

**THE ROLE OF SCHOLARS ON THE JIHAD LEADERS OF  
THE SOKOTO CALIPHATE**

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## Introduction

"Allah, the exalted, has ordained to send forth, to the ummah, at the end of every century, a scholar who would revive the religion for her. Such a scholar would take upon himself the duty of enjoining the good and forbidden the evil. He would call for the regulation of the affairs of the people and the establishment of justice amongst them. He would support the truth against falsehood, revive the Sunnah, suppress innovation, and denounce bad customs. As a result of his activities, his conditions will be different from those of the Ulama of his age and he will find himself a stranger amongst them, because his qualities are different from their own and men like him are few... "1

In conformity with the above hadith, Shehu Uthman b. Fodio undertook a jihad, which transformed the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Hausa land and saw the establishment of the Sakkwato caliphate. The Sokoto jihad of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was preceded by important intellectual as well as political and social developments and might even be argued that the intellectual pre-history of the revolution has been crucial to the course it has taken. This paper basically examines the role of scholars on the jihad leaders of 1804 in Hausa land. These include Shaikh Uthman b. Muhammad b. Fodio (1754-1817) his brother Abdullahi b. Muhammad b. Fodio (1776-

1828) and Shaikh Uthman's son Muhammad Bello. The paper also examines the role of scholars in shaping the kind of polity that came to be established, the Sokoto Caliphate. It first shows the link between scholarship and revolution, the different scholars that influenced the Jihadists of the caliphate as well as the pattern of such influences and concludes the study by pointing the way forward.

### **Scholarship as foundation of Change:**

There are consensuses among scholars, classical or contemporary about the interconnectedness of scholarship and change in societies. Particular scholastic traditions culminate into the establishment of particular kinds of societies based on certain recognized principles. The jihad leaders were very clear on this. According to Muhammad Bello, one of the key architects of the caliphate, everything has a foundation and the foundation of this caliphate is knowledge. The Shehu himself has clearly captured the place of scholarship. He wrote,

*A man without learning is like a country without inhabitants. The finest (qualities) in a ruler, in particular and of people in general are the love of learning, the desire to listen to it and holding the bearers of knowledge in great respect-this is the surest way for a ruler to be loved by his subjects. On the other hand, if the king is devoid of learning, he follows his whims and lead his people astray, like a riding beast with no halter, wandering off the path and perhaps spoiling what it passes over<sup>2</sup>*

The Shehu has also asserted in his kitab al-Farq that acquisition of knowledge by study and the teaching of that knowledge is one of the objectives of Muslims in their government. The very serious concern with

scholarship by the Sokoto triumvirate is in recognition of its place in the progress and development of humankind and the societies in which they live in. The Shehu, Abdullah and Muhammad Bello thus become preoccupied with the acquisition of knowledge such that they have together over 300 scholarly works to their credit. These were written at different times, including in battle fronts and dealt with a variety of subjects from jurisprudence, political theory, economics, history, tafsir, to virtually every field of human endeavour. They were so concerned with learning and scholarship such that this becomes the most pronounced and lasting tradition the caliphate came to be associated with. The Sokoto caliphate was thus clearly a product of learning, a product of decades of preaching and enlightenment campaigns aimed clearly at establishment of a just socio-economic and political entity.

### **Role of Scholars on the Jihad Leaders**

Of the many factors and forces that shaped the thought of the jihad leaders, that of the scholars is the most important. All the jihadists were greatly influenced by a number of prominent scholars that are contemporary with them. They have testified to this in a number of their works through the expression of opinions and the experiences of scholars before them from the prophetic era through the first four caliphs of Islam, through the Abbasid and the North African scholars to those of the Bilad al-Sudan.

One of the greatest influences exercised upon the jihad leaders is that by scholars contemporary to the jihadists. The Shehu, Abdullah and Bello have testified to this in the numerous works they authored. Abdullahi has listed vast number of scholars as some of his teachers in *Ida al-Nusukh*. Ten of those are related to him by blood. But of greater prominence of the scholars mentioned was Shaikh Jibril b. Umar who was both Shehu's and Abdullah's teacher and significantly noted for his radical views in matters of Islam as it applied to society. He was in fact viewed to have engineered the Sakkwato revolution. So significant were his contribution that the Shehu stated thus, *"I wonder whether we would have been guided to the right path, had it not been for the Sheikh for the destruction of customs contrary to Islam in our Sudanese country was initiated by him and it was completed by us"*. Similarly, Abdullah composed several poems of eulogy for Jibril in his *Tazyin*, which show his reverence for him.

