

The Poor and Politics in Nigeria: An Exploratory Note

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Introduction: Rationale for Study

The poor in Nigeria are neglected, oppressed and humiliated in more ways than one. In addition to their degradation in the spheres of political decision-making and the distribution of the wealth of the nation, their contribution to national progress is inhumanly suppressed. The impression is given that the achievements of Nigeria are the handiwork of isolated leaders and groups, the influential members of the society, the rich, educated and politically powerful members of the society. Alternatively, pride of place is given to non-human forces such as capital, technology and managerial know-how.

The positive role of the poor is neglected. There are no national heroes among them. No monuments are built in their name; and no streets are named after them. They do not feature in press conferences and the numerous current affairs discussions of the mass media. It is generally assumed that the history, politics and economics of Nigeria can be understood without examining the views, conditions and activities of the poor majority of the country.

In most cases the political activities of the poor are presented in a simplistic and superficial way as characterized by apathy, resistance to innovation and, therefore, against the grain of historical progress. In addition, they are presumed to be submissive to antiquated, outmoded and even anachronistic institutions; suspicious toward all and sundry; and politically negative, atavistic, anarchic, and largely embodying the dark and ugly sides of humanity.

Much of this caricaturing by the rich has gone on without enough effort at a rigorous and scientific explanation of the political behaviour of the poor. Even if the presumed characteristics are valid, how are they to be explained? What are the demands of poor? Why have they not succeeded in achieving them? What organisations have they formed or identified with and why? What is the experience of these organisations? What strategies, resources and tactics have the poor employed in their political action and why? These are some of the questions about the politics of the poor that need to be addressed rigorously and scientifically.

In the 1960s Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral attempted to provide answers to some of the above questions. More specifically they discussed the relationship of some elements of the poor in the various revolutionary struggles in which the authors were involved. In the process they generated a debate in African academic circles over the class leadership of the African

revolution against both colonialism and neo-colonialism. Much of that debate remained at the level of the abstract with very little examination of the concrete history of individual African countries. The issues raised by these two authors are as relevant today as when they wrote. The various African states have so badly deteriorated in terms of their ability to sustain life, basic needs and the democratic aspirations of the broad masses of the people that only their revolutionary transformation can save their populations from utter destruction. The perennial question, of course, is how is the revolution to be brought about? The response is limited to an acceptance that only the underprivileged classes, the workers and peasants, the poor, can bring it about. The limit is imposed by ignorance about the politics of the poor, the underprivileged classes.

The need for the relevant understanding is made more urgent by the difficulties being experienced by avowedly revolutionary states such as Mozambique and Angola in harnessing the energies of their rural and urban poor to their struggle against local reaction and South African racism. How can these regimes gain the confidence, loyalty and active support of the poor peasants, the working class, the underemployed and unemployed, and the lower echelons of the petty-bourgeoisie? How can these groups be prevented from supporting the rebel movements and the South African racists? What lessons can we learn from the Tanzanian effort to build a new society by seeking to rely on the poor?

A focus on the poor also brings into full view the need for understanding the correct relationship between the peasantry and the working class in the African revolutionary process. Such a perspective is often lost sight of in an analysis of either the peasantry or the working class. Neither can carry out the revolution on its own. And at the level of consciousness their interests may not even coincide. Therefore, how to fashion and sustain a viable alliance between them may be the most critical problem facing the revolutionary process. And to solve it needs a good understanding, not only of the peasantry and the working class in isolation, but more importantly in their mutual interrelationship. What are the fundamental differences between the two classes and how can they be resolved or accommodated? What similarities exist between them and how can they be exploited for their mutual benefit? These are some of the relevant questions whose answers are critical for understanding the African revolution.

Finally and more specifically, the Nigerian Federal Military Government has embarked on a highly publicised rural development programme. It is being executed by a Federal Task Force operating from the office of President Babangida, and complemented by various task forces operating from the offices of various State Governors. What are the prospects of this programme? Such a question cannot be properly answered without a good understanding of the politics of the rural poor. To what extent are the interests being pursued by the Federal and State programmes congruent with, contradictory to, or complementary to the interests of the poor? And what is the manner of rural

participation in the programme and why? These are crucial questions for the Nigerian society.

Very little has been written about the politics of the Nigerian poor as a social group. Gavin Williams has examined the political consciousness of the poor.¹ But his study is confined to the urban poor of Ibadan. The rural poor are excluded. Therefore, the relationship between the rural and urban poor, the peasantry and working class, is not closely investigated. At the same time analysis is confined to consciousness and neglects praxis. On the other hand Olatunbosun's study of the neglected poor majority focuses exclusively on the rural poor.² Even then it merely describes their socio-economic conditions as well as their role in the Nigerian economy. There is hardly any political analysis, and no rigorous explanation of the behaviour of this section of the Nigerian community.

