

CHAPTER 13

Bauchi

The Academic and the Imam



In chapter 6, we traveled through Ibadan, Enugu, Onitsha, and Nsukka, with some minor additional stops, all in southern Nigeria. In the north, Zaria may for some time have been the closest counterpart of these settings. The city of Zaria is the capital of a major old Hausa emirate, and not very far north of Kaduna, the more recent regional metropolis. We saw in chapter 12 that the Smiths took Baba of Karo there for extensive interview sessions. Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), with its main campus on the northern outskirts of the city, was the first university in the region, founded in 1962 and named (already in his lifetime) after Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto, premier of Northern Nigeria, leader of the Northern People's Congress, and, until his murder in the first 1966 military coup, the most powerful politician in the country.

The writer whose only novel is the main topic of this chapter, Ibrahim Tahir, had strong links to ABU.¹ His childhood home, however, was in Bauchi, a somewhat more southerly old emirate, where his education began at a Native Authority school (that is, not one run by any Christian mission). He went on to Cambridge University and took a doctorate in social anthropology, a department that for a long time was a stronghold of West African research. Then he returned to Nigeria, first taking up a teaching position in sociology at ABU; however, it does not seem that he continued to engage much in scholarly production.

The intellectual climate at ABU in the 1970s was one of a rather heated debate between right and left—the left represented most prominently by the historian Yusufu Bala Usman, and the right by Ibrahim Tahir. (Expatriate faculty in the human sciences seem in large part to have sympathized with the left.) In this case, Tahir was the been-to. Bala Usman, for his part, had a Northern aristocratic

background—his father belonged to the Katsina Emirate elite, and his mother was the daughter of an Emir of Kano.² But he had his doctorate from ABU, with a thesis on the establishment of Katsina Emirate. His mentor had been a prominent, influential historian with the intriguing name Abdullahi Smith, originally Henry Fredrick Charles Smith, from Somerset, England. After serving in the British army in India during World War II, he went to Cambridge, and then went first to the University of Ibadan before he moved to Zaria. After many years in Nigeria, he converted to Islam and changed his name. Considering his intellectual impact in both Zaria and Kaduna, one may be tempted to see Abdullahi Smith as a Northern counterpart of Ulli Beier in Ibadan, to a degree “going native” while helping to shape an intellectual milieu.

Ibrahim Tahir, for his part, moved up in the university administrative hierarchy, played a somewhat complicated insider role in regional party politics after military government ended the first time around, and reputedly wrote unsigned editorial pieces for the *New Nigerian*. And then somewhere he found time to write a novel, *The Last Imam* (1984).

Its theme is the tragic life of Usman, lead preacher-savant at the central mosque of Bauchi, closely linked to the emir’s court. The young Usman more or less inherits the position from his father, who had it after his father; they are all of the proper Fulani ethnic background. Already at a very young age, the boy Usman shows his talent for scholarship, and he just goes on studying. In his teens, it is hinted to him that it is time to get married, but Usman continues celibate for several more years. When the young Aisha is more or less forced on him through a ritual arrangement, their first sexual encounter is violent, and widely gossiped about in town circles.

Yet Aisha soon becomes his strongest support in life, even as soon enough he acquires a second wife, and a third, and a fourth. She is also a source of household strength as Usman continues his career of learning and preaching. He accompanies his father on a pilgrimage to Mecca—but while there, the father dies. Dying in the Holy City, of course, is itself a matter of highest sacral status. When the son returns, however, now an *alhaji*, someone who has performed the hajj, it is self-evident that he must be Bauchi’s new imam. People come to admire him and also fear him, as he shows his learning but also disciplines them, preventing them from backsliding into old but still tempting heathen practices. Among the slightly more secular office holders at the Emir’s court, it is true, there is some resentment. Yet Usman sees his main adversary as Sheitan (Satan).

A success story so far—but there comes a new complication. To begin with, it adds to Usman’s happiness. There is a beautiful teenage

girl, Hasana, daughter of a former slave family. (The British have certainly freed the enslaved, but it does not really matter so much.) As he already has four wives, Usman can only take her as a concubine, but as such she becomes his favorite, and, when soon enough she bears a child, this son, Kasim, also becomes a cynosure.

Then things fall apart. After more than a decade of shared happiness with Usman, Hasana falls ill and dies. As he grows up, Kasim turns out to be bright but unruly, and disliked in the wider polygamous household. Consequently, the relationship between father and son is increasingly tense.

