious community, and attitudes towards intermarriage are often ambivalent (cf. Kringelbach 2016, though see Bangstad 2004 for an exception). Often men's and women's experiences and expectations of the future intersect with religious concerns to produce highly gendered patterns of marriage and conversion. Such patterns illuminate both the logic of social reproduction within particular groups and the ongoing 'boundary work' required to maintain their distinctions (Pelkmans and Umetbaeva 2018: 542). As in other patterns of intermarriage, unions between Yoruba Muslims and Christians are highly gendered. However, the article's focus on a single ethnic group enables it to explore gender not only in the context of inter-ethnic relations, but as an aspect of the boundary between Muslims and Christians.

This insight informs the article's engagement with the conceptual separation of Islam and Christianity in academic fields including anthropology. Reflecting both the historical importance of congruent religious and political boundaries in Europe and the more recent rise of religious conflict following the end of the Cold War, many observers conceive of Muslim-Christian relations in terms of a 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington 1993). Even where non-conflictual engagement is explored, a focus on toleration implicitly confirms that the practices of a religious other can at best be tolerated, i.e. endured or suffered (Forst 2004). But while many anthropologists of religion study Islam and Christianity separately, the complex relationship between their religion and an Other has featured

both in the anthropology of Islam and of Christianity: just as academic debates about Islam have centred on the boundary between the religious and the 'everyday' (Schielke and Debevec 2012, Fadil and Fernando 2015), scholars of Christianity have explored the relationship between the Christian and non-Christian through concepts ranging from rupture to ambience (Robbins 2007, Engelke 2012). The shared interest in what is religious and what is not (sufficiently) religious clearly reflects anthropological concerns but also illuminates important similarities between the two religions (Asad 2003, Marshall 2014).

Current debates about 'the broad range of ways in which Muslims and Christians have interacted with each other over time' (Soares 2006: 2) illustrate the limits of thinking about each religion in isolation. The wide variety of Muslim-Christian interactions across Africa illustrates that an understanding of religious coexistence solely through the ostensible opposites of conflict and tolerance would be misleading (Nolte, Ogen and Jones 2017). Janson and Meyer suggest that religious coexistence is most productively understood through the concept of the religious field (2016: 616). Bourdieu describes the field as a dynamic social arena whose underlying order is created by the shared conventions of those who produce it. As the agents within the field struggle to assert their positions vis-à-vis others, they are defined both by their own mobilisation of resources and by the difference between their own and others' positions (1993: 29-30). Similarly, the Yoruba religious field is constituted by the mutual engagement of Muslims and Christians. As this article sets out, this includes the agreement that gender and marriage are central categories of religious practice. But while the shared focus on gendered conjugality enables marriages especially between Muslim men and Christian women, it also reveals irreconcilable differences between Muslim and Christian understandings of gender and marriage. The concept of the religious field therefore enables us to consider interfaith marriage as the product of shared emphases in Islam and Christianity, while also illuminating that this similarity contributes to a dynamic process in which religious and gendered differences are reproduced.

The mutually productive relationship between the two religions with regard to marriage is illuminated by the concept of 'family resemblance'. Emphasising the complexity and ambiguity of categories of thought, Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that many things or practices that appear to be of the same kind are not linked through a single feature but through a series of overlapping similarities. For example, the 'family resemblances' between a card game and a ball game arise from the fact that they belong to a larger population of practices recognised as games, even though that population is not defined by a single feature that all members share. Rather than constituting a fixed or 'objective' category, the category of the game is constituted by everyday understandings and uses, and therefore remains open to debate and change. (Wittgenstein 2010 [1953]). In a corresponding manner, Yoruba Muslims and Christians engage with gender and marriage on the basis of very different ideas and debates.