An overwhelming proportion of the relevant literature concentrates on the growth and politics of the working class. Although numerically inferior to the peasantry and some of the other classes of the poor the working class represents a more organised, modern and conscious sub-category. It is, therefore, more amenable to academic study and analysis. In this regard Robin Cohen's study of the politics of the Nigerian labour movement is the most comprehensive yet.³ Nevertheless, it puts more emphasis on the internal relations of this movement than on its relationship with the Nigerian state. Paul Lubeck examines the interplay between Islamic nationalism and the class consciousness of the Nigerian workers.⁴ However, the focus is on the strike action rather than on the political behaviour of the working people. In fact, the focus on strikes is pervasive. It dominates much of the literature on the Nigerian working class.⁵

Thus there is an unfulfilled need to understand the politics of the poor. Since the latter constitute the vast majority of the Nigerian population such understanding will illuminate Nigerian politics generally, and the national revolutionary politics specifically. It may then be possible to explain the capacity of the Nigerian state to survive even when it does not address the interests of the poor majority. It may also then be possible to explain the popular reaction to the various changes of the Nigerian government in spite of their inevitable ineffectiveness.

Defining the Poor

Today poverty refers to the consequence of the rule of money. The poor represent that section of the population which has been crushed by the power of money. The previous factors of wealth have been replaced by money as the supreme factor. Without money one is unable to do much even if one has land, slaves, children and wives. Everyone has to obtain money, sometimes at all costs, in order to pay taxes, rent land and living quarters, buy food, and procure goods and services.

The power of money is all-pervasive. It both uplifts and crushes, enhances and degrades, exhilarates and disenchant, dignifies and dehumanizes,

enlightens and blinds, unites and divides. Under the influence of money egotistic motives reign supreme; each remains nearer to himself and the unity of the group is countered by the divisive force of utilitarian considerations. The acquisitive instinct is encouraged, and every one promotes greed in order to exploit it. In the process, freedom, equality and dignity so essential to the progress of humanity, are sacrificed on the altar of the perennial rat-race for the accumulation of money.

The fact that various other sources of wealth than money have dominated societies in the past suggests that the concept of the poor has a concrete character, an historical specificity. Therefore, it must be understood dialectically within the context of definite historical circumstances. Historically, the rule of money is associated with states under the domination of the bourgeoisie, the bourgeois class. The role of this class in the production process is to invest money capital. This is the major resource that its members have which marks them out from members of other classes.

Therefore, the bourgeoisie has organised society in such a way as to give the greatest importance and prestige to this factor of production, and has arranged the pattern of incentives and rewards in favour of those who have it and use it in production. By making money a scarce resource the capitalists have transformed it into a very valuable commodity to be keenly sought after, thereby increasing the importance of and respect for those who have it. Consequently, the bourgeoisie wants nothing more than that the subjugated classes should strive to obtain money, believe in the possibility of obtaining it without dethroning the hegemony of money, and place their hope in diligence and frugality as the means for accumulating money. By thus fostering deceptive faith and hope in the bourgeois system the bourgeoisie lulls the under-privileged classes into accepting without challenge the rule of the bourgeoisie.

In order to fully understand the poor it is necessary to go beyond money *per se* to those resources that lie behind the power of money and give it force. Money is, in fact, only a symbol of the wealth of individuals and society. Indeed the most significant elements of wealth consist of those means of production that are used for creating more wealth. They include land, real estate, factories, technology, capital and know-how whose monetary values are very high.

The bourgeois state is split between those who own the means of production and those who do not. This division corresponds largely to that between the rich and the poor. The rich are essentially those who own the means of production and therefore enjoy the power of money; and the poor are essentially those who do not own the means of production and are, therefore, the victims of the power of money.

In addition to the workers, the small farmers belong to the poor category. In Nigeria, the small farmer is poor because his farm is in a constant state of decay, his livestock is badly nourished and he is not in a position to look after his land properly. His work is sheer misery, hard labour, endless drudgery. He

has no money; his land does not provide him with enough to eat let alone with money. But money is needed for everything: food, clothing, the farm and to pay taxes. One cannot farm without livestock, implements, seeds, a reserve of produce or money. In order to get money he has to look for earnings on the side. This means working for others and being fleeced in every way by all sorts of employers. Alternatively he may seek to improve his lot by cooperative work with other farmers. This may lead to his exploitation by farmers that are richer.

Although the Nigerian small peasant does not confront an immediate social overlord and generally is not land-poor, he is implement-poor and hence often enters into unequal relations in cooperative production and other forms of relationships. In such relations surplus is transferred from him to richer farmers and money lenders. Thus the Nigerian small peasant is not unexploited and "uncaptured" as Hyden suggests.⁶ In addition to this exploitation of the small farmer in voluntary production and exchange relations he is also exploited by the Nigerian state through forced labour, as in the building of the railways and in the so-called community development projects; in their forced contribution to the funds of the Marketing Boards and the various levies imposed by the state; and forced enclosures of his land as in the Bakalori, Hadeija and Kadawa irrigation schemes that paved the way for the penetration of capital to the adjoining countryside.

