Maitatsine was the nickname of a Camerounian religious teacher who died a violent death in Kano, Nigeria, in 1980.

His teachings were deeply heterodox—he claimed to be a Prophet. In December 1980, his followers in Kano revolted; the city was convulsed by what was virtually civil war, and 4177 died, among them Maitatsine himself. In October, 1982 a new rising broke out at Bulumkutu, 15 kilometres from Maiduguri, far to the east. 3,350 were killed. Fighting also broke out in Rigasa village, near Kaduna, which spread into the city. In March, 1984 there was an outbreak of violence in Yola, the capital of Gongola State, which left between 500 and 1,000 dead. In April, 1985, there was yet another rising in Gombe, in Bauchi State, when over a hundred were killed. His followers are usually called "Maitatsine"; the movement is also known as Kalo Kato.

This paper studies these risings, and the social forces which produced them. It also outlines other recent manifestations of militant Islam, in northern Nigeria, which have sometimes led to conflict.

The Leader

In 1980, Muhammmadu Marwa was a slightly built man in his late fifties. He came from Marwa, in Cameroun. His nickname Maitatsine developed because he would say, in halting Hausa "Wanda bata yarda ba Allah ta Tchine", "May Allah curse the one who disagrees with his version"—thus, Mai Tachine, later rendered more accurately as Maitatsine. He had had a long history as a dissident preacher in Kano, and had been imprisoned and deported in 1962, but later returned. His followers had been involved in a clash at the mosque in Kano’s Sabongari in 1972, and there had been an increasing number of clashes and arrests in 1979 and 1980.
He lived in an area of Kano called Yan Awaki. Many of his followers lived with him—two thousand according to one estimate. He supported them from donations from prosperous sympathisers and by the alms they solicited, which, according to one of his wives, brought in 200 Naira a day. His enclave increasingly seemed an imperium in imperio. Local residents complained, and there were some clashes. Later, the government of Kano State, (then ruled by the People’s Redemption Party, under Governor Abubakar Rimi) and the Nigerian Security Organisation were blamed for not taking action sooner. Presumably Rimi hoped, by being conciliatory, to avoid violence—on one occasion he actually invited Maitatsine’s envoys to lunch, much to the disapproval of the Aniagolu commission! There seems, too, to have been a breakdown of communication between the various organs of government—both the Kano State Governor and the Secretary to the state government first learned of the existence of a State Security Commission during the Aniagolu commission’s sittings. A police report of October 1980 stated, “Religious fanatics numbering about 2,000 occupied Yan Awaki Quarters in Kano City...when any member is arrested and charged to Court, they will not attend...They constitute their area into a private republic not accessible to other people.”

His Teachings

Maitatsine’s most glaring departure from orthodoxy was his claim to be a prophet. He was obviously a charismatic personality, deeply convinced of his calling. After the Kano riots of 1980, one of his leading lieutenants, who incidentally wore a remarkable panoply of home-made armour, had a Hausa inscription round his neck which mirrors this well.

The learned and influential Alhaji Abubakar Gummi, who was Grand Khadi of the Northern Region in the First Republic, described Maitatsine as one of “a trail of one-track minded Malams versed only in the recitation of the Quran by heart, and not fully comprehending what it contained.” Maitatsine’s recorded