

7. THE MANIPULATION OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA TODAY: ITS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL BASIS*

The subject of this lecture is the manipulation of religion in Nigeria today. What I am going to do is to slightly alter the topic, as advertised, and discuss, not so much the social and political context, but the social and political *basis* of this pattern of manipulation.

Definitions

The chairman of the lecture, Patrick Daudu, has in his introduction already started the discussion, which is as it should be. He says that there are various definitions of manipulation and even proposed one within the framework of administrative theory. But since, in the history department, we have always seen our subject as holistic, dealing with the totality of human existence over time, we take in all the administrative theories and even supersede them!

Now, somebody might ask, why presume that religion is being manipulated in Nigeria today? What is the evidence? Doesn't the very topic of the lecture presume something whose existence has to be established? Something which has to be proved? Is it actually a pattern of manipulation that is unfolding? Or is it merely one of contestation between various religious faiths?

It is clearly very important that we are precise about our terms. The key term is manipulation. And in whatever normative context it is placed, *manipulation means, essentially, controlling the action of a person or group without that person or group knowing the goals, purpose and method of that control and without even being aware that a form of control is being exercised on them at all.* On

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the basis of this definition, what is the evidence that religion is being manipulated in this country today?

There are some people who would say that all that is happening is a healthy development of people becoming more conscious of their religion, as a way of life, and rejecting secularism. Others would say that what is happening is that 'these Christians' are being put in their place; or that 'these Muslims' are now being dealt with properly, etc., etc. What I want to get across to you is that there is a significant number of influential people, even among you students, who deny that religion is being manipulated to serve particular vested interests, in Nigeria today. It is, therefore, important to establish the pattern of this manipulation before dealing with its basis.

The Assassination of Murtala

We could go back into Nigerian history to trace this pattern. But I will start with the developments associated with the assassination of Murtala Muhammed on 13th February 1976, and the consequent investigation, trial and executions. It is a convenient starting-point for brevity and also because of the clarity with which these developments brought out the full domestic and foreign dimensions of this pattern of manipulation.

On the very day Murtala was assassinated and several days afterwards, it was quite clear that there were domestic and foreign forces operating on this country which tried to present his assassination in religious terms in order to foster communal violence. The domestic forces were made up of two main tendencies. There were those that wanted to present Murtala as a Muslim martyr and his assassins as Christian villains. Then there were those that wanted to present Murtala as a Muslim villain and his assassins as Christian redeemers. The foreign dimension manifested itself very clearly in the despatch from Reuter sent by their chief Nigerian correspondent, Colin Fox, and broadcast over the British Broadcasting Corporation, which said that communal violence had broken out over Murtala's death in parts of the country. Co-ordinated with all these, at the public level, was a so-called message of condolence from an evangelical organisation controlled by a foreign government, 'to Nigerian Muslims for the loss of a Muslim leader'. This message came a few days late to have the

intended effect. In any case the powerful, popular and national response, unprecedented in our history, made such machinations much more difficult.

A significant characteristic of all these forces, domestic and foreign, was that they were all bitterly opposed to the domestic and foreign policies of the government under Murtala. The domestic forces were all, almost openly, opposed to the decision on the ex-governors announced by Murtala in his broadcast of 3rd February 1976. Usman Faruk, Joseph Gomwalk and Abba Kyari, for example, were presented as religiously devout leaders most unfairly treated.¹ The foreign forces from Britain, America and Saudi Arabia were bitterly opposed to the patriotic and decisive policies on Southern Africa, especially support for the M.P.L.A., which not only America and Britain were fiercely opposing but even the Saudi government was opposing by funding F.N.L.A. The point I want to get across is that all these forces were jointly and bitterly opposed to Murtala. But the moment he was assassinated these same divisive forces took what would appear as diametrically opposed stands, on ostensibly religious grounds. The fact that all of them were fundamentally hostile to the new direction, towards genuine independence and national cohesion and common purpose, the country was taking, and all of them said Murtala was turning Nigeria to communism, was camouflaged under a fake rivalry.

This particular episode of the manipulation of religion did not stop with the immediate aftermath of the assassination. Attempts seem to have been made to hamper the investigations, trial and executions of those who conspired to assassinate Murtala by spreading what is now becoming a standard tool — religious blackmail. Fortunately the government did not succumb to this.

Chike Obi, the Drum and the New Breed

The second significant, public manifestation of this pattern of manipulation was connected with a speech by Chike Obi at the 1976 National Union of Nigerian Students' (N.U.N.S.) Convention at Enugu. In this speech Chike Obi isolated Islam and the Fulani for a special attack as factors causing backwardness. If the speech had remained as a speech at a convention it perhaps would not have had the national significance it came to have.

