

# The “Islamic revolutions” of West Africa on the frontiers of the Islamic world

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## Introduction

It is difficult to know how to create comparability for the politics of Islamic reform in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The western part of SSA (the West African Sahel, historically often called the Western and Central Sudan) is at the frontiers of the Dar al-Islam in at least 3 ways: 1, geographical distance from the Holy Cities and heartlands of Islam, 2, location below the formidable barrier that is the Sahara desert, and 3, location in the first “clime,” according to the ancient, Arab and ultimately very Mediterraneo-centric conceptions of the world. “Africans” lived in areas where civilization, indeed humanity, hardly existed. The last reason “colors” a lot of views of SSA Islam, in mental as much as geographical ways.

In the main historiography of West African islamization, reform movements go back only 300 years. They were directed not at imperial European frameworks but practices of “mixed religion” which combined Islam with local traditions in all sorts of ways. This literature emphasizes 5 reform movements, all leading to the *jihad* of the sword and resulting in the creation of “Islamic” states.<sup>1</sup> Many Muslim intellectuals of the region would place the creation of a Dar al-Islam in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after or as these movements were taking effect in many parts of the Western and Central Sudan. The widespread islamization of the region, however, comes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century under the colonial regimes established by the British and French.<sup>2</sup>

My presentation will then focus on these reform (or “revolutionary”) movements of West Africa set in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and specifically the issues of legitimation and vernacular literatures. The movements, sometimes formulated as renewals of Islam, eventuated in military *jihads* and typically imitated the pattern of Muhammad, from preaching to emigration to *jihad* and the creation of the Muslim state. The foremost constituencies were from the Fulbe (Haal-Pulaar, Fulfulde, Fellata) ethnic group, a people who had spread across the Sahel over several centuries, emigrating from west to east. Their traditional vocation was cattle raising, with some farming.

Some of them were Muslim, and among these were scholarly lineages who furnished the leaders of the movements. The opponents of reform were typically “mixers” of Islam and “paganism,” in different proportions and forms, who could easily be convicted of sins of association and apostasy.

By far the best known of the movements was the one led by Uthman dan Fodio ( c 1754-1817 CE) in Hausaland. For many Nigerian Muslims, the “Uthmanian” reform forms the social charter of Northern Nigeria today. It is one of the few event sequences of SSA history known in the wider world, for example in world history texts. Through a long career of preaching, teaching and writing, mainly in the Hausa Sultanate of Gobir and its environs, Uthman formed a community dedicated to reform and increasingly impatient with the ruler and his court.

Confrontations in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century led to the steps of *hijra*, declaration of *jihad* and the creation of an embryonic Muslim state in 1804 CE. After a series of struggles, Uthman’s forces succeeded in defeating the sultan in 1808, chasing him out of the region, and creating a new capital at Sokoto (hence the name Sokoto Caliphate) in 1809.

At about the same time students and companions of Uthman fanned out through Hausaland, usually to their places of origin, led successful movements of military *jihad*, supplanted the old *sultans* and installed themselves as the *amirs*, autonomous in most internal affairs but subordinate for defense and diplomacy to Sokoto. This federation survived politically and prospered economically across the 19<sup>th</sup> century, until the British conquest of 1903 and the creation of colonial Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> Each emirate recognized the authority of Sokoto, accepted some interference in appointments, and sent taxes, gifts and soldiers every year to Sokoto. The soldiers engaged in military campaigns, framed as the annual *jihad*, mainly to the north against the refugee dynasties from the old Hausa courts.

The Uthmanian movement is well known because of the prolific literature which its leaders created in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and disseminated widely through the Central and Western Sudan and beyond. Sokoto became the place to visit, and its experience the model to copy, for ambitious young Muslims and for anxious Muslim authorities associated with an older order. I used the expression “Sokoto model” in my *Holy War of Umar Tal*, published over 20 years ago,<sup>4</sup> and I

would maintain the same usage today.

