

# Nigeria: “Peace is Divine”

by Michael Gleich

**James Wuye and Muhammad Ashafa once fought in opposing militias. Now they help mediate the conflicts that have repeatedly flared between Christians and Muslims in northern Nigeria. Successfully. Their strongest arguments are the Koran, the Bible – and their own biographies.**

One look at the ruined city is enough to reopen old wounds. James and Ashafa work their way ever deeper into the warren of alleyways, past charcoal-blackened skeletons of houses and orphaned wells. Mud-brick walls brought down by the last weeks of wind and rain lie in reddish brown chips on the ground. The only bright spot in the dullness is a curtain that flutters in the wind, serving as the door to a house that survived the rioters and the flames. James recalls how lively the town once was. Ashafa explains that no Muslims live here now. The Muslims fled or were killed. Those who murdered them were Christians like James. Touring the Muslim quarter of Jos is testing their unlikely friendship.

James, a head shorter than Ashafa, wears a tropic cap made of leather. In northern Nigeria, it immediately identifies him as a Christian. Ashafa’s beard and flowing gown label him an Arab and a Muslim. James nervously takes stock of his surroundings, repeatedly looking back over his shoulder. A group of young men are following them, muttering a running commentary and coming ever closer. They seem dissatisfied with what they see.

James reaches out with his left hand and takes Ashafa’s right. Where James’ right hand used to be, he wears a prosthesis. A Muslim militiaman – possibly under Ashafa’s command – lopped it off with a machete 18 years ago in the heat of combat. It is not the only painful loss that connects the two, but for James it is one that is impossible to forget. For now, James must demonstrate solidarity. Hand in hand with Ashafa, he calls out, “Leave him alone! He’s a friend of mine!”

The two quicken their pace and reach a small army post. The men who had followed them for so long in silence remain behind. They request a bodyguard. A young corporal agrees, and James and Ashafa continue on their way. Three soldiers march in front, AK-47s hanging casually from their shoulders, eyes watchful, while three others secure the rear.

“We need to improve our early warning system so that doesn’t happen again,” Ashafa says. Here in Jos, capital of the Nigerian state of Plateau, the two men have persuaded teams of like-minded people to sound the alarm when lives are at stake. The system, called “Early Warning – Early Response,” involves equal numbers of Christians and Muslims who open the lines of communication at the

first hint of tension. Prominent members of both religious communities then intervene to prevent renewed unrest.

“Yes,” James agrees. “More than anything, we require the support of clergy.”

They return to their van physically and spiritually in one piece. The old wounds do not reopen.

Their mission statement is visible in oversized letters on the side of the van: “Peace is Divine.” The organization that Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa oversee is called Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC). For years now, it has worked to mediate Nigeria’s religious conflicts peacefully, with results that have attracted respect and attention both inside and outside Nigeria. They see the values of the Bible and the Koran – peace and brotherly love – as a good basis for negotiations. Their workshops on nonviolent conflict resolution are attended by the country’s decision makers: community leaders, politicians, businessmen, bureaucrats. Each workshop begins with a prayer to the one God and ends with a chorus of “Amen.” The participants are reminded that, whatever their differences, Muslims and Christians alike can only find favor in God’s eyes if they love one another.

James and Ashafa are able to reach their audiences so effectively because they practice what they preach. People listen to them – not only in Nigeria, but in Sudan and Kenya, Switzerland and Germany, and the Balkan states as well – everywhere where friction has arisen between Christians and Muslims. Their efforts were recognized in 2005 with the Bremen Peace Prize and in 2009 with a Prize for Conflict Prevention from the Chirac Foundation in Paris. The power and authority they radiate feeds on their conscious transgression of norms: Once killers, they became peacemakers. But that could happen only because they were ready to practice forgiveness.

