THE GLOBAL IDEATIONAL ORIGINS
OF NIGERIA'S COMMUNAL CONFLICTS:
DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE & SHARIA

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BY KEVIN H. ELLSWORTH
INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Comment, Criticism, and Citations Welcomed
kevin.ellsworth@asu.edu – http://www.public.asu.edu/~ellsworke
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INTRODUCTION

In 1999 Nigeria embraced ‘democracy,’ and Nigerians began dying. Nigerians seeking that freedom-inducing, peace-instilling, conflict-resolving, wealth-enabling ‘democracy’ found lurking in its shadows violence, warfare, and death. When such profound tragedies appear unexpectedly, several questions demand to be addressed. Is there a connection between ‘democracy’ and the death in its wake? If so, what is the nature of the relationship between ‘democracy’ and the communal violence that followed? Finally, what made that connection and its dire consequences possible?

Many scholars describe various manifestations of the relationship between communal relations and ‘democracy.’ Still others prescribe institutional means to prevent or restrain communal violence in ‘democratic’ states. Scholars fall short, however, in their ability to adequately explain how ‘democracy’ can become such fertile ground for communal violence. They fail to explore discursive constructions of ‘democracy’ and how these discursive practices affect the likelihood and magnitude of the communal conflicts that sometimes accompany ‘democratization.’ I propose to begin that exploration--to consider issues of discourse and communal relations in order to understand how ‘democracy’ is written and read across both the North-South and international-domestic divides, and to reveal how those processes affect Nigeria’s domestic communal relations.

In pursuing this line of inquiry, I am taking seriously the challenges set out by Roxanne Doty in the closing chapters of Imperial Encounters (1996) where she begins to “call attention to
the meanings and identities that are constructed in the process of promoting democracy and human rights and the meanings these signifiers are given” (1996, 144). Noting that while promoting democracy the Reagan administration “also enabled a particular construction of the meaning of democracy,” Doty argues that “what needs to be examined are the representational practices that occur in the process of promotion. What meanings and identities are being (and will be) constructed?” (144).

These challenges are especially applicable to the study of Nigerian democratization, because, like the cases Doty considers, Nigerian ‘democracy’ was realized under intense economic and social pressures from the United States. Furthermore, as U.S. policymakers have promoted ‘democracy’ in Nigeria, they have wielded foreign aid (and the withholding thereof) as a primary instrument in that policy. This fits nicely with Doty’s conception of foreign aid “as a specific technique in the more general field of exercising power” (129). Doty explains, “The importance of conceptualizing foreign aid in this manner is that it focuses. . .on what foreign aid, as a practice, does” (129). “Foreign aid” she continues, “is but one of numerous domains for the deployment of disciplinary techniques. So understood, the practice of foreign aid. . .is part of the continuing drama in which meticulous rituals of power are played and replayed with various twists, turns, and modifications” (129). It is these twists, these turns, and these modifications that make Nigerian democratization and the role of U.S. foreign policy therein so fascinating.
Discourse Analysis

Central to this study lies the notion of discourse analysis. Motivated by reactions to positivism, rationalism, and structuralism and drawing on linguistic insights, discourse analysis has enabled some scholars to explore the farthest reaches of the abstract, while empowering others to better interpret the empirical world around them. This research takes the latter road and follows signposts set out by the writings of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and the ‘Essex’ school they inspired.¹ This approach to discourse embraces the post-structural and post-positive while simultaneously addressing methodological and epistemological issues in order to “put forward plausible and empirically justifiable explanations of the social and political world” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 1).

This so-named ‘Essex’ school offers a particularly appropriate foundation for understanding Nigeria’s ‘democratic’ conflicts for five reasons. First, its deliberate focus on discourse both compels and enables me to take seriously the speech, actions, and identities of the Nigerian people as the window to understanding this moment in their history. Second, having self-consciously developed a discursive epistemology, this approach to discourse analysis is more manageably applicable to the empirical Nigerian case than other more abstract approaches to discourse. Third, Laclau, Mouffe, and their students take agency seriously; “questions surrounding the way social agents ‘live out’ their identities and act–questions that pertain to the concept of subjectivity–are of central importance” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 12). Taking

¹ This “novel conception of discourse” (Laclau 2000, x) has been crafted and nurtured at the University of Essex’s graduate program in Ideology and Discourse Analysis. The faculty and graduate research pursued there “makes it possible to articulate the original system of categories introduced in Hegemony [and Socialist Strategy, 1985] in a more precise and detailed way” (Laclau 2000, x).
agency seriously enables me both to assign responsibility to those agents whose practices maintain dangerous discursive constructions, and to give life and voice to the Nigerian people who currently suffer under those constructions; both are central concerns of this research. No understanding of Nigerian politics can be complete if it disempowers the Nigerian people to either an abstraction of ‘Nigeria’ or to autonomous, disembodied discursive structures. With Donald Horowitz, I assert that a “bloody phenomenon cannot be explained by a bloodless theory” (Horowitz 1985, 140). Fourth, the ‘Essex’ approach has an explicitly political orientation, especially in their consideration of the empty signifier around which “various

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2 My desires to “assign responsibility” and “give life” to certain agents should not suggest that I will endow agents with an autonomy outside of the discourse(s) they inhabit. Nor do I mean to suggest here that they exist ontologically prior to discursive ‘structures.’ Yet throughout this research, I will explore how agents (embedded in discourse) find and express their voices, their desires, and some measure of freedom especially where they find themselves straddling the horizons of discursive spheres or on the borderlines between discourses. In this sense I draw on Doty’s 1997 article where she likewise applies the insights of Laclau and Mouffe to craft an understanding of the agent-structure problematique. Building on the conception of practice and the understanding of subject-position that follows, Doty draws on Laclau and Mouffe’s 1989 work to demonstrate that these understandings enable “us to conceptualize agents and agency without falling into the trap of attributing some timeless and unexplained quality to all subjects…” (Doty 1997, 384). Especially since “discourses are inherently open, contingent and overlapping [and] can create spaces within which practices of resistance are made possible” and because discourses are “often contradictory, as are the subject-positions that are made available within them,” agency becomes possible (Doty 1997, 384-5).

3 Laclau explains that “An empty signifier is, strictly speaking, a signifier without a signified” (1996, 36). By introducing this new category with this paradox, Laclau raises a number of fascinating questions regarding how societies organize themselves around their desire to signify the absent. He uses Hobbes conception of “Order” to illustrate his point; I will use ‘Democracy.’ Applying his closing example (45) to my study of ‘democracy’ Laclau suggests that if a pro-democracy struggle is successful, ‘democracy’ may become the signifier of all struggles against the ‘nondemocratic.’ If this were to happen, ‘democracy’ also “becomes the surface inscription through which all [such] struggles will be expressed, so that the chain of equivalences which are unified around this signifier tend to empty it, to blur its connection with the actual content with which it was originally associated” (45).
political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack” (Laclau 1996, 44, quoted in Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 9). The heart of this paper explores the empty signifier named ‘democracy’—that signifier which has been slowly and selectively emptied of its meaning in the discourse of U.S. policies of democratic enlargement4 thereby creating that vacuum of meaning which Nigeria’s domestic communal movements compete to fill. Finally, as Aletta Norval points out, “For Mouffe, as for Laclau, politics is essentially concerned with the formation of an ‘us’ as opposed to a ‘them’” (Norval 2000, 224). This is especially appropriate to the topic of this paper since the political divisions between democratic and nondemocratic states in the international arena and the divisions between ethnic and religious groups on the domestic area are so central to this study.

The theoretical underpinnings of discourse analysis can be introduced only very briefly here. By way of introduction, however, it is necessary to lay out some rough foundation.

