The Politics of Africa

Lent Term 2014. Optional Module C, Adam Higazi (ah652@cam.ac.uk)

Islam, Politics, and Cultures of Statehood in West Africa and the Sahel

Fridays, 11:00-13:00, 17 January – 21 February 2014
Location: Room S3, Alison Richard Building, Sidgwick Site, West Road, Cambridge.

Convenor’s Office: in the Centre of African Studies, Third Floor, ARB

This course focuses on the political anthropology of states, social movements, and insurgent groups in West Africa and the Sahel. It looks at state formation across the region and outlines both the transformation of pre-colonial West African states (especially Islamic ones) and the steady incorporation of ‘decentralised’ or non-state societies into state systems. What have been the ramifications of such dramatic social and political changes over the past century? In the modern context, how equitable and inclusive are political systems and state institutions in West Africa in managing socio-cultural and linguistic diversity and religious pluralism? The course offers a historically and ethnographically informed critique of the postcolonial state in West Africa and gives students the opportunity to develop a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the origins, variations and principal features of Islamic movements in West Africa and the Sahel. The seminar series has six sessions, each starting with a class discussion based on set readings and questions, followed by a lecture by the convenor on the following week’s topic. The notes provided on this reading list are also intended to introduce students to each topic and guide them through the selected academic literature.
1. Politics, society and statehood in Anglophone and Francophone West Africa

The purpose of this week’s work is to familiarise students with West Africa’s states, political systems, and varied post-colonial experiences. The aim is for a general, comparative overview. We will compare Anglophone and Francophone states (and touch briefly on the Lusophone states), and discuss colonial legacies and key features of selected post-colonial states. It should be understood that there is great linguistic diversity across West Africa and calling a state ‘Anglophone’ or ‘Francophone’ is a reference to the official language of a country and to colonial history; it does reflect the reality of linguistic diversity. There are, nonetheless, distinctions in the institutional forms and political cultures of West African states. What are the different types of political administration that have been experienced across West Africa since independence? How do they compare between states. They include governments formed from national liberation movements, authoritarian military regimes, one-party states, and presently, a plethora of multi-party states that have made or are making a democratic transition. What should the parameters for comparative analysis be?

How do international pressures and ties affect national politics in West Africa – from neo-colonialism (e.g. Françafrique) to the structural adjustment policies (SAP) of the IFIs in the 1980s-90s, to the wide-ranging local impacts of global capitalism? How similar or different are the politics and institutional features of different West African states? What have been their modernising projects and ideologies? It would help in the readings to focus on some specific comparisons, according to interest: e.g. compare Guinea, Senegal or Côte d’Ivoire with Ghana or Nigeria; or study the tripartite colonial heritage and early nationalist politics in Cameroon. The reading list for this week includes comparative works on the region as a whole, and others that focus on specific states. It would be best to work chronologically: read about the decolonisation process and early party politics, then on the trajectories of post-colonial states and the democratic transitions in the 1990s and 2000s. Also important at this stage is to study a good map to learn the geography of West Africa.

  Read chapter 7, ‘The Formation of a Postcolonial Historic Bloc’ (pp. 180-204). (This can equally be read in the first edition of the book, as the chapter was not amended for the second edition).


McGovern, M. (2012) *Unmasking the State: Making Guinea Modern*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. [this is a superb political ethnography of Guinea]


Austen, R. (2000) ‘Amadou Hampaté Bâ : from a colonial to a postcolonial African voice: Amkoullel, l'enfant peul’, *Research in African Literatures*, 31 (3): 1-17. [Amadou Hampaté Bâ was a brilliantly original novelist, poet, and ethnologist from Mali. He is better known in France, as he wrote in French (though some of his writings have been translated into English). This article analyses part of Bâ’s autobiography, which spans pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial worlds].
2. Citizenship, Ethnicity, and Regional Connectivity

One of the characteristics of West Africa is its heterogeneity, in terms of high ethnolinguistic diversity, religious pluralism, and varied cultures of statehood and political authority. This week’s class explores the politics of cultural pluralism and the struggle to forge nations and inclusive citizenship in contexts of diversity. We look at the possible tension between national citizenship and local politics of autochthony – which attempts to define ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ on the basis of ancestry. Such disputes sometimes lead to violence (e.g. Jos, Nigeria; or Côte d’Ivoire, though the parameters of these conflicts vary, and indigeneity is articulated differently in the Nigerian and Ivorian cases). We also need to think about the sociology and historicity of ethnic categories and inter-ethnic relations (see Fardon, Burnham, and Sharpe). The class will also consider regional connectivity in West Africa and the Sahara/Sahel. In the context of regional mobility – e.g., within and across the Sahara, or, historically, in the ‘desert side economy’ – is there a broader articulation of citizenship and ethnicity compared to the more local identity politics of autochthony? Or are ‘local’ political identities also part of regional systems? How are issues of citizenship, ethnicity, and autochthony treated by different states (at national and sub-national levels)? What are the consequences of different policies and social visions regarding these issues?


