

**Lagos Studies Association Conference 2026**  
**The State of African Studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**Panel proposal**

**Exploring ‘non-religion’ in Africa**

Organiser: Marie Lureau, IFRA-Nigeria.

Panel description

“Africans are notoriously religious” states Kenyan philosopher J.S. Mbiti, in the introduction to his foundational *African Religions and Philosophies* (1969). The vast academic literature on religion in the continent illustrates his point. Even when focusing exclusively on Nigeria, the presence of religion is ubiquitous in scholarly studies: from its role in the construction of the country after colonialism (Vaughan, 2016), to the danger of its politicization (Enwerem, 1995), its occupation of public spaces (Ojo, 2007), or its representation of gender norms in the new media born from the internet (Gbadegesin & Wale-Olaitan, 2021).

However, the topic of ‘non-religion’ and ‘anti-religion’ has attracted increasing press coverage in the country, including the 2020 case of Mubarak Bala, then president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, who spent four years in prison in Kano state following a Facebook post critical of Islam. This phenomenon, however, is hardly explored in academic studies of Africa, which tend to focus on the legal aspect of secularity (Michael *et al.*, 2024).

This exploratory panel opens the topic of ‘non-religion’ and ‘anti-religion’ as social phenomena, related to a set of intellectual traditions in the contexts of sub-Saharan Africa. Questioning the place of religion in society and the theory of secularization are integral to the birth of sociology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Weber, 2006). However, to this day, secularism studies are overwhelmingly focused on the West (Quack, 2011), with very few exceptions (Llera Blanes & Paxe, 2015; Malçok, 2024; Quack, 2011; van Nieuwkerk, 2020), resulting in a scarcity of knowledge on the manifestations of ‘non-religion’ and ‘anti-religion’ on the African continent.

This opens a question of terminology at three levels: the terms used by ‘non-religious’ people for themselves, the ones used by exterior parties to characterize them, and those used by researchers to qualify this phenomenon. Scholarship on secularism as a whole employs a diverse range of terms, interconnected but distinct (Lee, 2015), but that have

been built on the experience of Europe and North America. It is only through the study of the specific manifestations of ‘non-religion’ in Africa that we can hope to choose the term(s) best suited to describe it (Quack, 2011). This panel is a first step in this direction.

It draws on the critical work seeing secularism not as a neutral ‘absence’ but as a constructed intellectual and political category (Taylor, 2007), which allows for a more critical view of its influence in society (Asad, 2003; Mahmood, 2015). Similarly, it doesn’t conceive of ‘non-religion’ as a simple absence of religious belief or practices, but rather as a positive phenomenon with its own characteristics.

This panel focuses on the different ways religion is critiqued in sub-Saharan Africa and the people who engage in these critiques. This includes explicitly atheist militancy, but also possible overlaps with other forms of militancy where criticism of religion features prominently, such as humanist societies or certain radical left and feminist movements. To offer a broader understanding of these questions, this panel also explores the intellectual roots of such militancy in recent history.

More broadly, this panel is interested in viewing ‘non-religion’ not as detached from religion but as categories that exist in constant interaction and mutual definition with each other. As such, it seeks to study the possibly different interactions of ‘non-religion’ and ‘anti-religion’ with monotheistic religions (Islam, Christianity) and with other African religions.

This is a multidisciplinary panel, and we will accept work on ‘non-religion’ and ‘anti-religion’ in sub-Saharan Africa from African studies, sociology, anthropology, political sciences, theology, history, cultural studies and possibly other disciplines if relevant.

### Submission guidelines

Abstracts of **800 words** maximum should be sent as a PDF file to [marie.lureau@ifra-nigeria.org](mailto:marie.lureau@ifra-nigeria.org). Please include your name, discipline and affiliation.

Deadline: **1 January 2026**.

Final texts must be sent by **26 May 2026**.

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