Many studies have been published on the indigenous religions of various parts of West Africa, and a considerable literature exists of Christian missionary enterprise there, though on both subjects there are many gaps in our knowledge that need to be filled in. Much less scholarship has been expended upon the study of Islam in West Africa. Probably more has been written in French than in English, and there is a notable series of studies by Paul Marty on Islam in each of the French West African territories, though some of these are rather superficial. Fewer works still have attempted to estimate the relationships between Islam and the indigenous African religions, the effects of culture-contact or “acculturation.” A few notable books have appeared in Nigeria over the years, from A. J. N. Tremearne’s The Ban of the Bori (1914), a study of the Hausa, to J. Greenberg’s The Influence of Islam upon a Sudanese Religion (New York 1946), and Mary Smith’s outstanding biography of Baba of Karo (1954). Now the last year has seen the publication of the most comprehensive piece of research so far undertaken in J. S. Trimingham’s Islam in West Africa (O.U.P. 1959). J. S. Trimingham is already well known for his authoritative works on Islam in the Sudan and Ethiopia, and for his re-assessment of the Christian approach to Islam; and now he has set out “to try to assess what has been the result of the impact of Islam, the way it influences African society, and, conversely, the way the African community moulds the Islam it receives.” Other research workers still or recently in the field will add their quota in due course.

The importance of the study of this contact between the faith and “church” of Islam and the old beliefs and institutions of West Africa is considerable and topical, for it is part of the pattern of social change that is sweeping across Africa and rushing it through material and spiritual revolutions in a very short space of time.
West Africa may be taken as the country stretching from Senegal in the west, to the Cameroons in the east; sometimes it has been called the central and western Sudan, the Bilād as-Sūdān, “Land of the Blacks”, of the Arabs. On modern maps it appears as a cake in which the European colonizing powers cut almost vertical slices, mostly alternating between French and British, with a touch of Portuguese and Spanish thrown in at times. Geographically it falls roughly into horizontal strata, from the thick tropical forest of the coastlands, ascending to the savannah and then the desert of the interior. These two ways of viewing the country help to explain the progress of Islam; for it came into the interior plateaus first and long remained almost stationary there, cut off from the coastal regions by the impenetrable forest. With the advent of Europeans, and the building of roads and railways, the Muslim penetration of the coastlands began, now going down vertically to the sea.

Islam only came to West Africa slowly and in waves. 1) No doubt the Arab invasion of North Africa from the eighth century onwards affected such thin lines of communication from North to West Africa as existed then, and there were some migrations to the south but few in number. Spain was more attractive to the Arabs and the first impulse of invasion slowly abated. In the eleventh century the Berbers and some of the Senegalese were converted to Islam, bringing all North Africa and the Sahara under Muslim rule. Then came the foundation of the mixed African kingdoms of Mali, Songhai and Bornu, with their Muslim rulers and pagan populations. A further Muslim stream came in the fourteenth century from the Eastern Sudan, when the fall of the remaining Christian kingdoms, except Ethiopia, sent Muslim traders as far west as Nigeria. Then in the nineteenth century came more Muslim advances, corresponding to European entry from the coast.

The Hausa states had accepted Islam from the fourteenth century and they influenced those of the pastoral Fulani who settled in the towns. At the end of the eighteenth century ʿUthmān dan Fodio, a Muslim Fulani, began a revival for purer Islam in Hausaland and eventually declared a jihād, taking the title of Sarkin Musulmi, “com-

mander of the faithful." He subjugated not only the Hausa states but raided their pagan neighbours for slaves. The coastal kingdom of the Yoruba was broken in 1830, and when finally the British established their rule over both Yoruba and Fulani from 1890 they recognized the status quo, so that the northern Yoruba regions are still counted as part of Northern Nigeria and their rulers are Muslim. This helps partly to explain the strong influence of Islam among the Yoruba. Similar movements of Islamic revival and holy war were taking place in the nineteenth century in other parts of West Africa, e.g. at Fouta Jalon in the west and elsewhere. We cannot go into detail here, but the general picture is of the slow advance of Islam into West Africa, accelerated in the nineteenth century, and finally helped by the improved communications available under European peace and trade.