But clearly this was not just a speech at a convention. The department of history at this university was specially invited to write a rejoinder to it by the editors of the *Drum* magazine, with an implicit offer of remuneration. Our reply was that since there is a department of history at the University of Lagos, where Obi teaches mathematics and at other universities closer to Lagos, why send all the way to Zaria for a rejoinder on what is made to seem an historical issue? We asked was this invitation sent to us in order to generate a sensational controversy, which an attack, from a department in Ahmadu Bello University on Chike Obi's statements on Islam and the Fulani, could be used to create? I knew *Drum's* South African roots and I noticed on the letter head that Chief Rotimi Williams was one of its directors, so I added something about their desire to make profits at whatever expense to our country. *Drum*, for some reason, did not carry the speech.

But the Chike Obi's speech did appear in *New Breed*, another journal with an equally dubious purpose. The publication of that speech produced violent reaction and counter-reaction across the country and the government tried to seize some of the copies of that edition. The responses, I think, were quite expected and suited this style of manipulating religion, especially as it is spiced with crude ethnic chauvinism by Chike Obi. This whole episode was a typical exercise in provocation deliberately intended to produce violent reactions and equally violent counter-reactions. It is an example of a well-tuned act of manipulating religion in Nigeria today.

The So-Called 'Sharia Debate'

The third significant public manifestation of this pattern of manipulation continued to have the characteristics of provocation — reaction — counter-reaction, through the agency of the mass media. Most of this has had as its excuse what is called 'the Sharia Debate'. But there was one important episode which did not have this excuse, but clearly was part of the pattern. This was the article in the *Sunday Times*, which appeared just before the Festac Durbar. This article took on a tone of hostile and insidious references to both Islam and Christianity. The federal government issued a warning on this but this warning, although in strong language, was ignored as the

so-called 'Sharia Debate' was deliberately pushed to become the most prominent issue in the discussion of the future constitution. This 'debate' provided an excuse for the publication of provocative and scurrilous articles purporting to oppose or support the Sharia in newspapers, especially the *Punch*, the *New Nigerian* and the *Nigerian Standard*. The media also amplified various statements and communiques from symposia and seminars organised ostensibly to debate the constitution, but actually as part of this campaign of provocation — reaction — counter-reaction, the main feature of this phase of the pattern of manipulation.

The Constituent Assembly provided another forum for this campaign to be continued, even more stridently. The rehearsals for this had been started in the Constituent Drafting Committee. The element of numbers is brought in here more clearly tying in the manipulation of religion with the manipulation of ethnicity, statism and regionalism, quite conveniently.

But at the assembly, just as at the seminars, symposia and in the media, there was really no debate in the sense of an articulation and consideration of basic issues and dimensions of the matter. There were statements and counter-statements made up of a series of assertions of strength, threats of civil war and bloodshed and then pious pleas for unity; and then the same cycle of assertions, threats and pleas is repeated again. The very obvious fact that the whole judicial system of the country is stacked against the common people finds no place in this sordid circle of non-debate intended primarily to create a religious and ethnic constituency framework for self-aggrandisement. It is a well-known fact that the peasants and workers of this country — the true and only majority in numbers and production, and the true and only minority in power and wealth — avoid contact with the police and the judiciary because they fear the harassment, intimidation and swindling that usually follows. It is well known that the bourgeoisie have no such fear and some of them even boast of what they can do. It is well known that this is one of the fundamental causes of insecurity and crime. And only a police and judicial system serving the masses and rooted in their midst can deal with this, whatever the law is. All these well-known facts are barely mentioned

in the current campaign of provocation — reaction — counter-reaction, which we are supposed to believe is about the future judicial system for the people of this country!!

The Standard Explanations for this Pattern

But having established an outline of the public manifestations of this pattern of manipulation we cannot go on simply to analyse its basis without considering the various standard explanations given for it. There are several.

- 1 There is the one which simply ascribes all this to the inherently barbaric and predatory character of Nigerian people rooted in our racial genes. Sometimes this is extended to all Africans and black people.
- 2 A second explanation is one which has it that this sort of conflict is an inevitable part of the process of development towards a modern nation-state like those of North America and Western Europe; and gradually with more schools, television sets, *Time* magazine, graduates and suburbs we shall grow out of it as these other 'developed countries' have all done.
- 3 A third explanation which, like the second, used to be dominant in the political science department, but might not still be, is the ethnic competition for scarce resources by modernising elites.
- 4 The fourth one is that such developments are part of the growth of cultural awareness and assertion among the non-westernised section of Nigeria which the westernised sections would resist but ultimately succumb to.

