

Research Notes

The Maitatsine Revolution in Nigeria.

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The Maitatsine 'Revolution' in Nigeria

The spate of disturbances which had the appearance of Islamic fundamentalism in Nigeria in the early eighties can be viewed as a passing phase of underdevelopment. This symbolizes the realities of the Third World countries especially the African continent, where subsequent inefficient administrations have created a people at odds with itself, hampered by the underdevelopment of its economy, and socio-political lives, large turn-over of regimes and governments, all of which are engaged in governmental mismanagement, military autocracies, and democratic dictatorship. Such disturbances, if not promptly nipped in the bud, can lead to a more serious disturbance reminiscent of the war in Chad and Ogaden desert or the revolts in Shaba.

Of interest here is the series of riots which took place in some states of Northern Nigeria spanning specifically from Kano (1980), Bulumkutu (1982) and Jimeta Yola (1984). There were scares in 1982 of the same riots in major towns in the North including Bauchi, Jos, Zaria and Sokoto. There were also clashes with the police in Kaduna, the headquarters of the former Northern Region, where an Assistant Police Commissioner was captured by the rioters and killed.¹

Since then, there has been an avalanche of comments by the general public, many of them trying to find the cause(s) of the unrest. These various comments assumed such a divergent outlook that it is not easy to group them neatly under any general heading(s). They range from the trivial and grotesque to the most serious; from the possible and plausible to the absurd. While some dubbed the riots as sheer religious fanaticism, others thought that it was politically motivated; and yet others believe that the disturbances were caused by faceless illegal aliens; while there are also those who think they were caused by outside interests like Mossad or Al-Mafisa.

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¹ Assistant Police Commissioner Mr. Karimu Yakubu Sergeant Victor Suleiman and 22 others were killed at the disturbances in Kaduna as reported by *New Nigeria* 11/1/82, back page.

In spite of these comments and the work of the Aniagolu Tribunal (which the Shagari administration had set up to look into the long and short term causes of the Kano 1980 December Yan Awaki riots, identify the individuals involved, and recommend both short and long term solutions), the real reason(s) behind these disturbances still appear to have been concealed. It is no wonder then, that barely a year into the implementation of the Aniagolu report, similar riots² broke out in Kano and Bornu States simultaneously.

However, none of the above reasons or a combination of any or all of them appear to be the real cause(s) of the riots. They can at best be seen as parts of the effects, certainly not the cause(s). For instance, if the disturbances were politically motivated, why was there another religious riot in 1984 when the military had taken over the administration and when party politics had already been put in the cooler?; and if we are to believe in the thesis that the riots are the handiwork of illegal aliens there should be a concrete proof(s) pointing to this direction. But contrary to this is the fact that of the 1000 religious detainees released by President Shagari on 1st of October 1982, only 223 were aliens. The suggestion of outside interests, particularly the link of the Israeli Zionist Secret Service with the disturbances appears most absurd and run counter, not only to common sense reasoning, but also to all available weight of evidence. It is, therefore, most far-fetched.

What then are the real causes of these riots which have cost several lives, destroyed properties worth millions of naira, caused tremendous hardships to many Nigerians, and gave the Nigerian government much concern? Who is Maitatsine? What does he stand for? What are his religious beliefs? and how religious was the uprising of Maitatsine?; and are there similar religious riots in other parts of the world?

Mohammadu Marwa (Maitatsine) and His Religious Beliefs

Mallam Mohammadu Marwa (Maitatsine) was generally known as a Cameroonian national. He had lived in Nigeria for a long time, dating back to the First Republic. Over the years, he had established himself as a great Islamic scholar, and was recognized and respected accordingly by the people among whom he lived. He was not only accorded recognition by the people of Kano State but was also held in high esteem by the political leaders of succeeding governments and regimes of the state from whom he enjoyed special treatment. Because of the undue recognition and respect accorded him as a learned Mallam and a great Islamic scholar, he attracted many followers who not only trusted in, and believed his teachings, but also trusted and believed

² The word riot is used in disregard to the word 'Revolution' used on the title because to term what happened (or under discussion) as 'revolution' would be unscientific, as, we as Social Scientists, cannot just call a sect by what they call themselves but we call them by what they do and what their characters look like.

in him as the true prophet, as a result of which his words were sacred commands to his followers.

