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**ONE LOVE FAMILY:
INTERSECTION WITH STATE
AND
NON-STATE AGENTS
IN SPATIAL APPROPRIATION**



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Abstract:

This paper is based on research undertaken during the Masterclass “Sacred and Urbanism: Entrepreneurial Religion, Infrastructure and the New Urbanism in Nigeria” held at the University of Ibadan in June 2017. A team of postgraduate students carried out a day of field research at the Maharaj Ji Village, an estate belonging to the One Love Family Movement, a spiritual community based on the Lagos-Ibadan express way. The paper reports the experience of the team in the Village and investigates the spatial management of the land by the community, as well as the ambivalent relationship with state agents in the community.

Key words: Satguru Marahaj Ji Village, spatial management, state actors, spiritual community

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I. Introduction

The team visited the Maharaj Ji village, also referred to as the “Holy Land”, and was received by a protocol officer who outlined the rules guiding pilgrims to the team. The team registered and had to switch off all electronic gadgets before entering the main component of the *Ashram*, a Sanskrit term which refers to a secluded building often used as a residence for a guru, a religious retreat or an instruction centre in the tradition of Hinduism. As stipulated in the rules, the team took off their foot wears and walked barefooted to the main component of the *Ashram* where a communication team led by the Chief Protocol Officer of the Village took them through an interactive session. The communication team displayed a high degree of communication mastery as they confined the flow of communications and technically avoided some of the team’s questions. Later, the team was led to the gallery where the pictures of the Guru with other prominent public figures were displayed. The characters include the former President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo and other traditional rulers from different parts of the country. The Maharaj Ji village is home to the One Love Family Movement led by Sat Guru Maharaj Ji (SGMJ, literally the “the teacher of the awakening of the truth” in a mixture of Sanskrit and Yoruba languages), also called the “Perfect Living Master and the Light of the World” by his disciples. According to SGMJ, the Great Light of Creation settles in a particular location (referred to as “the “Holy Land” of the time”) to carry out his “divine project of salvation” for a limited period of time. Since 1987, Ibadan is thus the “Holy Land of the time” as the ancient Yoruba city hosts the Maharaj Ji village, where the Guru himself now resides. The village has since grown to be home and centre for knowledge for many including devotees and many others who continually seek the knowledge and wisdom of the Guru. From an uninhabitable bush before 1987, the Maharaj Ji village has been altered from a forest to a centre of peace and shelter. In the village, from dusk to dawn, devotees engage in meditation sessions under SGMJ’s supervision. There are recorded (though largely unsubstantiated) claims of healing, deliverances and turn-around of the situations of following their visit to the village and encounter with the divine perfect master. The following questions were used to engage our interaction: What are the strategies of acquisition and appropriation of space by the *One Love Family*?, How does the *One Love Family* negotiate its relationship with state’s agents? What is the significance of living in the community? These questions aim at interrogating the intersection of the One Love Family and state agents on the one hand and non-state agents on the other hand as it relates to building a spiritual community and land issues



Maharaj Ji Village Research Team with Sat Guru Maharaji and his devotees

The *One love family* was founded by SGMJ, whose real name is Mohammed Saheed Ajirobatan Dan Ibrahim, a former employee of the defunct Nigeria Airways. He was born on 20th, December 1947 and lived in London until 1980 when he returned to Nigeria. He then experienced a “rebirth” which he christened the “birth of his spirituality on 1st January, 1985. According to SGMJ, the One Love family is neither a religion nor a religious organisation. Instead, it is a way of life that had never existed before. SGMJ stresses that membership of the movement gives knowledge and power. He counters the teachings of both Christians and Muslims, declaring them “deceitful” concepts and philosophies aimed at perpetrating the enslavement of the bodies and minds of Africans⁷. A document entitled “The Divine Song of Creation and Constitution of *Premies*/Discipline of Truth” contains general guidelines for the *Premies* (mission coordinators), including the discipline they have to follow and what is expected of them. The document also includes songs and stanzas praising SGMJ, seeking “his grace”, considering him as a “gift of life” whose “divine knowledge is immeasurable⁸”. According to the devotees interviewed, the nature of the community is inclusive as religion, race and ethnicity are “signs of impurity.” They asserted that organised religious and so-called sacred spaces such as the estate of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) are “symbols of confusions and calculus of probability⁹”. Instead, Maharaj Ji Village is a “divine and inclusive place”. “It is not a community but a divine public place to get answers, access to knowledge and become an extension of power, a ‘Holy Land’ of light where people come to

⁷ Interview with SGMJ

⁸ARTI Series No. 0442010 and Satguru Tract Series No. 10/13/3846, i-10, 16-20

⁹Interview with a community member

experience God as a living being¹⁰. Hence, the place is “sacred” as effect of “unity” and not as a religious centre¹¹.

