

Research Article

A Reinterpretation of Islamic Foundation of Jihadist Movements in West Africa

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Abstract: It is no exaggeration that the Jihads of the 19th century West Africa were phenomenal and their study varied. Plenty have been written about their origin, development and the decline of the states they established. But few scholars have delved into the actual settings that surrounded their emergence. And while many see them as a result of the beginning of Islamic revivalism few opined that they are the continuation of it. This paper first highlights the state of Islam in the region; the role of both the scholars, students and rulers from the 14th century, in its development and subsequently its spread among the people of the region as impetus to the massive awareness and propagation of the faith that was to led to the actions and reactions that subsequently led to the revolutions. The paper, contrary to many assertions, believes that it was actually the growth of Islamic learning and scholarship and not its decline that led to the emergence and successes of the Jihad movements in the upper and Middle Niger region area.

Keywords: Islamic revivalism, Jihad, Niger Region, West Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Of all the 19th Century themes in West African history, that of the Jihadist movements is one that has received more attention from both scholars and students. There are quite a number of interpretations for the reasons behind the movements. Of the earliest was the racial/ethnic division between the indigenous people and the Fulani and subsidiary to this, the division between Muslims and non-Muslims (Johnston 1965, 26). Another explanation saw the movements as being part of a general historical process of the formation of larger political units (Adeleye 1976, 557). Other scholars like Olderoge would want us to believe that the movements were but rebellions by economically and socially oppressed groups against their harsh masters (Waldman 1965, 333). This paper attempts a critical look into the role of Islam in bringing about these movements. And it posits that it was actually the growth and not the decline of Islam that accounts for the emergence of the 19th century revival movements in West Africa. To prove this, the paper will first look back to the evolution and development of Islam in the middle and upper Niger area of West Africa up to the later part of the 19th century. The second part will move to look at the state of the religion in the 19th century in

Hausaland. The final part will conclude the argument of the paper.

The State of Islam in West Africa before the 19th Century

The river Niger is the principal river in West Africa. From its source in the Guinea highlands it runs through the countries of Mali, republic of Niger and Nigeria before reaching the Atlantic Ocean in the Gulf of Guinea (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2017). The upper and Middle Niger region was the area in which the ancient western Sudanese empires of Mali and Songhai flourished. These empires were to act as the springboard for the spread of the ideas of Islam to other parts of West Africa.

The Religion of Islam is said to have first infiltrated into the region at about the 11th or 12th century A.D mainly through the agency of Arab and Berber traders from North Africa. It arrived first in the old Ghana Empire where it expanded through the activities of the al-Moravids. In the successor states of Mali and Songhai, particularly the periods of Mansa Musa and Askia Muhammad the fortunes of Islam expanded and it became a state religion. From there it spread southwards into as far areas as Hausaland to the extent that by the 14th century there existed among the

states in West Africa considerable followers of the new faith. However, upon all these developments, according to Ralph Willis, it was only from the 15th century there emerged a new pattern of religious proselytisation which was to characterize the expansion of Islam for the next four centuries (Willis 1976, 539). This was undertaken by two distinct methods – Arabisation of the people of the north of the Middle Niger by the influx of a large Arab group, and by Berberisation of the same Arab group also. Thus the two processes led to the Islamisation of nearly all Berber groups in the middle Niger area. From the same period was also the role of the *Zawaya* groups such as the Kel al-Suq and the Kel Antassar who were training grounds for preachers that are sent out in various directions for the dissemination of Islam in the region (Ibid. 40).

The rise of the Kunta group also added more to the development of Islam in western Sudan during the early period; for they brought with them a new element in the diffusion of Islam – that of religious Tariqa (Ibid.,541). The Qadiriyya Tariqa spread by means of peaceful propaganda. Its agents settled in trading centres where they opened Qur’anic schools to teach the new converts and the children of the emerging Muslim community. It was out of the Kunta clerical group that emerged Sidi Mukhtar al-Kunti (1729-1811) an outstanding Islamic scholar. He wrote a very large number of works many of which became standard reference texts for the Ulama of his time and after. Moreover, al-Kunti established a number of training centres to train preachers to facilitate the dissemination of the knowledge of the religion as well as win more converts (Ibid.,259). With his emergence, Islam was to win nearly over practically all the Berber peoples of the middle Niger and penetrated deeply into the western Sudanese hinterlands. Meanwhile, in his efforts to further spread Islam, al-Kunti further launched a spiritual Jihad in order to purge away certain practices which had polluted Islam. His teachings and preaching became particularly directed against various superstitious practices. The importance of this spiritual Jihad to the Muslims of the Middle and Upper Niger was revolutionary. This for the fact that the fervor of al-Kunti’s preaching and the extent of his literally output were to give impetus to a renewed interest in mystical studies and restore the dignity of Islamic piety. There is also some evidence to suggest that Usman dan Fodio and Seku Ahmed both of whom were to later retain spiritual links with the Qadiriyya drew some considerable inspiration for their movements’ from al-Kunti (Ibid.,542). In fact it has been clearly admitted by one of the leading figures of the Sokoto Jihad that ‘al-kunti gave moral and spiritual backing to the Sokoto revolution (Ubah 2001, 259). From 1750s the Kunta scholars also use to receive quite a number of students from all over the western Sudan many of whom were to foster the cultivation of Islam among their own people (Willis 1976, 543).

