

## **THE SOKOTO JIHAD AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF POLITICAL COMMUNITIES IN WEST AFRICA**



\*Prof. Attahiru Ahmad Sifawa

### ***Abstract:***

*In this paper, an attempt has been made to look into the extent to which these reform movements succeeded in transforming different political communities in West Africa. In order to provide a clear and vivid analysis of the level of such transformations, this paper will consider the jihad led by Uthman bn Fodiyo, the most spectacular and far-reaching, as our case study.*

### **Introduction**

There existed a very long tradition of Islamic reform movements in the history of West Africa. Popular among these movements includes; the Almoravids activities under the leadership of Abdullahi Ibn Yasin in the 11th century, Askia Muhammed Tore (1493-1528), and Sheikh Abd al-Kareem Al-maghili (c.1503). Similarly, in 1725, Alfaba declared a jihad in Futa Jallon and in 1775 a section of Fulani in Futa toro declared a jihad against the ruling pagan Fulani.

Of all the series of jihad struggles, in West Africa, the 19th century jihads in West Africa, notably, those of; Sheikh Uthman bn Fodiyo, Muhammad Labbo of Masina, and Al-haji Umar (The Bambara jihad) were the most successful. Apart from dislodging the existing traditional political rulers off their seats, these Jihads succeeded in transforming the affected communities and establishing Islamic states that drew their guiding principles from the oxordous and rightly guided Caliphs.

### **The Jihad**

It was unfortunate that the development of modern historical scholarship coincided with the period of European colonization of Africa. Thus, initially, they denied the existence of Africa history. Instead, Africans were assumed to be living in an ethnographic present. And therefore anthropology was used in understanding Africa. It was not surprising therefore, when, imperial scholars always tried to portray the historical activities taking place in Africa as the continuous struggles of domination and subordination among the various ethnic/racial groups in the continent. Consequently, scholars like Lugard, H.A.S Johnson, M.G, Smith and others, as Y.B. Usman rightly stated, all bent on describing the Sokoto jihad as a tribal struggle. This notion has greatly hampered the proffer conceptualization of the jihad, let alone appreciating its role in the revival of Islam and the overall transformation of the affected communities. According to M.A, Al-Hajj, "The Sokoto jihad, therefore, must be conceived as a revolutionary movement within a Muslim community and not as warfare between Muslims and pagans." He further pointed out that

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\* PhD Scholar, Department of History, Sokoto State University, Sokoto

the jihad was intellectual movement and revolutionary in ideology, in organization as well as intellectual and emotional appeal.

In a short note, unless historians try and understand the true meaning and teachings of Islam, and the jihad in their theological context, as well as the type of people that constituted and fought the Sokoto Jihad, they will hardly appreciate its significance and role in the overall transformation of the society. This paper attempts to conceptualise the jihad as a revolutionary movement, taking the example of the Sokoto jihad and its role in changing the socio-economic and political realities of the greater part of what is today, modern Nigeria. The paper demonstrates the role of Islam as a unifying force, and caliphate both as a political system and as one of the major political entities that laid the foundation of modern Nigeria.

#### Pre-Jihad Hausa land

According to Balogun, the manner in which Islam was introduced had itself contributed to the persistence of non-Islamic customs in West Africa. The earlier Islamic scholars were liberal in their interpretation of what constitutes the profession of Islam, and therefore were tolerant of some non-Islamic practices, believing as many Muslims still do, that new converts can, with time improve their practice of Islam. For instance;

“Sarkin Kebbi, despite the profession of Islam, was himself a chief custodian of the sacred places of Tsafi. He continued to propitiate spirits (Iskoki) either personally or through the services of traditional priests.

The same was the case at Zamfara and most parts of west Africa, that upto the 19th century, there existed a strong belief in the farfarun Aljannu (benevolent spirits) that safeguarded the economic and social interest of the people as well as the Babbakun Aljannu (remorseless spirits), a sarakunan Arna occupied a very important religious position. The belief in their power to bring or avert misfortune, is popular among the local communities. By all standards, the mode of practice of Islam among the local communities was unoxordus

Socially, these were high level of moral decadence. Woman freely intermingled with men half naked. Slaves and woman were equally ill-treated and deprived of educational right. The political picture of the region was equally characterized by tyranny, oppression, corruption and injustice. The peasants were economically exploited by the ruling class. There was the prevalence of *gaisuwa*, *kuddinkasa*, *kuddin tudu*, *kuddin rafi* etc, with officials such as Tudun-Kebbi, Rafin Kebbi Saran-Kebbi, Gundari among others, charged with the responsibility of collecting different forms of levies and taxation.