So Uthman, his brother Abdullah, his son Muhammad Bello, his daughter Nana Asmau (Asma' bint al-Shaikh), and a number of other contemporaries wrote extensively about the genesis, justification and vicissitudes of creating an "Islamic" state in Hausaland and environs, as soon as they consolidated their base over against the Sultan of Gobir with a military victory in 1808. They particularly drew parallels between their experience and that of the embryonic Muslim community operating out of Medina, and between Uthman and Muhammad.<sup>5</sup>

The views of the Uthmanians did not go uncontested, especially from the spokesmen for older "Islamic" establishments. The most serious came from the regime of Bornu to the east, led in name by an old dynasty but in fact by another "renewer" of Islam, the well versed scholar and administrator named al-Kanemi. Al-Kanemi challenged the basis of the Uthmanian revolution and in particular the reasons for attacking citizens of Bornu, who might be "sinners" but were certainly not "infidels" or "apostates."<sup>6</sup> The publication in the last 20 years of several works<sup>7</sup> on Nana Asmau, her pedagogy and use of *'ajami* literature to spread the understanding of Islam, has only added to the salience of the Uthmanian reform and its political manifestation, the Sokoto Caliphate.

### **Legitimation**

All of the 5 reform movements faced a difficult dilemma of legitimation. They lived on the southern edge of the Sahara, with no obvious relationship with a Muslim state of any longevity or distinction. The Sultan of Morocco claimed to be a descendant of the Prophet and to have jurisdiction over portions of the Sahel, but his successors exercised no real authority, and none of the reformers evoked his name. The Ottoman presence in or below the Sahara was even less apparent. Who was in a position to declare that the Islamic practice of the region was deficient and that the creation of a Muslim state was called for?

The most frequent formula to solve this problem was the "Muhammadan" one, made highly visible by Uthman dan Fodio. The reformer followed, one might say, the jihad of the heart, tongue and hands, by engaging in active preaching and pressure on the sultan of Gobir and his court over a period of almost three decades.<sup>8</sup> By the early 1800s the tension between court and Uthmanian

community had become impossible to control. The new sultan considered the growing community to be a threat to his security, attacked and took some members prisoner, the equivalent of enslavement for Uthman and his followers. This provoked the *hijra - jihad - bay'a* formula described above, and led to open conflict, the creation of the new capital of Sokoto and the emergence of the federation.

Masina was next in line chronologically, and it followed a different line. Initially, however, the leader, Seku Amadu Bari, requested a flag of authorization from Uthman in Sokoto, and saw himself as a western extension of the Gobir *jihad*. By 1820 he had opted for an independent Islamic state, called the Caliphate of Hamdullahi, as he began to succeed against his foes and faced the formidable arsenal of scholars called the Kunta, who lived around Timbuktu and looked askance at upstart and ambitious political movements and Muslim states in general. Seku Amadu “solved” his problems of legitimacy by linking up with a former student of the Kunta. Together they formulated a prophesy which was framed in the words of the famous Egyptian authority, al-Suyuti and mediated by the pilgrimage of a revered Muslim ruler of Songhay, Askiya Muhammad, at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE. In this prophesy the Askiya was the 11<sup>th</sup> and Seku Amadu the 12<sup>th</sup> Caliph of the Dar al-Islam as a whole. Seku Amadu and his partner then managed to insert the prophesy into most copies of one of the main Timbuktu chronicles, the *Ta'rikh al-Fattash*, and to proclaim their achievement over much of West and North Africa.<sup>9</sup>

The key portion of the inserted text runs as follows:

A man of virtue, knowledge and piety, faithful to the Sunna and named Ahmad, will emerge in the islands of Masina, in the one of Sebera. He will belong to the family of scholars of the Sangare [Bari]. He will inherit from you the title of caliph, as well as your fairness, virtue, generosity, devotion, piety and success....He will rise higher than you, because he will know more, for you in fact know only the rules

about prayer, alms and the main doctrines. He will be the last of the caliphs....<sup>10</sup>

The third kind of legitimation came from Al-Hajj Umar Tall (1797-1864). Umar came from the “far west,” the Islamic state of Futa Toro (itself the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 5 reform movements). He was initiated into the Tijaniyya Sufi order just coming in to the Western Sudan at the time (circa 1820). He then spent three years in Mecca and Medina (1828-30 CE), returning not only with the

distinction of *al-hajj* but also with an “appointment,” variously described as *muqaddam* or *khalifa*, of the Tijaniyya order for the Western Sudan. On his way to and from the Holy Lands he visited Hamdullahi, Sokoto and Bornu. On the return voyage he used his credentials and charisma to acquire several prestigious wives and, he would say, superiority over his fellow reformers. He used his Tijaniyya affiliation to challenge the Islamic practice of Sokoto and Hamdullahi.

