

Impact of Nigerian Moslems in

the new world

A FEW weeks back, around Christmas time, I wrote an article that discussed some aspects of Nigeria's Christian heritage. Now, in the aftermath of Ramadan, I wish to follow up the earlier article with a discussion of a little known dimension of Nigeria's Islamic heritage. Little known, that is to Nigerians, but certainly not little known in the region and country in which the events took place: Bahia, Brazil. What makes the episode even more intriguing, however, is that it also indirectly links the history of Catholicism in Nigeria to that of the history of Islam.

In the early 1800s, anti-slavery activists in Great Britain led a major campaign to end the Atlantic Slave Trade. Slave traders from countries such as Portugal, however, were not keen on ending such a lucrative trade, and thus carried on in earnest. Because they would now be forced to fill their slave ships quickly so as to depart from ports before British naval vessels caught them, they needed to find a source where slaves were in abundance.

For this, they turned to Onim (today's Lagos), a destination for thousands of slaves who had been captured due to the upheavals caused by the Islamic jihads in what is now Northern Nigeria and the constant stream of wars in what is now Western Nigeria. Those taken in Portuguese vessels at Onim were usually bound for Bahia, Brazil, a place now said to have many remarkable cultural similarities to Western Nigeria.

At first, this trade brought a multitude of militant Hausa Moslems to Bahia. These Hausa Moslems, angered at their captivity, and inspired by the jihad taking place back home, led a series of slave uprisings in the first decades of the nineteenth century. None of these uprisings were very successful, but they were important instances of events in Africa directly affecting the New World through the involvement of enslaved Africans. The slaves from 'Yoruba country', known in Bahia as 'Nagos,' later outnumbered the Hausa, and thus the subsequent slave uprisings, culminating in 1835, were led by Yorubas.

As was the case with the Hausa slaves, many of the Yorubas in Bahia were Moslems. It was these Yoruba Moslems who, in 1835, on the streets of Bahia led what the Brazilian scholar Joao Jose Reis called "...the most effective urban slave rebellion ever to occur on the American continent." The uprising only lasted a few hours, but during that short time, the Moslem led rebel slaves ran rampant over the city of Sal-

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vador, Bahia, and instilled a deep fear in the hearts of their Portuguese overlords. Hundreds of Africans from diverse backgrounds took part, but Yoruba Moslems were clearly in charge. Nearly seventy Africans were killed during the uprising, and at least five hundred were imprisoned, whipped, sentenced to death, or deported in its aftermath.

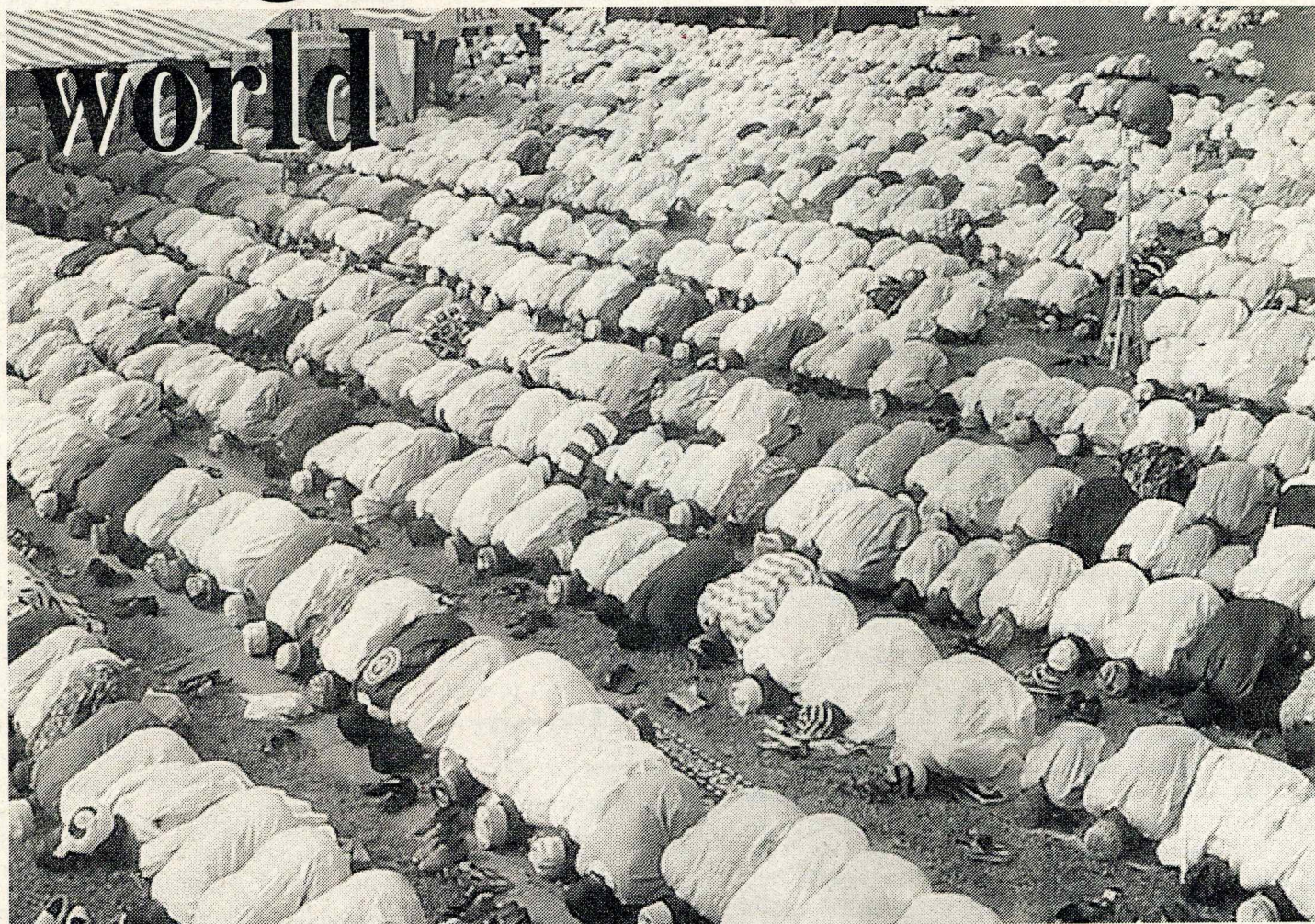
How, the Portuguese wondered, could such a thing have happened? How could a group of slaves nearly take over the city without them knowing anything about it? The answer, it seems, was Islam. Paul Lovejoy, an expert on West African Islam, the Hausa, and slavery, believes there was a definite link between the 1835 uprising in Bahia and the Sokoto jihad. The link, he claims, is through the leadership of one Malam Abubakar, a Hausa man from Kano who was apparently present in Bahia at the time.