First, the claim that ethnic identities are socially constructed has recently risen to the status of truism in the discipline of political science. Academic consensus proclaims that ethnic identities and boundaries have no essential nature and little permanence. The now all-encompassing literature on social constructivism has easily latched on to the ethnic project as one of its own. Social constructivism, popularized by Nicholas Onuf (1989) and Alexander Wendt (1992, 1999), boasted promise in disclosing the social nature of relations between communal groups or between democratic and democratizing states.5 Likewise, studies on social constructivism and

4 This process—the emptying of ‘democracy’ through U.S. Foreign policy is being explored elsewhere (Ellsworth 2002).

5 See Garcia (1996), Pollis (1996), Myers et al (1996), Posse (1993), and Wilmer (1997) for applications of social constructivism to ethnic relations. Regarding social constructivism and
and political identity in general have found a comfortable bunk in the social constructivist camp. These now-mainstreamed constructivist efforts, however, do little to delve beneath the apparent contingencies regarding ethnic composition and boundaries. Despite their indispensable focus on the intersubjective nature of identity and all representation, theories of social constructivism tend to neglect agency and even more importantly, they neglect the processes that tie the agents to the structures of meaning (Checkel 1999). Furthermore, they do little to place these constructions within the larger context of discourses that reach beyond a simple ethnic content.

The larger context this research hopes to establish is that of a much broader discourse of ‘democracy.’ The meaning of ‘democracy’ is likewise never fixed, and despite academic and policy attempts to conjure a stable ‘Democracy’ with a solid center, those attempts are necessarily undermined by the contingency of that attempt. Rather than lend power to these attempts to represent an essential meaning of ‘democracy,’ whose only impediment is a rational operationalization, I suggest that the language and discourse surrounding ‘democracy’ reflects a constant struggle among political forces to naturalize its meanings.

I will present how elements of ‘democracy’ are linked up with those elements defining communal identities and relations in ways that can lead to violent communal conflict. This particular discourse of ‘democracy’ will therefore become implicated in communal rivalries.

Methodologically speaking, how can these goals be realized? First, this study will consider its primary data to be text, broadly defined. Unlike the positivist endeavors of the

democracy, the very prolific literature on Democratic Peace Theory considers in its dyadic, normative school the social relationship among democracies, that makes it ripe for application of a social constructivist approach. More directly Mark Peceny (ISQ, Spring 1999) suggests that although many scholars of democratization hint at social constructivist processes, they do little to capitalize on the social or international natures of that process.
physical sciences, one cannot measure any tangible, essential, objective meanings of the key elements of this study: ‘democracy,’ ‘ethnicity,’ or even ‘Nigeria.’ Instead, a discourse generates temporally, contingently fixed meanings of these elements. This discourse consists of the rhetoric among policy makers; words spoken and images interpreted in the news and on radio; images found in advertisements, posters, and campaign literature for candidates and office holders; the spoken word of average people, professors, and students; the actions of policy makers and the public interpreted through their audiences’ particular cultural lens—all the forms of communication that together generate meaning and portray as given the underlying elements of ‘democracy’ and communal identities.

Embedded within this text lie representational practices which portray both the content of the discourse and the privileging of various meanings and relationships. As described succinctly by Doty (1996, 10-12) these representational practices follow a few key patterns, of which I will mention only those most relevant to this research. The first among these is the use of nodal points, those privileged signs upon which meanings are fixed. ‘Democracy,’ ‘Sharia,’ ‘Pariah,’ ‘human rights,’ and ‘civilized’ are all crucial nodal points whose meanings will be disclosed elsewhere (Ellsworth 2002). Second, one finds presuppositions, those self-evident truths whose potentially political nature has been neutralized by the discourse. Presuppositions, important in their own right are also most revealing in that they underlie the final two practices that will be disclosed. Third, classifications or the presupposed categorization of states, people, and governments are evident in how U.S. policy makers and Nigerians alike understand Nigeria’s

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6 In enumerating these “representational practices” Doty draws on the works of Lacau and Mouffe (1985), Spurr (1993), Morrison (1992), Foucault (1978), and Wolfe (1982)
international and domestic political relations. Fourth, these classifications are especially important in the *positioning* of states (U.S. and Nigeria), communal groups (Ibo and Hausa), religious groups (Christian and Muslim), and governments (democracy and nondemocracy) as similar, opposed, or complementary. Finally, the logics of equivalence and difference illuminate how political frontiers discursively divide political space into opposing camps or, instead, undermine that division. How international space is divided between ‘democracies’ versus others, and how Nigerian space is divided between religious and ethnic groups is another matter I tackle elsewhere (Ellsworth 2002).

The discourse in which the United States and Nigeria find themselves is rife with these representational practices. U.S. policy makers and Nigerians share presupposed understandings of ‘democracy’ understood as complementary to ‘human rights’ and ‘civilization’ but in opposition to the ‘nondemocracy’ and the ‘pariah.’ This shared discourse faces its limits, however, when the presupposition of all these nodal points and their relative positions is confronted by the ‘Sharia’ (Islamic law) which occupies radically different positions in the discourse of Southern Nigeria and the United States than in predominantly Islamic, Northern Nigeria.

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7Aletta Norval explains that “[w]here the logic of equivalence predominates, social division tends towards a dichotomisation of political space, a paratactical division of the social sphere into two opposing camps” (2000, 221). This happens, she explains quoting Mouffe (1993, 50), because political discourse “attempts to create specific forms of unity among different interests by relating them to a common project and by establishing a frontier to define the forces to be opposed, the ‘enemy.’” As they were applied by Norval (1997) to explore the ‘First’ vs. ‘Third’ world distinction, I will use of these logics in this research to illuminate the ‘democratic’ vs. ‘nondemocratic’ dichotomization.
Case Selection – Why Nigeria?

Building on these ontological insights, I explore the current process of ‘democratization’ in Nigeria, ‘democratization’s’ links with Nigeria’s domestic communal relations. Nigeria presents itself as an ideal case for such a study. Both Nigeria’s national ‘democratic’ identity and Nigeria’s intranational communal identities find themselves in states of flux that coincide temporally and geographically thus demanding an explanation of their possible links.

Regarding Nigeria’s ‘democratic’ flux, Nigeria has, since the death of General Sani Abacha in June 1998, moved steadily toward assuming an internationally acknowledged ‘democratic’ identity, culminating in the inauguration of President Olusegun Obasanjo on May 29, 1999. This began Nigeria’s Fourth Republic, the heir to three previous attempts to democratize. Nigeria’s ‘democratic transition’ represents a field whereon the international community, and especially U.S. foreign policy makers, seized upon the signifier ‘democracy’ and attempted to establish some hegemonic meaning most significant in its lack of meaning.

Regarding Nigeria’s communal flux, Nigeria offers a mosaic of subnational identity groups, varying in content (religious, ethnic, and regional), size, and access to political-economic resources. Unfortunately, the onslaught of communal violence since Nigeria’s ‘democratization’ occurred these identities which find themselves separated not only by the intersubjective religious, regional, and ethnic chasms, but are also divided along the fault lines of competing

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8 “Crisis” might be a more appropriate term. The “flux” I mention, represents a temporal period in which change had enabled a rearticulation of certain signifiers. This flux might have allowed for a crisis of identity except that political forces (expressed through certain U.S. policy makers) acted to fill the empty signifier, ‘democracy,’ thoroughly enough to avoid an overt military crisis in the sort term. On the other hand, the subsequent competition of domestic forces (expressed through Nigerians in the North versus those in the South) asserting their desires to fill ‘democracy’ have produced crises of meanings and of physical violence.

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discourses (i.e. competing domestic interpretations of ‘democracy’). Conflicts along these
discursive fault lines have cost several thousand lives in the past two years. The conflicts
centered on the nodal points\(^9\) of ‘democracy’ and ‘Sharia’\(^{10}\) are those most threatening to
Nigerians’ peace and security.