As a place of knowledge and meditation, the Maharaj Ji Village is the “highest spiritual place in the universe¹²”. More importantly, it is the “Holy Land” for the One Love Family and a centre of knowledge for mankind, members, as well as visitors (Pilgrims) are bound by the laws and rules guiding their conduct on the land¹³. Residents and visitors are expected to abide by series of regulations. Noteworthy, the symbolism of various regulations enforced appears to be derivations from Yoruba traditional religion and the Abrahamic religious practices. It can be interpreted as a bid to gain legitimacy. For instance, the prohibition of shoes in the “Holy Land” is present in Yoruba traditional religion as well as in Islam. It was said to be as a “sign of respect for Mother Earth” by some members. Interestingly, the “Holy Land” is commonly construed as a point of connection to the “Supreme Being”. It is also understood as a place to serve SGMJ and the world. Indeed, the present world is described as “in chaos”, which urges for the arrival of a “saviour”. Presence in the space is seen as an opportunity for self-realisation and engaging in selfless activities, such as participation in maintenance of the vicinity and upkeep of the “Holy Land.” The movement also has its significant dates which are sacred and religiously observed by the devotees. These are important landmarks that give clearer picture of the inner workings and philosophical leanings of the movement. Dates celebrated include:

January 1 - Spiritual birthday of SGMJ

April 17 - Opening of the “Holy Land” in 1987

May 29 - Rebirth of Nigeria

July 17 - SGMJ appearance to the world

July 25 - Day for saving the world

August 16 - Declaration day for No War in Nigeria

November 9-17 Golden Age Festival (blessings of innovations of the devotees)

December 10 - Birthday of PremRawat (the preceding Guru Maharaj Ji located in the US)

December 20 - Physical birthday of SGMJ

¹⁰Interview with SGMJ

¹¹Interview with a community member

¹²Interview with a community member

¹³Interview with a community member



Maharaj Ji Village

II. Living in a spiritual place

Sat Guru Maharaj Ji's village is located on the Ibadan- Lagos Express Way. The vast expanse land was a thick forest which was opened up by SGMJ himself. The "Holy Land" of the "One Love Family" was formerly at 33 Shitta Thompson Street, Iju Water works, Lagos State, with visible presence at 10, Awolowo Avenue, Bodija, Ibadan which also served as SGMJ's residence. They were forcefully evicted by court order of the Oyo State High Courton the 25th of October, 2011¹⁴ and had to relocate. The land management is conducted by the chief protocol officer, O.A., who coordinates how activities, processions, sanitation and other managerial duties within the "Holy Land" are carried out to follow divine processions. The rules and regulations guiding individual and collective conduct on living and coming in to the "Holy Land" are spelt out by the Maharaj Ji himself. They are in accordance with spirituality as well as the way of life of the devotees. These rules entail prohibitions such as: wearing of shoes, wearing of blue colours (as it is seen to be "evil"), usage of and technological gadget whatsoever (as it "distract concentration" during meditation) wearing of trousers for ladies, entry to women observing their 'monthly period', urinating anywhere on the "Holy Land" aside designated places ("else, the person would urinate until death¹⁵"), smoking of any form and drinking of alcohol, sex nor any contraceptive, indecent cutting of flowers except otherwise compulsory for 'divine' procession sake and should be communed with through the mind, laying down of any sorts (as in sleeping) is prohibited but dosing is allowed and seen to be a part of meditation within the premises of the "Holy Land". Any violation whatsoever has

¹⁴Vanguard "Guru Maharaj ji appeals eviction order" November, 4, 2011. Available at: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2011/11/guru-maharaj-ji-appeals-eviction-order/> (accessed 4 August 2017)

¹⁵Interview with O. A., Chief Protocol Officer

an implication (physically or spiritually) or otherwise would lead to discharge from the *Ashram*.