A focus on Muslim and Christian similarities with regard to gender and marriage does not suggest that the relationship between Islam and Christianity as a whole is most productively explored through this concept (cf. Geertz 2005). Because Yoruba Muslims and Christians conceive of the remit of the divine in distinct ways (cf. Asad 1983), there are many aspects of each religion that do not share a 'family resemblance' with the other religion. For example, growing interest in Islamic

law among Muslims has not led to a similar interest in Canon law.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, a strong emphasis within Pentecostal Christianity on the Prosperity Gospel has not been matched within Islam. Rather than enabling comparison between religions, the concept of family resemblance is productive for the exploration of the 'craving for generality' (Wittgenstein 1969: 87-80). It is in the wider context of religious difference that the shared emphasis on gender and marriage among Muslims, Christians, and, as the conclusion highlights, even 'traditionalists',<sup>2</sup> constitutes a remarkable point of agreement that evokes a sense of universality.

Yoruba speakers often take the shared emphasis on marriage to mean that its importance transcends religious difference, which implicitly justifies interfaith marriage. Importantly, the emphasis that arises out of family resemblances in a context of multiplicity differs from the regularities 'between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices' Michel Foucault describes as a discursive formation (1972: 38). However, family resemblances are not reducible to a common denominator: they bring multiple imaginaries into conversation. In the interreligious field constituted by Yoruba Islam and Christianity, the very discourses that produce family resemblances – e.g. the shared focus on gender and marriage – are also linked to wider, partly linked debates and practices within global Islam and Christianity, which in turn reflect these religions' engagement with reconceptions of marriage. The slippage between multiple debates on conjugal normativity and unequal gender relations also creates space for the imagination of alternative truths and practices.

### ***Muslim-Christian marriage among the Yoruba***

Discussions of positive Muslim-Christian relations among the Yoruba have strongly centred on cultural practice, highlighting both the Yoruba attachment to an 'ancestral city' (Laitin 1983: 17) and 'strongly held community values' more generally (Peel 2016: 9). However, religious ideas and practices have played an important role in shaping community making (cf. Peel 2000 for Christianity, Nolte 2018 for Islam). While many Yoruba groups have historically valued difference and multiplicity (cf. Guyer 1996), there are examples of religiously exclusive communities, such as the Muslim city of Ilorin (Reichmuth 1998) and the Zionist towns of Ilaje (Ololajulo 2017). An exploration of the close relationships between most Yoruba Muslims and Christians must therefore avoid a reification of Yoruba cultural practice. It is however complicated by a wider bias within the anthropological literature on religion in Yorubaland towards Christianity and traditional practice.

Typical anthropological studies of Yoruba towns suggest the existence of highly differentiated religious economies across Yorubaland, and my own experiences confirm this impression. As a culturally Christian student and fellow academic, I have been part of debates on university campuses where Christian interlocutors emphasised the need for greater distance to Muslims. (More formal conversations with members of the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria [MSSN] indicated that similar concerns existed among Muslims.) However, my field research in medium and smaller-sized towns, where most Yoruba-speakers live, also illustrated the importance of collaboration across religious boundaries. Even so, the informality of interactions between

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<sup>1</sup> This may reflect the predominance of Protestant and Pentecostal denominations in southwest Nigeria. However, even in strongly Catholic Southeast Nigeria, attempts to revive Canon law have not attracted much support.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term 'traditional religion' and its synonyms here solely in reflection of the fact that this is how Yoruba speakers refer to a wide range of practices legitimated by the past.

members of different religions in the southern Yoruba Remo and Ijebu towns, where Islam and Christianity were largely seen as personal choices (Nolte 2009), differed in many ways from the engagements in the historically Islamic town of Ede in Oyo, where Christianity was not only a minority religion but also associated with immigration (Nolte, Ogen and Jones 2017). This degree of internal diversity makes generalisation on the basis of community-based research alone difficult.

Keen to produce data that would offer an alternative approach to the practices and debates surrounding Muslim-Christian relations, I embarked on a multi-disciplinary approach that would enable me to locate different patterns of coexistence within the wider religious landscape of southwest Nigeria. The last census to take religious affiliation into account had been completed in 1963, and while the decline of ethnographic surveys since the late colonial era partly reflects criticism of 'enlightened' forms of colonial control, such surveys have continued to inspire theoretically exciting and interpretively sophisticated work decades after their completion (cf. Ferguson 1999, McCaskie 2000). Moreover, the lack of reliable quantitative data for Africa also reflects the enduring marginality of the continent, and recent survey work in areas including the economy, public health, politics, and even religion has served to challenge misconceptions which could not be addressed through a focus on the local level (cf. Jerven 2013). With the help of an ERC grant, begun in 2012 under the title 'Knowing Each other: everyday religious encounters, social identities and tolerance in southwest Nigeria', I was able to build a team that designed, piloted, and carried out a large-scale survey (below: KEO survey).

