# Historical Background: Conquest and the Struggle for Africa's Soul

*This article by Greg Guma first published in 1987 provdes a historical insight which relates directly to recent events including US-NATO acts of aggression directed against the African continent.*

From the Persian Gulf to Capetown, religious ideals have long fueled cultural confrontation and political combat. In Northern Africa, a center of Islamic civilization for centuries, fundamentalist sects have pressured national elites for a new social order based on the Koran – or face dire consequences. Throughout the Christian and Animist south, both independent churches and traditional religions have struggled against state repression and clerical imperialism.

The continent's independence movement, which decades ago led nations like Ghana out of colonial domination, did not complete the process of emancipation. Kwame Nkrumah, the ardent pan-Africanist who led Ghana's movement and inspired others, noted that national liberation was merely a step in a long revolutionary process. In a multipolar world, that process pits nationalist states against religious values and rising aspirations for freedom.

As dictators fall, will Islamic "radicals" roll back the secular modernization of some Muslim states? Can Christian churches resist the marginalizing of faith by one-party governments which impose a "development" model geared to foreign powers? Must "traditional religion" be sacrificed on the altar of "progress"? Is an endless string of "holy" wars avoidable?
We need only consider Iraq and Iran in the 1980s to see the fate that could await many African states. These two Muslim societies, at war for most of a decade, sacrificed several hundred thousand lives in a battle over conflicting concepts of humanity. In most of the reportage about United States' involvement in that Gulf War – arms to Iran, intelligence data to Iraq – the reason for the fighting was lost. Simply put, Iran's radical Shiites saw moral decay in the gradual secularizing of Arab societies. They rejected Arab nationalism and wanted instead an Islamic revolution. The Iraqi approach, based on Arab unity and cultural diversity, was simply unacceptable to the Shiites.

In one of few honest attempts to unravel the Iran-Iraq war at the time, Milton Viorst, writing in Foreign Affairs, noted that, "By the standards of Iran's revolution, Baathism (Iraq's dominant philosophy) has made of Baghdad not a model for the future but a den in which the virtues of Islam have given way to modernist corruption." Viorst was clearly too kind to Baghdad, which he described as "debonair" and westernized, but he did at least acknowledge the religious underpinning of the war.

Although the Shi'a are a minority in the Islamic world, and tend to split into rival groups, they have spurred a revival of Muslim militancy that deepened conflicts in Muslim-dominated states such as Egypt and Sudan. Islam is still the main religion in Northern Africa – from Senegal on the Atlantic to Somalia on the Red Sea. In most Muslim countries ruling regimes claim to follow the essence of Islam, but beginning in the 1980s militant groups, looking to Iran as a model, saw societies "corrupted" by Christianity, Jewish "Zionism" and Communism. For some of them, humanity consisted of non-believers and believers, and holy war was inevitable.

It is nevertheless unfair to portray Islam as a fanatical faith spread by barbaric zealots. That approach, taken by historians and orientalists such as Bernard Lewis, has distorted Muslim beliefs and its historic capacity for tolerance and accommodation. One contribution by Lewis to public misinformation, Semites and Anti-Semites, attempted to shield Israel from criticism for its own ruthless acts by degrading the entire Muslim civilization. At least Lewis admitted elsewhere that Sunni Muslims – dominant in Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Somalia, among other states – were more open to accommodation, and that even the Shi'a have a "pragmatic" faction prepared to settle for Shiism in one country. Most tracts about the Middle East and North Africa play to deep prejudices.

In several North African states, the Muslim crusade also put Islam on a collision course with Christianity in the late 1980s. Sunni Muslims in Egypt considered Coptic Christians Trojan horses, opening the door to secularization and raproachement with Israel. And in Sudan, fundamentalists, dominant in the North, fueled war with the Christian/Animist South. After the imposition of Islamic law (Sharia), Sudanese Christians weren't even free to pray in church. The excesses, which deeply alienated southern provinces and fueled guerilla war, eventually led to a military coup. Even if Sharia was rescinded later by the more moderate new regime, considerable damage had been done. Archbishop Paolina Lukudu, who led a 1987 Christian peace delegation in Sudan, charged that Blacks faced the threat of cultural extinction due to the Islamization promoted by the Arab world.

Until the 15th Century, the Islamic world was a cordon between Europe and Africa. But eventually British, French and assorted other colonizers began to bypass North Africa to reach the continents' riches. Although native African religions dominated, Christian missionary movements spread along with colonial crusades.

These movements, designed to uplift and "civilize" as well as to exploit, created an evangelism rooted in repressive ideology. Despite independent missionary efforts, Church expansion was essentially an aspect of Western colonialism. Cameroonian theologian Jean-Marc Ela concluded in African Cry that, "For many generations, Christianity would be a religion of whites. It would propagate a manner of being Christian that was foreign to local cultures."

But Africa has experienced a new, indigenous missionary movement in more recent years, an attempt to find a way to real emancipation. Independent sects and churches, often in defiance of mainline churches, have attempted to reaffirm African identity. According to Rev. Maxime Rafransoa, general secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), nationalistic movements and liberation theology have promoted changes in African religion. The challenge of the future will be to develop theologies that "respond to the needs of the continent."

The World Council of Churches has attempted to take part by tackling problems such as

human rights and refugees. One Council declaration stated that "our liberation remains the most fundamental issue." Yet Ela noted that Christianity remains primarily an ideological tool of foreign capitalists, promoting a developmental model at odds with the deepest aspirations of black peasants.