***Recreated from a sign found on site

III. Holy Land Regulation

Members commonly engage in the conservation of flowers and trees and other forms to which nature should be conserved. This practice of the 'One Love Family' believes that animals, trees, flowers and other elements of the environment have "life in them". The question of mortality and immortality is left aside. Plants within the *Ashram* are to be respected and none of these plants were plucked without a spiritual-ritual reason or notice of SGMJ. However, it was clearly stated that new trees and flowers are planted every day. As it was told and observed that, they give special attention and regards to flora, though it is an important element in the practice of their "way of life":

"All the leaves you see here, they are medicine. We don't eat life, we don't swallow blood, anyone eating chicken, cow, he's not human" People are free to come here but they must strictly abide by our rules. We are talking of spirituality here, love and prosperity. If you don't follow the law, you can die anytime 'na you put your hand inside fire.' Life depends on obedience¹⁶."

Furthermore, the animals from the inner part of the bush and the forest have reportedly noticed that they are "more safe" within the premises of the "Holy Land." As a consequence, they reside there without fears of being harmed. SGMJ also disclosed that there are no residential buildings within the "Holy Land". Similarly, there is no ambition for constructing institutional edifices such as universities (with the exception of hotels) within the premises of the "Holy Land" unlike

¹⁶Interview with O.A

other sacred assemblies, because visitors of the Village are here to receive knowledge. Existing development in the “Holy Land” includes vast expanse of farmland, a canteen, Maharaj Ji’s own building (where he personally receives visitors), a supermarket, a “meditation building”, a bank where people make contributions alongside other boxes (offering boxes like with the inscription of *Maharaj Ji Modupe*, which means “ Thank you Maharaj Ji”) where one could drop gifts in appreciation to Maharaj Ji, a media house where publication and media materials are displayed and the *Satsang Hall* (meaning “Testimony Hall”¹⁷) which doubles as both the main auditorium for spiritual events, *aspirants* (willing members) dedication as well as the main gallery for pilgrims and visitors. According to community members and SGMJ himself, the population in the premises of the Maharaj Ji village receiving knowledge and meditating approximates 250 people but informants claim that attendees could reach 250 million during festivals and similar large programmes. In addition, a number of people are said to be there “spiritually”: although we were told that we cannot see them, their spirit is reported as presently seated on the chairs we see as vacant.

Generally, one cannot overlook the significant presence and cross-cultural references to Yoruba mythology and religion. The references to Egyptian civilization and belief system are also evident in images and pictures adorning the Satsang hall and its premises especially in connection with the professed way of life of *One love family* members and their leader.

IV. Acquisition, Appropriation, Administration and Development of Land

According to SGMJ, the Village was acquired from the Alaadorin family of Yemetu of Ibadan. Prior to this period, the Ashram was located in Lagos. The increasing presence of his devotees at this place may have contributed to the agitation by youths in the area who had grown uncomfortable with his religious preaching and practices, and consequently resulted in the demand for his vacation of the neighbourhood. Another reason for the relocation of the “Holy Land” is the spiritual belief of Satguru Maharaj Ji and his devotees that Ibadan, a Yoruba land, was the cradle of human existence. According to a publication by Divine Light Mission titled “Original Locations and Names of Cities in Nigeria before the European Invasion”, SGMJ listed Nazareth as the original name for Ibadan. According to one of the Divine Ministers of SGMJ, the “Holy Land” of the *One love family* is recognised by the master plan of the state, as proper land survey and other forms of approval with the government were properly done and documented by the government. Hence, the location of the land on the state’s master plan is noted to be the “Holy Land”. The set back of

¹⁷Testimony, see Satguru Tract Series No. 10/13/3846

meters away from the main road was observed to comply with the regulation of the government's master plan. Appropriation of space within the "Holy Land" is seen to be "divine". Therefore, it is solely and strictly done by SGMJ who is regarded as the highest living spiritual being of the land. Hence, SGMJ is said to locate where what should be and how what should be, regarding land administration within the camp. The government does not have control or influence on the allocation of space for development or the location of any of the spiritual artefacts or any other form of structure on the holy ground. Although, spirituality is taken at high regards. Approvals are granted to developments within the camp as it was described to us by one of the spiritual ministers (a "Papa"), by government upon SGMJ's spiritual approval as well as other documents associated with development. This includes architectural drawings, structural drawings and other documents associated with the 'physical' development done by professionals that belong to their family. According to SGMJ, the "Holy Land" functions as a "terrestrial temporal space" primarily for the acquisition of knowledge belonging only to SGMJ, he has the wherewithal to guide both the aspirants and the devotees. Devotees always come around to meditate in search of embedded truths in the universe which can only be achieved after receiving knowledge from SGMJ himself.