3. Muslim worlds and religious practice in West Africa

This week of the course acquaints students with Muslim West Africa, focusing on religious practice and the diversity of Islamic movements in the region. The readings listed here are by some of the foremost scholars of Islam in West Africa and include a mix of historical works and contemporary ethnography. Of particular interest is religious practice: in this class we focus on how Islam shapes peoples’ moral, social and political worlds, and what this means empirically. This requires reflexivity and the putting aside of ‘war on terror’ abstractions and propaganda. We will also consider if there is necessarily a consonance between religious doctrine, preaching, and practice? What of the interpretation of doctrine? Muslim piety and practice take different forms – as is also the case with Christianity and other world religions – and so it is important to recognize that we are studying complex social and religious environments.

At a basic level, how significant are the distinctions between Sufis (darika orders) and reformists (including Salafists) in terms of religious practice and politics in different parts of West Africa? How do reformist currents play out socially and politically in West African history (see Murray Last’s work on c.19th) and how has the past shaped the present? In this session we analyse Muslim worlds and Islam not in a totalizing way, but instead by focusing on particular Islamic movements (this week there is more on Sufism, especially the Tijaniyya order, next week there’s more on Salafism – terms which themselves need to be understood critically). As well as considering different Islamic movements we will study the religious and socio-political worlds of particular social categories of people – women (Cooper, Masquelier, Boyd & Last), youths and education (Last, 1993a, 2000, Brenner), pilgrims (Yamba) – and long-standing debates over the definition of Muslims and the diversity of religious practices within the Islamic world of West Africa (al-Hajj & Last, 1965; Last 1993b; Masquelier, 2001, 2008).


4. Islam, pluralism, and the state in northern Nigeria

This week we continue on from the work and readings of week 3 and look in more depth at northern Nigeria, which has by far the largest Muslim population in West Africa. We continue to look at the major Islamic movements in the region and in this class we will study contemporary Islamic reform (aka revivalism) in northern Nigeria. Some of these movements, such as Izala (aka JIBWIS), have permeated outwards from Nigeria into neighbouring countries. This shows the regional flow of Islamic thought – as, historically, does the book trade, and the spread of the Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya (darika orders) from their places of origin in earlier generations.

The reformist movement has been understood in different ways. To what extent should we think of Islamic reform, as represented by Izala and other groups, as ‘modernist’ (Kane, 2003)? Note that modern Islamic reform began in opposition to the Sufi orders (read Umar, Barkindo). It is also important to consider religious politics and the politics of religion, which can vary between different Islamic groups. What is the relationship between the various Islamic movements in northern Nigeria and the Nigerian state? Most of the ulama (Islamic scholars) – including those promoting shari’a – work within the constitutional bounds of the state (on the accommodation of shari’a within Nigerian federalism, see Suberu, 2009). ‘Reformists’ have tried to enact changes to the state/constitution along Islamic lines through political influence, from within the state. This approach contrasts very sharply with militant groups, notably Boko Haram (see Higazi, and ‘Anonymous’) and, earlier, the ‘yan tatsine (Lubeck), which adopt far more radical positions, rejecting the Nigerian state, constitution, laws, educational system, and government. On the other hand, there are also Islamic groups in northern Nigeria which reject all these things but are not militant; they have attempted to withdraw from the state in a quietist fashion. We can also ask, to what extent is Boko Haram just the latest dissident movement in a longer history of dissent in northern Nigeria (see Last, 1970, 2013)?

Students should also appreciate that northern Nigeria has great ethno-linguistic diversity – the often-used ethnic category ‘Hausa-Fulani’ is unacceptable to many people in the region. ‘The North’ is a political construct that, under British colonialism and in the First Republic (1960-66), referred to the Northern Region. This was by far the largest area of the country and included what in the 1950s became popularly known as the Middle Belt, which is a religiously mixed area, large parts of which are majority Christian but there are also many Muslims there. In correct scholarly usage, Northern (large ‘N’) Nigeria refers to the Northern Region, whereas northern (small ‘n’) Nigeria refers to the territory covered by the post-1967 states that were formerly part of the Northern Region. The twelve so-called ‘shari’a states’ constitute what is often referred to as the ‘far north’. Northern Christian leaders coined the term ‘Middle Belt’ in the 1940s/50s as they sought to carve out a separate region from the Northern Region in the lead up to independence in 1960. Their campaign for a Middle Belt Region failed, but after the division of the regional system into states in 1967 (and subsequent state creation exercises), Christian political activism in northern Nigeria has continued to
draw on and develop a discourse of being part of a Middle Belt that is historically distinct from the Muslim north. The Middle Belt thus consists of an idea and set of political values that is seen as ‘emancipatory’ by many Christians of the area, but which is viewed as divisive and sectarian by northern Muslims, including many of those who live in the ‘Middle Belt’ or central areas of the country. This is by way of introduction to the modern political history of Muslim-Christian relations in northern Nigeria. These themes are developed in greater detail in some of the articles on this week’s reading list on inter-religious relations in northern Nigeria (see Ibrahim, Pereira and Ibrahim, Suberu, and Meagher). In general, to understand Islam, pluralism, and current conflict and co-existence in northern Nigeria, it is necessary as a pre-requisite to comprehend the political and administrative development of the region (for which, see Last, 1970).