It has been asserted that the Maitatsine followers have as their aim, the cleansing and purification of Islam. They are against compulsory prayer hours, and the practice of facing Mecca while praying. They are also said to be against materialism such as private ownership of properties like houses, and even the possession of wrist watches.

Muhammadu Marwa is said to have proclaimed himself as the true and approved prophet. His followers were prohibited from mentioning the name of prophet Mohammed whom they referred to as an Arab.

West Africa, reports that several of the corpses brought to Maiduguri General Hospital from the Maitatsine enclave after the Bulumkutu riots, could not be immediately identified because their eyes, ears, tongues, and noses were cut off.³ Thus apart from challenging the fundamentals of Islam, Muhammadu Marwa and his followers are said to have had a style of preaching that was deeply offensive to, and conflicting with the general Muslims. He was said to have regarded other Muslims as infidels and encouraged his followers to use violence against non-members of the sect, including civil authorities, whom he held in contempt.

It has been asserted that the Izala Muslim sect, which is officially recognized, has doctrines similar to those of Mautatsine, although they have denied any link with the Maitatsine group. But like Maitatsine doctrines, they too are opposed to materialism; they aim at the purification of Islamic practices; they are equally against compulsory prayers and the facing of Mecca while praying; and they resent any material ostentation including private ownership of houses and even the mere possession of wrist watches.⁴

JONES TOWN MASSACRE: 1978

The emergence of a social movement from a concrete oppressive material condition in any state that takes on the religious garb is not new. In 1978, an incident, which has a lot of resemblance to the Maitatsine riots occurred in Guyana. Our aim here is to briefly show the similarities — between the two 'disasters' and to later show how, these could have occurred and could not have been avoided only in some given socio-economic formation.

In 1978, 900 people on the orders and persuasion of Rev. Jim Jones in Jones Town of Guyana either took poison or shot themselves dead as Rev. Jones himself did. Rev. Jones had founded the People's Temple whose membership consisted mostly of the poor — and people who saw themselves as suffering. He was reported to have said he was the actual God who created the heavens and earth — and his followers sold his small pictures to the public as a way

³ Quoted in Eukora Joe, *Kano After the Rioting, West Africa*, page 53, Jan. 12, 1981.

⁴ *West Africa*, Jan. 12, 1981.

of warding off evil. He demanded and received for the Temple's coffers, savings and earnings of members running to a staggering fortune of \$15 million. Though it is customary to feel that most people belong to such 'cults' as a way of finding a psychological solution to emotional troubles,⁵ one can deny the fact that such religious cults provide a number of social services to its members. Accordingly, Jim Jones' Christian Assembly of God, engaged itself in distributing free food and helping people find jobs. Jim Jones himself at one time was appointed the first full time Director of the Indianapolis Human Rights Commission. The concrete material conditions in the United States where Rev. Jim Jones had a lot of contact with 'the powers that be' (e.g. democratic party leaders such as, Rosalyn Carter, Walter Mondale and Governor Jerry Brown, who appointed Jim to the City's Housing Authority in 1976) was such that encouraged abject poverty living side by side with the affluence of the minority. Even in Guyana, as in the U.S., where the mass suicide took place, there existed intensive racial discrimination against the blacks. The position of the blacks, who constituted 80% of the membership of the Peoples Temple was pathetic, *inspite* of the historical fact that the blacks built up the wealth of the United States, especially in the era of primitive accumulation of capital. By and large, a concrete look at the historical material condition would show that religion is not as abstract as it is seen. It has been well argued – and yet to be faulted – that religion arose mainly to serve property relations of production. As a cursory look at the workings of society would show religion dialectically linked with the prevailing socio-economic nature of society. This fact explains two things: that religion can be used either as a way to justify, or to protest against the prevailing situation. Protest against a prevailing situation; this thesis is aptly demonstrated by the situation in South Africa for instance, where the Dutch Reform Church justifies apartheid using the Bible, while the black people, using and quoting profusely from the same Bible, condemn apartheid. It is not always the case that those heading the protesting religious sects share the aspirations of the downtrodden (retrenched, unemployed, workers, and peasants) who are struggling against exploitation land oppression. Sometimes, as in several cases, these are even part of the bourgeois who are perpetrating the conditions or system which creates poverty for the creators of wealth, and affluence for the lazy appropriators.

