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A History of Shia and its Development in Nigeria: The Case-Study of Kano

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Abstract

This article outlines the history of Shiism in Kano State. Most existing studies on Shiism in Nigeria focus exclusively on the political activism of Ibrahim El-Zakzaky and his Islamic Movement in Nigeria (formerly, Muslim Brothers). This article, on the contrary, tries to bring to light the activities of a variety of Shia actors, including Lebanese migrants, Iranian officials, and competing networks of Nigerian Shiites (Zakzaky's IMN and Nur Dass' Rasulul A'zam Foundation). The diversification of Shia actors – this article argues – can be explained as the result of the complexities of the social and religious space of Kano; as the reflection of changing Iranian policies over the years; or as a combination of both factors.

Islam in Nigeria: The Background

The traditional Islamic groups in Nigeria for the past centuries have been the two Sufi orders, the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya. The former is named after Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani; a scholar and jurist who rose to prominence in Baghdad in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries.¹ The latter's eponym is Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani (1735-1815) who was born

1 Jonathan Hill, *Sufism in Northern Nigeria: A Force for Counter Radicalization?* (Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), 17. For more in information on the Qadiriyya in Nigeria see Asif Folarin Ahmed, "The Qadiriyya and its Impact in Nigeria" (PhD Dissertation, University of Ibadan, 1986).



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in 'Ayn Madi (a village in the Algerian desert) into a family of learned scholars, and established a Sufi *ṭarīqa* around the claim of being the "seal of saints" (*khātim al-awliya*).²

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the face of Islam in northern Nigeria was changed by a jihad waged by Shaykh Usman Dan Fodio (1754-1817), a religious scholar and reformer who fought the rulers of Hausaland condemning the superficial practice of religion and syncretism which was the order of the day at the beginning of the nineteenth century,³ successfully establishing an Islamic state, known as the Sokoto Caliphate. Dan Fodio was a Qadiri, and thus the Qadiriyya became the official doctrine of the new state. The Tijaniyya, on the other hand, after having been introduced in Nigeria by the leader of another nineteenth-century West African jihad, al-Hajj Umar al-Futi (d. 1864), experienced an unprecedented development after the major leaders of the order (mainly based in Kano and Zaria) affiliated themselves with the Senegalese scholar Ibrahim Niassé, who had claimed to be the depository of the divine flood (*sahib al-fayda*) of Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani.⁴

The virtual monopoly of the Sufi orders over the Islamic public space in Nigeria was broken in the second half of the twentieth century by the introduction of Wahhabism. Although Mervyn Hiskett has argued that Wahhabism found its way into Nigeria in the late nineteenth century, there is no concrete evidence to support such a claim,⁵ and we can say that

2 Lucy Behrman, *Muslim Brotherhood and Politics in Senegal* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970), 18-19. For more information on the Tijaniyya in Nigeria, see Yasir Anjola Quadri, "The Tijaniyya in Nigeria: A Case Study" (PhD Dissertation, University of Ibadan, 1981); John Paden, *Religion and Political Culture in Kano* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

3 For more on the Sokoto Jihad, see Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (London: Longman, 1967).

4 For a biography of Shaykh Ibrahim Niassé, see Rüdiger Seeseman, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niassé and the Roots of a Twentieth Century Sufi Revival* (London: Oxford University Press, 2011); Muhammad Tahir Maigari "Ash Shaikh Ibrahim Niassé as-Sunghali" (Master's Dissertation, Bayero University Kano, 1981).

5 For this claim and its criticism, see Mervyn Hiskett, "The Community of Grace, and its Opponents, 'the Rejecters', A Debate about Theology and Mysticism in Muslim West Africa with Special Reference to its Hausa Expression," *African Language Studies*, XVII, 1981, 99-140 and Muhammad Sani Umar, "Sufism and anti-Sufism in Nigeria" (Master's Dissertation, Bayero University Kano, 1988).