As young men, they were archenemies with no religion but revenge. *They have humiliated us. Insulted God’s name. They have killed our people, even women, children, old people, everyone. No one was able to defend himself. Oh, this powerlessness. I hate them, these bastards. They should suffer as our bros and sistas have suffered. No, worse! Kill them like dogs. Set their houses on fire. To hell with them. We are God’s tool. We lend the sword to his revenge. The burning in my belly should finally stop.*

James knows this inner boiling, this resentment that makes his stomach ball up like a rock. “I grew up with it,” James says. He seldom saw his father, an officer posted to Biafra, but hoped to please him by becoming strong, a hero, an invincible soldier. His mother beat him, and that humiliation strengthened his resolve never again to tolerate feelings of powerlessness. As a six-year-old, he played with helmets made from tin plates and hand grenades made from glass insulators and pepper. The local boys called him their commander-in-chief.

James was always the shortest, but he made up for it with daring – on the town's dusty soccer field, in fistfights where he refused to give up or let go, in nights of drunken rambling.

Then, one Sunday, his eyes reddened by alcohol and his fingers yellowed by cigarettes, he went to church. The preacher addressed him directly in front of everyone: You're wasting your life. You have no self respect. Jesus loves you. Jesus is the one keeping you alive now.

"He stared at me the whole time he was talking. I started wondering how he knew what was going on in my head," James recalls.

The sermon hit its mark. A religious awakening? A substitute father? Whatever the reason, James began to wear a suit on Sundays and attend services, intent on becoming a devout believer. But even though he started spouting Bible verses instead of dirty jokes, his heart was still consumed by rage. And the rage was looking for an outlet. "I had been serving the devil, so I decided to serve God," he says soberly. He enlisted as a missionary and went to northern Nigeria to convert the heathens – that is, Muslims, who refused to accept that Jesus was God's begotten son. He rose to become director of several protestant youth organizations, several of which were armed and conducted military training. In the end, the missionary to Kaduna was the leader of a large paramilitary force. The embattled city in Nigeria's Middle Belt region has over a million inhabitants.

One day, a group of men and boys under James' command paid a visit to Ashafa's religious teacher at his home outside the city. Ashafa was the commander of the Muslim militias and their real target, but he was harder to track down. They dragged the elderly Sufi into the open, threw him down a well, and went on filling the well with large rocks.

The holy man meant everything to Ashafa. That loss is what ties him to James more than anything. Like James, Ashafa had felt he was in the right, a heroic defender of the one true faith, *Allahu akbar!*

"I didn't develop that hatred myself," Ashafa explains. "I inherited it." The imam is lying on the floor, his elbow propped on a round cushion while he nibbles dry toast – a short break between morning prayers and the many conversations he will be conducting with members of his congregation in the course of the day in the Tadun Wada neighborhood of Kaduna. His duties range from crisis intervention to political activism, health advice, and marriage counseling. "My father was a 14th-generation clergyman, a highly respected man," he says. "He read and spoke Arabic fluently." When the British took over in the early 20th century, they did not regard him as a learned man: He knew no English. "That insult made him loathe everything western. The clothing, the music, and above all the Christian religion." He hesitated at first even to send his son to school. It was the only school far and wide, but it was run by Methodists. Eventually,

friends talked him into letting Ashafa get an education. Ashafa read the Bible in elementary school and continued studying it regularly, if only to be able to argue against it.

A tall man, blessed with a resonant voice, Ashafa quickly rose to be general secretary of a large youth organization. And like James, he was de facto head of a militia. In the same year when James lost his right hand, he lost his teacher and two cousins – killed by groups that reported to James.

A few years later, both men were invited to the governor's residence. The topic was an upcoming polio vaccination campaign. Islamic groups had been spreading a rumor that the vaccine was a ploy to render Muslims infertile. During a break, an elderly journalist, Idris Musa, took Ashafa aside and led him to James. Musa placed their hands together and said that he trusted them now to make peace.

*Don't let anyone notice anything. Smile! I've got you now, you pig-dog. You took away what I loved most. The hour of vengeance has come. Until now, no one could tell me where you were lurking. But now I will find you in your hole. And then I will kill you.*

Ashafa smiles at the pastor.