This situation is most prevalent in areas where religion has for years covered the political consciousness of the people. It is those who sponsor religion, in most cases, that are the cause of their problem. The issue is not even religious fanaticism – because even religious fanaticism has a historical material base. People are not just 'fanatical' because they want to be. It is the historical material condition that brings about this fanaticism – but why? – It may be of interest to ask – is the fanaticism relative to the poor in society and not the rich – who not only write the religious books but publish and sell them?

⁵ See *Time* Dec. 4, 1978.

MAITATSINE REVISITED

In the case of Maitatsine some people have scolded the 'gardi' system of Islamic education, religious fanaticism, intolerance and bigotry as the cause of the uprising. Others have sought answers in the political climate in the states where these riots occurred. Others talked of the inefficiency of the police and security agencies. Yet other people think that it is caused by the influx of aliens. But, all these have failed to outline one important aspect. Why did it occur at all? and why at the particular time? Could these have occurred if the conditions prevailing in the country were different?

GARDI SYSTEM OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION

Abba Dado,⁶ the then Editor of *Sunday New Nigerian*, added that the "Gardi system – the traditional way of acquiring religious education must be held responsible. He argues that because of the relative freedom and honor, respect and tolerance of people considered to be scholars, quacks could emerge". He further argues that "Maitatsine was able to get such a large following because the system of "tutelage under which a person considered to be a great mallam is still followed. . . parents. . . still send their children far away from home in quest for knowledge. Such students (mostly of tender age) fend for themselves when they live mostly by begging and having to submit to the directives of teacher.⁷ This group, constitutes "the underclass of society".⁸ Whatever Abba Dabo means by underclass is not clear, suffice it to mention that Maitatsine followers are constituted by the poor in society – and the rich don't send their children to Gardi system of education. It is the superstitious and religious poor who do so – as Abba Dabo points out himself, these people are easily manipulated and "patronized by the rich and the powerful".⁹ Indeed as "the ambitious and rich in Nigeria have enough reasons to turn to them instead of God".¹⁰ Although this explanation is helpful in identifying the real cause of the riots, it certainly cannot be held as the cause of the disturbances. It is therefore one of the effects of a more fundamental reason(s). The Gardi system of Islamic education cannot therefore be said to be responsible for the religious riots.

POLITICAL MISCHIEF

Like the Jim Jones massacre in Guyana's Jonestown, there are always political undertones read into uprisings such as that of the Maitatsine. Rev. Jim Jones had the privilege of receiving a hand-written note from Rosalyn Carter dur-

⁶ Abba Dabo, *Religious Riots: Aftermath of a Tragedy*, *Sunday New Nigerian*, p. 3, 11/21/82.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

ing the 1976 United States election. Vice-President, Walter Mondale invited him aboard his plane and Governor Jerry Brown even gave him a political appointment because of the active role he played in the democratic party's campaigns. His activities were therefore given some political interpretation by many people. For instance, the question had been asked; why was it that the Maitatsine riots did not go as far as the States controlled by the NPN? Why was it that only the "progressive parties states", were affected? It is instructing to note that of the ten Northern States, the following were affected: Kano, Kaduna, Plateau, Borno, and Gongola — whereas states such as Sokoto, Bauchi, Kwara, Niger, and Benue States that were controlled by NPN were not affected. In this connection, Abba Dabo has argued that these "heretics" were always patronized by the rich and powerful, and that these "disturbances occurred in certain cities because "the political climate was confused and fractionalized"¹¹ It is worth mentioning at this juncture that on October 1, 1982, Shagari granted pardon to 1000 detained rioters of Maitatsine, and it has been posited by Alhaji Lawal Gana Daura that "these fanatics released by him (Shehu Shagari) are now a threat to peace, harmony, progress, and stability in the nation" and are said to be behind the riots in Bulumkutud and in Maiduguri.¹² To add to the suspicion of NPN being behind the riots, Alhaji Umaru Dikko, in a bid to justify Shagari's release of the rioters argued that none of those rioters arrested in Borno, Kano, and Kaduna states was identifiable with those released and he went further to exonerate the security forces from blame.¹³ However, it would be simplistic to blame one party or the other for the riots — but the point that must be stressed is that, in a situation like ours, the people, the poor, the unemployed majority can easily be manipulated for political reasons. And it is this fact that manifested itself during the Maitatsine riots. For, some believe that having lacerated the economy of the country; increased poverty and hunger; and made life extremely difficult for people to live, the ruling class decided to find ways of diverting attention from the hardship styled 'austerity' which had been imposed by virtually all the states. This being the case, it was easy to use their connections and get Maitatsine and his gang working, and this was precisely what was politically achieved. Apart from the serious damage the working people suffered, attention was diverted to religious uprisings and temporarily, the hue and cry against austerity cooled off.