A final reason to utilize the Nigerian case for this research is that Nigeria’s social context
in the greater global society provides a unique opportunity to address how discourse is translated
across predefined national-international and North-South boundaries. Nigeria’s colonial history
and its subsequent position in the international world-economy has endowed it with a widely-
spoken national language, English, which facilitates the relatively easy diffusion of discursive
practices across international, national, and subnational barriers. Furthermore, because Nigeria
occupies what is considered to be two important subject-positions: \(^{11}\) first, as a geopolitical
hegemon in the West African security bloc and second, as a source of oil in the international
political economy, there exists abundant text to make such analysis possible.

In this research, I use Nigeria’s unique context to explore the links underlying the two
phenomena mentioned in this paper’s opening paragraph: first, the transnational discourse and
domestic implementation of ‘democracy’ and second, the reorganization/redefinition of

\(^9\) Nodal points are “privileged signifiers or reference points. . .in a discourse that bind
together a particular system of meaning or ‘chain of significance’” (Howarth and Stavrakakis
2000, 8).

\(^{10}\) “Sharia” is the term used to represent the implementation of some interpretation of
Islamic Law. The significance of ‘Sharia’ in Nigeria’s ‘democratic’ conflicts will be explored in
great depth in the second half of this paper.

\(^{11}\) A subject-position is the position a ‘real’ person assumes which is made possible and
meaningful by the discourse s/he inhabits. A Nigerian agent may, for example, adopt positions
of an African, a Nigerian, a woman, a mother, a Muslim, a democrat, a Yoruba, and so forth
depending on his positions in the various discourses he inhabits.
Nigeria’s domestic communal relations. Elsewhere (Ellsworth 2002), I disclose how the signifier ‘democracy’ is emptied, but a brief summary of this argument is nonetheless in order here. The process begins in the international arena, where a discourse of ‘democracy’ emerges out of a global society dominated economically and politically by the United States but a society that incorporates Nigeria and the Nigerian elite as well. Within this discourse, certain meanings and identities become privileged while others become marginalized and rendered insignificant. Consequently, certain performances become necessary while other are made unnecessary.

Among these consequences, it becomes necessary for the U.S. to condition Nigeria’s behavior and for Nigeria to adapt its behavior and assume a ‘democratic’ identity in order to capitalize on the privileged status and concrete economic rewards dependent on a ‘democratic’ identity.

Within the domestic arena, a community of previously imagined yet forever reimagined communal groups (primarily ethnic and religious in composition) tune in to the transnational discursive practices (i.e. they eavesdrop) and privileged meanings of ‘democracy,’ interpreting for themselves the meanings associated with the expectations and promises of ‘democracy’.

These communal groups adapt their performance and redefine their intercommunal relations in accordance with these hegemonic meanings of ‘democracy,’ which privilege a zero-sum, economistic, and competitive ontology.

More importantly, several of these communal groups find themselves within more localized discursive spheres, with horizons that exclude other groups who nonetheless still physically inhabit the Nigerian polity. In particular, Nigerians find themselves within a global discourse in which ‘democracy’ has been endowed with social significance, but nevertheless remains an *empty signifier* when meaningful applications are sought. A conflict thus arises when
Nigerians inhabiting an ‘Islamic’ discursive sphere attempt to fill that signifier with ‘democratic’ meanings that conflict with the meanings asserted by Nigerian’s outside of that ‘Islamic’ discourse. These conflicts are best understood by exploring the nodal point, ‘Islam’ and the “chain of signification” that provides new meaning to the already available signifier, ‘democracy’ (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 8).

Exploring the transnational discursive practices, therefore, enables us to better understand both the Nigerian state’s behavior and the relationship among communal groups within Nigeria. Such an exploration also promises to expose the political forces whose ‘practices’ enable some agents to benefit from the discourse or to direct its course. The possibility that people continue to die, in part due to the U.S. foreign policies and the discourse of ‘democracy,’ demands that we seek to better understand these processes and their consequences. This understanding begins at the surface with the many positivist theories of frustration-aggression and democratic transition, but then necessarily delves beneath these theories to disclose the discourse within which political practice is meaningful.

Only with a deep exploration of how national and subnational relations are being rearticulated and redefined can one first begin to reveal why expectations rise and why frustration might result. Only with an exploration of how national and communal identities are being reimagined can one begin to understand the emotional fire that accompanies that frustration and the potential targets it will find for its release. Only a coherent model of how communications flow across the social strata (international, national, subnational) and how meanings are created, manipulated, and transferred ties it all together.
Application

How might such a model look? A one-dimensional chain of causes and effects will not suffice. A two-dimensional model will provide a starting place, but only that. It is useful, nevertheless, to begin with some mapping of the ‘agents’ and the practices that connect them.

Imagine first that we can temporarily isolate three subject-positions or spheres of agency: U.S. policy-makers, Nigerian leaders, and the Nigerian public who have been preidentified as politically and socially demarcated communal groups. First, the particular discourse regarding the meaning and content of ‘democracy’ is found in the spoken and symbolic dialogue between U.S. and Nigerian policy-makers and in the public statements and actions of each directed at the broader audiences of each country’s domestic constituency as well as at the broader international community. A set of linked meanings are thus established and alternative understandings of ‘democracy’ are disempowered.

From these representational practices, certain performances emerge as natural and necessary. The U.S. must ‘encourage’ Nigeria to adopt a ‘democratic’ identity while at the same time, U.S. policy makers must actively seek to redefine what ‘democracy’ is in a way that allows the U.S. to overlook many seemingly ‘undemocratic’ Nigerian attributes and actions and to provide seemingly undemocratic forms of geostrategic assistance and economic exploitation while preserving these policy-makers’ idealistic rhetoric. Nigeria is likewise engaged in a very limited performance made necessary by the generative affects of its shared discursive space with

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12 The choice of tools which the U.S. employs in its foreign policy is circumscribed by yet another discourse underlying all foreign policy implementation. A deep-seated and unspoken behaviorist discourse constrains what is thought possible (even what is imaginable) and limits foreign policy options to those of material and social rewards and punishments. The nature and content of this behaviorist (latter named ‘Skinnerian’) discourse is being developed elsewhere.
the U.S. Nigeria, in order to dawn its ‘democratic’ identity must hold elections through which it can legitimize a set of local and national leaders. Beyond that performance, little else must change. The U.S. policymakers find freedom in the construction of ‘democracy’ which enables the pursuit of their economic and geopolitical interests absent the troubling accusations of hypocrisy. Nigeria finds in its ‘democratic’ status the opportunity to re-engage with the United States and thus it reaps the political and economic benefits bestowed directly from the United States as well as those garnered from the larger global democratic society (debtforgiveness, developmental assistance, and the cessation of sanctions).

We might at this point overlay another dimension to this representation. This particular ‘democratic’ discourse (one of many that hover around the world’s many political and academic centers) whose initial horizons\(^{13}\) were limited to U.S. policy makers had been adapted, negotiated, and transformed so that its borders could circumscribe Nigerian policy makers as well and thus constrain the Nigerian state’s behavior and identity (See Figure 1).

\[\text{Figure 1. Horizons of ‘democratic’ discourse expand from U.S. elite to Nigerian elite.}\]

\(^{13}\) By *horizons* I refer to those borders to which a particular discourse extends. As more people begin to share and practice a particular articulation of signifiers, they enter the discourse that represents that “structured totality resulting from articulatory practice” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 7), and the horizon of that discourse (or I like to think of it as discursive sphere) expand to include them.
This ‘democratic’ discourse, its expanding horizons, and its accompanying performances are not, however, without their consequences. The rhetoric shared between Nigerian and U.S. policy makers which articulated the meaning of ‘democracy’ is overheard by the Nigerian population who represent, in raw numbers, Africa’s largest literate and politically engaged population, one with easy access to a prolific free press and radio transmissions in a widely understood language. As the U.S. models what appears to be a successful and prosperous ‘democracy,’ and as U.S. policy-makers begin to actively market ‘democracy’ in the Nigerian state with all its accompanying promises, Nigeria’s population hears the many promises linked to ‘democracy.’ As Nigerian elite dawn a national ‘democratic’ status with its requisite election, Nigeria’s population understands that all of these spoken and unspoken promises are soon to be fulfilled.