Other scholars, however, are slower to accept the link with the Sokoto jihad, and in-

stead see the uprising as something very particular to the situation in Bahia, although still inspired by Islam and the desire of enslaved Moslems to worship freely.

Because of their status as Moslems, those who led the uprising in 1835 had already set themselves apart from the Portuguese society around them. The Moslem elders of Bahia, even though enslaved and thus officially at the bottom of Bahian society, were able to maintain their dignity and prestige through their literacy and knowledge of the Koran. Islam was a way for Africans in a place like Bahia to have some level of control of their own lives and maintain some sense of independence. It gave them an opportunity to rise above their enslaved status and to gain respect even from those not enslaved.

The Moslems of Bahia, especially the scholars and clerics, attracted quite a following and many non-Moslem slaves and ex-slaves converted to Islam. Even some Portuguese did. The dignity



•Moslems at prayer during the Eid-el-Fitri

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and aura of these Moslem leaders would certainly have seemed a threat to the largely illiterate Portuguese of the upper classes who had a distant memory of their own ancestors being ruled by Moslems. After the uprising, the Moslems appeared to be even more of a threat, and thus the Portuguese felt they had to deal with them harshly.

When it really comes down to it, the Yoruba-led Moslem rebels accomplished very little, and if not for the backlash and the ensuing court cases, little would be remembered. If it was fear of Africans in Bahia that they wished to promote, then it was successful. If it was an attempt to force an acceptance of things African and Islamic in practice in Brazil, it was not, for the aftermath did little but force these rebels and other Africans to face harassment and repression. Their only other alternative,

and the route most followed, was to become Brazilianized. For many of the Moslem rebels, this was an impossibility, and thus the Portuguese who dominated Bahian politics were forced to find other ways to deal with them.

The solution decided on for many of the perpetrators of the 1835 rebellion was to deport them back to Africa, opening the door for an extensive repatriation of Africans and Brazilians of African descent back to the continent. These deportations followed by official and unofficial harassment of free blacks in Brazil provided a cogent incentive for a return to Africa, especially for African born slaves. Over the following decades, about 8,000 Afro-Brazilians, most of them Catholics, returned to Lagos so that by 1889, 5,000 out of the Lagos population of 37,458 were Brazil-

ian.

It was with the return of these Brazilians that Catholicism also returned to what is now Nigeria, after its failure centuries earlier in Benin and Warri. Ironically, then, the door for Catholicism's return to Nigeria was opened by Moslem rebels in the New World whose deportation back to Africa encouraged others to follow. Just as this episode shows the influence of Nigerian Moslems in an unexpected place - Brazil, its aftermath shows how the histories of Nigeria's two dominant faiths are intertwined. The Brazilians - Moslems and Catholics - who returned had a greater impact on Lagos and the Nigerian society than their numbers perhaps merited, but that is another story.

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