Islam descended into West Africa in waves from the north. At a late date, and for all practical purposes only from the nineteenth century, Christianity arrived in the country from the opposite direction, from the sea to the south. Although European trade with West Africa is now nearly five centuries old, penetration of the interior hardly began before the last century. Mungo Park first saw the "majestic Niger... flowing slowly to the eastward" in 1796, while Hugh Clapperton was the first European visitor to the Yoruba towns of the interior in 1825. It was to the interest of the slave-raiding kingdoms of the interior to keep the European traders on the coast. Christian missionary enterprise only began to venture seriously into the interior from 1830 onwards. Hence it is that today the main Christian centres are in the coastal regions. Islam is strongly entrenched in the Sudan. Both of these religions are rivals for the allegiance of vast numbers of West Africans who remain attached to animistic and ancestral cults.

To attempt an estimate of the religious affiliations of West African peoples that would have any approximation to accuracy is exceedingly hazardous, yet some indication would be useful. Trimingham states that the proportions of the religions are: "Christians 4.4 per cent., Muslims 36.3 per cent., and pagans 59.3 per cent." 2) This is out of a total estimated population for West Africa of about 65 millions. But these percentages are misleading. If one consults Trimingham’s Appendix V

of statistics, one is struck at once by the complete absence of any figures for Western and Eastern Nigeria. Yet these are two of the most populous regions, totalling nearly as many inhabitants (14 million) as the whole of the vast but sparsely populated area of French West Africa (17 millions). Many people in Western Nigeria are Christians, and probably more than half the people of Eastern Nigeria, while the latter are virtually untouched by Islam.

For other areas the vagueness of the estimates, in thousands or hundreds of thousands, leads to suspicions. There are hardly any census returns available with any pretence at precision. A census taken in Lagos in 1950 gave 95,000 Muslims and 122,000 Christians, out of a total population of 230,000. In Ibadan, the largest city in tropical Africa, the 1953 census showed 275,110 Muslims, 147,887 Christians, 31,218 Animists, and 4,981 unspecified, to make a total population of 459,196. However, it may be doubted how accurate these seemingly exact figures really are. They were based, apparently, on questions addressed to individuals or heads of families. The only religious organizations which keep any records of adherents are the Christians, and they register only those who are baptized members or under instruction. When I collected figures from church lists in Ibadan in 1951 only 25,056 were claimed as members, catechumens, and scholars. The number had not multiplied by six in the intervening two years to the census, but other factors swayed those who declared their religious allegiance. Prestige, education, modernism, and other subtle influences, led tens of thousands of Yoruba in Ibadan to declare themselves Christians or Muslims.

Such factors must always be borne in mind in considering the religious situation in Africa. It is regarded as a sign of status or education to be called Muslim or Christian. The name “pagan” is disliked. At the Lagos census very few were willing to be counted as “pagans”, for to the Yoruba a pagan is one of the “naked pagan tribes” of the central Nigerian Plateau, the nudists whom members of Parliament, Muslim and Christian, have wished to clothe forcibly. So for the Ibadan census the label “pagan” was changed to “animist.” But few know what this means, and in translation one might well be asked, “are you a worshipper of the gods?” This is not a bad way of describing the ancient religion, though unacceptable to Christians and Muslims.

Over the whole of the coastal regions of West Africa, and increas-
ingly in the interior, the old animistic religion is at a discount. It is said to be in a “twilight of the gods.” Nevertheless not only are animistic influences still strong everywhere, but in many areas nominally under Islam there are many who hardly belong to it even by name. Governments have a habit of labelling large areas Muslim, like much of Northern Nigeria, where there are millions who have never heard of Muhammad or the Qurʾan.

A curious feature of West Africa is the religious tolerance, especially in the coastal area, where members of different religions live together in such harmony that they may join in one another’s festivals. In Sierra Leone many of the Creoles, most of whom were born Christian, marry freely into Muslim families. One has heard it asked whether a Muslim may act as sponsor at a Christian baptism? Among the Yoruba it is not uncommon to find Christian, Muslim and Animist in the same family. Some say that this is a local tradition by which the family would sacrifice to the largest number of gods so as to have the greatest chance of good fortune. Many Christians teach in Muslim schools, and innumerable Muslim children attend Christian schools for the latter are by far the most numerous schools.