Graphically, we might again imagine that horizons of this discourse have now grown beyond the elite social circles and have penetrated into Nigeria’s domestic relations. This expansion is not, however, as complete as the initial expansion depicted in Figure 1. Although a ‘democratic’ identity has taken hold state-wide, those particular meanings associated with ‘democracy’ presupposed in the elite discourse, are now challenged by alternative discourses, especially the discourse of Islam in northern Nigeria.

Figure 2. The horizons of the ‘democratic’ discourse expand from the international elite spheres to penetrate Nigeria’s domestic realm.
Regarding the state-wide acceptance of the ‘democratic’ identity, Nigeria’s population is unified in its acceptance of the ‘democratic’ label and its accompanying promises, but they are not unified in how they seek to fulfill these promises. Although the entire state has adopted the ‘democratic’ identity, Nigeria’s Islamic and non-Islamic populations diverge profoundly in how they fill that empty label with meaning. The individualist-competitive elements that are so naturally linked to ‘democracy’ in the U.S. centered discourse are easily integrated into the southern Nigerian’s world view. There, the greatest danger is the propensity to intensify conflict around democratically-driven competitions. In the predominantly Islamic northern regions, however, these so-called ‘western’ elements of ‘democracy’ are easily discarded or reinterpreted in ways thought unimaginable in the western discourse of ‘democracy.’ As a result, a series of devastating conflicts has emerged at the fault lines between these two world views.

**Theoretical Summation**

To summarize, a ‘democratic’ discourse represented initially in U.S. and Nigerian elite communications has privileged a construction of ‘democracy’ which necessitates a certain minimal performances (especially elections) while emptying ‘democracy’ of any deeper meaning. The effects are three-fold. First, the Nigerian state is engaging in a ‘democratic’ performance enabled by the emptying of ‘democracy’. Second, this discourse–powerful in both its content and its emptiness–has penetrated Nigeria’s domestic arena where previously constructed communal groups, whose own identities and intergroup relationships are always in flux, hear this discursive meanings and its lack thereof. Third, the partial penetration of the discursive horizon into Nigerian society has created a fault line between those Nigerians who
more easily incorporate the western-centered discourse into their world view and those whose subject-positions in an already pervasive Islamic discourse lead them to interpret and integrate ‘democracy’ much differently. As each group attempts to apply and realize their vision of ‘democracy,’ violence ensues. In particular, here I focus on those communal conflicts sparked by Nigeria’s northern states’ implementation of Islamic law (Sharia). The bulk of this paper portrays the communal nature of these conflicts and then analyzes scores of quotes that reveal how the people involved in these conflicts have interpreted ‘democracy’ in ways that directly and almost unavoidably contribute to the conflicts.

**TRACKING COMMUNAL CONFLICT**

First it is necessary to boldly display the consequences of these conflicts and document deaths of thousands of Nigerians. After decades of moderate to low levels of communal violence, Nigeria witnessed a rash of ethnic and religious bloodletting that it had not see in such a costly and sustained levels since its civil war. Although communal conflicts are part and parcel of Nigeria’s history, and seasons of pervasive peace are rare if they exist at all, the recent escalation of ethnic/religious conflicts is remarkable even by Nigerian standards. To establish the
To achieve this, I searched the *Post Express Wired*’s archives for “(communal OR ethnic OR regional OR religious OR tribal) and (kill OR killed OR death OR deaths OR died OR die OR clash OR conflict OR riot OR riots)” and then skimmed each of the 1100-1200 articles that fit that query to tally the number of communal conflicts and the reported death tolls of each conflict. After August 2001, when the *Post Express Wired*’s archive seems to end, I refer to a similar search of the newspapers at www.allafrica.com.

Figure 3. Death toll of communal clashes as reported in *Post Express*.

existence and magnitude of this trend, I reviewed five years of Nigerian news and quantified any reference to deaths resulting from communal violence. The findings are depicted in Figure 3 above.

To what might one attribute this tragic pattern? Unfortunately, this undeniable spike in both the quantity and the magnitude of communal conflicts immediately following the advent of ‘democratic’ governance in the second quarter of 1999. Whereas previous quarters rarely

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reported more than one conflict, and none of these with more than 100 reported deaths, the quarter following the ‘democratic’ transition reported ten separate conflicts--several with very substantial death tolls. Moreover, just as the initial wave of violence seemed to subside near the end of 1999, an even more costly wave of communal conflicts beginning with the Sharia riots in Kaduna cost Nigeria as many as 2,000 lives.

As developed elsewhere (Ellsworth 2002), the U.S.-Nigerian discourse of ‘democracy’ establishes binary opposites (the ‘democracy’ and the ‘nondemocracy’ or ‘pariah’) and ties to these signs only to the behavioral attributes of “free and fair” elections, freedom of press and assembly, and the freeing of dissidents. Other elements of a successful social transition from outcast to partner were likewise spoken or implied--an open market economy and a cooperative relationship with the United States also seemed to be important elements in the construction of the ‘democracy.’ In contrast to clear communication of these behavioral and social elements of ‘democracy’, the more potentially delicate components of a liberal democracy remain unidentified and unexplored so as to prevent their hindering a quick ‘transition.’

What went unspoken in the U.S.-Nigerian ‘democratic’ discourse has since been implied on the ground in Nigeria. Where U.S. expectations remained vague (as not to create impediments to attaining ‘democratic’ status), a heterodoxy of Nigerian domestic discourses has built various conflicting interpretations of ‘democracy’ upon the common, sparse, economistic foundation provided by the United States in word and deed. Relying in part on the unspoken lessons gleaned from U.S. exemplarity in addition to vague notions of majority rule, representation, and religious freedom, a number of domestic discourses have supplemented the
U.S. discourse with the following elements. Consequently, the three paths that join ‘democracy’ to communal conflict are as follows.

First, ‘democracy’ is associated with ‘representation,’ and in the liberal tradition, ‘democratic representation’ refers principally to the political representation of the individual or of ‘the people’ collectively. These liberal interpretations stand in sharp contrast with how ‘representation’ may be interpreted and applied in deeply divided societies where such notions of ‘representation’ are instead supplanted by the desire to represent the communal group. Although there is a general consensus among Nigeria’s communal groups (whether minority or majority) regarding this interpretation, the problem emerges when exclusionary identities are written deeply into the fabric of society, and ‘representation’ in a competitive system inevitably excludes some group from their imagined fair share of political representation.

Second, ‘democracy,’ which has already been tied to substantial economic expectations for all of Nigeria, is also interpreted as promising some degree of prosperity to each communal groups through a ‘democratically’ enabled ‘fairness of distribution.’ These words arose continually in my interviews and seemed to be bent so easily to serve almost any communal will. For example, in the oil rich Delta states, ‘democracy’ demands that they keep their ‘fair’ share of the oil revenue, whereas in the Northern states ‘democracy’ demands that the natural resources belonging to Nigeria be shared ‘fairly’ with all of Nigeria’s states.

Third, throughout Nigeria ‘democracy’ is associated with ‘religious freedom,’ but this liberal truism is greatly complicated by each region’s interpretation thereof. In northern Nigeria, the most vigorously sought freedom is that tied to their closest held identity—freedom of religion. In practice, this ‘democratic’ freedom is expected to naturally take the form of the long awaited
reintroduction of Sharia, or Islamic law. In southern Nigeria ‘freedom of religion’ is interpreted as the freedom from religious imposition, which they feel should naturally accompany a ‘democratic’ (read secular) state.