Including responses from over 2,819 respondents from 18 Local Government Areas in the seven predominantly Yoruba-speaking states of Nigeria, the KEO survey explored respondents' religious history and attitudes, and it collected data, and invited comments on, typically ethnographic topics including kinship, marriage, conversion, and everyday practices and expectations (Nolte et al. 2016). It confirmed that despite the rise in Pentecostal Christianity and reformist Islam, the majority of Yoruba Muslims and Christians engage with members of the other religion in both private and professional life (cf. Nolte and Ogen 2017). While some Muslim and Christian groups emphasise the boundaries of kinship, residence, or even close interpersonal relationships (Balogun 2017, Ololajulo 2017), most welcome or even celebrate religious difference as a social and political asset (Tijani 2017), and yet others engage with the spiritual practices of others in the pursuit of self-realisation and individual ambition (Jones and Nolte 2017). Where worshippers openly draw on both religious traditions simultaneously, they often do so to double their chances of divine favour and thus 'retain rather than reconcile the distinctions between the two religious traditions' (Janson 2016: 665).

The survey illustrated that the expansion of Islam and Christianity during the twentieth century produced a highly dynamic religious environment in southwest Nigeria. A 1952 census indicated that the population of the area covered today by the seven Yoruba-speaking states of Ekiti, Kwara, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo had a larger share of Muslims (43.3 percent) than Christians (38 percent).<sup>3</sup> In the 1963 census, the percentages of Yoruba Muslims and Christians in this area had increased and were roughly equal, with 46.3 percent and 45.5 percent respectively.

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<sup>3</sup> In 1952, 'Others' (predominantly traditionalists) constituted a sizeable minority (18.6 percent). The data for 1952 and 1963 are aggregated from Ostien (2012). As administrative boundaries have changed several times since 1952, Ostien produced retrospective population numbers for each of the present-day states on the basis of local-level data.

Contrary to the assumption that the adoption of a 'world religion' constituted the end point of modernisation (cf. Horton 1971), the KEO survey confirmed that the slow overall shift towards Christianity already visible by mid-century had continued. According to the survey, in 2012-13 Christians constituted a majority with at least 63.9 percent of the population in the seven states covered, while the Muslim share of the population was not higher than 35.5 percent (Nolte et al. 2016: 557).<sup>4</sup>

The growth of the Christian population was strongly differentiated by gender and generation.<sup>5</sup> Generally, women were far more likely than men to be Christians, while the opposite was true for Muslims. Due to intermarriage, this however means that the percentage of Muslim-headed households and families is not likely to have declined significantly. Overall, almost six percent of all first marriages were between partners who still followed different religions, usually Muslim men and Christian women. Polygamy was practiced widely, though less frequently by Christians than Muslims, and interfaith marriages – usually of Muslim men – were much more frequent in second and subsequent marriages.<sup>6</sup> The resulting higher number of Muslims among younger people suggests that the shift towards Christianity may not be permanent (Nolte et al. 2016: 558-60). In addition, over 17 percent of first marriages where one partner had converted were interfaith unions, again with higher numbers in later marriages. The high incidence of intermarriage meant that almost four in five people had at least one close relative – a partner, parent, or sibling – of a different religion.<sup>7</sup>

However, the KEO survey also confirmed that a significant number of Yoruba speakers thought of interfaith marriages as undesirable for themselves or for others, with only slightly more Yoruba speakers recommending interfaith marriage (47.9 percent<sup>8</sup>) than advising against it (42.5 percent). Unexpectedly, the overall differences in responses from Muslims and Christians were not statistically significant, with members of both religions divided about interfaith marriage in a very similar way. Indeed, many people who were in interfaith marriages themselves recognised the ambivalence of Muslim-Christian marriages. Asked about his views on interfaith marriage as a Muslim man, Rafiu Debo explained that,

Before you can see a Muslim who marries a Christian, let me tell you this, that person must have had a serious problem. Those Christians that do marry Muslims have one problem or the other that they are hiding. Likewise we Muslims that marry Christians. ... [But] if you don't allow such a thing [i.e. interfaith marriage] the problem may persist (Ede, June 2012).