Through these scholars, the jihad leaders studied the *Qur'an* and its *Tafsir* (exegesis), *Tawhid* (the science of the unity of Allah), *Fiqh*, (Jurisprudence), and *Hadith* (the traditions of the prophet) and a variety of other branches of scholarship. They thus became men of very deep learning. It is this breadth and depth of learning possessed by the Sakkwato Mujahidun that greatly prepared the intellectual phase of the Sakkwato jihad. But there are other set of scholars whose philosophy and practise the jihadists worked to counter. Abdullahi described them as those who

*...Neglect their prayers and obey, in procuring pleasures their own souls. And the majority of them have traded their faith for the world, preferring what they desire; their minds are full of temptations. They are bold in eating forbidding food, they eat like beasts... they do not listen*

*to commands and they disobey their Imam, and they ridicule anyone who stands and who stands and forbids them from evil*<sup>3</sup>

The Shehu in his *Tanbih Al Ikwan* also noted that

*one of the habits of many scholars of the Bilad al-Sudan is that they leave their wives, daughters and slaves neglected like a grazing livestock without teaching them what Allah makes obligatory on them; they consider them like a container which they use; when it breaks they throw it in dung and rubbish places*<sup>4</sup>

### **Muslim Scholars and the Jihadist**

The works of several scholars who were not their contemporaries profoundly influenced the jihad leaders. It has been viewed that,

*The triumvirate, their supporters have consistently stressed the link between them and the preceding generations of Islamic scholars. In their works on constitutional matters, for instance, they frequently quoted or referred to the works of Ibn Al-Arabi Ibn. Jama'a, Al-Suyuti, al-Gazzali, Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Arafa and al-Maghili. Thus Shehu, Abdulahi and Bello drew their inspiration from a remarkable and enduring academic tradition...*<sup>5</sup>

Al-Mawardi, the Abbasid political theorist, to begin with, is one such scholar whom Abdulahi referred to in his works, particularly in *Diyaal-Hukkam*. Al-Mawardi argued that religion and politics are not separate as far as Islam is concerned. He also viewed the institution of the imamate is a necessary requirement of the shariah and not of reason. The imamate, to al-Mawardi, is established to replace prophecy in the defence of the faith and the administration of the world. Consequently, he discusses the means of instituting the imamate and the qualifications required of an Imam as well as those who are empowered to elect him. Now, there is close correlation between Abdullah's ideas with those of Al-Mawardi as outlined above. Murray last confirmed this when he noted

that Abdullahi follows the arguments made familiar by Al-Mawardi in his *Al-ahkam al sultaniyy*<sup>6</sup>.

Al-Ghazzali, a prominent Muslim political thinker, is also one of the important personalities who have greatly influenced the thought of the jihadists. His *Kitab al-Halal wal Haram*, which is a part of his famous work, *Ihya ulumuddin*, was one of Abdullahi's main sources in delineating what is permissible and what is not in an Islamic state. The jihadists views on the need of calling a corrupt and unjust regime to order is also logically connected to Al-Gazzali's view, as discussed in his "*Min huna Na alam*". His view too that religion and politics cannot be separated has also been expressed by Abdullahi in his *Diya –al-Siyasat*. Al-Maghili was one such scholar to have exercised tremendous influence on the Sokoto jihadists. It has stated that by Abdullah Smith,

*All the leaders of the Sakkwato Jihad great attention to the writings of Muhammad b. Abdal Karim al-Maghii who seems to have exerted an important and lasting influence on learned Muslim opinion in this region, particularly on politics*<sup>7</sup>

Al-Maghili (d.1503/04), a Muslim jurist noted for his scholarship, held great revolutionary ideas on a wide range of issues of religion, society and leadership. Many of those were expressed in his public teachings and the scholarly works he authored, many of which were in circulation in North and West Africa since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The radical nature of his ideas was partly instrumental in his falling apart with many ulama of his period and his subsequent leaving for the Bilad-al-Sudan.

Al-Maghili's ideas however found a fertile ground in the Bilad al-Sudan. In Kano, he was warmly accepted by the then Amir of Kano, Muhammad Rumfa (1493-1499). It was here that al-Maghili wrote his famous

*Tajuddin fi ma yajib ala al-Mulk* (On the Obligation of Princes). The work is a constitutional treatise that laid down details of administration, court procedures, defence and foreign policy. In brief, its main focus is on how best a state could be administered. The jihadists drew a lot from this scholar. A study of Abdullahi's *Diya al-Sultan* will reveal that it consisted of a summary of four works. The first two works belong to al-Maghili and they were those written respectively for Muhammad Rumfa of Kano and Askia of Songhai. The other two works were Shehu Uthman's. In addition, the entire section dealing with the question of the Imamate and the duties of the Supreme Imam contained in Abdullahi's *Diya al-Hukkam* is based on the views of Al-Maghili. Abdullahi himself stated at the end of that section, "know that all I mention in this section is an extract from a book written by Muhammad b. Abdalkarim al Tilmi Sani". The book referred to here is the *Tajuddin fi ma yajib ala al-Muluk*. Mentioned earlier while the name was al-Maghili's full name. It is also to be noted that Shehu's *Siraj al-Ikhwān* adopted some of the views of Al-Maghili as contained particularly in his *al-Ajwiba*.