What happens when these interpretations of ‘democracy’ are exercised in a political system whose primary settlement mechanism is periodic electoral competitions? Interest groups (defined communally) are compelled to compete in each of three major fields, each associated with a particular construction of ‘democracy’ listed above. First, who is represented? In other words, how are constituencies defined, how are subnational political borders drawn, and what communal groups will ultimately be represented in office. Second, to whom are economic resources dispensed? In other words, how do local and regional groups compete with each other for political control of economic assets as well as jockey with state and federal government for their share of the tax revenue from such assets. Third, which law rules? That is, which laws and which legal system will be established (liberal-secular or religious). Unfortunately, as each of these competitive games is overlaid upon a ‘democratic’ playing field already filled with entrenched identity groups and nonnegotiable identity-laden symbolism, violent conflict can all too easily erupt. Whereas the first two of these fields of conflict are discussed elsewhere (Ellsworth 2002), the following examples will clarify the third—the ‘democratic’ conflicts over religious law and the Sharia.

**RULED BY WHAT – SECULAR OR ISLAMIC LAW?**

Today the conflicts brought about earlier by economic and political competition have been eclipsed by those concerning religious law. Democratic governance demands some type of
There have been other religious/ethnic conflicts in Nigeria since the recent inauguration of ‘democracy’ that are not directly linked to Sharia (Islamic law) but might instead be linked to a general feeling of religious tension. For example, in southern areas where large Muslim minority populations live, a religious crisis can easily emerge within an already tense atmosphere. For example, in July 1999 in Ogun State a Hausa woman was killed for violating a “no-movement” requirement in observance of the Yoruba cultural festival. Hausa reacted violently and soon more than 40 people had died on both sides of this religious divide (Adedeji 1999). Violence then spread to the far reaches of the North where in Kano, Muslims retaliated against Christian enclaves. Within a week 70 more were dead and thousands more were displaced.

Over the past three years, Nigeria has faced a number of very deadly disputes related to Nigerian states’ adoption and implementation of Sharia (Islamic legal system) as the official code of law. When supported by a majority of the population, many claim, the adoption of Sharia is ‘democratic,’ and when challenged to separate church and state, they respond that it would be ‘undemocratic’ not to establish as law the will of a state’s majority citizens. It seems, that such conflicts are yet one more inevitable consequence of ‘democratic’ transition in a deeply divided religious society. In an interview one Northern

Figure 4. Mean rank (1 representing the highest ranked, 6 the lowest) of each identity category, contrasting North and South. Asterisk indicates ANOVA statistical significance (Ellsworth 1999).

15 There have been other religious/ethnic conflicts in Nigeria since the recent inauguration of ‘democracy’ that are not directly linked to Sharia (Islamic law) but might instead be linked to a general feeling of religious tension. For example, in southern areas where large Muslim minority populations live, a religious crisis can easily emerge within an already tense atmosphere. For example, in July 1999 in Ogun State a Hausa woman was killed for violating a “no-movement” requirement in observance of the Yoruba cultural festival. Hausa reacted violently and soon more than 40 people had died on both sides of this religious divide (Adedeji 1999). Violence then spread to the far reaches of the North where in Kano, Muslims retaliated against Christian enclaves. Within a week 70 more were dead and thousands more were displaced.

16 Once again, refer to Figure 4, which depicts how the students I polled (Ellsworth 1999) value their religious identities. In a nation deeply divided, where religious identification far
Muslim, Ibrahim Alhassan, claimed that “To every Muslim, Islam is more important than a nation. Without Sharia, Islam has no value in Nigeria” (Ibagere 2000).

**Brief History of Sharia (Religious) Conflicts**

This recent round of Sharia-related conflicts began when Zamfara state first adopted Sharia in October 1999, just five months after the advent of ‘democracy.’ This announcement set in motion a cascade of Nigeria’s Northern states announcing and then officially enacting Sharia law.

**Table 1. Time Line of Nigerian States Adapting Sharia.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Date Signed</th>
<th>Date Enacted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Zamfara</td>
<td>Fall 1999</td>
<td>January, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Niger</td>
<td>Feb 22, 2000</td>
<td>May 4, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Sokoto</td>
<td>May 29, 2000 (?)</td>
<td>May 4, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Kano</td>
<td>March 5, June 21</td>
<td>November 26, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Katsina</td>
<td>August 1, 2000</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Jigawa</td>
<td>August 2, 2000</td>
<td>“Later in Year”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Yobe</td>
<td>August 7, 2000</td>
<td>October 1, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Borno</td>
<td>August 19, 2000</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Kebbi</td>
<td>December 1, 2000</td>
<td>December 1, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Bauchi</td>
<td>February 27, 2001</td>
<td>March 31, 2001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Kaduna State, initially the site of the most violent conflicts over Sharia, announced that it would enact Sharia, but due to the extremity of the bloodshed rescinded that plan soon thereafter.
When Zamfara first announced it would adopt the Sharia, the seeds of unrest were already present, but remained nonviolent in their manifestation. Nevertheless, a storm was brewing. In the announcement ceremony, Zamfara’s governor claimed that the Muslim faith could not be complete without Sharia. Many outside the ceremony supported the Sharia arguing that Muslims in Nigeria had for years “endured subjugation and denial of their rights to live as [M]uslims” (Emerole et al 1999). Echoing those sentiments, the Secretary-General of the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs argued that “No true Moslem can oppose or avoid Sharia” (Emerole et al 1999).

Commenting on Zamfara’s new Sharia law at the time of its adoption, Nigeria’s Vice President, Atiku Abubakar, was clearly unaware of what this peaceful ceremony had set in motion. “Events are still unfolding as regards the issue. As at now, the Federal Government is just watching” (Faturoti et al 1999). Soon thereafter the storm soon broke with ferocious consequences.

Ground zero was located in Kaduna, the Northern region’s second largest city, where the Sharia was announced several months later but with much more dire consequences. Fighting between the Christians and Muslims broke out in late February 2000 and within four days had cost an estimated 1,000 lives.¹⁷ Corpses littered the streets. Upon fleeing, one Christian

¹⁷ An alternative estimate provided by U.S.-based Human Rights Watch put the death toll closer to 700 (Farah 2000).
commented succinctly “Nigeria is divided. I am going home to the eastern region” (Nwosu 2000b). Framed even more in the competitive zero-sum attitude, another fleeing resident claimed that “the Moslems don’t want peace with us, they want to make us follow their religion, they have to know we will never accept Sharia. Never” (Nwosu 2000a). Yet another claimed while employing one interpretation of ‘democracy’ that “the Moslems should realise that Nigeria is a Christian country. The majority of us in Nigeria are Christians and we will resist any attempt to force us into Islam” (Nwosu 2000a).

Upon visiting Kaduna, President Obsanjo was horrified exclaiming in a televised address, “I could not believe Nigerians were capable of such barbarism against one another,” and vowed he would resist any attempt to dismember the country. Yet to the international audience, and especially to foreign investors he assured that this bloodbath was “a hiccup that will be put behind us” (Cornwell 2000). Echoing this unwarranted optimism in August 2000, President Obasanjo argued in an interview that best approach to Sharia is to ignore it. “I think [S]haria will fizzle out. To confront it is to keep it alive” (Farah 2000). It did not “fizzle out.” As summarized by one reporter,

Two bouts of bloody riots, in February and May between Christians and Muslims, led to more than 2,000 deaths, following attempts by the northern Kaduna State government to introduce Sharia there. Several churches and mosques were set ablaze and properties destroyed. Hundreds more were killed in reprisal attacks against northern Muslim immigrants in the largely Christian south-east (Ibagere 2000).