At one point, Kasim runs away, but is returned to his father by an itinerant mallam, Shuaibu, who has found him. Usman is now faced by a rebellion in the household, led by Aisha. He returns home early in the morning from the emir's court, where he has spent most of the night in a group waiting for a sighting of a new moon, to begin the month of Ramadan. But this means that he has neglected his nocturnal duties in bed with Aisha, whose turn it is, in the series of wives. While the other wives have borne children, Aisha has had only miscarriages, although still maintaining the authority of senior wife. Now they all threaten to run away. After a crisis, Usman asks for their forgiveness. But then Kasim decides to leave, to join Shuaibu and his flock of *almajiri*, homeless beggar students, continuing his education with them. Much to the consternation of townspeople, the imam's son is thus in the streets, doing demeaning odd jobs.

Usman's public performance as imam becomes unstable. He dresses idiosyncratically, putting on too much ceremonial clothing at the time when the season has become very hot. He rides a horse when it would make more sense to walk, and has conspicuous trouble mastering that particularly unruly, strong horse. The emir's courtiers seem to exchange questioning glances as they observe him. Still, he somehow pulls through.

The time comes when he and Shuaibu have an exchange only between themselves about their relationships to Kasim. Shuaibu reveals that he and Usman are in fact brothers—more precisely, half-brothers. When Usman's father, later to become imam, was in his teens, he had been as reluctant to engage in sexual life as Usman once was. At a time when he was visiting in Gombe, another large town, further to the east, a slave had taken him to a young slave girl to experience intercourse.³ Then Usman's father had returned to Bauchi and probably never knew that the slave girl had borne a child: Shuaibu. So that also meant that now Shuaibu was Kasim's paternal uncle, much like another father. Acknowledging that as a scholar he has nothing like Usman's learning,

Shuaibu is deferential to what has turned out to be his younger brother. Nonetheless, he remains firm in his insistence that he should take charge of Kasim.

He does, taking the youth away to Gombe. But the relationship between Kasim and Shuaibu also goes bad, as Shuaibu treats his nephew harshly. Kasim wants to return to his father.

A period comes when the quality of life in Bauchi slides downward. There is a terrible draught. Herdsmen have to take their cattle further south, toward Lokoja, to find grazing. There is little garden produce for the market. Traders are having a hard time. People begin to grumble about what the imam is really doing—he is supposed to be their main intermediary with Allah. Their complaints find some support among the emir's courtiers.

Finally the rains come, and things are good again. But later come thunder, lightning, and a loss of lives. Then more drought. One day Usman is summoned to the court. At the end of lengthy proceedings, with much give and take, he finds himself unturbanned by the emir, removed from his office as imam. He will have no replacement; Usman will have been the last imam. If there will ever emerge one again, it will be someone more like Shuaibu. It turns out, moreover, that the emir has known all along that Shuaibu is the son of Usman's father. Word had already reached this emir's father and predecessor long ago, from Gombe.

What reflections may we have over *The Last Imam*? One could note, first of all, that before Tahir's novel, there had been little if any Northern Nigerian fiction writing in English—perhaps the nearest thing was Cyprian Ekwensi's handful of northern excursions. It may come naturally to compare it to southern writing of more or less the same period. There is no lack of drama and sensuousness in *The Last Imam*; yet these are not set within the freewheeling individualism of twentieth- or twenty-first-century Lagos. They occur instead within the domesticity of compounds, between kin groups, and up and down in an established local social-political-religious hierarchy. In this the story is not so unlike the episodic narrative of Baba's life, as retold in the preceding chapter.

There is also a notable timelessness. Pilgrimages to Mecca are mentioned, but it is not clear whether they take place overland or by air. Again, the English have freed the enslaved, but that was apparently rather long ago, and in some ways it does not make so much difference. In Usman's Bauchi there are no real strangers—no white people, no southerners. The one sign of new times may be that when the group at the palace are waiting to learn of a sighting of a new moon to begin

Ramadan, the message may come by way of a wire from Kano, Sokoto, or Katsina. At least it seems we are somewhere in the twentieth century.