*I hate this guy with his scraggly beard. He even looks like a fundamentalist. Lying snake! You won't lull me with this play-acted friendliness. You just want to spy on me. As soon as you know where I sleep at night, you'll send me your men. They'll chop off my other arm before they slit my throat.*

And James smiles back.

Today, fifteen years later, they would risk their lives for each other. Their mutual affection overcomes differences that are more than doctrinal: Ashafa drives a pattering diesel, James an elegant sedan. The pastor frowns at the imam's unpunctuality and shakes his head at his announcement of the birth of his sixteenth child. "He can't possibly afford it," James points out. Meanwhile, Ashafa wonders why Christian families are so small. He wants four wives and as many children as possible. He jokes that soon he'll be able to field two soccer teams. Sometimes they seem like an old married couple – not always in agreement, but part of each other.

The massacre and the arson they are tracing now in the ruins of Jos were an act of retaliation. Somewhere, sometime, there was a massacre of Christians in revenge for a massacre of Muslims – an endless chain reaction of hatred that keeps much of Plateau State under a pall of fear. Again and again, murderers present themselves as victims, and always with the same stock phrases.

Plateau is part of the Middle Belt of Nigeria. In southern Nigeria, Christianity is the dominant religion. In the north, most people follow Islam. And in the Middle Belt – the curse of geography – the two religions clash like tectonic plates. Over and over, tension builds up and is released in an orgy of violence. Nigeria is one of the most religious countries on earth. A BBC-funded poll found that ninety-five percent of Nigerians declared willingness to die as martyrs for their faith. Officially, Muslims and Christians each make up around half of the populations, with animists a tiny minority. But even those figures are the object of embittered debate.

Religious differences are not merely a question of theology. Religion in Nigeria means money and power: Whether contracts or loans, university admissions or jobs, everything in Nigeria is distributed according to religious quotas. If the president is a Muslim, then the vice president must be Christian. The gap in prosperity between the Christian south and the poorer, Muslim-dominated north only heightens the conflict. And as so often happens in conflicts where violence escalates, each side feels it has been pushed to the wall, the older generation robbed of its dignity, the younger generation robbed of every opportunity to succeed in life.

At the IMC in Kaduna, James and Ashafa have set up ten additional pastor-imam teams. Several of the participants were likewise active in militias. Today they fight only for peaceful solutions, with a message that is both religious and political: Loving one's neighbor is a good start, and after that everything depends on the fair distribution of power. In a country where sermons still matter, they preach that creating the conditions for peaceful coexistence is a way of praising God.

But their opponents, too, exploit the power of religion. Fanatical preachers and politicians stoke young men's rage. Their followers imbibe courage in the form of alcohol, drowning their last vestiges of self-doubt and coming together as mobs ready for anything.

It happened in 1992 – a year that marks a turning point in the lives of the former militiamen James and Ashafa. The tension between Christians and Muslims in the Middle Belt had reached one of its periodic maximums and found release as a melee among sellers in a provincial market square that degenerated into the mass killing of Muslims. Dozens of corpses were brought to Kaduna, a great distance away, and put on display – a blatant violation of the usually swift ritual of Muslim burial. Muslim authorities insisted that they were wounded survivors who had died after they got to Kaduna. Christian organizations protested that it was a deliberate provocation meant to fuel more violence.

*We have to prepare. I don't trust a single Muslim anymore. These medieval barbarians! They believe in all seriousness that an eclipse of the sun means the world is ending. We have to prepare. At the next eclipse, they'll be at our throats.*

*We need more weapons. We won't let ourselves be slaughtered again passively by these dogs. That I swear, James Movel Wuye, by everything I hold sacred.*

Fighting broke out. In the southern quarters of the city where Christians predominate, Muslim homes were set on fire, many with their inhabitants still inside. Mosques were burned and knocked down. Where Muslims were in the majority, they turned on their Christian neighbors. And that is when James was caught in the ambush in which his bodyguard was killed.

He woke up in the hospital with his right arm missing - severed with blows from a machete. He felt the sting of defeat more painfully than the wound itself, and rushed to get back on his feet. He made personal appearances in militia training camps, announcing that "even if they cut off all our arms, the struggle continues." But behind the bravura façade, his belief in his invulnerability was broken. And as he labored to learn to write with his left hand, the doubts multiplied. How could his military operations be manifestations of God's will when he didn't even have the nerve to tell his wife Elisabeth about them?

