

## **ULAMA RESPONSE TO COLONIALISM IN NORTHERN NIGERIA: A MODEL OF NON-VIOLENT APPROACH TO PRESERVING MUSLIM SOCIO-CULTURAL IDENTITY**

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### **Abstract**

This paper looks at the responses of the Muslim to colonial encroachment on socio-religious and cultural life in Northern Nigeria. It employed qualitative design drawing data mainly from secondary sources. The findings are that, the response of the Emirs was earlier peaceful, but degenerated into open conflict and military confrontation. The Mahadists' put up violent uprisings, but the *Ulama* adopted a non-violent approach. This approach was implemented through teaching, non-compliance with English laws, and providing religious orientation. The response neutralized negative impacts of colonialism, serving as a model of active non-violence to preserving Muslim traditions in all situations.

### **Introduction**

Northern Nigeria has a long standing contact with Islam dating back to the time of *Banu- Umayyah*. Hudgkin Thomas maintains that some members of the *Umayyad* royal family took refuge in Borno, to escape persecution in the hands of Abbasids (88). From the 11<sup>th</sup> century Islam became the dominant religion in Kanem-Borno, following the conversion of its ruler Mai Ume Jilme, to Islam (Thomas 88). Around the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, majority of the rulers of Hausaland were Muslims, and Islamic principles of government were adopted in Emirates of Kano, Zaria and Katsina (Trimingham 130). The strong influence of Islam in the region, transformed the socio-religious and cultural life of the people. The religion of Islam had changed their world view, shaped their life and modified their cultures in accordance with its principles. The transformation was undoubtedly the outcome of the activities of teaching and *Irshad* (religious orientation) carried out by the class of *Ulama* (Muslim scholars).

*Ulama* were very instrumental in the spread of Islam in Northern Nigeria and beyond, and recorded successes in converting the rulers as well as their subjects. Thus, Muhammad bn. Mani successfully converted Mai Ume of Bornoto Islam (Thomas 88), Sheikh Abdurrahman Zaiti the leader of Wangarawa, featured

prominently in the traditions, giving account on the spread of Islam in Hausaland. Sheikh Muhammad bn. Abdulkarim al-Maghili served Muslim rulers in West African region in various capacities, including the role of adviser on the implementation of Islamic principles of government (Trimingham 130). In due course, condition became favourable for the *Ulama* to settle down, teach and further spread the message of Islam. The result of this effort was the establishment of scholarly tradition, with scholarship becoming full time business. Thus, *Ulama* functioned as advisers to the rulers, judges, and devoted their time to teaching (Balogun 212). Their services transformed the Emirates into major centers of Islamic learning in West Africa (Trimingham 133). However, the effort of this *Ulama* was not without challenges, because some of them had to pay with their lives, for challenging the excesses of the people and rulers of their time (Naniya 53).

The coming of Colonialism to Northern Nigeria ushered in a new phase of challenge to the *Ulama*. Colonialists' method of establishing their rule involved cultural subjugation the use of force, by subjecting communities to military action (Johnston 208). This use of force particularly generated varieties of reactions, from Muslim and non-Muslim extractions, which in some cases, were violent. Such responses were, among other things, measures aimed at stopping foreign domination. Thus, retaining local traditions and customs, as well as checking the colonial interference with the affairs of the local communities, were part of the causes of the responses. This paper examines the varieties of responses to colonialism in Northern Nigeria. The aim is to find out how the approach employed by *Ulama* worked in preserving the socio-cultural life of the Muslims. Using qualitative research design, the paper generates data from secondary materials and employs analytical approach in its presentation.

