

Title—Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements Against the European Colonial Order

Author—Michael Adas

Year—1987

Categories: Colonialism, Social Movements, Politics, Imperialism, Theory

Place: The World

Time: 1820-1934

Argument Synopsis:

Adas' book is focused on revitalization movements, a form of social movements, during the colonial period. He is specifically concerned with revitalization movements that took the form of prophet-inspired rebellions among non-Western people against European-dominated colonial regimes. A revitalization movement in general is defined as a deliberate conscious effort by members of society to construct a more satisfying culture. Adas explores the relationships between the rise of prophetic leaders and violent protest. He defines a prophet as a person who believes and is able to convince others that they have special contact with supernatural forces. Adas is concerned with the relationship between violent protest movements and prophetic expression—he analyzes the key factors that have caused them to fuse in prophetic rebellions. For his analysis, Adas compares five different cases of these prophet-inspired violent movements. All of the movements analyzed display a blend of the impulses of assimilation and nativistic tendencies. The five case studies are: the revolt led by Prince Dipanagara in the Netherlands East Indies from 1825 to 1830, the Pair Maire or Hau Hau movement of the Maoris in New Zealand from 1864 to 1867, the Birsa disturbances among the Mundas of Chota Nagpur in East Central India from 1895 to 1900, the Maji Maji rebellions in German East Africa from 1905 to 1906, and the Saya San risings in Burma from 1930 to 1932. Limiting his number of case studies allows for an examination of the sociocultural contexts of these rebellions and the patterns displayed by each movement.

Adas discusses the need to use new ways of approaching sources when relying on colonial sources. He argues that you must correct for the deep-seated prejudices that permeate the colonial sources. He originally planned on focusing on peasant protests, but it quickly became clear that elite groups played key roles in the genesis and development of these movements. Adas deliberately does not rely on a framework based on the dichotomy of tradition and modernity. He posits that these rebellions involved the restoration and reformulation of customary ideas and institutions. All five movements share a common origin in situations of accelerated change—all five present one type of revitalization responses generated by the process of European expansion. Each movement involved collective protest that came to be focused on prophetic leaders whose teachings ultimately led to rebellions against the European colonizers and their allies. The support for these movements was mostly drawn from groups that had lost political power and social status under colonialism. The emergence of prophetic leaders deeply influenced the mobilization patterns and tactics of the protest movements adopted by dissident groups.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Revitalization movements have been seen as key examples of social protests against conditions resulting from European colonial rule
- Central aim of revitalization movements is to provide meaningful ideologies, codes of behavior, and systems of social interaction that will allow their adherents to overcome the feelings of deprivation and sense of disorientation pervasive in periods of accelerated change
- The enemy was the agents of the new order, whether they were Europeans, co-opted indigenous leaders, or African or Asian migrants who served the Europeans