The Nigerian situation illustrates Mamdani's identification of the pauperization of the small peasant by two forms of exploitation.⁷ One is internal to the rural peasantry and represents petty exploitation of the rural poor by the rural rich. It is characterized by capital accumulation from below and gives rise to a village bourgeoisie out of the ranks of the rich peasantry. This is a long gradual process founded in the process of production and exchange itself, and governed by competitive market relations. The other represents capital accumulation from above, and its starting point is a political connection. It thrives on political coercion even if only as a complement to market relations so as to give it a monopolistic character. This is the dominant tendency in the rural areas of Nigeria. Its beneficiary is not the village bourgeoisie but the bourgeoisies of the urban centres for whom concrete political processes pave the way to wealth generation. In one form or another they appropriate the surpluses generated by the small peasantry.

Migrant farmers are to be included in this category of small farmers. A large number of Nigerians migrate to food farms, cocoa and rubber estates and timber concessions to work. Long distance migrants from Sokoto usually spend the months of the dry season working for cash in the cocoa belt in Yorubaland, then return home in time for the next farming season. Migrant Igbira food farmers and Isoko oil palm harvesters who are also found in the cocoa belt are usually self-employed and tend to spend several years in the area. Some wage-earning migrants also farm for subsistence as well as cash. Examples include Igbo migrants in the cocoa and rubber estates, the Igbira in parts of Ekiti, Owo and Afemai areas, and Isoko migrants. The non-indigenous food farmers in the Asaba, lower Benue Valley and Cross

River areas and the fishermen of the creeks and lagoons of Southern Nigeria form another relevant group of rural-rural migrants.

The vast majority of the small farmers live in poverty, are ruined over time and become proletarians, semi-proletarians and petty traders, while the minority trail after the capitalists thereby helping to keep the rural poor ideologically dependent on the moneyed classes. This explains in part why the poor peasants have so far kept aloof from workers' causes and have instead supported the various reactionary parties and organisations of the bourgeoisie. Therefore, the natural alliance between the rural and urban poor is not always or easily achieved.

Another class of the poor which, like the small peasantry, lies outside the working class is the class of the petty traders such as street hawkers, vendors, touts at motor parks, airports and elsewhere and market men and women who retail food items and other basic necessities such as washing soap, tinned goods and pomades. They are said to belong to the informal sector. As products of the state neglect of the villages, local resources and the traditional and habitual consumption patterns, they have migrated to the urban centres but are unable to find wage-earning jobs, and are compelled to make ends meet the best way they can by petty trading. They are the underemployed.

Like the other members of the poor this group lives from hand to mouth. Its members have very little, if any, savings to call upon in times of financial difficulties. Consequently, they are also victims of money-lenders. And once they fall into the hands of the latter they are inevitably ruined. Their trading activities are carried out without any money capital that is worth speaking of, turnover is low, returns are quite meagre and the possibility of hiring help is permanently non-existent. They are quite willing to abandon their trading in order to secure employment with the government or the private sector.

Closely related to this class of people are the roadside motor mechanics, motorcycle and bicycle repairers, petty handicraftsmen, blacksmiths, welders, carpenters, bricklayers, masons and nightsoil men. Associated with the so-called small scale enterprises, they are largely under-employed and ply their trade more out of necessity than by choice, and seize any opportunity that presents itself to obtain more lucrative jobs as hired hands. Their much vaunted individualism and rugged self-reliance are essentially glorified myths propagated by the rich to make them feel contented with their wretched existential conditions. The slightest deterioration in the financial situation of these workers creates ruin for them and forces them into the category of unemployed or underemployed, compelling them to seek wage-earning jobs as paid hirelings of the rich.

They, too, are brothers to the beggars, paupers, domestic servants, tramps, taxi drivers, prostitutes and that group of young people who are connected to poor families who have recently arrived from the rural areas, and who generally live at the expense of these families. This lumpenproletariat is a horde of starving men, uprooted from their villages. Their section of the urban area is that of ill repute, peopled by men of ill-fame. "It is a world without

spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other".⁸ It is a hungry section of town, starved of bread, yams, meat, shoes, water and electricity. Their number has been growing rapidly with the increasing army of unemployed consisting essentially of school leavers from the primary, secondary and more recently university educational system. As the Nigerian economy has sharply declined, the ranks of the unemployed has swelled. Unable to find jobs that are commensurate with their level of education, or even any job at all, they are forced to continue to live off their nuclear and extended families.