### **Colonialism in Northern Nigeria**

The precise date of the contact of the European traders or explorers with Nigeria cannot be determined. But the earliest recorded contacts occurred in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, though there must have been undocumented contacts before that period. Thus, the Portuguese trader Ruy De Sequiera is said to be the first European to arrive at Benin, and met Oba Ewuare of Benin in 1472. In course of time, other Europeans followed and established commercial relations with the kingdoms that formed what is today known as Nigeria. They began to trade in slaves and after the fall of the slave market, they turned to trade in other goods like palm oil and palm kernel (Iruku 112). In Northern Nigeria, the earliest recorded contacts between the Europeans and the rulers of the Northern Emirates were the visits paid to Muhammad Bello, by the Borno mission and Clapperton in 1824 and 1826 respectively. They were warmly received by the Caliph, who never anticipated any ulterior motive, nor did he perceive unfriendliness behind the visits. Other missions received by leaders of the Sokoto Caliphate included the

mission of Lander Brothers, which traced the course of river Niger from Bussa to its termination in the gulf of Guinea (Fari 43).

In the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, European firms were competing for controlling trade on the Niger, and each trading firm was fully backed by the government of its country. To arrest their imperial ambition from degenerating into an all-out arm conflict, the Europeans organized a conference in Berlin between November 1884 and February 1885. An agreement was reached between the Europeans to share out the continent of Africa as their possession (Yahya 187). The colonialists used various means of provocation, and unnecessarily forced different communities into conflicts. Different parts of Nigeria were unjustifiably subjected to military attacks, and Northern Nigeria was not spared. Thus, the coming of two French trading companies in the 1880s to Emirs of Nasarawa, Muri and Yola brought these Emirates into direct contact with European interests (Fari 43). In 1886, the Royal Niger Company was mandated by the British government, to govern and levy customs on trade on the Niger and its affluent. The company then created a machinery of government with board of directors vested with legislative, executive and judicial powers. An army, equipped with heavy weapons, was also created and kept concentrated for the use of force (Johnston 208).

In the 1890s, the British government took direct responsibility of the Emirates of Sokoto Caliphate, and declared them the protectorates of Northern Nigeria. The instrument used for the implementation of the imperial policies was the West African Frontier Force. In 1900, the decision was implemented by Lugard, under the false pretext of fighting for slain lieutenants in Bidda and Keffi (Fari 44-45). The killing of Sultan Attahir I at Burmi, in March 1903, marked the beginning of the move for complete subjugation of the Sokoto Caliphate (Naniya 55). The death of the Sultan changed the course of events in Northern Nigeria, particularly in the Emirates under Sokoto Caliphate. The political structure was changed by transferring power from the Sultan and the Emirs to the colonial officers. This coupled with the anticipated collapse in morality and religious values, resulted in a tensed condition (Galadanci 157). Thus, the stability of the region became acutely fragile, and the Muslim society in Northern Nigeria remained highly suspicious of the motive of colonial administration. This presented the British colonialists with the challenge of administering the areas and maintaining effective control. To gain full control of the areas, an administrative technique known as indirect rule was introduced (Paden 67). From 1890s, through to the first and second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, colonial rule in Northern Nigeria was highly fragile. The colonialists had to contend with varieties of reactions and responses, among which the responses of the Emirs, *Ulama* and the Mahadists were the prominent.

### **Responses of the Emirs to Colonialism**

Before the colonial period, Emirs in Northern Nigeria occupied positions of authority. They provided leadership to the people, especially in the areas under the Sokoto Caliphate. The establishment of colonial rule saw the end of the authority of the Sultan as the head of government, and the Emirs as the provincial administrators. However, Europeans have had contacts with the Sultan and some Emirs under the Caliphate early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is attested to by the report on the earliest recorded contacts between the colonialists, and the rulers of the Northern Emirates. Thus, the visits paid to Muhammad Bello, by the Borno mission and Clapperton in 1824 and 1826 respectively were the first contact between the Sultan of Sokoto and Europeans (Fari 43). The trading activities of African Inland Commercial Company along the Niger as far as Raba, between 1832 and 1834 which were accorded free rein are cases in point. Thus, John Beecroft visited Nupe and Niger in 1840, while Henrich Barth and W. B. Baikie visited Yola and Muri in 1851 and 1854 respectively. The policy of giving free rein to Europeans continued, and in 1857 Baikie and his exploration team were given protection by Caliph Ali bn Bello, and assisted with material assistance after shipwrecked in Jabba. They were given assistance to build a settlement near Lokoja where they stayed until 1862 (Fari 43).

