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In Nigeria, Christians and Muslims in uneasy calm

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

For three years in the mid-1990s, James Wuye, a Pentecostal preacher and former leader of an anti-Muslim Christian militia, worked tirelessly to launch a pioneering new effort in Christian/Muslim harmony in his blood-soaked region of northern Nigeria. And for almost every day of those three years, he harbored a secret, burning urge: to smother his Muslim partner, Imam Muhammad Ashafa, with a pillow.

"When we traveled together, we would share a room, and he was a heavy sleeper," Wuye recalled on Wednesday. "Every time that happened, I felt a deep desire to kill him." In explaining why, Wuye offered a chillingly simple explanation: "In my heart, my hatred for Muslims knew no bounds."

I met Wuye on Wednesday in his office in Kaduna, the capital of northern Nigeria and the site of the some of the bloodiest Muslim/Christian clashes anywhere in the world over the last 25 years. I'm in Nigeria this week to do research for my book on "Mega-Trends in Catholicism." My wife and I are the guests of Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja. (That connection has made us near-royalty in Nigerian Catholic circles; when I gave a talk at a local seminary Tuesday night, my wife was actually introduced as "Lady Shannon" -- making me, I was quick to point out, "Sir John.")

Eventually, Wuye overcame his hatred and gave himself fully to the task of building peace. If his story suggests that dialogue between even the most embittered Christians and Muslims is possible, it also comes with a sobering footnote: Whatever uneasy peace exists today is, in the opinion of many -- perhaps most -- observers here, due to the fact that Christians used violence and that was an incentive to make

peace. It's a paradox. But more on that later.

First, a bit of background on Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation with 140 million people, and the ninth largest supplier of oil in the world. Among other things, Nigeria is destined to be a Catholic powerhouse in the 21st century. It will be the ninth largest Catholic country in the world in 2050, with 47 million members, and because Nigerians speak English, they're poised to be the "voice" of African Catholicism in the global media culture.

Imam Sani Isah of Kaduna's Waff Road Mosque, another local leader in Christian/Muslim relations whom I met this week, likes to say that from a religious point of view, Nigeria is Saudi Arabia and the Vatican rolled into one. In other words, it's a volatile mix of tens of millions of highly motivated Muslims, and a roughly equal number of devout Christians. There's really no such thing here as the spiritually lukewarm; according to the latest Pew Global Survey, 92 percent of Nigerians regard religion as a "very important" force in life.

Onaiyekan once defined Nigeria as "the greatest Islamo-Christian nation on earth," by which he meant that it's the country with the greatest concentration of both Muslims and Christians within the same boundaries. While the two groups tend to be regionally segregated -- Muslims in the north, Christians in the south -- they also live side-by-side in significant numbers all across the country, making Nigeria a unique laboratory for the possibilities of Christian/Muslim co-existence.

Nigeria declared independence from England in 1960, and for much of the early post-colonial period, the country was dominated by the Muslim north, whose leaders often pursued a program of Islamization -- taking Nigeria into the Organization of the Islamic Conference, for example, in 1986.

Saidu Dogo, secretary general for the Christian Association of Nigeria for the northern states, told me this week that serious Muslim/Christian difficulties broke out for the first time in 1978, when a local sheikh began preaching the need for an Islamic uprising. The pretext came with a Pentecostal revival in the northern city of Kafanchan in 1978, when a Muslim woman grabbed a microphone to shout anti-Christian slogans. Things got ugly, which triggered anti-Christian outbreaks by Muslims in Kaduna and elsewhere.

Since then, uneasy calm punctuated by periods of extreme violence has been the dominant Christian/Muslim storyline here. Some examples:

- Waves of violence in Kaduna in 1987 and 1992 left hundreds dead, and caused an informal religious partitioning of the city, with Christians moving to the south side of the river and Muslims to the north.
- Clashes between the predominantly Muslim Fulani tribe and the mostly Christian Taroh tribe from September 2001 to May 2004 are estimated to have cost at least 1,800 lives and some 160,000 cattle. The Fulani graze their livestock on land farmed by the Taroh, thereby damaging it, with both groups claiming to have been there first.
- Controversies over the introduction of shariah law in several northern Nigerian states triggered violence that left 1,000 dead in Kaduna in 2000, and 2,000 dead in the northern city of Jos in 2001.
- In the summer 2002, thousands of people died during communal clashes in Plateau state, with an estimated 100,000 people displaced and 88 localities almost entirely destroyed.
- Violence broke out anew in November 2002, related to the international "Miss World" pageant to be held that year in Nigeria. When a local newspaper columnist satirically suggested that Mohammad might have taken a wife from among the contestants, a chain of tit-for-tat attacks broke out that left hundreds dead and dozens of churches and mosques destroyed.

- In 2004, 900 people were killed in Plateau state, including 630 Muslims slaughtered by hundreds of armed Christians in the town of Yelwa-Shenda, followed by 200 Christians killed in Kano by Muslims as a reprisal for this "Yelwa-Shenda massacre."
- In February 2006, violence broke out in Nigeria as elsewhere as part of the Danish cartoon controversy. More than 150 people were killed after a group of Christians was massacred by angry Muslim militants, triggering several anti-Muslim reprisals.

Few Nigerians incarnate this checkered history more thoroughly than Wuye.

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Born a Baptist, Wuye entered the Catholic church while attending Catholic school, then gravitated to the Assemblies of God, where he has stayed. When the first waves of violence hit northern Nigeria in the late 1970s, Wuye said he watched as Christians were targeted by Muslim extremists, with no support from the local police or army forces. In fact, he said, soldiers would drive away Christian men who sought sanctuary in army compounds, asking why they didn't stick up for themselves.