V. Ambivalent Relationship with State Agents

SGMJ has demonstrated a clear propensity to function as an opinion-maker especially as it concerns the politics of the country. His stance on national socio-political issues marks him out as a nationalist and opinion-leader. He frequently grants interviews and issues press statements on burning national issues. Although SGMJ claimed he is not a religious leader, his movement possesses characteristics of a religion. In probing questions bordering on Sat Guru Maharaj Ji and his institution's relationships with apparatus of the state, it appears there are issues of conflicts that come up at irregular intervals. A case in point was the controversy SGMJ had with the Military administration of General Babaginda, the military president from 1986-1993. According to SGMJ, during a fieldtrip to his *Ashram*, he claimed the General Ibrahim Babangida's led regime sponsored publications to tarnish his image, where he was accused of killing some people and burying them at the present site. SGMJ states:

"We were all here in the Ashram when soldiers and government officials stormed this place to arrest me based on the claim that I used people in building the foundation of my Ashram. My *premies* wanted to fight but I told them to let go. I was arrested along some of my disciples and we were put in prison for nine days. The government sent

people to revisit my Ashram to find out but they couldn't see any dead body. So, we were released after nine days¹⁸.”

The case was eventually dropped because the accusation could not be substantiated. It did not receive the media attention it got initially. Perhaps aware of the ambivalent public perception of the *Ashram*, in his word, he asked “did anybody offer you a bottle of blood when you got here?¹⁹.” This question brings to the fore his awareness of what people say and how his image and spiritual movement is perceived by people outside the *Ashram*. He further stated:

“Controversy is created by those who want to disconnect with God and that people prefer religion than experiencing God alive²⁰.”

He observed that Nigerians are easily swayed by rumours rather than query the truth of a phenomenon. Another point of reference was the confrontation with the Military Administrator of Oyo State in the mid 1990s, and there are several versions on what transpired between the government and SGMJ. However, two different versions of the stories were obtained during the course of the field work. A.G., a divine minister of SGMJ, said the invasion of the site by the military administrator of Oyo State Colonel C. N. was motivated by his religious sentiments. N., a Christian who professes faith in the mainstream Christian ideology, wanted to clamp down on the operation of the site, which he perceived to be “strange and unconventional”. He said “this got N. infuriated and personally led his men to the Ashram and devastated structures at the “Holy Land.²¹” Also, O. A., a divine minister for protocol who also doubles as the general inspector of Divine Light Mission who attempted to give an insight as to why a military administrator invaded the site but eventually swayed the conversation said in his words: “He came here with his group, but masters don't fight, they don't fight people²²”. Some people claimed our Ashram extends to their farmland, they went to government, and government came²³.” The need to query further the measures employed to resolve the issues at the time did not produce any concrete or conventional method of conflict resolution. Owadioha only told us that “it solved itself, *anything wey get beginning deh end* [anything that has a beginning will have an end] (our emphasis). The expression shows that although, measures of conflict resolution which was sought ended in their favour, there is no known mechanism identified as panacea, which can be conveniently suggested to be enshrouded in secrecy. Besides these confrontations with governments, SGMJ has also enjoined some kind of endorsement from

¹⁸ Interview with SGMJ

¹⁹ Interview with SGMJ

²⁰ Interview with SGMJ

²¹ Interview with A. G.

²² Interview with O.A.

²³ Interview with O.A

government. Worthy of mention was his relationship with Alao Akala, who was the governor of the Oyo state from 2007-2011 was alleged to have gotten spiritual support from the SGMJ that led to his emergence as governor. The governor, at state wide media programme tagged “*E Pade Gomina*” (Meet the Governor) declared that the founder of One Love Family, SGMJ was his long time close friend that he cannot deny him because of his current political and social status. In his words:

“Sat Guru is my friend. We have known each other for a long period. As a matter of fact, we became friends when I was in the police force and I am sure that you know that police have all kinds of friends. It is long that I visited him and it is not because I don’t want to visit him but I am so busy that I don’t have time to visit him of recent. But I want to tell everybody that Guru is my friend and I can go to anywhere I like²⁴.” During the democratic administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo, Maharaj Ji claimed Obasanjo recognized him, though indirectly. According to him, “Obasanjo said God is a Nigerian”. This alone is enough for me²⁵.”