His counterpart, Muhammad Ashafa, was also becoming increasingly unsure whether Allah approves of hatred. But what alternative did he have?

*Do I lose my Islamic roots when I talk with Christians? Who will remain my friend, and who will denounce me as a traitor? It can go very quickly, becoming suspect. And that they think I'm a weakling. Can I forgive those who have brought us such suffering? I don't know. I'm in over my head.*

So a few days after his first encounter with James in the governor's residence, he looked him up at his office. Outside, heavily armed militiamen stood guard. Before leaving home, he had told his people to take swift revenge should he not return within half an hour. But on the way to the church, something happened. He recalled the journalist Musa's words, saying the two of them had the ability to bring peace. And something inside him began to teeter.

Instead of greeting James with demands and accusations, he suggested a public discussion: Islam vs. Christianity, the New Testament vs. the Koran. James was perplexed but agreed to try.

The search for a venue took a year. No conference center was interested in hosting a confrontation between gangs of armed hooligans. Only the British Council had the courage to offer them a room.

James feared an ambush, but he also feared appearing a coward. *If this Ashafa has the nerve to set foot in a church to talk to me, then I can't chicken out. But we should arm ourselves for all eventualities.* Many of the burnouses and briefcases at the discussion concealed long knives. But the ice began to melt. At

a second debate, the topic was no longer the moral high ground but how the two sides might work together for a peaceful solution.

“I was touched by how Christians like James empathized with our sorrow over the dead and wounded,” Ashafa says. Empathy was the last thing he had expected. He recalls a sentiment from the 41st chapter of the Koran: “Return good for evil; then your enemies will become your friends.”

At that point, both were still far away from returning good for evil. But they begin organizing interfaith workshops. They traveled together to conflict resolution training courses in South Africa and the United States. They often shared a room. Their hosts were delighted: At last two enemies who have foresworn revenge. Everyone was eager to believe in the miracle.

But the reality looked different. James was plagued by fantasies of murder. His visions made the pain of losing his arm pale by comparison.

*I can't sleep. My stump hurts. And the helplessness is driving me crazy. I can't even tie my shoes by myself. So many sleepless nights! And him over there, partly responsible for everything, sleeping like a baby. I'll kill him. But how? The best thing would be to smother him with a pillow. That doesn't leave marks.*

The nightly attacks of homicidal rage continued for three years. Then Pastor Ina Omakwu, someone whose wisdom he respected, told him that no one would ever be able to convert Muslims to Christianity with a soul poisoned by hate. How can you preach love to someone you loathe? And then he left him standing.

*It's as if lightning were striking. It destroys something. And it illuminates something. How could I have been so stubborn? I can feel the love. The look in Ashafa's eyes is always so kind! His mouth is so gentle! I can hardly wait to see him again and just give him a big hug. It feels so good to just let go of this anger I've been ruminating over so long. I feel so light.*

Every person experiences inner revolutions differently. But the two men tell similar stories. Ashafa, as well, had to let go of treasured prejudices in order to take the last few steps toward James.

*I am afraid. My world was always clearly understood. The good over here, and over there the evil Christians. We are the victims, they are the perpetrators. They attack, we only defend ourselves. In hatred I know am at one with my fellow believers. But if I go a new path, then I may stand alone. I need all my courage.*

Just as for James, it was a sermon that opened Ashafa's mind. “The imam talked about how ignorance is healed by knowledge and revenge by forgiveness. About how to conquer your enemy by making him your friend. Not with violence, but

with love.” Ashafa realized that he was at last ready to forgive his friend completely.

That was twelve years ago. Since then, the two have been inseparable friends. “The Pastor and the Imam” – these days, they could copyright it. They enjoy sharing their foreign travels, and in their hometown of Kaduna, they are esteemed as heroes of the peace.