Somewhat later he used these credentials and the presence of a strong, like-minded Tijaniyya community, to justify a *jihad* of his own, declared in 1852. In contrast to Uthman and Seku Amadu, he did not preach and fight within his homeland but instead recruited *mujahidin* from there to “destroy paganism” in the form of Mandinka and Bambara states, most spectacularly represented by the regime of Segou on the Middle Niger. He may well have seen himself creating a regime equivalent to the Sokoto Caliphate, but in the Western rather than the Central Sudan.<sup>11</sup> In any case, he never came close to succeeding, because of the frenetic military pace of his campaigns and the absence of an intellectual cadre who could create a justificatory literature.<sup>12</sup>

The Segou conquest led Umar into a disastrous second phase (1862ff) of *jihad*, waged against the Hamdullahi Caliphate, in which he lost his own life and launched a destructive struggle in the Masina region which lasted until the French conquest of the 1890s. This second phase began when Hamdullahi and the Kunta, threatened in different ways by the Umarian movement, coordinated their opposition and gave support to the overtly “pagan” regime of Segou, behind the fig leaf that the king had converted to Islam and was thus immune from attack.

Umar discovered the full extent of the “conspiracy” when he seized correspondence between the parties after entering Segou in 1861. He then insisted that Hamdullahi surrender the refugee Bambara king, acknowledge the error of its ways and the validity of the Umarian *jihad*, and he spent the better part of a year formulating his view in a well documented treatise.<sup>13</sup> When Hamdullahi refused Umar’s demands, Umar declared *takfir*<sup>14</sup> on this Muslim and Fulbe regime and attacked, with the disastrous results mentioned above. I would add that the resulting *fitna* did considerable damage to the widespread assumption, spread especially by Uthman and his family out of Sokoto, that Muslim reformers could achieve considerable progress for the cause of Islam,

islamization and social justice.

### **Propaganda, islamization and *ajami* literatures**

A fundamental part of the process of reform and establishing new, more “Islamic” societies in the Central and Western Sudan was a more conscious effort at spreading the faith than had been attempted in the earlier centuries. This was accomplished in part by the development of literatures in local languages, first of all Fulfulde or Pulaar, the language spoken by the Fulbe people, and especially in the 2 movements that institutionalized their mission most effectively, endured for the longest time, and spread over the largest region. These were the Sokoto Caliphate, in the Central Sudan (roughly today’s Northern Nigeria), and the Almamate (from *al-imam*) of Futa Jalon, in the Western Sudan (roughly the northern portion of today’s Guinea Conakry). The *ajami* literatures in the 2 areas have received some attention in the last decades, but their role in the successful institutionalisation (and legitimation) of reform has never been emphasized.

Why are *ajami* literatures so important in these 2 areas and movements? This is a hard question to answer, but at this juncture I would venture the following. Both movements succeeded in enslaving significant numbers of non-Muslims for agricultural and domestic work, freeing up a number of clerics for teaching, writing and pedagogical work.<sup>15</sup> Both had talented and committed intellectual leadership, sensitive to the needs not only to interpret their efforts to a broader group of scholars across the Sahel but also to devise means to spread the message and practice of Islam to the non-literate and never-to-be-literate subjects: women, slaves, pastoralists, and others. Both had a strong consciousness of Fulbe identity, accentuated by their reform struggle against non-Fulbe authorities: the Hausa Sarkins (sultans) in the Sokoto case, the Mandinka or Jalonke rulers in the Futa instance.<sup>16</sup> In both cases the *ajami* literatures, in which poetry for recitation was the most prominent genre, seem to have developed in tandem with the reform movements,<sup>17</sup> in the same way that Arabic became a fully developed written language in the course of Muhammad’s mission and the subsequent creation of the Qur’an.

The Nigerian case has become associated with Nana Asma’u (1793-1864), the daughter of

Uthman.<sup>18</sup> But she did not begin her teaching and writing career until the 1820s, under the encouragement of her brother Bello, the first caliph of the regime, and after creating and raising a family with the *wazir* of Sokoto. The pedagogical and propaganda enterprise, including the development of *`ajami* materials, begins with the consolidation of the new regime after the 1808 victory over the sultan of Gobir and the establishment of the new capital at Sokoto the following year. The effort, including considerable writing in Arabic as well as materials in Fulfulde and Hausa in the Arabic script, was undertaken by Uthman, his family and their close followers, including Wazir Gidado, Nana's husband.