ALIEN'S INVOLVEMENT

Many people have reasoned that the practice whereby Nigeria threw its borders open to aliens cannot but create similar security problems for that country. Alhaji Umaru Dikko suggested, in the same vein as Dr. Sam. Oyovbare, that a critical view should be taken of the ECOWAS protocols on

¹¹ *Ibid* A few months after writing these, Shagari appointed him Press Secretary).

¹² See *Daily Sketch*, back page, 11/28/82.

¹³ See *Sunday New Nigeria*, front page, 11/7/82.

free movements — and more thorough screening be done of aliens at the borders¹⁴ Also more attention should be paid to all our borders with proper intelligence network and military surveillance.¹⁵ To add vent to this alien syndrome, Ibrahim Biu reported that “most of the fanatics arrested were aliens”. The Kaduna State House of Assembly passed a resolution calling for a review of the ECOWAS protocol on free movement, because it reasoned that most of the troublemakers were non-Nigerian ECOWAS members. However, blaming aliens had no basis in the facts which came to light. And if anything, it only serves as a divisionary tactic to draw attention away from the fundamental material contradictions which have given rise to the riots. Secondly, a thorough examination of this suggestion would reveal that Nigeria stands to lose if the ECOWAS protocol on free movement was reviewed — because the ECOWAS protocol is good for Nigeria as the long-term, and reviewing it would disrupt our commitment to our fellow African States and our claim that Africa is the centerpiece of our foreign policy. Indeed, only very few of the fanatics were aliens — the majority were bonafide Nigerians whose quarrel was that they have been denied the basis of life and that they have been manipulated by the ruling elite. For instance, of about 1000 followers of Maitatsine released by Shehu Shagari on October 1, 1982, only 223 were aliens, and they were promptly deported.¹⁶

FOREIGN MOTIVATION

Some people have added another side to the question of foreign motivation of the Maitatsine riots. Of scholarly importance is the article by Dr. Bula Usman Yusuf who insists that the Maitatsine riots have both an internal and external imperialist connection.¹⁷

Dr. Junaid Muhammed on his part contended that “the riots were a carefully conceived plan by Mossad — the Israeli Zionist Secret Service — the host of Chief Awolowo during his visits to Israel — to recruit non-Nigerians, train them in the use of modern weapons and urban guerilla tactics, exploit the sparse policing along our Northern borders, infiltrate the peace, and thus lead to the overthrow of the Federal Government. . . We have no doubt in our minds that behind the facade of religious fanaticism is a deep political motivation”¹⁸ This contention sounds too absurd and has no validity in the context of available evidence.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Dr. Sam Oyovbaire, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Ibrahim Biu, *New Nigeria*, p. 5, 11/20/82. *Causes of the Bulumkutu Religious Disturbance.*

¹⁷ *New Nigeria*, front page, 11/11/82.

¹⁸ See Dr. Yusuf Usman, *Internal and External Connection of Maitatsine*. Published in three series by the *Nigeria Standard* Jos, Plateau State.

The Yen Izala Sect also claimed that an Israeli based Islamic group called Al-Mafisu which was involved in the siege of the Kaaba Mosque in 1979, is involved in the Maitatsine revolts. Others have accused the Ayatullah and Pakistani Muslims, while some believe that Ghadafi was involved as part of his ambition to extend his influence throughout Africa.¹⁹ These suggestions also are far-fetched. But then what exactly is the cause of the disturbances?

Protests for reforms taking the shape of religious fanaticism is not a new thing in Nigeria, particularly Northern Nigeria. There is the Jihad led by Shehu Usman Dan Fodio which historical researches have conclusively proven was a protest against oppression and exploitation of the poor by the rich. It took the form of Islamic revolt where the *talakawas* in the affected region affected some changes.