#### **The Transformation of the Political Communities**

The Sokoto Caliphate was the largest single polity in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century sub-saharan Africa, and probably the only political entity up to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Africa that had successfully accommodated over 250 ethnic groups, with 30 emirates and numerous sub-emirates, as well as a population of more than 10 million people.

“it also covered a territory of over a million square kilometers. The core of the caliphate lay within the boundaries of the present day Nigeria. It stretched as far as Nikki in Benin republic, Ngau-ndere and Tibati in the Republic of Cameroon and much of part of Niger republic”.

It is however important to note that there was large scale misrepresentation in both public and Academic presentation of the history of the Sokoto Caliphate. One of such erroneous view about the Jihad was the racial-ethnic conception of the Jihad movement. That the struggle was considered to be racial or tribal struggle between the ruling Habe (Hausa) Kings and the impatient and power mongering Fulani. On the contrary however, there were enough reasons to believe in the cosmopolitan nature of the membership of the Jihad movement. For instance, many southern Nigerian communities had settled at Dan Malle and Badau, the Gimbana/Hausa communities at Abdul salami, the Zamfarawa at Madorawa and Danchadi as well as several others, while the Sheikh was at Sifawa. Even the initial composition of the jama'a and principal Actors were not based on ethnic affiliation. Namoda was the head of some Muslim communities at Zamfara, while Abdul Salam had initially been the head of some Hausa communities/students. Agali was the leader of Tuareg and other Muslims from Adar, while the Fulani who came from Konni were rallied by "Ali Jedo a scholar and eventual leader of the Army.

### **Political Structure and Administration of Justice**

It is particularly interesting to note that the leaders of Sokoto Caliphate device the most efficient ways/policies of uniting and administering the amalgamated and hitherto various independent ethnic and political communities. Thus they device the federal system of Emirate administration.

"A new order based on written laws and moral Codes with State religion and its vast and radical transformation of institutions and social relationship.

New offices such as those of *Sa'i* who was in charge of the administration of Zakat, and Muhtasib (censor of morals) which fight social vices and ensure the observance and compliance with Shariah, were introduced. Kwaire stated in clear terms, that;

"in order to reach out to his provinces pass instructions to the subordinate rulers, collection of taxes from their districts, and channeling information and public complaints, from the districts to the caliph", Bello re-introduced some of the pre-jihad titles. Magajin Gari, Magajin Rafi, Galadima and Ubandoma.<sup>17</sup>

However, it is noteworthy to state that appointment to public offices was based on merit. Learned and God fearing judges were appointed, as directed by Islamic Shariah. according to Bunza;

"It was... an Islamic State based on social justice, equity and fair play. It was a State whose principles directly derived from the Shariah. There was no discrimination whatsoever among the tribes, instead all were given equal opportunity to serve in the best way possible in their professions and expertise."<sup>18</sup>

It is a widely reported view of the famous Greek philosopher, Plato, that the only solution to human-problems-or gate way to human progress is a philosopher to be the king or the king be philosopher. Therefore, basic knowledge of the essence and practice of governance is necessary before any meaningful progress could be achieved, within the society.

It was not surprising therefore with the visionary, just and transparent leadership provided by the leaders of the Sokoto caliphate, there were absolute freedom of expression and accountability. For the first time in the political history of the modern

Africa, people (scholars) publicly announced the withdrawal of their allegiance to their commander in chief.<sup>19</sup>The event that is similar to casting vote of loss of confidence in the modern democracy.

The condition of slaves was equally improved upon, compared with the pre-jihad era when a master could treat his slave the way he wishes. In the Caliphate Era, the institution of slavery was modified, restricted and regulated in compliance with Islamic tenants. Slaves under the Islamic Shariah have their own rights and shall not be assign jobs that are beyond their ability. At Runjin Sambo Plantation, for instance Slaves worked from morning to the time of Zuhr prayers. They were provided with shelter, wives, education, farms and other privileged<sup>20</sup>. Muhammad Bello established a special quarter for the blind, called Unguwar Makafi, where they were provided with both academic instruction and vocational training in form of various crafts, Such as rope making, cloth weaving, basketry, mat weaving etc.<sup>21</sup> This was what is referred to as functional special education in modern Academic parlance.