Apart from al’Kunti’s Jihad, there were also other reformist movements in this area who recognized the uniqueness of Islam and its incompatibility with the pagan practices of the local chiefs and the local pagan societies. Foremost was that of one Alfa Ibrahim b. Nuhu among the pagan Mandingo of the Futa Jallon hills in 1725. From the fighting which ensued, there emerged a Muslim government with its headquarters at Timbo. In the area of Futa Toro between Senegal and Ferto rivers there also developed a tension between the indigenous people and a class of pagan Fulani called *Denyonkobe* in the mid 18th century. It was out of this situation that there appeared Sheikh Sulayman who fought a Jihad against both the Fulani and Moors in 1769 and 1775. The end result was the overthrow of the ruling dynasty to be replaced by *Torodo* Imams (Smith, 1961, 174). This in a nutshell was the evolution and development of Islam in the Middle and Upper Niger area of West Africa in the period preceding the emergence of the two great Jihadist movements that ushered in the 19th Century. In this way, contrary to the view that the Moroccan invasion of 1591 brought about an eclipse in the fortunes of Islam it really accentuated the movement of scholars and traders southwards thereby extending the gains of the Religion. In addition, there was no evidence of pagan reaction against the gradual encroachment of Islam from the Moroccan invasion to 1800A.D (Willis 1976, 542& 552).

Islam in Hausaland before the 19th Century

In the areas that were later to be known as the northern Nigeria, the development of Islam was also identical with the Niger region. This fact was stressed by Frobenius when he observed that ‘Islam came not with alarms and excursions, but crept its way through the backdoors of Sudanese palaces in the comfortable slippers of inner African commercial, which was already thousands of years old’. Here the first people to receive Islam were the Borno people in about the 11th century while in Hausaland, 14th century is considered as the period of Islamic intrusion. It is argued to have come from Mali through the activities of the *Wangarawa* traders (Adeleye, 1976, 557).

Although by the 14th century Islam was already in Hausaland yet it was no near to be fully accepted by the majority of the populace. What seems to have happened, according to Hiskett, was that individual Muslims from peripheral areas of North Africa and Egyptian traders after the initiative patronage of the governments of the Habe States came into the Habe Kingdoms and settled thereby forming small communities that gradually began to affect the pagan peoples (Hiskett, 1973, 58). Little wonder, therefore, that in its first stage of diffusion, Islam was only nominally accepted by some Kings and courtiers and usage of Islamic names and titles. But it was very

much mixed up with traditional religions (Smith, 1961, 174).

It was the second half of the 15th century that saw great expansion of Islamic conversion. This was the period of Muhammad Korau in Katsina (1380-1430) Muhammad Rabbo in Zazzau and Muhammad Rumfa (1463-1499) in Kano. These leaders played a significant role in the spread of Islam. Korau and Rabbo were regarded as the first Muslim rulers in their respective areas while Rumfa was regarded as a Mujaddid, a renewer and a developer of Islamic Society in Kano (Smith, 1976, 190). Sarki Muhammad Rumfa was said to have gone to the extent of consulting a jurist of intellectual fame – Muhammad b. Abdulkarim al Maghili who not only entered into correspondence with Rumfa but wrote to him a treatise on the art of governance titled *Tajuddin fi ma yajib ala al - Mulk* (The Obligation of Princes) a celebrated master piece for his use (Raji, 2015, 2). In the book it was reported that al-Maghili for the first time laid down the legal and constitutional foundation for proper Islamic government. The relationship between the ruler and the ruled, the state functionary, the political institutions that maintain the government, division of labour, sources of revenue and the political structure of the state in Islam were clearly delineated by al-Maghili (Tsiga, Adamu 1997, 26). He was also to later settle in Kano where he lectured on Law, while Rumfa built many mosques in Kano. All these seem to indicate that the government in Kano had now entered an era of Islamization. The coming of al-Maghili to Kano was also said to have coincided with the arrival of Wangarawa scholars from Mali to the city. Moreover, al-Maghili was said to have taught the Qur'an in Katsina and was the brain behind the construction of Gobirau Mosque inside the city of Katsina. The Gobirau developed into a major centre of advanced Islamic scholarship which served the interest of the students and scholars of Hausaland, Borno and beyond (Ubah 2001, 169). In Katsina the successors of Sarki Muhammadu Korau such as Ibrahim Sura (1493-8) and Ali Murabus (1498-1524) were devoted Muslim rulers that provided patronage to visiting Muslim scholars in their efforts to spread the knowledge of the religion. It was during his reign of Ali Murabus that the famous Muslim scholar Aida Ahmad al-Tadhkhiti settled in Katsina after performing the pilgrimage to Mecca (Balogun 1980, 215).