Kaduna and its eponymous state were for decades one big battlefield. The low points include the Sharia crisis of 2000 when several northern states switched to Islamic law. Resident Christians were outraged. Mobs of young men destroyed hundreds of mosques and churches. The chaos ultimately cost thousands of people their lives. The trauma was repeated when a female commentator on the Miss World pageant in Lagos wrote that the prophet would have enjoyed seeing so many beautiful women. The Middle Belt proved again and again to be a powder keg. One spark – no matter how small and far away – was enough to set it off. Self-organized ethnic cleansing made Kaduna a segregated city with strict separation between Christians and Muslims. The entire country’s economic potential lay fallow. No one wanted to invest in a war zone.

Only Ashafa and James had the credibility needed to get both sides to the negotiating table. They had founded the IMC and, by attending courses overseas, learned effective methods of nonviolent conflict resolution. In 2002 they resolved to take the Alexandria Declaration, a peace charter for Jerusalem signed by religious leaders from around the world, as a model, adapting it to the situation in Kaduna. In the end, 22 high-level Nigerian clerics from both sides signed a document abjuring hate preaching and founding the joint committee that now serves an early warning system to head off violence.

The peace has held for eight years, and the city is thriving. In the evenings, young people who grew up with violence and uncertainty stroll along the Kaduna river or sit in pairs under the glowing orange-red flame trees, visibly enjoying the fruits of peace.

The pastor and the imam now want to transfer the project’s success to other at-risk areas of the Middle Belt. Many regions are still off limits to members of one group or the other. For example, the two must separate to reach the state capital of Jos: James takes the southern route through the Christian villages, Ashafa the northern route that is safe for Muslims. Plateau State is still the scene of feuding and massacres.

James stands in a dusty square in Dogo Nahawa, a tiny village near Jos. It is early afternoon and the sun is burning down on the gathering from directly overhead. But that is not the pastor’s only reason to be sweating. He feels unsure what he should say to the people who have come to greet him.



They are Berom, a Christian people, and in the stillness their faces are alight with expectation. He knows that look: They have been through hell, and not too long ago. They are looking for a way out. But how can he speak of forgiveness in a place where corpses only recently lay in long rows in the dust under scraps of cloth?

It was March 7th, at half past three in the morning, when rifle shots roused the villagers. They ran out of their huts. Many of the thatched roofs were already on fire. On every side, shadowy figures were calling out "*Allahu akbar*." Many headed for a dry riverbed on the east side of the village, expecting a measure of safety. They were greeted with blows from swords and sickles. The attackers knew exactly which way the villagers would run. After all, they were neighbors: Fulani cattle herders. In less than three hours, 500 Berom were dead.

That was Ashafa's reason for letting James go to Dogo Nahawa by himself. No Muslim is safe there. So James stands alone on the village square in the hour before the Sunday church service. The men wear neatly pressed pants and white shirts, the women colorful dresses and their prettiest headscarves. Will James ask them to forgive? How can he ask someone like Pauline to take the long view?

Pauline sits in the shade of a mango tree and cries. She is 40 years old. Her face is gray. She lost a lot of blood. "It is a miracle that I survived," she says in measured tones, as if in a trance. Her voice is almost inaudible. The back of her head is conspicuous for an eight inch long, red-rimmed scar. She lost three fingers to machete blows. Her children are dead, incinerated in their home.

One by one, the villagers tell the pastor their stories. Then they are silent. They are looking to him for guidance. At first he can only turn away and wipe his eyes.

Eventually James says, "Look at me. Look at my artificial arm. I struggled with it for a long time. I wanted somebody to pay the price. That made me a prisoner, for many years." His voice remains soft. "But today I am free. Why? Because I let go of the idea of revenge. There is only one way out of the cycle of violence and vengeance, and that is forgiveness. Do it for your own sake."

The villagers listen, offering no objections. They see the value in what he has said. But they know they will need God's help to achieve it. Someone – not James – begins to pray.

Soon the entire group is praying earnestly between calls of "Hallelujah!" and "Praise the Lord!" In all the large group, not a single person is smiling.