In general, treatises destined for scholarly consumption across the Central and Western Sudan was written in Arabic.<sup>19</sup> The challenge of al-Kanemi, the scholar who had settled in Bornu and contested the legitimacy of the *jihad* and regime, provoked a considerable apologetic literature. Material destined for recitation to women, slaves and the non-literate members of the society, was done in Fulfulde and Hausa, and usually in the form of poetry. These "consumers" were living in the countryside, and they constituted the majority of the population. Nana Asmau is justifiably featured in this endeavor, because she concentrated on developing materials and training women teachers for about 4 decades, but she did not start the process.

A considerable portion of the *`ajami* addressed the question of legitimation, quite understandably. What follows is a poem, written and recited in both Fulfulde and Hausa, which draws parallels between the careers and patterns of Muhammad and Uthman. "The attributes of the Shehu [Shaikh]" was written and recited in both local spoken languages. It was probably written in the 1808-13 period, by Uthman himself.

I give thanks to God for the generosity He showed me,  
I give praise to Him, the Generous One.  
I say, "Peace be upon our Prophet,"  
Know that I have (obtained) many of his characteristics.  
These will I mention in gratitude to Allah  
That Muslims may know them, East and West.  
Know that prophecy was made of Him before his coming,  
A similar prophecy was made of me, I am fortunate.  
Know that He bore with the troubles of the people,  
Likewise am I known for this and for loving peace.

Indeed, He never angered anyone:

For this too have people known me and for mercy.

After summoning people to the religion He made the *hijra*,

When I made mine it cost me great effort.

At that place where the enemies came out

As (they failed) against Him, so also against me did they fail.

By making the *hijra* He was indeed saved (from them),

I did the same and the same has been repeated.

He made it at the beginning of the sixth decade (of his life),

Of a truth, mine was indeed (made at) the same (time)....<sup>20</sup>

The poem goes on for 10 more couplets, drawing out the parallels between the two men. The same theme was picked up in a variety of treatises and poetry by the whole Uthmanian group, and driven home by Nana Asma'u constantly in her work and recitation.

The *`ajami* of Futa Jalon is less well known. A considerable literature, mainly poetry, exists in a collection at the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire in Dakar and other locations, and much of it has been worked by a Futa Jalon literary scholar, Alfa Ibrahima Sow.<sup>21</sup> The *jihad* in Futa Jalon stretched over a considerable portion of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and was not consolidated until the 1780s under a confederal system in which the head of state, the Almamy, alternated between two houses. Over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the confederation was relatively stable, but the central authorities exercised less influence over the constituent provinces than did Sokoto.

The strongest and most autonomous province was Labe, which expanded in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to rival in size and prosperity the rest of the Almamate. Labe also became the main center for the development of *`ajami* literature, beginning probably in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars gave instruction in reading, writing, exegesis and law, for the male aristocracy and future scholars. In the exegetical phase some scholars developed skills in writing Fulfulde and mastering existing Fulfulde texts, with a view to recite and instruct the women, pastoralists and others who did not understand the revelation and practice of Islam.

The best known scholar was probably Cerno Mamadu Samba Mombeya (1765-1852). He



witnessed some of the struggle against the Jalonke in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and was one of the founders of the *`ajami* system from his base near the town of Labe in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is how he articulated the need for the new literature:

I will cite the classical sources in Fulfulde  
to aid you in understanding. As you hear them, accept them.  
To each in effect only his own language  
allows him to grasp what the classics have to say.  
Many Fulbe do not absorb what is taught them  
in Arabic and remain in confusion.  
To remain in incertitude, about the great obligations,  
is not sufficient for speaking, nor indeed for acting.  
He who would seek clarity, free of uncertainty,  
may he read then in Fulfulde the verses of this modest man.<sup>22</sup>

The *`ajami* tradition has continued across the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and has expanded to dynastic chronicles, satire and a variety of other uses. But its origins, and its strength, remained the pedagogy designed to communicate the essentials of the faith. In contrast to the Sokoto example, the Futa Jalon literature seems less concerned about the legitimation of the *jihad* itself, probably because the leaders were not challenged in Islamic terms by the likes of al-Kanemi.

## **Conclusion**

The 5 reform movements of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were probably the most important chapter in the emergence of the West African Sahel as a part of the *Dar al-Islam*. The 2 that contributed the most to growing Muslim identities were the movements and states of Sokoto and Futa Jalon, thanks in considerable part to the pedagogies of islamization they developed through *`ajami* literatures. The considerable difference in the profiles of the two societies today owes a great deal to the colonial regimes established by the British and French, and their successors.