The acceptance of Islam by the ruling elite and the patronage given to Islam and Muslim leaders provided an enabling environment for the growth of the class of Muslim scholars through the immigration of learned Muslims from other areas (Ibid., 221). The result was that in a number of cities in Hausaland there started to emerge a class of *ulama* under the patronage of the ruler. This in turn is likely to have prepared the way for the spread of Islam into surrounding countryside (Hiskett 1973).

Towards the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries more scholars from the western Sudan flocked in to the areas of Hausaland. More particularly Shaykh Ahmad b. Umar b. Muhammad Aqit the grandfather of Ahmad Baba al Tambukti was said to have visited Hausaland around 1490's sojourning for a while in Kano and later moved to Katsina. Similarly other notable scholars that were known to have either visited and taught in Hausaland or influenced in different ways the development of an indigenous Muslim intelligentsia included al-Shaykh Aida Ahmad al-Tadhkhiti and Makhluq Ibn. Ali ibn Salih al-Bilbali and Aqib Ibn Abdallah al- Ansamuni (Tsiga, Adamu 2007, 59). Moreover, there was the famous Yandoto dynasty in the areas of present Zamfara State said to have been established by Imam Yahya bn. Abdullah believed to be a scion of the Prophet of Islam. The Yandoto dynasty was said to be blessed with many seasoned scholars on various fields of Islamic sciences (Diggi 2011, 17). These Scholars not only taught people in schools and Mosques, but also brought along with them new books on Islamic sciences, thereby creating conditions for the development of an indigenous Muslim intelligentsia (Maishanu, 2007, 58). For example, Muhammad Abdulkarim al-Maghili was said to have brought with him many books on Islamic sciences. Moreover, the 16th century saw the introduction of more books on Islam such as al-Shifa of Qadi Iyad; Mudawwanatul Kubra of Sahnun; Jami al-Saghir of Jalaluddin al-Suyuti, Tambih al-Ghafilin of Abd Allah al-Darimi al-Samarqandi and Mukhtasar Khalil of Khalil ibn Ishaq al-Jundi (Ibid., 59).

Similarly, the sixteenth and seventeenth century witnessed different waves of Fulani migrants into Kasar Kebbi from Futa Toro, Futa Jalon, Timbuktu and other western parts of the region. Many of these migrant Fulanis were scholars bringing with them large volumes of Islamic books of theology, Qur'an, Hadith, Fiqh, Arabic Grammar, literature etc (Arnold 1982, 60--66). Little wonder therefore, by the seventeenth century Kebbi started producing indigenous scholars of the caliber of Umar B. Muhammad B. Abi Bakar Al-Turudi Al-Kabawi (Sifawa, 2004, 42). These and other related developments aided the gradual expansion of Islamic education in areas of Kebbi, Zamfara and Gobir.

With all these developments, thus, by the 17th century, indigenous Muslim scholars had come of age and have started composing works on various fields of Islamic sciences. In addition by this period Islam not only invaded the courts of Hausa kings but had made important intrusions into the ranks of the general masses. The Muslim preacher's in Hausaland by this time comprised mainly of indigenous people who had not only learned but were themselves teachers of Islamic sciences. For example in Katsina the period saw