'The Nigerian Character' Hypothesis

The first explanation which may be called 'the Nigerian character hypothesis' can be dismissed as racist nonsense. It merely expresses the refusal of the ruling classes of neo-colonial Africa to admit their incapacity to maintain even the neo-colonial structures at a tolerable level of efficiency. Instead of admitting their incapacity, they look in our people for congenital, inherited, character defects, just as their mentors, the colonialists, have always done. The 'Nigerians are ungovernable!' cry is part of this attempt to deny politics and economics and go for psychology and genetics, and thus to refuse facing the brute fact of

a *system*, which is inherently and congenitally corrupt, and inefficient.

The Stages-of-Growth Theory

The second explanation, the stages-of-growth explanation, is contradicted by the evidence in North America and Western Europe, whose societies are supposed to typify the most advanced stage yet reached by humanity. North America may be seen as a pot, but no serious melting has taken place in it; at some levels a process of freezing is more discernible. Both American and Canadian societies are seething with religious and ethnic tensions and conflicts of the most multifarious kind, whose significance, the other well-known myth, of pluralism, cannot hide. The ethos, politics and even dialect pattern of New York, Chicago, Boston and Montreal, for example, leave no doubt about this.

But Belgium is perhaps the best example of the fallacy of the stages-of-growth theory. It was one of the first countries to industrialise and establish a bourgeois democratic system. It is right now one of the most highly industrialised countries of the world; a key hub of the European Common Market; high on all the 'growth' indices, from colour television to suicide; from antibiotics per capita to old people per capita. But right now Belgium is racked with tension and conflict over the use of the languages of the Flemish and Walloon ethnic groups. This conflict is also a Catholic vs Protestant one. There is no need to mention Great Britain with its Scottish, Welsh and Irish problems. All these of course are normally explained as further evidence of the inevitability of ethnicity; and the revised version of the inevitability of instability thesis. It is always of course never the instability of the wealth, property and privilege of this bourgeoisie, but of the nation. The former gets more stabilised — abroad!

The Competition for Scarce Resources Rationalisation

The hypothesis that all such religious and ethnic conflicts are part of the inevitable competition for scarce resources by modernising ethnic elites is perhaps the most popular in this country. It was at one time almost the official ideology of this university, especially our Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. It is still very powerful, widely held and

disseminated. This is largely because it seems to provide a scientific and rational justification for what would otherwise appear, for what it is, sordid, self-aggrandisement. For according to this hypothesis if one gets a plot at Victoria Island, or a directorship, a Mercedes or some shares, one is getting a share of the scarce resources of the country on behalf of an ethnic or religious group one is supposed to belong to. Private greed and accumulation, legal and illegal, is rationalised in smooth American social science jargon. Gifts, a pittance of what the modernising elite loots, at local functions and to individuals, seen to provide an empirical proof of this hypothesis, which is basically one of riding limousine cars and vacationing abroad on behalf of one's tribesmen or co-religionists, who are starving, but somehow vicariously share in the limousine and the luxury! It not only provides a rational basis for corruption of all sorts and stealing, but makes all this part of the eternal order, since according to bourgeois economics, resources are always scarce, and according to bourgeois political science it is the allocation of these which politics is always and everywhere about.

But let us examine the two key premises of this explanation. The first one is that there is a scarcity of resources. The second one that there is a competition for this between modernising elites.

In our country the basic resources of labour, land, water, fauna and flora are, far from being scarce, abundant in an almost absolute sense. What is scarce is the utilisation of these resources. Or more accurately, the organisation for their utilisation. The first premise is clearly false.

What about the second premise? Is there any competition between modernising elites? A few days ago the annual public accounts of the Metal Box Company were published in the papers. One of the directors is called Mr. Silas Daniyan and another is called Alhaji Shehu Malami. One is Mr. Silas and the other is Alhaji Shehu. Are they involved in any competition in Metal Box boardrooms? This is presumably what we are supposed to believe. We are supposed to believe that Mr. Silas is somehow representing Christians and Alhaji Shehu, somehow, the Muslims, and they compete in Metal Box to obtain scarce resources for the ethno-religious communities their names ascribe them to. Far from competing, every evidence indicates that

they co-operate fully, as they have the same interest in playing their role of 'local nationals', as Sir Alex Page, the chairman of the mother Metal Box Company in Britain, calls them, when he reported on how highly profitable the Nigerian market has been for the Company.