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<sup>4</sup> All survey data discussed in this article are adjusted for population by state (cf. Nolte et al. 2016: 553-4). In the survey, only six out of 2,819 respondents indicated agnosticism or gave self-definitions that challenged or transcended existing religious boundaries, confirming that religious boundaries matter even as they are crossed.

<sup>5</sup> The shift towards Christianity was stronger in Lagos, Ibadan, and the south of Yorubaland.

<sup>6</sup> Looking only at marriages to women's husbands and men's first wives, 6.5 percent of married respondents reported having a husband or first wife of a different religion. Over 90 percent of these marriages, or 5.9 percent of all marriages, were Muslim-Christian unions.

<sup>7</sup> Adjusted for population by state, 79.6 per cent of KEO respondents had at least one close relative – a partner, parent, or sibling – of a different religion. The percentage of traditionalists among respondents was 1.3 percent, and among respondents' parents, 3.5 per cent.

<sup>8</sup> This number includes those who advocated interfaith marriage without reservation and those who recommended it under certain conditions.

By noting that interfaith marriage serves an important function as a 'solution' to a 'problem', Rafiu emphasised that conjugality exists within a wider social context where individuals weigh different and often contradictory concerns, dispositions, and ambitions against each other. The use of the term 'problem' is relatively open and can refer to different aspects of self-realisation. But while the most important problem addressed by marriage is the single state, 'problems' potentially resolved by intermarriage also include childlessness, which is one of the most frequent reasons for the divorce or quiet dissolution of more conventional marriages.

### ***Conjugal duties, familial love, and religious difference in the marital future***

Everyday conversations and exchanges about marriage suggest that ambivalent individual dispositions towards interfaith marriage are closely linked to different expectations of the future (Jovanović 2016: 1-2). Among women, pessimistic assessments of interfaith marriage frequently highlighted concerns that religious difference might limit their ability to fulfil typical marital roles to the satisfaction of their husbands. Unlike Bola Adesanya, fellow Christian Rachael Akinbulure explained that she refused to marry a Muslim man because she feared that religious difference would lead to everyday 'battles' and 'quarrels' associated with marital breakdown:

If the wife is a Christian and the husband is a Muslim, she may find it difficult to prepare food for the husband early before going to church on Sunday so when she comes back she will come and meet battle. During Ramadan she might not be able to participate; this may also lead to a quarrel (Okitipupa, April 2014).

Rachael's concrete comments illustrate the high degree of knowledge that Muslims and Christians have of each others' practices, which is reflected in the widespread awareness that successful interfaith marriages require more 'investment' in the form of communication, negotiation, and effort than other marriages (Khan 1998: 9). At the same time, such expectations reveal the widespread desire for marital harmony (cf. Kringelbach 2016: 155).

Men's concerns about interfaith marriage often centre on the religion of their future children. Both Christians and Muslims emphasise the importance of children in validating a marriage, and children are generally seen as a blessing and a lasting contribution to the world. Reflecting Islamic injunctions as well as local notions of husbandly authority, most marriages between Muslim men and Christian women produce Muslim children and thus constitute Muslim men as heads of Muslim households. Many Muslims share the understanding that by producing Muslim children, intermarriage contributes to the expansion of Islam.

Yet Christian mothers are not always compliant with the expectations of Muslim husbands and in-laws. Hamzat Balogun told me that he was once very close to a Christian girl. However, when he began to think about marriage, his mother reminded him that some Christian mothers would directly or indirectly undermine the commitment to Islam of their Muslim children, and that children by a Christian mother were therefore more likely to become Christians themselves. Hamzat was concerned that the conversion of one or more of his children would 'divide' his family, which he perceived as 'destroy[ing] what [he] used [his] hand to build' (Ede, May 2012). While both Muslim and Christian men view the religious identity of children as an indicator of paternal authority and



achievement, the conversion of Muslim children to Christianity is a deeply felt embarrassment in Islamic scholarly families.