Without the Sokoto Caliphate, Would There Ever Have Been a Nigeria?¹

Sokoto (181194)

Hilâfet (081217)

Nijerya (140448)

Murray Last

(Professor emeritus, University College London)



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It is a privilege and an honour for me to talk before this gathering about the Caliphate that I have spent most of my life learning about.² A great honour too to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the *Sarkin Musulmi*'s³ appointment, and to offer my sincere congratulations.

You may not have noticed that we can add to these celebrations by also marking today the 250th anniversary of the Shehu's preaching career – he started, aged twenty, in 1188 of the Hijra (1774-5), preaching when he was still a student, says his younger brother Abdullahi.

1 Text of the keynote address delivered on 3 November 2016, on the occasion of the celebration for the tenth anniversary of the appointment of the Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar III. Annotated by Andrea Brigaglia.

2 For the past five decades, the author has been a leading authority on the history and the anthropology of Islam in northern Nigeria. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of his masterful monograph, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (London: Longman, 1967; published also in Hausa as *Daular Sakkwato*, transl. by A. M. Bunza and B. B. Usman, Lagos: Ibrash Publication Centre, 2007). On the topic, Murray Last has also authored various influential articles. See, amongst many others (with M.A. Al-Hajj), "Attempts at Defining a Muslim in Nineteenth Century Hausaland and Bornu," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 3, 2, 1965, pp. 231-236; "A Note on Attitudes to the Supernatural in the Sokoto Jihad," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 4, 1 (1967): 3-13; "Reform in West Africa – the Jihad Movements of the Nineteenth Century," in *History of West Africa*, edited by J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder (London: Longman, 1974), v. 2, pp. 1-3; (with Jean Boyd), "The Role of Women as 'Agents Religieux' in Sokoto," *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, 19, 2 (1985): 283-230; "Contradictions in Creating a Jihadi Capital: Sokoto in the Nineteenth Century and Its Legacy," *African Studies Review*, 56, 2 (2013): 1-20.

3 'Commander of the Faithful,' the traditional title for the Sultan of Sokoto.

However, here, given my limited time, I will focus on only four points, to provoke thought. To start with, we must remember that the original 'caliphate' that the Shehu and his brother developed was far larger than today's northern Nigeria: in the West, it extended to Liptako, some four hundred miles west from Birnin Kebbi, beyond today's Benin and Niger and into Burkina Faso. In short, the Gwandu-governed half of the Caliphate⁴ was huge, if not as dramatic commercially or militarily as the half we are discussing here today, but it too needed structures and institutions for its effective administration.

My first task for you is to ask you to imagine what Nigeria would have been like without the Sokoto Caliphate. What if the Shehu and his *muhājirūn* and *anṣār*⁵ had been defeated, and what, if Muhammad Bello had later failed to stem the wars of *ridda* after the death of the Shehu? The answer I suggest is that we would not have had the united 'nation,' the sense of nationhood that gradually developed all through the nineteenth century, but instead, a series of petty warring states, with one big but tired empire, Borno,⁶ and all these separate mini-nations, I suggest, in the twentieth century would have been swamped by direct colonial rule. For as a vast state and nation, the Caliphate clearly intimidated the incoming *Nasara*⁷ – forcing the British to devise their policy of 'indirect rule.' But I would also suggest that the unity – the order, the inter-emirate peace – brought by the Caliphate also helped

4 After successfully establishing his state, the Shehu withdrew from direct political involvement and left the affairs of the newly established state to his brother Abdullahi, who ruled the western and southern segments of the Caliphate from his capital at Gwandu (former capital of Kebbi), and to his son Muhammad Bello, who ruled the eastern and northern half from Sokoto.

5 In the community of Usman Dan Fodio, the *muhājirūn* (migrants) were those who had left Degel with the Shehu at the beginning of the jihad, while the *anṣār* (helpers) were those who had joined the community later. These terms were, of course, taken from the Prophetic community, where the *muhājirūn* were those who had migrated from Mecca and the *anṣār* were the converts from Medina (and later, from other Arab tribes).

6 The oldest but declining Islamic political entity in the region, Borno controlled the north-eastern part of today's Nigeria and had come into conflict with Sokoto.

7 Hausa for 'Christians.' The term was used to refer to the Europeans during the early colonial rule.