It is thus clear that the poor and the rich are distinguished by the nature of the sources of their money. Pius Okigbo, a rich man and one of the most sophisticated advocates of the present money-dominated Nigerian social order, in his enumeration of sources of wealth, mentions income from unincorporated enterprises, dividends, interests, rent, royalties, trust and estate income, pensions and other payments.⁹ He conveniently excludes income from official and unofficial corruption, the embezzlement of state funds and the inflation of government contracts and other expenditure in order to increase commission fees. While the rich utilise all these sources of money in the amassing of their riches, the poor are confined only to wages, salaries and pensions for workers, and income from unincorporated enterprises for petty traders, small farmers and handicraftsmen. The overwhelming concentration of wealth and income in, and their control by, the rich contrasts very sharply with the obvious lack of access to wealth and income by the poor.

The poor in Nigeria live under very harsh existential conditions. They cannot afford three meals a day. In any case the nutritional content of these meals is very low. They eat meat, fish, or any other fish or animal protein source very rarely. The caloric content of the meals is usually below the minimum recommended by the United Nations Organisation. In addition the poor cannot afford a reasonable shelter for self and family, and usually live in very unsanitary environments. At the same time they cannot afford the cost of education and health care and, therefore, suffer from ignorance and endemic diseases. Similarly, they lack access to credit facilities, and to elementary social amenities and basic needs such as adequate transport facilities, pipe-borne water, social security insurance, consumer goods, adequate provision for old age, any help whatever for house work and child care and simple recreational facilities for their children. The poor man never has any reserves; he lives from hand to mouth. Each difficulty or accident compels him to sell his belongings at a trifling price. And once he falls into the clutches of the money-lender or his equivalent he can rarely escape utter ruin.

The Poor and State Power

In Nigeria there is total exclusion of the poor from the political process. They have never participated directly and substantively in deciding what is produced, when and how, and who gets what of the products. Military rule abolishes politics and democracy. Protest is banished. Agitation is equated with sabotage. Workers' demonstrations are not tolerated, much less strikes. The culture of struggle must die. And with it whatever gains the poor can obtain through struggle against state power. Military rule suspends the struggles of the poor for the democratisation of access to the ownership of the means of production and wealth in order to ensure full political equality; and for the universalization of the systems of education and health care in order to abolish the political inequality arising from large differentials in educational attainments and medical fitness. Therefore, military rule serves the cause of reaction.

Similarly, the poor are excluded from civilian politics. The politicians quickly convert the political process into fraud and illusion. They prevent the poor from coming to a true self-consciousness of themselves, of their position in society and of their true interests. The poor are forced into political superstition or else into indifference and opportunism. This is done by the unbridled demagoguery of politicians who promise heaven on earth, the skilful manipulation of the ethnic bogey, intimidation, bribery and outright rigging of elections. In the face of the illusions constantly spun by the political parties, the latter's intimidation of the people, their dumping of money in the people's laps, the obvious fundamental similarity of their programmes and their glaring commitment to the rigging of elections, how could the poor have a say in their own affairs?

All this has been possible because the poor have never had a political party of their own that is centrally characterized by a determination to ensure that the creativity of popular activity and popular organisation is not hemmed in by the imperatives of intra-bourgeois factional squabbles and rivalries. This means organisation from below and is not possible without raising demands that are of direct significance to the poor classes.¹⁰ Even the progressive parties such as the NEPU and PRP who articulated the demands of the poor were essentially petty-bourgeois opposition movements and ended up confining their organisations and the activity of the poor within parameters defined by the imperatives of intra-bourgeois factional rivalries.¹¹ They behaved like bourgeois opposition movements by setting their goals in a narrow parliamentary way, and organising themselves in a top-down manner. Narrow demands and top-down methods of organisation strengthen bourgeois rule. Only broad demands and bottom-up organisation can weaken that rule.¹²

Nevertheless, the poor have played a creditable role in Nigerian politics, albeit within the ambit of petty-bourgeois politics. During the struggle for national political independence their support was critical. It enabled the

nationalist leaders to gain credibility and therefore acceptance by the colonial authorities who had dismissed them as representing no one. That support was sustained until independence was achieved in 1960. In fact, in patriotic solidarity with their leaders, the poor majority were able to struggle and obtain concessions for the latter, in relation to foreign forces, to exercise a certain margin of autonomy in economic matters, and to implement important social reforms in education, labour relations, health and social welfare services generally. Also, their support enabled the leaders to achieve the expansion of public enterprises beyond mere elements of the infrastructure to their status as patriotic instruments against foreign private capitalist domination of the country. They even succeeded in forcing the colonialists to subsidize these enterprises. The power of the leaders to effect changes in the society and in their relations with foreigners lay in their support from the poor classes.