Read more about Allen's trip to Nigeria in his daily column for March 9: [Two parallels for understanding the 'powerhouse' church in Nigeria.](#)

Eventually, Wuye and other young Christians decided to do just that, organizing themselves into secretive para-military bands. These groups were designed solely to protect churches and Christian populations, and members took firm oaths never to strike first. Yet, Wuye concedes, the militias eventually took on a more provocative role -- in at least one case, he said, blowing up a bridge in a Christian area and blaming it on Muslims, in order to radicalize Christian opinion.

Having grown up the child of an army officer -- "in the barracks," as he put it -- Wuye was a natural drill sergeant. He told chilling tales of how young Christians were indoctrinated to justify violence against Muslims, including selective use of Biblical texts. (For example, Luke 22:36: "If you do not have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one").

The militias operated in near-total secrecy, Wuye said, so that even pastors and family members didn't know who was involved.

"It was almost like a cult," he said.

Wuye said the militias were also a very ecumenical enterprise, with Catholics, Anglicans, Pentecostals, and other Christians making common cause in roughly equal numbers.

They picked their targets carefully, Wuye said, going after wealthy Muslim-owned businesses to make the point that it wouldn't only be Christian elites who suffered when violence broke out. It was when the reality that Muslim property-owners too had become vulnerable began to sink in, Wuye and others said, that interest in dialogue on the Muslim side began to stir.

Wuye paid the price of violence in his own flesh. In 1992, he lost his right hand during a pitched battle to defend a church against Muslim militants in Kaduna; today, he wears a prosthetic limb due to the injury. (For several years, his wife thought he lost the hand in an auto accident.)

Ashafa, the imam with whom Wuye launched a peace effort in 1995, was more or less Wuye's opposite

number on the Muslim side, a fearsome leader of armed bands of Islamic youth. So when Wuye dreamt of taking a pillow to Ashafa, the resentment churning inside him wasn't abstract in the least; and Ashafa, as it turns out, blamed Wuye's militia for the death of his spiritual mentor, and therefore harbored private thoughts of revenge of his own.

To complete the picture, Ashafa looks every inch the Islamic militant, with a flowing beard and wide eyes as he preaches. His wife wears the traditional, full-body covering with only her eyes exposed.

As fate would have it, Ashafa and Wuye met during a local conference on drug abuse in the early 1990s, and warily began talking to one another. They agreed to try to do something together to promote peace, though Wuye concedes that he began doing so without his heart really being in it.

His conversion moment, Wuye said, finally came in 1999, when he attended a local revival where he heard a well-known local Pentecostal pastor thunder from the pulpit, "You can't preach Christ with hate ? you have to take on the mind of Christ!"

With that, he said, the bloodlust in his heart drained away, and he gave himself fully to the work of the Interfaith Meditation Centre founded by himself and Ashafa, which is by general agreement one of the most creative efforts anywhere to promote peace on the frontlines of Muslim/Christian conflict.

Over 12 years of operations, the two men have assembled a network of pastors and imams who can be dispatched to hot spots when rumors of violence begin to stir. They've conducted hundreds of training seminars up and down the country, and even made presentations to the United Nations and the Library of Congress.

Wuye has also tracked down all those young Christian men he once drilled for the militias, trying to win them over to peace. He thinks about 80 percent of the old militia structures have been dismantled, though he concedes that all it would probably take to rebuild them is another spike in violence.

In August 2002, Wuye and Ashafa convinced a "who's who" of 22 Islamic and Christian leaders to sign a "Peace Declaration," condemning "all forms of violence" as well as "incitement and demonizations." They repeated the process in Plateau state after the spate of killing in 2004, culminating in a colorful "celebration of peace" attended by dance troupes from both Muslim and Christian communities.

There are promising indications that these efforts are bearing fruit. When the Regensburg controversy broke in September 2006, for example, there were protests from Muslims in Nigeria but no real violence, a result attributed by locals in part to the work of the Interfaith Mediation Centre.

Wuye and Ashafa have even been the subject of a feature-length documentary, "The Imam and the Pastor," produced by FLT films in the United Kingdom. (Information is available here: <http://www.fltfilms.org.uk/imam.html>)

And here's a clip of the film:

Yet this good news comes with a sobering footnote.

While it's true that a rough peace seems to be holding today, and that dialogues between Muslims and Christians are growing, many locals say that dialogue may never have begun if Nigerian Christians hadn't learned to stand up for themselves. That is, they believe the Muslims might never have come to the table if they hadn't been forced to do so by a growing Christian capacity to answer Muslim-initiated violence blow-for-blow.

It's a position endorsed almost unanimously by our Nigerian Catholic hosts, who have repeatedly told me this week that Christians in the country "aren't folding our hands anymore." Much to my surprise, even Imam Isah told me that in the beginning, Christians were seen as largely defenseless, and thus not taken seriously by some Muslims.

The frightening implication seems to be that retaliatory violence on the Christian side may have been necessary to balance the scales.

"Only when we started reacting did the Muslims see a need for dialogue," said Dogo, the general secretary of the Christian Association of Nigeria in the north. "They saw our people have resolve, and that's when the decision was made to form a consultative forum of religious leaders."

What the lesson of Nigeria may thus suggest is that a stiffening of the spine on the Christian side may be necessary to set the table for future breakthroughs. Yet however it happened, perhaps the only element of Wuye and Ashafa's story which really matters is that these lions have learned to lay down with the lamb.

"Even though he's not a Muslim, I like him," Ashafa said of Wuye. "I would give my life to protect his honor and dignity. That is what Islam has taught me to do."

Wuye returned the compliment.

"I practice my faith vehemently, and he does too," Wuye said. "But here we are. Yes, Christians and Muslims can live side-by-side. It is possible."

That, indeed, is a lesson with implications well beyond the borders of Nigeria.

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