In the case of Alhaji Mohammed Marwa – as in the case of Rev. Jim Jones – the majority of the followers were poor, jobless, and dissatisfied with the socio-economic formation. Mohammed Haruna²⁰ suggests that our dependent capitalism, can and does breed social injustice and therefore perpetuates social discontent. He goes further to suggest that our neo-political economy is not being operated efficiently, and that it is also alienating in the sense that development is seen as something to be taken to the people instead of being seen as something the people must actively participate in. While not to dispute this reasoning, it is worthwhile to mention that our dependent, capitalist system stratifies the society into the rich and poor, and it is the poor who must generally protest or are manipulated. It was noted, after the 1980 December riots in Kano State that the Maitatsine sect drew its followers from the poor, the jobless who are often unskilled, and rural migrants to the towns seeking work.²¹

NIGERIA AND THE ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS FANATICISM

This aspect of the discourse is very relevant as Nigeria has to be located within a specific historical context, and how the historical context has given rise to crisis. Nigeria as a state is a creation of capitalism, which is in its imperialist stage. To offset the problems facing this metropolis, structures had to be created to serve it. For Nigeria, as most parts of Africa, this process began at the initial stage of the development of capitalism i.e. the era of primitive accommodation during which some Nigerian societies were depopulated and internal developments distorted. Then came the era of colonialism after capitalism had been developed in Europe – via the process slave trade (or better put – primitive accumulation). During this era, using the mechanisms

¹⁹ Quoted in Erukora Joe, *Kano After the Rioting, West Africa*, p. 53, 1/12/81.

²⁰ See Mohammed Haruna: *Return of Maitatsine, New Nigeria*, 11/12/82, p. 7.

²¹ p. 28873, *West Africa*, 11/8/82.

of education, religion, trade, and direct colonial rule, capitalism was effectively entrenched in Nigeria – and through some other institutions such as the Transnational Corporations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, a relationship of domination was created between African States including Nigeria and the industrialized Capitalist States.²² This explanation is necessary because as we have posited earlier, capitalism engenders crisis and a lot of problems such as the likes of Maitatsine and those of Rev. Jim Jones. And these crises are more acute and severe for those countries, which to all intents and purposes are underdeveloped and retrogressing more into misery, poverty, and economic backwardness.

In all parts of the country, including the North, where the Maitatsine riots took place, the capitalist mode of production is dominant. Even religious and traditional rulers are big time capitalists – and so also Directors/Chairmen of Transnational Corporations such as U.A.C. Where religion is used it is only used as a cover against the plundering of the wealth created by workers and peasants. And when, therefore, there is an outbreak of violence, seemingly a religious one, the explanation is not to be found in the religious atmosphere but in the concrete material conditions within the socio-economic system, which allowed the religion to thrive. For instance, in the case of Rev. Jim Jones, it was the oppressive capitalist condition which marginalized the poor and black, that made people believe that their salvation was in heaven instead of the destruction of capitalism that can create and recreate philanthropists like Dantata, Ugochukwu and Jim Jones who use religion and their bogus philanthropism to cheat and exploit. This oppressive material condition in the United States, more than anything, is responsible for people being dissatisfied and discontent. If material conditions for people were fair and evenly distributed such scamps as Jim Jones and Maitatsine might never have secured supporters.

CONCLUSION

The Maitatsine riots were not revolutions, but revolts against the socio-economic formation, which rewards theft, corruption, and laziness while reducing workers and peasants to penury. Further, as the land investigations which were done by Kaduna State government of Balarabe Musa show (these reports are very important for any analysis on the land question and poverty in Northern Virginia), a lot of peasants are now landless in the North. This land has been bought by the rich or the government on behalf of the rich. In 1981,

²² See *Path to Nigerian Development* (Ed.) O. Nnoli Codesria, 1981, Waltham Rodney. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Bade Onimade *Imperialism and Nigeria*, Bala Usman,

peasants at Bakolori went on protest and were killed in the hundreds by the police. Hence it is these landless and underprivileged people who are forced to use unofficial religious channels to protest – and protest against official religions because of the contradictions existing in the country.

Therefore, to avert Maitatsine and their likes in this country is impossible. It is only through transformation and destruction of the bourgeoisie state, which breeds crises, that we shall crush religious revolts.