Their track record of service to and sacrifice for the nation is enviable, unexcelled. During the pre-petroleum days they provided the "almighty" foreign exchange. Today, they suffer with patriotism and fortitude the hunger imposed by the economic banditry of the political class; and the deprivations sponsored by the IMF and World Bank. These latter hardships arise from the insistence of these foreign agencies that public enterprises must give way to private enterprise, subsidies to the strict demands for profit, socio-cultural gain to unalloyed economic private capitalist gain, egalitarianism to capitalist inequality and exploitation, economic experimentation to orthodox capitalist practices and any socialist production orientation to unambiguous capitalist individualism in production, distribution and exchange. And by bearing in silence the major brunt of the consequences of the high prices of goods and services, and the loss of benefits from programmes that might have been undertaken in the broad public interest, the poor have been the guarantors of whatever socio-economic stability exists in the country.

Nevertheless, ever since national political independence was achieved in 1960 the poor have become more and more the object rather than subject of politics, pawns in the political chess game of rival factions of the bourgeoisie, and the veritable dumping ground for the woes and sufferings of the nation. Their powerlessness, helplessness and political marginalization have become both pervasive and debilitating. And all these have occurred at precisely the time when it has become increasingly clear that the poor must take their political destiny into their own hands if they are to emancipate themselves from the quagmire of poverty, ignorance and disease.

Certain factors account for the inability of the poor to fulfil, or even undertake, this emancipatory mission. The most crucial of these concerns the incapacity of the working class to assume its inherent leadership of the poor in political and organisational terms. The working class represents the greatest threat to the foundations of the colonial and neo-colonial social order on which capitalist exploitation depends. The workers' position as urban dwellers with rural contacts, and their strategic location in the process of political communication give the working class an influence in the neo-colonial

societies much greater than their relative numerical strength would warrant. Therefore, despite their small numerical strength, the trade unions have a considerable propaganda strength and influence over the political opinions of a sizeable number of people outside the union structure.

Various colonial policies served to emasculate this revolutionary potential of the working class and the trade unions. Some of these policies were designed specifically to counteract working class consciousness, but some others were part of the general colonial strategy and tactics of subjugating the colonised population as a whole, creating a docile subject population, and pre-empting the class struggle. The colonial myth of white racial superiority served these latter functions. Although it did not succeed in making Nigerians docile objects of colonial oppression and exploitation, it succeeded in pre-empting class consciousness and directing it along racial, cultural and ethnic lines. Workers lost sight of the exploitation, oppression and alienation of the work place as they become preoccupied with refuting the falsehood of the racist myth and resisting the degrading racist policies of colonialism. It became easy for them to participate in one political movement with the petty-bourgeoisie under the leadership of the latter.

Furthermore, fearing the revolutionary potential of trade union activities, the colonialists did not permit the formation of trade unions until much later than the establishment of the ethnic associations which proceeded to pre-empt many of the activities that the trade unions could have performed. Legal sanction to organise trade unions in Nigeria was only granted in April 1939, much later than the proliferation of the ethnic associations that occurred during the Great Depression.¹³ The ethnic unions performed necessary social, economic and cultural functions for the worker which the trade unions or even the government was unable to do. Consequently, they have secured the primary loyalty of the worker. Only much more limited functions, especially those that the ethnic associations were unable to perform, were taken up by the trade unions. Therefore, only a much more limited and secondary loyalty was attracted to these working class organisations.

The colonialists even incited workers against each other along ethnic lines in order to destroy effective working class collective action. The 1945 general strike is illustrative. The strike hit food supplies to the north by rail at a time of food scarcity, inflation and rationing that followed the end of the Second World War. The colonial authorities blamed the hardship in the north on Igbo strikers in the south and prevailed on the northern workers to boycott the strike on ethnic grounds. The Hausa attack on the Igbo in the Jos communal riot of 1945 became inevitable.¹⁴

In another respect the colonialists used terror tactics to discourage the emergence of a revolutionary working class movement. Brutal and punitive reactions of the employers and colonial officials attended any expression of militant unionism. On 21 June 1947 defenceless United Africa Company (UAC) workers in Burutu were shot down by the police because they went on strike in furtherance of a wage demand. But by far the bloodiest incident was

that of 18 November 1949 at the Enugu Colliery following unrest and dissatisfaction among the coal miners over claims for a wage increase, the payment of daily allowances for certain categories of workers, and for arrears that the colliery management was withholding. In the ensuing colonial reprisal the police opened fire killing twenty-one and wounding fifty-one miners.¹⁵ Similarly, the Zikist National Vanguard which operated as an arm of one of the petty-bourgeois political parties but articulated some of the demands of the underprivileged peasant workers, unemployed and other poor classes in favour of an alternative and progressive system of production was vigorously repressed and hounded out of existence by the colonialists.

In the face of this determined intimidation, repression and liquidation of militant trade union movement, the working class lost its revolutionary character and its political mission. Subsequently, its approach to labour matters became single-mindedly economic, concerned essentially with the working conditions, wages, cost of living allowances, pensions and related demands.¹⁶ Its relationship with the struggles of the other poor classes became more and more tenuous. Therefore, it could not actualize its leadership potential of these classes. And without such a leadership the unity of the poor became ephemeral, indeed a mirage. Quagmired in mundane considerations the working class movement easily accepted the political leadership of the petty-bourgeoisie and became bogged down in petty personal, ethnic and other struggles for power which do not serve primarily the cause of the poor.