In passionate prose, Ela bared the poignant choice confronting Christianity: "The church cannot allow itself to rest content with the privileges accorded it in the area of worship. In the one-party regimes that are spreading across Africa, the ideal way of divesting the church of its critical function in society is to restrict it to the sphere of the religious. At most it is allowed a place in education and health, where its activities hark back to a tradition of charitable works. But the poor in the one-party states may be deposed chiefs, a silenced and socially disenfranchised elite, ethnic minorities serving as scapegoats, outlawed opposition movements or pressure groups under close official surveillance and control. How can one testify to basic values of the gospel before this new category of 'poor'? The answer can only come if the church refuses the false security it is promised by the powers that be on condition it accept the privatization and marginalization of the Christian faith."

Cedric Mayson, a British minister who spent 30 years in South Africa before his expulsion on charges of high treason in 1983, made much the same case in A Certain Sound: The Struggle for Liberation in South Africa. Although churches in this most avowedly Christian of African states engaged in anti-apartheid struggles, Mayson documented that most church thinking equated Christianity with the capitalist way of life. Contact with the liberation struggle was usually secondhand. Most whites and even some blacks upheld traditional principles or opposed political activism. It was among grass roots people that Mayson found the clearest understanding of the gospel as a blueprint for fundamental change.

The crossroad to which Christianity had advanced could be seen quite clearly in Kenya, independent since 1963 yet dominated by a corrupt elite that continued to govern in the colonial style. In the 1980s, church leaders began to challenge President Daniel arap Moi and his ruling party. Ministers urged free national debate about Kenya's future, and opposed Constitutional and election "reforms" that would further consolidate state power.

One of the most objectionable developments was abolition of the secret ballot. In future primary elections, voters would have to line up behind the candidate of their choice, a change ensuring that no opposition leader would be elected. Pastors and bishops joined the Kenyan Law Society in condemning the new procedure. The government responded by blacklisting churches for "subversion" and banning open air religious meetings and prayer – unless the group obtained a permit. Moi also pressured clerics to resign or stay out of politics. The Kenyan government was prepared to go quite far in muzzling the churches of this predominantly Christian land, forcing them to weigh the full consequences of becoming a formal part of the "opposition."

In the struggle for Zimbabwe's independence, nationalist politics joined forces with ancestral religion to create a powerful movement which drew heavily from spiritual beliefs. The key to the relationship between guerillas and local mediums of the Shona religion was a shared mission: protection of the fertility of the land. The guerillas promised to return the land to the peasants; the mediums "represented" ancestors who had once controlled it. Traditional religion provided an idiom within which the legitimacy of resistance could be expressed.

After winning independence, the government continued to make use of Shona images, and

the Shona, a large and autonomous community, managed to survive, retaining their central belief in the existence of life after death. But in most of southern Africa, where a majority of the people remain animist, these traditional beliefs have been under severe attack.

In African Cry, Ela wondered whether "traditional religion" is really the obstacle to progress that most modernists suggest. Although animist beliefs often do act as a brake on social changes, he noted that the same traditions provide peasants with "reasons for rejecting a developmental model that generates an economic surplus to be divided up by foreign capitalists and local bureaucracies. Their religious life has even enabled African peoples to fight foreign economic, political and cultural domination."

Promoters of development label ancestral religions as the source of most African woes. This is "organized mystification," wrote Ela, designed to deflect criticism of continued European-U.S. exploitation. In truth, African traditional religion is an assertion of the sacred which has much in common with ecology's cult of Mother Earth, a search for harmony with nature and the past.

Some indigenous African churches have incorporated aspects of traditional religion. According to Kofi Asare Opoki, professor of Religion at Zambia's University of Legon, "This development is rather new and is by no means complete, but it at least points the way." He noted that the clash between the two belief systems stems from the West's interpretation of Christianity, but that the Biblical and African world view often agree. Courses in various schools attempt to overcome misconceptions and the persistent ridiculing of traditional beliefs.

In the long run, nevertheless, the most crucial struggle will not be between tradition and modernism, animism and Christianity, or even between church and state; it will be the conflict between domination – by foreign beliefs and interests – and the liberation of Africa's living culture.

The map of Africa has changed dramatically since 1957, when Ghana became the first colonial territory south of the Sahara to regain its independence. One by one the colonial powers surrendered or lost control, eventually leaving South Africa as the last bastion of overt racism.

However, the emergence from direct colonial oppression produced a new set of problems. The economies of the new nations remained dependent on foreign financial interests, and in many places nationalism became the excuse for cultural and political repression. In the North, Muslim radicals persisted in a "holy" crusade that could damage or destroy minority cultures. In the South, one-party rule permitted little opposition from "dissidents" who found inspiration in Christian faith and, as Cedric Mayson puts it, wanted "God's will to be done in the world." And throughout the vast continent, followers of traditional religions – still the largest single group – faced condescension, censure and the virtual extermination of their cultures in the name of science and progress.

These clashes persisted long after the political struggle in South Africa was resolved. In truth, they are much more intractable than any oppressive regime. They can only be settled in the souls of women and men, in the gradual emergence of a unity that transcends religious boundaries, through a process of cultural emancipation – the real liberation of the oppressed.

*Greg Guma edited the international affairs publication Toward Freedom from 1987-1988 and 1994-2004. This was his first article as editor; original version published in January 1987, Vol. 36. No. 1.*

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