This claim by SGMJ could be held to concretize his cordial relationship with top government officials although depending on their political dispensation. Several pictures of Obasanjo adorned the Satsang Hall to show for this. SGMJ believes and confesses that he is an “embodiment of God in the world”, the “revelation” which was foretold by one of the Gurus who lived before him. As a consequence, people and constituted authorities, including the leaders of government in Nigeria, and beyond should come to him for guidance. He articulates his political statements and disseminates them through the media, print and electronic. Such statements cover a whole lot of subject from welfarism to nationalism and from traditional African beliefs to globalizing phenomenon. For the adherents, compliance with the law of the land is sacrosanct to the belief of the Divine Love Mission and anyone who creates controversies around its spiritual practices must have done so out of religious sentiments and jealousy. S. A., also a divine minister made this position clear when he said “Maharaj Ji says, ‘where there is no law don’t stay there²⁶’. With this cited position, it can then be interpreted that adherents of the Divine Love Mission are law abiding citizens of Nigeria and possibly other places beyond the physical location. According to informants, the spiritual site also has a cordial relationship with the Nigerian Police. Police personnel operating in the area are aware of the location of the seven physical security posts that serves the security function of the site’s property. Galapopo further claimed that there have been

²⁴Gbenro A. (22/04/2011) “Sat Guru Maharaj Ji is My Friend. Gov. Akala” *PM News* online. Available at: <https://www.pmnewsnigeria.com/2011/04/22/sat-guru-maharaji-is-my-friend-gov-akala/> (accessed 4 August 2017)

²⁵ Interview with SMGJ

²⁶ Interview with S.A

occasions in the past where Police personnel came to them to get information about criminal activities along the express way. The site of the “Divine Love Mission” suggests a communal living of closely knitted people coming together by a common purpose. The purpose of the site is expounded by SMGJ as including the following:

Uniting the people of Nigeria across tribal and religious line: The presumption which motivated the trip to Maharaj Ji village was that it is a religious site. However, this presumption was doused. Adherents and even the so called perfect living master claimed that the Divine Love Mission is not religious and anyone irrespective of the faith you profess could come to have spiritual encounter at the site. SGMJ is a friend to all, traditional and political leaders alike. This was observed in a section at the Satsang Hall where pictures with notable political, traditional and religious leaders including the former president Olusegun Obasanjo, the Oni of Ife: Oba Ogunwusi, His Royal Highness EzeWajorchi of Omagwa, Amanayabo of Kalabari Kingdom; King T. J. TPrincewell. As contained in a 2017 press statement, SGMJ expresses concerns about not only the welfare of the people but the need to keep the political entity as one and indivisible. The June 8, 2017 press release prescribed 52 ways out, in which the Nigerian government must abide by to transform the nation into charting a new and promising direction for development. It is also about maintaining equilibrium in the world order by motivating the blacks to embrace technological innovations and understanding the importance of technology and the role it plays in driving development, A. said “the world is standing with one leg, which is the white and it need the other leg²⁷.” Africans needs to rise up to the challenge making technological headway so as to be on the same level with the western world. The paucity of research as a result of poor funding was identified as one of the inhibitions for breakthrough in this direction. Technology brings about self-reliance, it gives the ability to harness and put to [good] use the provisions of nature. Although the spiritual site at one time or the other have had to deal with issues of controversies with the people and the state government, it appears most of the issues were resolved through the courts. This shows that SGMJ and the Divine Love Mission respect the law of the land and constituted authority. Government disposition to the spiritual movement have been shaped not by a fixed relational pattern but by the different disposition of individual government as discussed above. It might therefore be convenient to say that although there is more to be discovered about this spiritual movement, it appears on the fringes of its modus operandi that the movement operates within the ambit of the law. And if for any reason there are issues of controversies, it has always subjected itself to legal scrutiny. SGMJ considers himself as a friend to all and sundry and to the government of the nation. He

²⁷ Interview with S.A

tenaciously gives advice to the government and pays courtesy visits to political and traditional actors in different parts of the country in his mission at promoting peace and love.

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