Ethnic Spillover

This communal conflict, although marked primarily by religious differences, has not been contained solely within the religiously divided communities. Instead, it almost immediately
spilled over into ethnic-based conflicts as well. Soon after the religious conflict began in Kaduna, an Igbo organization, the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), claimed that because Christian Igbo were targeted in the Kaduna riots, it would soon “mobilise Igbos in retaliate (sic) against Hausas in the South.” They furthermore added that “Igbos resident in Kaduna, in particular, and in the North in general, should use every amount of force available to defend themselves, with any ammunition in their possession . . . “ (Ukeh 2000). In fact, after the approximately 1,000 people died in the North, Hausas were then “killed by the hundred[s] in Aba in Nigeria’s southeastern corner as groups of local Christians exacted a bloody revenge for murdered relatives, their bodies brought home on the back of a trailer” (Cornwell 2000).

Although such large-scale conflicts appear to have subsided,18 various small outbreaks have cost and continue to cost Nigerians their lives. On September 7, 2000, after a committee visited the predominantly Christian Bambam village to poll opinions regarding support for Sharia, Christian and Mulsim groups both began peaceful marches in support of their favored policy. The marches passed peacefully, but that evening the killings began19 which led by the end of the day to the deaths of more than 20 people and the burning of two churches and two mosques along with many homes and businesses (Doki 2000). The religious nature of this conflict and its ties to Sharia were clear. One young man, Musa, recounted that some attackers

18 This statement was premature. I’ll need to update that in September 2001, another Sharia riot swept Jos city wherein hundreds were killed.

19 Some blamed this conflict initially on outsiders from neighboring communities (No Author 2000, Non-indigenes). Although this is a comforting theory, evidence months later suggested that instead “several prominent citizens of the area were alleged to have sponsored the agitation that led to the crisis” (Leman 2001).
called “Allahu Akbar!” (“God is great”) as they burned buildings and killed villagers. Reporters visiting Bambam to assess its aftermath report that pro-Sharia slogans were scribbled in English and Arabic stating ‘Sharia no going back,’ ‘Sharia forever’ and ‘Sharia is a must’ (Doki 2000). Months later some report that “Hundreds of lives were lost” (Leman 2001).

In discussing the mayhem almost two weeks after the initial conflict, a community Christian leader, Reverend Solomon Hussaini Kalshingi clarified that “Of course the clamour for and against Shariah is still with us and it is the bone of contention,” and spoke of Gombe State’s religious makeup being a crucial issue when understanding this conflict. He explained,

> The fact is that in Gombe State, there are eleven local governments, four out of these number are in the northern part of the state. These four local governments are dominated by Muslims, Christians do not have influence there. The other four local governments in the southern parts of the state are dominated by Christians. There, Muslims have no influence. Apart from these are the major local governments of Gombe, Yamaltu, Deba and Akko. If there is much disagreements (sic) or lack of consensus in these local governments, it would be a reflection of their multi-ethnic and multi-religious diversity because Christians, Muslims, and even traditional religious worshippers are there (No Author 2000, Non-indigenes).

Yet, he concluded that “We have lived together, coexisted side-by-side for ages” (No Author 2000, Non-indigenes). An unfortunate lesson on the volatile nature of divided societies can be drawn from these words. Gombe State, positioned between the Christian and Muslim worlds finds itself particularly vulnerable to religious-based conflicts. It is in many ways a microcosm of the entire Nigerian State which finds itself similarly positioned and facing the same volatile issues of “multi-ethnic and multi-religious diversity.”

Again in February 2001 a riot in the nearby state capital of Gombe (also named Gombe) cost four lives when rioting Muslim youth sacked two Christian churches. According to reports, thousands of Muslim youths took to the streets protesting a visit by the Israeli Ambassador to
Nigeria who came to speak with state officials about economic matters and to inaugurate a Shalom Club for Christians who have been on pilgrimage to Israel. Some government officials, however, “linked the riots to frustration by various Muslim groups over the delay in the implementation of the Sharia law” (Leman 2001).

It should not be surprising that political debate over the nature of religious law could easily evolve into debates over religion and then into outright warfare. At a rally at the Katsina Central Mosque, Alhaji Datti Ahmed engaged in such inflammatory speech as to declare that “what [President] Obasanjo is trying to pracicalise is war against our religion, against our sharia and war against us.” Accusing Obasanjo of implementing a Christian agenda he charged that, “[Obasanjo] said ‘One Nigeria One God.’ But who is the God of Obasanjo. It is Jesus who is his God.” Unfortunately this rhetoric could easily turn more violent. In response to this ‘declaration’ or war, he claimed that the North is forming and “Islamic Suicide Squad” preparing in the bush to defend Islam. His justified these actions by claiming that “instead of living a second class citizen it is better for me to become a martyr” (No author 2000, North Is Raising).

Sharia’s ‘Democratic’ Discourse

How might we account for this often-called ‘fundamentalist revival’? Such ‘reawakening’ of identities is often portrayed in the popular press and in some academic literature as resulting from an absence of authoritarian control—the “taking the lid off the boiling pot” theory. To the contrary, the statements of those involved in the Sharia conflicts suggest that these conflicts are tied more closely to the presence of ‘democracy.’ For example as Borno state’s Governor, Mala Kachallah, inaugurated a Sharia Implementation Committee in February
2001, he utilized a nation of ‘democracy’ in Sharia’s defense. Dismissing those who opposed
the Sharia, he claimed that “Sharia was in response to the yearnings and aspirations of the
majority of the people.” Regarding the ‘democratic’ notion of ‘rights’ he explained that the
“government will ensure that the rights of all its citizens are protected and guaranteed as
enshrined in the constitution and indeed the Sharia legal system” (No author 2001, Borno
Governor).

Likewise, Muzzammil Hanga, leader of the Muslim Lawyers Forum (MLF) and head of
Publicity of Sharia Implementation Committee, explained that Kano State joined other Sharia
states because “the time for a clearly defined status of Muslims had come with the advent of
democracy. They saw no other apt environment and time than that now that there is freedom for
all” (Ikyur 2000, Italics added for emphasis). At that same ceremony Dr. Datti Ahmed, former
President of the Social Democratic Party, boldly warned that “to oppose our effort as a state in
this regard (of adopting Sharia) is to oppose democracy. . .” (parenthetical reference added by
reporter– Ikyur 2000). To clarify, he explained that “if any state wants another system cherished
by the vast majority of its citizens we will regard it as their right to establish such a system
within our federal democratic set up.” Furthermore, he suggested that any resident was free to
leave the state and relocate elsewhere “if any individual feels too uncomfortable with any set up
established by the majority in any state” (Ikyur 2000).20

Similarly, Isa Ibdulsalam, an academic who is advising Kano State government on the
reintroduction of Sharia claims that the introduction of Sharia is “the benefit of democracy. . .

20 Similarly, Datti Ahmed, a Muslim leader and former presidential aspirant suggested
that Christians opposing the Sharia may leave. “The only thing they have to do is to vacate the
place and go where the climate is good for them” (Roughton 2000).
The people can come forward and demand something. Under previous regimes, people didn’t have that freedom” (Singer 2001).