The jihadists also made significant references to al-Nafarawai, Ibn Arabi, al Suyuti and Ibn Farhum. They all have discussed in varying details the nature of the Imamate institution, its role as well as the supportive institutions like Wazir, Qadi, Muhtasib and the like. Abdullahi, following al-Nafarawi's held "It is unanimously disallowed to have more than one Imam at a time in one country unless the two places are far from each other such that the jurisdiction of one of them cannot reach the place of the other"<sup>9</sup>. In the case of Ibn Al-Arabi, Abdullahi relied on him in his *Diya-al-Hukkam* in enumerating the essential offices that make up the state. Al-Suyuti's ideas have similarly found their way into the jihad leaders. Suyuti's work on the caliphate of the four rightly guided Caliphs



entitled "*Tarikh al-Khulafa*" was the main work on which Abdullahi based his *Diya al-Muqtadin lil Khulafa al Rashidun*. Al-Suyuti is also severally quoted in Abdullahi's *Diya al-Hukkam*, *Diya al-Siyasat* and *Sabil al-Salama fil Imama*. It is thus not surprising that Zahradeen noted that a figure of the jihad, Abdullahi derived his constitutional ideas from the kitab al Ahkam of Ibn Al-Arabi, the *Tarikh al Khulafa of al-Suyuti* and the *Tabsirat al-Hukkam* of Ibn Farhum since quotations from these works are numerous.

It is now apparent that the scholars discussed to this point and many others, have through their various works aided in various degrees in the shaping of the Sokoto Mujahidun's thought. Their scholarship and the inspiration they drew from both classical scholars and those contemporary to them as well as their extensive travel to spread that knowledge had the singular effect of preparing the intellectual phase of their revolution.

Although the Jihadists borrowed extensively from constitutional theorists such as al-Mawardi, Al-Gazzali, Al-maghili, Ibn Farhun and others yet, they were not mere imitators. Far from that, the jihadists sifted their writing, simplified them and made them applicable to the environment they lived in. In other words, their originality lies in the fact that they studied the teachings of the predecessors, sifted, and simplified them and above all made those ideas the living ideology of the Sakkwato Jihad movement.

## **The Effect of the Influences on the Bases, Nature and Outcome of the Jihad**

The impact of the scholars on the jihadist could be seen on the bases, nature and outcome of the jihad. The first of these is to be seen on the jihadist philosophy and the bases of the jihad. They embarked on the jihad mainly for the sake of Islam. Scholars of the jihad have agreed on the establishment of a state system based on the principles of Islam is what the jihadists strived for. Nowhere does any member of the triumvirate indicate that they were fighting a 'national war' for the domination of one ethnic group over the other. Nor were they fighting for material motives as some writers have tried to portray. They were preoccupied with creating of *Dar'al-Islam* and a system of government that will facilitate the realisation of Islam. In Abdullah's poem, the purpose of their campaigns were more succinctly stated:

*We went for the sake of Allah; we hoped for His reward  
and the raising up of Islam so that all should benefit. And  
he whose aim is wealth or the demonstration of his courage  
or the assuaging of his anger, has not waged holy war; that  
is the true judgement<sup>10</sup>*

Abdullahi who further stated in his *Tazyin al-waraqat* reinforced the above,

*then we rose up with the Shaikh, helping him in his  
mission work for the religion. He travelled for that  
purpose to the East and West, calling the people  
to the religion of Allah by his preaching and his  
qasidas (pamphlets) in other languages and  
destroying customs contrary to Islamic law<sup>11</sup>* ←

Their travels covers Zamfara, Kebbi territories, Gulma, Daura and across the present day River Niger where they taught and preached in local languages, mainly Hausa and Fulfulde to facilitate understanding.

Another impact is to be seen in the kind of state they established as well as the values to govern its conduct. Different set of values informed the new polity. These, according to Tukur include justice impartiality, consultation/advice, kindness/flexibility, abstinence/moderation/ascetism, truth/integrity/probity etc.<sup>12</sup>. Tukur concludes "That under the Shehu and Bello, at least public business was conducted within the framework of the accepted value system in tune with the ideals which inspired the revolution and created a noble political order" in which unity, welfare, and primacy of public interest" occupied the center.