Those who think positively about interfaith marriage frequently emphasise the importance of love. Christian Elizabeth Ige explained that love enabled her and her husband to overcome any difficulties posed by their different religions. Suggesting similarities between Islam and Christianity beyond marriage, she argued that each individual could find guidance in her or his own religion as long as they practiced it 'with devotion', because everyone shared in the final aim of 'making heaven'. While Elizabeth emphasised the importance of women's submission within marriage, she also explained that 'if there is love between you and your fellow human being no matter the religion you will be able to interact' (Ijebu-Ife, Jan. 2014).

Such comments could be taken to suggest that interfaith marriage reflects a triumph of romantic and individualised love over kinship concerns. However, this is not borne out by the local use of words. The Yoruba term for love, *ifé*, is used to describe romantic and familial love as well as affection and general goodwill towards others, highlighting the importance of understanding local forms and ideologies of emotional attachment (Cole and Thomas 2009: 25-6, 4). In conversations about marriage, my interlocutors often mobilised the term in ways that related to broader familial bonds.<sup>9</sup> For example, octogenarian Oluwadamilola Adeniyi, an early Christian convert in a rural Ikale community, explained that her father chose a non-Christian husband for her. While women who had not enjoyed their arranged marriages often emphasised their coercive nature, Oluwadamilola understood her own more harmonious relationship also as the result of parental and familial love: she explained that she could never have resented 'what [her] father gave [her]' and therefore accepted her husband 'wholeheartedly' (Irele, Sept. 2014). For Yoruba Muslims and Christians, love and kinship are deeply entangled.

The wide range of ideas associated with love is also mobilised in nostalgic evocations of an idealised conjugal past (Cornwall 2001), when women adopted their husbands' religion upon marriage. Especially among Muslims, nostalgic references to this practice contrasted negatively with the behaviour of contemporary women wishing to hold on to their own religious practices. Reflecting on his experience of Muslim-Christian marriage over time, Muslim Issa Adeleke contrasted his own mother's conversion to Islam negatively with the women of later generations who insisted on retaining their religion. He noted that in his mother's days, 'love was the determinant factor' for religious harmony. For him, the challenge to interfaith marriages did not emerge from the need to navigate the differences between Islam and Christianity, but from women's self-assertion. He explained, that 'these days of gender equality, women will tell you, you have your own certificate, I have my own (Ede, May 2012).

These reflections suggest that ambivalence about interfaith marriage is strongly linked to women's roles in ensuring marital and family harmony. While many agree that love – expressed by the wife's acceptance of, or support for, her husband's religion – can enable good interfaith marriages, others are worried about the impact of religious difference on familiar harmony and unity, and in particular, through the children, in the next generation. As debates about interfaith

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<sup>9</sup> Such resonances have been discussed in more detail for Asia (cf. Abeyasekera 2016).

marriage centre on women's ability to fulfil their roles as wives and mothers adequately, they also reflect fears about women who contribute to division and a lack of love in the home by not submitting to the religious authority of their husbands.

### ***Unequally gendered debates: Muslim and Christian views on interfaith marriage***

As noted in the previous section, Yoruba Muslims have historically welcomed the marriages of Muslim men to Christian women based on Sura 5:5, which allows Muslim men to marry women from monotheist religions predating Islam. Reflecting a gendered model of religious authority, the permission to marry outside of Islam is limited to men, and Islamic legal provisions imply that Christian women will accept the religious authority of their Muslim husbands. This means that the Islamic community has long been conceived as potentially open to non-Muslim women. While this provision relies on a privileging of male religious authority, it confirms the religious community itself as potentially including religious Others, and illuminates the boundary between Islam and Christianity as highly gendered.