A similar debilitation plagued the poor peasantry. Through intimidation, terrorism, co-option of the leadership, and divide-and-rule tactics, the colonialists succeeded in emasculating the peasant struggles and forcing the peasants to operate within the norms, rules and regulations laid down by the colonial order. Punitive expeditions crushed the Ekumeku (league of the silent ones) among the Igbo peasants of Asaba and its environs, which had carried on a quasi guerrilla struggle against colonial control and exploitation of the peasantry. A similar expedition crushed the Aros of south-eastern Nigeria, the Dancing Women's Movement, a general protest movement against colonialism in the areas from the Calabar to Okigwe. Poor peasants also rose up in arms over the widespread introduction of taxation in the rural areas. These protests included the Iseyin uprising of 1916, the Egba uprising of 1918, the market toll uprising in Calabar in 1925, similar protests in Sapele and Warri in 1927, culminating in the famous Aba riots of 1929. In 1903 the Gwari of Gussoro attacked a British political officer and released some prisoners in his custody. In 1908 the Dakarkari attacked the police, and in 1916 the Montol of the Central Plateau rebelled. These uprisings were ruthlessly suppressed by punitive expeditions sent by the colonialists against the peasants and their movements.¹⁷ Also, other forms of peasant resistance to colonial repression and exploitation, such as banditry and armed robbery, existed.

The colonialists were able to crush the militant workers and poor peasants because of the inadequacies of the latter's organisations. And these inadequacies stemmed essentially from their low level of political

consciousness. They were unable to see the interrelationship of their various grievances, and the need to pursue their redress in a consistent, continuing and co-ordinated manner. These grievances and actions to redress them became localised either spatially or functionally. Consequently, the colonialists could easily isolate and destroy them. More importantly they engendered a history of isolated and essentially parochial struggles with very limited national and class character. Inter-class co-operation among the struggling poor could not materialise. Even co-operation within the same class along national lines could not be established. Under these conditions the colonialists manipulated the Nigerian poor to the advantage of foreign capital.

The low level of consciousness of the poor in turn arose from the low level of development of productive forces and production relations. Pre-capitalist forms of consciousness continued to prevail. In the north, workers saw themselves first and foremost as *Talakwa*. In the south they maintained links with the village and clan and therefore acquired a parochial orientation which made them amenable to appeals based on ethnic sentiments. The *Zikist National Vanguard* which was the only political movement that could have helped to create this consciousness was theoretically barren, strategically adventurist, politically tactless and organisationally incapable of establishing structural links with the vast majority of the poor. It relied on the same populist slogans as the petty-bourgeois parties, and was quagmired in personal loyalty to an individual petty-bourgeois leader, becoming disillusioned and immobilised as the selfish character of its idol became more and more apparent.

Thus, at the time of independence in 1960 the poor were politically fragmented with no history of joint struggles, no political organisations of their own, no co-ordination of their activities, no national outlook, no class consciousness, and therefore no political militancy. They had been terrorized, intimidated, and coerced into accepting a reformist approach to socio-economic transformation. Socialised into the norms of philistinism and opportunism, bribed into disbelief and cynicism, and thoroughly alienated from their work and society they had become politically indifferent, if not apathetic. They were well moulded to be tossed about by the civilian and military regime; used as cannon fodder in a fratricidal war for petty-bourgeois advantages, whipped and assaulted in various dehumanising ways by law enforcement officers; and buffeted, cheated and defrauded by the ruling petty-bourgeoisie of independent Nigeria.

Nothing has happened since the attainment of political independence in 1960 to transform the political behaviour of the poor that was conditioned by their colonial history. Although the national ideological situation has changed in favour of increased class consciousness this change is not reflected in the political and organisational activities of the poor. The People's Redemption Party (PRP) has forcefully articulated the interests of the poor and obtained concessions in their favour in respect of the abolition of cattle tax and personal

tax. But it suffered from the same shortcomings as the Zikist National Vanguard and, inevitably, the same fate.

Thus in 1964 the workers organised a most successful general strike in support of their agitations for enhanced wages and salaries but turned out in mass to vote for the petty-bourgeois parties organised along ethnic lines. The success of the strike posed such a threat to the Government that Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, in a manner reminiscent of the colonialists, infiltrated the ranks of the workers through intrigues, withholding of favours and appointments so that by the time the military intervened in 1966 the labour movement had lost its unity of the early 1960s. Even its limited economic activities came under threat from the Government. The Trade Disputes Decree No. 7 of 1976 was designed to provide stringent measures against the activities of the trade unions. Among other things it consolidated the obnoxious Trade Disputes (Emergency Provisions) Decree No. 21 of 1969; and provided for a National Industrial Court to be dominated by the rich classes. When the workers ignored the decree the Trade Dispute (Essential Services) Decree No. 23 of 1976 was promulgated which provided for the proscription of recalcitrant unions, and the detention of their leaders. Predictably the decree was silent on recalcitrant employers. More importantly, the regime undertook to purge the leadership of the unions, a curious case of an enemy purging the camp of its major adversary.¹⁸ In 1978 the regime reformed the trade unions, uniting them but banning the new central union and its affiliates from political activity and seeking to impose a pliable leadership on it.¹⁹