the emergence of indigenous scholars such as Muhammad bn al-Sabbag popularly known as Dan Marina and his Student, Muhammad Dan Masani. In the Zamfara, area, however, it was only at about the beginning of the second half of the same century that saw the first Muslim rulers converted to Islam (Augi, 1984). By this period also various villages grew around famous servants which became great outposts of Islamic teaching with zealots from far and wide resorted to. In fact it was around this period that, as Sultan Muhammadu Bello told us in his *Infakul Maysur*, one Mallam Ramalana a native of Agades settled in Zamfara (Hiskett, 1977, 572). During the second half of the 18th century, for example, the region of Degel seemed to have been a centre of attraction especially to various Islamic scholarly groups who became identified with such other settlements in the area as Chimmola, Baraya Zaki, Marnona and Marannu (Ibid., 475-6). This fact is clearly evident if one look at the list of scholars under whom the Sokoto Jihad leaders studied as stated by Abdullahi bn Fodiyo in his *Ida in Nusukh ma Akhazta minas Shuyukh*. Some of the prominent Ulama identified by Abdullahi bn Fodiyo in his write up included Usman Binduri a learned and pious Scholar after whom it was said the Shehu moulded himself: enjoining the right and forbidden the wrong (Maishanu 2007, 99). Others were Muhammadu Sambo, Muhammadu ibn. Raji, Hashimu al-Zamfari, Ahmad ibn Abi Bakr ibn Ghari and the famous Jibril bn. Umar whom it was said had a dominant influence on the Shehu. In fact it was in relation to this Scholar that Shehu was reported to have stated thus, "I wonder whether we would have been guided to the right path, had it not been for the Sheikh (Jibril) for the destruction of customs contrary to Islam was initiated by him and it was completed by us" (Muhammad2014, 4) In this way one can safely say that the 17th and 18th centuries saw the dominance of Islam in both Borno and Hausaland. However, though rulers were by these period bearing Islamic names and some Islamic rituals such as daily and Id prayers were practiced yet the belief in the *Iskoki* was too deep rooted in their social and political consciousness to have been displaced by Islam (Na-Dama 1977, 367-8).

Thus, in most Hausa states Islam had by now moved away from a simple acceptance of the faith to the awareness of its fundamental bases. Irrational beliefs were given way to intellectual awareness. As oppose to decline, Islam was, thus, by the 18th century increasing its influence all over Hausaland and Borno. There existed in various cities and villages a largely Islamised population in terms of the norms, values and identity, where rulers were also Islamised. Indigenous Scholars like Imam Muhammad b. Alhaj Abdur-Rahman al-Barnawi had also started emerging as reformers by becoming more critical of the society; attacking the present dispensation with all its iniquity as unislamic (Maishanu,2007, 98). Shurb al Zulal Poem

composed by Imam Muhammad bn al Hajj Abdur-Rahman al Barnawi in 1750 conveys a powerful expression of his condemnations of the state of affairs.

In it for example he averred that and everything which is taken by the judge in return for his judgment, leave it, even if the Judgment is lawful: do not eat it and the like of this is the gift of the governors, for all of it is unlawful profit from error and everything that is taken from a Muslim by force in the Market, what is taken is illegal. There is nothing which enters the belly more evil than Usury: Therefore flee from it, and strive to avoid it (Ibid., 98--99)

From all these pieces of evidences, therefore, it is safe to say that it was the growth of the Islamic influence that was responsible for the 19th century Jihads in West Africa. By the beginning of the century there was a situation whereby the "knowledge of Islam was widespread enough and the Hausa states were corrupt enough to make Islamic reform welcome" (Balogun, 2012, 225). The increasing expression of radical ideas about Islam by scholars and the social criticisms directed towards Muslims and non-Muslims exhorting them to follow the path of truth as individuals found enough support from the mass of the people. The number of preachers had also grown so also the general awareness among both scholars and their students of the stipulations of the Shari'a. Muslim servants also now travelled from one place to another with their sermons while students moved from the feet of one *Malam* to another. Preaching became a full-time professional job. The direct result of all these developments was the deepening of the faith of the believers. Each learned *Malam* of note also now had his own community of followers around him. This development became widespread throughout Hausaland (Adeleye 1976, 597).

The fact that during a visit to Bawa in 1788, Usman dan Fodio is said to have had one thousand Ulama on his side (Last 1968, 7) also clearly shows the progressive growth of Islamic faith rather than its decline. And yet this was only one out of the many groups of Muslim *Jama'a* in Hausaland. The Ulama by their open condemnation of the various forms of iniquities perpetrated by the Hausa rulers against the majority Talakawa (peasants) provided the leadership for the launching of Jihads leading to the sweeping away of the old order and the establishment of Muslim Caliphates in areas of West Africa.

CONCLUSION

With the introduction of Islam into the west African sub region the fortunes of the religion kept on expanding largely through the activities of scholars both indigenous and foreign and the Moroccan invasion of Songhai empire did not result in an interregnum of eclipse in the fortunes of Islam as suggested by Trimmingham. In fact one can rightly argue that it was

not the decline of Islam but rather the growth of its influence that brought about the 19th centuries Islamic movements in West Africa. What prompted these was nothing but the relatively weak status of Islam in relation to paganism. As we have noted, Islam had gained many converts yet there can be little doubt that the religion rested very highly upon the persons of that minority of West Africans who claimed to be Muslims. Added to this was widespread existence of Muslim communities living in subservience to pagan powers syncretizing the practices of Islam with paganism. Under these conditions Islam was placed in position of humiliation and true Muslims were seen as enemies that should be wiped away. It was out of these tensions, with the growth of population of the faithful and the shifting status of the faith from irrational belief to intellectual awareness that there emerged movements that were to bring about the 19th centuries Jihads in West Africa.

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