Tahir allows us to encounter the *almajiri*, pupils of peripatetic teachers of rather uncertain Koranic learning, in this case Shuaibu. The *almajiri* are still there—in the twentieth/twenty-first century they are understood as a social problem in urban Northern Nigeria. A recent novel, Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* (2015), offers a first-person narrative of one of them, set in the context of political and sectarian tumult (but where we can note in passing that some of these youngsters now seem quite knowledgeable about British football teams).⁴ *Yan iska*, “sons of the wind,” may have been a largely overlapping, more secular term. Boys or young men who have lost a secure foothold in their households of origin, they survive by doing odd jobs, begging, perhaps petty crime, getting a nighttime roof over their heads at least for a while from one of those freelancing *mallams* who teach them while very likely also keeping a good part of their street profits.

The *almajiri*, however, are not just a diffuse problem of city streets. People more or less like them and their teachers have again and again been at the roots of unrest in Northern Nigerian society. We may indeed be reminded already of Usuman dan Fodio, a rebel out of a scholarly Fulani margin of a northerly Hausa kingdom, coming from preaching a cleaned-up, Sufi version of Islam and moving on to the major jihadi rising in the early nineteenth century, still a central fact of Nigerian history. By the time when the British arrived a hundred years later, that uprising had transformed itself into a region-wide hierarchy, with the Sokoto caliphate/sultanate at its apex. Through the colonialist principle of indirect rule, it could then be further strengthened as a conservative establishment. (The Bauchi emirate, of course, was a part of this.)

In more recent times, there was the Maitatsine upheaval, climaxing with a massacre in Kano in 1980. Mohammed Marwa, more widely known as Maitatsine, “the one who damns,” saw himself as a prophet, and a new Usuman dan Fodio; he condemned watches, radios, bicycles, and cars. After he and his motley gang of followers attacked and killed a large number of policemen, the authorities counterattacked. All in all, some five thousand people were killed (the number is very uncertain), including Maitatsine himself.⁵ Yet, on a smaller scale, the rebellion lived on.

Then in the early twenty-first century there has been Boko Haram, “Ban Western Education,” centered in Borno in the northeast, led first by Mohammed Yusuf, then more dramatically by Abubakar Shekau, and in a more globalized era vaguely and mostly symbolically affiliated

with the Islamic State movement of the Middle East (see also chapter 8). In its heyday, apart from kidnapping the Chibok girls (not least to satisfy the sexual urges of its young soldiers) and robbing banks, it also killed the emir of Gwoza, a Borno emirate.

Last but not least, *The Last Imam* offers us a glimpse of the importance of pilgrimage to Mecca. Usman and his father go there, although only Usman returns. It is said to have been a life-long regret of Usman dan Fodio that he never made it to the Holy City. Now the hajj remains important in Muslim West Africa. In the past, it was an overland journey, and one should be aware that Nigeria's northern borders are hardly any more historically given than those along the Guinea Coast. Rather than using the name of present-day countries, or parts of them—such as “Northern Nigeria”—one should perhaps use a more neutral geographical term, such as Sahel, for the broad savanna belt stretching through much of the continent south of the Sahara desert. There are traces of past pilgrimages along the way, in Chad and in Sudan.⁶ Some, such as Usman, made it all the way. Others did not, remaining somewhere with their descendants as permanent pilgrims, so to speak.

Again, Ibrahim Tahir himself, returning to Nigeria with a Cambridge PhD and setting himself up in Zaria university life, was in a way a variation of the main Western-oriented Afropolitanism. His novel, on the other hand, bears witness to another transnational cultural continuum, with another center-periphery structure. In his brief, accessible account of Usuman dan Fodio's life and its impact on Northern Nigerian history, *The Sword of Truth*, the historian Mervyn Hiskett (1973: 36) emphasizes that Islam, for all of its long presence in Hausaland, has remained in a way alien to the West African milieu, with its transcendent Koranic authority resting in the end on literacy in Arabic.⁷ The monotheism of Islam, “with its teaching that death is a final severance from the world, and a prelude to divine reward or punishment in the Hereafter, is very different from the indigenous African beliefs which involve veneration for ancestors and a cyclical view of life and death.” The Mecca here is not London or New York: it is Mecca. And at the peripheral end of that continuum, one perhaps finds those phenomena more rooted in local traditions, such as the Bori cult referred to in the preceding chapter.