The relationship between the Emirs and the European colonialists at the initial stage was cordial. European trading firms entered into treaties with some Emirs on trading activities and received guarantee of protection. The responses of the Emirs at this stage were warm reception and honoring of treaties by protecting the interest of the European firms. This provided the Europeans with the opportunity to freely do business. The 1885 partitioning of Africa handed to the British government entire Northern part of Nigeria. To maintain its control over the areas, the British government mandated Royal Niger Company to take charge of the administration of the region. The Company ignored treaties it had with the Emirs, imposed taxes and even incited some people to revolt against some of the Emirates. This development drastically changed the attitudes of Emirs towards the colonialists and resulted in a different response characterized by conflicts and crises in the Northern region (Fari 44).

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century however, the company reached the peak of its interference with the affairs of the Emirates by openly taking charge of areas under Sokoto Caliphate. To respond to this, the Emirate of Nupe launched an attack on the headquarters of the company at Lokoja, forcing the Company to return to the 1885 agreement, it had signed with the Emirate (Fari 44). Continuous interference with the affairs of the Emirates coupled with forceful establishment of authority; seriously undermined the relationship between the Emirs and colonialists. The natural result was military engagement that became characteristics of the relationship between the two sides. Emirs' response became hostile, and degenerated into military confrontation. For instance, the

Emirs of Nupe, Muri, Bida and Yola had clashes with the colonialists through the Royal Niger Company (Far 44, Yahaya 49).

The move by the colonialists, to take over all areas under the control of Sokoto Caliphate, deteriorated the relationship between them and the Emirs. Further clashes at Ilorin and Keffi resulted in the death of the colonial officials. The death of official in Keffi particularly became the pretext for waging full-fledged war against entire Emirates of Sokoto Caliphate (Yahaya 49-50). The superior fire power of the colonial army placed it at a great advantage in the war of occupation. Despite the military success, maintaining stability in the Northern region remained elusive. The colonialists resorted to removal and banishing of the Emirs considered disloyal to the colonial administration. In 1903 for instance, the Emir of Bida Abubakar, that of Kwantagora Ibrahim Nagwamatse, the Emir of Zazzau Kwasau, and Emir Muhammad Bashir of Burmi were all deposed and exiled. In 1906, the Emir of Katsina Muhammad Durbi was deposed so also was Emir Aliyu of Kano in 1904, and Lamido Bobbo of Yola had the same fate in 1909. In 1920, the new Emir of Zazzau was removed on ground that he was not loyal to colonial administration. These Emirs were deported to unknown places and some of them never returned to their homeland (Musa 49).

### **Mahadists' Uprisings and Arm Insurrections**

The military defeat of the Emirate governments escalated the tension created by the colonial onslaught on the Sokoto Caliphate. As a result, rebellious spirit gradually developed in some people, who put another form of violent response to colonialism in different part of the country. Thus, in the Emirates of Northern Nigeria particularly, the overthrow of the Sokoto Caliphate and the coming of colonialism were seen by some as signs of the end of time. Waves of rebellions and violent uprisings hit different parts of Northern Nigeria, as reactions to colonial encroachment on the territories. Insurrection against colonialism, erupted at the French controlled part of Niger, and quickly spread to the British controlled Northern Nigeria (Lovejoy and Hogendorn, vol.31 No 2, 217). A number of rebellions broke out at the district of Satiru in Sokoto, from 1906. In Ilorin Balogun Ajikobi and Ajayi Ogidilu together headed a revolt against the British rule in 1907 (Abubakar 470). There was another bigger revolt which spread from Kano to Bauchi as well as Borno and Dambam. In 1915 another revolt broke out in Sokoto, and in 1916 *Mahdi Mai Rigar Karfe* headed a rebellion against the British in the middle Benue region, and attacked Nukko and Donga (Oshuntokun 148). Among all these uprisings the Satiru rebellion proved deadly, and inflicted heavy casualties on the colonial army (Lovejoy and Hogendorn, vol.31 No 2, 223).