Reflecting a less inclusive discourse within European Christianity, mission churches historically emphasised the boundedness of the religious community and considered close familial and intimate bonds with non-Christians as problematic. Reflecting this view, several Christian interlocutors explained to me that marriages between Christians and non-Christians were not recommended because Paul advises believers not to be 'unequally yoked' with unbelievers (Corinthians 6:14). However, missionaries recognised that women often had little control over their marital circumstances.<sup>10</sup> In most mission churches, sanctions against marriage to non-Christians were applied more emphatically to men, and women married to non-Christians could often play significant roles.<sup>11</sup> The welcoming attitude of Yoruba Muslims to non-Muslim women, and the Christian acceptance of women in marriages to non-Christians brought Islam and Christianity into a particular gendered relationship. The very incompatibility of Muslim and Christian discourses on marriage and gendered religious subjectivity distinguished the two religious communities from each other. But at the same time, the difference of their conceptions enabled marriages between Muslim men and Christian women.

However, the relationship between Islam and Christianity was transformed in the light of wider debates about marriage and religion from the 1980s onwards. Both Muslims and Christians suggested that attitudes towards intermarriage had changed following the rise of Pentecostal Christianity and the success of Islamic reform. As Yoruba Christians and Muslims sought explanations for economic and political decline and explored religiously sanctioned forms of agency, religious debate intensified (Marshall 2009). A new generation of believers has reconceived extended kin and family relationships, marriage, and family life through Muslim (Masquelier 2009, Janson 2014) and Christian (Meyer 1998, Lauterbach 2017) discourse.

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<sup>10</sup> This position reflected official attitudes towards polygyny. In 1888 the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church confirmed that only women in polygynous marriages could be admitted into the church, and the position was shared by the other European missions in West Africa (Ajayi 1965: 106).

<sup>11</sup> However, this did not always prevent men from seeking alternative arrangements (cf. Mann 1985).

While many aspects of religious change focused on social relations within Islam and Christianity, they also affected interfaith relationships. Despite a rhetoric that advocated distance to those who were not 'born again', many of the Pentecostal churches that became popular during this period welcomed Christians married to non-Christian partners,<sup>12</sup> often to the point of inviting non-Christian partners to attend services with their spouses. But while Muslim husbands typically explained to me that their participation in Christian services was a way of 'satisfying' their wives, Christian wives often represented their husbands' church attendance as part of a process leading to conversion. This illustrates that the welcoming attitude of many Pentecostal churches to religious others is linked to the desire for conversion, which in turn reflects the historical Christian concern with religious homogeneity.

At the same time, Muslims have increasingly come to perceive women's roles as potential agents of conversion to Christianity as problematic. Several Muslims explained to me that while interfaith marriage had worked well in the past, times had changed because, as set out above, contemporary Christian women did not know how to 'love' their husbands (i.e. by adopting their religion). Other respondents were worried about Christian women's assertiveness in other ways, such as their tendency to 'disturb' others with loud Christian songs or prayers, or their ability to take their children to church where they might be turned against their father's religion.<sup>13</sup> Overall, critical attitudes on interfaith marriage among Yoruba Muslims focused strongly on gender, and in particular on Christian women's failure to accept the authority of their Muslim husbands.

Although the Pentecostal emphasis on conversion potentially recognises women as powerful religious intermediaries, most Nigerian churches also stress the importance of women's subordination to men in marriage. Reflecting this, Christian women whose husbands had converted often pointed out that they had not insisted on this conversion. To emphasise her lack of responsibility for her husband's conversion, one woman even suggested that her husband's decision to become a Christian was linked to an extramarital friendship. Thus, even as Muslim and Christian debates about gender, marriage, and community remained incommensurable,<sup>14</sup> their common discomfort with female religious assertion in the context of marriage also highlighted significant similarities.

The shared emphasis of Yoruba Muslims and Christians on the submission of wives to their husbands contrasts with trends outside of Nigeria, which have seen a growing emphasis on equality and compatibility in marriage. It does however resonate with the 'radical conservatism' of contemporary Yoruba popular culture, which Karin Barber explains partly as the result of neoliberal reform. She suggests that the intensification of economic and political competition between men and women led to an increasingly stereotypical depiction of self-assertive women as socially threatening and destructive (Barber 1986). But as state withdrawal led to growing social and economic competition, growing numbers of Nigerians also took recourse to religion. Both Muslims

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<sup>12</sup> These policies are often explained with reference to 1 Corinthians 7:14, which affirms that the unbelieving spouse is sanctified by her or his partner (cf. Nolte and Akinjobi 2017: 210).