The powers of the working class were drastically curbed, and the confidence of the workers in themselves and their leadership shattered when the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) watched helplessly as thousands of workers were retrenched or dismissed indiscriminately by the Buhari and Babangida administrations. And this is taking place at a time, especially under the latter's regime, when devaluation of the currency, salary cuts, withdrawal of the minimum wage, privatisation, removal of subsidies from social services, increase in the cost of petroleum products and various slashes of the nation's welfare programmes is imposing severe hardships on the workers. The disarray of the working class movement in the face of the onslaught is evidence of the further deterioration of the weak, helpless and marginalized position it inherited from the colonial times. Even to hold a demonstration has become a serious difficulty for the workers.

A similar deterioration of its position afflicted the poor peasantry. The Agbekoya rebellion of the peasantry in the Ibadan area fizzled out with time as the Government made a few gestures while at the same time co-opting its leadership. The peasants rose against the repressive and exploitative machinery of the privileged classes as expressed by the refusal of the government to pay fair prices for cocoa, sending of corrupt officials to persecute them, denying them the benefits and amenities they had been promised, and the demanding of higher taxes when the farmers could not earn

enough to feed themselves.²⁰ The situation was worse in the Bakalori incident of 1980. As a result of N200 million irrigation project financed by the Federal Government in the Sokoto area of Bakalori, the original small farmers of the area faced the prospects of being displaced by absentee farmers made up of bankers, civil servants, military personnel and other elements of the rich classes. On April 26, 1980, over five thousand poor peasants took direct action to stop work on the project. In reprisal the Government engaged the farmers in a three-day battle that left an estimated one thousand peasants dead or wounded.²¹ Other peasant communities did not rally to the aid of their class comrades. The Bakalori peasants were isolated and crushed.

As the situation of the poor has degenerated, they have come increasingly under religious influences. In this regard the spread of religious fervour widely in the country, especially of the healing and evangelical sects, is symptomatic of the malaise of the poor. Inevitably, some of their reactions and resistance to Government have taken religious forms. Among these are the Maitatsine uprisings. These have occurred in Kano, 1980, Maiduguri and Kaduna, 1982, and Yola, 1984. Most of the followers of the Maitatsine moslem sect are among the poorest of the urban poor. Their protest was against the dehumanised conditions in which they lived. In Kano they were able to hold out against the police and army for over a week before they were finally dislodged by aerial bombardment of the airforce.²²

Conclusion

In order to be effective in dealing with state power in pursuit of their interests the poor must rid themselves of this historically acquired fear of state power as well as their own lack of self-confidence and desire to succeed. This needs some impetus from other poor classes that have not succumbed to the intimidation and terrorism of state power. Fortunately, the Nigerian students are providing such an impetus. In their consistent struggle against the Government they have shown a remarkable fearlessness, audacity and capacity to reject intimidation, dictation, divide-and-rule tactics and various machinations of the ruling circles to break and crush them. At the same time their political activities, particularly their demands against inequality, injustice, profligate living by the rich, corruption, mismanagement, insensitivity to the living conditions of the poor, repression and foreign dictation, have contributed to the sharpening of the political consciousness of the poor.

Similarly, the deteriorating economic condition of the nation is shaping the poor's consciousness in the revolutionary direction. As the ranks of the unemployed increases in all sectors of the economy, affecting all sections of the poor classes and even the petty-bourgeoisie, the poor have become more alienated from the rulers and are raising important questions about national direction and policies. And as the economic situation worsens official repression has increased. The Government assumes the role of supervisor of the masses. It becomes an administration relying on the police and the army

to control the people and extract loyalty and obedience from them. The masses respond. In the presence of government officials, they behave like a flock of sheep and sing praises of the regime. Their bitter disappointment, despair and anger can only be heard when leaders and officials are removed from office and must face the music.

However, the poor will remain ineffective outside a bottom-up organisation of their various classes. Their unorganised effort can only be a temporary dynamic. Neither stubborn courage nor fine slogans can be a substitute for organisation. People's power is people's organisation. Without it the masses will be too slow to react to government pressures and policies. And their vision of the future as well as an idea of what should be done will remain blurred.