The Mahdists of Satiru commanded significant respect and enjoyed the support of the neighboring towns and villages. Among the people who led Mahadist movements were Malam Siba, Malam Maikaho and Malam Bawa. The defiance of

the colonialists and the newly appointed Sokoto authorities by the Mahdists of Satiru, influenced other areas like Nupe, Kontagora, Zaria, Sokoto and Gwnadu. Thus, Malam Mai Zanna claimed to be Mahdi in Bida, while MaiKaho declared himself as Mahdi in Satiru. The revolts in Satiru were suppressed in 1906, but this did not end the insurrections in Northern Nigeria (Lovejoy and Hogendorn, vol.31 No 2, 243-236). Obviously, people anger against the British rule in its early phase, turned into rebellion. The Mahadists exploited any available opportunities to incite people and ignite war. During the period of the First World War, uprisings engulfed almost the entire regions of Nigeria. In Sokoto another revolt broke out in 1915 which had to be quelled by the combined forces of the colonial army, native administration's Dogarai and Emirs' horsemen (Oshuntokin 148).

The uprisings were reactions to British forceful destruction of the existing political and religious institutions. Thus, when protests against the British encroachment began in northern Nigeria, it was dismissed as a desire to continue with the habits of murder, robbery and cannibalism (Abubakar 464). But for the local population, the uprisings were an opportunity to express their anger and dissatisfaction with colonial rule, as well as a defense of the traditional and religious institutions. The revolts were, at the same time, reactions to the first phase of colonialism as well as fighting against what the people anticipated the British rule would involve (Oshuntokin 101). Thus, the rapid spread of colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the occupation of Muslim lands by Christian West were viewed as signs of end times. Besides, the success of Muhammad Ahmad Mahdi of Sudan against British colonialism, inspired people in other part of the world including Northern Nigeria, to rise up against colonialism (Lovejoy and Hogendorn, vol.31 No 2, 226-227). Many local Mahadists appeared in different parts of Northern Nigeria, who put stiff resistance and defied British rule. But like the Emirs the Mahadists' resistance was short-lived. The superior fire power of the colonialists gave them great advantage, and like the Emirs, the Mahadists were militarily defeated as well.

### **The Ulama' Approach**

*Ulama* were the custodian of Islamic tradition, and instrumental in disseminating the teachings of Islam. Their status as learned men, accorded them special rank in the society. The services they rendered in various capacities enabled them to gain respect and enjoy special privileges. Before the coming of colonialism to Northern Nigeria, *Ulama* were part of the decision making body in the Emirate political structure. They wielded strong influence on the Emirs and their subjects, and had the opportunity to shape public opinion. The establishment of colonial rule, changed the social status of the *Ulama* and almost relegated them to the background. Changes in the political structure of the Emirates, where real authority was exercised by the colonial officers, affected the public functions of the *Ulama*. The influence they wielded on the

Emirs was curtailed, and the services they offered as teachers, judges and counselors were no longer necessary. But all this did not stop the *Ulama* from the pursuit of their primary responsibility of teaching and learning (Mahmud 7). The position of *Qadi*(Judge) was the prominent positions held by the *Ulama* before the colonial rule. Appointment to the office was based on highly acquired skills and sufficient knowledge of *Shari'ah*. A person must be a *Faqih*(Learned in Islamic law), well-equipped in technicalities and methods of issuing independent legal opinion. This method of training had provided appropriate structure and framework under which the operation of *shari'ah* would be successful (Mustapha 125-126). During the colonial period, the application of *Shari'ah* was restricted. Judges and their courts were placed under the supervision of colonial officials. *Shari'ah* itself was classified under customary laws, its jurisdiction was narrowed down to cases determined by the colonialists. *Ulama* appointed to positions of judges were introduced to rudiments of English law, so that their judgments should be based on English law. But the *Ulama* defied the colonialists, ignored the English law and continued to judge with *Shari'ah*. Some did that indirectly, while others openly passed judgments that directly clashed with the dictates of English law (Naniya 55).