<sup>13</sup> Several **interlocutors** justified their arguments by pointing to Sura 60:10, which advises believers to separate believing women from unbelieving men and vice versa.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of incommensurability in the context of contradiction, see Berliner (2016: 4;) and Lambek (2016: 6).

and Christians re-conceived marriage as a central point for the constitution of the religious self, and revalidated marriage as a locus of religiously sanctioned gender relations.

### ***'Family resemblances' in a field of difference: The importance of marriage***

Both Muslims and Christians are aware of the similarity of their religions' attitudes to marriage and gender, and members of both religions mobilise more than one religion to shore up their positions. In exchanges with me, Muslims referred more frequently to the Bible and Christianity than Christians referred to the Qur'an or Islam. This may be because my Muslim interlocutors assumed that I was a Christian and this would draw me into agreement. In addition, many older Muslims became familiar with the Bible while attending Christian schools. However, differences in this practice also reflect the diverse ways in which each religion conceives of the other: while many Yoruba Muslims recognise Christianity as a part of the Islamic tradition, Christians are more likely to consider Islam as a clearly different religion.<sup>15</sup>

Even so, several Christians referred to Islam in conversations with me. In one case, this was clearly linked to my own respectability as a married woman. In the town of Sagamu, the Christian landlord of a flat I had rented told me that he would only agree to extend my contract beyond our original agreement because I was a married woman and a mother. He explained with candour that despite coming from 'what we see here as a godless society', I had followed 'God's commandment in the Bible and even in the Qur'an' by getting married and bearing children. Thus my ability to research Yoruba debates about interfaith marriage was greatly facilitated by my conjugal and reproductive status, which my landlord took as a sign that I was 'responsible' enough to be trusted with another rental contract (Dec. 2013).

The general association of marriage with respectability and achievement affects the lives of all men and women: marriage is a marker of adulthood. As a woman who married in her mid-thirties, Bola Adesanya, whose wedding I described at the beginning of this article, told me that she had experienced a lot of pressure from her parents to get married. Her father had begun to complain about her 'over-aged' or even 'over-ripe' presence by the time she was in her late 20s, and after a promising relationship with another man failed, he began to cold-shoulder her. Although she had by that time moved into staff accommodation at her place of work, her father's refusal to recognise her hurt Bola deeply. Her father's suggestion that despite her economic independence, she had failed as a daughter, confirmed to her that no matter how successful she was, her achievements had to be sanctioned by marriage.

By the time she was in her early thirties, Bola's mother, her aunts and other women in the extended family were equally unsympathetic to her plight. Bola remembered that she once turned for support to her mother, who simply responded, 'This is not my father's house'. The implication was that as a responsible woman, Bola should be married and therefore also live in her husband's house (field notes, Ibadan, December 2014). The defiant relief about 'at least' being married, which Bola voiced to me on her wedding day, suggests that such pressures played an important role in her decision to commit to her Muslim partner in marriage. While she initially experienced rejection of

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<sup>15</sup> Barber and Moraes Farias point to a similar tendency in their discussion of Yoruba religious ephemera (2002).

her interfaith relationship in her family and social circle, the couple reconciled with many members of their extended families following the birth of their first child.