Others acknowledge Sharia’s grassroots ‘democratically’ driven ascension of Sharia, and suggest that under ‘democratic’ elected officials have no choice but to implement the will of the majority. For example Kano’s state governor, Rabiu Kwankwaso, resisted implementing Sharia at first but was overwhelmed by its popular support and in the words of one reporter he was “vilified by the very citizens who elected [him]” (McGreal 2000). Suliman Kumo, one of Kano’s leading Islamic scholars, explained

> If you are a politician you can’t ignore the appeal. The governor of Kano tried his best to sideline the issue . . . but he realised he had no alternative but to make a declaration in favour of sharia. For some incomprehensible reason the sharia issue has become so emotional and the one issue that has united people in northern Nigeria. I’ve never seen a single issue do this in Nigeria. Partly it’s rebellion against a non-functioning [Nigerian political] system (McGreal 2000).21

Other governors faced similar ‘democratic’ pressures which they felt helpless to resist. One reporter explains that although, “The Kano governor’s decision to introduce Sharia goes against an accord suspending implementation that Mr Obasanjo said he reached with the 19 northern governors after riots in Kaduna last February,” the governor had little choice but to defy the President’s accord. “Colleagues said Mr Kwankwaso’s hesitation over the issue had threatened his political survival”(Wallis 2000b).

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21 Drawing on this quote and other observations, the one western reporter staying in Kano notes the irony that, although defended as a ‘democratic’ imperative, Sharia has also grown in popularity as Sharia’s advocates have critiqued Nigeria’s ‘democratic’ project. He claims that “There is little doubt that many ordinary Nigerians embrace Islamic law as an act of desperation rather than a religious value system. Islamic intellectuals may talk of Sharia as a rulebook for life, but it is sold to many ordinary Muslims as a solution after so many failed alternatives - democracy, military rule and now the reign of President Olusegun Obasanjo” (McGreal 2000).
Speaking at the recent anniversary of Sharia in Zamfara State, Governor Ahmed Sani Yerima implied that the Sharia was consistent with ‘democracy’ because “Today, all Muslims support Sharia” (Kelejaiye 2001). It is noteworthy, however, that he noted no contradiction between the ‘democratic’ reference to a ‘majority will’ and what followed in his speech. Because the national Nigerian Police Force had been reluctant to enforce the Sharia, the Governor warned that “If the police continue with this attitude for next month the vigilante group will have the powers to arrest and present for prosecution violators of Sharia laws. The Attorney-General is hereby mandated to prosecute such culprits” (Kelejaiye 2001).

Finally, other brief allusions to some interpretation of ‘democracy’ are frequently found in passing statements by those officials attempting to provide their religious law with a sense of ‘democratic’ legitimacy. Zamfara’s governor spoke of “freedom of religion” claiming that, “. . .Sharia law has been recognized for centuries throughout Nigeria’s Muslim north, particularly in such civil matters as marriage and inheritance, and that by guaranteeing freedom of religion, the constitution allowed Zamfara to enforce Islamic law” (Simmons 2000). The governor of Sokoto State in a symbolic act signed Sharia into law on May 29, 2000--the first anniversary of the return to ‘democracy.’

Others, especially from Nigeria’s Southern or Christian populations are not convinced by these interpretations of ‘democracy.’ In stark contrast to these supportive views, for example, the Minister of Information and National Orientation, Professor Jerry Gana, explains that the imposition of Sharia was not a fulfillment of ‘democracy’ but an attempt to derail it.

22 As part of this celebration but in a remarkably anti-‘democratic’ spirit, the Governor also commissioned N385 million (about $4 million) to improve the “Sani Abacha” road named for one of Nigeria’s most ruthless dictators.
[Gana] argued that if the federal government had prosecuted the sharia proponents, those involved would have painted it that federal government was prosecuting the moslems without taking into consideration that it was a constitutional matter.

‘The issue of sharia, yes, it is a constitutional issue.
But given the religious nature of that particular problem it was essentially a political trap to derail democracy’ (This Day 2001).

Echoing the opinion that Sharia threatens the Nigerian State, the esteemed author Chinua Achebe claimed, while visiting Nigeria in 1999, that Nigeria is “sicker than we feared” identifying Sharia as “the greatest threat to the federation” (Jaggi 2000, journalist’s paraphrasing).

Finally, outside of Nigeria, President Obasanjo has been quite critical of the Sharia project. While speaking at Harvard University in November 1999, Obasanjo argued that Islamic Law contradicted Nigeria’s constitution. He claimed, “We have a constitution in Nigeria and the constitution is against any state religion. To that extent, no part of Nigeria can formulate or go for anything that is a state religion -- it is unconstitutional” (Johnson 2000). President Obasanjo, a Baptist from southeastern Nigeria, continued to explain that although Nigeria’s federal system permits the states to adopt their own laws, “blanket implementation of any religious law is not permitted” (Johnson 2000, journalist’s phrasing).

As interesting as these accusations may be, it is all the more revealing how ‘democratic’ images and rhetoric are then used to rebut those accusations. Responding to fears that Sharia might lead to a dissolution of the Nigerian state, Ibrahim Datti Ahmad, president of the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria, claimed, “I don’t see any division happening at all. Muslims are not thinking along those lines. I hope other people who are making so much noise will realize sharia is a fact of life for us here” (Farah 2000). Then activating the ‘democratic’ discourse he added. “We give [non-Muslims] the right to live as they want where Muslims are not a majority,
so what is the problem? Here, we are a majority in a democracy, and happily we are now in a position to choose, and we choose to go back to sharia.” Commenting on the long-term implications of this trend, Ibrahim Datti Ahmad predicted that Sharia will eventually become law in 19 of Nigeria’s 36 states (Farah 2000).

Similarly, at the inauguration of Sharia for Kebbi State in December 2000, Governor Mohammed Adamu Aliero defended Sharia by stating that,

> Of all assertions against sharia, none is more baffling than the much talked about allegation that sharia was yet another way of undermining democracy in Nigeria. Unfortunately, those who hold this erroneous view failed to realise that we who are championing the cause of sharia are products and beneficiaries of the current democratic dispensation (Editorial Staff 2000).

It is all the more telling to note the source of some rebuttals. For example, one of the great champions of ‘democracy’ in Nigeria’s history, the democratically elected President Shagari to whom then General Obsanjo turned over his military-led government, sharply criticized Obsanjo’s efforts to suspend Sharia during the earlier Kaduna riots. Shagari declared such attempts to resist the implementation of Sharia as “unconstitutional” (Cornwell 2000).

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23 Some states are in a real danger of dissolving. The Sharia controversy has also tied in with the representational issues of drawing borders. Just as several of Africa’s Sahel nations (like Sudan and Chad) have faced national religious divides that threaten the viability of a unified state, some central Nigerian states find themselves likewise pulled apart when internal religious schisms run across political borders. For example Reverend Filibus Gwama, the Borno State head of the Christian Association of Nigeria, suggests that in Borno state, where Sharia is being considered, Christian leaders speak of dividing Borno into Muslim and Christian sections. He explains,

> We want to be very blunt and frank that the Christians cannot condone the establishment of Sharia in Borno. We shall firmly create and recognize southern Borno as an entity that shall not in any way be affected by Sharia laws (Mejias 2000).
‘DEMOCRATIC’ DISCURSIVE HETERODOXY

Such debates over the democracyness of Sharia, reveal how easily the ‘democratic’ discourse is turned to justify and legitimize either of the two diametrically opposed conceptions of the role of Sharia in a ‘democratic’ state. What hegemonic qualities the ‘democratic’ discourse might have possessed (its econom[ist]ic nature) seem to have been split into two heterodoxic discourses as they have been applied in Nigeria’s Southern and Northern regions. Evidence of these multiple discursive spheres is found in many particular applications of ‘democracy.’ Below I will briefly present both sides of that divide as ‘democracy’ is used to promote different views of first, religious freedom; second, peace and order; and third, the protection of minority rights.

FREEDOM OF/FROM RELIGION

Previous statements have already presented the Northern/Muslim views of Sharia as fulfillment of the ‘democratic’ freedom to practice their religion. The following quotes suggest once more that in the Muslim areas freedom of religion is prized, whereas in the Christian communities, the guarantee of a ‘democratic’ secular state that protects freedom from religion is more important.