Take those people who got commission from Leyland for the buses and shared it out among themselves. Were they competing in any way with each other? In all the reports of the probes published, hundreds of millions of naira were involved, but what is the single shred of evidence that any competition hampered the deals through which public wealth was looted. The evidence is of co-operation and collusion, and where there was conflict, it had nothing to do, even as a preference, with ethnicity, religion but hard cash, and individual greed. And this happened right across the country. There is now substantial documentation of the operation of this system for at least the period 1970-75. I challenge all those who hold and disseminate the theory of competition for scarce resources on behalf of ethnic and religious groups to show any evidence of it from these or any other body of documents! What is quite clear is that there was competition, but this was between the interest of the common people of this country, on the one hand, and avaricious private interests of intermediaries right across the country and their capitalist principals right across the world, on the other.

The Cultural Awareness and Assertions Myth

The fourth explanation for this pattern of events, that it is an expression of growing cultural awareness by non-westernised groups, is easy to see through. This can be done just by trying to discover the cultural content in these assertions. One of the most striking features of the assertions and posturing by these so-called defenders of a non-western culture, is that they are empty of culture, non-western or western. But they are full of humbug and hypocrisy and other sentiments which are nowadays scraped up to cover the greed and neuroses of the more insecure fractions of Nigeria's dependent bourgeoisie.² But culture, as that dimension of human existence dealing with fundamental conceptions and values and their communication and expression (except in its neo-colonial residue form), is completely absent from these assertions and 'awareness'.

Even the posturings in defence of non-westernised culture, takes the form of a caricature of western orientalists and anthropologists protecting pristine native cultures.

The Real Basis of the Manipulation

If all these standard and conventional explanations for this pattern of events are false and mystifying, what then is its real basis? In order to get to this we have to start our analyses with the meaning of manipulation.

If the meaning of manipulation is *controlling the action of a person or group without that person or group knowing the goals, purpose and method of that control and without even being aware that a form of control is being exercised on them at all*, then an essential precondition for it is ignorance on the part of those who are being manipulated. But ignorance of what? It is impossible to keep a group of people, especially those belonging to the productive classes, ignorant of all aspects of social and political reality. So it has to be ignorance of some aspects of reality. But, then what particular aspect?

The particular aspect of social and political reality to be obscured and mystified depends on the purpose of the manipulation. It also depends on the structure of the economy and society within which this manipulation is taking place. In the case of the manipulation of religion in Nigeria today the purpose of this manipulation is to be found in the purposes and function of the classes who do this manipulation. Nobody denies that the class responsible is what is popularly known as the 'elite', or more substantially the intermediary bourgeoisie. This class is created to serve as the link and intermediary between the people and the wealth of Nigeria and the world capitalist system. It is created to serve as the leading agent of the trading-post which has been and still is Nigeria. It can only continue to be dominant if Nigeria remains a trading-post; that is a trading-post, built to export raw materials and import manufactured goods and services; a trading-post where ownership and consumption and *not* production are dominant in the whole system.

What I want to get across is that an intermediary bourgeois whether a contractor, financier, bureaucrat, academic, landlord, owner of assembly plants, or transporter lives by appropriating goods and values for consumption which

he plays no role in creating. He is a broker, a middleman, socially, economically and culturally! He embodies the domination of appropriation over creation; consumption over production. Far from contributing to the creation of material goods, services, or even functioning social and political values and structures, he survives on shortages and blockages in production just as in communication and understanding. He is the quintessential gateman! This is true of the sleek fat cat as it is of the lean cat trying to get fat.

Can this sort of person come out and frankly ask the people to follow him for what he is? So that he can take a piece of paper from one bank to another; from one factory to another, and make millions? What I mean is that the intermediary bourgeois will cease to exist once the people can see clearly what his true nature is. Can anybody come out and say 'vote for me so that I can get contracts and build foreign bank accounts and houses with my foreign partners'? Or, 'follow me and listen to me so that I can get a plot at Ikoyi or Bompai and get a directorship and shares in U.A.C. or Leventis'? Or, 'follow me so that I can get a big job and you can derive the satisfaction that, although you do not have one square meal a day and your daughter is deformed by and dying of chronic malaria, I am eating dinner costing N15.00 at Federal Palace Suites Hotel on your behalf and that of others in our tribe and religion'? Can anybody come out and say that? No! That is why this class has to obscure its true role and function in our political economy. You cannot stand and win elections, even if the electoral college is only two dozen councillors, on the platform that you want to own houses in Ikoyi or in London.