But there is a hardening of attitude as one goes north. Northern Nigerians have been suspicious of the University College of Ibadan, where out of a thousand undergraduates not more than fifty are Muslim. This is easily explicable by the much poorer educational standards of the north.

Despite all the cautions that one may utter, and criticism of statistics, it is generally agreed that Islam is making rapid progress in West Africa, that its advance took on new life in the last century, and that it increases its tempo under modern conditions and in many kinds of environment. Recent observations have shown that in Freetown where there were only five mosques in 1954, there were fifteen in 1958, and eight of the twenty-two municipal councillors are Muslims. In coastal villages in Dahomey there are numerous mosques where there were none twenty years ago. In Ilorin province in Nigeria a government survey of three sample villages in 1930 gave 48 per cent. pagans, 48 per cent. Muslims, and four per cent. Christians. In 1954 the same villages had 80 per cent. declared Muslims, 12 per cent. pagans, and eight per cent. Christians.
Islam and West African Indigenous Religion

There are many areas of West Africa where Islam is dominant, but there are others where it is still less influential than animism or Christianity. Eastern Nigeria, southern Dahomey and Togo, the south of Ghana and the southern Ivory Coast still have few Muslims. On the other hand almost the whole of the interior, the Sudan and savannah area of the ancient Muslim kingdoms is under solid Muslim rule. And in our time Islam has spread with increasing rapidity into Western Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia and Senegal.

In many parts Islam is stagnant with the lethargy of ages, but it still dominates the scene and spreads naturally. In the disintegrating world of today Islam seems to many Africans to offer stability and community.

It has been said that Islam is an urban civilization, and diffuses its influence most easily in centres of commerce and industry. It appeals to trading peoples, and to those wandering African traders who are almost like nomads. An important factor is the zongo, the Muslim quarters which are to be found in most large West African towns. The Muslim quarters are hospitable, and are often the only place where strangers from the villages can find shelter. There they can observe Islam in worship and life, and may take Muslim wives on conversion to the faith.

The appeal of Islam to the townsman and traders helps to explain the rapid spread of Islam among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria. The huge towns of this people (a number of them having over 100,000 inhabitants), and their addiction to trade, mingling with the Hausa traders who come down from the north, make them an easy prey to Islam. By contrast, the Ibo of Eastern Nigeria are scattered in small villages and farms, given to agriculture, and show hardly any Muslim converts. The appeal of Islam to “black nationalism,” which has been noted in Senegal and Sierra Leone, seems to have had no effect in Eastern Nigeria despite the strong growth of nationalism among its people.

The appeal of Islam to the rural villages is very much less than to the townsfolk. There are vast areas, often labelled Muslim, where the rulers in the towns are Muslim but the mass of the farmers is pagan. S. F. Nadel, in his Nupe Religion, has shown how many of the Nupe are still animists despite their Muslim rulers. For the farmer, the old beliefs fit into and serve his daily occupations. A new religion
is foreign and appears out of place. This will doubtless remain so as long as the round of agricultural life remains unaffected by new methods and crops.

The traditional religious beliefs and organization of West African peoples undergo modification when confronted with Islam. There is a general belief in God as creator and supreme, but there are countless lesser deities and ancestral spirits whom men propitiate for help. Polytheistic systems are particularly strong in Nigeria and Dahomey, and in the latter country the cults have been so tightly organized that neither Islam nor Christianity has made much progress against them. Elsewhere the cults of the gods are less developed, but ancestral rituals are of great importance.

What is the place of God in this polytheism? A Sierra Leone writer says, “God is therefore regarded as an absentee Lord who, whilst wielding ultimate authority, relegates the details of every day government to minor deities with whom are sometimes associated the ancestral dead. One must add here the fact that in rituals of worship and sacrifice, God is never left out. In the case of rites involving the dead ancestors, one gets the impression that their aid is invoked the secure the blessings of God particularly in times of crisis.” 3)

When Muslim preaching intervenes, the belief in a supreme God will be strengthened; this can be seen among the Nupe and Yoruba. The cults of the gods often have their own priests, who will be displaced by Islam, and with whom therefore there is conflict. The ancestors, on the other hand, are normally served by the head of the family or the oldest man, and hence ancestral cults may remain under the new religions. Similarly, the magicians who dispense medicines also remain, both because they work on their own and are not tied to the social organization, and also because many Muslim traders are also purveyors of magical remedies.