From the North, Abdulatif Adegbite, the secretary general of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, spoke from Abeokuta, Ogun State. “Our religion does not allow us not to apply Sharia. It is part and parcel of Islam. You can not have freedom of religion without observing Sharia. I do not see why [opponents] should dogmatically insist we have no right to apply Sharia to ourselves” (Eagle 2000).


From the Christian perspective one reporter quotes Ferdinand Obi Abbas, a Christian who works in a tiny electronics shop, and explains that “It’s not Islam as a religion that we worry about,” he says. “We have a secular state, where people are free to practice their own religions. And to keep one Nigeria, this must not change” (Roughton 2000, Italics added).

A ‘DEMOCRATIC’ PEACE – SHARIA AS A CURE TO CRIME VERSUS A CAUSE OF WAR

From the North – Sharia brings Peace and Order

Because of the harsh penalties mandated by Sharia, and because of the officially sanctioned vigilante squads who enforce the punishments with enthusiasm, crime has dropped in the Sharia States. In the words of one reporter, “Bands of vigilantes in frayed red uniforms, armed with homemade machetes, whips, and clubs, roam this poor and parched state on the edge of the Sahara, detaining anyone suspected of misconduct. The list of possible offenses is long, and justice is swift and severe. In the past year, one cattle thief lost a hand, an unwed teen mother received 100 lashes, and countless other men and women endured similar public lashings for lesser transgressions. Not surprisingly, crime has plummeted by more than half” (Singer 2001). Quoting one Northern policeman, Musa Ossa, “People here are afraid to commit crime. We don’t have many thieves anymore” (Singer 2001).

Zamfara’s Governor Sani says his aim is to create a society of high morality, social order, peace and progress, stating that, “We Muslims believe that there is only one solution to human problems, and that is going back to divine rules and regulations.” He continued, “Once you have divine rules governing your life, there will be peace and stability” (Simmons 2000). Abbas
Ibrahim, a Muslim handyman from Zamfara State, “talks about sharia in the same manner as Americans fed up with crime might discuss the death penalty” (Singer 2001).

Even at the height of the early massacres, some believe that Kano’s declaration of Sharia helped avert even greater bloodshed. After the initial riots in Kaduna cost so many Christain/Igbo lives and retaliations in Aba took its toll on the Muslim populations, many feared an unending escalation of revenge. However, some Northern state officials insist that the quick passage of Sharia in Kano “was the key to defusing tension” because it quickly ended the debates and allowed for peace enhancing prayer services the following Friday (Cornwell 2000).

The Southern View

Among the Christian populations, the links joining ‘democracy,’ order, and Sharia are not so apparent. Raising the specter of civil war, Rev. Hamidu Samaila, Secretary of the Evangelical Church of West Africa claims that “There is every possibility this country will split. Christians will have no freedom of worship, and freedom of movement will be restricted. All we are after is peace, but as soon as sharia is implemented, that will be gone” (Farah 2000).

Some Southern critics are also quick to point out that although Sharia may be justified by constructing it as a cure to Nigeria’s political ailments, it is clearly not free of political manipulation itself. Typical of stories coming out of the North, consider the experience of one devout northern Muslim, Mohammed Sani. Speaking with a reporter, Sani recounted an incident from August 2000 which began when he was preaching to fellow Muslims near the main mosque in Gusau (Zamfara’s capital). Pointing to the plethora of propaganda posters and banners “featuring the governor’s photograph and praise for sharia law” he explained that “they give this
state the feel of China under Mao.” He argued, “This is a political campaign. Not sharia.” and went on to argue that “sharia is from God not a governor” (Singer 2001).

Mohammed Sani continued to criticize the governor for his political opportunism and those enforcing Sharia for their unfair implementation, enforcing harsh judgments on the poor while requiring no enforcement among the rich and powerful, finally stating that this was all “Because this governor is using sharia law for his own political purposes” (Singer 2001). Consequently, he was arrested and brought before judge Umar Shitu who explained, “He went right into the mosque and criticized the government. . . . We tried to make him understand that he can cause anarchy. He refused to listen. We decided to put him in prison,” where he spent four months. An Islamic leader and advisor to Zamfara’s governor explained, “Islam does not permit someone to criticize the government” (Singer 2001).

Another related incident has added to the feeling that Sharia dissuades political expression. A prominent member of an opposition political party was brought to sharia court accused of throwing a stone at the governor’s convoy. Although judge Shitu admitted to a reporter months later that, “We weren’t convinced that he threw the stone,” the accused spent two weeks in jail (Singer 2001).

‘Democratic Protections of Majority versus Minority Rights

From the North—No exemption for Minorities

At the inauguration of Sharia in Kano, the governor, “Mr Kwankwason said there would be no exemptions from sharia, withdrawing an earlier statement that a predominantly non-Muslim area would be exempted” (Oboh 2000). As a result Christian businesses, especially
those associated in any way with alcohol, have been forced closed. “Sharia has affected us badly,” said Umeadi, a Christian hotel owner whose earnings helped put his 10 children through school. Contradicting those who claim that only Muslims are being held subject to Islamic law, he reasons that, “if it was a thing for Muslims only, then they would not have forced me to close down.” Although he has lived in the North for 25 years, Umeadi says he is on the verge of packing up and moving (Simmons 2000).

Sam Emeka Anosike, President of the Zamfara branch of the Nigerian Bar Association, says Christians will have no protection from Sharia. “If it’s the law of the land, whoever offends that law will be brought to book,” he explained. “Sharia is for everybody” (Simmons, 2000). In the most open public statement on this subject, Zamfara’s Governor now says he “draws no distinction between Muslims and Christians” (McGreal 2000). This despite some unusually harsh penalties for those who transgress Islamic law.

Among sentences passed by the Islamic courts there in recent months are the amputation of a man’s leg for stealing a bicycle and an arm for stealing a cow. In August two motorbike-taxi drivers were lashed for carrying female passengers. The most controversial sentence was 180 lashes imposed on a pregnant unmarried girl. She will be publicly flogged 40 days after the baby is delivered (McGreal 2000).

It seems that Christians are even being held to the purely Islamic elements of Sharia. “In Kano, city employees in one district have been warned that they will be fined a day’s pay every time they miss prayers (McGreal 2000).
CONCLUSION

Communal conflict occurs under many circumstances and in many conditions. In addition to the many communal conflicts described above, Nigeria also exhibits violent communal conflicts that appear in no way related to ‘democratization.’ Nevertheless, given the sharp rise in communal conflicts accompanying ‘democratization,’ and given the degree to which many of the conflicts are directly linked to ‘democratic’ competition over representation, economic assets, and rule of religious versus secular law, it appears that ‘democratization’ in Nigeria is strongly associated with its rising levels of communal violence. Most importantly, the nature of this association is expressed not only in its rational manifestation (as the players attempt to adjust to and capitalize on the new rules of the game), but these expression of rationality are made possible only because particular meanings of ‘democracy’ have been communicated to, internalized within, and then expressed through the very minds of the agents involved (i.e. the discourse-enabled associations between ‘democracy’ and communal identities and ambitions are occurring in the minds of those citizens and leaders).

This suggests that the relationship between ‘democracy’ and communal relations in Nigeria illustrates the interconnectedness of the international and the national discursive spheres. The U.S.-Nigerian discourse of ‘democracy’ seems to have penetrated Nigeria’s domestic sphere where Nigerian citizens have drawn on this ‘democratic’ discourse and their communal identities to seek the fulfillment of ‘democracy’s’ promises of political representation, a fair share of Nigeria’s economic resources, the promise of religious freedom. All of this implies that research in international relations and comparative politics should not be done in isolation of one another. Furthermore, it cautions international policy makers to carefully consider the social effects of
their rhetoric and consider the possible unintended consequences of their rhetoric and policies as they affect not only actors on the international stage but within domestic realms as well.
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