Although, most of the jihad battles were fought in Hausa land, its consequences were wide spread across the greater part of West Africa. Okunland, otherwise Kabba, under the supervision of Nupe-kingdom, Birnin Ngaure in Niger Republic, and eastern Adamawa were clear examples. However, because of the liberal nature of the Caliphate system, many communities within its territories and in the outlying Districts, were allowed to maintain their un-Islamic identities, yet enjoying the protection of Islamic government.

The prevalent political instability and upheavals during the Jihad wars as well as reluctance on the part of their neighbours in extending the teachings of Islam explains the reason why they easily embraced western culture and Christian missionaries, as Ige strongly argued. Yet, because of these historical experiences, they always see themselves as minority in Northern Nigeria than southerners.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Jihad and Inter-group Relations**

One of the surviving legacies of the Jihad and by extension the Sokoto Caliphate was enhancing the peaceful co-existence and relationship between the numerous religions and ethno-political communities. Under the Islamic Shariah which was the guiding principle of the caliphate, even if a particular community do not accept Islam, they could agree or sign 'Aman' with the Muslims/Islamic state. According to Nengel,

*"Aman... in political parlance, the term refers to the non-aggression pact entered into between Muslim and non-Muslim peoples for purposes of peaceful co-existence... (It) simplify denotes the bonds of amicable relationship that existed between the Muslims and many of the non-Muslims Societies of Central Nigeria".<sup>23</sup>*

Little doubt therefore, immediately after the jihad, people continue to intermingle and exchange goods and ideas in every nook and crannies of the region. The Nupe and by extension the Sokoto caliphate had a significant influence over several parts of central and southern Nigeria States. "Allen and Crowder for instance, observed that Igala, Nupe, Hausa, Kanuri and Fulani people were in large numbers in Onitsha, Agbor, Asaba and Bonny<sup>24</sup>Jimada further expatiates the strong socio-political relations which existed between the Northern Nigeria ethnic groups and the Southern Nigerian communities. He said:

“Similar relations were also established in the political field. Crowder recorded seeing Hausa and Nupe advisers at the court of the Obi of Onitsha and made reference to one Aliheli Lander, a Hausa adviser to Obi. Within the same period, Masaba (i.e. Muhammadu Saba, 1859 – 1973) received and accepted a joint invitation from the Obi king of Agbor and the Atta, the Igala king to send troops for an expedition to punish some Delta communities who had obstructed the free flow of Coastal Commerce over the Niger.<sup>25</sup>

### **Urbanization and Emergence of States**

Politically, Yoruba land was one of the major areas affected by the 19<sup>th</sup> century “Jihad in Hausa land”. With the fall of Oyo, after its defeat by the Jihadists, a lot of people scattered and eventually founded or continue to troop in new cities like Ibadan, which later emerged as the dominant political power in Yoruba land.

According to Ifamose, as a result of the Jihad activities in Yoruba land, a lot of people were displaced from their initial homes. And by 1850s, the population of Ilorin and Ibadan was 70,000. But by 1890, that of Ilorin rose to 100,000 with Oyo having 80,000.<sup>26</sup> Abba highlighted the role of Sokoto Caliphate in the growth of urbanisation in the sub-region. According to him:

“Urbanization had of course a long history in Hausa land and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century not only were villages converted to towns but new towns were founded as centres of government, industry and trade. Many towns were also founded in emirates outside Hausaland, through personal efforts of (some flag bearers) Emirs, e.g. Yola, Bauchi, Bida, Gombe-Abba, Kontagora, Keffi, Nasarawa etc. Town life by drawing more people together, broadening their outlooks and involving them into more and newer economic and social activities built a bigger territorial community in terms of functional interdependence and social integration”.<sup>27</sup>

Last, further expatiated how the newly established Ribat towns developed to urban-centres and sub-emirates. Sokoto itself was initially a Ribat town founded by Muhammad Bello, when the Sheikh was at Sifawa, before it later rose to administrative nerve centre of the Caliphate. Other places like Wurno, Rabah (formally Yan Shawara), Isah, Tambuwal, Bodinga, Salah, Kware, Binji and several others started as Ribat towns (walls) before they later developed into towns and cities.