It is said that Islam spreads also because it is a layman’s religion, it has no priests and hence does not bring a foreign organization into African life. Moreover its worship is simple and easily explicable, and its moral standards adapt themselves to African life. Its permission of polygamy suits the African background. Its laity are often traders

3) H. Sawyerr, Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion, i, p. 5.
who spread the religion as they travel and set up simple places of prostration. Men drift into this religion, often with no instruction or initiation, and get called Muslims when there is a mālam in the village.

It is true that from time to time Muslim missionaries appear and conduct preaching campaigns. This most frequently happens in the Ramadān monthly fast, when itinerant preachers may be seen in the streets expounding their faith. Muslim chiefs send for such preachers and pay their expenses; some come to Nigeria from as far away as Mauretania. Others have studied in Egypt, or made the pilgrimage to Mecca, and so bring more advanced Islamic teaching to enliven the rather debased forms of it that exist in many parts of West Africa. Many West Africans do indeed make the pilgrimage to Mecca, by air, bus, or on foot; some take several years over it, working for their livelihood on the way, and some die away from their homes. But the pilgrimage serves to strengthen the faith and brotherhood of Muslims.

Some of the religious orders, the Qādiriyya and the Tijāniyya, have been very active in West Africa, and at times have been involved in political activities. But these orders show little sign of the mystical character to be found in such movements elsewhere, and they are chiefly concerned with ritual and moral practices, being more puritanical than the ordinary Muslims.

The most obvious and active Muslim missionaries in West Africa are the Aḥmadiyya from Pakistan. These came to Nigeria in 1916, and spread thence to Ghana and Sierra Leone. In the latter country in 1959 they claimed eighty centres and forty mosques. After some initial success, being welcomed as “white Muslims from the sea,” the Pakistani missionaries split away from the orthodox and set up their own organization and mosques. They have become exceedingly active in literature, education and propaganda, claiming converts among Christians as well as among animists. Many of the best Muslim schools are run by the Aḥmadiyya. In Lagos they print literature and journals, and a weekly column every Friday in the chief English newspaper (the “Daily Times,” with a daily circulation of over 80,000), is written by the chief Imam of the Aḥmadiyya. Entitled “Calling all Muslims,” this column is Aḥmadiyya, and often contains anti-Christian propaganda, intended for literates. It is sometimes said that there are two Islams in West Africa, the orthodox and the Aḥmadiyya; but to the layman they probably look very much alike, in their mosques and worship.
E. G. Parrinder

Trimingham has stressed the religious appeal of Islam, in addition to its social significance: "Islam has powerful religious assets which, if combined with other forces, exercise a strong influence. It has the utter certainty of the true faith, and it is this which impresses more than the idea of the one God. Islam offers a heaven of a recognizable, because material, bliss; and the confident assurance the Muslim displays of attaining Paradise exercises a clear attraction. Life's problems are settled because Islam has its answer to those both of this world and the next." 4)

On the other hand, it must be stressed that it is not the religion of Islam alone which has enabled it to profit by present-day conditions. Without the "opening-up" of Africa in the last century, West African Islam would undoubtedly have remained largely confined to the interior.

Since the establishment of European rule African society has been subjected to violent and rapid changes. The four centuries of slave-trading on the coast, and the infiltrations of Islam from the north, both took place gradually and adjustments were made to their presence. But the speed and extent of changes in the last century have affected both Islam and animism.

It is important to note that the impact of the West has been disruptive upon African Islamic culture, as well as upon the traditional animism. C. K. Meek said that Islam in West Africa "made the way easier for the reception of Western civilization." 5) But Trimingham declares that the opposite is the truth, that Islam had resisted the encroachments of the West and sees in it too many dangers. The western secularization of life is opposed to the Muslim world-view. And in education, so popular in Africa today, Muslims have had to face a great dilemma, since most scholars were in the hands of Christian missions: either Muslim children must be exposed to this influence, or remain uneducated. In fact, many of them do pass through Christian schools but remain Muslim.