What I am getting at is that the intermediary bourgeois cannot appear as what he really is in the political economy of Nigeria. He has to find a cover. He cannot claim political leadership openly on the grounds that he is, or wants to be, an exporter-importer, a contractor, commission-agent, shareholder, rentier or rich bureaucrat. He has to take cover as a Muslim or Christian. He has to take cover as an Ibo, Hausa, Idoma or Efik. He has to take on disguises. He has to posture as a 'majority' or a 'minority'. The manipulation of religion in Nigeria today is essentially a means of creating the context for this fancy-dress ball,

for this charade of disguises. This game of masks!

Conclusion

The real basis of the manipulation of religion in Nigeria today is the need to obscure from the people of Nigeria a fundamental aspect of our reality: that is the domination of our political economy by a class of intermediaries who are being increasingly exposed. And this is to enable this class to cover themselves with religious and ethnic disguises in order to further entrench division among our people, slow down their awakening, at any cost; even the unity of our country, for which so much has been sacrificed.

Recently, some of you students, here in the campuses in Zaria and Kano, became active agents of this pattern of manipulation. This is mainly through the way you have defined the issues in your elections. It might appear to you that joining in this manipulation is doing something new, avant-garde and profoundly political. It might well seem to you that you are taking part in some really advanced strategic or tactical operation etc., etc. You might not be old enough to know, but a lot of you should, that what you are doing is retrograde in a really tragic sense. It has all been done before, here in this country and its bankruptcy became so blatant. There was a political organisation known as the Non-Muslim League. The N.P.C. and U.M.B.C., A.G. and most of the other parties made the same assertions and posturing that some of you are making on religion; that is over twenty years ago and they did not get anywhere, except into confusion.

Far from engaging in anything unique you are doing what every cheap imperialist huckster has done and is still doing — using religion to confuse and destabilise. Right now it is being done in Egypt, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Sudan, and other countries around the world. For some of you there is, I think, no likelihood that you will ever appreciate that you are playing this role. But most of you may face up to the reality, the hard brutal facts of our social and economic reality. You may face up to these honestly, and up to the consequences, as to where your duty and responsibility lies. You may refuse and follow the parade and march-past of all parasitical and retrograde forces into the dung-heap of history. The choice is not going to be

indefinitely open to you. But whatever you choose our people are going inevitably towards their total liberation. The manipulation of religion in Nigeria today can only waste time, a little time.

Notes

1. These three were governors of North-West State, Plateau State, and North-Central State holding the ranks of Assistant Commissioner of Police, Commissioner of Police and Army Brigadier respectively when the Gowon regime was toppled. Along with the other nine military and police governors they were dismissed with ignominy and ten million naira worth of their domestic assets confiscated. This was announced by Murtala in a nation-wide broadcast on 3rd February 1976. What finally provoked the forces of reaction to mount their rebellion against Murtala's government was this part of the broadcast. Murtala said: '... all the ex-military governors and the former administrator of East-Central State, with the exception of two, were found to have grossly abused their office and guilty of several irregular practices. Clearly (the) investigation has revealed that they had betrayed the trust and confidence reposed in them by the nation. Those of them who wore uniform betrayed the ethics of their profession and they are a disgrace to these professions. They should be ashamed of themselves. They are therefore all dismissed with ignominy and with immediate effect. Where the public officers have not been able to explain satisfactorily their earnings and assets, these have been confiscated. In addition, the Ministry of Justice and Police will look into the criminal aspects of their activities with a view to taking the necessary legal action if need be.' What made this even more threatening was that a White Paper, setting out the decisions of the government on the findings of the panel which investigated these governors, federal commissioners and officials was issued immediately (*New Nigerian* 9th February 1976 and 10th February 1976). Among the intentions mentioned in the White Paper were the decisions:

(a) To investigate the overseas assets of all the governors and federal commissioners;

(b) To investigate the domestic and overseas assets of their associates and of 'certain individuals who grew rich overnight'.

(c) To carry out further investigations into the assets of some senior serving or retired officers of the government not included in those already investigated.

Within ten days of this broadcast, Murtala was assassinated. See the lecture on Murtala Muhammed Memorial Day, page 102 above, for the discussion of the significance of these decisions announced on 3rd February 1976.

2. One of the most voluminous examples of this type of outlook is the thesis of Mahmud Mohammed Tukur, former Vice-Chancellor of Bayero University, Kano; *Values and Public Affairs: the Relevance of the Sokoto Caliphate Experience to the Transformation of the Nigerian Polity* (Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1977). His views and those of Chike Obi, Professor of Mathematics at the University of Lagos, essentially constitute complementary variants on the same theme. See *New Nigerian*, 5th August, 1978.