Back to Kafanchan for a moment: by the 1970s, I would find that the wealthy Hausa contractor-entrepreneurs there would normally make their way to Mecca by way of Kano airport, and return as *alhajis* on the seasonal charter flights. Even if they came back with a lot of luggage, goods purchased at the upmarket shopping facilities around Mecca,

they had above all converted financial capital into symbolic capital. The *alhajis* were another sort of been-tos.

As far as the hajj in its modern form was concerned, it could also have its regional and local political implications. Mecca, of course, was under Saudi control, and that host power used varied organizational means to broadcast its Wahhabi variety of Islam wherever it could reach. By the late 1970s, again, this had inspired a separate mosque in Kafanchan, competing with the town's old central mosque. The new mosque had loudspeakers in the street outside, and at least once it caused a street brawl. This was at about the same time as the Maitatsine movement was causing havoc in Kano, some six hundred kilometers to the north.

Christian entrepreneurs in Kafanchan, mostly those with their roots in local mission churches, found a counterpart to the hajj in a trickle of pilgrims to their own holy city of Jerusalem. And the blurredness of borders in the Sahel region was also hinted at in Kafanchan by the presence of a handful of Folomi—an ethnic identity perhaps locally invented at some time for migrants from around Fort Lamy, now renamed Ndjamena, capital of Chad.

Ibrahim Tahir died in Cairo in 2009, due to complications from diabetes. In a memorial note, one Northern Nigerian admirer claims to know for a fact that on the basis of *The Last Imam*, Tahir had been very close to being awarded a Nobel Prize in literature. Whatever may be the literary merits of the book, that seems absolutely unlikely.⁸ But perhaps since Wole Soyinka, a Yoruba, Southerner, and recurrent adversary of Northern dominance, had been awarded such a prize in 1986, it may just have seemed to some that it was the North's turn.

Notes

1. I was a research associate in the sociology department at ABU while conducting my field research in Kafanchan, but spent little time on the campus. To the best of my knowledge, I did not meet Ibrahim Tahir. The department still had expatriate heads at the time, and several expatriate faculty members.
2. For a view of Yusufu Bala Usman's collected opinions, see his *For the Liberation of Nigeria* (1979). Nineteen years after the country's achievement of independence, he apparently felt that this was still an adequate title.
3. We briefly encountered Gombe before, in chapter 8; Helon Habila, author of *The Chibok Girls*, grew up there.
4. Intriguingly, *Baba of Karo*—see chapter 12—also shows up here, among a young man's readings. Elnathan John, born in Kaduna in 1982, Christian,

of mixed ethnic parentage, is himself a graduate of Ahmadu Bello University. He has a more recent short book of satire, *Becoming Nigerian: A Guide* (2019), published by Cassava Republic. Chapters include “How To Be a Pastor,” “How to Be a Nigerian Writer,” “How To Be a First Lady,” “Tips For the Foreign Journalist Covering Nigerian Elections,” and “Travel Advice for Nigerians Going to the U.S.”

5. Paul Lubeck (1985), American sociologist and Nigeria specialist, discusses the Maitatsine rebellion as an outcome of the growing socioeconomic cleavage in Northern Nigerian society brought by the late 1970s oil boom.
6. For academic studies of the paths of West African pilgrimage in Chad and Sudan, see Works 1976 and Yamba 1995.
7. Mervyn Hiskett, notes the back cover of his book, was vice-principal of the School for Arabic Studies in Kano for a decade ending in 1962, and thereafter lecturer in Hausa Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London.
8. Unlike, for example, Booker Prizes, Nobel Prizes are not awarded for a single book, but rather to writers with a larger body of authorship—more like a life-time achievement award. So *The Last Imam* alone could hardly have taken Tahir anywhere close to the prize.

References

- Bala Usman, Yusufu. 1979. *For the Liberation of Nigeria*. London: New Beacon Books.
- Hiskett, Mervyn. 1973. *The Sword of Truth*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- John, Elnathan. 2015. *Born on a Tuesday*. New York: Black Cat/Grove Atlantic.
- . 2019. *Becoming Nigerian: A Guide*. Abuja: Cassava Republic.
- Lubeck, Paul M. 1985. “Islamic Protest under Semi-industrial Capitalism: Yan Tatsine Explained.” *Africa* 55(4): 369–389.
- Tahir, Ibrahim. 1984. *The Last Imam*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Works, John A., Jr. 1976. *Pilgrims in a Strange Land: Hausa Communities in Chad*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Yamba, C. Bawa. 1995. *Permanent Pilgrims*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.