During the colonial period, Islamic education did not receive patronage from the colonial administration. Colonial education aimed at raising certain class of people in the North, who should not be religiously inclined, and who should take over the political and administrative affairs of the region. Islamic religious education was suppressed in the schools the teachers employed to teach Arabic and Islamic subjects were under-rated and poorly paid (Mahmud 7). Some *Ulama* who served as teachers under the colonial administration, seized the opportunity and provided their pupils with the skills that enabled them circumvent the policy aimed at eroding religious values introduced by the colonialists. But when the colonial administration realized that, they relieved such *Ulama* of their duties and completely removed them from the service of colonial administration (Yahya 195). These and other groups of *Ulama*, who refused to serve under the colonial administration, embarked on teaching privately at entrance parlour of their houses (Inuwa 64). To preserve the Islamic tradition of learning, the accurate teachings, and by implication sound understanding of Islam, many private schools were established, on the pattern of *Nizamiyyah* (Modern School System), by the *Ulama* (Paden 508).

Another activity embarked upon by the *Ulama* to check the excesses of the public over high inclination to materialism was *Irshad* (Religious Orientation). *Ulama* have been at the forefront of fighting social vices and moral decadence throughout the history of Islam. *Ulamain* Northern Nigerian, embarked on various activities of *Irshad*, to caution people about indulgence in excessive materialism and moral laxity. They employed poem, preaching and writing short letters to pass across their message. They heavily utilized this medium, in the colonial period to show lamentation at the spate by which materialism was

growing, and sharp decline in learning and morality (Naniya 55). They also used *Irshad* to warn about the subversive activities of some individuals causing confusion in the society, using poems and short letters to warn about fabrication of lies and envy over Allah's favour (Galadanci 157-158). *Irshad* was also employed to remind people about their religious responsibility, instilling corrective behavior and discipline. The medium of *Irshad* significantly helped the Muslims to preserve their culture and tradition, and withstand the challenge of adopting alien tradition. It has seriously weighed down systematic attempt by the colonialists to remove and or erode the spirit of religion in the minds and persons of the Muslims in Northern Nigeria.

### Conclusion

At the initial stage, the relationship between Northern Emirates and colonialists through trading firms were based on good will in form of treaties signed by the sides. With declaration of the entire Northern Nigeria, by the British government as a colony, the relationship dramatically changed. Colonial officials saw themselves as real authorities and controllers of affairs in the region. As a show of authority, they violated the agreements signed between them and the Emirs, and deliberately interfere with the affairs of the Emirates. The attempt by the colonialists to establish their hegemony in Northern Nigeria generated varieties of responses, from different sections of the society. Thus, the Emirs responses were earlier peaceful but degenerated into arm conflict with the colonialists but the Emirs were eventually defeated. The Mahadists also rose up in arm rebellion, and challenged the power of the colonialists, but also suffered defeated. The *Ulama* adopted a non-violent means, through teaching and *Irshad* in resistance to colonial domination, and cultural subjugation.

The military defeat of the Emirs forced them to come under the control of colonialists. Likewise the defeat of the Mahadists ended their arm insurrection aimed at overthrowing the colonial government and its agents. These forms of responses forced the colonialists to be cautious and avoid issues that could lead to open conflict. However, the defeat suffered by the Emirs and Mahadists, ended the move to preserve tradition and culture through violent means. Thus, the non-violent method employed by the *Ulama*, neutralized and minimized heavy damages colonialism would have caused to the socio-religious life of the Muslims of Northern Nigeria. Ignoring of the English law and passing judgment based on *Shari'ah*, preserved the Islamic legal tradition. The engagement of the *Ulama* in further teaching Islamic values preserved the tenets of Islam, and its practice by the Muslims. *Irshad* significantly served as a tool for the orientation of the general public on religion and morality. This non-violent approach adopted by the *Ulama* enormously helped in preserving the religious and cultural identity of the Muslims in Northern Nigeria. Had they run into arm

conflict with the colonialists and suffered a defeat, the Islamic legal tradition and values would disappear, and the Muslim religious and socio-cultural identity would have been lost.

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