As these examples suggest, expectations of conjugality affect women more than men. While a bachelor might be considered as 'an irresponsible and worthless fellow' (Iwu 2007: 3), unmarried or divorced women are often referred to as *aṣẹwó*, popularly translated as prostitute. This suggests that irrespective of their other achievements, the validation of women's achievement hinges strongly on marriage and eventually motherhood. But although the association of conjugal deviance with prostitution reflects the heterosexual and hierarchical conception of marriage, the focus on women's sexual pleasure and economic independence (as prostitutes) also hints at alternative social orders, presented as revolting and yet also tempting and even titillating, and imagined through the lens of (non-)marriage.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of interfaith marriage in southwest Nigeria illustrates that the coexistence of Islam and Christianity cannot be understood by researching Islam and Christianity separately. Together, both religions are part of a dynamic field, in which Muslims and Christian mobilise incommensurable religious discourses. Yet within the wider arena of religious difference, a shared emphasis on the importance of gender and marriage constitute family resemblances between Islam and Christianity, which contribute to the underlying order of the field. As an anchor point for mutual engagement, family resemblances transcend the religious boundary and appear as higher-order or more deeply meaningful categories simply because they are shared. Reassuring both Muslims and Christians, such family resemblances also seem to reify the object of their similarity: for most Yoruba-speakers, marriage is central to gendered social practice, even if members of both groups disagree on how or why exactly this is the case.

Some interlocutors, again more frequently Muslim than Christian, also emphasised the importance of marriage in traditional practice. For example, Abdulhamid Larabi, an Islamic community leader, explained that,

As a responsible wife you have to adhere strictly with the injunction of your husband, she should know that when she gets to the husband's house she is going to be a learner... She must be obediently submissive to the husband; the Bible, the Qur'an and even the African traditional religion emphasise that a wife who is submissive to the husband will achieve greater [things], which will affect the children positively (Ede, Nov. 2013).

In this quote, Abdulhamid extends the 'family resemblance' between Islam and Christianity to include Yoruba tradition, which emphasises the spiritual importance of marriage and parenthood. His insistence on the wider similarity between traditional practice, Islam and Christianity suggests that the notion of the religious field might be expanded to include Yoruba traditional religion, and that the family resemblances linking Islam and Christianity might be framed even more widely. As fields and their conventions are products of distinct historical trajectories (Bourdieu 1993: 37), it is also possible that the privileging of marriage and gender within Yoruba Islam and Christianity reflects

the influence of older cultural patterns on the local realisation of both Islam and Christianity. While these questions are beyond the remit of this article, they suggest avenues for future research on the relationship between gender and religion.

The mobilisation of traditional religion in debates about marriage also reflects wider discourses that posit an often unspecified African tradition in opposition to recent trends validating same-sex marriage. Certainly, Nigerians of all religions were united in their support for the 2014 Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (cf. Gaudio 2014). Reflecting the fascination with the forbidden at the popular level, some Nigerian authors have explored questions about marriage that appear deeply threatening, but also absurd and exhilarating: for example, in a treatise sold at the bookshop of the University of Ibadan in 2015, the author asks whether same-sex marriage heralds a future in which societies will 'marry cats and dogs' (Iwu 2007: 15).

While the shared views by Muslims, Christians, and indeed traditionalists ostensibly affirm the centrality of heterosexual marriage, the very excitement its alternatives generate inspires debates that can veer off in unexpected directions. For example, while my interlocutors almost exclusively rejected same-sex marriage, several explained my acceptance of it as part of the advantages conferred upon me by my European origin. In this context, a number of women noted that I was lucky to live in a society where women did not have to produce children 'by force'. A male respondent expressed relief that his son, who lived in the UK, was free to 'enjoy' life without the pressure to marry young. Such comments highlight the importance of international debates and Diaspora experiences for the internal heterogeneity of Yoruba marital and religious imaginaries. Equally importantly, they show that despite pervasive conjugal and reproductive pressure, many people can – and do – recognise the possibility of happy and meaningful lives outside of normative conjugality.

Subjected to ongoing debate and burdened with overlapping religious meanings, family resemblances between Islam and Christianity reproduce marriage as both overdetermined and potentially unstable; almost like a Freudian dream object that represents a large number of partly unrelated connotations at the same time. Yet the dissimilarity of overlapping imaginaries also produces new possibilities. As long as alternative practices are mainly imagined in exchanges with and about expatriates and outsiders, it is impossible to say how future transformations of religious discourse might transform marital practice, and in what manner changes to the idea that men and women should 'at least' get married could impact on Muslim-Christian relations. But as marriage, gender and religion are intrinsically linked, it is likely that a change in one will also influence the other.

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