New warfare techniques involving the use of heavy cavalry was reinforced in the caliphate. Although the caliphate do not had a standard army, whenever there was serious political uprising/revolt in any of the emirates, the *Amirul Muminin* could send instruction to the neighbouring emirates and sometimes sent reinforcement forces from the headquarters. This was exactly what happened at Katsina to help the Emir crushed rebellion, as Y. B. Usman clearly mentioned.

### **Reforms in Borno**

Although the jihadists could not claim to have successfully conquered and established their rule over the whole of Borno, their activities had no doubt opened a new page in the History of Borno.

A part from establishing the caliphate's rule over the emirates of Gombe and Katagum, within the old Kanem Borno Empire, the Jihad activities led to the emergence of Sheikh Al-Amin El-Kanemi, who later emerged as the new leader and eventually founder of the Shehu dynasty.

However, El-Kanemi while engaging the jihadists with intellectual warfare, he quickly embarked on the reorganization and the re-structuring of the new state of Borno.<sup>28</sup> He equally introduced Shariah, employed judges and fought many un-Islamic practices. Thus, the impact of the Sokoto Jihad was not only felt at Borno and Niger Delta in the Southern Nigeria area, but as far as the present day Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Ghana and Togo.

### **Conclusion**

There was no single movement in the history of West Africa that was as significant as the Sokoto Jihad. It led to the revolution that had successfully transformed the entire life of the affected communities. What made the Sokoto caliphate distinct among the political communities produced by various revolutions across the world was the principle of equity and the respect for the worth and dignity of the individual, irrespective of his race or ethnic affiliations as Y. B. Usman, rightly argued. He mentioned for instance that;

“What made it distinct and favoured its success were, firstly, the commitment of its leaders to justice, ensured by the law and by economic, social, educational and cultural development promoted by responsible public institutions. Secondly, their insistence on universal values and standards of incorporation into the new polity it established, derived of course from the Koran (Qur'an) and Sunna, over and above all, tribal and racial differences”.<sup>29</sup>

One note worthy aspect of the reform brought by the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate was transforming the women and placing them at their rightful places, both religiously, social, economically, intellectuality and politically. The pre-jihad Hausa land had significantly differ from most parts of the world concerning their treatment to women. Despite the deprivation of their social-economic rights, women exercised considerable political influence in some part of the pre-jihad Hausa land. Boyd, demonstrated the political influence of Inna of Gobir in pre-jihad Gobir kingdom. According to her:

“When she (Inna) is appointed she dresses in men's clothing, appearing to the outsider just like a man, complete with turban. She is publicly installed and beats the tambari (ceremonial drum) twelve times, just as the Sarki does. A chair is provided for her on traditional public occasions, when all others sit on the floor in the Sarki's presence. When the Sarki goes to the Eid prayer, Inna occupies the public parts of his house, with her attendants, and there is drumming until he returns. In former days, when the Sarki left town, she was left as sole-regent until his return. There use to be bori activities attendant on any ceremonial departures from Sabon Birni made by the Sarki”<sup>30</sup>

But despite the political eminence of Inna, and certain influence enjoyed by some female members of nobility, the average women in Hausaland suffered untold socio-economic and educational deprivation and exploitation. But with the establishment of the caliphate, women were provided with a special education package, known as the “Yan' taru”. It was a specially designed education programme for women. It was started by Sheikh Usman bn Fodiyo, before it was eventually perfected by Nana Asma'u. Through the Yan'taru

programme, women were educated in the tenant of their religion, and it at the same time served as a medium through which they were kept abreast with the socio-political transformations and events taking place in the caliphate. However, instead of coming publicly to take part on the administration, they always channel their opinion and advice through their leaders (Yan' taru leaders) and husbands. Their positions, have on several occasions determined the decision of the Caliphate on many matters. The roles of Nana Asma'u and Maryam, during the episodes of the installation of Caliph Aliyu Babba and Emir Ibrahim Dabo of Kano respectively, were clear examples.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, the 19<sup>th</sup> century jihad in Hausa land was one of the most important religious and socio-political movements in the world which have open up new epochs and successfully transformed the values, beliefs, cultures and the overall socio economic and political philosophy of significant political communities, in modern times.

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