Systematic overviews of the large number of Islamic groups and movements in northern Nigeria can be found in the Working Papers of the Oxford-based Nigeria Research Network: http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/research/research-networks/nrn


5. Tuareg rebellions, Islamic movements, and interventionism in Mali

We now move on to Mali, with a main focus on the rebel movements in the north and the political crisis of 2012 that led to the state losing control over the northern portion of the country and an intervention by the French military. Start by reading the article by Lecocq et. al. (2013) and the three *African Affairs* Briefings and then turn to the other readings. Should we view the crisis as an outcome of a weak Malian state? Who are the Tuareg? What are the political and socio-economic reasons for the Tuareg rebellions (also see Guichaoua (ed.) for accounts of the rebellions in Niger Republic)? What is the historical relationship between the Tuareg of northern Mali and the Malian state (see Lecocq, 2004, 2010)? How should we characterise and explain the internal differentiation within the Tuareg rebel groupings? What is the relationship, if any, between Tuareg nationalism, rebellions, and jihadi groups active in the recent conflicts in northern Mali (notably AQIM, MUJAO etc.)? What are the origins and aims of AQIM and MUJAO and how do they operate? Do they have a political project? In what ways does a wider understanding of Islam in Mali aid our comprehension and contextualisation of the jihadi movements in the north (see Soares, 2005, 2012)? What of the wider international and global contexts, such as the fallout from the Libyan war and the overthrow of Gaddafi, and the mediatisation of jihad and the al-Qaeda franchise? What impacts has the French intervention had and what motivated it? Is it part of a ‘War on Terror’ in the Sahara?


6. At the margins of the state: livelihoods, political authority, and environmental change in rural West Africa

There is arguably a strong urban bias in current research on West Africa, so in this the final class we will study rural politics and livelihoods. Can rural populations of West Africa be characterised as being ‘at the margins of the state’? In any case, ‘marginality’ can provide important analytical insights into the workings and limits of the state, and of informal, often illicit, networks (Roitman, 2004, 2005). Areas that are at the margins of states can also be redoubts of banditry and rebellion – as with Tuareg rebels in Mali and Niger, and in a different way also in the Chad Basin (Debos, 2008, 2011). The concept of marginality could also be applied to people whose access to land for grazing livestock or farming is threatened or constrained, for example by the state and neo-liberal ‘modernising’ projects that ignore the interests and rights of small-holders and the majority of rural people (Bassett). This can easily become a source of wider political instability (Chauveau and Richards).

Farmer-herder relations have become fraught in many parts of West Africa, for a variety of reasons, but it is a mixed picture as within the region there are also areas where co-existence rather than competition continues (Dafinger & Pelican, Higazi). The cattle-rearing Fulani (or more properly, Fulɓe) are the largest pastoralist population in West Africa (and, in fact, on the African continent). Meanwhile, Fulani ulama have had a significant role in the propagation of Islam in the region and in the c. 18th and c.19th jihads, and a political class emerged to control the emirates and lamidates that were the outcome of the jihads (see Burnham and Last, 1994, for an analysis of this process, and Abubakar for history of the Adamawa area of Nigeria/Cameroon). For a deeply impressive ethnographic study of the mode of life and cultural outlook of a pastoral Fulɓe clan in Burkina Faso, see Riesman (1977). The nomadic Fulɓe are also known as Mbororo (see Bocquené, and for comparative analysis of pastoralism, see Burnham, 1987). Two of the papers listed focus more on the contemporary political and social pressures on pastoralists and on their mobility and herding strategies, using rich ethnographic data that also provides a good introduction to Fulani ethnography (Boutrais, de Bruijn and van Dijk).

As part of the equation we need to consider patterns of environmental change. What kinds of changes are occurring in West Africa, especially in the Sahel, and why? How are environmental issues framed politically? What effects are they having? On the issue of desertification and the alleged southwards expansion of the Sahara, there is a lively literature that draws on empirical research to contest some of these assumptions (Mortimore, Mortimore and Adams). How have rural communities living in the Sahel and ‘marginal’ areas adapted politically and economically to environmental and climatic variability and risk? How are they likely to cope with the onset of anthropogenic climate change? These are now vital issues in West Africa.