The Islam of West Africa has been hidebound and stagnant, largely out of touch with movements in the rest of the Muslim world. Muslim leaders, imams, teachers, and chiefs, know little Arabic, or at least not

beyond the Qur'an, and very few of them can read modern Arabic. Their isolation, on the other front, from Western education renders them particularly liable to be regarded by the young as out of date in the modern world.

The disintegrating forces of the West have been political, economic and cultural. The defeat of the old Muslim kingdoms and the establishment of European rule not only changed the authority but also the attitude of the chiefs. Having looked down upon pagan culture from the heights of Muslim civilization, they now had to admit the technical superiority of the European, and many of the younger men came to oppose the conservative leaders. Nevertheless, the disturbing effect of the West has been much greater on animist societies than on Muslim, particularly on their members who have migrated to the great new towns of today: the trading centres, mines, ports, and capitals.

It has often been said that the chiefs are the principal agents in spreading Islam in West Africa, and it is true that men will say that they are Muslims because their father, the chief, is one. But the indigenous people have often remained pagan when their Fulani chiefs are Muslim, as in Nupe. There is, of course, the advantage that the theocratic system helps the spread of Islam. On the other hand, the increasing tension today between the chiefs and the politicians taking over rule from the Europeans, slows down tendencies to follow the chiefs.

Not only political but economic changes have come, and there is not a village in West Africa that has not some evidence of European trade. Household utensils, agricultural and hunting implements, and even the very crops themselves may be new. The introduction of coinage, the working of cash crops, the amalgamation of small family holdings into large plantations, and many other factors operate to break the continuity with the past. Once again the Muslim groups are the ones that retain the greatest cohesion. In the new towns they build their zongos and mosques. The animist trader or mine-worker may come to live there also and enter the fraternity of Islam.

The great spread of education, covering West Africa with primary and secondary schools, and now at least four universities, all working on European curricula, has had a massive effect. Not only European officials, who have always been very few in number relatively to the total population (and there have been hardly any European settlers),
but educated Africans themselves have been bearers of the western way of life. The "évolués" or "new men" act as mediators, in differing degrees, between western culture and traditional Islamic or animistic ways of life. Yet in some areas, but by no means everywhere, Islam profits by union with modern educated Africans who are reacting against European rule, and it is hailed as the "religion of the black people." Curiously enough, this gives the foreign Ahmadiyya its greatest effect in a Christian environment, whereas it fails against orthodox Islam in the interior.

If the Muslim has been influenced by the West, he has returned his own influence also. There is a two-way traffic in culture-contact. Western colonial policy has been affected by the dominance of Islam, the status quo was maintained in the Fulani feudal system, Muslim law was imposed on pagans, Christian teaching was often forbidden, and Islam frequently recognized as the state religion.

The animist, in his turn, has affected Islam as well as being affected by it. Spiritist and magical practices have flourished in the midst of Islam. Baba of Karo is a revealing story of a Muslim Hausa woman who still believes in the spirits "who know everything," "they are here in the compound, they are here in the town," "everyone has his own." 6) In the bori cult of spirit-possession each spirit has its name, receives appropriate sacrifice, and is believed to control sickness. It is significant that "the custodians of the cult among the Muslims are the prostitutes, a class of women who deviate from the correct Muslim patterns of behaviour, but cannot be effectively controlled or eliminated from the body of the faithful." 7)

If animism influences Islam in West Africa, and gives it characteristics of its own, it is just as true that Islam affects animism. Muslim traders are notorious vendors of amulets, in which a verse from the Qur'an may replace the magical leaves of the pagan amulet. Because of the tolerance and syncretism of animism, Muslim teaching and mythology find easy entrance into pagan myth. Muslim ritual (naming, circumcision, marriage, etc.) may easily fit in with traditional practice. Hence comes the emergence of a Negro Islam which may eventually

6) Baba of Karo, pp. 208-9, 219.
7) Ibid., p. 261.
have some effect on Islam in other lands, for instance, in its resistance in many places to the seclusion of women.

The agents of Islam in West Africa are themselves Africans (apart from the Ahmadiyya missionaries), and in this they have a great advantage over the European Christian missionaries who generally live far from the people and are mostly engaged in education. Amid the disrupting forces of today Islam is to the West African the most familiar of the new cultures. Erstwhile pagans call themselves Muslim, and if they come willingly within the Muslim orbit then the spread and consolidation of Islam in West Africa will continue to increase.