As individuals, the jihadists come to personify high moral values, gentleness, forgiveness, humbleness, generosity, self satisfaction, keeping good company with relations, honesty and fulfilment of promise were some of the virtues that were zealously nurtured by the jihadists. They were traits nurtured the revolutionary fervour of the caliphate that was established, a state based on justice and devoid of corruption, favouritism, nepotism and sectionalism. Their intellectualism was clearly translated into reality.

The influence of scholars and political thinkers could also be clearly seen in the jihadist conception of the nature and essence of the state. All the jihadists have agreed that a state has both spiritual and temporal roles. According to late Professor Abdullah Smith, this involves raising the moral tone of society and providing a societal ideology in accordance with Islamic ideas.... General education reform... to be accomplished by the training of teachers, economic reform to be brought about by the improvement of markets, the development of communications (by opening roads and bridges)... transactions of the government (and undertaking) all good works...The role is also captured in the *Diya al-*

Waliyat and the first few pages of *Diya al-Umara* of Abdullahi when he wrote,

*The state should look to their citizens' education in matters of their religion in principle and detail, the performance of prayers in all its details, all matters relating to fasting, the pilgrimage and all the obligations connected with it... the state should similarly look at the institution of marriage and all that is connected with it, their commercial transactions and such matters, the affairs of their markets and all that is necessary relating to them, the maintenance of their roads, the protection of their water supplies, the maintenance of their graves; the affairs of their treasury... No person is made a ruler over the people to become their master; (Rather) he is to serve their religious and temporal interests*<sup>14</sup>

In the words of Bello, it is also the duty of a ruler to commission craftsmen and provide for people in various occupations which are necessary for mankind such as farmers, blacksmith, tailors, dyers, physicians, drapers, butchers, carpenters and all the professions which are the basis of life in this world. He should set them up in every town and locality. At the same time he should make the people busy themselves with the production and storing of food, settle the urban and rural areas... He should seek to achieve everything conducive to their general welfare that the proper order of life in this world may be restored. Encouragement of all virtuous acts, the protection of the poor and the weak, etc. At the end, the jihadists were able to establish the largest and most organised polity in Africa south of the Sahara, a state based on the ideals of justice and equity and the realisation of the interests of the people.

## Conclusion

The jihadists were greatly influenced by the different scholars with whom they have studied and associated with. From them they learnt and eventually mastered different fields of scholarship. The Shehu was himself nicknamed Fodio for his great learning and piety. The writings of great Muslim jurist and thinkers such as al-Mawardi, al-Maghili, Ibn al-Arabi, al-Suyuti to mention but a few, have exerted great influence on the thought of the jihadists. They left an indelible mark on them and remained for them a source of inspiration. This is as evidenced by their frequent quotations from their works.

However, far from being mere initiators, the jihadists never succumb to the views and opinions of others without question except they are clearly grounded in law. Although they made references to the preceding generations of scholars, their originality lies in the fact that he sifted, selected and simplified their works and made them the living ideology of the Sakkwato jihad movement. The jihadists were quite aware that the scholars they quoted wrote taking into consideration the problems and circumstances of their times. They must have therefore addressed themselves to those problems. It is thus the case that the jihadists did not unduly idealize the works and ideas of the scholars that influenced them.

## End Notes

1. Uthman b. Fodiyo, "Ifham al-munkirin, cited in Bugaje U., "The Sakkwato Model: A Study of origin, Development and Fruition of the jihad of Uthman b. Fodiyo 1754-1817" (paper presented at International Islamic Conference, Bayero University, Kano, 16<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 1980).

2. Uthman B. Fodiyo, "Bayan wujub al Hijra" Cited in Bugaje, Usman, The caliphate in modern Nigeria: Ending it, Mending it, or Reinventing it , Text of a public lecture organised to commemorate the 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the installation of the 19<sup>th</sup> sultan of Sokoto, Alh. Muhammadu Maccido, April 21, 1997, p.9
3. Cited in Ayegere, P.D, The life and works of Abdullahi b. Fudi. Unpublished Ph. D Thesis, University of Ibadan, 1974
- 4 Uthman b Fodiyo, Tanbih al-Ikhwan
- 5 Mahmud Tukur, "Philosophy. Goals and institutions of the Sokoto caliphal administration: A preliminary Review" in Nigerian Administration Research project, 1972, pp.16-17
- 6 Murray, Last. The Sokoto caliphate
- 7 Smith, Abdullahi A neglected theme in West African history, 1961
- 8 Abdullahi b. Fodiyo, Diya UI Hukkam
- 9 Ibid
- 10 Ibid
- 11 Abdullahi b, Fodiyo, Tazyin al- waraqat, p.85
- 12 Tukur, Mahmud, Values and Public affairs, Ph. D theses, ABU, Zaria, pp59-62
- 13 Smith, opt.cit.
- 14 Abdullahi b. Fodiyo, Diya al- Umara