The formation of this organisation must recognize not only the objective alliance of the poor classes but also their separate interests. It must reconcile the peasants' demand for private property with the workers' demand for the abolition of private property. This reconciliation cannot be achieved all at once through some single tactical formula. It can only come gradually, step by step, through the development and extension of contacts between the various classes of the poor. It may require separate organisations of these classes initially, especially as regards the workers and peasants, together with determined efforts to unite the activities of such organisations in one area of life after another. This is not possible unless they are backed up by a knowledge of the aims, tasks and strategies of their struggle.

The struggle of the poor against poverty, the politics of the poor, hinges on how the working class and the poor peasantry in particular and other poor classes in general, succeed in overcoming the obstacles in their path to achieve courage, self-confidence, unity and organisational strength. A sense of urgency is added to the search for ways to overcome these obstacles by the increasing financial power of the rich and the brazenness of officials in the coercion of the poor, as reflected in the Black Maria episode and the Bakalori massacre of 1980.

Footnotes

1. Gavin Williams, "Political Consciousness Among the Ibadan Poor" in E.de Kadt and G. Williams, ed., *Sociology and Development* (London: Tavistok, 1974).
2. Dupe Olatunbosun, *Nigeria's Neglected Rural Majority* (Ibadan: OUP, 1975).
3. Robin Cohen, *Labour in Nigerian Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1974).
4. Paul Lubeck, "Class Formation at the Periphery: Class Consciousness and Islamic Nationalism Among Nigerian Workers" in R. L. and I. H. Simpson, *Research in the Sociology of Work: Worker Consciousness* (Greenwich, CT.: JAI Press, 1979).
5. Cf. for example, Wogu Ananaba, *The Trade Union Movement in Nigeria*, (Benin Nigeria: Ethiope, 1969); and W. C. Alli, "The Working Class and National Politics", paper presented at the conference of the NASA University of Jos, January 1984.
6. Cf. Goran Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania* (London: Heinemann, 1980); Goran Hyden, *No Shortcuts to Progress* (London: Heinemann, 1983).
7. Mahmood, Mamdani, "The Agrarian Question and the Democratic Struggle (with specific reference to Uganda)" *Bulletin of the Third World Forum*, No. 6, April, 1986, p.10.
8. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (N.Y.: Grove 1969) p.38.

9. Pius Okigbo, "Interpersonal Income Distribution in Nigeria" in Proceedings of the 1975 Conference of the Nigerian Economic Society on Poverty in Nigeria (Ibadan: NES, 1975) p.135.
10. Mahmood Mamdani, op. cit.
11. The People's Redemption Party, the PRP, was the successor to the Northern Elements Progressive Union, the NEPU. Both were founded by Aminu Kano.
12. Cf. Okwudiba Nnoli, Ethnic Politics in Nigeria (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1978) chapter 3.
13. Leonard Plotuicov, "An Early Nigerian Civil Disturbance: The 1945 Hausa-Ibo Riot in Jos" Journal of Modern African Studies, Vol. 9, No. 2, August 1971, pp.299-300.
14. Cf. Wogu Ananaba, The Trade Union Movement in Nigeria (Benin: Nigeria: Ethiopie, 1969) pp.98-119; Nigeria, Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Disorders in the Eastern Provinces of Nigeria, November 1949 (Lagos: Government Printer, 1950).
15. Ikpe Etokudo, "All These Talks About Political Trade Unions" New Horizon, Vol. 3, No. 1, Jan-Feb. 1978; Adrian Peace, "The Lagos Proletariat: Labour Aristocrats or Populist Militants" in Richard G. Sandbrook and Robin Cohen, eds. The Development of An African Working Class (London: Longman, 1975), Peter Waterman, Division and Unity Among Nigerian Workers: Lagos Port Unionism, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague: Research Report Series No. 11, 1982; W. O. Alfi, "The Working Class and National Politics". Paper presented at the conference of NASA University of Jos, January 1984.
16. Cf. E.O. Abiola, 100 Questions and Answers on West African History AD 1900 to Present Day (Ado Akiti: Omolayo Press, 1972). Sa'ad Abubakar, "The Northern Provinces Under Colonial Rule 1900-1959" in Obaro Ikime, ed., Groundwork of Nigerian History (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1980).
17. Umoh James Umoh, "More Jobs Less Strikes", Daily Times, Monday, Nov. 15, 1982.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. C. E. F. Beer and Gavin Williams, "The Politics of the Ibadan Peasantry" The African Review, Vol. 5, 1975; Gavin Williams, "Class Relations in a Neo-colony: the Case of Nigeria" in Peter C. Gutkind and Peter Waterman, eds. African Social Studies (London: Heinemann, 1977).
21. A. F. Esetang, "The Politics of the Poor in Nigeria and Ghana, 1900-1986, Mimeo, 1986, pp.58-59; B. Beckman, "Bakalori: Peasants vs State and Capital". Nigerian Journal of Political Science, Vol. 4, Nos. 1 & 2, 1985, pp.76-104.
22. Cf. A. Abba, et al., Nigerian Economic Crisis (Zaria: Geskiya, 1985).